



EXPERIENTIAL THEOLOGY

My conversations with people who had experienced traumatic life events and had found thoughtful and prayer-rich ways to integrate them were powerful and moving. I was also struck with how similar the theologies of people who had experienced certain types of life challenges were, independent of religious tradition: severe illness, for example, or the care of an ill child, or the early loss of a parent. I often wanted to bring these people together because I thought their conversations would enrich each other emotionally and spiritually and that they would find remarkable similarities between them. It led me to think farther about how our theologies develop from our life and find their deepest accountability when brought back *to* our life.

In all our lives we have the experiential ground needed for us to answer these major questions I was presented by Dr. Bobbi Patterson of Emory University as the scaffold for any systematic theology:

Who or what is God?

Who is humankind?

How and why are God and humankind connected?

What went wrong with the connection?

What were the consequences?

How do these consequences continue?

Where is the hope/salvation/new life?

How is that new life sustained and enriched?

The questions, even for the great theologians, arose from their own lives, as did their answers. Every great religious figure has asked these questions out of her or his own life—and taken these answers *back into* their own life to test them. In our own ways, we are all systematic theologians. Life demands it. It might be helpful sometimes to think of these questions and how they have been posed to us by life itself and the answers that have risen organically out of our own life.

As we listen to some very different spiritual journeys here, let these questions resonate: Who or what is God to them and how did they come

to know this? What has it meant to them to *be* human—what kind of pleasure, joy, suffering, confusion, injustice and privilege have made up their understanding of what it is to be fully so? How do their experiences of God and of themselves intersect? Where and how has that relationship been disrupted? What were the consequences of this disruption for their faith? If their original faith left them, what came to take its place? What is the freedom and new life and coherence in this new faith? What fosters this new and richer connection? What threatens it?

GINGER HARGRAVES

Ginger Hargraves is an attractive, middle-aged housewife who lives with her husband and family in Greenville, South Carolina. She shyly agreed to meet with me at the request of Dr. Royce Short and her husband. We met at her large, immaculate, colonial style home in a suburb of Greenville. She showed me into a comfortable den and settled me on the generous sofa.

Her husband and her son Brian, twenty-three and in a wheelchair, came in to say good-bye as they headed to evening church services. She was staying to talk with me.

She and her husband were both Bob Jones graduates and had worked on staff for ten years before moving to Pennsylvania for eighteen years. They had returned to Greenville seven years ago. The city had grown enormously in that time, she mentioned, but they had visited regularly during their time in Pennsylvania, so the shock on return wasn't too great.

In Pennsylvania, they had lived in a rural setting, between Philadelphia and Reading. She had found it isolating; people were clannish. Here in Greenville there were many people who shared affiliations with them through their Bob Jones connection and their church.

Ginger grew up in rural Washington, first in a very small farming community, and then in a town of 25,000. In her small community, there were one Baptist, one Methodist, and one Presbyterian church.

Going to church was what we did. It was a way of life. It was fun. At vacation Bible school, they had competitions to keep you motivated. My mother would work all week to get ready for Sunday. There were seven children. Not that we had rules, it was just normal and what we did. Not just as a tradition. It was what we believed we should do because the

Bible talks about gathering together with like believers.

From the point Ginger was saved, "the words of the Bible began taking root in my life and my desire was to obey God in His Word. I had no desire to seek out other people and their words. I was seeking God's Word."

She has never questioned this allegiance. Indeed, she says that even though she wasn't as focused as a teenager as she is now, "I did make a decision as a teenager to give myself totally to the Lord—to follow and serve Him and you don't know what that is to be."

Ginger consistently makes a distinction between tradition and making an active, intentional choice to align with God's Word as a way of life: "God's will is day by day. It is not in plans only, it is in accomplishment. It's in my responses—to my children, a phone call. And I know how He wants me to respond, because if I don't, He convicts me in my heart." She goes on to say:

God is with me all the time. I can talk to God. I can say, "I need your help. I need your wisdom." I can say, "God, I only have twenty minutes to get to the grocery store and back. Could you get me a parking place?" Sometimes it happens—and it just gives me a little encouragement that He is in control within every second of my life. The Bible says pray without ceasing. I think that is being in a state where you know you can pray at all times.

But above everything, Ginger's God is sovereign: *He is in control of everything. He always has been. He is Holy and pure. He wants us conformed in His image, to be Christ-like and pursue holiness. This pursuit is by faith, not works. He knows everything. He is the Creator and before the world He was. He is the beginning and the end. Everything comes from Him. He is loving, but in His love, He chastens us also.*

What God requires of us, in Ginger's experience, is total reliance on Him. She knows that the goal of her life is to glorify God in everything she does and become more like Christ, to be conformed in His image. "God has allowed things into my life to help conform me," she said.

Ginger's father died when she was sixteen. This was a great blow to her and her mother and six brothers and sisters.

When you are a teenager, that is very difficult. It was a hard time. But it made me as a teenager trust God more. The Lord used that time in my life later. I learned little things then—but in preparation for larger things I learned in spiritual maturity.