

CCET Banquet Address  
“The Emerging Christian Minority”  
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**A Parish Pastor Speaks of Robert W. Jenson**  
Gregory Fryer, Executive Director, CCET

In my portion of this banquet address, I want to speak of one of the founders of our Center – the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology (CCET). I want to share with you something of what I have learned from theologian Robert W. Jenson. He and Carl Braaten founded the Center back in 1991. They were the directors of the Center for the first dozen years and continue to lead and encourage the Center in their retirement years. Robert Jenson was my teacher back in Seminary days. He was the teacher of a good number of us in this room. So I want to share something of what I have learned from him in my life as a parish pastor. Many of you are clergy. Even if you do not know Dr. Jenson, still I hope it might interest you to hear what a pastor has learned from an eminent theologian.

That Dr. Jenson is an eminent theologian is something with which many people would agree. Indeed, I once heard it said in a group of seasoned ecumenical theologians that two or three centuries from now, it will not be plausible to be doing theology without referring to Robert W. Jenson. He is *that* important of a theologian.

But there is something unusual about the career of this eminent theologian: he spent much of his career teaching in a seminary. Jenson taught Systematic Theology at Gettysburg for twenty years, from 1968-88. That is where my wife, Carol, and I met Robert and Blanche Jenson — at the Gettysburg Lutheran Theological Seminary back in the early 1980s.

That Jenson should teach in a seminary coheres with his conviction that theology is a handmaiden of proclamation. So a

generation of clergy learned about preaching and presiding from this master theologian.

But the downside of Jenson's career in the seminary is that there is not what could be called a "Jenson School," as there is, say, a "Lindbeck School." That is, there is no generation of doctoral students, now occupying important chairs of theology, who studied under Jenson. Colin Gunton did his doctoral work under Jenson at Oxford University in England, and Gunton was an important theologian, but he died young. So, for the most part Jenson did not have doctoral students. What he has is *us* – not just us, but he does have us. He has a generation of parish clergy who have been blessed to have been formed by him. He has clergy who love him and will be shaped by him to our dying day. So, in this little address, I am going to share with you something of what I have learned from Jenson in my life as a clergyman.

### **An Objective Element in the Gospel**

The first thing I learned is something cheerful about the Gospel: its *objective* element. Jenson thrilled many of us at Gettysburg Seminary with his picture of the apostles running around the Mediterranean world, grabbing people by the shirt collar and exclaiming, "Have you heard? Jesus lives!" We are justified by faith, yes, but faith needs something firm to which to cling. Jenson taught me that my faith and the faith of the people in my congregation have something firm – something objective - to cling to: Jesus is risen. Jenson's point still rings true: it would not be gospel to hear that Stalin is risen. But to hear that Jesus is risen, well, that is indeed good news.

### **Israel**

The second great thing I learned from Jenson requires a modification of the clause I just used. The primitive apostolic proclamation is not quite that "Jesus is risen," but rather that "Jesus *of Nazareth* is risen." That is, a Jewish rabbi from Galilee lives and

is King of the universe. The prayers and the ways of Jesus are Jewish. There is no understanding of Jesus apart from the Old Testament. Jenson urged a generation of clergy to preach on the Old Testament. He said that if Christological commentary on the Old Testament was good enough for the apostles, it should be good enough for us too. Some of us have tried it. We have preached to our congregations from the Old Testament, permitting the stories of Israel to teach us about Jesus and to set the stage for the good news that Jesus is risen and is in charge. Not every one of my sermons is based on the Old Testament, but many of them are. I believe that the people of my congregation are glad for those sermons.

### **The Triune Identity**

Third, I have learned from Jenson to respect the Triune Name of our God. “What *can* be said prior to God’s identification must be said,” as Jenson writes in *The Triune Identity*. And what can be said is that we invoke “God” that a *human* life might be possible. We cry to God that we not end up in a madhouse or in despair. Jenson’s observation here has encouraged me in face of modern intellectuals who claim that they are calm and rational and scientific and can very well do without God. I do not believe them. I believe that the question is not “Whether there is a God,” but “Who is your God?”

Another line from Jenson’s book *The Triune Identity*:

If we speak of “God,” a life’s substance is given by which God we worship, and a *life’s truth* is given by whether this is the God that really is.

I want my people have a true life, and so I am careful to try to proclaim the God that really is, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

### **The Holy Law of God**

As we were approaching graduation from Seminary, one of my classmates asked Jenson this question: “What do you think is

theology's main task for the coming generation?" Jenson answered that he believed that theology's great task for the coming generation was to spell out the moral content of the Gospel.

We learned a vision of the Gospel from Jenson that included love of the holy law of God. One of his great insights about the Ten Commandments, for example goes this way: Because we are created by the command of God, "let there be," to hear God's command is not to be depleted but rather is to be "refreshed in [our] very being."<sup>1</sup> So, as a pastor I have tried to refresh the being of our people and myself by also proclaiming the holy law of God.

### Marriage

The marriage of Robert and Blanche Jenson is a sight to behold — a good sight! Jens and Blanche gave Carol and me our pre-marriage counseling, thirty-four years ago now. They taught us about love that takes into account in advance all those things that tend to separate people — all those things encompassed in the phrase "for better for worse." They taught us about love that means to "love and cherish each other until you are parted by death" in full face of "for better, for worse." They taught us and have illustrated for us a love whereby the two become one. They taught us about a love that endures into old age, in which husband and wife still adore one another even to grey hair. They taught us that such love is possible and has been enjoyed by generations and millions upon millions of people. I have tried to share such a vision of married love with the people of our congregation.

### Hospitality

I remember in seminary days Jenson smiling with gratitude at his memory of the hospitality of Gerhard von Rad — one of Jenson's magnificent teachers at Heidelberg. Jenson recalled how cultured von Rad was, but also how courteous he was to his guests. Well, if

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<sup>1</sup> *A Large Catechism*, page 6

you ever attended seminars at the Jenson home, if you remember Blanche’s “seminar bread” and the wine and the cheese at their home in Gettysburg, or if you have ever visited Robert and Blanche Jenson at their home in Princeton, I think you have experienced the same thing. The Jensons taught a generation of clergy to try to be hospitable and to cherish our guests.

### **A Final Thought about the CCET Community**

Finally, let me try to say a word of encouragement about the divided Body of Christ. Longtime participants in these CCET conferences might have gotten used to the idea, but nonetheless, it is an extraordinary idea: We form a remarkable community — a community of clergy and scholars who are united by a vision of the Gospel that transcends the denominations and the fragmentation of the church. I think we constitute what Jenson calls a “contradiction of the contradiction.”<sup>2</sup> That is, the church of the creeds is “one,” yet the church is divided. An incoherence. I suggest that our CCET community is a humble but real step in the right direction, toward the unity of the church. We are contradicting the contradiction.

So I say let our bonds of unity continue and grow as we go back home. Let us seek kindred souls across the denominations. Let us seek new friends and learn from one another and pray for one another and care about what is going on in the life and in the congregations of our new friends.

Thank you.

In Christ,  
Gregory Fryer

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<sup>2</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology – Volume 1*, Preface.