

continued from page 64

church, business, or culture, without seeing first what it is and second how it would look if I were able to grab my hammer and change it. If I act on my impulses, I tend to cause hurt feelings and frustration. If I decide I don't want to cause pain, I abstain. I withdraw and try to ignore the issue that bothers me. This is not really a solution, only a concession.

What justifies me in being a hammer or a nail? Actually, the very fact that I'm in the river means that I am both. That's the tumbler. When we live in community, especially Christian community, we're inevitably going to be bounced, jostled, scuffed, and hacked off by the other rockheads that are tumbling down the stream with us. Every impact makes its mark. Every blow breaks off an edge. Every interaction with another human being leaves a two-way mark. That's the matrix we live in. I am learning to appreciate the way God has used other people and circumstances to jostle and grate against me, knocking off the sharp edges, breaking off the weak parts, and revealing a core that has much more integrity. I can imagine that there is a "flow" to this process that avoids the extremes but is still effective for creating positive and valuable change. If I could get into the "flow" I would be reformed and reforming, and helpful in the process of seeing others reformed for the good.

Consider this stanza from a well-known poem by Robert Frost.

But yield who will to their
separation,
My object in life is to unite
My avocation and my vocation.
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal
stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the Future's
sakes.¹

The arts have a special function in our lives and society. They have a peculiar



Annabella at Birth

ability to penetrate deep into the heart-soul-conscience of a person in a way that no textbook or three-step self-help book can. Art can inspire and form the inner part of a person. The arts are tools that form us individually and socially. This can be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on the artist. The larger question is, "How are they forming our person? How does it affect me? Who is doing the shaping?"

Art is itself value-neutral in much the same way that science, philosophy, and theology are value-neutral. They are merely extensions of the sinner and saint within us. Regenerate art can help the viewers develop the ability to discern which things are valuable, which things are distractions. It holds a special power to motivate us to desire those things which are true values. They get in deep and speak of first things—the things that truly matter—not of jobs, salaries, gadgets, or gossip—but of quiet discernment of simple beauty. A believer may bear good fruit through science and art just as much as an unbeliever may bear bad

fruit through a pulpit. To the degree God wants to reveal Himself to us, He wishes us to be thoroughly engaged in and integrated with these academic disciplines as much as He would have us engaged in service vocations such as teachers, pastors, law enforcement, and political office. It is far better for this creation that people who are fully aware of their redemption in Christ should be reaching into all corners of the public sphere. Too long have we, as Christians, run away from the arts, philosophy, and science, as they grew too "worldly." Francis Schaeffer says in *How Should We Then Live*, "As Christians we are not only to *know* the right world view, the world view that tells us the truth of what *is*, but consciously to *act* upon that world view so as to influence society in all its parts and facets across the whole spectrum of life, as much as we can to the extent of our individual and collective ability."²

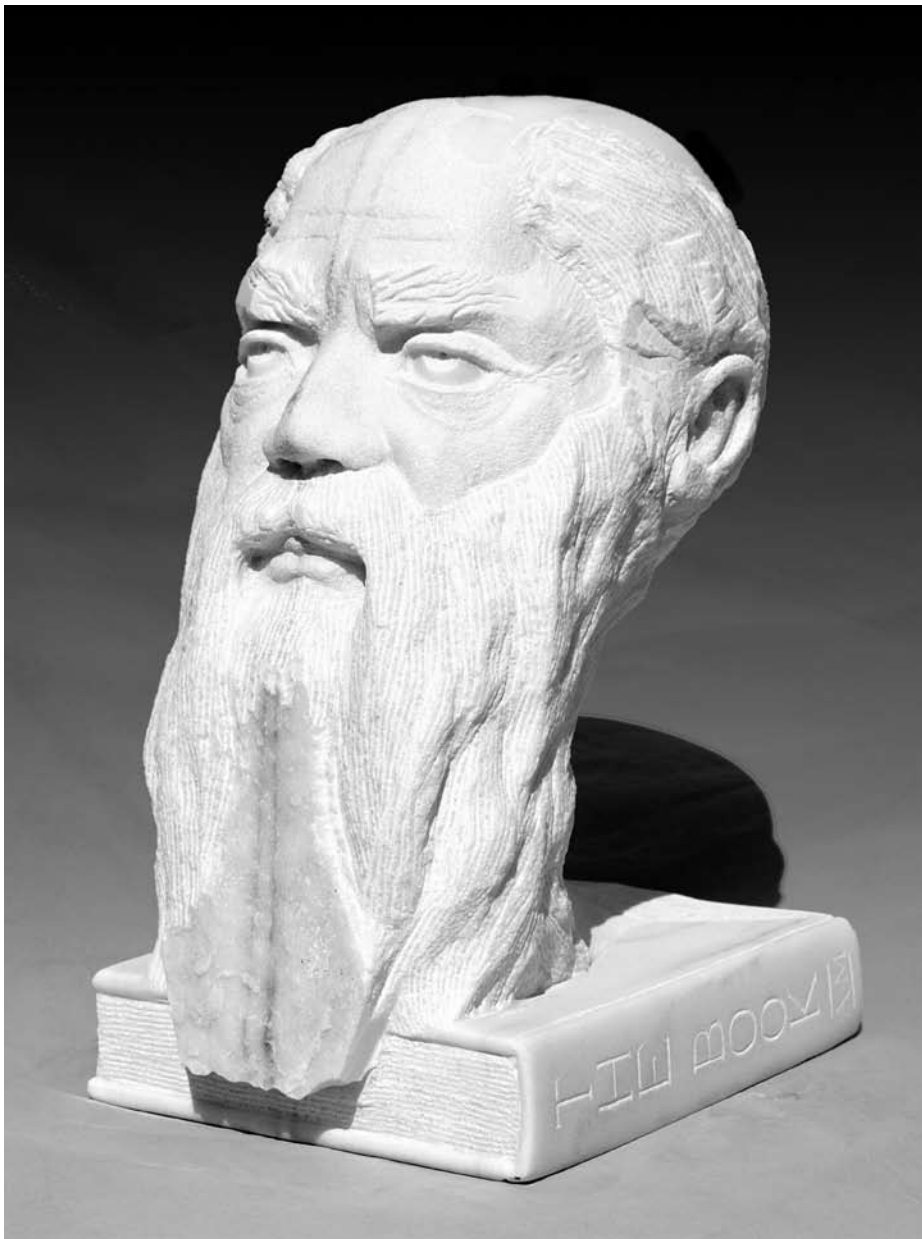
Artists are so often the vanguard of a culture's value system. Tomorrow's scientific "discovery" affirms or recognizes today's intuition. Today's intuition was whispered by yesterday's

revelation. It is in this field of intuition and revelation that the artist is meant to be at work and play. It is critical that artists are infused with the gospel in order that the gospel may have its effect on shaping culture. I hope the church will jump on this recognition that the arts are effective for, first, reforming the value systems of the individual and, second, reforming the value systems of a society. If as Christians we desire to impact culture, we seriously need to invest in the arts. We should begin with artists who are trustworthy in their sense of biblical values and doctrinal truths and praiseworthy in their ability to com-

municate them. It may take a while for the investment to bear fruit that actually is potent to impact the lives and attitudes of the culture inside and outside of the church. But that is certainly where we as the church should be sowing seeds.

In any case, education in regard to how to live well is not necessarily a vocational sort of training but a theoretical one in a system of evaluating or assigning appropriate value to things, habits, and ideas. Art should establish a value system—a disciplined way of looking at the world and ascribing worth. Imagine that consuming good art is a way of sharpening your tools.

Melville as the Prophet Elijah



It's a way of cultivating your palate in such a way as to give you the taste for the finer things, the more excellent things. Those temptations that are cheap and vulgar would hold less sway over our lives, until finally they no longer have the ability to arouse the base appetites. That's sanctification.

In Frederic Baue's book, *The Spiritual Society: What Lurks Beyond Postmodernism?* he notes the important role that artists will play in the next era of human history. He writes, "Today the call goes out to sanctified Christian young people to take up careers in the arts, and for Christian congregations and institutions to support them. As apologetics was well-suited to an age of reason, the arts will be well-suited to communicate the faith in this The-rian Age when spiritual things and imagination are highly prized."³

How do we communicate a value such as the gospel in today's pluralistic, relativistic, de-churched culture? For one, we have to re-present it in a creative way. If we're painting the same images that past generations have painted, they need to be done better than they were in the past. If we're telling familiar stories, we need to tell them better than anyone has heard before. We also have to live the gospel. Rote memorization of doctrinal statements is not enough. We have to let the gospel reform us. We need to get into intentional community so that the tumbling and polishing can take place. We need to allow transparency so that people around us can see the changes that are taking place in our systems of value. We need to let the values that the gospel brings force out and replace the value systems that this world has set up in our hearts. I think the bottom line, which is a universal theme behind all value statements and worldviews, is the question, "How do I live well?" The gospel provides both the milk and the meat that this question is looking for.

I've been extremely fortunate to enjoy the success that I have had, though it is a terrific struggle, one with no promise of reward or payoff.

There is currently no stable or solid vocational track to walk. The artist is always caught between dangers on either side. On one side is the art academy, including the universities, art schools, and contemporary museums. I love them dearly, but they are at the moment dreadfully caught up in a ridiculous pursuit of self-discovery or self-definition, with no objective absolute or “plumb line” with which to measure themselves. It’s the equivalent of masturbation, for lack of a better comparison. That world of self-gratification and self-love is abhorrent. For a person who doesn’t bother with silly games, the system is at once irrelevant and a closed, exclusive bubble. On the other side of the road is the world of artists that have created a recognizable commodity, a brand, and who are in the business of expanding their brand awareness and market value and presence into everyone’s living room. This too can be a perverse world in which the value of what the artist is doing has an artificial construction put in place by the system of galleries, critics, and self-promoting hacks. It’s the equivalent of prostitution. It’s little better than the stock market where value is dreamed up on paper and buzzes with nothing

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real or substantial, no specie to back it up. Either of those extremes is a perversion of the method and meaning of love and need.

Almost as a rule, I have avoided doing artwork that is explicitly Christian, not because it is intrinsically bad, but rather because its goodness appears cheap and worthless to the



Ahab’s Mask

non-Christian culture in which I live and work, to whom I long to bring an understanding of the depths and the riches of the fullness of God. As an artist who is a believer, I find that my attitude in the art world is often that I am somewhat responsible for cleaning up the mess that others have made through cheap and vulgar art, Christian or non-Christian. Mine is often work that attempts to build bridges with a post-Christian audience in order to encourage them to reconsider some ideas and truths that they have discarded.

My friends often feel that Christians are worshipping a mask when we worship the God of the Bible. Therefore, in “Ahab’s Mask” (see p. 64), I’m creating a reference to that inscrutable deity that Herman Melville’s Captain Ahab is trying to strike at. I’m acknowl-

edging that indeed we can only see the mask, but it is what the mask points us to that is truly worth considering. In “Melville as the Prophet Elijah,” I’m pointing out the similarities between Melville and his shadowy character in *Moby Dick*, which is a clear reference to our Old Testament prophet. I’m also intentionally linking Herman Melville with Elijah of the Old Testament in order to make assertions about our own American history and Melville’s prophetic work. I’m very deliberately exhorting my friends to pick up *Moby Dick* (if they won’t dare pick up the Bible) and dig through Melville’s incredibly prescient writing. Melville stands in contrast to his post-Enlightenment, Transcendentalist contemporaries. Today we are in a very similar intellectual cycle and I think Melville is useful in containing

the loose mysticism that was so prevalent with the Transcendentalists and prevails in my contemporary artistic circle.

Speaking of containing, the sculpture entitled “Government” (on the back cover) began as a very direct response to my friends’ complaints about “organized religion.” The structure of the church has come under intense attack by my friends who have often been personally hurt and turned off by the church. I wanted to show the beautiful role that structure plays in permitting and creating freedom. I’ve juxtaposed the organic, anthropomorphic, wild growing tree branch with the thoughtfully designed temple. The way in which these two elements complement each other is a metaphor for our relationship with the church, with government, and with established authority in general.

I began my career absolutely resolute and adamant that I would *not* take a “day job” and pursue my art on the side. I believe that God created me with a special ability to make art and a special purpose through that ability. I also believe that He is actively shaping my ability to do it and do it well. For me, it can’t be accomplished “part time.” There is no “side.” I either live in my calling or I put it off. There is no “plan B.”

Here’s the problem, though. In order to have the guts to stick it out, I need a biblical proportion of faith and an extra measure of stubbornness. To force myself to stay the course it was and is extremely important to be able to refer to myself as an “artist.” In order to live out what I’ve been called to do, I’ve made an idol of what I want to do, and it is incredibly difficult to untangle the two. This posture toward my calling lands me in a nuthouse when I try to find my identity in the fact that I’m an “artist.” This ridiculous pursuit of happiness has produced an idol that I worship, devote my time, money,

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energy, prayer, and thought to. All this because I want to be confident in my identity as an “artist.” That’s the way it is. That’s the law. Thank God for the gospel! Freedom in Christ for me means that I do not have to regard my sense of identity as derived from my status or recognition as an artist. Freedom in Christ also means that I’m free to pursue my love for the arts with the utmost passion and excellence. Living in that tension is exactly what it means for me to live well.

Luther says our conscience (the deepest part of ourselves) is transformed by hearing God’s promise. The law terrifies us, but the gospel purifies us and restores us back to health. Changes in attitudes, postures, and behaviors are the more superficial changes that can take place when the core has been transformed. It is so important for us to find our identity not in our vocations or how we receive our bread money, but instead, we must realize that our identity *is* in Christ. Having this gospel breathed into us daily frees us up to begin looking outward from ourselves with the humble confidence of knowing who we are, how God made us, what He is doing in our lives, and how we might now

interact with the world around us. We can look at our lives closely to realize how we are made up as individuals in a perfectly unique matrix of relationships and circumstances. If we begin to address the question, “How do I live well?” by taking an inventory of our abilities, life skills, and spiritual gifts, we are in a much better position for God to shape us along His design rather than on our fractured lines and weakened cracks.

Hopefully this artist has offered himself up as a living prayer and testimony to the God that provides and directs. My faith is in a God Who has created me in His own image, for a purpose in His plan of Redemption, though the road before me is not an easy one and it is certainly one less traveled! LF

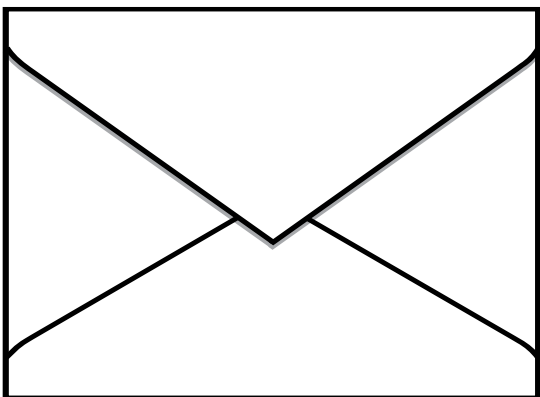
ABRAHAM MOHLER is a sculptor based in St. Louis, Missouri. Between carving stone, creating gardens, playing ball, holding table talk discussions, and making music with dear friends, he is also a doting husband and father. See more of his work at www.abrahammohler.com.

Notes

1. Robert Frost, “Two Tramps in Mud Time,” in *Immortal Poems of the English Language*, ed. Oscar Williams (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952), 505.
2. Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1976), 256.
3. Frederic W. Baue, *The Spiritual Society: What Lurks Beyond Postmodernism?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 176. “Therian” is a neologism Baue coined from the Greek for beast, *therion*, in Revelation 13:11, which describes the beast from the earth, often interpreted as representing religious forces that oppose the church. By a “Therian Age,” Baue means an emerging culture that is highly spiritual and optimistic but hostile toward Christianity.

LETTER TO A FRIEND ON A DIFFICULT ISSUE

Rodney Juell



Dear friend,
Thank you for the copy of the book you wrote. Since I received it, I have been pondering your inscription: “Knowing that our hearts and minds may be in different places on these matters, but hopeful that our faith is strong enough to create a sanctuary where all can be heard.”

I suspect that our hearts, if not our minds, may be more in the same place than you suspect. I am, to be sure, nothing if not a traditional, orthodox Lutheran pastor. I have opposed, and will continue to oppose, the proposals of the revisionists in regard to gay marriage and gay ordination (but especially to the former). However, having said that up front, I will take second place to no one in my desire and effort to make our church a welcoming community for everyone.

How could I embrace any other position? For I really believe all this Lutheran stuff about grace and the all-sufficiency and sole sufficiency of Christ. There is no one who is not to be welcomed. I think you believe that, too. But I suspect we come to that same place from two very different perspectives. I come to my place from the sober reality of sin. We are all broken human beings, and no sinner can claim superiority to any other sinner, and in the ultimate sense no sin can be classified as worse than any other sin. Welcome all, the great unwashed mass of sinful humanity. Unwashed, that is, until we are washed together in Christ’s mass, in the church, in his blood. I suspect (correct me if I am wrong) that you arrive at the same place I do via a different way. I suspect that you (not necessarily you personally but many of those who advocate for the gay agenda) come to this place from the perspective that gay sex is just as “good” as heterosexual sex. I don’t think such a theology of glory helps anyone. I’m content to say that a heterosexual sinner has no advantage or bragging rights

over the gay sinner, and let it go at that. And then live by grace, all of us.

What I *can* do, and what I do all the time, is compromise with sin. I’ve had almost sixty years’ experience doing it and I’m pretty damn good at it (I say that with no pride, and using the word “damn” in its most proper theological sense.). What I *can* do is sometimes even “wink” at sin in the service of grace. Again, almost sixty years of experience makes one fairly proficient. What I *cannot* do is declare to be good what is clearly contrary to God’s intention for creation. To do so would be a pastoral care tragedy and a mockery of my ordination. As a pastoral care provider, I don’t invite anyone to rejoice in, for example, divorce, or addiction, or emitting greenhouse gases, or anything else that is clearly contrary to God’s intention. At the same time, I certainly don’t insist that they “clean themselves up” to be acceptable to God. Sometimes I even invite people to live with the ambiguity (I am a Lutheran and we are supposed to be good at that, right?) of sin. But while I may, however uncomfortably, live with sin or even tolerate it, I will not celebrate it. To do otherwise would make me utterly unfaithful.

I really believe all this Lutheran stuff about grace and the all-sufficiency and sole sufficiency of Christ. There is no one who is not to be welcomed. I think you believe that, too. But I suspect we come to that same place from two very different perspectives.

Please listen to a story. We had a woman in the medical center awhile back, around forty years old, with a long history of drug and alcohol abuse and some behavioral health issues. In the course of our conversations she identified herself as a lesbian. At one point

she asked me what I thought about homosexuality. I asked her if she was sure she wanted to know, because she might not like what I had to say. She said she did. So I told her that I didn’t believe that God had created her to be a lesbian, that it was not God’s will for her. But I also told her that I did not believe that her lesbianism was something she had chosen (I think that might be changing for some people today, but that is a story for another time), that she was

not somehow individually culpable, and that in fact she was “in bondage to sin and cannot free herself.” I also told her that I believe Jesus was sent to die for her in her brokenness, and that she, like all of us, could live confidently in the mercy of God, even while living with and maybe even acting out the ambiguity of her sexuality, not unlike (without intending to flip about it) the fact that I’m gonna worsen global warming next weekend by taking my wife on a car trip. In short, her sexuality, and even her sexual behaviors, are part of the “nothing else in all creation” that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Now her response to me was interesting. She cried. She told me I was the first clergy who had not told her either that 1) she was a condemned sinner on her way to hell, or that 2) gay is good and God made her that way so she should rejoice in it. This wise or at least very intuitive woman recognized that those were false alternatives. I can’t help but wonder how her life might have been different (and better) if, instead of hearing those versions of the law (and they are both law), she had heard the gospel.

Do I want the church to welcome everyone? You bet. If for no other reason than that I want it to welcome me, the chief of sinners (sorry, St. Paul, but I can one-up you on that). But I want the church to welcome everyone (including me), not because I’m such a good guy, but because we have all been welcomed by a good Lord in

the waters of baptism. We don’t welcome anyone because we justify them (or perhaps worse because they justify themselves). We welcome everyone because Christ justified the ungodly (welcome to the club, all ye miserable reprobates).

I have learned, both from bitter personal experience in all these years that have flown too quickly and from my pastoral care of others, that Christ welcomes the broken. My problem with the gay agenda, and my reason for opposing it, is primarily because its advocates appear, at least to me, to deny that they are really broken in their sexuality, or anything else! In my brokenness, they appear to be the “proud” whom God opposes. Gay is

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not good! Of course neither is lots of other stuff. Sigh! I guess I must confess to being an advocate of the much maligned double standard. Compromise with evil. Tolerate the evil. Even make your peace with the evil and do the evil if there seems to be no alternative. But do not approve the evil. Do

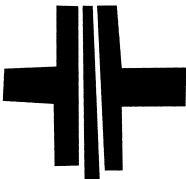
no rejoice in the wrong, but rejoice in the right.

May I please close with a challenge? You have spoken of “prejudices” regarding sexuality that once “infected” nearly all Christians. My challenge to you is this: what makes you certain that they (and not you) are the ones so infected? What I would love to hear you say is, “I can’t be certain.” Then, as Lutherans, we can live with the ambiguity, and in some ways even celebrate the paradox, having assigned the gay agenda question a value somewhere approaching adiaphora. And we will have elevated to central place the only thing that ultimately matters and from which the present question is the most tragic of distractions, namely, that we are sinners redeemed by the blood of Christ.

I do indeed hope, as you say in your inscription, that “our faith is strong enough to create a sanctuary where all can be heard.” Yet it is not even our faith that creates the sanctuary. It is Christ who does, and who welcomes sinners all.

I remain your brother in Christ. ✠

RODNEY JUELL, an ELCA pastor ordained in 1975, is the Director of Pastoral Care at Provena St. Joseph Medical Center and long-term interim Pastor at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Joliet, Illinois. This letter was originally written to a beloved parishioner of years past.



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TRIDUUM

Travis Scholl

I. THE EARTH GROANS

In the garden—
amid the grappling
with anguish and silence
—a sound of sounds arising
as if from earth itself
scorning the tumult of the city.
Discern the sounds: mountain
goat bleating her birth; thump
of wild ass and ox; futile beating
of outstretched ostrich wings;
fierce laugh—“Aa-ha!”—
of war-horse; young
eagles sucking blood...
Grief and praise intermingle
here, unworded, in this absence
present in the wind, this garden
of sound. But only he
heard the wild, pleading
synchronicity.

The sleep of the three
was too deep to be
broken by groaning.

II. THE EARTH RECEIVES

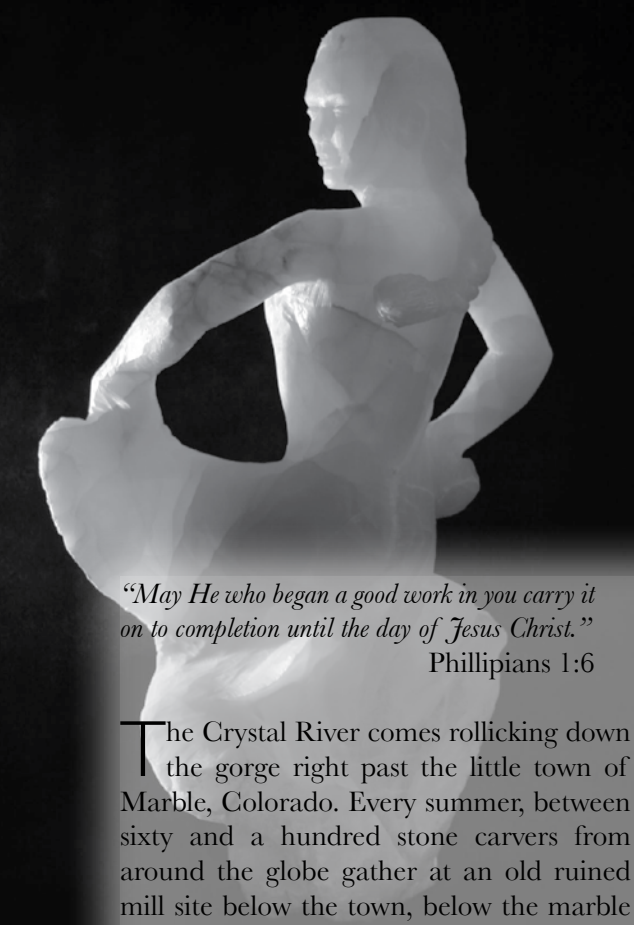
Then—he liked to liken himself
to the wheat seed as he
walked the ripened fields,
plucking the tops of stalks
and popping the kernels
into his mouth. They gave
his breath a starchy sweetness
as he pulled the circle
close to whisper secrets,
mysteries, and signs.
Now—the two are carrying
his corpse, ruddy flesh
spotted maroon, brown
primordial clay mottled
with drying blood still wet.
The grinding mash
of leathered feet against gravel
mimics memories of the crunch
of kernels between his teeth.

Receive him, O earth, to rest in peace
as you would a grain of wheat
dropped into the ground to die.

III. THE EARTH RESTS

The dawn broke silently
and noon is calm.
The day is quiet, exhausted
from labor of death.
The day is sabbath, resting
from work, the making
of things, doing and undoing.
This earth and her people
lie dormant with hearts
emptied by grief.
The dusk will lie like an infant
asleep on a bed of mountains.
Nothing is left to be done.
After all, what is left to do
but sleep when the one who is
life—who was our life—
is dead and buried,
shut up with a seal of stone?
—sleep being to dissolve
into the awaiting rhythms,
the patience of time in place,
the memory of tomorrow.

REFORMED TO BE A REFORMER

Abraham Mohler


“May He who began a good work in you carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ.”

Phillipians 1:6

The Crystal River comes rollicking down the gorge right past the little town of Marble, Colorado. Every summer, between sixty and a hundred stone carvers from around the globe gather at an old ruined mill site below the town, below the marble

quarry. We spend anywhere from a week to a month in

Cristina Dances Flamenco

this mountaintop experience: camping, carving, and enjoying life at a much different pace. This is a lifestyle I love dearly, and I cherish my time not only with my friends and neighbors but also with my creator in a special and intimate way.

Just down from our carving site, the Crystal River winds around a little beach that some people will retreat to in the heat of the day to escape the noise of grinders and the grit of dust in the air. Those with gumption will wade into the icy runoff for a rinse and refreshment. It's a peaceful place; a place where in the morning I begin my days with a quiet prayer and a remembrance of baptism in the frigid waters. As most other carvers have yet to make it down to their workspaces for the day, the whole valley is peaceful and larking, as the morning sun dances off a million tiny facets on the surface of the river. This is a time where my mind is clear, my heart is glad, and my soul is filled up with the wonder and longing for God. I have a tendency to linger, maybe a little longer than I should, and my mind seeks out patterns of things seen which are illustrations of things unseen.

The notable thing on this beach is the

mosaic of variously colored rocks that have stopped in their journey down the river to rest on the beach until the next spring's snowmelt tumbles them on their way again, down to the Colorado River. In looking closer at the rocks it's easy to see the ones that have come the farthest. They have been sculpted by the trip down the river. They are distinctively more rounded, smoother, and often flatter than those that have traveled a shorter distance. The river acts just like a rock tumbler, or actually vice versa, as the rocks bump and grind each other down in their grand tumble down the river.

I imagine if I were to look closer, I would begin to see a pattern where one type of rock, a relatively buoyant one, is easily visible bouncing around, here and there, bumping and skipping off the boulders and rock walls that make up the riverbed. In fact, if I looked really closely, I might see that one rock is holding a hammer and a chisel and attempts to smack everything it happens to come near. That rock is me.

Another type of rock is a darker, denser rock. This rock seems to hide out in eddies. It's not terribly interested in the flow around it. It is as reluctant as a rock can be about traveling down the river and interacting with other rocks of various shapes, sizes, and hardness. It has a sloped side toward the current that serves to deflect the barrage of boulders continu-

When we live in community, especially Christian community, we're inevitably going to be bounced, jostled, scuffed, and hacked off by the other rockheads that are tumbling down the stream with us.

ally passing by. The best any rock can do is serve a glancing blow, and this, as if by design, is a feature shaped by blows it has received in the past. This rock is better at maintaining its sharper edges, especially to the lee side of the current. It has no tools to speak of, just a defense mechanism that minimizes the impact any other rock might have on it. This rock is also me.

When it comes to human fellowship, like many people I vacillate between the two extremes. I'm either zealous and flit around with a hammer in my hand, or I'm completely withdrawn and disengaged from the people around me. I have a tendency either to wreak havoc and inflict pain or to stand idly by, unmoved, unmoving, and wholly unto myself. This is not good. I cannot look at anything, whether it's a rock, landscape, person,

Continued on page 57