



# Irresistible Grace

Ordained  
Servant  
April 2024

# Ordained Servant Online

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**CURRENT ISSUE: IRRESISTIBLE GRACE**

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### *From the Editor*

Aaron Mize brings a different biblical theological perspective to Eve and the presence of irresistible grace in his article “The Church’s Desire toward Christ Her Sin Offering in Genesis 3:16.” He summarizes his thesis: “Genesis 3:16, immediately following Genesis 3:15, is not speaking about an issue between Adam and Eve in their marriage relationship. It is concerned with the church and the Last Adam.”

I offer chapter 13 of *The Voice of the Good Shepherd* on the topic of ways for preachers to develop their preaching to keep it fresh and always improving in “Cultivate Your Preaching.” I explore what it means to open the Word. I also show the importance of telling the story of redemption with a simple and direct style in compelling language, all the while pointing the hearers to God through Jesus.

Allen C. Tomlinson, review article, “On the Matter of Worship,” reviews *Worship Matters* by Cornelis Van Dam. This book covers all the basics on this important topic.

Charles M. Wingard reviews *C. S. Lewis in America: Readings and Reception, 1935–1947* by Mark A. Noll. Lewis has been warmly received across denominational lines for nearly ninety years. Bringing literary, theological, and intellectual gravitas to the believing churches, Lewis has some serious differences with aspects of the theology of confessional churches.

For poets who are not afraid of revealing the influence of other poets—no poet is without influence—a poem responding to a notable poem of a great poet is an educational pleasure. James Lee does this admirably in his lyrical response to Robert Penn Warren’s *Audubon: A Vision*. Many critics have noted that this long poem marks the beginning of Warren’s greatness as a writer. It has been compared to the mythical qualities of the ancient Greek poets. It is really a series of poems linked together to reflect on John James Audubon’s life (1785–1851). The seven poems, similar to Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, have a number of parts, with the exception of III and VI. The ethical concerns of Warren allow Lee to add a spiritual twist to those concerns.

The cover this month is Brookside Congregational Church, which began as an outgrowth of First Congregational Church in Manchester, New Hampshire in 1844. In 1957 the congregation accepted the offer of Mary Manning’s ten acre estate for the construction of a new building, first used for worship in 1960. The design is Georgian Revival. The youth choir of my South Main Street Congregational Church used to sing

with their youth choir. Sadly, the gospel has disappeared long ago. It is just ten blocks from our own Amoskeag Presbyterian Church (OPC).

Blessings in the Lamb,  
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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- “John Knox and the Reformation of Worship.” (Gregory E. Reynolds) 23 (2014): 33–40.
- “Reforming Presbyterian Worship.” (D. G. Hart & John R. Muether) 9:4 (Oct. 2000): 84–85.
- “What is a Worship Service?” (Larry Wilson) 10:3 (Jul. 2001): 53–54.

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*Ordained Servant* exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

# Servant Word

## The Church's Desire toward Christ Her Sin Offering in Genesis 3:16

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By Aaron P. Mize

Geerhardus Vos, speaking of biblical theology and the organic-progressive nature of special revelation, said:

From the beginning all redeeming acts of God aim at the creation and introduction of this new organic principle, which is none other than Christ. All Old Testament redemption is but the saving activity of God working toward the realization of this goal, the great supernatural prelude to the Incarnation and the Atonement.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this article is to follow the biblical, theological thread of Scripture, conveying its progressive and unfolding nature on Christ as its substance and goal, seen primarily in Revelation 12 and its connection to Genesis 3. Put succinctly, Genesis 3:16, in the immediate context of 3:15 with its focus on the promised Messiah, and in the broader context of its interpretation in Revelation 12:2, presents the relation between the promised Last Adam and his church. This reading of the text challenges many traditional readings that reduce the focus of the verse to the marital relation between Adam and Eve.

Revelation 12:2, reflecting on Genesis 3:16 and related texts, describes a woman laboring in the anguish of childbirth as a great red dragon stands before her ready to devour the child when he is born. The woman does not represent any single individual; she represents the faithful covenant community of the church. Such a conclusion arises initially from the description and allusions in the Old Testament that conceive of Israel as pregnant.<sup>2</sup>

Revelation 12:1–2 is really the redemptive historical narrative of the people of God awaiting the birth of the promised Messiah. In the trial of waiting for their deliverer, who was promised in Genesis 3:15, they are persecuted by the serpent and his offspring who stand ready to devour the child. Revelation 12:5 then speaks of the male child being born and taken up into heaven to God and his throne, and the dragon who consequently pursues the woman to make war on her and her offspring. Revelation 12:5 then is the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ in one verse. So the woman can be said

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<sup>1</sup> Geerhardus Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," in *Redemptive History and Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Several biblical texts make clear this leitmotif that sheds light on our understanding of Revelation 12:1–2 along these very lines: Isa. 26:17–18; 66:7–9; Mic. 4:9–10; 5:3.

to represent the one persecuted covenant community of faith from the Old and New Testaments.

Of the many Old Testament allusions present in this section of Revelation, one stands out as the primary focus: Genesis 3:15–16. Here we see that the entire canon of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, is framed as a woman, her offspring, and a serpent. Just as we can read of pre-fall Adam as a type of the person and work of Jesus Christ the second Adam, so, too, we can understand more about Eve and how she also represents the covenant community of faith. <sup>3</sup>So while holding to the view of the historical Eve who was created supernaturally by the Lord from the side of Adam, and in light of the organic character of progressive revelation, the woman of Revelation 12 can and does help us better understand the narrative regarding the first woman Eve, mother of the living.

In Revelation 12:2 the woman who is symbolically representing the one covenant community from the old and new covenants is described as being “pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.” The Greek word translated here as “agony” is the verb βασανίζω (*basanizō*). It can mean, “to subject to punitive judicial procedure, torture, to subject to severe distress, torment, harass.”<sup>4</sup> The verb is used in several places of the New Testament to describe persecution or trial. For example, consider the italics in the following passages:

And behold, they cried out, “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to *torment* us before the time?” (Matt. 8:29)

And he saw that they were making headway *painfully*, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them . . . (Mark 6:48)

(For as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was *tormenting* his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard) . . . (2 Pet. 2:8)

They were allowed to *torment* them for five months, but not to kill them, and their *torment* was like the *torment* of a scorpion when it stings someone. (Rev. 9:5)

And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a *torment* to those who dwell on the earth. (Rev. 11:10)

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine writes of the symbolic meaning of Genesis 3:16: “There is no question about the punishment of the woman. For she clearly has her pains and sighs multiplied in the woes of this life. Although her bearing her children in pain is fulfilled in this visible woman, our consideration should nevertheless be recalled to that more hidden woman. For even in animals the females bear offspring with pain, and this is in their case the condition of mortality rather than the punishment of sin. Hence, it is possible that this be the condition of mortal bodies even in the female of humans. But this is the great punishment: they have come to the present bodily mortality from their former immortality.” Augustine, *Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichaeans*. Fathers of the Church: A New Translation 84, trans. Ronald J. Teske (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1947), 123.

<sup>4</sup> A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, eds., William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), s.v. “βασανίζω.”

These birth-pangs are then the persecution caused by the great red dragon, identified in Revelation 12:9 as, “that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.” Satan stands before the woman ready to devour the Christ-child who is born and “who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron” (Rev. 12:5). The serpent hates this Son of Man because he knows that the person and work of the Son born to the woman guarantees his doom. The dragon knows that this is the one spoken of in the protoevangelium of Genesis 3:15 who will bruise (crush or strike) his head. The dragon knows that this is the one spoken of in Isaiah 27:1, “In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.” And so he rages against God and the divine Son of God. He sweeps a third of the stars from heaven in his malice. Stars here refer to the offspring of Abraham who was promised that his offspring would be multiplied “as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore” (Gen. 22:17).<sup>5</sup>

After the Christ-child is born and is taken up to the throne of God, the woman flees into the desert wilderness which is the redemptive historical place of testing and trial.<sup>6</sup> She is pursued by the dragon, who in his fury, knowing that his time is short and doom is sure, goes to “make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (Rev. 12:17). The woman then is clearly the persecuted church, representing the prophetic (Old Testament) and apostolic (New Testament) witness to the person and work of Christ and the deeper conflict between the Serpent and his offspring and the righteous offspring of the covenant community.

Understanding the broader meaning of the woman in Revelation 12 helps us to understand the broader symbolism of Eve in Genesis 3. That is not to say that Eve was not a historical person and the first woman of creation. She was supernaturally created out of Adam’s side as the first woman. One cannot stress the historicity of both Adam and Eve enough. Without them there cannot be a gospel. However, there is also a deeper structure that needs to be exegeted to shed light on some of the mystery surrounding Eve. This article is seeking to pull out the biblical theological significance on a broader scale. If the woman of Revelation 12 is symbolic of the covenant community, awaiting the promised offspring (also having other offspring), while being tormented by the serpent and his offspring, then the same can be said about Eve in Genesis 3.

Before focusing again on Genesis 3:15–16 in light of what we have seen in Revelation 12, let us consider the overall context. The serpent has entered the temple sanctuary of Eden. His malicious and blasphemous strategy is to undermine God’s Word to Adam and Eve, who bear God’s image,<sup>7</sup> and to call into question the glory of God’s righteous character. The serpent goes to the woman and deceives her while the man

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<sup>5</sup> See also Genesis 15:5 and Matthew 13:42. Daniel 8:10 also speaks of stars being cast down by a beast and trampled upon in the last days, while Daniel 12:3 identifies those stars as God’s covenant people.

<sup>6</sup> See Deuteronomy 8:3, Exodus 16:2–3.

<sup>7</sup> “It is self-evident that by ‘image of God’ is expressed what is characteristic of man and his relation to God. That he is God’s image distinguishes him from animals and all other creatures. In the idea that one forms of the image is reflected one’s idea of the religious state of man and of the essence of religion itself.” Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. and ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012-2014), 2:12.

stands silently by until he also joins the woman in eating the fruit that the Lord had commanded him not to eat. God then comes to them in judgment. Judgment against the serpent. Judgment against Adam and Eve. He summons them before him as they hide from his face. They hide from the judgment of the Lord like the unbelieving earth dwellers are said to hide in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains in Revelation 6:16–17, pleading in their distress to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”

The Great Day of the Lord has come in the garden temple, and God summons all to stand before him and to give an account. God addresses the serpent first:

The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” (Gen. 3:14–15)

It is within this judgment against the serpent that we get the first light of gospel hope. God promises that the enmity that now corrupts his image bearers, which is directed toward him, will be redirected toward the serpent. There will be hostility, or hatred, between the woman and the serpent, and between the woman’s offspring and the serpent’s offspring. This sounds strikingly similar to Revelation 12.

God then turns to the woman after pronouncing judgment on the serpent and says something that is widely misunderstood:

To the woman he said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.” (Gen. 3:16)

We can understand the words of the Lord toward the woman by remembering how the woman of Revelation 12 also brought forth children in the pain of persecution. This is the enmity between the offspring of the serpent and the offspring of the woman played out. Eve truly experiences the most painful aspect of child bearing when Cain her oldest son, murders Abel, her youngest son. This is the serpent seed persecuting the seed of the woman as foretold in Genesis 3:15. This enmity is recapitulated over and over throughout redemptive history. Think of Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Shem and Ham, Isaac and Ishmael, David and Saul. Mary, the mother of Jesus, experiences the same pain at the cross. It recalls the words spoken to her by Simeon in Luke 2:35, “a sword will pierce through your own soul also.” This is the persecution of the serpent and his seed against the seed of the woman. This is the agony of childbearing that is being described in Genesis 3:16 and Revelation 12:2 as she awaits the coming of a suffering Messiah who will redeem the woman and her offspring by crushing the serpent’s head through the bruising of his own heel.

When we come to Genesis 3:16 everything said so far must be kept in mind; we must read it in light of the history of special revelation which focuses on Christ and his church. The last part of the verse in particular has been interpreted in various ways, many of them

problematic and unhelpful because they assume there is conflict between Adam and Eve and miss the redemptive focus between Eve and Christ. The text says, “Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.” The word translated here as “husband” (ish, וְיָאֵשׁ) is translated as “man” the majority of the time. In light of the context, it would be better translated as “man,” not referring to Adam her husband, but to the Messianic Champion who was just promised in Genesis 3:15.

Moreover, the next time this noun is used is when Eve exclaims in gospel filled hope that she has, “gotten a *man* (ish, וְיָאֵשׁ) with the help of the LORD” (Gen. 4:1). Eve is expecting the male offspring who will come from her body and crush the head of the serpent. In her heart and mind she presumes that Cain is the one promised. The reality turns out to be more sinister. Cain becomes the first of the serpent’s seed, the first antichrist figure who manifests enmity and malice toward righteous Abel “at the altar of worship.”<sup>8</sup> Climactically, Cain eventually murders his brother in the field, “because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous” (1 John 3:12).

Before Cain murders his brother Abel, and after the brothers present their offerings to the Lord, God speaks to Cain in Genesis 4:7. Understanding this verse correctly sheds light on how to interpret Genesis 3:16, because it is in Genesis 4:7 that we find the parallel verse to 3:16: “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.” This verse, like its counterpart in Genesis 3:16 has been often misunderstood. If you cannot make sense of one, you will not make sense of the other.

In Hebrew, the word for sin and sin offering חַטָּאת (*chattā’t*) are identical. The meaning is determined once again by context, which is the offering of sacrifice at the door of Eden. Moreover the Hebrew word translated as crouching (*rābatz*, רָבַץ) is used of animals lying down in green pastures. Michael Morales writes,

Conceivably, then, it was to the original sanctuary door, the gate of Eden guarded by cherubim, that Cain and Abel would have brought their offerings. Indeed, an alternative translation of Genesis 4:7, once common, makes this door the probable referent in YHWH’s address to Cain, reading ‘a sin offering lies at the door/entrance [petah]’ (rather than ‘sin crouches at the door’, as in the door of Cain’s heart or tent). In Hebrew both ‘sin’ and ‘sin offering’ are rendered by the same word (חַטָּאת), the meaning of which must be determined by context, and the participle rendered ‘crouching’ or ‘lurking’ (רֹבֵֿץ) by some translations is, in fact, more commonly used in the Hebrew Bible with reference to an animal lying down tranquilly. Psalm 23, for example, expresses the psalmist’s reflection upon YHWH as shepherd with this same word: ‘he makes me lie down [rbs] in green pastures’. It could be,

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<sup>8</sup> Meredith Kline writes, “Cain’s murder of Abel was not the upshot of a merely social or civil disagreement. It was in the cult, at the altar of worship, that enmity had broken out. Cain’s hatred flared when the Lord exposed the hypocrisy of his act of worship. It was because he was still in league with the deceitful serpent that he could not be accepted at the sacred place. Cain’s quarrel was with the Lord God, and with Abel as the one accepted by the Lord. This violence was an erupting of the predicted conflict between the serpent’s seed and the seed of the woman. Ominous indeed that the spiritual source at the origin of the city of man was the spirit of Cain, devilish and antichrist.” Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 182.



then, that YHWH had revealed to Cain the means by which he might be restored to divine fellowship, precisely the same means he would later reveal to Israel through Moses in the book of Leviticus: a sin offering at the sanctuary doorway.<sup>9</sup>

So if one reads “sin offering” in place of sin which is a viable translation, what we have before us is God graciously revealing to Cain the means by which he himself might be restored. What is offered to Cain is the righteous, sacrificial offering of another at the door of Eden before the flaming sword of judgment. In other words, Genesis 4:7 is the second instance (following Genesis 3:21 and the garments of animal skins made for Adam and Eve) of substitutionary atonement. It is the sin offering of righteous Abel that lies at the door. Its desire is toward Cain, or for Cain, and Cain must rule “with” or “in” it<sup>10</sup> in the way that the saints reign with the Lamb that was slain for their sins (Rev. 5:9–10). The righteous offering of another could restore Cain to divine fellowship and lift his gaze from the cursed earth to the heaven of heavens. Abel and his sacrifice typifies Christ and his high priestly office, Christ the unblemished Lamb of God whose blood “speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Hebrews 12:24) because it says, “it is finished.” (John 19:30)

Seeing how the same language is used in Genesis 4:7 and applying what we have discovered to Genesis 3:16, what we have is this, “Your desire will be toward your man (the Messianic-Redeemer-Offspring who will deliver her from her sins as a sin offering and by the bruising of his heel in crushing the serpents head), and he shall rule with you.”

In summary, Genesis 3:16, immediately following Genesis 3:15, is not speaking about an issue between Adam and Eve in their marriage relationship. It is concerned with the church and the Last Adam. It is speaking of the hope of the gospel for the covenant community typified in Eve, a community in a wilderness world persecuted by the dragon and the curse. Living on this side of the cross, we do not have to wonder when our hope will manifest and accomplish our redemption. It has already been accomplished in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who by his death and resurrection has secured the church’s salvation and seated us in the heavenly places to reign with the Living One who died, and is “alive forevermore” (Rev. 1:18).

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<sup>9</sup> L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*. New Studies in Biblical Theology 37. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 57.

<sup>10</sup> The Hebrew particle  $\text{אִתּוֹ}$  can be translated as “in” or “with.”

# Servant Word

## The Voice of the Good Shepherd: Cultivate Your Preaching, Chapter 13<sup>1</sup>

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By Gregory Edward Reynolds

*Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.*

—1 Timothy 4:13

*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.*

—2 Timothy 2:15

*Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.*

—2 Timothy 4:2

*The person today who cannot read a Shakespearean sonnet with pleasure or understanding can learn. . . . To preach the Word of God well, one must already have cultivated, at a minimum, three sensibilities: the sensibility of the close reading of texts, the sensibility of composed communication, and the sensibility of the significant.*

—T. David Gordon<sup>2</sup>

### Open the Word

The Word alone nurtures true Christian piety. In this world of late modernity, we must emphasize that God's Word is absolutely true. It is his infallible Word, and it is thus to be believed because it is true; believed because God has spoken. Many evangelicals claim that there is no absolute truth. So the idol of tolerance has even infected the church. Furthermore, the gospel is utterly unique; it is the only way of salvation. "And there is

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Gregory E. Reynolds, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Preaching in the Electronic Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 386–98.

<sup>2</sup> T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 106.

salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Although it may seem to contradict my emphasis on the importance of orality in the preacher’s life and ministry, the preacher must ever be a man of letters—a man saturated with the Word and widely read. McLuhan once observed that as the printed word has lost its monopoly as a channel of information, “it has acquired new interest as a tool in the training of perception.”<sup>3</sup> McLuhan was a professor of English and a literary critic before he became a media critic. The preacher must not stand above the Bible as an analyst but be absorbed by it as the environment of thought and life into which the risen Lord draws us by his grace.<sup>4</sup>

If the Bible is essentially a book written to preserve its oral message to God’s people, then sticking closely to the text will enhance orality, not diminish it, especially when we seek and discover the sermon already in the text.<sup>5</sup> The text’s own organization should be our cue in sermon preparation. Furthermore, this will provide a continual, living example for the congregation of hearers of how to hear, read, and understand God’s Word.

As the quote above by T. David Gordon indicates, the preacher must cultivate “three sensibilities: the sensibility of the close reading of texts, the sensibility of composed communication, and the sensibility of the significant.” Orality and literacy must work in tandem; one without the other will impoverish our preaching.

Teach the doctrines of the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). Using the catechisms and confessions of the church help people to see how the system of doctrine is rooted in and discovered in the text of Scripture. Every sermon should be full of doctrine but not a doctrinal lecture. Without the Word the preacher has nothing to say.

### **Tell the Story of Redemption<sup>6</sup>**

As we saw in the last chapter, “There are no ‘modern’ preachers; there are only preachers.”<sup>7</sup> With Paul and John we are in the final, that is eschatological, epoch of redemptive history. However, this does not eliminate the challenges that the preacher faces in our unique cultural situation. The biblical response to that challenge is exemplified by Paul in terms of his approach to the two different audiences: the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, and the pagan forum in Athens. The era of electronic communication media represents a unique challenge to the preacher in our new century. But, as with Paul, our situation demands that we tell the story of redemption. The centrality of narrative in the Bible cannot be overemphasized. The covenantal structure of the entire Bible places the narrative text in the context of God’s plan and work of redemption. Every other biblical genre is rooted in that covenantal narrative. For example, many Psalms were written about the historical event of the Exodus (e.g. Pss. 78,

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<sup>3</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Counterblast* (London: Rapp & Whiting, 1969), 99.

<sup>4</sup> Joel Nederhood, “Effective Preaching in a Media Age,” class notes, Westminster Seminary California, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Dave McClellan with Karen McClellan, *Preaching by Ear: Speaking God’s Truth from the Inside Out* (Wooster, OH: Weaver, 2014), 114.

<sup>6</sup> This section is a slight modification of the original based on Gregory E. Reynolds, “Preachers: Tell the Story of Redemption!” *Kerux: A Journal of Biblical Theological Preaching* 15:3 (Dec. 2000): 26–30.

<sup>7</sup> Charles G. Dennison, “Preaching and Application: A Review,” *Kerux: A Journal of Biblical Theological Preaching* 4:3 (Dec. 1989): 52.

80, 81, 105, 106, 114, 135, 136). Thus, we should not be surprised to find New Testament preaching focusing on the story of redemption, even when it is given to an audience that has only natural revelation at its disposal. Without the Gospel-Acts narratives, for example, the epistles are meaningless.

The importance of storytelling in the ancient world has been largely overlooked by Reformed preachers. The reaction to evangelical anecdotal preaching has left a void which needs to be filled. In the orally-aurally oriented culture of the ancient world, where personal possession of “books” was rare, storytelling was the primary means of propagating and transmitting and remembering tradition. “Oral people tend to see truth in the context of story. . . . Stories are how we organized ideas without ink.”<sup>8</sup> This appears to have been the case during the millennia from Adam’s fall to the Mosaic revelation. The increase of oral-aural sensibilities in the electronic age is a providential prod to call us to return to the power of the story of redemption to impress the souls of our hearers.

Those, like Neil Postman, who sought to fend off the purposelessness, dumbing down, and evacuation of public education, affirm the transcendent value and necessity of the great narratives, of which Christianity is one.<sup>9</sup> But the church itself has atomized Scripture by quoting proof-texts and taking Scripture’s stories and examples and using them as if they came out of nowhere. We have eviscerated the Scripture by tearing apart the single story of redemption into little timeless pieces, used for moral lessons and schemes for successful living. The power of the great epochal narrative of redemption thus disappears. With Christ at its center every text has a location in that history, as Jesus reminds the disciples on the Emmaus Road (Luke 24).

To call it a *story* does not necessarily imply fiction. It is a single history with a beginning and an end. It is a true story. It is full of characters and concrete detail, full of interest and told by the great Raconteur, the Holy Spirit, to reveal the original hero, Jesus Christ. The narrative power of television and cinema as the great storytellers of our time can only be countered by the story of redemption in the Bible. The story line of the Bible is the structure of the whole. The electronic media, especially television and film, narrate the stories of a lost world seeking transcendence apart from God, and thus disciple the world. The church needs to be discipling God’s people in the story of salvation. God has spoken. God has entered history. The self-attesting Christ of Scripture is his final Word to this present evil age.

“Biblical theology imparts a new life and freshness to the old truth by placing it in its original historic setting. The Bible is not a handbook of dogmatics: it is a historical book full of dramatic interest.”<sup>10</sup> Biblical theology represents the interface between the text of Scripture and our system of theology. It is, after all, God’s way of accounting for his redemptive acts in history. Thus, far from being a threat to either systematic theology or supernaturalism, biblical theology lends cohesiveness and coherence to the orthodox account of truth. Without systematic theology, biblical theology will tend toward

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<sup>8</sup> McClellan, *Preaching by Ear*, 97.

<sup>9</sup> Neil Postman, *The End of Education* (New York: Knopf, 1995). Cf. *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Dell, 1969); *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (New York: Dell, 1979); *The Disappearance of Childhood* (London: Allen, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> Geerhardus Vos, “The Nature and Aims of Biblical Theology,” *Kerux: A Journal of Biblical Theological Preaching* 14/1 (May 1999): 7. Originally from *The Union Seminary Magazine* 13/3 (February-March 1902): 194–99.

immanentism; without biblical theology, systematic theology will tend toward mere abstraction.<sup>11</sup>

Immanentism in all its forms, including evolutionary thought, and process theology's idea that God is himself developing, is best answered on its own grounds: the historical. The "history of special revelation" is the divinely given account of the way in which the absolutely transcendent creator God has acted in history through the vehicle of his covenants. Ultimately all forms of immanentism fail to find meaning and direction in history for the very reason that, in seeking concreteness in the historical, it has no reference point by which to interpret the very history it investigates. Only the covenant theology of the Bible presents the absolute One and history together. It

grants us a new vision of the glory of God. As eternal, he lives above the sphere of history. He is the Being, and not the becoming one. But, since for our salvation he has condescended to work and speak in the form of time, and thus to make his work and his speech partake of the peculiar glory that belongs to all organic growth, we must also seek to know him as the One that is, that was, and that is to come, in order that our theology may adequately perform its function of glorifying God in every mode of his self-revelation to us.<sup>12</sup>

For the preacher there is no other theology which will answer his practical purposes in the church.

The knowledge of God communicated by it [the historic character of revelation] is nowhere for a purely intellectual purpose. From beginning to end it is intended to enter into the actual life of man. Hence God has interwoven his revelation with the historic life of the chosen race, so as to secure for it a practical form in all its parts. This principle has found its clearest expression in the idea of the covenant as the form of God's self-revelation to Israel. The covenant is an all-comprehensive communion of life, in which every self-disclosure is made subservient to a practical end.<sup>13</sup>

And yet at once the practicality of this historical concreteness stands as a most needed corrective to the subjectivism of our age and of the church which has taken on too much of the world's mindset in this department.

Sacred history deals with the redemptive realities created by the supernatural activity of God. Biblical theology deals with the redemptive knowledge communicated in order to interpret these realities. . . . Revelation is designed to prepare, to accompany, and to interpret the great objective redemptive acts of God, such as the incarnation, the atonement, the resurrection. It is not intended to follow the subjective appropriation of redemption in its further course.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that abstraction is a necessary part of the human thought process. It is when this process in theological reasoning is not rooted in history, that it leads to the kind of abstraction with which I am concerned here.

<sup>12</sup> Vos, "The Nature and Aims of Biblical Theology," 8.

<sup>13</sup> Vos, "The Nature and Aims of Biblical Theology," 5.

<sup>14</sup> Vos, "The Nature and Aims of Biblical Theology," 4–5.

It is primarily by the work of the Holy Spirit through preaching of the Word that this “subjective appropriation of redemption” is carried on.

The faithful preacher will demonstrate from every text of Scripture the connection of his hearers to the history of redemption. “Practical” in this context is not to be understood as advocating the kind of “world-catering” application to which many preachers give the same label. In our day, “practical” often means meeting the so-called “needs” of people who are wedded to this world. In this false construction the gospel becomes another program for promoting self-help and self-esteem. The practical nature of the covenant of grace is found in its revolutionary altering of the entire orientation and framework of the believer, who is connected by Christ to heavenly reality. “Seek first the kingdom of God” (Matt. 6:33). The world’s order of concerns is reversed. The source of this reversal is the present historical situation in which the Christ has come and reigns from his heavenly throne, guiding history towards its consummation. The preacher will therefore avoid co-opting the gospel for a surreptitiously idolatrous agenda in the church, which is being promoted with renewed vigor through the new electronic means.

The subject-object distinction of the Cartesian worldview tends toward logical sequential formulations in which discreet realities are abstracted from their context. The history of redemption brings subject and object together, without the relativizing tendency of postmodern alternatives to the Cartesian model. Unlike the “meta-languages” of structuralism, post structuralism, deconstruction, and all earth-bound attempts to describe the world, the narrative of redemption functions as *the* metanarrative by which all others are to be interpreted and judged.

Truly there are no biblical-theological preachers, only preachers. Preachers who do not tell the story of redemption are not preachers in the biblical sense. The preaching in the book of Acts exemplifies this emphasis.

### **Be Simple and Direct: Preach with Purpose**

*The Westminster Larger Catechism* (Q. #159), as we have noted, tells the preacher to preach “plainly,” using 1 Corinthians 14:19 as its proof text: “in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.” The catechism enjoins preachers to apply “themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers.” Paul took the ability of his hearers into account. “I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready” (1 Cor. 3:2). The Puritans, with all their immense learning—and they were among the most learned men of their times—were known for their “plain speaking” in the pulpit. William Perkins, in *The Art of Prophesying* (1592), concludes, “To speak plainly is to be charged with telling the truth in the moment. The plain style puts the emphasis on a natural voice, but it does so with great enthusiasm for the drama of the Word.”<sup>15</sup>

We must take special care with the language of theology and common Christian parlance. Some approach this problem by avoiding the use of terms like “propitiation” or “regeneration” altogether. This is a grave mistake. But it is also a serious error to use these words without explaining them in a vivid, plain, and memorable way. Never assume, especially given the current level of biblical illiteracy, that your congregation, or

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<sup>15</sup> William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying* (1592; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 124.

an evangelistic audience, has a biblical vocabulary. Best to assume that an evangelistic audience knows nothing except its culture; that the church knows a little more, but still not much, because there are always unbelievers or new Christians present. The call is not for sermon-lite, but for clarity. As Augustine counseled: “The speaker should not consider the eloquence of his teaching but the clarity of it.”<sup>16</sup> With Cicero he advised a “studied negligence” of high sounding speech in the interest of clear communication. As ambassadors our goal is to be understood in order to win our hearers, not to impress people with our vocabularies or our learning.

Believing, as we do, that preaching is God’s direct communication to his church, we must labor to *engage* people. Use the introduction as a porch that invites people in. Begin where people are, not where the text begins in history. Ask a challenging question or make a provocative statement. Give a pointed illustration or story. But be careful not to try to “make the text relevant.” This is not the purpose of a good introduction. The hook of the introduction is meant to draw the church out of the world in which they are absorbed and into the text of which the church is a part.

It is into the Bible world of eternal redemption, that the preacher must bring his people. This eternal world from whence Christ came is contemporary with every age. . . . The only preaching which is up to date for every time is the preaching of this eternity, which is opened to us in the Bible alone—the eternal of holy love, grace and redemption, the eternal and immutable morality of saving grace for our indelible sin.<sup>17</sup>

Peter used the questions, misinterpretation, and scoffing of the crowd, due to the phenomena of miraculously speaking an unknown foreign language by the disciples at Pentecost, to introduce his sermon. Paul used the statue to an “unknown god” in Athens to introduce his sermon on Mars Hill. The introduction should be directly related to the purpose of the sermon, as these two biblical examples demonstrate. It should make the congregation hungry, like an hors d’oeuvre, to know what God has to say to them. “Tell me more!” should be their response.<sup>18</sup>

Conclusions should leave the congregation with the difference the sermon makes in their lives. “How shall we then live?” should be the question the conclusion answers. This is not the same as a “practical how to” at the end of every sermon. It leaves the hearer with the point of God’s Word in the expounded text. The conclusion should be brief, memorable, and done only once. Both introductions and conclusions are best constructed after everything else in a sermon has been determined, then studied with extreme care just before the preaching event.

An important aspect of simplicity is sermon length. As a young fan of the Puritans, I used to believe that limiting sermon length was akin to heresy or quenching the Spirit. I have learned the opposite. To tax people beyond their capacity, especially in an era of short attentions spans, lacks the compassion and wisdom of an undershepherd of Jesus.

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<sup>16</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (427 AD; repr., Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), 133 [Cicero *Orat.* 21. 69].

<sup>17</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), 32–33.

<sup>18</sup> Jay Adams, “Preaching with Purpose,” class notes, Westminster Seminary California, 1990.

Better to hold people's attention for half an hour with a clear, well pointed message, than to lose people for an hour. When the point of the text has been made, stop! In a generation informed by sound bites, anything extraneous is not appreciated. The preacher would do well to heed the advice of W. Somerset Maugham to playwrights in 1938:

It is very different now, and the difference has been occasioned, I suppose, by the advent of the cinema. Today, audiences, especially in English-speaking countries, have learnt to see the point of a scene at once and having seen it want to pass on to the next; they catch the gist of a speech in a few words, and having caught it their attention quickly wanders. . . . His [the playwrights] dialogue must be a sort of spoken shorthand. He must cut and cut till he has arrived at the maximum of concentration.<sup>19</sup>

Add excessive length to a lecture-like sermon and you will foster a new motto of communication: the tedium is the message.

On the matter of directness John Angell James enjoins:

Our hearers must be made to feel that they are not merely listening to the discussion of a subject, but to an appeal to themselves: their attention must be kept up, and a close connection between them and the preacher maintained, by the frequent introduction of the pronoun "you;" so that each may realize the thought that the discourse is actually addressed to him.<sup>20</sup>

Spurgeon used the apt analogy of shooting barbed arrows. Arrows without feathers fly nowhere, like most applications and many illustrations. And if they arrive without barbs, they do not stick. *The Westminster Larger Catechism* (Q. #159) uses the same archer's metaphor: "sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation." When we aim, we should ask if our target includes these elements. If we have no target in mind, we will leave people wondering why we spoke. Aimless preaching is one of the reasons why critics say preaching is dead. Our aim is the God-given purpose of the text. We may think of the use of the second person as the feathers which direct the arrow of the sermon. The third person aims at no one in particular. Many preachers are afraid to say YOU, because they feel that people will think they are arrogant. There is certainly value in including yourself when appropriate, but you are God's spokesman and he wants you to address his people directly, as the voice of the Good Shepherd. This directness must be reflected in your title and main sermon headings of oral cues. Preaching is first of all his Word to his church. The barbs are the specifics of the application.

Let us consider Matthew 15:13–20 as an example. Notice our Lord's use of "you."

He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain the parable to us." And he said, "Are

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<sup>19</sup> W. Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1938), 126.

<sup>20</sup> John Angell James, *An Earnest Ministry: The Want of the Times* (1847; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1993), 117.



you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.”

Jesus does not leave it to us to identify the specifics of what defiles man.

Make preaching that transforms people into the image of Jesus Christ the focus and soul of your pulpit ministry. Romans 12:1–2:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

A very helpful book on preaching with directness is Jay Adams’s *Preaching with Purpose*.<sup>21</sup> Adams pleads with preachers to stick to the purpose (*telos*) of each text. This is not simply a summary or description of its meaning, but communication of God’s purpose for his church in light of Paul’s dictum in Romans 15:4: “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” Only when this purpose is kept clearly in mind will directness be the result. With the purpose in his sight the preacher will hit the target intended by his Master.

Here a word about “effectiveness” is in order. Joel Nederhood refers to preaching effectiveness as “the great temptation.”<sup>22</sup> As Cornelius Trimp points out that “our age is characterized by a strong attraction to *observable* and *measurable* events.”<sup>23</sup> As we have seen in Chapter 6, persuasion seeks a certain result. Evangelists brag about the number of decisions recorded as a result of their “revival” preaching campaigns. We are overly impressed by denominational statistics. Much of the “marketing the church” movement motivates churches and pastors to adopt its techniques based on measurable statistical results. Visible success becomes the proverbial bottom line. One of the subtle, but pernicious, forces in this equation is the desire to join culture in its putative forward movement. We want to fit in and demonstrate to the world that we are not as bad as we have been painted. We are here to aid the progress of human culture, just like any other social institution.

This mentality means that our greatest fear is of being removed to the margins of our society. When we observe the results of New Testament preaching, we see that it often caused social upheaval, as in Jerusalem at Pentecost, and in Ephesus. To be faithful to our calling as heralds of the Head of the new humanity, we must be prepared to preach without fear of the consequences and without discouragement that our message may not

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<sup>21</sup> Jay Adams, *Preaching with Purpose* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1982).

<sup>22</sup> Nederhood, “Effective Preaching in a Media Age.”

<sup>23</sup> Cornelius Trimp, “Preaching as the Public Means of Divine Redemption,” trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, Theme Issue: Preaching, vol. 10 (1999), 42.

meet with great visible success. Faithfulness, not measurable results, is the hallmark of the herald (1 Cor. 4:2).

### **Draw Attention with Compelling Language**

The challenge of the preacher in an age in which words are cheap and devalued, due to the all-at-onceness of mass electronic media, is to

find ways to convey through the dynamics of his words and the interrelations of words the sensible realities embodied in such ancient “carriers of meaning” as God, Christ, Holy Spirit, reconciliation, redemption, salvation, sacrament, heaven, hell, faith, hope, love. In order to reach with words a people accustomed to communication through total sensory stimuli enwrapped in the convincing and attractive environments of electronic media, we must be able to unwrap and enwrap in similarly convincing and attractive ways the great words in which our Christian tradition is stored.<sup>24</sup>

While we must not concede, as Mehl seems to in this statement, that the Scriptures need to be *made* relevant, the point of the power of words should be well taken. The Hebrew word for “word” (דָּבָר *dabar*) “carries with it the dynamic connotation of ‘event.’ . . . Words have evocative power. They can call things into existence, change the old, undo what was, bring forth the new.” Hebrews 4:12 declares: “the word of God is living and active.”<sup>25</sup>

David Buttrick asks, “What will happen to a religion of book in an age dominated by the epistemology of the electronic media? Obviously the whole notion of biblical authority will not wash in an electronic age.”<sup>26</sup> He advocates a “street smart” strategy of “visual logic.”<sup>27</sup> Since biblical religion has by definition always been a religion of the book, we should not panic. The answer is not in the electronic media but in the Bible itself. The visual, along with all the senses, and the metaphorical have always been a vital part of human knowing and communicating. Rather than signaling the demise of biblical authority their use in preaching reminds us that we are God’s creatures and live in his world. He has created the structures of experience, and word pictures, poetry, and metaphors, all given in the Bible, and used to communicate biblical truth are assertions of his Lordship over all of life. And, after all, Christianity is primarily a religion of the Word, which is preserved in a book.

Compelling language, whether painting pictures, telling a story, or describing an emotion, stimulates the imagination in a biblical way. Jesus used metaphors and drew verbal pictures throughout his earthly ministry. Study and use the biblical model of vivid, concise language (stories, illustrations, and metaphors) to capture the imaginations of your hearers, thus making the theme of your pericope stick to their souls. Use the images and metaphors of Scripture. From Jesus we also learn that images from our culture are

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<sup>24</sup> Duane Mehl, “Mass Media and the Future of Preaching,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 41 (1970): 210.

<sup>25</sup> Daane, *Preaching with Confidence*, 20–21.

<sup>26</sup> David G. Buttrick, “Preaching to the ‘Faith’ of America,” in *Communication and Change in American Religious History*, ed. Leonard Sweet (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 319.

<sup>27</sup> Buttrick, “Preaching to the ‘Faith’ of America,” 310, 316.

effective means by which to make a point. He used soils. We may use automobiles and computers. Notice that Scripture metaphors and images are inspired, and though at times requiring explanation in urban culture, they are universal. They involve finance, agriculture, family life, etc. They engage people in the concreteness of their everyday lives in God's world. For example, the ungodly are "like chaff that the wind drives away" (Ps. 1:4).

Spurgeon was a master of what Jay Adams calls "sense appeal." His book *Studies in Preaching: Sense Appeal in the Sermons of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* is instructive in this regard.<sup>28</sup> Adams observes that most homiletics texts advocate vividness, which is an appeal only to sight. However, all the senses should be used in a biblical model.<sup>29</sup> In an age of image media, it is especially important that preachers take full advantage of this biblical resource. It is also an excellent antidote to the danger of icon worship, since the meaning of metaphors is interpreted by the written Word of God.

Our language, generally, ought to be the language of Scripture and be calculated to arrest, awaken people to the awful danger of being outside of Christ, and the awesome glory of being his.

### **Point Them to God: "We would see Jesus"**

The ultimate object of all preaching is to bring people into contact with God himself. "The sense of being an ambassador of God makes preaching a holier experience than any other kind of public speaking." Our inspiration and authority in preaching comes directly from God. "When so many are preaching to the times, let one brother speak eternity."<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Edwards beautifully depicts the glory of tasting heaven on earth. Good preaching should aim at this.

Intellectual pleasures consist in the beholding of spiritual excellencies and beauties, but the glorious excellency and beauty of God are far the greatest. God's excellence is the supreme excellence. When the understanding of the reasonable creature dwells here, it dwells at the fountain, and swims in a boundless, bottomless ocean. The love of God is also the most suitable entertainment of the soul of man, which naturally desires the happiness of society, or of union with some other being. The love of so glorious a being is infinitely valuable, and the discoveries of it are capable of ravishing the soul above all other love.<sup>31</sup>

Bring God's people into the presence of God. As preaching overcomes the secular dichotomy between transcendence and immanence, the preacher as God's spokesman does not leave the congregation or the evangelistic audience on the horizontal plane, but draws them through the Word of Christ into heavenly reality, into their spiritual relationship and status as new creatures, united with Christ. At the center of this

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<sup>28</sup> Jay Adams, *Studies in Preaching: Sense Appeal in the Sermons of Charles Haddon Spurgeon*, Vol. 1. (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976).

<sup>29</sup> Adams, *Preaching with Purpose*, 87.

<sup>30</sup> Gerald Hamilton Kennedy, *His Word Through Preaching* (New York: Harper, 1947), 10–11. Dr. Ian Maclaren quoting an old Puritan.

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Edwards, Sermon on Matthew 5:8, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman. Vol. 1. (1834; repr., (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 907.

homiletical trajectory is the only Mediator between God and man, the Lord Jesus Christ. As the heart and soul of every text He is the One who makes the hearts of his disciples burn within them.

It is this Word—evocative, dynamic, creative, saving, sin-annulling, death-defeating, healing, life-giving—which the church proclaims. This is the Word the pulpit must preach, and those in the ministry are summoned by God to proclaim.<sup>32</sup>

Our preaching must encourage contact with heaven:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. (Col. 3:1–2)

The importance of this pursuit cannot be overstated. “Our task is to find a way to take God’s unchanging message into a world nearly void of biblical categories and rife with theological confusion.”<sup>33</sup> It should remind us also that we preach in Paul’s world in two ways. First, since Adam’s fall rebel sinners have resisted God’s revelation of himself in all the world, “who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom. 1:18). Second, Paul’s world was radically syncretistic and pluralistic as ours is, or America is rapidly becoming. But the West, and soon the entire world, is radically affected in a way that Paul’s culture was not. We are all part of the electronic dispersion which ill suits us to receive the message of the gospel, much less preach it. This challenge is exacerbated for preachers who do not come from strong, well-informed, Christian backgrounds as well as those for who lack the breadth of education that Paul had. More on this in the last chapter. T. David Gordon sums this problem up well:

As a consequence of this cultural shift, those human sensibilities essential to expository preaching have largely disappeared, so that a theological seminary attempting to teach a person who is not comfortable with texts, nor comfortable with writing organized prose, is analogous to a theological seminary attempting to teach a dachshund to speak French.<sup>34</sup>

If preaching, in its authentic Biblical, apostolic (and Reformational) sense, is to be recovered, it will be necessary also to recover an enduring commitment to Christ-centered, expository preaching, in addition to cultivating the necessary pre-ministerial sensibilities. Ministers will need to renounce their tendency to use the pulpit as a catch-all; a place from which they attempt to do everything, and will need to return it to its proper place of proclaiming how (and how *well*) God reconciles himself to hopelessly lost sinners through the person and work of that beloved Son in whom he is well-pleased.

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<sup>32</sup> James Daane, *Preaching with Confidence: A Theological Essay on the Power of the Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 29.

<sup>33</sup> David Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God’s Word Today* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 89.

<sup>34</sup> Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Preach*, 36.

A return to such Christ-centered preaching, however, probably cannot occur apart from cultivating the sensibility of reading texts closely (since it is the New Testament *texts* that teach us to preach Christ). And almost surely this change will not occur apart from cultivating a sensibility of the significant; because *only* a true sense of what is significant will cause a minister to realize that nothing in the entire history of human affairs is more significant than what the God-Man has done; and therefore nothing should crowd the proclamation of Christ from the center of Christian preaching.<sup>35</sup>

One way Christ-centered preaching may be fostered is by embedding the ministry of the Word in a Christ-centered liturgy. At Amoskeag Presbyterian Church, where I was pastor, we have two very important elements in our liturgy: corporate confession of sin and an assurance of pardon in Christ, and the Lord Supper at the end of each morning service. The church motto is “preaching the Christ of Scripture.” No one will ever leave a service without having heard the gospel.

English Puritan preacher Thomas Brooks has a wonderful section in *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ* on the importance of preaching Christ in Chapter 6, “Christ the Great Subject of the Gospel Ministry.” He gives five reasons why it is “the great duty of ministers to preach Christ to the people.” First, the gospel of Christ is the only way to save sinners. Second, preaching Christ is the best way to win sinners to love Christ. Third, the gospel is the only weapon against all opposition to Christ. Fourth, preaching Christ frees the preacher from “the blood of souls.” Finally, such preaching comforts the souls of preachers both now and forever. Then he goes on to describe eleven ways to preach Christ.<sup>36</sup> Unlike modern “how to” suggestions, these have to do with the attitude and delivery of the preacher. He is to preach plainly, faithfully, humbly, wisely, boldly, painfully, exemplarily, feelingly, rightly, acceptably, constantly. Here are twenty pages every minister needs to take to heart.

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<sup>35</sup> Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach*, 92.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Brooks, *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ*, in *The Select Works*, C. Bradley, ed., vol. 1 (London: L. B. Seeley and Son, 1824), 268–88.

# ServantReading

## Worship Matters, by *Cornelis Van Dam*

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by Allen C. Tomlinson

*Worship Matters*, by Cornelis Van Dam. Carman, MB: Reformed Perspective, 2021, xvii + 327 pages, \$25.00, paper.

There are minor points I would have stated differently if I had been the author, and at a few places I would have used different arguments for the same teaching. However, such is almost always the case anytime one reads a book written by someone else, no matter how much we appreciate the book. I would recommend this book especially for Christians who have been reared in non-Reformed churches. It is a good introduction to the idea of biblically governed worship versus the “make it up as you go along” kind of worship, which we find in much contemporary worship. I would recommend it because it does a great job emphasizing the holiness and greatness of God, our creator and redeemer Jesus Christ, and therefore our need to approach Him in our worship with “reverence and awe” (Heb. 12:28), as the New Testament affirms is our duty in this New Covenant.

The main divisions of the book have the same emphases that many similar Reformed books have: “General Survey of Key Elements” (of worship), “Administering the Word,” “The Glory of Worship,” “Singing and Music in Worship,” “Some New Challenges,” and “Worship in Heaven and on Earth.” These six main divisions cover ground that many other books written from a Reformed or Presbyterian perspective cover. Sometimes Van Dam does a great job summarizing those other books on a given point, always giving due credit. Other times he does a great job taking one of the “subpoints” of Reformed worship and expanding on it: e.g., does the Bible teach us to dress up for public worship? Another example: he gives a fairly full argument on the presence of the angels in our worship and how the knowledge of that should affect our approach to worship.

The book is written from a particularly Dutch Reformed background, so “Reformed Worship” includes some of the particularities that we find in Dutch background denominations but not necessarily in Presbyterian background denominations. For example: many begin a service with Psalm 124:8. Those of us from a Presbyterian background do not always begin a service with that particular text. However, many of us Presbyterians have no problem with beginning a service that way and can gladly worship in a church that begins worship with that verse every time. While we do not begin our services with that particular verse, we do open the service with some other statement that makes the same point about approaching together the God of our salvation. At one point Van Dam mentions that there is some minor variation on a given point he makes between those of his Dutch background and Presbyterians. So he obviously is familiar with these minor differences by Christians who have the same basic interpretation and application of Scripture and the same historical influences from the Reformers and their successors. None of this was a problem for me.

One way in which Van Dam makes a point was a concern for me, but it must be kept in its context so that we appreciate the point being made. In speaking of the use of musical instruments in worship (ch. 15), and particularly of the use of the organ, he mentions that Voetius protested based on the regulative principle of worship, which is our main approach (historically and biblically) to worship as Reformed and Presbyterian believers. Van Dam writes that Voetius's and Calvin's arguments against musical instruments in public worship did not persuade him, because of the silence of the New Testament on the matter with the Old Testament background using instruments. Van Dam then writes, "The regulative principle of worship goes too far by insisting that Scripture is clear on not permitting musical accompaniment in worship" (212). My issue with this statement is this: the regulative principle is the biblical principle and does not go too far being the commanded approach to worship; however, how any one of us makes use of the regulative principle may be faulty. That would not nullify the biblical priority of the principle; it reminds us that not one of us is perfect in our understanding of the Scriptures. I do not believe the regulative principle is contrary to a use of musical instruments in public worship in this New Covenant stage of the church, *but* some Reformed Christians do believe this. It is a matter for us to lovingly discuss together, being like-minded in our Reformed faith and like-minded in our desire for worship regulated by the Scriptures. Particular applications of the principle we do not always agree upon, though we should try to help one another come to a better understanding and application of the principle when that is possible. If we "go too far," or do not go far enough with the principle, the problem is always with us and not with the biblical or regulative principle. However, I suspect, in the context of the whole book, that is precisely what Van Dam means by his statement.

The book's first part, "General Survey of Key Elements," does a good job summarizing what biblical worship is, stressing God's presence in our midst in Christian worship, stressing the Lord's Day as a day of rest and worship, and summarizing important biblical elements in approaching God biblically as a congregation.

Part two, "Administering the Word," reminds us that in the Bible and in historical Reformed and Presbyterian worship the Bible is the main emphasis—worshipping as the Bible commands, preaching and hearing the Scriptures expounded, going forth to live in light of what we have heard as those trusting in Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Van Dam, true to the historical Dutch Reformed practice, emphasizes our need to read the Ten Commandments, the moral law, to enable us to fully preach the Gospel of salvation by grace. In my forty-four years of full-time pastoral ministry, I did not read the Ten Commandments every service; however, I did preach both the law (as background to the gospel) and the gospel (as the only true fulfillment of the law in our Savior Jesus Christ). There are other texts that emphasize the moral law of God and other ways to keep bringing the congregation back to the moral law as the absolute standard of right and wrong to show us our sin and what a godly life is and ought to be, and so to "drive" us to the Savior and his gospel of grace. I had no problems with this part of the book, even if I try to do the same thing with a little more variation. Most of us in our circles are in perfect agreement with the heart of the point Van Dam makes.

I loved part three: "The Glory of Worship." Van Dam deals with the privilege of worship, a biblical basis for a second service on the Lord's Day, the glory of the gospel of Christ crucified, as well as the glory of the resurrection and the ascension. There is a

chapter for each of those points. Very wonderful. This section gave a summary of what other biblical teachers have shown from the Scriptures over the centuries, the presence of the holy angels in our midst and how this should add to our sense of solemnity (seriousness not somberness) and reverence before a holy God. The emphasis on Christ and the glory of Christian worship because of the Savior is superb.

Part four is “Singing and Music in Worship.” Here are four chapters that are all very useful and of immediate concern: “Singing to the Lord,” “Can we Sing all the Psalms?” “Musical Instruments in Public Worship,” and “Dancing for Joy.” Apart from our “in house” debate regarding the use of musical instruments, much of this would be agreed upon by those of us who minister in churches subscribing to the historical Reformed creeds. For the most part, there is some very good argumentation.

The fifth part of the book, “Some New Challenges,” deals with the immature nature of most contemporary worship approaches, reminding us that we need to grow up! Hopefully we come to a more mature understanding of the Scriptures and of biblical worship as we grow age-wise and as we study God’s Word. Many years ago I briefly connected with an old college chum online; we both had been part of the milder section of the Jesus Movement back in the 1960s and 70s. We both were very thankful we had “grown up” and matured and had soon left behind some of the less thoughtful aspects of that movement. Many of my friends who were in that movement to some degree, have also like me ended up in conservative Lutheran or Reformed or Presbyterian churches, with the “grown up” worship the movement had mocked. Other “challenges” he deals with are “Holy Attire,” a contrast between evangelical and historically reformed worship, the de-emphasis on the sacraments (especially baptism with a lopsided view of Scripture that falls short of seeing the place of our children in the covenant), and the desire to make the church “attractive” to unbelievers or to immature Christians. That last chapter in this section about making the church attractive is very much worth reading, as is the entire section of the book.

Van Dam’s concern about “dressing down” for worship comes in throughout the book. I might not use some of his argument from certain texts, believing that in the New Covenant those texts would be best understood and applied to us being “dressed” spiritually in the righteousness of Jesus Christ and in those robes that are the “righteous deeds of the saints” in Revelation 19:8 (which both Van Dam and I believe to be the changing lives of believers in progressive sanctification through the power of Christ’s redemptive work). However, his arguments based on the holy character of God and the awesomeness of what we are doing and whom we are approaching in worship and what it cost Christ for us to be able to worship, were extremely well-argued and deserve full consideration. Once I read or heard a statement by Dr. Gregory Reynolds comparing a casual approach to worship as “everything written in small case letters,” so that nothing is seen as really important.<sup>1</sup> Van Dam argues that few of us would not try to look our best for an earthly dignitary of great importance; how much more so as we come before the glorious Triune God!

The last section of the book is comprised of one chapter, “Our Worship and Heaven.” We are worshipping this glorious God in the presence of our contemporaries here on earth, in the presence of the holy angels, and of the church triumphant. We are not in

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory E. Reynolds, “Living in a Lowercase World,” *Ordained Servant* 17 (2008): 15–18.



heaven physically as we worship in our church assemblies, but we are spiritually in heaven, and heaven is with us! Again, this speaks of Van Dam's constant emphasis: the glory of public worship as the gathered people of Jesus Christ!

One last remark I have is on the title: "Worship Matters." I love puns and double meanings when carefully used. Worship has many elements and circumstances that need to be thought through. These "matters" are important, though some are more critical than others. Worship is very important; worship really "matters." I highly recommend this book.

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# ServantReading

## C. S. Lewis in America by *Mark A. Noll*

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By Charles Malcolm Wingard

*C. S. Lewis in America: Readings and Reception, 1935–1947*, by Mark A. Noll. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023, xviii + 158 pages, \$18.69, paper.

The works of C. S. Lewis have found a home in America for nearly nine decades. His technical studies in literary criticism, imaginative works, and expositions of the Christian faith have been well received by Christians of various denominations. Avid Lewis readers are found among adherents of both Protestant and Catholic traditions. Reviews of Lewis's books were numerous and not limited to Christian publications, but also appeared in secular magazines and journals. One would be hard pressed to think of other writers so highly acclaimed by such a diverse readership.

With modest revisions, the book contains three lectures delivered under the auspices of Wheaton College's Marion E. Wade Center at its 2022 Ken and Jean Hansen Lectures.

Noll recounts the reception of Lewis's writing during the pivotal years of 1935–1947, a period that included the Great Depression, World War II, and the early years of the Cold War. A helpful table lists his books published in America during that time, from *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1935) to *Miracles* (1947)—seventeen books in all—arranged in three categories: literary scholarship, imaginative writing (including *The Screwtape Letters* and the Ransom Trilogy), and Christian exposition (5).

Each lecture is followed by a response from a member of the Wheaton faculty:

Lecture 1: “‘Surprise’: Roman Catholics as Lewis's First and Most Appreciative Readers,” with a response by historian Karen J. Johnson.

Lecture 2: “‘Like a Fresh Wind’: Reception in Secular and Mainstream Media,” with a response by historian Kirk D. Farney.

Lecture 3: “‘Protestants Also Approve’: (But Evangelicals only Slowly),” with a response by political scientist Amy E. Black.

An appendix includes two 1944 articles by Catholic author and Canisius College English professor Charles A. Brady.

### **Lewis and Roman Catholic Readers**

Early Catholic reviews of Lewis's early works were generally favorable and appeared in lay, Jesuit, and scholarly publications (9). Noll observes that

of Lewis's ten works that were noticed at least twice by Catholic authors, five received positive or even enthusiastically positive notices (with very occasional quibbles): *The Pilgrim's Regress*, *The Screwtape Letters*,

*Perelandra*, *The Great Divorce*, and *The Abolition of Man*. Three works received mostly positive reviews: *Out of the Silent Planet*, *The Case for Christianity*, and *The Problem of Pain*. For two others, Catholic judgments were mixed: *Beyond Personality* and *That Hideous Strength*. (13–14)

While reviewers could be critical of Lewis's neglect or departure from official Roman Catholic teaching, they affirmed him in his commitment to natural law and objective moral values. The favorable reception to Lewis reflected a diminishment of the insularity that marked American Catholicism prior to the Second Vatican Council (25–6).

## **Lewis and the Secular and Mainstream Media**

The high quality of Lewis's scholarly writings during the period under consideration was recognized by both the secular academy and the mainstream press. Noll reminds us that at this time, before the New Criticism became a formidable force in college and university English departments, there were still many literary critics who shared Lewis's high regard for Western Christian tradition and belief in the existence of universal moral absolutes (61).

Moving from American intellectual life to the mainstream media—think the *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post*—Noll notes that Lewis's imaginative works found more than a warm reception. The mainstream media “loved these books, even loved them ecstatically” (62), an indication that the “public sphere could still respond positively to Christian writing when it was artfully framed” (67). Examples include favorable comparisons of Lewis to G. K. Chesterton, *That Hideous Strength* to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra* to the works of H. G. Wells (69). Even Lewis's expositions of the Christian faith earned more positive than negative reviews (70), although some commentators, like Alistair Cooke, could be sharply critical, as he was in a 1944 piece where he asserted that “Lewis offered only ‘fantasies,’ ‘befuddlement,’ and ‘a patness that murders the issues it pretends to clarify’” (79–80).

From 1935–1947, Christian culture was still sufficiently prevalent for Lewis to win the admiration of both literary scholars and popular audiences. In his response, Farney notes that Fulton Sheen's *The Catholic Hour* and Walter Mair's *The Lutheran Hour* reached worldwide audiences as high as 17.5 million and 20 million respectively (86–88). Whatever talents Lewis, Sheen, and Maier possessed, they worked in a time where significant numbers of Americans wanted Christian exposition, a desire that the mainstream media gladly accommodated.

## **Lewis and Protestants**

In his concluding chapter, Noll reviews Lewis's reception among mainline Protestants and those theologically conservative Protestants who eventually came to be known as evangelicals.

Not surprisingly, *The Christian Century*, the mouthpiece of theologically and culturally progressive Protestantism, expressed criticism of Lewis's work. Otherwise, the response of mainline Protestants was “strongly positive” (97). In a 1947 review,

Princeton Theological Seminary's *Theology Today* praised Lewis while also responding to the criticisms of Alistair Cook (100–101).

Evangelicals were slower to embrace Lewis. Readers of *Ordained Servant* will be interested especially in Noll's comments on reviews by ministers associated with Westminster Theological Seminary—including Paul Wooley, Cornelius Van Til, and Edmund Clowney (104–14). Wooley was the most appreciative of the Westminster reviewers, going so far as to say the volumes he reviewed were “the ‘find’ of the year for any literate Christian.” At the same time, he pointed out what he considered the weakness of Lewis's apologetic methodology, namely, that “thinking and rational argument that do not begin with God as a premise are useless and prove nothing.” Noll says of Wooley's presuppositional apologetic: “The shift in starting point from belief in objective morality to belief in God was the crucial matter” (109). Van Til was blunt, asserting that because Lewis did not sufficiently grasp the Creator-creature distinction, “the main argument of [*Beyond Personality*] is destructive of the evangelical faith” (110).

According to Noll, the Westminster Presbyterians were the only evangelicals in the 1940s providing serious theological engagement with Lewis. The author is certainly correct to say that their criticism “deserves theological reflection in its own right” (113).

Lewis's widespread popularity among evangelicals would come later. But even in the few years preceding 1947, future evangelical missionary and author Elisabeth Howard (later Elliot) and well-known Presbyterian pastor Donald Grey Barnhouse had begun to articulate highly favorable views of Lewis's work.

In his concluding remarks, Noll praises Lewis for his learning, creativity, and wise focus on “emphasizing what the main Christian traditions held in common” while cautioning that today “there is no guarantee that writing oriented toward ‘mere Christianity’ will gain a hearing. It is, however, almost certain that writing advocating only one variety of Christianity will not gain a wide public hearing.” (123–24)

I recommend this book. As the last Christian public intellectual to earn widespread admiration in the United States, the writings of C.S. Lewis are worthy of study. So also is the culture that eagerly purchased and read his works. Noll gives us insight into the relationship between Lewis and his American readers.

I also appreciate the extended treatment Noll gives to the reactions of confessional Presbyterians to Lewis's work. Whatever might be said of their critiques, their desire was to bring Lewis's work to the touchstone of Scripture. They, like Lewis, are worthy of commendation too.

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# ServantPoetry

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James Lee (1980—)

*after “Audubon: A Vision”*

on Robert Penn Warren’s poems

What Warren refers to as the guilt that unmans him,  
the punishment he finds so sweet. A misery  
that likens breathing to grief  
and gasping to air; *a thousand desires and enticements!*  
Each one better than the last,  
each next one begging more:  
to invoke a world, to incite, to condemn,  
to be made abject, privy to.  
If ever there was a word—it is *harrowing*.  
Akin to apprehension  
(the fear that something bad will happen)  
but more suggestive of the fear that something  
bad already has.