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Martyria and Mission: The Witness of Creative Disruption

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Editor’s Note: At its root, *martyria* means “witness.” Martyrdom throughout Christian history has sometimes been the fate of those who, in the face of opposition, have chosen to give witness to their faith.

Abstract: God’s mission, introducing a realm of holiness and forgiveness, cannot enter the unholy realms of this earth without some interruption to business as usual. There will be some scraping of structures, some reordering of priorities, turning some systems upside down. This article defines this missional activity as creative disruption. It suggests that creative disruption functions best when it is creative, with respect to tradition and disruptive with respect to traditionalism. While leaders committed to stirring up the status quo are often unpopular and inhere sacrificial witness (*martyria*), this article addresses some of the constructive benefits of disruptive work to God’s mission.

Ambassadors for Christ are those through whom God is appealing to people to be reconciled by the Gospel’s message of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:20). On occasion, they must engage others wisely in creative disruption that often appears to be non-reconciliatory. This essay will propose (1) a definition of creative disruption, (2) the conditions and manner in which it is to occur, and (3) the constructive benefits to God’s kingdom of disruptive work.

To evoke Jaroslav Pelikan, creative disruption functions best when it is *creative* with respect to tradition (furthering the living faith of deceased believers) and *disruptive* with respect to traditionalism (challenging the dead faith of those who are alive).¹

Theological support for this idea will be interwoven throughout the article as



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will historical considerations and general practical descriptions. This mission-related consideration of creative disruption is predicated on a theological underpinning that, as Robert Kolb summarizes, joins with those who have “striven to demonstrate that Luther’s proclamation of the God who justifies is not trapped inside sixteenth-century thought forms but is relevant and applicable to the dilemmas and distresses of the twenty-first century.”² In this sense, creative disruption is not an *avant-garde* breakthrough for missional leaders, but rather a reiteration of ancient truth revealed in the living tradition of Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) in a manner that constructively confronts the wounding captivity of traditionalism. Against this, the Spirit persists in witness with the ever vivifying, ever innovating doing of God’s promises to God’s people, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (Is 43:19). As such, living traditions in which the Spirit’s enkindling presence abounds are robust as they anchor community, inform liturgical practices, and prompt spiritual and numerical growth.

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Such acts of creative disruption that are attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit should be distinguished from what the Lutheran Confessions describe as *Schwärmer*. The Reformers’ concerns for *enthusiasm*—those raving verifications of salvation apart from the operative means of the Spirit, God’s Word and Sacraments—do not negate, however, the fact that God through the Word is dynamically alive in the church (Heb 4:12). As a corollary, however, that liturgical assembly constitutes a proper arena through which these means are communicated does not imply that the worship forms themselves cannot be creatively disrupted if they deteriorate into lip service (Mt 15:9).

A Historical Witness and Martyred Disrupter

Gudina Tumsa, of the Oromo ethnic group, was born into extreme economic poverty in western Ethiopia in 1929, the same year as Martin Luther King. Tumsa was martyred on July 28, 1979, at the hands of a brutalizing Marxist revolutionary government. Candid rhetoric, cheerful fearlessness, and courageous witness in the name of Jesus were his traits despite his hardship, suffering, and persecution. Educated at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota in the 1960s, Tumsa was also a student of the civil rights movement in the United States. Tumsa opted for a Martin Luther King-like strategy of identifying structural sin, mobilizing people of faith, and then working non-violently (which is not passively) within human institutions, not to overthrow them, but to improve them gradually from within.

Upon his return to his homeland and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), Tumsa rose quickly in leadership. This dynamically burgeoning Lutheran church body, headquartered in Addis Ababa, embodies its name “Mekane Yesus,” which means in the Amharic language, “place of Jesus.” Its membership grew from 65,000 members in 1959 to 2.5 million by 1999 (larger than the LCMS) and then to more than 5 million in 2009 (larger than the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). Since 2009 alone, the EECMY has grown by more than a million people. Lutheranism is vibrant with a bright future on the African continent.³ The EECMY is now, in 2016, upwards of 7 million members. Joy in the power and promises of the Gospel, the integration of service and witness, the proximity of the practice of these marks of the church, and willingness to suffer for the faith have historically characterized the members of this church body and offered an example for the reimagining of Reformation traditions in the global north. Another early African church leader, Tertullian, was right: “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”⁴

In the 1970s, Tumsa served as the General Secretary of the EECMY. Refusing to bow down to the draconian political demands of the revolutionary government that sought to silence the church, he was arrested. Refusing to submit or recant, he was tortured. Refusing to flee from Ethiopia while he had a chance (like Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany), he was re-arrested and viciously murdered. Each refusal was predicated on his doctrinal conviction: that God’s justice in the world and God’s justifying act in Christ are inextricably linked. He wrote:

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is God’s power to save everyone who believes it. It is the power that saves from eternal damnation, from economic exploitation, and from political oppression. . . . It is the only voice telling about a loving Father who gave his Son as a ransom for many. It tells about the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body. It is the Good News to sinful humanity. . . . It is too powerful to be compromised by any social or political system.⁵

Generational Dynamic

There is a generational aspect to tolerance for and expectation of creative disruption that may also be a global phenomenon similar to what motivated Tumsa. I have observed a considerable elasticity in the ecclesiology of those who are “digital natives”—as contrasted with “digital immigrants.” Perhaps this phenomenon is related to the developing world’s nimble witness, missional creativity, and embrace of the poetics of disruption. Those with fewer material investments have smaller portfolios—by portfolios I am referring not only to financial assets, but the entire range of the goods to which one is attached, which one carries (*portare*) through life—those goods that become “bads” when used to violate the First Commandment.

Once while lecturing on this in a classroom of twenty-somethings, I was struck by the extent to which their awareness of creative disruption was textured by the frequency of technological innovation in their lives—the rapid cycles of interruption by its introduction. Their lives—with respect to Diagram A (below)—were rarely lived in the realm of complacency, except when associating with those unfamiliar with new technology and frequent innovation. This acknowledgment seems to suggest that creative disruption is not a concept posited on the axis of liberal or conservative⁶; rather it is posited demographically, namely generationally and geographically.

Institutional Wisdom

One of the most difficult aspects in the calling to lead a Christian organization is the negative consequences of being creatively disruptive in a destructive manner.

Christians are often conditioned, not wrongly, to be peacemakers and bridge-builders who value highly doing things decently and in good order. The normal human aversion to conflict seems amplified in Christ-followers. That one might actively nurture disruption seems contradictory to middle-class Western notions of what it means to be “nice” Christian leaders. The example of Gudina Tumsa and Bonhoeffer⁷—as martyrs, witnesses to a way of the cross in sacrificial service—provides biographical material in support of this observation.

Think of the prayers that liturgical churches pray in Advent: “Stir up your power and come,” and “Stir up your might and come.” These echo the Psalmist, who pleads, “Stir up your might and come to save us. Restore us, O God” (Ps 80:2b/3a). Ponder on what is actually being prayed for here—matters being stirred up.

Consider the prayer Jesus taught His followers and their spiritual descendants to pray, especially the petition, “Your kingdom come.” God’s realm of holiness cannot enter the unholy realms of this earth without some interruption to business as usual, without some scraping, some reordering, turning things upside down. G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) once described the way that the coming of Christianity did not, by any means, do away with the traditional patriarchal family, but merely turned it upside down. Instead of moving from father to mother to child, the Holy Family moved from child (Jesus) to Mother Mary to Father God. He then concludes with a quote that’s become epigrammatic and applied to many other scenarios: “many things are made holy by being turned upside down.”⁸ Those words are worth framing as a reminder above one’s desk.

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Repentance—which typifies daily the Christian life—is itself sometimes seismic and painful and always includes, humanly speaking, some element of loss, some facing of hard truth: “There can be no redemption unless the truth about the world is told and justice is done. To treat sin as if it were not there, when in fact it is there, amounts to living as if the world were redeemed when in fact it is not.”⁹

In our devastatingly broken world, Christian leaders must dare to be creatively disruptive of the patterns, lifestyles, cultural habits, excesses, oppression, that are not God-pleasing. True Christian leaders cannot avoid this prophetic dimension. They are called to call individuals, organizations, staffs, the community, and the world to turn around—for Christ’s sake.

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This is not an advocating for being disruptive for its own sake, stirring up dissension for the sake of one’s personal agenda or emotional needs, or to get even; Proverbs 15:18 warns: “Those who are hot-tempered stir up strife.” Rather, we who are in pursuit of excellence, of best practices—of missions that transform hearts, change minds, and renew relationships with forgiveness—must ourselves be transformed by rekindling “the gift of God that is within you” (2 Tim 1:6). The verb “rekindle” in biblical Greek comprises three words: *ana* (again), *zōe* (life), *pureo* (to burn). To “rekindle” is to burn back to life, to restore the fire (Ps 80:3), to relight or reignite the fire, to resurrect, *ana-stasis*, to light the fire that helps others to see their way forward. That is a responsibility of the leader.

Creative disruption:

- surgical, not random
- scalpel, not sledgehammer
- managed, not unintentional
- careful, not reckless
- prayerful, not self-sufficient
- missional, not self-indulgent
- systemic, not atomistic
- complex, not simplistic
- pruning, not cutting
- generative, not destructive
- oxygenizing, not suffocating
- life-giving, not death-dealing

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Tips in Truth Speaking and Creative Disruption from John the Baptizer

(Luke 3:1–20)

What can truth speakers learn from the ministry of this grasshopper-eating, camel-hair wearing, full-throttled eschaton-preparing, Isaiah-echoing, fire-repentance, field-preaching prophet who comes to stir things up?

1. Speaking God’s truth is often unpopular, a solitary activity; don’t be surprised when you feel like a voice crying the wilderness.
2. Truth speakers must avoid both the temptation toward self-righteousness and the traumatizing victimhood of self-pity.
3. Truth speakers often convey their message in metaphors, i.e., the in-filling of valleys, leveling of mountains, straightening of crooked ways, smoothing over of rough places.
4. Truth speakers stir up the established in-circle with diversity so that all flesh sees the salvation of God.

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Rooted in the Death and Resurrection of Jesus

The paramount event of creative disruption is startling and counterintuitive. Even to consider the sequence of events in Holy Week is to contemplate the most epochal, brain-bending, meaning-making moment in world history. While the creative act in Genesis disrupted the primordial chaos of pre-history, this redemptive interruption constitutes an even greater work, according to Martin Chemnitz: “The work of re-creation and rebuilding is greater than the work of creation and building.”¹⁰

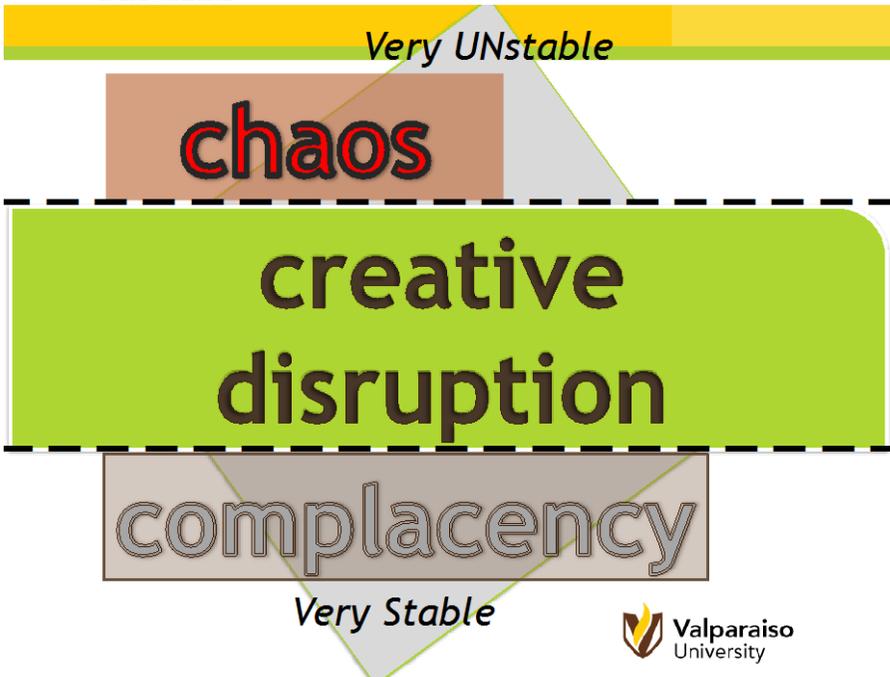
God’s intervention for human salvation happens ironically, even amidst the injustice of Roman colonial violence. There are numerous disruptive implications of Jesus’ death, myriad ways that it disturbs the status quo. The crucifixion shatters human fixations with worldly fascinations—like obtaining material possessions, maintaining political power, or maximizing physical pleasure. The death of the very icon of God, the One whose coming restores fully the divine image in human identity, disrupts our fabrications that attempt to remake God in our own image. The resurrection of Jesus represents an unpredictable intrusion into complacent religiosity. It resists being printed in the bulletin. It is actuarially ridiculous.

Those who believe it are carried away in an unspeakable sway; they shout “Hallelujah.” They are transported by faith, their sanctified imaginations now

redefining reality, incorporating people previously sworn off as off limits. Old boundaries fall away. Lepers or the leper-like are healed by God’s love. Outsiders gain access. The joyless leap in ecstasy. Powerbrokers are broken in repentance. The intimidating territories of the brave and strong no longer terrorize the weak and fearful. Lion and lamb share terrain. Categories no longer exclude. Tax collectors are not only challenged, but by God’s incalculable grace volunteer to change. Privileges are not only upended but willingly surrendered. Idolatrous priorities are forsaken—the energy once committed to selfishness is now redirected for the good of others. Sinners are welcomed home and transformed by an unanticipated hospitality. Fragmented communities discover new forgiveness-fueled friendships. Dying people are loved to a life that goes beyond their last breath. Human dignity is respected at every age and stage of biology, from every mother’s womb to the moment of entrance into Mother Earth’s tomb.

All of this incurs disruption, but it is creative disruption because it ennobles us, calling us to our highest selves and fashioning before our very eyes a portrait of eternity.

DIAGRAM



Endnotes

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

² Robert Kolb, “Contemporary Lutheran Understandings of the Doctrine of Justification,” *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004): 159.

³ There are twice as many Lutherans in Africa as there are on the continent of North America and more Lutherans in two east African nations, Ethiopia and Tanzania, than in Germany. Two summarizing demographic facts add perspective to the typical Western view of Lutheranism: (1) There are more Lutherans alive now than ever in the history of the world, and (2) the average global Lutheran now looks like an Ethiopian.

⁴ Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, Chapter 50. For easy access to the work of Tertullian, see Tertullian and Robert D. Sider, *Christian and Pagan in the Roman Empire: The Witness of Tertullian* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

⁵ Gudina Tumsa, “The Role of a Christian in a Given Society” in Oeyvind Eide, *Revolution & Religion in Ethiopia: The Growth & Persecution of the Mekane Yesus Church, 1974–85* (Oxford: J. Currey, 2000), 200–204. See also Tumsa’s “Memorandum to Ato Emmanuel Abraham, President, ECMY; from Gudina Tumsa, General Secretary, ECMY Re: Some Issues Requiring Discussions and Decisions,” 271–279 in the same volume.

⁶ If, however, we are speaking of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, I have long maintained that the range of the axis is from ultra-conservative to moderate. There are very few in the LCMS who are theologically liberal.

⁷ “There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared, it is itself the great venture and can never be safe. Peace is the opposite of security. To demand guarantees is to mistrust, and this mistrust in turn brings forth war. To look for guarantees is to want to protect oneself. Peace means giving oneself completely to God’s commandment, wanting no security but, in faith and obedience, laying down the destiny of the nations in the hand of Almighty God, not trying to direct it for selfish purposes. Battles are won, not with weapons, but with God. They are won when the way leads to the cross.” Renate Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Brief Life*, trans. K. C. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 34–35.

⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (Rockville, MD: Serenity, 2009), 92.

⁹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 294.

¹⁰ Chemnitz is quoting St. Bernard in *Loci Theologici*, tr. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia, 1989), 154.