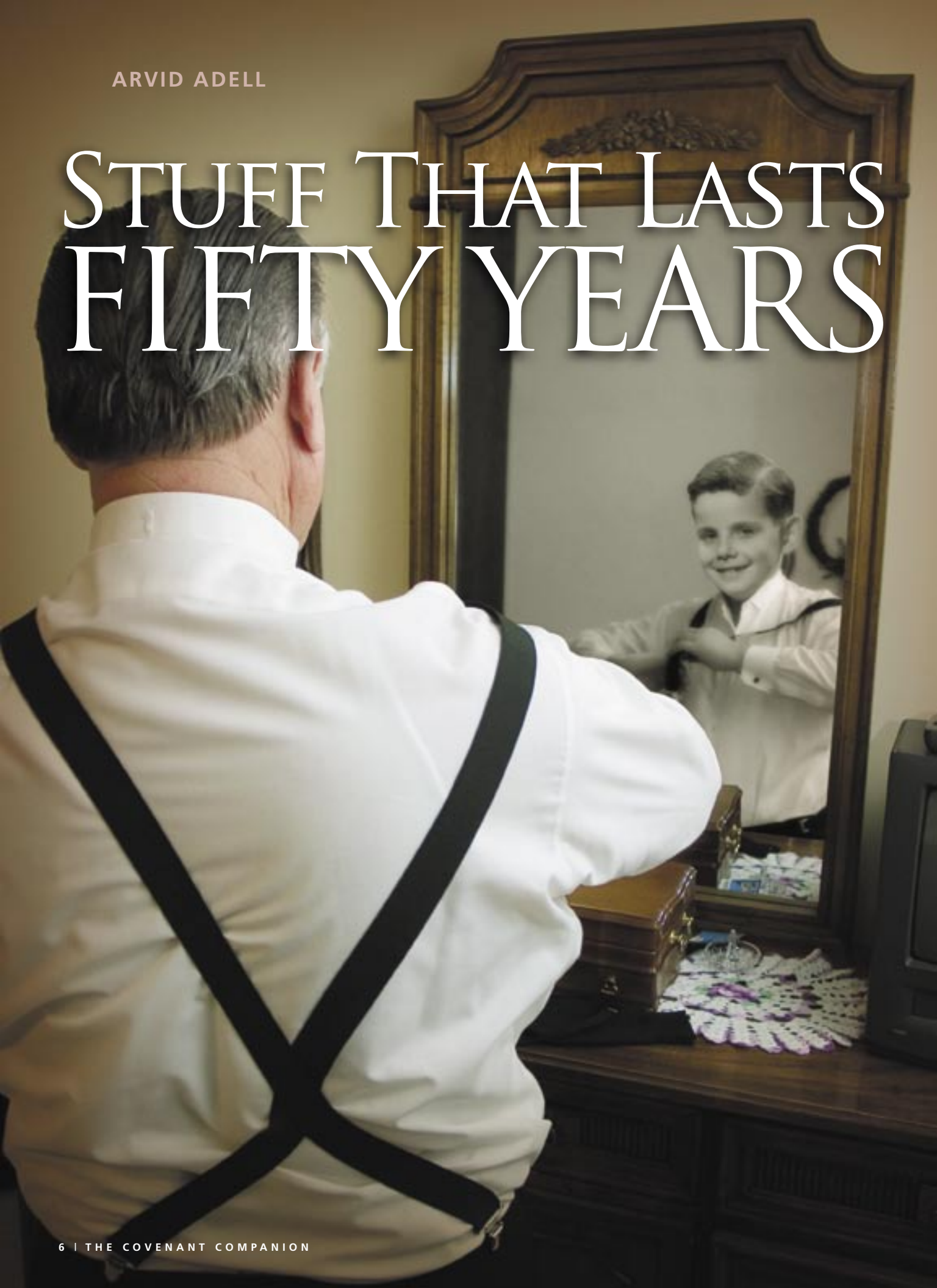


ARVID ADELL

# STUFF THAT LASTS FIFTY YEARS



**T**WO YEARS AGO, I received an invitation from the high school in Essex, Iowa, to attend a special class reunion for the graduates of 1952, 1953, and 1954. The school was so small that they needed to include all three years in order to have enough people to justify calling it a “reunion.” Technically speaking, I didn’t graduate from Essex—but I did make it through my junior year and apparently they were hard up for bodies.

When the invitation arrived I put it aside, figuring if I didn’t make this reunion, there would always be the next one. Then I ran across an old poem chronicling the stages of human existence that convinced me otherwise. It read: “Spills, drills, skills, thrills, bills, ills, pills, and wills.” I reflected where I was on this continuum and decided I better “gather a few rosebuds while I may.” So I went.

I was assigned two roles at the reunion. First, since I was the only person in the three classes who was in the apostolic succession, I was the official pray-er. This meant doing the blessing of the banquet feast and praying for those of our group who had died. There were five in the necrology of my class and I prayed for each of them, including Bob Hurlbert.

When I was finished, Wayne Ryberg stood up and said, “You shouldn’t have prayed for Bob. I bought worms from him two days ago!” Sure enough, Bob was alive and sold worms in a bait store in Denison, Iowa. Now here’s a question for you: How do you rescind a prayer that is already heaven sent? We couldn’t answer that one, so we decided to hold it in escrow. Sooner or later, Bob will need it and it will be there, ready to be activated.

My second role during the reunion was to preach in the Essex Covenant Church in which I was nurtured for nearly a decade. Their pastor called and asked for a sermon title. I was in a feisty mood so I said, “How about ‘The Thesis, Antithesis, and Synthesis of the Resurrection According to the Hegelian Dialectic?’” That, I explained, was the first sermon I preached in my homiletics class in seminary.



There was a significant pause and then he responded.

“I am afraid that won’t work.”

“Well,” I answered, “that’s the same thing Dean Hawkinson said back in 1957.”

After a brief dialogue, he suggested, “How about sharing your experiences from fifty years ago in the Essex Covenant Church?” We both thought this was a good idea, and so the title of the sermon was, “Stuff That Lasts for Fifty Years.”

The sermon was a providential occasion for me. For the last forty years I have been a prodigal son, laboring in the far countries of the Methodists and the Presbyterians. But for the first thirty years of my life, I was as Covenant as anyone could possibly be. I attended her churches, I graduated from North Park Academy, College, and Seminary. I was ordained in the ministry of the Covenant Church and was pastor of the Edgewater Covenant Church in Chicago for five wonderful years.

Now after my sojourn in alien denominations, I was “returning home,” at least for one memorable Sunday. What did I remember about the Covenant? What made it so distinctive?

What influence did it wield over my spiritual odyssey?

I found that there were four things I recalled from my days at Essex Covenant—stuff that has lasted for fifty years.

**T**he first thing I remember is pretty sophisticated. I learned that the church—even the local church—has a divine mandate to ontologize linguistics. Therefore, the church is the most important institution in the whole world; eleven o’clock on Sunday morning is the most important hour in the whole week; and being a preacher is the most important job in the whole universe.

What does it mean to “ontologize linguistics”? It means to use language to create reality.

When I was in graduate school, there was an unending acrimonious debate between two kinds of philosophers: linguistic analysts and metaphysicians. The linguists insisted that language created reality. The meaning of life depends entirely on words, their logical form, and the context in which they are used.

We metaphysicians thought it was the other way around. We said that reality is primary and the task of language is merely to point to the things that exist. As Augustine wrote, “Language pictures reality.” Things have their own meaning independent of what people think or say. Personally, I thought the linguists were both simple and silly.

Then I remembered a story about a young man who was in love with an

**Arvid Adell, a philosophy professor and ordained minister, teaches in the Tabor School of Business at Millikin University.**

attractive young woman. One moonlit night, the two of them were seated on a bench in the park. Overwhelmed by her beauty and irresistible charm, he blurted, “Will you marry me?” She said “Yes I will!” There was a long period of silence, broken by her asking, “Why don’t you say something?” His response was, “I think I have said way too much already!”

Many of us can relate to that story. All it takes are two life-altering words—“I do!”—and our lives are changed forever and our reality can never be the same. We have ontologized linguistics.

The text for my sermon was from John, chapter two, where a paralyzed man is dropped in front of Jesus. The occasion is a worship service. The text reads, “Jesus was preaching the message to them.” Like us Covenanters, the Jews must have been asking, “Var står det skrivet?”—“Where is it written?”

Also, the congregation must have been very curious: What will Jesus do with this interloper and his friends? What spectacular acts will he perform? Surprisingly, Jesus does nothing. Doesn’t even touch the man. Instead, he talks!

To the paralytic he says, “Your sins are forgiven.” Then after a brief conversation with some scribes, Jesus says, “Take up your mat and walk.” And the man does. The ontology of linguistics—God created the world by speaking. Jesus recreates it the same way.

In preaching the word, in confessing the faith, in the company of believers a new reality comes into being. Paul Holmer put it this way: in worship people speak the language “of” faith, not the language “about” faith. The language “about” faith examines reality; the language “of” faith creates and recreates it. That happened in Capernaum and it happened in a small town in Iowa as well.

**T**he second thing I recollect after fifty years is that there is a categorical difference—as Ar-

istotle would say, a difference of kind and not just degree—between making a decision and making a suggestion. There’s an old saying in sports: “The difference between being a head coach and being an assistant is the difference between making a decision and offering an opinion.”

I learned that the hard way. Back in the 1970s, I was an assistant basketball coach at Millikin University. The job was a piece of cake. I coached junior varsity and the only people who watched our games were my two pre-teen daughters and their friends who were self-appointed cheerleaders even though there was no one in the stands. During the varsity games, I sat on the bench, next to the head coach, and occasionally made suggestions that were mostly ignored. It was a no pressure deal.

My idyllic world of coaching came to an abrupt halt when the head coach had a health issue. For one week I was in charge. First I hired an assistant—the chaplain, who, like myself, was an ordained minister. He didn’t know much about coaching either, but you’d figure between the two of us we would have had some connections that might come in handy.

Unfortunately, our first game was against Augustana, who was ranked number one in the country for division III, and who had recently been featured in *Sports Illustrated*. We made the trek to Carver Arena where the home team had not lost a game that year. Still, there’s always a first time!

The first half was a miracle in the making. We were ahead by several points and I envisioned fame and fortune. “Rookie coach defeats unbeatable super team.”

Then something traumatic happened. Our superstar, largely responsible for our success, picked up his third foul. I called time-out and conferred with my assistant. “Bill, should we take Gary out or leave him in?”

The chaplain’s response was, “I’ll

pray about it.”

Well, the officials had no interest in waiting for a divine command and I had to decide. I took Gary out. Augustana went on a tear. They scored a dozen or more quick points and grabbed an insurmountable lead.

At halftime, on the way to the locker room, Chaplain Bill sided up to me and said, “Coach, I just heard from the Lord. He said, ‘Leave him in!’”

At Essex Covenant Church, we learned that to be a Christian meant to make a decision, not a suggestion. We were continually confronted with the invitation to take a leap of faith, to make a public confession, to respond affirmatively to the promptings of God’s Holy Spirit.

Of course, even a good thing can be overdone. A wise old church deacon took me aside after my fourth or fifth response to an altar call and observed that everyone knew where I stood and now was the time to live it.

In Mark 2, the paralytic is carried to Jesus by four men. One can only imagine how difficult it must have been for these friends to decide whether to make the venture. The incident occurs in the early part of Jesus’s ministry. There is a rumor that Jesus can heal; perhaps he’s the genuine article. On the other hand, there have been many charlatans who have claimed magical powers. Should they risk making fools of themselves and dashing the slim hopes of the paralytic? What should they do?

Surely suggestions came from many of their acquaintances. Go! Don’t go! Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus is the young man from next door. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? It is very unlikely that this man we knew as a kid is the Savior. Why not do some research? Why not wait until we know more about him? Suggestions are easy and cheap. Decisions are hard and costly. After the opinions are in, these men must decide. They do. They decide to take the gamble. And the paralytic is miraculously healed.

## In preaching the word, in confessing the faith, in the company of believers a new reality comes into being.

It is not ideas about God and Jesus that make the difference: it is the presence of our Lord.

The fourth thing I learned some fifty years ago is that the church has the ability and the mandate to practice surrogate faith.

Immediately before Jesus heals the man on the mat, we find this comment about the paralytic's four friends: "When he saw their faith, he said, 'My son, your sins are forgiven; take up your mat and walk.'"

I call this surrogate faith—faith the church holds in escrow for those who have lost or never been able to find it in the first place.

Probably all of you practice surrogate faith for someone who needs it—a spouse, a child, a parent, another student, an acquaintance. Life has a way of temporarily paralyzing most of us at some time or another. Like this helpless man, we need someone like these four friends to keep the faith for us, to bring us to the rejuvenating Christ so we can hear his words of healing.

I have a friend who was pastor of a church in the Midwest. One Sunday he stood in the pulpit and shocked the congregation by stating he couldn't preach. A personal problem made it impossible for him to embrace the good news, much less try to proclaim it.

What did the church do? Did they fire him? Or insist he take a temporary leave without pay? Or report him to his superiors?

None of the above. Instead, they took over his ministry for him and kept the faith for him. After a few weeks, my friend got up off his mat, his sins forgiven, and became a prominent, successful minister.

After I preached at the Essex Covenant Church, an older member of the church commented, "Well, I never thought you would become a preacher!"

When I ask why, he said, "You were kind of ornery."

"Don't you mean creative or a bit feisty?" I asked.

"Nope, I mean full of mischief," he replied. Then he reminded me of the time a guest preacher came to church when I was growing up and spoke on the stoning of Stephen from the book of Acts. That guest preacher decided to act out throwing stones at the people in the pews. The old man smiled at the memory, then said, "And you boys pretended that you caught them and then threw them right back at him in the pulpit."

I did remember that. Our play action caught the attention of everyone who was there, including my mother, who again that day demonstrated that there was more than one use for a good ping-pong paddle.

The old saint reminded me of that incident, added a couple of others, and then offered an editorial. "No matter how bad you kids were, we still had faith you'd turn out OK and I guess you have." Often surrogate faith works.

That's what I remember from fifty years ago. The church can ontologize linguistics and therefore it is the most important institution in the world. There is a categorical difference between making a decision and offering a suggestion. The purpose of worship is to experience the presence of God in Christ. And we are called to practice surrogate faith for a world that has lost it.

Stuff like that lasts for at least fifty years, and maybe forever. □

The third thing I recall learning in the Essex Covenant Church five decades ago is that God is not so much a concept to be understood as a presence to be encountered.

Søren Kierkegaard, who most certainly would have been a Covenant Pietist had he been born in Sweden instead of Denmark, was asked if he knew any good arguments for the existence of God. He replied that he never argued about such matters. When his interrogator asked why, he answered, "It is very rude to argue about someone's existence in their presence."

In our church, we never engaged in disputes about the existence of God or other theological matters—at least not on Sunday mornings. Once a visiting preacher fresh out of seminary tried to instruct us in the ways of biblical criticism. He suggested that we consider the book of Jonah to be a parable rather than a historical narrative—figuratively, but not literally true. That didn't work.

Afterwards angry laypersons confronted him, quoting Billy Graham (so they said) that "they would believe that Jonah swallowed the whale if the Bible said so." End of biblical criticism!

We didn't go to church to hear a lecture nor to attempt to demythologize the Scriptures, but to feel the presence of God and to experience, perhaps mystically, the reality of Christ. Of course it didn't always happen, but the times it did were life transforming.

In our Scripture, a confrontation occurs between Jesus and the learned "teachers of the Law." Jesus forgives the paralytic's sins and is accused of blasphemy: "Only God can forgive sins."

Notice Jesus's response. Instead of disputing, he apparently concedes their point and proceeds to show he can heal both the body and the soul. When the paralytic experiences the forgiveness of his sins and also takes up his mat and walks, no one can deny that they are in the presence of God. "God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself."