

# Ordained Servant

Volume 24  
2015



A Journal  
for  
Church  
Officers

Park Street Church (1810), Boston, Massachusetts / photo: Gregory E. Reynolds

published by:

The Committee on Christian  
Education *of the*  
Orthodox Presbyterian Church

# Ordained Servant

A Journal for Church Officers

VOLUME 24, 2015

# *Ordained Servant*

## A Journal for Church Officers

A publication of the Committee on Christian Education  
of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

ISSN 1525-3503

Volume 24 2015

**Editor:** Gregory Edward Reynolds • 827 Chestnut Street • Manchester, NH 03104

**Telephone:** 603-668-3069 • **Electronic mail:** reynolds.1@opc.org

**Website:** [www.opc.org/os.html](http://www.opc.org/os.html)

*Ordained Servant* is published monthly (except for combined issues June/July and August/September) online as *Ordained Servant Online* (E-ISSN 1931-7115, online edition), and printed annually (ISSN: 1525-3503) after the end of each calendar year, beginning with volume 15 (2006) published in 2007. *Ordained Servant* was published quarterly in print from 1992 through 2005. All 53 issues are available in our online archives. The editorial board is the Subcommittee on Serial Publications of the Committee on Christian Education.

**Subscriptions:** Copies of the annual printed edition of *Ordained Servant* are sent to each ordained minister of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, each organized congregation, and each designated mission work, and are paid for by the Committee. Ordained elders, deacons, and licentiates of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church may receive copies gratis upon request. *Ordained Servant* is also available to anyone in the U.S. and Canada who wishes to subscribe by remitting \$10.00 per year to: Ordained Servant, The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 607 N. Easton Rd., Bldg. E, Willow Grove, PA 19090-2539. Checks should be made out to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, designated for *Ordained Servant* in the memo line. Institutional subscribers in the US and Canada please remit \$15.00 per year. Overseas individual and institutional subscribers please remit \$20.00 per year. All remittances should be made payable in U.S. funds. Subscriptions, both paid and gratis, may also be received through our website on the "Publications" page under "Resources" on the top right of the OPC.ORG home page.

**Submissions:** Chosen submissions will be published on the web and possibly chosen for the annual print edition. Please consult "Submissions, Style Guide, and Citations" on our website.

**Copyright Information:** All material in this periodical is subject to U.S. and international copyright laws and may not be reproduced without prior written approval. Please refer to "Submissions, Style Guide, and Citations" at our website once you have received permission. Interested parties are invited to obtain permission to reproduce material found in this publication by writing to the editor.

© Copyright 2015 by the Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.  
All rights reserved.

# Ordained Servant

A JOURNAL FOR CHURCH OFFICERS

---

## CONTENTS

5 From the Editor

### Servant Thoughts

---

EDITORIALS

6 “Beautiful Truth”

7 “The Jeremiah 29 Option”

### Servant Word

---

9 “Expository Preaching: What Is It and Why Should We Do It?” **Dennis E. Johnson**

### Servant Truth

---

15 “The Doctrine of Divine Simplicity: A Pastor’s Appreciation,” **D. Scott Meadows**

21 “Jonah’s Baptism,” **Robert Mossotti**

### Servant Church

---

24 “The Path to Ecumenicity,” **William Boekestein**

28 “L’chaim: An Invitation to the Blessedness of Ecumenical Life,” **William Shishko**

### Servant Work

---

32 “Youth Ministry?” **T. David Gordon**

38 “Is Church Membership Biblical?” **Ryan M. McGraw and Ryan Speck**

### Servant Education

---

48 “A Dozen Reasons Why Catechizing Is Important,” **Thomas E. Tyson**

53 “Nurturing Theologically Rich Women’s Initiatives in Your Church,” **Aimee Byrd**

### Servant Witness

---

58 “Lord Defender: Jesus Christ as Apologist,” **Brian L. De Jong**

### Servant History

---

63 “A Righteousness apart from the Law That Is Not against the Law: The Story and Message of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*,” **Andy Wilson**

### Servant Humor

---

From the Back Pew

68 “Stooping and Lipping,” **Eutychus II**

### Servant Reading

---

BRIEFLY NOTED

70 *Inventing the Individual*, by Larry Siedentop, **Richard M. Gamble**

### Servant Reading

---

BOOK REVIEWS

71 *Renaissance*, by Os Guinness, **William Edgar**

73 *China’s Reforming Churches*, edited by Bruce P. Baugus, **Mitchell R. Herring**

75 *Biblical Interpretation and Doctrinal Formulation in the Reformed Tradition: Essays in Honor of James De Jong*, edited by Arie C. Leder and Richard A. Muller, **Martin Emmrich**

- 77 *Ordinary*, by Michael Horton, **Dale Van Dyke**
- 79 *On the Brink*, by Clay Werner, **Stephen Magee**
- 80 *The Psalter Reclaimed*, by Gordon Wenham, **David A. Booth**
- 81 *Rediscovering Catechism*, by Donald Van Dyken, **Everett A. Henes**
- 83 *Grounded in the Gospel*, by J. I. Packer and Gary Parrett, **James J. Cassidy**
- 84 *Confessing the Faith*, by Chad Van Dixhoorn, **Robert Letham**
- 86 *The Heart Is the Target*, by Murray Capill, **Shane Lems**
- 87 *From the Mouth of God*, by Sinclair Ferguson, **Stephen J. Tracey**
- 88 *Expository Preaching*, by David Helm, T. **David Gordon**
- 90 *Evangelical versus Liturgical?* by Melanie C. Ross, **Matthew W. Kingsbury**
- 92 *The Digital Divide*, edited by Mark Bauerlein, T. **David Gordon**
- 94 *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, by James K. A. Smith, **Susan M. Felch**
- 95 *Called to Be Saints*, by Gordon T. Smith, **David A. Booth**
- 96 *Talking with Catholics about the Gospel*, by Chris Castaldo, **Camden Bucey**
- 98 *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*, by David VanDrunen, **Carl Trueman**
- 100 “A Clarification of the Review of *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*,” **David VanDrunen**
- 101 *For the Glory of God*, by Daniel I. Block, **David A. Booth**
- 103 *The Crisis of British Protestantism*, by Hunter Powell, **Ryan M. McGraw**

## ServantReading

### REVIEW ARTICLES

- 105 “Countercultural Spirituality,” review of *Schaeffer on the Christian Life*, by William Edgar, **Gregory E. Reynolds**
- 111 “Science as God’s Work: Abraham Kuyper’s Perspective on Science,” review of *Wisdom and Wonder*, by Abraham Kuyper, **Douglas**

### A. Felch

- 119 “True Theology,” review of *A Treatise on True Theology*, by Franciscus Junius, **John V. Fesko**
- 122 “True Paradox,” review of *True Paradox: How Christianity Makes Sense of Our Complex World*, by David Skeel, **William Edgar**
- 125 “New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis,” review of *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, edited by Moisés Silva, **Stephen M. Baugh**
- 128 “Calvin’s Company of Pastors,” review of *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, by Scott M. Manetsch, **Glen J. Clary**
- 132 “A Biblical Theology of Mystery,” review of *Hidden but Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery*, by G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, **Sherif Gendy**
- 136 “Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin,” review of *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives*, edited by Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves, **Sherif Gendy**
- 140 “The Antidote to Juvenilization,” review of *From Here to Maturity*, by Thomas E. Bergler, **Gregory E. Reynolds**
- 143 “Knowledge and Christian Belief,” review of *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, by Alvin Plantinga, **James D. Baird**
- 145 “The Song of Songs,” review of *The Song of Songs*, by Iain M. Duguid, **Sherif Gendy**
- 148 “Do We Need a Better Country Now More Than Ever?” review of *The Age of Evangelicalism*, by Steven P. Miller, **Darryl G. Hart**
- 150 “Insightful Fool’s Talk,” review of *Fool’s Talk*, by Os Guinness, **Ted Turnau**
- 154 “Interpreting the Prophets,” review of *Interpreting the Prophets*, by Aaron Chalmers, **Sherif Gendy**
- 157 “To Persuade or Not to Persuade,” review of *Paul’s Theology of Preaching*, by Duane Litfin, and *Persuasive Preaching*, by Larry R. Overstreet, **Gregory E. Reynolds**
- 165 “The Importance of Orality in Preaching,” review of *Preaching by Ear*, by Dave McClellan, **Gregory E. Reynolds**

# ✦ From the Editor

This is the tenth annual printed edition of *Ordained Servant*, as we enter our twenty-fifth year of publication. G. I. Williamson edited the journal from 1992 to 2005, producing 54 quarterly issues. I took the helm in 2006, and by the end of 2016, we will have publishing 110 online issues. May the Lord be glorified by our imperfect but earnest labors over the next twenty-five years.

The cover photo is the steeple of Park Street Church in Boston. The website of that church ([www.parkstreet.org](http://www.parkstreet.org)) states:



“We hereby covenant and engage ... to give up ourselves unto the Lord ... to unite together into one body for the public worship of God, and the mutual edification one of another in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus: exhorting, reproving, comforting and watching over each other, for mutual edification; looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of ... *our Savior JESUS*” (from the Park Street Church Articles of Faith and Government, adopted on Feb. 23, 1809). With these words, twenty-six charter members covenanted together to form Park Street Church. In a time of increasing apostasy from the gospel and rising Unitarianism in New England, a small group of devoted Christians, primarily from Old South Church, formed a “Religious Improvement Society” in 1804 to hold weekly prayer meetings and lectures. Though they faced opposition from all sides, the group continued to meet for six years, founding Park Street Church in February of 1809. This small group acted in faith that God would use their efforts to accomplish no small task. And he did. By April of 1809, our location in the center of town was chosen to serve as a beacon of the hope we have in Christ. By 1810, the small congregation had grown and raised over \$100,000 to complete the construction of our current meetinghouse.

The first pastor of Park Street Church, staunch Calvinist Edward Dorr Griffin (1770–1837), served six years and preached a famous series of Sunday evening sermons warning of the errors of the New Divinity. The present pastor, Gordon P. Hugenberger (1997–present), continues to preach in the Reformed tradition. He was a student of Meredith G. Kline and preached at Kline’s funeral.

It is my prayer that the pages of *Ordained Servant* will be used by our Lord to encourage, instruct, and motivate ministers of the Word, elders, and deacons to serve tirelessly to build the church throughout our world, however slim our resources, by trusting the in the grace, power, and wisdom of the Lord of the harvest, who has promised to be with his church to the end of the age.

Once again I would like to thank general secretary Danny Olinger, Alan Strange, and the subcommittee of Darryl Hart, Sid Dyer, and Wallace King for their continued support, encouragement, and counsel. I would also like to thank the many people who make the regular online edition possible: Diane Olinger, Linda Foh, Stephen Pribble, and Andrew Moody; and the many fine writers without whom there would be no journal. Finally, I want to thank Ann Hart for her meticulous editorial work, and Jim Scott for his excellent formatting in InDesign of this printed volume.

—Gregory Edward Reynolds  
Amoskeag Presbyterian Church  
Manchester, New Hampshire



# ✦ Servant Thoughts

## Editorials

### Beautiful Truth

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* January 2015<sup>1</sup>

by Gregory E. Reynolds

When I emphasize the importance of poetry in my lectures on preaching, I always ask if anyone in the audience likes poetry and reads it regularly. Invariably only a few say yes. Then I tell them that I am certain that they *do* like poetry, because they like the Bible—more than a third of God’s Word is in the form of poetry. And all of the Bible is artfully composed in the forms of various literary structures.

In our age of bits and bytes we are told that science alone gives us truth, the hard facts of reality. Thus, we are generally suspicious of poetry. Many Christians believe that all talk of literary structures undermines our confidence in God’s Word. The creation debates in our own circles often yield such ideas. However, it is overlooked frequently that poetry was written under the inspiration of God’s Spirit to enshrine the Exodus event in a song (Exod. 15) and in many psalms (cf. Pss. 106, 136). They are no less historical or less true for being poetry. Poetry in the Bible presents truth in beautifully memorable form.

When we look at the intricacy of the design of all things in the created order, is it not a proof

of the unique inspiration of the Bible that it is artfully composed? Among the Bible’s “incomparable excellencies” the Westminster Confession of Faith (1.5) refers to “the majesty of the style.” There are patterns in everything. Think of the beauty of the patterns of our DNA and the human genome system. So, because we are made in God’s image, we think and live and create in patterns. The eternal Word through whom all things were created and are presently upheld, became flesh in order to create a new humanity after his own glorified humanity. Thus, he refers to us as “his workmanship” or artistry (Eph. 2:10). The Greek word for “workmanship” is *poiēma*, the same as the English word “poem” or “poetry” (ποίημα). The Greek word refers more broadly to all creating or creations than our English word “poetry.”

The writer of Ecclesiastes has some important things to say about the artistry involved in composing the Scriptures:

Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. (Eccl. 12:9–12)

The sage’s inspired words in this text are carefully crafted divine wisdom—“arranging many proverbs with great care.” He fashions wisdom especially designed for troubled believers living amidst the injustices and wackiness of a fallen world. We must remember to leave the mystery of God’s disposition of our lives in the hands of God, recognizing our mortal and human limits. The beauty of Ecclesiastes’s design is itself a testimony of the perfect control and benevolent purposes of our God in caring for us. God’s Word is crafted with the original Designer’s care—a care with which he gifts the writers of Scripture—“weighing and studying and arranging.”

<sup>1</sup> [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=459&issue\\_id=101](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=459&issue_id=101).

The concept of artfully wrought truth reminds me of the Roman architect Vitruvius's three rules of good architectural design explicated in his foundational *The Ten Books of Architecture*: firmness (structural integrity), commodity (usefulness), and delight (beauty). They are all necessary to one another, just as biblical truth must be expressed artfully. So the text describes its own words in two ways.<sup>2</sup> The first is “words of delight (*hephets* הֶפֶּתִּים).” The basic meaning of “delight” is to feel great favor towards something. The Author of beauty gave literary skill to the human authors of Scripture to draw us to its meaning and transforming power. The second is “words of truth (*emeth* אֱמֶת).” These are straight or orthodox words. Truth and beauty go hand in hand. The medium is perfectly suited to the message. In God's Word, content and craftsmanship are inextricably linked. The medium and the message are perfectly complementary as they teach us the beauty of God's grace. This should give us confidence in our task of communicating God's Word in an artful way to the rising generation through preaching, teaching, and writing to the glory of God. ☺

**Gregory E. Reynolds** serves as the pastor of *Amoskeag Presbyterian Church (OPC)* in Manchester, New Hampshire, and is the editor of *Ordained Servant*.

---

<sup>2</sup> We could also relate the three rules of Vitruvius to the biblical text in this way: 1) Firmness (structural integrity) is found in the various literary forms of the biblical text, which serve the interests of the text's meaning—chiasm, for example, is structured to make a main point in the center. 2) Commodity (usefulness) is the application of the biblical text in worship and service. 3) Delight (beauty) is the beauty of the text, artfully crafted and structured to fulfill the purposes and designs of the ultimate author, God.

## The Jeremiah 29 Option

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* October 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Gregory E. Reynolds**

The following is a response to David Skeel's editorial “Now Isn't the Time to Flee the Public Square,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 24, 2015. It was not published, so I thought I would share it in a slightly modified form.

David Skeel's thoughtful reflection on the “Benedict Option” (popularized recently by Rob Dreher, based on the idea of Catholic philosopher Alasdair Macintyre), encourages a shift to what should always be the norm for the Christian church, namely, a focus on the strengthening of the community of faith through the Word, prayer, and sacraments. The church must first be the new humanity that Christ died and rose to form; it must be the church. Only then can it be an effective witness to the realities of the gospel in the midst of the world. As the church awaits its perfection at the end of history, it is called to be an example to the world around it. But church members can hardly disengage from involvement in the many arenas, including politics, of the world in which God has placed us. A kind of Protestant ecclesiastical monasticism is not an option.

Since, as the Apostle Peter says, the church exists in exile, it is called to win people to this new order of humanity that Christ initiated and presides over. The prophet Jeremiah laid out a program for Israel in Babylonian exile that is the perfect agenda for the church in the United States and elsewhere: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7). So, the New Testament mandate (like the Old Testament one from Jeremiah) is not a call to retreat, but to be a positive witness in the

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=504&issue\\_id=108](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=504&issue_id=108).



culture. We are not called to take monastic vows of separation, but to take an active role as mature Christians in all of the activities of the culture in which God has called us to be ambassadors. We are called to demonstrate care and respect for those who do not share our faith and show them that the Lord Jesus Christ is the only true hope of a lost humanity.

Skeel ends on a note that needs serious attention by conservative Christians. Rather than condemning the world, Christians should be examples of Christian virtue ( i.e., what the new humanity transformed by God's grace looks like). Skeel does not mention that exercising love and forgiveness, and explaining the sufficiency of God's grace in Christ to redeem sinners, are at the heart of that example. Virtue without grace is not much help to a world alienated from God. As Jesus said, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17).

As a pastor, I recommend, instead of the Benedict Option, the Jeremiah 29 Option. ☺

**Gregory E. Reynolds** *serves as the pastor of Amoskeag Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Manchester, New Hampshire, and is the editor of Ordained Servant.*

# ✦ Servant Word

## Expository Preaching: What Is It and Why Should We Do It?

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* May 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Dennis E. Johnson**

Pastors rightly feel the weight of our calling to feed Christ's people a robust and balanced diet of God's Word, full of spiritual nutrients. We long to be able to echo what Paul said to the elders of the church at Ephesus, as he looked back over his ministry there: "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying ... of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ... I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:20–21, 26–27). What audacious claims to make for a preaching and teaching ministry that lasted only three years (v. 31)! Without fear of contradiction Paul asserted that he had not withheld from his hearers "*anything* that was profitable," that he had delivered "the *whole* counsel of God." Even after a pastorate of thirty-three years, would we dare to echo Paul's claim? Yet all Scripture is God-breathed, so all of it is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). How should we follow in the Apostle's footsteps as stewards of God's mysteries (1 Cor. 4:1), faithfully distributing his bounty to

his hungry household (Luke 12:42)?

Pastors have many shepherding duties, but none can rival our central calling to preach the Word (2 Tim. 4:2). The church has witnessed various approaches to preaching over the centuries: expository, evangelistic, catechetical, festal, and prophetic.<sup>2</sup> Preeminent among these, I would claim, is *the expository sermon*. Let me elaborate that thesis: For the health, safety, and growth of Christ's people and for the advance of the gospel among the unchurched, pastors must preach *carefully studied, meditatively processed, thoroughly prayed, contextually applied, Christ-centered expository sermons*. Our sermons should explore the wide spectrum of the Bible's books and genres and texts, from Old Testament and New, applying the various forms of God's speech to the diversity of human sin and suffering. In this essay, I will first explain what I mean by expository preaching, and then give reasons that such an approach to preaching faithfully fulfills our calling to proclaim "the whole counsel of God."

### What Is Expository Preaching?

An expository sermon is drawn from, and controlled by, the distinctive content of the biblical passage being "exposed." The text drives and dictates the sermon's thesis, structure, purpose, and application. An expository message is different, for example, from a *topical* sermon, which brings together a variety of biblical passages to address a theme, whether doctrinal or ethical. Catechetical preaching, practiced in the continental Reformed churches, often consists of topical sermons in which various biblical texts are enlisted to demonstrate the doctrinal conclusions summarized in the catechism's answers.<sup>3</sup> The expository sermon, on

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=485&issue\\_id=105](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=485&issue_id=105).

2 Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 1, *The Biblical Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 8. Old refers to these categories throughout this seven-volume series.

3 On the other hand, catechetical preaching can be offered through expository sermons, expounding one primary biblical passage that reveals the truth summarized in the catechism (or a significant aspect of that truth) in a contextually fitting way, as I will mention below.

the other hand, does not try to communicate what the whole Bible says on a particular subject, but rather to express the message and mission of *one specific text*—a psalm, a parable, the narrative of an event in history, a section of doctrinal discourse or ethical exhortation, etc.

The focus of an expository sermon on unfolding the meaning, flow, and implications of one biblical passage appears in classic definitions of expository preaching over the last few centuries. Southern Baptist John Broadus wrote in his influential *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (originally published 1870):

An expository discourse may be defined as one which is occupied mainly, or at any rate very largely, with the exposition of Scripture. It by no means excludes argument and exhortation as to the doctrines or lessons which this exposition develops. It may be devoted to a long passage, or to a very short one, even a part of a sentence. It may be one of a series, or may stand by itself.<sup>4</sup>

That same year (1870) Presbyterian Robert L. Dabney published *Sacred Rhetoric*, in which he wrote:

If the text [of a sermon] contains a number of verses of Scripture, the whole of which are to be explained and applied in their connection, the discussion is called an “expository” sermon. If the text contains only a single proposition, or at most a brief passage of the Word presenting one point, it is denominated by some a “textual” and by others a “topical” sermon. But ... assuredly every expository sermon ought to be textual in the true sense, and ... many expository and narrative sermons may be topical.<sup>5</sup>

---

4 John Albert Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, ed. E. C. Dargan, rev. ed. (New York; London: Harper, 1926), 322.

5 Robert Lewis Dabney, *Evangelical Eloquence: A Course of Lectures on Preaching* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1999), 76. Originally, *Sacred Rhetoric: A Course of Lectures on Preaching* (1870). Dabney went on to register his vigorous disapproval of a “species of discourse upon insulated fragments of Scripture, which should never have had a place in the Church

Haddon Robinson, who has taught homiletics at Dallas, Denver, and Gordon-Conwell Seminaries, offers this definition:

*Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.*<sup>6</sup>

More recently, in *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, Presbyterian Bryan Chapell explains the expository homiletic that he seeks to “redeem”:

A sermon that explores any biblical concept is in the broadest sense “expository,” but the *technical definition of an expository sermon requires that it expound Scripture by deriving from a specific text main points and subpoints that disclose the thought of the author, cover the scope of the passage, and are applied to the lives of the listeners.*<sup>7</sup>

Some flexibility is built into these definitions of “expository preaching.” As Broadus observes, the biblical text to be expounded may be long or short. Expository sermons may belong to a series that continuously expounds a biblical book in order (*lectio continua*, discussed below). But an expository sermon may also stand alone. The common thread is the sermon’s focus on unfolding and applying *the message of a single passage* of Scripture, understood in its appropriate contexts (literary, historical, and ultimately canonical).

To the general definitions offered by Broadus, Dabney, Robinson, and Chapell, I would add some details: Good expository sermons should be

---

at all. We will call them, for convenience, sermons without context.”

6 Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 20 (italics original).

7 Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 132 (italics original). The first edition appeared in 1994.

*carefully studied, Christ centered, meditatively processed, thoroughly prayed, and contextually applied.* Let's explore these qualities, and see how they help us avoid pitfalls sometimes associated with expository preaching.

**Carefully Studied.** The life-transforming power of any sermon springs from the sovereign power of God's Holy Spirit, but the Spirit uses means. So we can also say that the authority and persuasiveness of an expository sermon depend on the pastor's showing his listeners that the message he is conveying is, in fact, what the biblical text itself says. The preacher, therefore, takes pains to demonstrate that he is not exploiting a scriptural passage as a mere pretext for propounding his own theories. Rather, he comes as a servant to the text, urging hearers to submit their minds and hearts to the Word, as he has. Responsible expository preaching therefore demands that the pastor do his homework, hard work, drawing on every resource available to him in order to grasp, fully and as accurately as possible, the message of that particular text. This includes disciplined analysis of the semantics and syntax of the original language (Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek), features of the literary genre, the immediate historical setting and the text's location in the unfolding history of biblical revelation and God's covenants, and other relevant passages throughout the Bible. Preparing expository sermons is demanding work, because our aim is to exhibit such submission to God's message in a specific text that, though we are not apostles, our hearers will respond to our sermons as the Thessalonian believers responded to Paul's: "When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers" (1 Thess. 2:13).

**Christ Centered.** If a sermon gives adequate attention to a passage's words and phrases, its literary and historical environments, its theological themes, and its contemporary relevance, but fails to place it into its *most important context*, then some may call it "expository," but it falls far short

of the goal of true Christian preaching. That most important context is the history of God's redemptive plan, worked out in history and climaxing in Christ. This is not the place to make this case at length, so I won't discuss Jesus's interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures as all about himself (John 5:45–47; Luke 24:25–27, 44–29; see 1 Pet. 1:10–11); or trace the way that Paul sums up the content that he preaches simply as "Christ" (1 Cor. 1:18–25; 2:2; Phil. 1:14–18; Col. 1:25–28; 2:2–3; see Eph. 4:20–24); or show that apostles asserted that the Old Testament had us new covenant believers in view (1 Cor. 10:6–11; 1 Pet. 1:12).<sup>8</sup> Since Christ Jesus is the only mediator between God and men (1 Tim. 2:5), since God's plan for the fullness of time is to unite all things in Christ (Eph. 1:9), and since only Christ could accomplish what the law as commandment could never do (Rom. 8:1–4), then any sermon that fails to show the text's connection to Christ has ignored the text's most significant and most life-transforming context.

**Meditatively Processed and Thoroughly Prayed.** The demands of preparing expository sermons do not end when we have explored the passage in its every context and answered every interpretive question it poses. An expository sermon is not an exegetical lecture. It is not a running, word-by-word or phrase-by-phrase commentary on the passage's linguistic and literary features, its historical background, or its theological concepts, interspersed with whatever "applications" suggest themselves to the preacher's mind as he struggles to connect an ancient text to his contemporary hearers. To convey the text's unique message and to serve its God-designed mission (purpose), the expository preacher needs to immerse his preparation in a spiritual discipline of *stepping back* from the plethora of intriguing details turned up in his exegetical spadework. He must get perspective on *the passage as a whole*: What is its central theme? What transformative purpose does the Spirit of

---

<sup>8</sup> See Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007).

God, who breathed out the text, intend to accomplish in people's lives today? In this pregnant pause between digging, on the one hand, and delivering, on the other, we need illumination from the text's divine Author, so prayer must permeate our pondering. For ourselves and our hearers we ask "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened" (Eph. 1:17–18). If expository sermons are to resonate with the ring of truth, preachers must spend time in quiet meditation and humble petition, asking the Holy Spirit to write the text first into their own hearts, and then into hearers' hearts as well.

**Contextually Applied.** Expository preaching at its best becomes a bridge "between two worlds."<sup>9</sup> It connects its first recipients' life-context and locale in redemptive-covenantal history, on the one hand, to our cultural environment today, on the other. In terms of the deep realities—our unchanging creator and Lord, our identity as his image-bearers who have fallen into sin, our need of redemption, and his provision of the matchless redeemer —our context now and theirs then are identical. But God works in history. So history's ceaseless change is significant. The realities that span ages display themselves in different ways at different times. As our prayerful meditation turns toward the challenge of our proclaiming the text's burden to others, our exposition has to take account not only of era-transcending spiritual truths but also of the distinctive challenges to God's message posed by our location in time and space. Idolatry is a constant threat. But the idols that vie for our allegiance today are rarely carved from wood or cast in gold. Instead, they may take the form of sophisticated electronics or economic investments. Faithful expository preaching interprets both the biblical text and the time in which we live.

## Reasons for Expository Preaching

1. **The expository approach to preaching reminds pastors and shows their listeners that preachers are "men under authority," like the rest of us.** Jesus marveled over the faith expressed by a Roman centurion, who understood his authority to heal with a word as analogous to the military chain of command that he knew well: "For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it" (Matt. 8:9–10). Pastors too are men under authority, "stewards of the mysteries of God," slaves entrusted with our master's message and charged to preserve and deliver it, undistorted and undiluted—uninfected by our own opinions—to others (1 Cor. 4:1–2; see 2 Cor. 2:17). When our sermon exposes the distinctive message of a biblical passage, we are implicitly inviting listeners to put our words to the test of God's Word, as the members of the synagogue at Berea did to Paul's preaching: "They received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

2. **Expository preaching implicitly subverts the postmodern "hermeneutic of suspicion" that views preaching as a pastoral power play to wield influence over congregants.** Topical sermons, which convene a variety of biblical passages to address a single theme, should express the fullness and balance of God's revealed truth concerning that theme. In principle, every passage cited in a topical sermon should be soundly interpreted in context. But even when a topical sermon faithfully fulfills its mission to present the Bible's truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, jaded postmodern listeners may harbor suspicions that the preacher is playing fast and loose with Scripture, "cherry-picking" texts that support his point and ignoring others, in order to leverage its endorsement for his own ends. Expository sermons, on the other hand, help to disarm skeptics of the suspicion that the preacher has chosen this Sunday's Scripture for the sake of some personal agenda.

<sup>9</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

**3. Expository preaching models how to read Scripture in its contexts.** Whenever pastors preach, they are setting an example for those who hear them. Consciously or unintentionally, preachers model for the persons in the pew what should be “best practices” in studying and understanding the Bible. When they lead listeners into the passage’s content and flow of thought, placing it against the backdrops of its book, its historical occasion, and its place in the Bible’s big story of redemption in Christ, preachers are implicitly informing and forming how their congregants will read the Word throughout the week.

**4. Expository preaching displays the integration of God’s various ways of speaking in the Bible.** It is fine to distill from a biblical text doctrines to be believed and duties to be fulfilled. And we can draw together the truths and obligations distilled from different passages into a coherent summary, a “pattern of sound words” (2 Tim. 1:13). Our confessions and catechisms handle the Bible in this way, sketching for our finite minds the vast system of truth that the Lord has disclosed in his Word. Yet God’s speech in Scripture displays the variety we hear in other conversations, interweaving truth and urgency, delight and dismay. The Westminster Confession of Faith (14.2) cites some of the different ways God addresses us when it describes saving faith’s response to the Bible’s various tones of voice (emphasis added):

By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speaking therein; and *acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof contains; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises* of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are *accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone* for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

Often doctrine and duty (truth and command, gospel and law, indicative and imperative), not to

mention threatenings and promises and love songs and laments, come interwoven with one another in the biblical text, just as our everyday conversations blend appeals or demands with rationales and motivations. A topical sermon enjoining truth-telling could certainly appeal to Ephesians 4:25. But an *expository* sermon on Ephesians 4:25, will not only show *that* we must speak truth but also *why*: “for we are members of one another,” which evokes the imagery of the church as the body of Christ (4:12–16). When pastors preach passages as we find them in the Bible, our listeners are drawn into the lively conversation that our God has initiated and carried with his people.

### **Expository Preaching and *Lectio Continua* Series**

Preaching pastors labor at the intersection between God’s final, firm, fully sufficient revelation in the Bible and the vicissitudes of his people’s life in the present. How can we preach to meet the diversity of spiritual conditions represented in the folks sitting attentively before us as we enter the pulpit? How can we prepare and serve a balanced, healthy diet for our hearers’ hearts, the right blend of various nutrients—Old Testament and New, narrative and doctrinal texts, praise and lament, passages that comfort and those that command—in appropriate proportions?

Expository preaching is often associated with continuous sermon series that work through one book of the Bible after another. This practice of continuously preaching through books or sections of Scripture over a span of weeks or months or years, called *lectio continua* (continuous reading), has ancient and honorable pedigree. Church fathers such as Origen and John Chrysostom planned and conducted their preaching agenda this way. After centuries in which the church’s homiletical diet was controlled by lectionaries and liturgical calendars, Protestant Reformers such as Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli revived the practice of preaching through biblical books.<sup>10</sup> It makes sense

---

10 For the big picture of the *lectio continua* approach to sermon



to connect an expository handling of a specific biblical passage, on the one hand, with the *lectio continua* approach to scheduling a congregation's ongoing diet in the Word, on the other. It models the sound practice of reading each passage in the Bible in context.

Some may wonder whether an unbroken series of sermons that plods, text by text, through a long biblical book—Job, for example—over a period of months or years might run the risk of serving one's congregation an imbalanced spiritual diet. Consider the numbers. Depending on a church's weekly schedule, today's pastor will typically proclaim God's Word in Lord's Day worship services between 50 and 100 times a year. Pastors with extraordinary expository preaching ministries may sustain *lectio continua* series in a single book over a span of years. During his ministry to Westminster Chapel, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached 366 sermons on the Epistle to the Romans on Friday evenings. That is the equivalent of seven years of messages, although the series actually extended over thirteen years.<sup>11</sup> Yet Lloyd-Jones also preached twice each Lord's Day, feeding God's flock on other sections of God's Word.<sup>12</sup> Pastors who preach only once or twice weekly might expose their flocks to "the whole counsel" of God by taking Romans in bigger "bites" than the Doctor did, or by interspersing briefer series on smaller biblical books among their expositions of longer books (Isaiah) or deeper books (Romans). A *lectio conti-*

*nua* series of expository sermons could also focus on discrete units within books (for example, the Joseph narrative in Genesis 37–50, or the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7).

Pastoral wisdom is needed in mapping out a congregation's homiletical diet year-by-year. The distinctive spiritual challenges confronting the congregation should be taken into account in selecting biblical books, or sections of books, to be preached. The important thing is that pastors demonstrate their submission to the Word, display the distinctive message of each passage, and proclaim the Bible's coherent witness to Christ and his grace in each and every sermon. ☺

**Dennis E. Johnson** is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and serves as a professor of practical theology at Westminster Seminary California in Escondido, and associate pastor of New Life Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Escondido, California.

---

series, see Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998–2010), which was reviewed in four parts in *Ordained Servant* 21 (2012): 148–53; 22 (2013): 130–32; 23.3 (March 2014): 15–19; and 23.8 (October 2014): 24–30. (Accessed at <http://www.opc.org/os.html>.)

11 Iain H. Murray, *David Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith 1939–1981* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 233, 582–83. Murray reports that the Friday sermon series ran from October through May, "with a short break at Christmas and Easter" (233n1). The Romans series began in 1955 and concluded in March 1968. Audio recordings of 366 of those sermons can still be heard online at <http://www.mljtrust.org/collections/book-of-romans/>.

12 In the preface to *Preaching and Preachers*, Dr. Lloyd-Jones reported preaching ordinarily three times each weekend at Westminster Chapel. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 3.

# ✦ Servant Truth

## The Doctrine of Divine Simplicity: A Pastor's Appreciation

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*  
Online August-September 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **D. Scott Meadows**<sup>2</sup>

The very first of Charles Spurgeon's 3,561 published sermons is entitled "The Immutability of God," with the text, Malachi 3:6, "I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (KJV). Spurgeon begins by extolling a Christian's study of "the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father," calling this "the highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God." Since I first read his comments about three decades ago, they have stuck with me:

There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can compass and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-content, and go our way with the thought, "Behold I am wise." But when we

come to this master-science, finding that our plumb-line cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought, that vain man would be wise, but he is like a wild ass's colt; and with the solemn exclamation, "I am but of yesterday, and know nothing." No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God.

But while the subject *humbles* the mind it also *expands* it... Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity. (emphasis Spurgeon's)<sup>3</sup>

Lately, I trust that my own soul has been humbled and expanded in the sacred investigation, with much help from a recent book by James Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness*.<sup>4</sup> Now I wonder how and why its subject matter is so generally absent or grossly truncated in theological education today. By the standard of historical theology, it has occupied a large and important place in the biblical and orthodox doctrine of theology proper. At the very least, I know this book has addressed significantly the deficiency in my own study. Even with twenty-five years of experience in pastoral ministry, I have read little and heard little discussion among colleagues on the specific topic of divine simplicity. Of course, I was not wholly unaware of our adherence as Reformed, confessional ministers and churches to the concept—that God is "without body, parts, or passions"<sup>5</sup>—but my

3 C. H. Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit Sermons* (1856; repr., Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications), 1:1.

4 James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011). Dolezal (Ph.D., Th.M. from Westminster Theological Seminary; M.Div. from the Master's Seminary; M.A., B.A. from the Master's College) teaches church history, Trinitarian theology, and philosophy in the School of Divinity at Cairn University of Langhorne, PA.

5 E.g., Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), 2.1; Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1677/1689 (1689 LBCF), 2.1.

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=498&issue\\_id=107](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=498&issue_id=107).

2 Presentation by D. Scott Meadows, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church (Reformed) of Exeter, NH, for the Granite State Reformed Ministers Fellowship, meeting in Manchester, NH, on December 18, 2014.

investigation, especially of God “without parts,” had been slender. The subject is so lofty and some aspects so new to me that I can only hope to introduce it to others, while directing them to sound and substantial treatments like Dolezal’s worthy book.

I had thought to present a book review, but in my consultation with the author, I have come to believe that a straightforward introduction to the topic of divine simplicity seems better for this occasion. Alexander H. Pierce, who teaches at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, wrote a worthy summary and review, concluding,

Paul Helm gets it right when he says in the foreword of the book, “The result is the best full-length philosophical treatment of divine simplicity that I know’ (p. xi). Anyone interested in bringing historically and philosophically informed consideration of DDS together with its contemporary critiques should read this book, for although it is written for the academically disposed, it has to be to provide a capable rejoinder to the legion of contemporary DDS skeptics.<sup>6</sup>

My modest ambition in this presentation is to answer briefly two basic questions: 1) What is the doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS)? and 2) Why is the DDS important?

### What Is the DDS?

The DDS is largely framed as a denial of composition in God in any sense whatsoever, though it has “numerous positive implications for one’s understanding of God’s existence and essence.”<sup>7</sup> Succinctly, God is without parts. With more specificity, the DDS

denies that he is physically, logically, or metaphysically composite. Non-composition ... must characterize God inasmuch as every composite is a dependent thing that cannot

account for its own existence or essence and stands in need of some composer outside itself... Furthermore, composition signifies the capacity of a thing to change or even be annihilated. If God is to be understood as “most absolute” all such composition must be denied of him.<sup>8</sup>

Thomas Aquinas’s treatment of the DDS (exposition and defense) is particularly important because of its fullness and its influence upon Protestant scholastic theology at the heart of the Reformed doctrinal tradition. The classical theism of Roman Catholicism and Reformed theology are not at odds here. To those acquainted with the modern academic debate, it may seem peculiar in our current theological milieu that the DDS has not been particularly controversial in historical Christian thought. Some objections raised today are novel. The critics are generally philosophers claiming incoherence of the DDS and evangelicals claiming inconsistency of the DDS with the Christian view of God.<sup>9</sup>

Classically, the DDS rests upon a discussion of “parts” with some relation of “act” and “passive potency” in a thing.<sup>10</sup> “A part is anything in a subject that is less than the whole and without which the subject would be different than it is.”

“‘Act’ is that in virtue of which a thing is,” and a thing may be as an act of existence, or according to forms or properties by which a thing exists in one way or another.” An “act” as a “part” of something refers to “that in virtue of which existence and/or change is brought about.”

“‘Passive potency’ is the capacity of a thing to receive act or to be in a certain way. It is that principle in virtue of which a thing is able to receive existence and to be changed while in existence.”

---

8 Ibid.

9 Dolezal, 11; philosopher-critics include Richard Gale, Christopher Hughes, Thomas Morris, and Alvin Plantinga, while evangelical critics include Ronald Nash, John Feinberg, J. P. Moreland, and William Lane Craig (11–29).

10 I am also greatly indebted to unpublished lecture notes of Dolezal (“THE 311 Lecture Notes 5: Divine Simplicity”), which are the source of quotations and most ideas in this section of my paper not specifically attributed.

---

6 Alexander H. Pierce, *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 32.1 (Autumn 2014): 104–6.

7 Dolezal, 31.

In this sense, all creatures are compositions, even immaterial spirits like angels and the souls of men. The DDS asserts that this reality pertaining to creatures forms the basis of a necessary and important distinction from the Creator who must necessarily be completely devoid of “passive potency.” Nothing could possibly be more basic and fundamental than the divine nature itself. God is wholly uncaused and unchanging. The ground of his being is in himself (this is known as his “aseity”). Puritan John Owen states it well:

Now, if God were of any causes, internal or external, any principles antecedent or superior to him, he could not be so absolutely first and independent. Were he composed of parts, or accidents, manner of being, he could not be first; all of these are before that which is of them, and therefore his essence is absolutely simple.<sup>11</sup>

“Absolutely simple”—a strong affirmation by such a champion of the Reformed faith should be noted well. Aquinas was pithier when he wrote,

Every composite ... is subsequent to its components. The first being, therefore, which is God, has no components.<sup>12</sup>

These observations lead to the conclusion in the classical Christian tradition that God is “pure act” (*actus purus*) and is “subsistent being itself” (*ipsum esse subsistens*). “This does not mean that he is abstract, static, or lifeless, but that he is so infinitely full of actuality that he could not be moved to some additional actuality. *God is being, not becoming*” (emphasis Dolezal’s).

Aquinas denies six varieties of act/potency in God. These are a traditional part of the elaboration of the DDS.

---

11 John Owen, *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, in *Works* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1966), 12:72.

12 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 1.18, <http://dh-spriory.org/thomas/ContraGentiles1.htm#18>.

### 1. God Cannot Be Composed of Bodily Parts.

We know this from explicit biblical teaching (e.g., John 4:24; Luke 24:39; 1 Tim. 1:17—other apparently contradictory passages are figurative accommodation language called “anthropomorphisms”), and also from reason. “If God had a body he would require a unifying principle of actuality to preserve the unity of his body,” and a needy God is an ontological impossibility.

### 2. God Cannot Be Composed of Matter and Form.

Concrete material subjects are composed of “matter” (the principle of passive potency in a thing) and “form” (the principle that enables matter to exist as this or that particular thing). Thus, concrete materials require constituents more basic than the subject itself in order to exist as they do. These components only apply to material things and so are wholly irrelevant to God who is pure spirit.

### 3. God Cannot Be Composed of Supposit and Nature.

A “supposit” is a particular existing thing, while “nature” is the “whatness” of that thing. For example, a particular man and humanity are not precisely identical. “Socrates is a man (a supposit), but Socrates is not humanity (a nature).” The relevant correlative is God and his divinity, but in his case these are necessarily the same. “He just is the divinity by which he is God. To be divine and to be this God are one [and] the same.”

### 4. God Cannot Be Composed of Genus and Species.

Whereas genus is a classification, and species is a subset within a genus, this is impossible for God. He is not one particular type of divinity, differentiated in some way from other divine beings. He is *sui generis*, in a class by himself, unique and distinct from his creation as a whole and all his particular creatures. As Herman Bavinck wrote:

For precisely because God is pure being—the absolute, perfect, unique, and simple being—we cannot give a definition to him. There is no genus to which he belongs as a member, and there are no specific marks of distinction whereby we can distinguish him from other beings in this genus.<sup>13</sup>

### 5. God Cannot Be Composed of Substance and Accident.

An “accident” is a quality that inheres in a substance and causes it to be or exist in some way that it does not in virtue of itself. This composite trait makes the object with it capable of and liable to change. Further, accidents depend on the substance in which they inhere for their very existence. Such a dependence is utterly foreign to the biblical revelation of God, and therefore composition in this way is impossible.

### 6. God Cannot Be Composed of Essence and Existence.

Perhaps the most difficult conceptually, this distinction is very important to grasp. Creatures are universally composed of the metaphysical qualities of essence (*essentia*, what a thing is) and existence (*esse*, that it is). These “are prior to the complete actuality of the thing (*ens*) possessing them.” By definition in an *ex nihilo* creation, a creature’s existence is not essential to it, being necessarily dependent upon another for its very existence. Its existence is derived, not inherent. But we know that God’s being is absolutely necessary and infinite because his essence is identical with his existence.

## Divine Attributes

The DDS has important implications for how we understand the divine attributes as well. Briefly, it asserts that there is no real distinction between God’s essence and his attributes. When we distinguish divine attributes, we are merely describing the simple divine essence. God is good in virtue

of God, not goodness; he is wise in virtue of God, not wisdom, etc. These attributes are not so many really distinct parts in God, but God is all these things in virtue of his own nature as God.

Some have objected that this collapses all divine attributes into each other, so that no distinction is rationally possible. This objection confuses the existential reality of God as he is in himself with the revelation of God to his creatures. In order that we might know him truly but not comprehensively, he uses analogical language related to the multifaceted creation in great condescension to our limited perception and understanding. As George Joyce wrote:

Our minds can form no single conception to express that all-embracing unity of God’s being: our only resource is to form partial concepts, each of which exhibits some aspect of Divine fullness.... The attributes ... are not distinct determinations in God, as are justice and mercy in man: the distinction is the work of the mind. But it is grounded on the reality, because the fullness of the Divine being contains all that is involved in these terms.<sup>14</sup>

In short, “God is simple; our thoughts and language about him are not.” The DDS affirms that our language about God is analogical, not univocal. His being is incomprehensible, ineffable, and inexpressible in words, except by analogy.

## Why Is the DDS Important?

For me, the mere explication of the DDS is quite obviously profound, momentous, and laden with great implications for the Christian faith and our relationship with God. But I will offer three of the more significant arguments for our shared appreciation. The DDS is important:

### 1. For Understanding Theology Proper in Our Reformed Confessional Heritage

The form of sound words concerning God

13 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 121.

14 George Hayward Joyce, *Principles of Natural Theology* (London: Longmans Green, 1923), 260–61.

which arise from Scripture through diligent observation, reverent meditation, and holy consultation has been abundantly evident in our Reformed confessional heritage. The WCF and the 1689 LBCF, for example, stand in the mainstream of prior Christian thought, which is 1) evident in the inscripturated and preserved revelation God gave Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles with their associates by divine inspiration, along with 2) the writings of the post-apostolic fathers in the early centuries of church history, and also in 3) the extant literature of the greatest theologians from centuries just preceding the Protestant Reformation. The Reformed confessions exhibit the same spirit and promote the same general understanding and vocabulary of their predecessors, while they make progress in articulating the doctrines more fully, formally, and systematically. For example, one familiar with the great ecumenical creeds (Apostles', Nicene, Athanasian) readily detects their formulaic statements enfolded in the later Reformed confessions, and yet the same essential insights are admirably extended further.

At this point and with these things in mind, I recommend a careful review of chapter 2 in the WCF and/or the 1689 LBCF, entitled, "Of God, and the Holy Trinity," along with the biblical texts cited in it. I now appreciate its content more than ever.

Modern students of these historic documents are sometimes grossly impoverished by their ignorance of the theological and philosophical context in which they were produced. This general observation applies specifically in the realm of theology proper. "Without body, parts, or passions" (WCF 2.1; 1689 LBCF 2.1) cannot be understood clearly or appreciated in a vacuum, nor many other elements of the confessional doctrine of God as articulated in the second chapter of the aforementioned confessions of faith. The sound rule of biblical interpretation that takes into account the original sense of words and expressions applies to the interpretation of all documents, including these confessions. Expounding the confessional substance without a knowledge of historical theology is bound to produce error. Furthermore,

attempts to pervert the sense of such phrases in keeping with modern ideas while claiming confessional subscription are ill-founded and implicitly unethical, despite the best of intentions.

More to the point, the theology proper of Reformed confessions both assume and propagate ideas wholly consistent with the DDS. This has substantiating evidence in the works of great confessional sympathizers, including Stephen Charnock and John Owen. One may plausibly reject the classical position, but he ought to admit that he also rejects the confessional language that grew out of and implies this position.

Therefore, growth in our familiarity with classical theism will enhance our grasp of what our confessions mean by what they say, and foster a more intelligent and ethical subscription to the truths they formally state in their language tested by Scripture and consensus, if indeed we are in agreement with our Reformed forefathers.

## **2. For Safeguarding All Aspects of the Biblical Revelation of Our Exalted God**

Some may object to classical Christian theism on the ground that it is more philosophical than exegetical. Even mentioning "substance" and "accidents," along with many other terms in the specialized technical vocabulary the DDS requires articulation, arouses suspicion in many, if not outright rejection. Colossians 2:8 has been misinterpreted to mean that rational observations by Aristotle, for example, have no place in sacred reflection and doctrinal formulation.

But the same prejudice necessarily militates against the doctrine of the Trinity, as it has come to be expressed by Christians generally over two millennia. You will search your Bible in vain for "hypostases," "essence," and "person," in the technical and philosophical senses of the orthodox formulations. That in itself is no sound argument against them, as generally acknowledged by Christians today. That the philosophical language associated with the DDS may be more complex and less familiar to us is no greater argument against its fidelity to Scripture truth. In my opinion, this only testifies of our need to recover the knowledge of



our rich theological heritage.

Such language has been usefully pressed into the service of grasping and appreciating the biblical revelation of God himself. There is no passage or even brief collection of Scripture texts which adequately convey the whole divine witness in its holy pages to the reality of our triune God. The stock philosophical language used in trinitarian theology came about “by good and necessary consequence;” it was “deduced from Scripture” (WCF 1.6). The 1689 LCBF statement on this is similar, recognizing that doctrinal truth “is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture” (1.6). Adherents to the DDS believe the same thing about it as the doctrine of the Trinity. Both are truly and rationally deduced from Scripture and necessarily contained in it.

An illustration may be helpful. Consider a numerical series: 1, 3, \_\_, \_\_, 9, 11, 13, \_\_, 17. It is a fact to state that the numbers 5, 7, and 15 are just as legitimate a part of this series as 1, 3, 9, 11, 13, and 17, though the former numbers are not explicitly stated and the latter are. Whatever doctrine is justifiably deduced from and truly contained in Holy Scripture is just as true and authoritative as that which it states explicitly.

Classical Christian theism exists partly because it seems the only way to understand and account for the plainly-stated biblical teaching about God. Assertions of his unity (Deut. 6:4), infinity (Ps. 147:5), immutability (Mal. 3:6), eternity, immortality, and invisibility (1 Tim. 1:17), cohere rationally with the DDS, and it is hard to see any alternative system of thought exhibiting comparable consistency with the testimony of God’s Word. To quote Dolezal:

It appears that those doctrines that are traditionally understood to establish an absolute Creator-creature distinction are dependent upon the DDS for their strength of absoluteness. It is God’s simplicity that promotes these doctrines of aseity, unity, infinity, immutability, and eternity to their status as genuinely incommunicable divine attributes. In this way the theological function of the DDS can be

understood as that by which God is rightly regarded as most absolute.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. For Worshiping God in Spirit and in Truth

Our Lord Jesus Christ characterized the kind of worship sought by God the Father as that which is “in spirit and in truth,” and such is our moral obligation (John 4:23–24). A sound knowledge of God as he has revealed himself actually to be is essential to worship he accepts. It is impossible to worship the true and living God with grossly incorrect notions of his being, as the golden calf episode illustrates (Exod. 32:4).

Whereas the First Commandment requires our worship of God alone (Exod. 20:3), the Second Commandment prohibits worshiping him under any visible form (Exod. 20:4–6). We infer from this that the possibility of false worship is not limited to visible misrepresentations; it includes doctrinal as well. The Mormon god who began as a man in their teaching is a false god. It is likewise with the creaturely false Christ of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, whose full deity they deny.

Yet doctrinal perfection in the realm of theology proper is not a requirement of true worship that God accepts graciously through Christ. Who among us does not need more study and sustained contemplation upon God’s self-disclosure so that our thoughts may be refined toward the existential reality?

I believe God is pleased by our holy yearning to know him better, and by our studious pursuit of him as he really is. Furthermore, as we grow by his grace in our apprehension of the divine being, our souls are awakened and stirred to greater reverence and awe, which characterizes pure worship. And this, in turn, promotes our progress in sanctification of heart and life that makes us more fit to glorify God as his faithful servants.

My concluding contention is that as the classical DDS has been a catalyst to true and purer worship for many centuries, so a revival of interest

---

<sup>15</sup> Dolezal, 92.

and appreciation today will tend to the same great end. Not only is the mind improved, humbled, and enlarged by means of these profound insights, but we draw nearer to the grandeur and glory of the experience Jesus promised: “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). May our Lord and Savior grant us this for the sake of his own glory. Amen. ☉

**D. Scott Meadows** is a Reformed Baptist pastor serving as the pastor of Calvary Baptist Church (Reformed), in Exeter, New Hampshire.

## Jonah’s Baptism

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* November 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Robert Mossotti**<sup>2</sup>

“Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead.” (Luke 24:45–46)

Nowhere in the Old Testament is it “written” that the Christ should suffer death only to rise again on the third day—at least nowhere is it written explicitly. It is only by following Jesus’s own hermeneutics that we can find this idea in the OT.<sup>3</sup> Since Christ is the new and true, that is, the antitypical, Israel, his death and resurrection are foreshadowed in Hosea 6:2; thus, vindicating,

humanly speaking, this use of the OT by Jesus. However, for all the merits this text from Hosea has as being the OT “writing” to which our Lord here refers, he was at least additionally referring to the second chapter of the book of the prophet Jonah. After all, it was the clear intention of Christ that we find a direct (“as . . . so”) correlation between his death, burial, and resurrection and the experiences of Jonah poetically related in that chapter. “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:40). But before we can explore those correspondences in any depth, it must be shown that there is a thematic connection, namely, the theme of baptism, that connects the experiences of the prophet Jonah and those of the Christ. In what way can it be said that both Jonah’s and Jesus’s experiences can be understood in terms of baptism?

In brief, Jesus directs us to think of his death and burial in terms of a baptism in Luke 12:50. His passing under the judgment of Calvary and the trial of the tomb is revealed in that verse to be akin in his mind to a water ordeal calculated to establish juridically his guilt or his righteousness.<sup>4</sup> To be baptized then is to pass under the judgment of God (cf. the Red Sea crossing<sup>5</sup> and the Flood, in which the wicked are destroyed and the righteous are saved/justified<sup>6</sup>). Likewise, it was God’s judgment upon Jonah’s disobedience that brought the calamitous storm and resulted in Jonah’s being cast down into the water to undergo his ordeal. These associations being sufficient to find a baptismal theme in the ordeals of both Jesus and Jonah, and also appreciating the explicit direction from our Lord to see in Jonah’s water experience a correspondence to his own judgment ordeal, let us now explore what may be found by way of material connections between Jonah 2 and the suffering, entombment, and resurrection of our Lord.

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=511&issue\\_id=109](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=511&issue_id=109).

2 This article was adapted from a sermon preached by him at Mid Cities Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Bedford, TX, during the summer of 2014.

3 See R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Vancouver: Regent, 1998), *passim*.

4 See Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), *passim*.

5 1 Cor. 10:2.

6 1 Pet. 3:20–21.

The Book of Jonah is a work of prose that narrates the experiences of a rather colicky Hebrew prophet who prophesied in the eighth century BC. But in chapter 2 of this four-chapter narrative, one is suddenly confronted with several lines of poetry. The sudden appearance of poetry is so jarring that it has caused some critics to suggest that this chapter belongs to a later hand.<sup>7</sup> Could it be that this abrupt shift from prose to poetry, from history to verse, from chronicle to song, serves as a formal signal to the reader that the tale is departing from the relation of facts about the protagonist's experiences and is shifting to portraying the experiences of the coming Messiah? This chapter in Jonah is in fact a blend of quotations from—and allusions to—the Psalter,<sup>8</sup> which according to Edmund P. Clowney should be seen as the personal songbook of our singing Savior.<sup>9</sup> Such a sudden formal diversion in chapter 2 from simple narrative to the songbook of the Christ is accompanied by a change in the substance of what the book communicates about its subject. These together serve to alert the reader that the book is no longer discussing Jonah's experiences but has paused to relate the descent of the Righteous One into the underworld and his ultimate deliverance.

After Jonah has been cast into the sea, the attentive reader will see that the imagery is ill-suited to depict a man who has been placed in the belly of a great fish. Indeed, once the lines switch from prose to poetry in verse 2, the speaker is seen to be no longer speaking “from the belly of the fish,” as in verse 1, but “from the belly of *Sheol*.” Verse 2 is in fact a summary of the entire experience of the singing subject, while verse 3 begins the relation of the entire experience in full. The subject is first cast into the deep—he is far from dry land, the abode of men. In verse 4, the subject relates his feelings in these terms: he is driven

away from God's sight. With this he is saying that he is forsaken of God. Then he reveals in verse 4 a note of confidence that he shall come out of his predicament; he will yet again look on God's temple. In verse 5 he has gone under the surface. The waves and billows that had battered him in verse 3 are now above him. He has gone under, and the waters have closed up over him and are drowning him. He begins a free fall. The dark and the deep are all about him. This is how “Jonah's” experience is cast—in terms of first being thrown into the sea by God, the waves and billows beating him, his dropping below the surface of the waters, and then his falling—down, down, down, into the black abyss. These descriptions are not consistent with being inside the belly of a fish.

The prayer then asserts in verse 6 that his descent did not halt until he had reached the very bottom of the sea, where, as it says in the last half of verse 5, weeds wrapped around his head, holding him fast. And, he adds in verse 6, this took place at the root of the mountains. Then he even declares that he went down to the land whose bars closed upon him forever. How could the man in these verses hit the bottom of the sea where he touched the roots of the mountains, where he was even ensnared in the weeds growing there, if he was in the belly of the great fish? Does this suggest that the fish was a literary device, a personification of the sea, perhaps; that Jonah was never actually swallowed by a great fish?

The answer to that question is that although Jonah was swallowed by a giant fish especially appointed for this task by God—for Jesus says in Matthew 12 that Jonah was in the belly of a fish for three days—the record of experiences we see in this chapter is actually meant to relate not Jonah's experiences poetically, but Jesus's. Jonah did say these words—the text says he prayed these words—but as with other prophets, what he spoke had reference more to Christ than to himself.<sup>10</sup>

7 Richard D. Phillips, *Jonah and Micah*, Reformed Expository Commentary, ed. Richard D. Phillips and Philip Ryken (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 72.

8 Psalms 3, 5, 16, 18, 31, 42, 50, 65, 69, 88, 118, 120, 142.

9 Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 144–50.

10 Cf. Psalm 22, in which the psalmist relates that his enemies have pierced his hands and feet, which has less to do with the literal experiences of David than it has to do with the experiences of Christ.

Note how the singer says that the bars of the deepest point of the underworld were closed upon him ... forever. Then in the very next line he says: “yet you brought up my life from the pit.” No ordinary man’s experience could make this apparent contradiction work: “bars closed upon me in the prison of *Sheol* forever, yet you brought me up from the pit.” This combination of ideas shows that this is a portrayal of the person and work of the Christ, who alone as the God-man could bear the eternal consequence and the infinite weight of sin down into *Sheol* and still rise up after the fact. As the sin bearer, the Messiah’s descent to the deepest pit of the underworld was final. The sin he bore there remains there, in the depths of the sea of divine judicial forgetfulness. That weight of sin would have held him fast there forever, too, but the Messiah was not in fact guilty. He had kept his hands clean, so the Father had to deal with him according to his righteousness, as we find in Psalm 18:4–24, Romans 1:3–4, and 1 Timothy 3:16. The Father had to bring him up again, for he was personally just, but the sins he had borne there for his people he left down there, never to be remembered again. Note also that there is no hint of repentance in Jonah 2. This chapter of Jonah is instead a prayer of thanksgiving to God, a prayer of deliverance from God’s abandonment. It is ultimately a poem about Christ’s fall into *Sheol*, his descent into the underworld, the realm of the dead. But on the third day the singing Savior is brought up again with a psalm of thanksgiving on his lips—that salvation is of the Lord!

The second chapter of Jonah can be seen as Jonah’s baptism because of the typical relationship asserted by Christ to exist between the prophet and himself and between their respective experiences, in addition to the clear associations in that chapter to “Jonah’s” passing under God’s judgment by means of a water ordeal. In Romans 6:4–5 we read:

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like

his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

By faith in the person and work of the Lord’s Anointed, both we and the prophet Jonah have survived that antitypical judgment ordeal at Calvary’s cross “in him,” and so have come out the other side, up from the waters of the divine wrath for sin, reckoned with him as having clean hands, blameless before God. The songbook of the singing Savior, as Jonah’s prayer anticipates, has become the songbook of his people. ☉

**Robert Mossotti**, a licentiate of the Presbytery of the Southwest, is a member of Mid Cities Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Bedford, Texas, and a graduate from Redeemer Seminary (Dallas).

# Servant Church

## The Path to Ecumenicity

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* June-July 2015<sup>1</sup>

by William Boekestein

I love biblical ecumenicity.<sup>2</sup> I am thrilled that “the Son of God, out of the whole human race, from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers, defends, and preserves for himself, by his Holy Spirit and Word, in the unity of the true faith, a church, chosen to everlasting life.”<sup>3</sup> I am thankful that our “Catholic and undoubted Christian faith” can promote unity and cooperation.<sup>4</sup> I relish reading in the pages of Acts and the Epistles about cooperation among churches and believers. I’ve enjoyed serving on denominational committees for church unity. Along with our elders and congregants, I have worked hard to pursue ecumenicity on a local level. I’ve been enriched by expressions of inter-church fellowship that have left an appetite for more.

But, perhaps like you, I have experienced frustration over how churches are sometimes content to allow ecumenicity to remain at a formal, denominational, and theoretical level. Biblical ecumenism is possible because of spiritual unity, but it is practiced through concrete activities that

promote tangible fraternity. So, what does ecumenicity look like locally?

The answer is not immediately obvious. The Church Order of the URCNA (United Reformed Churches in North America) simply says that, “Fraternal activities between congregations . . . may include occasional pulpit exchanges, table fellowship, as well as other means of manifesting unity.”<sup>5</sup> In addition to pulpit exchanges and communion, what are some “other means” of expressing practical ecumenicity? Much of the literature on the subject focuses on the important subject of what we might call macro-ecumenicity or formal, denominational ecumenicity.<sup>6</sup> There seems to be much less written on what we might call micro, or local, ecumenicity.<sup>7</sup>

To help move forward the pursuit of more meaningful catholicity at the congregational level, I suggest three main action items our churches should take.

### Evaluate Ecumenical Commitments

Most meaningful endeavors begin with evaluation. In the pursuit of biblical ecumenicity this will mean several things.

First, we should evaluate the ecumenical history of our congregations. Ask questions like, “What does our congregation know about faithful churches in our area? On what level of fraternity are we with other congregations? How often does

---

5 *Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America*, 4th ed., 2007, Article 34, [http://urcna.org/sysfiles/member/custom/file\\_retrieve.cfm?memberid=1651&customid=23868](http://urcna.org/sysfiles/member/custom/file_retrieve.cfm?memberid=1651&customid=23868).

6 For discussions on ecumenicity particularly related to the OPC and URCNA see: Peter De Klerk and Richard De Ridder, eds., *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church: Studies in Its History, Theology, and Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 261–383; Henry Zwaanstra, *Catholicity and Secession: A Study of Ecumenicity in the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); John Muether and Danny Olinger, eds., *Confident of Better Things: Essays Commemorating Seventy-Five Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, PA: Committee for the Historian of the OPC), 447–94.

7 For a notable recent exception, see Chris Bruno and Matt Dirks, *Churches Partnering Together: Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism, and Compassion* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), which offers very concrete suggestions in terms of how churches can partner together on a local level and do more together than they could individually.

---

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=492&issue\\_id=106](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=492&issue_id=106).

2 This article is drawn from William Boekestein and Daniel R. Hyde, *A Well-Ordered Church: Laying a Solid Foundation for a Vibrant Church* (Welwyn Garden City, Wales: Evangelical Press, forthcoming). This article is also based on a lecture given at the United Reformed Churches in North America Classis Eastern US, “Semper Reformanda Conference” on October 14, 2014.

3 Heidelberg Catechism, 54.

4 *Ibid.*, 22.

our church pray for other local churches? How have we partnered with regional churches in gospel ministry? Secessionist churches, whose history has been characterized by isolationism, might have to overcome significant hurdles before engaging churches outside of their congregations and tradition.

Second, we should evaluate our ecclesiastical reputation. Our ecumenical efforts will be affected by how other churches perceive us. Is your church known for being cooperative or schismatic, affirming or judgmental? For better or worse, perception will often be the reality upon which other churches will decide to interact with your congregation.

Third, we should evaluate our current challenges. What keeps us from connecting with other churches? Are we hamstrung by past conflicts with other local congregations where the fallout continues to keep congregations at arm's length from each other? Maybe your congregation has overreacted against the broader ecumenical movement and needs to learn to distinguish between true and false ecumenism. Perhaps your church fears that engagement with other churches will lead to distraction, theological compromise, or ecclesiastical wanderlust. We must avoid the cult-like habit of discouraging our congregations from positively connecting with the broader church (cf. Mark 9:38–41) and firmly trust Christ to build his church as he pleases.

Fourth, we should evaluate our congregation's ecumenical goals. For some churches that might not take long! Perhaps we lack goals because we subtly assume that ecumenicity happens spontaneously. If we do have goals for promoting practical catholicity, we should determine how much energy we are exerting toward those goals.

Evaluation helps us identify the true starting point from which we must move forward in pursuit of realistic goals.

But goals call for activity.

### **Exemplify Ecumenical Activity**

As church leaders, we must lead by example. This means several things.

First, church officers need to practice ecumenicity before they preach it. Perhaps much of our teaching on ecumenicity falls flat because it is not borne out of real experience. But a church will seldom be more ecumenical than its leaders. One way of leading by example is for ministers to join their local ministerium. Even when local clergy groups are formed from a broad theological spectrum—an often unwelcome situation for confessionally minded leaders—they can help a minister think more ecumenically. Further, if community spiritual leaders are having ongoing conversations about religious matters, should we not participate? In my own experience, being part of the Carbondale (PA) Area Ministerium has allowed me not only to speak from a confessional perspective during the meetings, but also to contribute to a weekly newspaper column called “Faith Matters” (to which I try to contribute with disproportionate regularity!). Beyond the ministerium, church leaders should develop relationships with other local church leaders outside of their own congregation. The enthusiasm that results from deepening personal interchurch relationships can be contagious.

Second, ministers should preach ecumenicity. When preaching Lord's Day 21 (if you preach from the Heidelberg Catechism), or John 17, or Ephesians 4, or Psalm 133, etc., ministers should bring the theology to bear on their local situation. In Ephesians 4, for example, Paul teaches on the catholicity of the church. He says, “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all” (vv. 4–6). But Paul starts that chapter by admonishing believers to walk worthy of the calling with which they were called (v. 1).

In our preaching and teaching we should apply the “body principle” of the church, beyond our congregations. The principles of 1 Corinthians 12 describe the interconnectedness of both believers and churches; there is one church with many parts that have been brought into intimate *koinōnia* (κοινωνία), or fellowship (cf. John 10:16). Fellowship could be briskly defined as “having in



common, and giving, and receiving.” Believers are called to give and receive for the benefit of the body. If we have study habits, enthusiasm, policies, seriousness, joy, or evangelistic zeal, we must share these things with those who differ from us. Perhaps “they” have something to teach us as well.

We should also preach about the dangers of failing to be ecumenical. We need to remind our people that, as Christian churches continue functionally to disregard each other, the world will increasingly perceive us as schismatic and irrelevant (John 17:21). Our effectiveness will be reduced, and our churches and believers will become more prone to imbalance. In a hostile world a robust, Reformed witness requires practical catholicity.

Third, leaders should help their congregation develop and apply a standard for fellowship. Specifically, we need to figure out how to engage churches around us by allowing both theology and geography to direct our ecumenical energies.

In the early years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, J. Gresham Machen and Ned B. Stonehouse attempted to express the unity of Christ’s church, “while at the same time do[ing] justice to their confessional commitment to the Reformed faith ... by recognizing different levels and purposes of fellowship and unity.”<sup>8</sup> They understood that even dissimilar churches of Christ already have some relationship with each other. The crucial task is to figure out how respective proximity or distance, both theologically and geographically, impacts that relationship. Such an approach can help congregations develop a protocol for interacting with all congregations that cross their path. In a sense, denominational affiliation as well as networks like the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) can help us to pursue relationships with regional churches of similar theology.

But how do we engage local churches outside our theological “inner circle?”

First, we should exercise a judgment of char-

ity; not by ignoring the marks of the true church, but by charitably using those marks to evaluate other churches. The Second Helvetic Confession is helpful: “Hence, we must be very careful not to judge rashly before the time, nor to exclude and cast off or cut away those whom the Lord would not have excluded nor cut off, or whom, without some damage to the church we cannot separate from it.”<sup>9</sup>

Second, we should attempt to develop meaningful relationships with neighboring churches. For some churches, limiting their ecumenical activity to NAPARC churches would rule out practicing local ecumenicity. Those churches that are closer to us in proximity might be further from us in theology. But the fact that they are our neighbors should drive us to at least pursue ecclesiastical neighborliness. Doing so will help us avoid caricaturing their theology, and, if possible, help them find a better way.

### Exercise Practical Ecumenicity

What follows are three areas in which we might begin the work of practicing local ecumenicity.

First, we should work to cultivate common ground between congregations. One of the simplest ways of doing so is to introduce NAPARC to our own congregations. It might be news to our congregations—perhaps to our leadership—that NAPARC members have committed “to advise, counsel, and cooperate in various matters with one another, and hold out before each other the desirability and need for organic union of churches that are of like faith and practice.” We agree to “exercise mutual concern in the perpetuation, retention, and propagation of the Reformed faith” and to “promote cooperation wherever possible and feasible on the ... local level.”<sup>10</sup> Better yet, we might introduce to our congregations the local churches of NAPARC, and pray for these congre-

8 Sean Michael Lucas, “J. Gresham Machen, Ned B. Stonehouse, and the Quandry of Reformed Ecumenicity,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 62 (2000): 197–222.

9 Second Helvetic Confession, 17.14.

10 The North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) website address is <http://www.naparc.org/basis>.

gations publicly. Our folks need to know that we value these churches and that we have more than a formal relationship with them.

It might also be helpful for Reformed churches to teach through the Westminster standards, and for Presbyterian churches to do the same with the Three Forms of Unity.<sup>11</sup> By so doing our congregants will note how much commonality we have even with respect to our differences.<sup>12</sup>

Second, be pro-active, persistent, and patient. Some of us may be more comfortable being on the receiving end of ecumenical contact. Remember that the officers of the churches in your region might have a different notion of ecumenicity; if we don't take the initiative, perhaps no one will. Ecumenically minded churches will also be persistent. Churches should beware of defending their so-called ecumenism by citing long out-of-date examples of interchurch interactions. Persistence and regularity is critical; local churches might be skittish and need repeated contacts and phone calls between leaders before a relationship can bud. Relationships that are forged will need steady nurturing to remain healthy. One caution: As we take initiative we should be careful to be patient, wise, and respectful. "Keep in mind that rushing to get commitments too quickly can kill a budding partnership. Allow God to build the relational foundation for the ministry efforts that will come later."<sup>13</sup>

Third, be creative. What follows is an attempt to give shape to the nebulous "other means" of manifesting unity referenced earlier. Consider these suggestions and brainstorm for more!

- *Hold joint church picnics between congregations.* Depending on the liturgical differences you might face with other congregations, this less-formal way of express-

ing church unity might be advantageous.

- *Participate in joint prayer meetings.* Reconsider your decision to never again participate in community National Day of Prayer gatherings (being fully prepared to hear myriad atrocious prayers). By participating we take the opportunity to demonstrate our interest in the people of the city, while at the same time modeling biblical prayer.
- *Hold joint worship services.* With due diligence in considering potential practical and theological concerns, combined Christmas Eve services, Good Friday services, Reformation Day services, or occasional combined evening services can bear great fruit. Some potential awkwardness can also be avoided by hosting the service rather than being hosted.
- *Organize occasional conferences, speaker series, or choral concerts.* Approach these types of events as genuine opportunities to be sharpened, to enjoy fellowship, and to strengthen solidarity among local believers. Depending on where you live, your conference might also be a great way to introduce people to sound theology and worship.
- *Promote and participate in pulpit exchanges.* The small congregation that I pastor has come to know and appreciate dozens of other churches and their respective denominations through pulpit exchanges. Not only do pulpit exchanges capitalize on various ministerial gifts in building up the body, they also can help build awareness and trust between congregations.
- *Brainstorm.* Might your church participate in cooperative mission, education, or relief efforts? Would involvement in local pregnancy resource centers or prison ministries be more effective if the workload were shared? Could you form a joint

11 For help in this endeavor, see Alan D. Strange, "Presbyterians and the Heidelberg Catechism," *New Horizons* 34 (October 2013): 3–5; John R. Muether, "The Heidelberg Catechism in the OPC," *New Horizons* 34 (October 2013): 6–7.

12 Cf. Joel Beeke and Sinclair Ferguson, eds., *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

13 Bruno, 147.

softball team with another church? What if your church held an in-house ecumenicity symposium so the members could share ideas by which you could partner with other believers?

It is not enough to confess our belief in the catholicity of the church by way of the Apostles' Creed. It is not enough for our churches to be mutual members of NAPARC if our membership amounts to a badge of Reformed conservatism. We need to take the principles and the commitments that we've already made through our NAPARC involvement, and which are impressed upon us in the Word of God, and translate them on the local level. When that happens we'll no longer have to "sell" ecumenicity. It will easily sell itself. ☺

*William Boekestein, is the pastor of Covenant Reformed Church (URCNA), Carbondale, Pennsylvania.*

## L'chaim: An Invitation to the Blessedness of Ecumenical Life

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* June-July 2015<sup>1</sup>

by William Shishko

Consider the beautiful case for true ecumenicity<sup>2</sup> pictured in Psalm 133:

A Song of Ascents. Of David. Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in

unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.

This is part of the Songs of Ascents beginning with Psalm 120 and ending with Psalm 134. These depict the various stages of the pilgrimages of the tribes of Israel making their way to Jerusalem for a time of united worship.

It is interesting that Psalm 120 is about strife, war, and division. The Psalm ends with these words: "I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war" (v. 7). Then, in Psalm 133, as this pilgrimage progresses, we read the word "behold": stop and think about the opposite: the goodness, the pleasantness of brethren dwelling in unity (v. 1). It is no coincidence that Psalm 134—the end of the Songs of Ascents—is a beautiful fanfare of the worship of people who have gone from strife and war to the blessedness of holy unity.

*Behold* is significant. It (like the word *Selah*) calls us to stop and think about what God has just said. *Behold* calls us to "stop and think about this" beautiful thing called ecumenicity.

True ecumenicity is a *blessed* thing: "Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity." Psalm 133 culminates with, "There the Lord has *commanded* the blessing" (v. 3; emphasis added). Here is a sure path to blessedness.

It is a unity that must begin at the top and flow down. It is like precious oil on the head running down on the beard and then on the garments of Aaron the priest. Or it is like the dew of Hermon that falls on the lower mountains of Jerusalem. Ultimately, this is in and from Christ, the one who is supremely greater than Aaron. It is a unity that represents the unity of the Father and the Son, together with the Holy Spirit. This is the unity for which Jesus prays so passionately in John 17:22: "That they may be one, even as we are one."

This is not so much an achievement as it is a blessing, a blessing that begins by communion with Christ who is the head. The closer you are to

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=493&issue\\_id=106](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=493&issue_id=106).

2 This article is based on a lecture given at the United Reformed Churches in North America Classis Eastern US, "Semper Reformanda Conference" on October 14, 2014.

him, the less comfortable you will be with disunity with any who call on the name of the Lord out of a pure heart. If our unity flows from the unity of the Son and the Father and the Spirit, then we have the heart of what that true unity is all about.

This blessed unity must begin with the leaders of the church. John Calvin, who furthered ecumenicity in the early years of the Protestant Reformation, wrote:

If men of learning [here he is speaking of ministers] conduct themselves with more reserve than seemly, the very heaviest blow attaches to the leaders themselves, who, either engrossed in their own sinful pursuits, are indifferent to the safety and entire piety of the church, or who, individually satisfied with their own private peace, have no regard for others.<sup>3</sup>

Ecumenicity is hard. It is difficult. It is upsetting. But, beginning with the leaders in the churches, the work must begin. That will never come to minds and hearts that are full, first, with debate and difference. For minds and hearts full of the love, the long-suffering, the patience, the kindness, and the goodness of God in Christ, there will be a passion for biblical ecumenicity.

Notice that this is messy stuff. Oil coming down on the beard of Aaron, running down on the garments: that's messy stuff. Most of you wouldn't like a lot of oil dumped on your head, and then running down your face and then on to your shirt. It's messy stuff—but it's messy stuff that is accompanied with God's blessing.

One of our elders is fond of saying, when we deal with difficult things, "The agony is part of the answer." The agony of working through ecumenical relations is part of the answer. But that messiness brings blessing to every member. It goes down to the garment. It goes to the very base of the mountains of Zion and causes lush plants to grow. The end result is a pleasant thing.

The word *pleasant* in Psalm 133:1 is used for

---

<sup>3</sup> Jules Bonnet, ed., *Letters of John Calvin: Compiled from the Original Manuscripts and Edited with Historical Notes* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 348.

the music produced by instruments playing together in what we would know of today as an orchestra—the pleasantness of various instruments and the various types of sounds in those instruments in concert together, all playing as they ought to, none of them out of tune, and all responding to the leadership of the great conductor. *Pleasant*. That's the kind of a beauty that describes true ecumenicity.

Notice the beautiful symphony of true brotherly unity in Psalm 133:3: "There the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore." This is both the life that comes to people regenerated by the Spirit of God and the richness of the life of which Jesus speaks when he says, "I've come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

This is the heart of the invitation to ecumenicity in our culture. Our culture is dying at a very rapid rate. We are seeing the last half of Romans 1 playing out before our eyes. God is giving us up to a culture of death. You don't need to think very hard for illustrations. Against that bleak backdrop, the greatest invitation to ecumenicity is that, in the context of healthy, biblical, principled ecumenicity, there is life—just what our culture needs and needs to see.

Our Jewish friends in New York have the concept right. At a toast you say, "L'chaim"—to life, to the blessedness of life. That's what's in view in Psalm 133. The writer says that true ecumenicity is an invitation to the blessedness of life.

Let me invite you to the blessedness of life in the bonds of true ecumenical unity. Here "the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore" (v. 3). What is the blessed life that comes in the development of biblical ecumenicity at any level?

*L'chaim*: To the blessing of lives of humility that comes by having to work together as a family. The blessedness that the Lord gives when there is true humility is that it makes us realize that we need to work together as a family—whether the biological family or the ecclesiastical family. It's the humility of being able to say, "My preferences are not the same as my convictions." Can you say that? In many cases ecumenicity has been stopped

for one reason: We make convictions out of our personal preferences, rather than being humble enough to say these are not necessarily equal.

Our background does not equal the Bible. That is a very humble thing to admit, regardless of our backgrounds. Likewise, personal and church traditions are not necessarily equal to the Scriptures. The only right way to deal with backgrounds and traditions that can become impediments to true ecumenicity is with this grace called humility. Remember Ephesians 4:1–3:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager [working hard, making every effort] to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

This is not a suggestion. It is a solemn and earnest mandate.

If you're going to keep a family together, you must work through your differences with grace and love. It's hard, and it takes humility. You must know where you can bend and where you cannot. But there is blessedness in that. That's also true of God's family, which is composed of his churches. *L'chaim!*

*L'chaim:* To the blessedness of a life of more multidimensional Reformed faith and practice. True ecumenicity brings together the richness of more diverse cultural backgrounds. The prospect of having a fuller expression of the Reformed faith bringing together the Dutch and Scottish and English and American expressions of the Reformed faith is blessed; but we should think beyond that.

It's a joy as well as a challenge to minister in the metropolitan New York City area. It is the most culturally diverse area in the world. It's a joy and a challenge to be part of a Reformed church in which we have Hispanics, people from the Caribbean, blacks, Asians, and Italians. They did not come to us knowing the OPC *Book of Church Order*. Reformed faith and practice doesn't come hard-wired into them. You must teach them. We disciple them in the things we believe are right and

good. And we learn from them as well. When we have the humility to learn from different cultural traditions, we invite the development of a more multidimensional (and beautiful) church life. That doesn't mean we're going to always be completely of one mind. But there will be a unity of one heart and mutual submission. *L'chaim!*

*L'chaim:* To the life of a little more visible unity in what, to the modern world, is a confusing mess. Split "peas"—OPC, PCA, ARP, RPCNA, KAPC. Then add URCNA, RCUSA. Oh, my!

Do you want to know what the church is to our culture? If you turn your desktop computer around, what do you find? Unless you're fully wireless, you see dozens of cords connected to all different ports and holes and plugs. It looks like a multicolored pile of spaghetti. And unless you are of a very rarified, geeky type, you don't want to have anything to do with those cords.

We're the geeks when it comes to our ecclesiastical spaghetti. Each of the cords of our faith and practice is important, but the world doesn't want to have anything to do with them. "By this the world will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another" (John 13:35).

Let's be honest. Our divisions have had a negative impact on our own children and grandchildren. For the sake of our generation and generations to come, let's start addressing our differences in honest love and in genuine grace. *L'chaim!*

*L'chaim,* to the life of a more efficient use of our resources in a time of increased expense and expertise for ministry. There is so much wasteful or prideful duplication of effort as we try to become adept in dealing with modern means of communication. (And remember that communication of the Word of God is what we are about.) We are making some progress in this area. It's wonderful that the OPC and the URCNA are working on a Psalter-Hymnal together. We are sacrificing no principles, and we will be benefitting both bodies (and others) as we pool our resources. Similarly the OPC and the PCA work together to produce the finest of Reformed educational resources through Great Commission Publications. That's the kind of thing that promotes ecumenicity and benefits the church



as a whole. Let's do more! *L'chaim!*

*L'chaim* to a life of practical, observable love, constrained by organizational union.

What does that mean?

Our relatively small church bodies struggle to get money for our various mission projects. It is understandable and right that we give priority to the projects of our respective church bodies. Wouldn't it be better to have a life of practical, observable love constrained by an organizational union in which we work *together* on things like disaster relief and home and foreign mission projects? Could it be that, then, the world might better see our love as those committed to the historic Reformed faith? *L'chaim!*

*L'chaim*, to a life that is in a position to ask the very blessing God has commanded. "There he has commanded the blessing, life forevermore" (Ps. 133:3). How many of us have seen many conversions in our churches? I don't mean people "converted" to the Reformed faith from broad evangelicalism, but people converted from the worst forms of paganism and wickedness. Are you seeing those kinds of conversions? Does not this text invite us to ask for this blessing as we work together and truly learn from one another in humility and love? "Lord, as we honestly seek to develop our visible unity in the truth, will you please honor your promise to bless us with the life of heaven, and with that life in more people?" He has promised to do that. He *will* do that—but not so long as—for whatever reasons—we avoid the responsibility of seeking visible unity among ourselves. *L'chaim!*

Finally: *L'chaim*, to a life that honestly lives out of our eschatology. By the Holy Spirit, God gives us a down payment of the "not yet" of glory in the "already" of this age. If we live out of that truth that heaven is, as Jonathan Edwards says, "a world of love," what does that mean for biblical ecumenicity? It means that we will have the spirit of a John Calvin, who says things like, "I think it right for me at whatever cost of toil and trouble to seek to obtain the object of this church unity."<sup>4</sup>

---

4 Bonnet, 348.

This is not a reluctant, begrudging view of working for ecumenicity. It's the impulse of eternity itself in one who felt impelled to move forward in the work.

Commenting on Psalm 133, Matthew Henry expressed this so well:

They that dwell in love not only dwell in God but do already dwell in heaven. As the perfection of love is the blessedness of heaven, so the sincere outworking of love is the earnest of that blessedness. Those who live and love in peace shall have the God of love and peace with them now, and they shall be with Him shortly, with Him forever, in the world of endless love and peace. How good then is this unity, and how blessed!<sup>5</sup>

*L'chaim!*

May God renew our zeal to see the beautiful picture of Psalm 133 realized more and more before our eyes, beginning with the principled, earnest labors of churches committed to the Reformed faith. *L'chaim!* To the special blessedness and life that come when brothers and sisters and churches dwell together in unity! ☺

**William Shishko**, a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, is the pastor of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Franklin Square, New York.

---

5 Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (New York: Revell, 1935), 3:746.



# ✦ Servant Work

## Youth Ministry?

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* February 2015<sup>1</sup>

by T. David Gordon

### Introduction and Thesis

When I am asked to speak or lecture on either preaching or hymnody (I've written little books on each), inevitably during the Q&A someone asks me something like, "What about the youth?" or "But how do we reach the youth?" Perhaps such frequently asked questions ought themselves to be questioned, because frequently asked questions tell us something about us and our concerns. So here's my question: Why do so many people *ask* questions about "the youth"? As a matter of simple arithmetic, people live only about twenty of their seventy-five years as non-adults; and expend the other fifty-five years as adults. If people live nearly three times as much of their lives as adults, why don't I receive three questions about adults for every one question about the young? Further, most people mean a different thing by "youth" than they do by "childhood." By "childhood," they refer to those who are entirely dependent on adults for their care, and by "youth" they mean that awkward stage between childhood and adulthood, about a five-year period, or roughly one fifteenth of an individual's life.<sup>2</sup> Why has no one ever said to me:

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=466&issue\\_id=102](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=466&issue_id=102).

2 Sociologists are now also addressing a group they call "emerging adults," aged 18–29, so perhaps we will see this group targeted for special ministry. Cf. Jeffrey Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford, 2004); Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging*

"But Dr. Gordon, how are we going to reach the adults?" Especially in light of the fifth commandment ("Honor your father and your mother"), why aren't Christians concerned about honoring adults and/or elders; why are they so concerned about honoring/reaching/addressing youth? Why develop strategies of ministry aimed at such a brief period of human existence, and this particular brief period? Indeed, why not develop strategies of ministry for people who are about to die and meet their Maker? Isn't the status of those who are about to face God's judgment more critical than the status of those who are fifty years away from the same?

The Bible recognizes either three or two categories of humans: children, adults, and elderly; or (like the IRS) dependents and nondependents (since the elderly are also dependent, as witnessed by Paul's instructions regarding widows in 1 Timothy 5 and the apostolic appointing of deacons to care for them in Acts 6). But the Bible does not recognize the category of "youth"—people in that brief window of human life where they are capable of substantial, but not entire, independence. In and of itself, this does not mean that we may not recognize the category, but it should raise questions about why such a large ministerial category exists in our churches that did not exist at all in the apostolic church. The category of "dependents" (infants, widows) existed ministerially, but not the category of "youth." Let me reiterate: In saying that the Scriptures do not recognize this category, I am not suggesting that it is illegitimate *per se* to do so; special revelation in Scripture is always augmented and/or complemented by natural revelation. I merely remind us that "youth" is an intellectual construct—something *we* have made, and have made fairly recently. As Notre Dame's Christian Smith says:

Life stages are not naturally given as immutable phases of existence. Rather, they are cultural constructions that interact with

*Adults* (New York: Oxford, 2009); Christian Smith with Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford, 2011).

biology and material production, and are profoundly shaped by the social and institutional conditions that generate and sustain them. So “teenager” and “adolescence” as representing a distinct stage of life were very much twentieth-century inventions.<sup>3</sup>

If we find such “cultural constructions” to be helpful, that is fine; but it is important to distinguish our *own* constructs from biblically-given constructs, since the former are negotiable and the latter are not. Few enterprises are more important than the enterprise of labeling aspects of reality correctly.

### The Human Duty of Naming

Most Christians agree that naming is an ethical duty, a responsibility of the human as a bearer of God’s image, since God gave names to the things that he had made:

And God *called* the expanse Heaven. (Gen. 1:8, emphasis added)

So out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would *call* them. And whatever the man *called* every living creature, that was its name. The man *gave names* to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field.... Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be *called* Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” (Gen. 2:19–10, 23, emphasis added)

What humans *call* something, then, is not an insignificant matter. We either imitate God well by naming things well, or we imitate him less well by naming them poorly; but we cannot escape the duty of employing language well. When we give a label to something, we also give it a kind of intellectual or mental existence;<sup>4</sup> we cannot think

about things that have no labels, whereas we can and do think about things that have labels. So the question is: Does “youth” exist in reality, or merely in our brains? Is “youth,” like “unicorn,” something that exists in language but not in fact? And is the existence of “youth” significant enough to warrant linguistic existence?

I think the answer may be no. We already have the term “adolescent” in our dictionaries, and it does the job better, because it clearly designates a moment in human existence that is both brief and awkward. If “adolescent” has any connotative value, its value is negative, whereas “youth” is either connotatively neutral or positive. But the reality of this phase of life *is* awkward, a stage of life in which the individual is somewhat dependent on adults, but capable—if an accident took his or her parents away suddenly—of living independently. Whether we say “youthful” or “adolescent” or “juvenile” is not a neutral matter; one of these words is probably more suitable than the others, and it is our duty to employ language as well as we can. In my judgment, we would think about the entire matter differently if we simply called it “juvenile ministry” or “adolescent ministry” rather than “youth ministry,” so I am gently questioning the propriety of the present label. I do not intend to close the conversation here, but to begin one: If we have such ministry at all, how should we label it, and why should we label it that way? I concur with Christian Smith that the label “youth” is a cultural construct, not warranted or necessitated by Scripture. On my website, I have a fuller version of this article, that includes several pages of the biblical evidence that brought me to this conclusion, and readers are invited to consult that fuller version there (<http://tdgordon.net/theology/>).

---

tism,” when we create a “thing” out of something that actually does not exist (metaphysically) simply by creating a word. When people ask why God “created evil,” they misconstrue language, for instance, because “evil” is an adjective, not a noun, and therefore has no created existence. It is an adjective of moral disapproval that we employ to evaluate certain behaviors, and until such behaviors were committed, “evil” did not exist.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Linguists sometimes refer to this as “reification,” or “concre-

## Strategic Questions

When Luther thought of the younger people, his advice was both positive and negative. Positively, they should be taught to sing adult hymns; negatively, they should be weaned away from their own music:

The music is arranged in four parts. I desire this particularly in the interest of the young people, who should and must receive an education in music as well as in the other arts if we are to wean them away from carnal and lascivious songs and interest them in what is good and wholesome. Only thus will they learn, as they should, to love and appreciate what is intrinsically good.<sup>5</sup>

Luther, then, did nearly the opposite of what we do: We give the young people their own music, and require the rest of the church to conform to their music. Luther weaned them *from* their music and trained them to appreciate adult music.<sup>6</sup> Insofar as Luther recognized youth as having any distinctive ministerial considerations, the considerations were negative: Don't let young people remain young very long. Implicit in Luther's program were two beliefs. First, Luther believed that there were and are objective standards by which we evaluate music; and second, Luther believed that young people needed to be educated in order to know and appreciate what these standards are.<sup>7</sup>

---

5 Preface to the *Geistliches Gesangbüchlein*, cited in Walter Buszin, "Luther on Music," *The Musical Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (January 1946): 87.

6 I do not insist that we follow Luther on every point. However, I do suggest that we not dismiss him briskly. After all, unless you have translated the entire Bible from its original languages into your own language and written commentaries on many books of the Bible, you probably do not know the Bible better than he did. Unless you have written a catechism that the church has employed for nearly five centuries, you probably do not know theology better than he. And unless you have written thirty-six hymns (lyrics and music) that have lasted for five hundred years, you probably do not know music better than Luther did. And if you haven't done all three, you may not be as well-rounded as he on the matter. So don't assume from the outset that you are his peer on this matter; you probably are not; I know I am not.

7 I do not dismiss or disagree with the common comment that many young people (and their parents, for that matter) do not "connect" with sacred music. To the contrary, I wrote a book

Our culture tends to waffle on both these points, if not deny them outright. But Luther was probably right on both scores.

Luther was right that there are some objective criteria for evaluating music, so that he could refer to what was "intrinsically good" in music. Whenever a personal acquaintance parrots our culture's mindless mantra about musical beauty "being in the eye of the beholder," or "just a matter of taste," I chuckle, as though they've told a joke. "Very clever, I say; that's a good one." When they protest that they are being serious, I tell them they are seriously mistaken and mildly dishonest (this part is ordinarily not well received, but since I judge it to be true, I continue to say it). I ask them if they enjoy singing a hymn while standing next to someone whose pitch is off. Do they enjoy trying to stay on pitch while hearing someone else who is singing off pitch (or listening to a piano that is untuned)? The answer, universally, is no, and I threaten to prove it by standing next to them at church the coming Sunday and deliberately singing off pitch (it is difficult to do so, but it is a difficulty I am willing to endure to ferret out dishonesty). Pitch is an objective truth; it can be measured by devices that measure cycles per second (commonly called "hertz"). The concert A, for instance, is precisely 440 hertz (though it was once 435). Again, I ask such individuals: "Do you enjoy attempting to sing a hymn that has been pitched too high for you to reach many of the notes?" Again, I get a universal reply of no. No one enjoys attempting to sing a melody in the wrong key signature, and again,

---

attempting to explain the cultural causes for this disconnect. But the solution is not simply to discard sacred music. The church has an instructional responsibility, and perhaps, like Luther, we should instruct both young *and* old in the Christian duty of singing praise to God. Part of that instruction would include the value of celebrating the catholic church/communion of saints by employing hymns that others have employed; and part of that instruction would include teaching about the practical non-viability of rewriting a hymnal from scratch every twenty-five years in order to sound "contemporary." If people who don't read poetry can learn to read poetry, and if people who do not initially "connect" with Brahms can learn to enjoy Brahms, then people can also learn to appreciate sacred music. It is uncharitably cynical to suggest that people cannot step outside of their comfort zone and learn new things.

with a cooperative accompanist I can prove this by transposing the hymns into unsingable keys and having the accompanist play the hymns in those unsingable keys. If their patience is not by now exhausted, I ask them if they enjoy hearing two altos singing on either side of them, the one singing the correctly written alto line that, at a given moment, has an interval of a third (perhaps an E-natural to the melody's G-natural), while the other is singing some other interval (a D or an F), and again, they reply "no," because it is unharmonious to do so, and the human neurology finds it (ordinarily) objectionable ("dissonant"). By this point, the conversation turns to baseball or politics, before I can ask if the individual finds it pleasant if a person next to him or her sings the entire hymn in a different rhythm (or to a different metrical melody entirely), or portions of it to different rhythms, but the answer would be the same.

Luther rightly understood that music is an objective phenomenon; sound exists outside of us and it has some mathematically-measurable properties that the human neurology finds pleasant (even infants appear to be calmed by lullabies). But the same neurology finds other sounds to be unpleasant, and still others to be not unpleasant in themselves but only apt for certain purposes or occasions. A kazoo, for instance, might be a delightful instrument to play at someone's birthday party, but not one human in a million would choose to have it played at his mother's funeral. So while it might be right to say that some people's musical tastes are more refined than others, or that some people's musical sensibilities are more developed than those of others (some people notice pitch more acutely than others, and "hear" dissonance when some others do not), it is not true that there are no objective standards for assessing music.

I sometimes object that some (not all) of the contemporary worship music does not resolve. Sandra McCracken's rendition of George Matheson's "O Love that wilt not let me go," for instance, does not resolve, and I regard this as a defect, especially in a hymn of trust. Many individuals tell me they enjoy the melody fine; and I do not doubt that they do. But resolution is a musical and psycho-

logical reality easily proven to exist (perform the final movement of a symphony publicly and omit the last three measures; see what kind of reaction you get). For thirty or forty years much pop music has not resolved, either (often it just fades out); and people whose sensibilities have been shaped thereby may not *notice* the lack of resolution as a defect, any more than some people do not *notice* when someone beside them sings off pitch; but in each case the matter is objectively true and objectively defective. Luther was right to recognize that there are some objective criteria (things that are "intrinsically good") that distinguish some music as better than other music, and he was right to train younger people to notice the difference.

Luther also correctly understood that, if left to themselves, young people would ordinarily prefer the wrong kinds of music. The same young people who, when a little younger, would prefer chocolate to vegetables, who need to be trained to recognize what is nutritious from what is not, also need musical training. Their youthful instincts are almost always wrong about almost everything (remember *Lord of the Flies*?); why would we regard their untrained musical instincts as being any better than their other instincts? Regarding human sexuality, do we tell them just to do whatever they like? Regarding beverage alcohol or narcotics, do we tell them that whatever they think about the matter is fine? Why has our culture's paedocentrism reached into the arena of music, but not into the arenas of human sexuality or substance abuse?

I also wonder why the consideration that we must adopt the music of young people is not extended to preaching. Why do we not gear our preaching to the youth? Should we restrict our grammar and vocabulary to that of the youth? Paul surely did not. Though he addressed the children in Ephesians (6:1), for instance, the vocabulary and syntax of Ephesians is remarkably mature and sophisticated. In the original, the first seven verses of chapter two constitute a single sentence that contains fifteen clauses and thirteen prepositional phrases; there is nothing unsophisticated about such a sentence; it is a masterful piece of Greek syntax, that makes even the Anglican *Book of*

*Common Prayer* seem simple by comparison. Try creating such a sentence yourself and see if you can even do it; I doubt that I could.

Should we restrict our preaching topics to topics that interest the youth? Must we consult the youth to determine what interests them, and only preach on things that do (did they appreciate Paul's commanding them to obey their parents)? If they have no interest in the resurrection, may we not still preach about it? Not long ago, I preached a sermon from the first half of John 11 that focused on the reality (and perhaps responsibility) of grieving. Most youth would have no interest in such a topic; they're very healthy, fairly present-centered, and many of them have not yet grieved. But John's gospel candidly records the grieving of Martha and Mary (and oh—by the way—Jesus) and the efforts of “the Jews” to console/comfort them. So it's in the Bible, and therefore ought to be preached, whether the youth are interested or not.

But now, if we should not adjust the ministry of *preaching* to the capacities or interests of youth, why should we adjust the service of singing God's praise to the capacities or interests of the youth? Why is there not a single church on our planet that adjusts its preaching ministry to the youth while *not* adjusting its musical ministry to them? If the stated goal is “reaching the youth,” why “reach” them (whatever that means) with music but not with preaching? Should it not be the other way around? Why do we wring our hands about “losing the youth” if we do not cater to their alleged musical interests, but not wring our hands about losing them if we do not cater to their preaching interests?

Paul said that when he became a man, he *gave up* his childish ways (1 Cor. 13:11). Perhaps the best “ministry” we can perform for youth is to urge them to give it up as soon as possible, to draw them into adulthood as soon as we can, so they can learn to be successful responsible adults as quickly as possible.<sup>8</sup> After all, assuming a normal life-span,

---

8 Many cultural observers are noticing that the millennial generation is extremely slow to become adults. Cf. Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young*

they will be children for roughly a dozen years, “youth” for five, and adults for fifty. Why not learn to do adulthood as soon as possible? And perhaps the best way to draw young people into adulthood quickly is to regard them *as* adults, to treat them *as* adults, rather than to institutionalize “youth” via “youth ministry.” Let me illustrate.

When I was in high school, the pastor of the Bon Air Baptist Church, Robert F. Cochran, took an interest in me and in my expressed interest to consider attending college and seminary with a view to becoming a minister. Rev. Cochran routinely let me accompany him in a wide variety of pastoral duties, and one night we visited a man in the psych ward of one of the Richmond hospitals. The man seemed fine, and for the first fifteen minutes or so of our visit he was entirely lucid. But then, with no visible change or visible agitation, no difference in the tone of his voice or expression on his face, he began to speak almost total nonsense (not hostile or violent, just nonsense). Later, as we drove home, Rev. Cochran said to me, “David, how should I have handled a situation like that?” In asking me the question, he was inviting me into the world of *adult* churchmanship. He was inviting me to think as a minister thinks, about the things a minister thinks about. I still love Rev. Cochran's memory sincerely, and I especially love him for regarding me—a youth at the time—as an adult. He asked a sixteen-year-old what he would have asked a fellow minister of sixty years.

What I suggest, then, is that we move children

---

*Americans and Jeopardizes our Future* (New York: Tarcher, 2008); Smith, *Lost in Transition*; Robin Marantz Henig and Samantha Henig, *Twenty-Something: Why Do Young Adults Seem Stuck?* (New York: Penguin, 2012); Jean M. Twenge, “The Millennials: The Greatest Generation or The Most Narcissistic?” *The Atlantic Online* (May 2, 2012), <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/05/millennials-the-greatest-generation-or-the-most-narcissistic/256638/>; Hope Reese, “Yes, 20-Somethings Are Taking Longer to Grow Up—But Why?” (*The Atlantic Online*, November, 2012) <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/11/yes-20-somethings-are-taking-longer-to-grow-up-but-why/265750/>. Smith et al. put it this way: “Emerging adulthood is at heart about postponing settling down into real adulthood.... Emerging adulthood as a social fact means not making commitments, not putting down roots, not setting a definite course for the long term” (Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 231).



to adulthood as soon as they are capable of being so, without ghettoizing them in an adolescent world in between. As soon as they are emotionally and intellectually capable of dealing with the matters adults deal with, we should invite them to do so. When I pastored in New Hampshire, this is what we did. We provided no separate education for our youth; they went directly to adult classes as soon as their parents judged they were capable of dealing with adult realities. And, by rubbing shoulders with adults at an earlier age than at many churches, a good number of them matured more quickly.<sup>9</sup>

For those who decide to retain their current Adolescent Ministries (by whatever label), I gently suggest that we do everything in our power *not* to normalize “youth.” If we have special ministries directed to adolescents, they should be aimed at expediting their arrival at adulthood. We could/should teach courses on family finances, courses on selecting a spouse, about community service and churchmanship, and perhaps above all, courses on marriage and family. We should gear everything towards getting them beyond adolescence ASAP and into successful adulthood ASAP.

### Cultural Sources of “Youth” – Commerce and the Sixties

As an observer of American culture, I can see at least two cultural forces that, in my judgment, are responsible for “Youth Ministry,” because they are responsible for youth *culture* (I call it “paedocentrism”) itself. First, commercial forces in our culture understandably wish to appeal to the unrefined tastes (and impulsivity) of adolescents (and adults who are like them). Of course it is easier to produce less-refined art than more-refined art. It is much cheaper to produce a recording of Justin Bieber than it is to produce a recording of Brahms’s Fourth Symphony. A typical symphony

---

9 I am not suggesting that every church do as we did; there may be a number of very good reasons for occasionally addressing youth *qua* youth. I merely suggest that we not treat the cultural construct of “youth” as anything *more* than a cultural construct, and that we recognize what we lose in addition to what we gain. By isolating/ghettoizing youth from adults, we lose something.

orchestra has nearly a hundred musicians; how many constitute Bieber’s ensemble? Further, the average number of years of experience with the musical instrument is probably about thirty for the players in a symphony orchestra; I’m not sure Bieber is even 30 years old. Therefore, commercial interests surely hope that the musical tastes of the potential buying audience will remain comparatively unrefined. Bieber probably outsells Brahms a thousand to one, but this does not mean he is a thousand times better (or any better). It merely means that people who currently could *not* appreciate Brahms *can* appreciate (and purchase) Bieber, which suits commerce fine. Commerce has an enormous financial interest, therefore, in youth culture, in propagating and encouraging the unrefined, impetuous wishes of the young.

A second source of paedocentrism in our culture is the Sixties. My generation (a generation whose iconic band The Who performed the hit “My Generation”) was very aware of its rebellion against its parents’ generation. One might even say that youth culture began in the sixties. Those who were youngsters then are CEO’s now, college presidents now, and deacons and elders of churches now.<sup>10</sup> The very generation that never repented of its open warfare against those elders, whom the Scriptures teach us to honor, is now the regnant generation, and in their regnant role they just assume that every generation wishes to be different from its parent’s generation because we wished to be different from ours. But this projection is not historically accurate; such rebellion against elders is simply not historically universal. Even more surely, the Holy Scriptures do not endorse such widespread contempt (or any contempt) for one’s elders.<sup>11</sup>

---

10 And, as Camille Paglia has observed, some are “ass-kissing deans” at prestigious universities who once marched in the Free Speech movement and now enforce political correctness statutes at their universities.

11 Zoologists remind us that some species are noted for the peculiar habit of eating their young; in our culture, it may be the other way around.



## Concluding Thoughts

As is often the case, the challenge of Romans 12:1–2 will not go away. In every moment and regarding every significant reality, we must ask whether our attitudes, practices, and values reflect our conformity to “this age” or whether they reflect our diligent efforts to be transformed by renewed minds. Is it not possible that youth culture itself, and therefore alleged “youth ministry,” reflects a culture’s hostility to the biblical warnings about childish folly and a culture’s hostility to the biblical injunctions to honor our elders?

My concern, of course, is not that we ignore caring for young people; we care for all the members of the body of Christ. My concern is both linguistic and strategic; is it wise and helpful to normalize or institutionalize the awkward years of adolescence by the expression “youth ministry?” Is it wise to flatter young people that their understandably immature, ill-conceived, and unrefined impulses are ordinarily wholesome, and to be a standard that directs the rest of us? Is it wise to ghettoize young people, retarding and delaying their entrance into adulthood? Which will serve their becoming adults better: separating them *from* adults or mingling them *with* adults? To raise the question may be to answer it.

It is, of course, not wrong to love the youth specially, at least in the etymological sense that “specially” shares with “species.” Of course, we love all members of the body of Christ with a due regard for their *kind* or *species*, for their circumstances in life. We care for a widow differently than we do for an elderly woman whose husband is still living; we take notice of her species or kind, and serve her in a manner appropriate to her condition (without necessarily having a Minister of Widows). And we should do the same with our youth, recognizing how awkward the transitional years can be, recognizing that their vocabulary may not yet be as refined as that of an adult, that their social skills are still underdeveloped, and that their world of experience is smaller. But we can do all this without ghettoizing them and without flattering them. The adult world will not revolve around them; and

we will not prepare them for that adult world if the ecclesiastical world does revolve around them. ⑤

**T. David Gordon** is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and serves as professor of religion and Greek at Grove City College, Grove City, Pennsylvania.

## Is Church Membership Biblical?

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* March 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Ryan M. McGraw** and **Ryan Speck**

### Introduction

How many membership cards are you carrying currently? Do you have a library membership, a grocery store “preferred customer” card, a gym membership, and perhaps others? We have so many memberships that we can become weary of them, which leads some people to groan when the church, which is a spiritual institution, requires official membership. Thus, it is increasingly common for Christians to question whether church membership is a biblical practice.

As Bereans, Christians ask rightly, “Is church membership biblical?” No one can cite chapter and verse to prove a multistep process for joining the church and being counted on her rolls. So, then, why do some churches insist on an official process to join their membership, while others do not? The biblical answer to this question is not direct, but indirect. Just as a canvas provides a necessary backdrop for a work of art, so the Bible as-

<sup>1</sup> [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=473&issue\\_id=103](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=473&issue_id=103).

sumes the necessity of formal church membership in order to fulfill the commands and to apply the promises of Scripture with regard to the church.

We define formal membership as a covenant bond made by a public vow by which a person commits him or herself to a local body of believers, under the authority of a well-defined group of church leaders. This results in an official record of members who belong to a local church. We will demonstrate the requirement for formal church membership by proving from Scripture that the church is a visible community, that every Christian must be a member of this community, and that such membership necessitates vows and rolls.

## **I. The Foundations of Church Membership: The Church as a Community**

### **1. The Analogy of Citizenship**

Throughout Scripture, God describes his people as a city or a nation: a gathered, defined group of people living together (e.g., Pss. 46; 48; 87; Matt. 21:43; Phil. 3:20; Heb. 12:22–24; Rev. 21). He depicts heaven itself as the City of God (Rev. 21:2) and Christians as “citizens” of a heavenly city (Phil. 3:20; Heb. 11:10). While foreigners may reside in a city or nation, citizens alone constitute its true membership. They have birth certificates, pay taxes, and obtain passports and other licenses. In other words, they have recognized privileges and responsibilities that noncitizens do not and should not have. The nature of any society includes official citizens belonging to it by open and clear declaration.

When someone is caught in a criminal act, one of the first points in processing his case is to determine whether or not he is a citizen of that society. In the United States of America, arrested citizens must be read their rights and treated with a measure of respect and dignity. The laws of other countries may affect the treatment of those who are not citizens.

Official status as a citizen and the rights and privileges that attend this status are not peculiar to any country or time. This principle was true

in biblical times as well. The Apostle Paul, for example, appealed to his Roman citizenship for similar rights and privileges (e.g., Acts 22:29). When Paul referred to citizenship in the kingdom of God (e.g., Phil. 3:20), he understood citizenship much as we do today. Being a citizen entails having official, publicly recognized membership in a community. This status brings particular rights and privileges within that community. To be a citizen of a country is to be an official member of its society, a subject of its laws, and a beneficiary of its government. As citizens of the kingdom of God, Christians enjoy all the rights and privileges of living under Christ’s rule and government.

Even Christ recorded the names of his citizens in his book (Rev. 13:8; 21:27). As it is in every other respect, the church militant (on earth) is a dim reflection of the church triumphant (in glory). Paul prized his citizenship in heaven at great personal cost. He declared it publicly through his open commitment to Christ (Acts 9:18–20; 13:1; 15:2; etc.). Did he not join with God’s people in a public and official manner in the presence of many witnesses? Timothy, his friend and fellow minister, did the same (1 Tim. 6:12). We have the documents to prove it (his writings and what others wrote about him). Since he used this language of citizenship to describe our status in the courts of heaven, would an official public commitment to the church on earth be out of place?

The church is both visible and invisible. In its visible aspect, we identify the members of the church through their profession of faith in Christ and obedience to him. In its invisible character, God alone knows who his elect are and who are truly born of the Spirit. The visible church is made in the image of the invisible church and, as such, reflects its character. Those who belong to the invisible church are citizens of a heavenly kingdom. Is it not appropriate for the members of this invisible society to express their citizenship by belonging to its visible and earthly expression?

Some consider “citizenship” to be a cold and lifeless concept. Is belonging to the “kingdom of God” merely a matter of having the “right papers”? This was not the apostle’s inspired opinion. He

held citizenship in this kingdom as his highest privilege in life and in death. He understood that this citizenship entails being members of the household of God (Eph. 2:19), part of Christ's body (Col. 1:18), and belonging to the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16). The citizens of this kingdom are the saving objects of the work of the triune God, into whose name they are baptized (Matt. 28:19).

Even regarding earthly citizenship, the Roman centurion in Acts 22:28 told Paul that he had purchased his citizenship "with a great sum." If he set such great value on his Roman citizenship, how much more should we value our membership in the church, which is the kingdom of Christ? Our heavenly citizenship is analogous to the citizenship and memberships we sustain on this earth. In placing church membership in opposition to the nature of a warm loving society, Christians can unintentionally neglect the full teaching of God's Word. In Scripture, official, public, formal vows are not at variance with living, warm, organic fellowship with other believers and with true, heartfelt, spontaneous devotion to God. Citizenship necessarily involves records of citizens.

What nation has citizens with no official documentation? As the members of the invisible church are recorded in heaven, so should the members of the visible church be recorded on earth.<sup>2</sup> Government is not possible without a record of citizenship. We must be members of the church even as we are members of other societies.

## 2. The Analogy of a Family

Membership in an earthly family is analogous to membership in the church. The Scriptures describe God's people (the church) as a family (e.g., Luke 8:21; Gal. 3:26; Eph. 5:25–28; Col. 3:20–21; Heb. 2:11; 1 John 3:1ff.). Though families can be less loving and cohesive than they should be, they are definite units of people living together in close relations. These relations should, and often do,

produce warm relationships. As such, they are the building blocks of society. Intimate love is God's intention within the family, which is his institution (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5; Eph. 5:31). Such love is also Christ's intention for his church. It is the love he has shown to the church (Eph. 5:23), and it is the love he intends for us to show to one another (1 John 4:11).

This description of the church as the family of God helps us understand (by analogy) what our personal conduct ought to be, both in the family and in the church. The husband should love his wife and give himself for her (Eph. 5:25), just as Christ did for the church. Wives must submit to their own husbands and respect them (Eph. 5:22, 33), just as the church loves and respects Christ. Children are obligated to obey their parents in the Lord (Eph. 6:1). Fathers must beware of provoking their children to wrath (Eph. 6:4). They do so by reflecting the just and wise government of the Lord as they (along with their wives) rear their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4).

Being a member of a family is a legal matter. While it is popular to speak of "starting a family" when couples have children, according to Scripture, a family begins with and is constituted by a marriage covenant (Gen. 2:24; Mal. 2:14). The intimacy and unity that should exist between members of a family begins with a husband and wife joined together by covenant in the sight of God through vows. The marriage covenant is a legal contract, involving officially recorded and publicly taken vows (Ruth 4:10–11; Mal. 2:14; Matt. 21:1ff.; Rev. 19:9).

This is true in civil society as well as in Scripture. Contractual agreements mean nothing legally unless they are established as a matter of public record with witnesses (Deut. 19:15; Matt. 18:16). For this reason, the Scriptures repeatedly affirm that a marriage can be dissolved only through a certificate of divorce (Deut. 24:1, 3; Isa. 50:1; Mark 10:4). The commitment a man and woman make to each other excludes all other people from the rights, privileges, and duties of that marriage. All others should know that these two people belong

---

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Reynolds, "Membership Rolls and the Book of Life," *Ordained Servant* 16 (2007): 39.

to one another; they are “off limits” to all outsiders. This is why we wear marriage rings—they commemorate publicly our marriage vows.

When we come to Christ, we become part of his church, which is his bride. Because we are born again by the Spirit’s power, we are children of God and belong to his family. We are children of God through adoption by the Father, through marriage to Christ, and by being born of the Spirit. Moreover, much like our public commitments in marriage, he commands us to confess him before men (Matt. 10:32–33; Luke 12:8–9; Rom. 10:9–10).

Do public vows and official records make marriage a dry, cold, dusty relationship? On the contrary, publicly and officially declaring their love for and commitment to one another should deepen a couple’s love. A couple with no public commitment to one another always has an uncertain and undefined relationship. They have no privileges and no binding responsibilities to one another. This is often why men who will not commit to a woman in marriage often speak of not wanting to be “tied down” and why the women who are with them are often insecure.

We could argue similarly in relation to having children (who then receive birth certificates) and adopting children (another prominent theme in the Scriptures to describe God’s people). Official commitments do not contradict the free, vibrant, organic nature of Christianity. They are part and parcel with it throughout the Bible. We are related to the triune God and to one another, and we must dwell together as a loving family.

### **3. A Practical Observation**

These biblical concepts apply to the “church-hopper” in our day: the person who jumps from church to church, never settling anywhere. When something happens that irritates him slightly, he jumps to another church. Does this reflect the importance that the triune God places upon the church? How can such a person be vitally connected to God’s people in any meaningful sense of the term? To borrow an analogy from James, as

death is separation of the spirit from the body, so those who claim to have the spirit of Christianity without expressing spiritual vitality in the body of the church act dead instead of alive. The spirit expresses life through the physical body. The members of the invisible church express their life through commitment to the visible church.

Have you experienced a time when you were, practically speaking, cut off from weekly and intimate fellowship with other believers? Perhaps you travelled to a foreign country. Perhaps you moved somewhere without a church nearby. If so, then was this not a difficult, waning time for you spiritually? Did you miss the sweet fellowship and mutual love and concern that you experienced with your brethren previously as a society, family, and body?

Such times drive the value of committed fellowship and true community home to our hearts. God established the community of believers for our good. It is necessary for our spiritual growth in the grace and knowledge of Christ. The nature of the church as a divinely ordained community does not prove the case for formal church membership, but it is the necessary backdrop for it. Defective views of church membership often reflect defective views of the church itself.

## **II. The Duty of Church Membership: We Must Join This Community**

The biblical description of the church as a community implies that we should join this community. This is true for at least two reasons, both of which highlight the fact that, ordinarily, it is neither desirable nor possible to live the Christian life alone.

### **1. The Interdependence of Believers**

The community of the church is vitally important because we need each other. The Apostle Paul drives this point home in 1 Corinthians 12:21. The eye cannot say to the hand that it does not need it. The head cannot say to the feet that it does not require them. It would be absurd to treat our physical bodies this way. Yet Paul indicates that this is

precisely how Christians often treat the church. He wrote about the interdependence between Christians, not the independence of Christians. We are differing members of the same body.

We all have the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22ff.) in greater or lesser measure. Yet the Spirit has gifted each of us in various ways to complement each other's faith and service. Some of us are called to be teachers and preachers. Some of us are specially equipped to administrate. Some are gifted for mercy ministries above others. Some have a remarkable ability to encourage others. Why has Christ distributed such gifts among his people? It is for the edifying of his body (Eph. 4:8ff.). Our fellowship with one another is necessary in order to live the Christian life and to express the life of Christ's body.

The Simon and Garfunkel song, "I am a rock; I am an island," is not sound theology. No one can live well alone. People, made in the image of the triune God, need fellowship. God needs no one. The communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is a fellowship that accepts no supplement and requires no complement. Yet man is needy. He needs God. The God whom he needs and reflects is a being in communion. Part of man's renewal in God's image consists in his communion with God and with God's church. Man was created for fellowship with God and with others in submission to God. The two tables of the Ten Commandments reflect this order and relationship. The new man in Christ is part of the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). The Christian is created for Christian fellowship, with God and with those who are in fellowship with God.

## 2. The Mutual Responsibilities of Believers

Believers not only need one another, but also have duties to perform toward one another. The necessity of Christian fellowship and the responsibilities resulting from that fellowship are joined inseparably by God; let no man rend them asunder. If God created us to be a body of believers needing fellowship and equipped us to help one another in the faith, then we must exercise our

gifts to bless fellow believers rather than for our private benefit. God commands us not to withhold from one another what the other needs. When you read Scripture, you find multiple "one another" commands. Wayne Mack notes fifty-eight such commands.<sup>3</sup> He writes:

All these commands are written in the present tense. This means we're to be constantly doing these things. The lives of every believer should be characterized by the fulfillment of these commands toward other believers. We're to be constantly devoted to one another, praying for one another, honoring one another, greeting one another, and motivating one another to love and good works. If this is true, then it also follows that we must be physically present with other people in order to do these things.... We cannot possibly fulfill these kinds of commands to every person in the world. We do not have the time or the resources to do it, no matter how much we would like to. We have to be selective about the people with whom we're going to work in fulfilling these commands.<sup>4</sup>

We have the clear responsibility to love one another, but we have limited resources to do so as individuals. The gifts of the Spirit and the community of the church highlight the fact that we exercise Christian love concretely in relation to a specific group of people. God in his Word forbids us from living the Christian life without fellow Christians. He commands us to walk in fellowship with them.

Many believe that they can do all of these things without formal church membership. Some will say, "Can't we be a community without belonging officially to a church? Can't we fulfill these commands and needs outside of the church as an institution through para-church organizations? Should we not be free to fellowship with

---

<sup>3</sup> Wayne Mack, *To Be or Not to Be a Church Member? That Is the Question!* (Merrick, NY: Calvary, 2004), 26. Consider Rom. 12:16; Gal. 6:1-2; 1 Cor. 12:25-26; Heb. 3:13; 10:24; Col. 3:16; James 5:16.

<sup>4</sup> Mack, *Church Member*, 29.



whatever group we want, whenever we want, without officially belonging to a specific church?” Many professing believers have no official relation to any church, but they regularly attend or even minister in churches or in informal Christian groups. Some churches forbid membership and ordination. Do such people fail to fulfill Christ’s commands to the church through his apostles?

The next section builds a case for formal membership in the local church from scriptural principles by drawing implications from the church as a community and the duties attached to communion with her.

### **III. The Form and Means of Church Membership: Membership Rolls and Membership Vows**

In addition to what has already been said, at least three practical reasons solidify the need for membership rolls and formal membership vows: the relationship between church members and church officers, the process of church discipline, and the right of the congregation to elect her own officers. The preceding material highlighted the need for formal church membership in terms of the nature of the church and the duty to join her. Part two below shows the form membership should take.

#### **1. The Relationship between Church Members and Church Officers**

The relationship and responsibilities between church officers and church members necessitates formal church membership. From the beginning, God instituted various means of governance for his people. He made Adam Eve’s head before the Fall (1 Tim. 2:11–13). Thus, God provided human leadership even in a perfect world with perfect people. A necessary implication of this fact is that human governance is not a necessary evil, but a necessary good. Even in a sin-cursed world, human governance continues to be a necessary good supplied by God to bless his people. Our Lord called Abraham to be the head of his house-

hold, who were the people of God at that time (Gen. 18:19). God provided priests, prophets, and kings to be over his people (Lev. 9; 1 Chron. 23:13; Amos 2:11; 1 Sam. 3:20; 16:13; etc.). He called apostles to lead the church under the New Testament (Matt. 10:1–8; Acts 1:24–25; Eph. 2:20; 3:5; 4:11). He set forth the eldership as a perpetual office in the church (1 Tim. 3:1–7; 5:17; Titus 1:5–9; etc.). God has always made it clear that he intended men to be ruled by other men according to the authority structures of his choosing and his designation. In fact, Jesus gave church leaders as part of the gifts he purchased by his own blood for the good of his church (Eph. 4:8, 11–16). The church is the authority structure under which God has placed all Christians in order to bless them. God places Christians under church leaders for their benefit. Sometimes it is difficult to see how such men are a blessing to Christ’s church. Most church leaders themselves are bewildered at times as to why God called them and how he could use them. Nonetheless, to the glory of his grace alone, he uses men with clay feet to help his people in various ways.

Regardless of how we understand the biblical form of church government, all should be able to affirm that the church is a body of believers under divinely sanctioned officers. For example, Acts 15 describes what is known as the Jerusalem Council. A troublesome teaching arose among God’s people regarding circumcision and importing Jewish rites into the Gentile church. In response, the apostles and elders gathered together in Jerusalem to address the problem through the use of Scripture, debate, and prayer. The delegates sent to this council reflected the authority structure that God had appointed in the church through his Word. They were not leaders of parachurch organizations. They were extraordinary (apostles) and ordinary (elders) church officers. The elders were the elected leaders of local churches who led the people and under whose authority the people submitted themselves.<sup>5</sup> The council arrived at its

---

<sup>5</sup> In Acts 14:23, the Greek verb is *χειροτονέω* (*cheirotoneō*), which lexicons universally recognize to mean choose or elect,



decision by appealing to Scripture rather than to apostolic authority, even though the apostles were present. The decision was nonetheless ascribed to the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28). The apostles and elders sent this decision to local churches in many regions with the expectation that all would follow their directions (Acts 16:4).

Hebrews 13:17 further highlights the mutual responsibilities God enjoins, both on church officers and on church members. The writer commands his audience to submit to those who rule over them on the grounds that such rulers must give an account to God for their souls. The Lord here assumes that there will be shepherds over his people. He holds those shepherds accountable for how they rule his people. How can they be responsible for a definite body of Christians if they cannot define the parameters of that body? Are they accountable for those souls who come and go as they please? Can such people obey the command of the text, when they have no commitment to the local body or to its officers? How can they fulfill these mutual responsibilities without formal commitments from both parties (vows) and membership rolls of some kind?

The Word of God does not denigrate authority. Men may abuse the power of church government through their sin, but this does not mean that the government that Christ instituted in his church is evil. This passage commands us to embrace this authority structure as part of our duty and love to God. When forced to choose between the two, we must obey God and not men (e.g., Acts 5:29). We must submit to our elders only insofar as they minister according to God's Word. Nonetheless, elders remain God's authority structure for his church today. The church ruled by elders is one means by which Christ exercises his authority, not merely through men in office, but through men in office ministering the Word of God.

If God has given an official authority structure to govern his church, then why do many Christians today believe that they can fulfill their

---

likely by raising the hand.

responsibilities to the church with no tangible commitment to a local congregation and to her officers? Could it be, at least for some, that the objection is really against the divine mandate to submit to church authority? Could it be that the spirit of radical individualism that pervades our culture has jaded our view of church membership? How do you respond to the language of Hebrews 13:17, "obey" or "submit" to those who "rule over you"? How can you apply this without membership?

Our Lord Jesus Christ instituted local authorities to rule over his bride. These governing authorities exercise spiritual power only. Church power is ministerial and declarative, not magisterial and legislative. Church power is not carnal or coercive; it is not by the sword. However, this does not mean that church officers do not exercise genuine authority under Christ their head.

In 1 Timothy, the Apostle Paul encouraged Timothy to exercise his ministry faithfully (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:18). Among other things, Paul taught Timothy about the requirements of elders (1 Tim. 3). The language of overseer, ruler, and shepherd involves ruling over a particular body of believers. These elders govern local congregations. For example, in Acts 20:17, Paul assembled the elders of Ephesus. They were elders of this church and of no other. Throughout the Scriptures, elders govern local bodies of believers—just as it was in the synagogues (Matt. 5:22; Acts 13:15; Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; etc.).

What if a group of church leaders from a church down the street came to your building and declared that your church service will start an hour later than usual next week? Would you submit to their decision? Or, do you not recognize clearly that such a declaration cannot have authority in your church. Those leaders cannot make the decisions for your church; your leaders alone can. The same is true in every other realm of authority.

Without membership, you are no more committed to the church and to her officers than a man is to a woman to whom he is not married. How can a woman submit to a husband unless she has a husband? How can a man become a husband without a vow before God that constitutes a new

family? Should every man, who happens to be a husband of a woman, be able to call every other wife to submit to him as a husband? Unless the woman vows to submit to the man, he has no such authority over her.

Likewise, in the local church, membership vows are necessary, in part, for you to promise to obey the command contained in Hebrews 13:17 (to submit to your specific, local “rulers”). Membership rolls are necessary to keep record of who has taken these vows and to know to whom the officers must keep their vows in service to God. Is it not possible that the strenuous objections to official church membership really stem from an unwillingness to submit to those God has called to be leaders of his people? Public vows and membership rolls are necessary in order to fulfill the responsibilities of church members to their officers (and vice versa).

## **2. Christ’s Discipline Process Outlined in Matthew 18:15–20 Reinforces the Need for Formal Church Membership**

Christ told his disciples that they must deal with unrepentant sin in their brethren specifically and concretely. If such people do not hear us after private admonition and after bringing one or two witnesses, then we must “tell it to the church.” Whether you regard this as an official church court or the membership at large, Christ assumes that the body of the church is both recognizable and definable.<sup>6</sup> Our Lord makes no provision in this process for dealing with churchless Christians.

The primary reason why churches do not follow through with excommunications (in our experience) is that the unrepentant person stops coming to church. Many are accustomed to refer to this as a person “excommunicating himself.” Yet putting the offender out of the church is an act of the church, not an act of the offender. It is a public declaration that this person no longer has any public official relation to the church because his or

---

<sup>6</sup> “The church” here likely follows Jewish use in the Old Testament and the synagogue. This referred to the eldership as the governing body that represented the church.

her life and profession of Christ are no longer credible. How could the church do this if the person was not a member but only a casual attendee?

This is a negative corollary to the vows taken upon joining the church. If a person can come and go from the local congregation as that person pleases with no official commitment to that congregation, then how is it possible to obey Christ’s command to excommunicate the unrepentant? This places many in the absurd position of exercising this sanction only when the offender consents to the process. Yet do we not know by experience that such a scenario is rare? Defective views of excommunication go hand in hand with defective views of church membership. Without membership vows and membership rolls, we will inevitably reduce excommunication to an act of the individual rather than to an act of Christ through the church.

Putting someone out of the church for unrepentant sin is an exercise of the keys of the kingdom (Matt. 16:19). Membership rolls are necessary in order to exercise the power of the keys, which is through the ministry of God’s Word. However, this implies the oft-overlooked corollary that entrance into the church is an exercise of the keys of the kingdom just as much as exclusion from the church is. The authority symbolized by the imagery of keys is that of both opening and closing doors. While the sword is the symbol of the state’s authority (Rom. 13:4, a symbol of the death penalty), and the rod is the symbol of parental authority (Prov. 13:24; 22:15, a symbol of physical discipline), opening and closing is the symbol of the church’s authority.

In Matthew 16:19, Jesus committed the keys to Peter (and spoke to Peter in the singular, “you”). However, in Matthew 18:18 (using the same language of “binding” and “loosing” as in Matthew 16:19), Jesus addressed the disciples in the plural. There is now a plurality of leaders who hold the authority to bind or loose, as symbolized in the keys. This group consists in the elders of the church. Admitting members to the church that have a credible and biblical profession of faith is a public declaration that their sins are remitted on

account of their faith in Christ. This is a positive act of church discipline that should strengthen the faith of believers. It is also a commitment. Just as you enter the church through the ministerial application of the Word, so you must voluntarily place yourself under the exercise of the power of the keys. The only way to exercise discipline, both for edification and for correction, is for members to join the church through a public commitment and to be counted on her rolls.

### **3. Membership Rolls are Essential in the Election of Church Officers**

The election of church officers is both a right and a privilege of church members. In Acts, the congregation participated in the election of an apostle (Acts 1:21–23), the first deacons (Acts 6:3–6), and elders (Acts 14:23). It is impossible to elect officers justly without a well-defined membership in the local congregation. Membership rolls necessarily determine who has the right to vote for new officers. These membership rolls should consist of those who have promised their commitment to the local church. Such public commitments are what we call vows.

Without membership rolls constituted by vows, it is impossible to preserve the biblical right of church members to elect their own officers. Several problems arise, for example, when a church without membership attempts to elect a new minister. The church has two options. In the first, it is left at the mercy of whoever shows up on the day of the election, whether they attend the church regularly or not. In such cases, it is not uncommon for attendance to double or triple on the day on which elections are held. Yet what right do those who have made no commitment to the officers and members of that congregation have to elect the future officers of the congregation? If the church has no membership, then how does anyone present have a sure right to participate in electing officers? In fact, what if the much larger church down the street decided to swarm into your building and vote for your officers? How could you prevent them from doing so, unless you recognized

that only members of your particular church could vote on your officers?

The alternative to allowing anyone present to vote is that the current leadership bypasses the election process entirely and chooses their own successors. The former option deprives church members of the right to elect a man who ministers regularly to them by making them subject to people who may not even attend the church regularly. The second option obliterates the New Testament example of the people electing their own officers and gives the current leadership tyrannical authority over the church. Membership rolls are necessary in order to protect the rights of God's people in the local church.

### **Conclusion**

Have you become a member of a local congregation? Have you resisted having your name added to the rolls? How can you keep Christ's commands in relation to the local church without doing so? To which elders do you actively submit? Which congregation are you committed to? You cannot adequately express your membership in the church invisible without doing so through the church visible and local.

Have you resisted taking membership vows? Recognize that good vows only require you to promise to do what Scripture requires of you already. Must you not be subject to the discipline and government of the church? Should you not support the local church in its worship and work to the best of your ability? No local church is perfect and no church needs to be in order for you to join it. Join that church that best reflects your understanding of Scripture, honors Christ, and will feed your soul. Take your vows freely and without coercion. Take them wisely. Take them prayerfully and seriously. But, by all means, take them.

Everything that the triune God commands you to do is for your good. Will his promises fail you as you seek to honor him in his church? We should always be thankful that Christ did not call us to live the Christian life alone. He went to the cross alone. He trod the winepress of God's

wrath alone. Yet he redeemed a community of sinners. The church is his body. Belonging to her is belonging to the Father's household. She is the temple of the Holy Spirit. In spite of the faults of the church militant on earth, she is inhabited by many who shall be part of the church triumphant in heaven.

Are you citizens of this heavenly kingdom? Then reflect your membership in this heavenly society by becoming members of the earthly society that reflects it. As William Perkins wrote, the church is "the suburbs of the city of God, and the gate of heaven; and therefore entrance must be made into heaven in and by the church."<sup>7</sup> Let us dwell with her and in her so that we might be near to God through her. ☪

**Ryan McGraw** is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves in First Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Sunnyvale, California. He is an adjunct professor of systematic theology in Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

**Ryan Speck** is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America, and serves at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Columbia, Missouri.

---

<sup>7</sup> William Perkins, *A Warning against the Idolatrie of the Last Times and an Instruction Touching Religious, or Divine Worship* (Cambridge: printed by John Legat, 1601), 145.

# ✦ Servant Education

## A Dozen Reasons Why Catechizing Is Important

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*  
Online April 2015<sup>1</sup>

by Thomas E. Tyson

What is catechizing? Simply put, it is systematically presenting Bible truth in a form that can be memorized, understood, and embraced, so that the covenant member knows what he or she believes and acts on it. It may be done by parents at home, by the church (in Sunday school classes, catechism classes, and via sermons), or by the Christian school or the home school. The word “catechizing” comes from the Greek verb *κατηχέω* (*katēcheō*), which means “to sound down” or “to speak with the objective of getting something back in an echo.” So, I am not speaking here of one more Sunday school “doing and seeing” exercise, but rather of the question and answer method, with the employment of creeds and catechisms, and with what we hear God in the Bible chronicling and commanding.

The purpose of this exercise, then, is to underline God’s command that both Christian parents and the church together catechize covenant children both to understand and to embrace the gospel. To accomplish this I intend to identify twelve reasons why catechizing is important.

### 1. Being a Command of God, It Is Not Optional

The scriptural mandate for catechizing is clear: to Moses, representing the whole of Israel, God said, “These words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (Deut. 6:6–7). It is clearly the parents of Israel who are addressed with this command, and in what words are these children commanded to be catechized? In “all the great work of the LORD that he did” (Deut. 11:7, which work is summarized in vv. 2–6). That work is termed *historia salutis*—history of salvation. And how is this Old Testament church to respond? Just to “hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God” (Deut. 31:12–13). That obedient service is termed *ordo salutis*—order of salvation. Catechizing, then, takes into its compass *historia salutis* and *ordo salutis*, both what God has done to deliver his people out of the estate of sin and misery and what he commands of them by way of fearing him and doing what he commands.

The people of Israel (the Old Testament church) were catechized by Ezra the priest and the Levites (ruling elders?). Nehemiah 8:8 tells us, “They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”

The Lord Jesus Christ, incarnate Son of God notwithstanding, as a son of Israel submitted to his own *bar mitzvah* (catechesis), as recorded in Luke 2:41–52, and as a result “increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.”

In the Great Commission, as it has been termed, *teaching* appears to be the climax of the command: “discipling,” yes; “baptizing,” yes; but especially “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Consequently, catechizing seems to be anything but an afterthought in the church’s marching orders.

<sup>1</sup> [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=479&issue\\_id=104](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=479&issue_id=104).

## 2. God Has Saved for Himself a Family, Not a Collection of Individuals

Of Abraham, the “father of the faithful,” God said “for I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him” (Gen. 18:19). The “way of the LORD” [דֶּרֶךְ יְהוָה *derek yahweh*] is twofold, involving: (1) divine accomplishment, “shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do” (v. 17), and (2) human response, “keep the way of the LORD.” Thus, the election of “some to everlasting life” (WSC 20) in the covenant of grace involves the election of Abraham *and* his seed. We understand, therefore, what the task of catechizing was that the LORD laid upon Abraham. And furthermore, that it is a task that has never been abrogated in the New Testament church. Abraham’s task was not merely to provide a model for the world of adherence to the worship of Yahweh, with the hope that disparate individuals might, here and there, be snatched hopefully from hell. His task was also to build, maintain, and indeed enlarge a covenant family which would exist to the praise and glory of the God of grace. And that covenant family would never disappear from the face of the earth, but would continue through its generations until the end of the age. That is what we have likewise in the New Testament church, and it forms the foundation for the instruction of the succeeding generations of the family of God’s gracious covenant. It is also why parents and the Christian church today find catechizing important.

## 3. Covenant Children Are Members of the Church

This is really a corollary of the preceding reason, as we shall see.

If God had determined to save a collection of disparate individuals, willy-nilly, then we would expect that members of the Christian church would consist of all those individuals who express faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. As far as their children would be concerned, they would be seen as po-

tential members, and would indeed become such if they happen to choose to believe in Jesus when they grew up. Meanwhile, while they are still children, and make no profession of faith in Christ, they would not be considered church members. Consequently, the church would seek to *evangelize* them, but that would be a far cry from understanding that it is to *catechize* them.

But the truth of the matter is that (as we have already seen above), God has saved for himself a family, not a collection of individuals who are the proper *members* of the church. That family includes the young children of the church’s members, and those children are themselves members as well. Otherwise, God would not have dealt with his people in Old Testament times as he did. Now, there is mystery here, to be sure, because it would seem that only those who have faith in Christ should be termed “church members.” And, we do not have an absolute promise in Scripture that every covenant child is, in truth, elect. But we are not here dealing with the secret counsel of God’s will, which we cannot fathom. What we are dealing with is his word of command, which is abundantly clear. And that word commanded the circumcision of Israel’s male offspring, thus identifying them from their earliest age as members of the covenant family of Yahweh. Likewise, the New Testament indicates that the infant seed of the church were, and indeed ought to be, baptized.<sup>2</sup> As baptized, therefore, these children are indeed identified as church members. And as church members they deserve to be catechized. We say more: indeed, they *must* be catechized.

## 4. Catechizing Is the Responsibility of Both Parents and the Church

Biblically it is primarily the family’s duty to train the children, and that by the head of the house, the father, chiefly. However, the church, especially on a local level, has a responsibility to assist, augment, and strengthen the impact of the

---

2 John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Philadelphia: Committee on Christian Education of the OPC, 1952), 51–71.



training received in the home. It is the family's responsibility to educate its children in all things of life (arithmetic, geography, biology, etc.) as well as the "way of the LORD"—his precepts, his ethics, his history, and his Word. However, the church and her officers still have a responsibility to educate children from the pulpit and through other means. The church and the family should not allow a false dichotomy to be wedged between them. Rather, they supplement each other in a unique way, a spiritual way. A father should indicate to his children the significance of the church's catechetical instruction, and likewise the church should support the family's role. These two institutions, church and family, should not oppose each other, but instead assist each other like two pillars that hold up the ceiling of truth. Thus, we might inquire: is the father more culpable than the church, when failure occurs in catechizing? I think we have to say: it's a toss-up!

### **5. Parents Vowed to Catechize Their Baptized Children**

At least Orthodox Presbyterian parents did! They did it when they responded affirmatively to this question: "Do you promise to teach diligently to [name of child] the principles of our holy Christian faith, revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and summarized in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church?"<sup>3</sup>

However faithful and diligent their local church might be, in fulfillment of *its* responsibility to teach the child, the parents cannot escape *their responsibility!* Remember, it was a sacred *vow*—not an indication of one's propensity, wish, or even human promise. In Ecclesiastes 5:4, the preacher warns: "When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow." Thus, violating a vow through either negligence, disregard, or even substitution, is a serious matter indeed. It is sin; and, if committed, can be confessed, repented of, and indeed forgiven

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, III.B.1.b.(5),(2) (Willow Grove, PA: Committee on Christian Education of the OPC, 2011), 145.

by God. But that correction, though gracious to the highest degree, does not erase the fact that such a sin, though removed by the blood of Christ, may indeed still have consequences, especially in the life of the child who was not faithfully catechized.

### **6. Christianity Is to Be Embraced, Not Inherited**

I say this to preclude anyone's thinking that God's saving of a family, and the inclusion of covenant children as members of that family, mean that such children are automatically regenerated and saved. Such might seem to be the case to some, but it isn't! Yes, perhaps strict logic might be seen to demand it, but the Scripture will not allow it. John 3:16 is still there, and it is crystal clear: "Whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." Once more, we are faced here with mystery.

But that is precisely why catechizing is so important. Both are true: our covenant children are God's, and they belong to his church; but because that is so, it is all the more vital that those children be instructed in his truth, to the end that they embrace and own that truth individually, and for themselves, by the working of the Holy Spirit, in and through the Word of God. Christian parents cannot sit back inactive, with regard to the religious instruction of their children, operating under the ungrounded hope that their children's baptism and church membership will save them.

### **7. Knowledge Is Foundational to True Religion**

For covenant children to embrace and own God's truth, they are going to have to *know* it, in the first place. Thus catechizing is, first of all, instruction in the Bible, God's Word. These children learn who God is, and what he requires of them, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it: "The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man" (WSC 3). Without that revealed knowledge, they will grow up ignorant of God's truth, the foun-

dation of the entirety of their innermost thoughts and outward actions. As such, having not attended to God’s revelation, they become, as adults, misguided religionists. They fall into well-intentioned preoccupation with philosophy and ethics, but, lacking the foundation of God’s Word, fail to draw correct conclusions regarding behavior. They may know *of* the Bible, but they do not *know* it.

This was Adam’s sin. He heard of God’s command, “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17, cf. 3:3), but he lacked true knowledge of it. For if he *knew* it truly, he would immediately and summarily have rejected the serpent’s lie: “You will not surely die.” Satan was there proposing another course, saying, “God knows that in the day you eat of it, you will become like God knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:4–5). But that was a lie, and Adam should have known it because it contradicted the Word of God. Thus, we see just how critical true knowledge of God’s revelation is, if our covenant children are to be equipped to withstand the temptation to embrace wrong thinking and sinful acting.

Knowledge is the absorption of things perceived or learned, the detection and recognition of truth. So, the Apostle Paul’s prayer for the church at Ephesus was that God might give them a spirit “of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know the hope to which he has called you” (Eph. 1:17–18). Knowledge comes from revelation, both general and special, so the covenant child is called upon to study both God’s world and God’s Word. We could even say that in both cases, he is catechized.

## 8. Knowledge without Wisdom Is Folly

On the other hand, knowledge without wisdom yields smart people who don’t use what they know to obey God—and that’s bad. That too was Adam’s first sin, and it produced arrogance in the heart of our first parent. He knew very well the situation about that special tree: God couldn’t have been clearer: “Hands off!” It is forbidden to

you. Whatever ruminations of logic, twisted or otherwise, in which you might engage, you may not, and cannot, overturn the “revelation of the knowledge of him” (Eph. 1:17) set forth in crystal clarity in the prohibition to eat of that special tree. Without wisdom, knowledge puffs up, as Paul wrote the Corinthians, and in Adam’s case his arrogance and direct violation of God’s command led to his death.

All of this yields the conclusion that catechizing is not satisfied simply with communication of the knowledge of God’s Word to covenant children; catechizing must include a homiletical purpose, namely, to call the covenant child to exercise wisdom by obeying the commands of the LORD. The children’s catechism answers the question, “How do you glorify God?” with “By loving him and doing what he commands.” That is wisdom: appropriate action on the basis of, and in the use of, knowledge. It is the opposite of the mind-set of the fool in Solomon’s Proverbs, who is a covenant breaker. The spiritually wise person is the covenant keeper. So, when it comes to catechizing, we are not dealing with superintelligence, but with *godly* application of what is known. Our covenant children are wise when they obey God—another reason why catechizing, indeed homiletical catechizing, is so important!

## 9. God’s Saving Activity Is Both Declared and Explained in the Bible

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are our catechetical text. Whatever creed or catechism we might employ must never be allowed to supersede or trump the Bible. In fact, catechizing should always include memorization of its very words, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Ps. 119:11).

## 10. The Concept of Covenant Is the Key to Understanding the Bible

Genesis 2:15–17 records God’s setting up the first of two great biblical covenants, wherein he commanded Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It has been called

either “the covenant of works” or “the covenant of life.” The second one is the “covenant of grace,” and the rest of the Bible after Genesis 3:13 is all about it—but you cannot understand that second covenant without the first. Now, a covenant is indeed what we might call a set-up, or an arrangement. It describes the way God relates to the people he created, to everybody who has ever lived or who will ever live. That is true, at least, of the first covenant, which we’re calling the covenant of works. The second one, the covenant of grace, applies only to believers, in the new covenant believers in Jesus Christ—for Christians.

Here we are discussing the fact that the creator of heaven and earth has such a lively interest in the human race that he talked to man, made arrangements with him, and entered into covenant with him. The first man, Adam, stood as a representative of the whole human race, and plunged us all into sin and misery through his disobedience. And the central theme of the whole of the Bible is this: that God is, and that he is interested in the people he has created, and has done special things for them—supremely a work of salvation—to deliver them from that broken covenant of works through the redeemer of sinners, Jesus Christ. That is why we affirm that the concept of covenant is the key to understanding the Bible. And that concept is to be pressed upon our children when we engage in catechizing them!

But just what is a covenant, in biblical terms? In the covenant of works, God condescended to bless Adam and Eve upon condition of perfect obedience, something only the Second Adam, Jesus Christ would ever achieve. In the covenant of grace, God’s elect are called into his kingdom by trusting the one who has perfectly obeyed and died as the only acceptable sacrifice for their sins. Both covenants are sovereignly arranged. Man agrees; he can do nothing else, for God has ordered it. That is the case even when man breaks a covenant—for then the penalties that God has imposed will surely come to pass. That is what the Bible is all about—the covenants of God.

Thus, in catechesis covenant children are taught to grasp that the Bible is essentially the story

of God’s great covenant relationship with man, in two parts: He entered into covenant with Adam, representing the whole human race to follow; then, when Adam broke that covenant of works, God made another, a covenant of grace, which has been in force from the fall of Adam until the present time, and it will go on as long as time endures, to the end. Possessing that grand concept, children have a marvelous key to understanding the whole of the Bible.

## 11. The Catechism Is a Road Map of the Bible

Again, we emphasize: the catechetical aid, whether it be the Westminster Shorter Catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism, or another, must never be held above Holy Scripture. Still, use of such an aid in catechizing covenant children is not to be avoided. This is because such catechisms may nevertheless be helpful; when used properly, they may be seen as road maps to the Bible. This advice has been put forth remarkably by G. I. Williamson.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps just one quote will be sufficient to make his point:

The Bible contains a vast wealth of information. It is no easy thing to master it all—in fact, no one ever has mastered it completely. So, it would be very foolish to try to do it all on our own, starting from scratch.

It would be foolish, because the results that we have from the study made by many great men of God down through many centuries are summarized for us in the catechism. The catechism ... is a kind of spiritual map of the Bible—worked out and proved by others who have gone before us.<sup>5</sup>

When going on an automobile trip, the main thing that needs to happen is that we make the right turns and go on the right roads to get to our destination. We may not think that because we

---

4 G. I. Williamson, “Catechism: A Map of the Bible,” *New Horizons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* 8, no. 5 (May 1987): 1–2.

5 *Ibid.*

have a good map, that our possession of it will guarantee good success. We have to actually “do it on the ground,” as they say. Likewise, saying that the catechism is a kind of “road map” of the Bible is not to affirm that all we need is the catechism, i.e., that we can trust it absolutely to get us to where we want to go. No, we must work out the map’s directions in actual driving! The catechism can be a real help in our understanding the Bible, but it is only that, and must never be allowed to replace Holy Writ, which *is* all the right turns and roads!

## 12. Rejection of the Gospel Has Dire Consequences

Perhaps considering a different understanding of one verse of the Bible will prove acceptable to the reader, and if so, will form a powerful reason for catechesis. We have already seen that wisdom demands obedience to God’s commands from our covenant children; and that obedience must be demanded by the parents of those children. Discipline is not optional, and this is underscored by a careful reading of Proverbs 22:6: “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.” However, a strict rendering of the original Hebrew text is: “Train up a child according to his way; even when he is old he will not depart from it.” Thus, “his way” would appear to be the child’s way, and not God’s way, yielding this striking conclusion: “spoil your child and he will stay spoiled.” If this exegesis is correct, the warning is a powerful reason for faithful (disciplinary) catechizing. For a full explanation of this exegesis, see Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel*.<sup>6</sup>

These, then, are twelve reasons why faithful and ongoing catechizing of covenant youth must be undertaken by parents and the church, *at all costs*. ☉

**Thomas E. Tyson** is a retired minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church living in Shermans Dale, Pennsylvania.

---

<sup>6</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975), 158n.

# Nurturing Theologically Rich Women’s Initiatives in Your Church

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* December 2015<sup>1</sup>

by Aimee Byrd

The OPC values robust, theological teaching. This is evident in the confession (Westminster) to which our denomination subscribes and the investment we put into our preachers. However, one area where this may not be as noticeable is in women’s initiatives. I am thankful that the OPC esteems the offices of the ministry, which is why I want to encourage the officers of the church to become more invested in the women’s groups that study together.

Please do not misunderstand. I know that women are valued in the OPC. The invitation to write this article reveals an interest in equipping women with good resources and helping pastors and elders gain awareness of what is being marketed to women. Whether women in your church are gathering together for a study, or shopping for their own personal reading and growth, they have become a valued target market for the so-called Christian publishing industry. From Bible studies to personal growth books, there is now a copious supply of resources available for women. The Christian bookstore can be a dangerous place to enter without proper discernment. And we do not want the women’s study groups in the church to be dangerous places to enter without proper discernment.

Unfortunately, I have seen this become an issue even in OPC and PCA churches. And I don’t think that it is because of the preaching. I have done a fair amount of traveling, speaking at women’s retreats for Presbyterian, Baptist, and non-denominational churches, and more. It is such a

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=520&issue\\_id=110](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=520&issue_id=110).

blessing to meet and talk with so many Christian women who desire to grow in God's Word. However, it is also disheartening to see women, across the board, caught up in poor theology. And it often causes discord in the church. Many of these women are under good preaching, and they claim to have a high view of Scripture. And yet some of the material they are studying with other women in the church, or reading for their own personal growth, contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture. How can this be? Why are numerous women embracing false teaching?

While good preaching is imperative, I think this is also a shepherding issue for pastors and elders. A pastor loves to hear that his congregation is taking initiative to learn more about what Scripture teaches. It's a challenge sometimes to find people who love to read. But what are they reading, and how are they processing the information?

I like to compare this situation to the wake-up call parents had when the television talk shows and news networks conducted faux abduction investigations, revealing the inadequacies of the whole "stranger danger" message. No matter how confident these parents felt about their talks with their children about never going off with a stranger under any condition, the whole "I lost my puppy, could you help me find him" guise worked every time. The problem is that predators are very friendly; they don't look like the monsters that their parents make them out to be. What child wouldn't want to help a smiley guy with a picture find man's best friend?

My illustration isn't meant to compare women with children. I am talking about a shepherd and his sheep. This really applies to the whole congregation because there are plenty of men reading and promoting harmful doctrine as well. But I'm writing to talk specifically about women's resources. When a top-selling Christian author, who belongs to a big church, who has adopted children from third-world countries, and who relates to the everyday Christian woman, offers a "stimulating" study on how to help "overwhelmed women" with an "underwhelmed soul," she sure doesn't look

like the image we may have of a false teacher.<sup>2</sup> These great qualities easily distract a reader from asking discerning questions about how the gospel is presented and how God's Word is being handled.

If pastors and elders become more aware of the books that are being marketed to their congregations, it will be time well spent. What are the top sellers in the Christian bookstore, and how faithful are they to God's Word? What is their appeal? Why would some of your congregants be attracted to their teaching? This takes a lot of shepherding, because it also takes an invested relationship between elders and the congregation.

But the investment doesn't need to be as daunting and time-consuming as it may appear. Of course, pastors want to spend most of their time being enriched by good teaching. This should be the case for all of us in God's church. Are there a few people in your congregation who may know the Christian market well and can help you in this area? Are you acquainted with some trusted websites and publications that you could refer to for book reviews? What if you were to ask some theologically sharp women in your church to read one or two books a year for review?

And yet, there's something even more important than offering book reviews for congregants to read, and that is teaching them *how* to read. That may sound superfluous, but many in the church are lacking the skill to read a book critically these days. False teachers do not come waving "We want to wreck your theology" signs. Many appear to have their lives more together than we do. So it is imperative to teach the discernment skills for what to look for in a book. What does it say about who God is, who man is, and the message of the gospel? How can we evaluate how the author is handling the Word of God? What is the conversation going on between the author and the reader?

Reading is an active engagement. In *How*

---

2. For my review, see Aimee Byrd, "The Best Yes: Making Wise Decisions in the Midst of Endless Demands," Books at a Glance, February 4, 2015: <http://booksataglance.com/book-reviews/the-best-yes-making-wise-decisions-in-the-midst-of-endless-demands-by-lysa-terkeurst>.



to *Read a Book*,<sup>3</sup> authors Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren compare the reader to a baseball catcher. While the writer is sending a message, readers are not passive. They need to receive the pitch, discerning whether it is a fastball, curveball, or knuckleball. And recognizing a changeup or screwball may take some conditioning.

### Some Recommended Resources

Women have indeed become a profitable target market for Christian publishers. But I don't want to end this article talking about all the bad books marketed to us. There has been a resurgence of great books written by women, for women. If you have women in your church who are interested in studying the books in the Old Testament, Nancy Guthrie's five-part series, *Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament*,<sup>4</sup> is outstanding. The Old Testament can be intimidating to teach, especially if you do not have any formal education. But Guthrie has provided a great resource for teachers, or even for private study, with tables and maps to help the reader gain an understanding of the historical context from which the book is written. Guthrie is faithful to the meaning of the text, highlighting the main themes while helpfully breaking down the important details. What I like best about this series is the author's zeal to show how the Old Testament Scriptures point to Christ. Readers will finish the study enriched by Guthrie's teaching. She also provides discussion questions for the ten-week studies and accompanying videos for the group studies. The one complaint I have heard about the videos is that they are a bit redundant if everyone is reading the book.

Nancy Guthrie has written many good books. She is also a great resource for bereaved families. Her work here comes from her own painful experi-

ence that drove her to find comfort in God's Word. Her book *Holding On to Hope: A Pathway through Suffering to the Heart of God*<sup>5</sup> has been a help to many grieving families. And while on the topic of bereavement, Jessalyn Hutto has written a helpful, small book, *Inheritance of Tears: Trusting the Lord of Life When Death Visits the Womb*,<sup>6</sup> for women who have suffered a miscarriage. These are great resources to offer to women in your church.

Kathleen Nielson's *Living Word*<sup>7</sup> Bible study series is worth noting. I love how these books are spiral-bound and have the feel of a notebook that the reader can write in. Along with great teaching, the benefit of using Nielson's studies is that she constantly forces the reader to go digging in the biblical text herself to find the meaning of the text. She doesn't prepackage her teaching into easily digestible bites, but rather teaches the reader to be a student of the Word. Nielson is not aiming to be an "answer person," but a teacher, and she does that well. She also has a section at the end called "Notes for Leaders" that will help your teachers do the same.

The issue of biblical distinctions between manhood and womanhood has been more pressing in the church lately. One book that I have found refreshing to read in this area is Hannah Anderson's *Made for More*.<sup>8</sup> What I appreciate about this book is how, as a conservative, Anderson does not write in an over-correcting way against feminism by focusing more on men's and women's

3 Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), 5.

4 See <https://www.crossway.org/books/?newnotable=All&series=Seeing+Jesus+in+the+Old+Testament>. For my review, see Aimee Byrd, "The Word of the Lord, Seeing Jesus in the Prophets," Books at a Glance, August 27, 2014, <http://booksataglance.com/book-reviews/the-word-of-the-lord-seeing-jesus-in-the-prophets-by-nancy-guthrie>.

5 Nancy Guthrie, *Holding On to Hope* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2002).

6 Jessalyn Hutto, *Inheritance of Tears* (Minneapolis: Cruciform, 2015). For my review, see Aimee Byrd, "Inheritance of Tears," Housewife Theologian, March 12, 2015, <http://www.alliancenet.org/mos/housewife-theologian/inheritance-of-tears#.ViUe-brTatUQ>.

7 See <http://www.prpbooks.com/blog/2013/09/kathleen-nielsons-living-word-bible-studies/#sthash.efv0Az7F.dpbs>. For my review, see Aimee Byrd, "Book Review: Nehemiah, Rebuilt and Rebuilding," Housewife Theologian, Feb. 7, 2012, <http://www.alliancenet.org/mos/housewife-theologian/book-review-3#.ViUf6rTatUQ>.

8 Hannah Anderson, *Made for More* (Chicago: Moody, 2014). For my review, see Aimee Byrd, "Made for More: An Invitation to Live in God's Image," Books at a Glance, June 6, 2014, <http://booksataglance.com/book-reviews/made-for-more-an-invitation-to-live-in-gods-image-by-hannah-anderson>.



roles as the subject matter rather than Christ. She begins with our identity as beings made in the image of God, and how that is true for both men and women. She then moves to our differences, and how we depend on one another to fully reflect God's image. This isn't a book that cherry-picks all the "pink" verses to teach biblical womanhood, but one that covers the big picture of the fall, redemption, and restoration as it teaches about our blessing and distinctiveness as women. Hannah Anderson is an engaging writer who is a joy to read.

Another favorite of mine is Melissa Kruger's book on contentment, *The Envy of Eve: Finding Contentment in a Covetous World*.<sup>9</sup> When I first picked this book up, I thought that it was only written for a certain type of woman. I quickly realized how beneficial it is for every woman in the church to read. Kruger writes like a friend who wants to help you find your satisfaction in Christ. While it is convicting, her book encourages weary women with the richness of the gospel.

Both Melissa Kruger and Gloria Furman have written gospel-centered books for new moms. Kruger's *Walking with God in the Season of Motherhood*<sup>10</sup> is an eleven-week devotional Bible study for busy moms, who of course still need to be nurtured in the Word throughout the week. What I like about this book is Kruger's reminder that we aren't to be more concerned with what we are *doing* as busy moms, than with what we are *becoming* in Christ. The study isn't about how to be a better mom, but on being a disciple of Christ as a mom. Gloria Furman's *Glimpses of Grace*<sup>11</sup> helps moms

find those glimpses of God's kindness to us in our everyday living. She offers a short, easy read that focuses on living our lives to the glory and praise of God. This is a needed encouragement for every mom. These are good books to give new moms, or mothers who are beginning to learn more about the faith. Also, Jen Wilkin has written a helpful book for beginners in Bible study called *Women of the Word*.<sup>12</sup>

This, of course, isn't an exhaustive list. It's just a few suggestions. And I am encouraged to know that there are more great books for women in the making. But women shouldn't just read books written by women, specifically for women. And this is an issue that I think is worth discussing. While I do think that it is valuable for women to have resources like this, I am afraid that women's groups are getting pigeonholed into a target market that is quite limited. Wouldn't it be great to have a women's group reading through some of the Puritans, or the theologically robust books that have stood the test of time? In fact, I was first introduced to the doctrines of grace while reading a Jonathan Edwards sermon,<sup>13</sup> and so identified with his account of wrestling with God's sovereignty in his *Memoirs*.<sup>14</sup>

## Encouraging Readers

Let me encourage you. People love to be invited—even to read sometimes! Make personal recommendations to your congregants, including the women. Ask them what they are reading. When a pastor or elder conversationally asks, "Have you read any good books lately?" that makes an impact.

---

9 Melissa Kruger, *The Envy of Eve* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, U.K.: Christian Focus, 2012). For a short reflection I wrote on it, see Aimee Byrd, "Reading Reflection," *Housewife Theologian*, April 2, 2012, <http://www.mortificationofspin.org/mos/housewife-theologian/reading-reflection-64#.ViUuhLTatUQ>.

10 Melissa Kruger, *Walking with God in the Season of Motherhood* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2015). For my review, see Aimee Byrd, "Walking with God in the Season of Motherhood: an Eleven-Week Devotional Bible Study by Melissa Kruger," *Books at a Glance*, July 13, 2015, <http://booksataglance.com/book-reviews/walking-with-god-in-the-season-of-motherhood-an-eleven-week-devotional-bible-study-by-melissa-kruger>.

11 Gloria Furman, *Glimpses of Grace* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013). For my review, see Aimee Byrd, "Glimpses of Grace,"

---

*Housewife Theologian*, June 3, 2013, <http://www.alliancenet.org/mos/housewife-theologian/glimpses-of-grace#.VlyMIYTatUQ>.

12 Jen Wilkin, *Women of the Word* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014). For my review, see Aimee Byrd, "Women of the Word: How to Study the Bible with Both Our Hearts and Our Minds," *Books at a Glance*, July 14, 2014, <http://booksataglance.com/book-reviews/women-of-the-word-how-to-study-the-bible-with-both-our-hearts-and-our-minds-by-jen-wilkin>.

13 Jonathan Edwards, *The True Believer* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2001), 104–65.

14 Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), liv–lv.

If she has read something worthwhile, she will be excited to share about it. This will help you get to know what the women in your church are interested to learn about and give you a gauge of what they are reading. It will also show them that you care about that sort of thing. And if she hasn't read anything lately, maybe she will walk away with a notion to crack something open. In that case, this is an opportunity to give a suggestion.

Perhaps some of you are reading this, wishing that you had more women readers in your church. For those who have trouble finding time and interest to read, I like to suggest Cruciform Press books. They have published a range of unimintimidating books on interesting topics. Each book is about a hundred pages or less. The church can subscribe to get their bimonthly releases and offer them in the library. Go to their website<sup>15</sup> to find books on identity in Christ, spiritual declension, miscarriage, with titles like: *Sexual Detox*, *The Company We Keep*, and *Cruciform: Living a Cross-Shaped Life*, to name a few.

Another way I like to get women into reading is through biographies. Crossway<sup>16</sup> has a wonderful series, *Theologians on the Christian Life*, on influential theological figures from history. Not only will they be reading about the lives of John Calvin, Martin Luther, Francis Schaeffer, John Owen, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, they will be learning about these ministers' teaching and benefit from its influence on the reader's own Christian life. Also, Karen Swallow Prior has written a fascinating biography on Hannah More, *Fierce Convictions*,<sup>17</sup> that will cause the reader to think about her own convictions. Another good recent biography written about a woman is *Amy Carmichael: Beauty for Ashes*<sup>18</sup> by Iain Murray.

---

15 <https://cruciformpress.com>.

16 See <https://www.crossway.org/books/?newnotable=All&series=Theologians+on+the+Christian+Life>.

17 Karen Swallow Prior, *The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More: Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2014).

18 Iain Murray, *Beauty for Ashes* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2015). For my review, see Aimee Byrd, "Amy Carmichael, 'Beauty for Ashes': A Biography, Books at a Glance, March 23,

A related complaint I often hear women make is that they are having a hard time getting into their Bible reading throughout the week. Often this is because they are lacking direction in reading. It may be helpful to recommend a devotional commentary for them. P&R's series on *Reformed Expository Commentaries*<sup>19</sup> may be helpful. Each author of these commentaries is a pastor-scholar who has first preached through the book in the pulpit ministry of his church. The commentaries are divided into short chapters that enrich daily Bible reading.

With all these resources at our fingertips, women have no reason to settle for the theologically trite studies that are marketed to them! Let's be active in showing the women in our churches that who they decide to learn from matters, not only in the pew on Sunday morning, but also in the books they are reading. ☺

Aimee Byrd is a member of New Hope Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Frederick, Maryland, married with three children, author of *Housewife Theologian and Theological Fitness*, and is a cohost on *The Mortification of Spin* podcast.

---

2015, <http://booksataglance.com/book-reviews/amy-carmichael-beauty-for-ashes-a-biography>.

19 See <http://www.prpbooks.com/search?query=Reformed+Expository+commentary&records=10>.

# ✦ Servant Witness

## Lord Defender: Jesus Christ as Apologist

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* January 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Brian L. De Jong**

Recently I attended a large conference for Evangelical theologians. Most of those in attendance came from the academic world, so I was not surprised to find myself sitting next to a seminary professor at the conference banquet.

Since this brother taught apologetics at a respected institution, I determined to pose a question. “Have you read anything that analyzes the apologetics of Jesus?” I asked. He pondered the question for a few moments, and then answered in the negative. Judging from his reaction, I wondered if the thought had ever crossed his mind. Not wanting to pursue an awkward conversation, I dropped the matter.

My new friend, however, was still thinking about my query. He seemed flummoxed by this thought, and tried to determine what I was really driving at. The conversation turned in an odd direction as he made slightly dismissive statements about “WWJD” (what would Jesus do?), supposing that was my angle.

The question was legitimate and the response typical. Has anyone seriously considered Jesus Christ as an apologist? Scour most textbooks on apologetics, and you will see what I mean. The only relevant book I have discovered is *The*

*Apologetics of Jesus* by Norman Geisler and Patrick Zukeran,<sup>2</sup> though it is of limited value.

The presuppositions of Geisler and Zukeran are revealed in the final chapter, entitled “Jesus’ Apologetic Method.” First, they state that

it is not surprising that Jesus was not a presuppositional apologist. That would have entailed beginning his apologetics with the Triune God, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and then reasoning from there.<sup>3</sup>

Shortly after this they conclude:

From the summary of the evidence presented earlier (chaps. 1–8), it is clear that if Jesus had spelled out his apologetics systematically, he would have held to a classical apologetics system. His thought contained all the elements of classical apologetics.<sup>4</sup>

Douglas Groothuis likewise pursues the thesis in an article<sup>5</sup> and two books,<sup>6</sup> although he clearly doesn’t exhaust the subject. He helpfully demonstrates how Jesus employed various forms of logical argumentation in his disputes with the Jewish authorities of his day. Yet because Groothuis also dismisses the presuppositional approach, he fails to fully appreciate the profundity of Jesus’s methodology.

To my knowledge, there has been no extended engagement with this concept by a presuppositionalist. Greg Bahnsen grappled briefly with this idea when he wrote:

---

2 Norman L. Geisler and Patrick Zukeran, *The Apologetics of Jesus: A Caring Approach to Dealing with Doubters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009). Kindle edition.

3 Geisler and Zukeran, *Apologetics of Jesus*, Kindle locations 1934–1935.

4 Geisler and Zukeran, *Apologetics of Jesus*, Kindle locations 1975–1976.

5 Douglas Groothuis, “Jesus: Philosopher and Apologist,” *Christian Research Journal* 25, no. 2 (2002), <http://www.equip.org/articles/Jesus-philosopher-and-apologist>.

6 Douglas Groothuis, *On Jesus*, Wadsworth Philosophers Series (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2003). Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

---

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=460&issue\\_id=101](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=460&issue_id=101).

In all our apologetical endeavors we must honor Christ as Lord over our thinking and argumentation. He alone must occupy this unique position of Lordship in our minds, for He must be set apart to that function.

Bahnsen then inferred that “the content and logic of our apologetic comes from the word of Christ our Lord.”<sup>7</sup> Yet, like so many others, Bahnsen failed to explore Jesus’s own apologetical theory, method and practice.

Although presuppositional and classical apologists disagree on many things, they would agree that 1 Peter 3:15 is a key passage for the task of defending the faith. Both sides of this intramural dispute stress the duty of always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks for an account of the hope that is in us. So far, so good!

Both camps typically overlook an obvious implication of Peter’s prerequisite—to sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. Without recognizing the Lordship of Christ over every aspect of human experience, we can offer but a truncated defense of Christian truth.

Specifically, Reformed apologists sometimes fail to explicitly acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the Lord of apologetics. If his sovereign authority and power extend to every square inch of the creation, then he must necessarily be the sovereign Lord of apologetical theory, method, and practice.

I believe it is time for presuppositional apologists to plumb the depths of our Savior’s apologetic—especially as it is revealed in the Four Gospels. He is the Lord Defender of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. This inquiry is needful for many reasons.

Such a study is appropriate because Jesus understood apologetics completely. His knowledge was thorough, exhaustive, and perfect, and thus he comprehended every component of apologetical theory and how those components interacted. Our Savior had an exhaustive knowledge of apologet-

ics, elenctics, and evangelism, and how these three aspects of ministry worked together to challenge unbelievers to repent and believe.

Similarly, he alone possessed a perfect apologetical methodology, and there was no inconsistency between his theory and his practice. He knew how to effectively use questions to provoke thought. He employed stories to draw people into a consideration of the truth. He added miracles as confirming signs, challenging the Jews that even if they did not believe him, they should at least believe the works that he did. Christ employed a perfect blend of history, theology, and ethics in his pedagogy. He understood the role of imagination and persuasion in dealing with weak and ignorant sinners. He was neither too strong or too weak, too soft in his approach or too hard. He also maintained the perfect balance and blend in dealing with real people.

Likewise, no one ever better comprehended the true condition of sinners. Jesus understood well the noetic effects of sin, and the darkened mind-set of fallen man. John 2:24–25 states, “But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people, and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.” Christ was never fooled by the tricks employed by his opponents to trap him in his words.

Jesus did apologetics perfectly. To paraphrase the Jews in Mark 1:22, “No one ever defended the faith like this man—with authority, not as the scribes.” Because he was sinless, he never squandered a single opportunity to demonstrate and defend the rational coherence of revealed truth. His arguments were never based on fallacies, nor were his assumptions ever inaccurate. Moreover, Jesus always maintained the proper priorities and balance in his apologetical encounters, never allowing himself to become distracted by trivialities.

We should also pursue this project because we have abundant relevant evidence within the gospel accounts. Not only were there numerous direct encounters between the Savior and unbelieving critics, but his teaching often has obvious relevance for the work of apologetics. Reviewing the gospel of Matthew alone, the following twenty

---

7 Greg Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics Stated and Defended* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision & Covenant, 2008), 26.

passages could be profitably mined for apologetical gold: Matthew 4:1–11; 9:1–8; 11:1–6; 12:9–14; 12:22–32; 12:38–42; 13:1–43; 15:1–20; 16:1–12; 16:21–23; 19:3–9; 19:16–22; 21:23–27; 21:33–46; 22:15–22; 22:23–33; 22:34–40; 22:41–46; 23:1–36; 26:57–68.

Jesus repeatedly faced opposition from the Pharisees, Sadducees, chief priests, scribes, teachers of the law, and elders of the people and even, at times, from the multitudes of his followers. We might understandably ignore this aspect of our Savior’s ministry if there were only a few scattered and inconclusive encounters. But because apologetical opportunities were increasingly numerous as his ministry unfolded, and because they fill pages of the Gospels, we ought to give them due consideration.

There are also theological reasons for examining the apologetics of Jesus. Colossians 2:3 informs us that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” This leads us to be Christocentric in our theological formulations, and rightly so. If our Savior is the touchstone for truth and the very incarnation of truth itself, we would be shortsighted to attempt to construct a theological system that failed to recognize his primacy in all things. Everything points to him, and everything flows from him—especially in theology.

Accepting that apologetics is a legitimate and vital branch of the theological encyclopedia, why would we not be Christocentric in our apologetics? Is it correct to view the Apostle Paul as the chief apologist of the church? Should Paul hold “first place” in defending the faith? Doesn’t that position belong logically and theologically to Jesus Christ? Wouldn’t Paul himself have pointed our eyes to Christ as we search for the perfect example of apologetics in practice?

I am not in any way dismissing or diminishing Paul’s fine example or the apologetical value of such passages as Acts 17:16–34. The scriptural accounts of Paul’s apologetical encounters are perfect and Christlike. I am simply suggesting that Paul should take a second place to Christ when it comes to defending the faith. This is in keeping with Paul’s own dictum in I Corinthians 11:1, “Be

imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.” Christ is the great original, and Paul’s example is authoritative insofar as he imitated Christ.

Some might object at this point, insisting that any talk of Jesus as an example is theologically liberal and smacks of moralism, à la Charles Sheldon. I would agree that treating Jesus as *merely* an example is moralistic and liberal. Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God—very God of very God. Christ’s redemptive work is far more than a mere example of good conduct. That said, 1 Peter 2:21 explicitly states, “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, *so that you might follow in his steps* (emphasis added).” The incarnate Redeemer of God’s elect does set an example in many areas for us to follow. To point to Jesus as the chief apologist for his church, and to call men to ponder and follow his example, is not inappropriate.

Another objection might be raised—namely that Jesus is so far above and beyond us that his example does us little good. While he always understood the tricks and traps of his enemies, we often misunderstand and become confused. He always knew the right thing to say, but we stumble over our words, and are plagued with faulty memories and vast ignorance. How can imperfect creatures like us learn anything from the infinite, eternal, and unchangeable Christ, perfect in all his ways? While this line of thinking may appear cogent, it leads us inescapably to an uncomfortable conclusion. If the disparity between Jesus’s perfections and our imperfections is so great as to nullify our learning from his teaching, then he was wasting his time by teaching us anything at all. Perhaps he should have come to earth solely to die on the cross, rise again, and return to heaven. Those three years of public ministry were for naught if this gap is too great to bridge.

It is here that Calvin’s insights help us greatly. In the *Institutes*, Calvin argues,

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to “lisp” in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking



do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.<sup>8</sup>

As in every other area, so also in apologetics. Jesus stoops down to us and accommodates himself to our weaknesses. He gives us a perfect pattern so that we can know how apologetics should properly function when done correctly. This divine archetype should not intimidate us, or suppress our enthusiasm, but lift us up and encourage us in our apologetical encounters.

So as to support my argument and simultaneously prime the pump, let me point out one of the more significant apologetical encounters of Jesus's earthly ministry. In Matthew 22, Jesus was ambushed by the Sadducees. Although they denied the doctrine of the resurrection (among other things), they set a trap for Jesus which presupposed the doctrine of the resurrection. In their fictional account, a man died childless, so his brother did his duty by marrying the widow in order to raise up seed for the dead brother. The second man died childless as well. This pattern continued until the seventh and final brother had died. Finally the poor woman died, which led to the question, "In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her" (Matt. 22:28).

As Groothuis argues, this clever argument put Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. By their scheme, they attempt to force him to choose between Moses's teaching on the law of levirate marriage and the concepts of resurrection and the afterlife. They suppose he cannot choose both options, since Moses taught monogamy and not polygamy. Neither could Jesus deny both options and still remain orthodox. Thus, they supposed that they had trapped him.

How did Jesus respond to this assault? What was his defense? The Lord responds with an

answer—a rational answer to their question. Yet he does not answer their question simply or naively. He argues indirectly by addressing their presuppositions. He also answers in such a way as to confront their true needs rather than their proposed problem.

The first thing he says is blunt and true: "You are wrong." He challenges the validity of their theoretical construct. Their thought process is not accurate, but is warped on the presuppositional level. How could they deny the resurrection and the afterlife, and then posit a story based on the resurrection? Furthermore, their presupposition that life after the resurrection will be largely the same as life before that great day is wrong. Such mistaken thinking must be identified, confronted, and rebuked—exactly as Jesus does!

The reason for their mistaken mind-set is two-fold—they do not understand the Scriptures or the power of God. Although they claim to be wise in their understanding of God's Word, their darkened minds have failed to grasp even the elementary truths of the Scriptures. Certainly the resurrection of the dead is one of the basic teachings of God's Word. Even the Sadducees' truncated canon taught the resurrection of the dead in such passages as Genesis 22:9–13 (cf. Heb. 11:17–19). Jesus challenged their supposed grasp of the Scriptures—surely this is a presuppositional critique of the Sadducees.

The second problem is that they failed to understand the power of God. While this could be taken in a personal sense—that they failed to experience the power of God in their own lives—it is more likely that Jesus is continuing his attack on their rejecting the resurrection and the afterlife. Scripture states and Jesus demonstrates that "God is able to raise the dead." Their theology was aberrant in not allowing for life after death, given that God can do whatsoever he chooses—even raise the dead.

Jesus next declares the truth about the state of men and women in the resurrection. They neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. He categorically refutes the minor premise of their argument by declaring

---

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, LCC, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, 1:13:1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).



invalid the assumption that resurrected people will be in a married state. The life to come will be very different from the world we now inhabit. Their supposed dilemma rests upon false foundations.

Going on, Jesus persuasively argues from the Scripture to back up his critique. In other words, he exegetically shows how the Scriptures teach life after death and support the resurrection. Reasoning from God's own statement in Exodus 3:6, Jesus draws a good and necessary inference. Since God said, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"—in the present tense—he must be considered the God of the living. Yet the historical moment when God spoke those words was hundreds of years after the patriarchs had died. How could God declare himself to be the God of those men if they were forever dead and gone? Rather, he is the God of the living as his statement proves. Therefore, those who die in faith yet live, and everyone who believes in Christ will never die.

It might be argued that the text that Jesus chose from Exodus 3 did not teach the doctrine of the resurrection per se. It explicitly establishes the fact that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were alive hundreds of years after their deaths were recorded, and their bodies buried in Machpelah. But the text doesn't "prove" their resurrection from the dead. Here again we see Jesus arguing by presupposition. As D. A. Carson points out:

The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection: both body and soul, they held, perish at death.... The Sadducees denied the existence of spirits as thoroughly as they denied the existence of angels (Acts 23:8). Their concern was therefore not to choose between immortality and resurrection but between death as finality and life beyond death, whatever its mode.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, Jesus is not supplying a proof text as evidence for the resurrection's validity, but rather giving a presuppositional challenge to the whole fabric of Sadducee theology.

---

<sup>9</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Matthew (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:461–62.

Throughout this encounter, our Savior employs the two-pronged apologetic of Proverbs 26:4–5. Jesus does not answer the foolish Sadducee according to his folly, lest he be like him. Jesus then answers the fool according to his folly, lest that Sadducee be wise in his own eyes.

Despite Geisler and Zukeran's claim to the contrary, the Lord does begin by assuming the Triune God as revealed in Holy Scripture, and then reasoning from that vantage point. This passage, and others like it, show The Lord Defender of the faith employing a thoroughly scriptural apologetic to overthrow his opponents.

It is my sincere hope that my brothers who appreciate presuppositional apologetics will take up this thesis and flesh it out to the vindication of the truth, to the benefit of the church, and to the winning of souls for the kingdom of Christ. ☉

**Brian L. De Jong** is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

# ✚ Servant History

## A Righteousness apart from the Law That Is Not against the Law: The Story and Message of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* October 2015<sup>1</sup>

by Andy Wilson

### The Story of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*

*The Marrow of Modern Divinity* is a book with an interesting history and an important message. The title is indicative of the book's content: it is filled with choice quotations from key Reformers, including Luther, Calvin, Bullinger, Ursinus, and Ames. First published in 1645 by an English bookseller/barber/surgeon named Edward Fisher, it was also at the heart of an eighteenth-century controversy in the Scottish church. In the midst of that controversy, a minister named Thomas Boston published an edition of *The Marrow* that contained extensive explanatory notes on Fisher's text. A 2009 edition published by Christian Focus presents Boston's helpful, but sometimes cumbersome, notes in a reader-friendly format.<sup>2</sup>

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=505&issue\\_id=108](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=505&issue_id=108).

2 Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, (Fearn, Ross-shire, U.K.: Christian Focus, 2009). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this article are taken from this edition. When the

*The Marrow* is written as a dialogue among four characters: Evangelista (a minister of the gospel), Nomista (a legalist), Antinomista (an antinomian), and Neophytus (a young Christian). Fisher uses the dialogue among these characters to distinguish the biblical gospel from the errors of antinomianism and legalism. Antinomianism says that God's moral law has no abiding validity for the Christian. Legalism says that a person's obedience is a contributing factor in his justification. But the gospel says that God counts his people as righteous on the basis of the righteousness of Christ alone, which is imputed to them by faith alone, and good works flow forth as the fruit of saving faith.

*The Marrow* is organized in three sections, the names of which are derived from phrases found in the Pauline epistles: the Law of Works, the Law of Faith, and the Law of Christ (see Rom. 3:27–28; 1 Cor. 9:21).<sup>3</sup> Boston explains these names as follows:

All men by nature are under the law of works; but taking the benefit of the law of faith, by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, they are set free from the law of works, and brought under the law of Christ. "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden—take my yoke upon you" (Matt. 11:28–29). (Boston, 50)

To use the terminology of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Law of Works is the covenant of works (WCF 7.2), the Law of Faith is the covenant of grace (WCF 7.3), and the Law of Christ is the moral law as a rule of life for believers (WCF 19.6). The distinction among these three "laws" is so central to the Christian faith that Fisher argues that "so far as any man comes short of the true knowledge of this threefold law, so far he comes short both of the true knowledge of God and of himself" (47).

The Marrow Controversy has been described as "one of the most significant controversies the

quote is from Boston's notes on Fisher's text, Boston's name is cited before the page number(s).

3 In a 1649 edition, Fisher added a second part to *The Marrow*, in which he expounded and applied the Ten Commandments and set forth the difference between the law and the gospel.

Church of Scotland has ever known.”<sup>4</sup> It began when the Presbytery of Auchterarder required ministerial candidates to affirm that “it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ.” While poorly worded, this statement was formulated in response to a hyper-Calvinist idea that said a person needed to demonstrate their election by showing sufficient evidence of repentance before they could know that they were eligible to receive the salvation offered in the gospel. The Presbytery of Auchterarder confronted this distortion of Calvinism by insisting that repentance does not qualify a person for God’s grace but is the fruit of God’s gracious work in a person’s life. In other words, while repentance is necessary for salvation in an *evidentiary* sense, it is not necessary for salvation in an *instrumental* sense.

In 1717, the general assembly condemned the so-called Auchterarder Creed as “unsound and detestable doctrine.” Thomas Boston, who was present at that meeting, agreed with the Presbytery of Auchterarder and responded to the church’s ruling by recommending *The Marrow* to some of the other ministers who were present. This resulted in *The Marrow* being reprinted in Scotland the following year, which then led to the general assembly’s 1720 condemnation of *The Marrow* itself as antinomian, prohibiting ministers from commending the book and instructing them to warn their people not to read it. Boston and eleven other ministers, who came to be known as the “Marrow Men,” lodged a protest against this ruling but were rebuked by the assembly in 1722. While they also protested against that action, their final protest was never dealt with by the assembly.

The Auchterarder Creed and *The Marrow* exposed the legalistic mind-set that had come to dominate the Church of Scotland in the early eighteenth century. The ensuing controversy served as a prime example of what John Newton meant when he would later write that “ignorance of the nature and design of the law is at the bottom

of most religious mistakes.”<sup>5</sup> As the Marrow Men explained, by condemning the Auchterarder Creed and *The Marrow*, the Church of Scotland was saying that “men ought only to come to Christ, the alone Saviour from sins, after they have got rid of them by repentance” (345). The Marrow Men were not denying the necessity of repentance but were insisting that repentance cannot be set forth as a condition that needs to be met before a person is entitled to lay hold of the gospel promises. Because repentance is an “evangelical grace” (WCF 15.1), a gift that is given by God (see Acts 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25), it is wrong to say that God forgives our sins on the basis of our repentance. A man will never find peace if he seeks it by reforming his life, for the simple reason that his conscience will always be accusing him of his failures. Repentance is necessary, but it cannot be the qualification for receiving God’s grace because it is a fruit of that grace.

The Marrow Men understood that while the law shows us what righteousness looks like, it cannot empower us to live righteous lives. The law can only command and evaluate. The law is good, but it is weakened by the flesh (see Rom. 8:3). It is grace, not law, that produces the fruit of righteous living in a believer’s life (see Titus 2:11–12). In Fisher’s words, “There is nothing that doth truly and unfeignedly root wickedness out of the heart of man, but only the true tranquility of the mind, or the rest of the soul in God” (262). The Marrow Controversy helped clarify that a Christian’s good works (including his initial and ongoing repentance) do not qualify him to receive God’s grace but serve as evidence of that grace at work in his life.

## **The Message of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity***

### **The Law of Works**

The message of *The Marrow* consists in its differentiation among the Law of Works, the Law

---

4 J. D. Douglas, “The Marrow Controversy,” in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 635.

---

5 John Newton, *Letters of John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960), 40.

of Faith, and the Law of Christ. The distinguishing feature of the Law of Works is that it sets forth God's moral law as the way to life. The basic principle of the Law of Works is "Do this, and you shall live." Apart from Christ, all men are under the Law of Works, which explains why we are all naturally "wired for law," when it comes to how to find favor with God. In Boston's words, "In all views which fallen man has towards the means of his own recovery, the natural bent is to the way of the covenant of works" (Boston, 35). Even Christians have a natural bent towards the Law of Works. As Evangelista explains:

Nay, where is the man or woman, that is truly in Christ, that findeth not in themselves an aptness to withdraw their hearts from Christ, and to put some confidence in their own works and doings? . . . I was a professor of religion at least a dozen of years before I knew any other way to eternal life, than to be sorry for my sins, and ask forgiveness, and strive and endeavor to fulfil the law, and keep the commandments. (41)

This legal tendency remains within us for as long as we live in this world. This is why we must always go to Christ, the fountain that can never be drained dry, instead of the hole-ridden cisterns of our own works (see Jer. 2:13).

Christians have been set free from the Law of Works by virtue of Christ's finished work on our behalf (see Rom. 6:14; 7:4–6). By putting himself under the law as a Law of Works and perfectly doing all that the law requires, Christ satisfied the demands of the law in its commanding power. By offering himself as the perfect sacrifice for sinners, Christ satisfied the demands of the law in its condemning power. Fisher explains:

God did, as it were, say to Christ, what they owe me I require all at thy hands. Then said Christ, "Lo, I come to do thy will! in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God! yea, thy law is in my heart" (Ps. 40:7–8). . . . And thus did our Lord Jesus Christ enter into the same covenant of

works that Adam did to deliver believers from it. (964–65)

This is why Paul declares that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4). The believer is no longer under the law as a Law of Works (though he remains under it as the Law of Christ). He has been set free from both the commanding and condemning power of the law insofar as it stands as a works covenant.

### The Law of Faith

The difference between the Law of Works and the Law of Faith is that in the latter the believer obtains life "not as an agent but as a patient, not by doing but by receiving" (132). Fisher sets a clear distinction between the law and the gospel in this section of *The Marrow*, explaining that the moral law was delivered at Sinai to drive the Israelites outside of themselves and away from all confidence in the Law of Works so that they would see their need for Christ. At Sinai "there is no confounding of the two covenants of grace and works; but the latter was added to the former as subservient unto it, to turn their eyes towards the promise, or covenant of grace" (Boston, 77). For Fisher and Boston, there was a sense in which the covenant of works was republished in the Sinai covenant, even though they ultimately see Sinai as an administration of the covenant of grace.

The Law of Faith allows for no blending of Christ's works with our works when it comes to the basis of our acceptance by God. Most legalists admit that they fall short of perfection, but they assume that God will reckon them righteous if they try their best and trust in Jesus to make up the difference. In Nomista's words, "God will accept the will for the deed; and wherein you come short, Christ will help you out" (110). But if Christ's obedience and our obedience have to be put together in order for us to obtain salvation, this would mean that both are imperfect. As Evangelista explains to Nomista:

If you desire to be justified before God, you must either bring to him a perfect obedience of your own, and wholly renounce Christ; or

else you must bring the perfect righteousness of Christ, and wholly renounce your own.... Christ Jesus will either be a whole Saviour, or no Saviour; he will either save you alone, or not save you at all. (111–12)

If our obedience were to be taken into account with regard to our justification, we would have no hope of being justified. While it is true that God is pleased to accept the good works of believers for Christ's sake (see WCF 16.6), our obedience is never good enough to merit God's approval.

This section of *The Marrow* explains that repentance cannot precede our coming to Christ because we have to go to Christ to receive the gift of repentance. In Boston's words, "Sinners not only may, but ought to go to [Christ] for true repentance; and not stand far off from him until they get it to bring along with them; especially since repentance, as well as remission of sin, is a part of that salvation" (Boston, 159). While it is true that both John the Baptist and Jesus summoned people to "repent and believe," they did not say this because repentance precedes faith but only because repentance is seen and evidenced before faith. Christ came to save sinners, not those who have already gotten rid of their sins through repentance. This is why Evangelista says, "Your sins should rather drive you to Christ than keep you from him" (151).

This relates to another aspect of the Marrow Controversy. Fisher and Boston insisted that in the gospel God has made a "deed of gift and grant" (144) to all of lost mankind, which means that the gospel is to be offered to all people as something that they have a right to embrace by faith. As Evangelista puts it, "Wherefore, I beseech you, do not you say, It may be I am not elected, and therefore I will not believe in Christ; but rather say, I do believe in Christ, and therefore I am sure I am elected" (145). We are called to preach the gospel indiscriminately to all people, assuring them that the salvation that it offers belongs to everyone who will lay hold of Christ by faith.

### The Law of Christ

In the section on the Law of Christ, Fisher

explains that believers remain under the law as a rule of life. The Law of Christ agrees with the Law of Works in its substance, which is the moral law as summarized in the Ten Commandments. But while the Law of Works says, "Do this, and you shall live," the Law of Christ says, "Live, and you shall do this." At conversion, the Christian receives the moral law from the hand of Christ the Mediator to be his rule of life, but this moral law does not have the power to justify or condemn. In Boston's words:

How can it do either the one or the other as such, since to be under it, as it is the law of Christ, is the peculiar privilege of believers, already justified by grace, and set beyond the reach of condemnation; according to that of the apostle.... "There is, therefore, now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). (Boston, 192)

The Law of Christ instructs believers to do good works, but in doing those good works they do not act *for* life, but *from* life.

Under the Law of Christ, believers have been set free from a legal spirit. That is, they are no longer constrained to obey God out of fear of punishment and hope of reward but out of faith, gratitude, love, and filial fear (see Ps. 130:3–4; 2 Cor. 5:14; Eph. 5:4, 20; 1 John 4:19). As Fisher points out, "It is impossible for any man to love God, till by faith he know himself beloved of God" (205). By way of contrast, a legal disposition reigns among both antinomians and legalists. While the antinomian rejects the law because he sees no point in keeping it when there is no fear of punishment or hope of reward, the legalist treats the law as a covenant of works because of his fear of punishment and hope of reward.

Fisher also deals with the connection between a Christian's good works and his assurance of salvation. While good works are necessary for salvation in an evidentiary sense, they are not necessary in an instrumental sense. Fisher develops this by noting the distinction between the direct act of faith and the reflex act of faith. The direct act of faith is the outward and objective component

of assurance. It involves looking to Christ as the source of our justification and, therefore, belongs to the essence of faith. In Fisher's words, "There is an assurance which rises from the exercise of faith by a direct act, and that is, when a man, by faith, directly lays hold upon Christ, and concludes assurance from thence" (243). The reflex act of faith is the inward and subjective component of assurance. It involves examining our hearts, with the help of the Spirit, to discern the fruits of faith that serve as the evidence of our justification. The reflex act of faith is not of the essence of faith, because it has to do with discerning the evidences of faith, and faith has to exist before its evidences can be seen. This approach to the topic of assurance is helpful because it is consistent with the fact that the believer's acceptance by God is not in any sense dependent upon his works. As Fisher puts it, "For this is certain truth, that as no good either in you, or done by you, did move [God] to justify you, and give you eternal life, so no evil in you, or done by you, can move him to take it away from you, being once given" (237).

## Conclusion

The law-gospel distinction that is set forth in *The Marrow* is by no means antinomian. Every true Christian is being conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ, and every true Christian desires to be holy. In Boston's words, "There can be no walking in Christ, without a true receiving of him; and there cannot be a true receiving of him without walking in him" (Boston, 43). That being said, the process of sanctification is not the process that we intuitively think that it would be. There is a significant degree of mystery here. Consider these thoughts from two other writers who emphasized the law-gospel distinction:

I think we may certainly conclude, that [God] would not suffer sin to remain in [his people], if he did not purpose to over-rule it, for the fuller manifestation of the glory of his grace and wisdom, and the making his salvation more precious to their souls.... [T]here are times when he is pleased to withdraw, and to

permit Satan's approach, that we may feel how vile we are in ourselves. We are prone to spiritual pride, to self-dependence, to vain confidence, to creature attachments, and a train of evils. The Lord often discovers to us one sinful disposition by exposing us to another.<sup>6</sup>

There is a mystery in God's method, in that he often increases grace by our sense and sight of our infirmities; God's children never hate their corruption more than when they have been overcome by it. Then they know that there is some hidden corruption that they did not discern before and that they had better take notice of.... We must be justified and stand righteous before God by Christ's absolute righteousness, having experience of our imperfect righteousness.<sup>7</sup>

*The Marrow* helps us to see that while the Christian is obligated to obey the Law of Christ, he is never any less dependent upon Christ for righteousness than he was when he first believed. In John Newton's words, the mature Christian is one who, "having found again and again the vanity of all other helps, he is now taught to go to the Lord *at once* for 'grace to help in every time of need.' Thus he is strong, not in himself, but in the grace that is in Christ Jesus."<sup>8</sup> ☺

*Andy Wilson is the pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Laconia, NH.*

---

6 Newton, 19–20, 22.

7 Richard Sibbes, *Glorious Freedom: The Excellency of the Gospel above the Law* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), 159–60.

8 Newton, 24.



# ✦ Servant Humor

## *From the Back Pew*

Eutyclus II continues the tradition of Eutyclus I, Ed Clowney’s pen name in the initial issues of *Christianity Today* (1956–1960). As Clowney explained in his later anthology, *Eutyclus (and His Pin)*: “Eutyclus was summoned to his post as a symbol of Christians nodding, if not on the window-sill, at least in the back pew.” Like his namesake, Eutyclus II aims at “deflating ecclesiastical pretense, sham and present-day religiosity.” This nom de plume will remain a cover for this ecclesiastical sleuth—to maintain his anonymity, and thus his freedom to poke fun.

## Stooping and Lispng

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* December 2015<sup>1</sup>

by Eutyclus II

I have been an officer in the OPC for over two decades, which means I have done my share of Sunday school teaching. It’s part of the job description. I have taught on books of the Bible, on doctrinal standards, theology, church history, you name it. And all of this to adults, of course.

But about a year ago I ventured into unfamiliar territory—teaching four- and five-year-olds. What possessed me, you ask? For one, I had a growing conviction that the men of our church should pitch in to teach the young’uns. Also, I thought it would be good stewardship for me to familiarize myself with the curriculum that

our denomination promotes. Finally, we had a shortage of teachers, and I thought that an elder condescending to take on this lowly task might set a good example for others. The idea struck many in my church as comically implausible. Not least my adult children, who long suspected that my patience level with children in the church registered fairly close to the standard set by W. C. Fields.

Despite my impressive Sunday school curriculum vitae, I underestimated what was in store for me. I can’t say I wasn’t warned by the teacher’s manual from Great Commission Publications, which gave me plenty of warning: the kids in my class would have only five- to ten-minute attention spans (a wild overstatement, I am convinced), they are literal and concrete thinkers, they are curious and talkative (you think?), and they tire very easily (or would that refer to the teacher?).

Still, I was convinced I had this covered. After all, there were just five kids in the class. The superintendent even secured for me an assistant, whom I tried to wave off so as not needlessly to burden. “No imposition at all,” she insisted, “I am happy to help you. Oh, and yes, you will need me.” Five minutes into my first class, a young pupil announced it was time for her bathroom break. My assistant took her hand, smiled at me, and escorted her out of the classroom.

While the teacher’s manual promised that I would be “enlightened and enriched” in this experience, I set a different goal: survival. Compared to teaching adults—I can yak about anything for forty-five minutes—this was work. One problem was the curriculum, which was either feast or famine—too ambitious or too restrained in its combination of teaching and activities. So I learned critical clock management techniques. With time running out, I employ a hurry-up offense through the lesson with the precision of a Tom Brady. With time to kill, there is always another chorus of a song or a review of catechism questions. And if I am really desperate, I pull out the crayons. What kid doesn’t like to draw?

An experienced teacher underscored for me the importance of addressing students at their level. So I consciously make efforts to bend down

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=525&issue\\_id=110](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=525&issue_id=110).

to make eye contact. Those ungainly and ungraceful exercises reinforce the bitter reality that knee replacement is in my future.

I committed my share of rookie mistakes. One day I set out to teach the kids a song to the tune of a familiar nursery rhyme. I practiced diligently the night before, to the amusement of my wife. But when it came time to lead the singing, I could not recall the tune. My co-teacher drew a blank as well, which prompted one five-year-old to observe, “Well, this is awkward.”

A particular struggle was to keep lessons focused on one simple takeaway every week. Something like, “God created a wonderful world that we see and touch and smell” or “God gives us grace to trust and obey him.” I strive to keep my words simple and my sentences short. This is hard to do. But what is not hard is telling whether I am getting through. Adult students disguise their boredom. Kids can’t hide it.

If the challenges proved daunting (and don’t even get me started on the crafts), the rewards were even greater than I imagined. “Hi, Mr. Eutyclus!” (or something similar) my pupils holler when they see me every Sunday. Two weeks into our class, a conversation with a friend before evening worship was interrupted when a young girl ran up to me and gave me a big hug that nearly knocked me over. My friend’s jaw dropped, and I proudly explained that she was among my “posse.” I image these kids a decade or so from now, nervously seated before the session and stumbling to make a credible profession of faith. I am heartened to think that one improbably friendly face will serve to put their minds at ease.

More than shaping me as a teacher, my tenure among the preschoolers has prompted reflections on my life as a learner. The things I share in common with these young saints were brought home to me in public worship a few weeks ago. A paraphrase of Psalm 113 offered this thanks to the Lord:

Yet I may love thee too, O Lord,  
Almighty that thou art,  
for thou hast stooped to ask of me

the love of my poor heart.

This is the doctrine of accommodation on which Calvin has written so eloquently. “For who even of slight intelligence does not understand,” he asks in his *Institutes*, “that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness” (1.13.1).

Stooping and lisping. Short sentences and simple takeaways. Isn’t that the essence of verbal revelation? If you study textbooks on Christian education, you will find one consistent theme—Jesus is the “master teacher.” I have no argument with that label, but I do with the logic behind it. Explanations range from Jesus’s way of confounding the wise to exposing the proud, or confronting stubbornness and pride, or appealing to emotions. These explanations only serve to flatter ourselves, and they overlook the obvious: Jesus knew how to stoop and lisp. ☺

# ✦ Servant Reading

## *Briefly Noted*

### Inventing the Individual

by *Larry Siedentop*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* November 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Richard M. Gamble**

*Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, by Larry Siedentop. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014, 434 pages, \$35.00.

The accepted narrative sees political liberalism as the triumph of Enlightenment secularism over reactionary Christianity. Over against this, Oxford historian Larry Siedentop argues in favor of the religion of Jesus and Paul as the true origin of human emancipation from the constraints of antiquity. Modern liberty owes its existence to *belief*, he argues, not to *unbelief*. Christian teaching of “individual moral agency” gradually produced our now-familiar world of human agency, rights, equality, the private sphere, the inner claims of conscience, and political and social democracy. These are achievements under assault by Islamic fundamentalism and the West needs a moral rearmament of the kind available through a renewed European and American “self-understanding” that recovers Christianity’s place as the source of liberalism and secularism. After the first century, the new faith

slowly eroded and replaced the ancient world built on family, clan, status, and aristocracy with the modern world of the state and the individual.

Siedentop’s story of “becoming” requires him to reinvent Christianity into a revolutionary movement of a kind the Apostle Paul (who gets the credit) would never have recognized. Siedentop’s version of Christianity sets the West on the road to universal human freedom, the brotherhood of man, the fatherhood of God, and the “new self” of the autonomous human will. Although he mentions Immanuel Kant only once, Siedentop projects a Kantian reading of Christianity, the individual, and morality back across the centuries in his search for origins. This is an ambitious, sweeping, and dramatic survey of two thousand years of history populated with generations always standing on the “brink” of some great change. He tries, unsuccessfully, to preempt complaints about the deeply embedded Whiggism of his story. On page after page, he indulges in a reading of the past where precursors “lurk” and “foreshadow” the modern West, where “anticipations” of the future await their moment, where revolutions lie just around the corner. By approaching the past at every step as a place “pregnant with the future” and where “seeds” lay hidden except to the eye of the discerning philosophical historian, Siedentop guarantees that neither he nor his reader ever confronts Christianity, or the past in general, on its own terms. This is teleological history that instrumentalizes Christianity for the purposes of present action and not for the purposes of cultivating historical consciousness. ☉

**Richard M. Gamble** is Anna Margaret Ross Alexander professor of history and political science and associate professor of history at Hillsdale College in Hillsdale, Michigan. He serves as a Ruling Elder at Hillsdale Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=515&issue\\_id=109](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=515&issue_id=109).

# ✦ Servant Reading

## Book Reviews

### Renaissance

by Os Guinness

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* January 2015<sup>1</sup>

by William Edgar

*Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Dark the Times*, by Os Guinness. Downers Grove: IVP, 2014, 187 pages, \$16.00, paper.

The astonishing breadth of Os Guinness's knowledge of history, trends, and biblical truth is only exceeded by the boldness, indeed the urgency, of his proposal: "These bones can live" (Ezek. 37:5–6). Why would an appeal to God's resurrection power be bold or urgent? Because of what Guinness describes in the pages of the book. The first chapter appeals for us to recognize our "Augustinian Moment." Just as Augustine was active during the collapse of the Roman Empire, so we are alive at a time of transition, living as we do "in the twilight of five hundred years of Western dominance of the world" (22). Guinness argues that the West has become post-Christian. It is characterized by "advanced modernity." Despite the unquestioned advantages of science, globalization, and technology that advanced modernity brings to us, these very advances, with their Christian underpinnings

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=461&issue\\_id=101](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=461&issue_id=101).

gone, have been powerful instruments for the secularization of the church. The salt and light that the church once brought to civilization have been removed. What about the Global South? Whereas there is extraordinary growth of the Christian presence in the Global South, for which we may be very grateful, the liability there is that the impact of the Christian faith is often "a mile wide and an inch deep" (36). And because modernity will inevitably steamroll its way into the Global South, the church there may be ill-prepared to face its distorting power.

Guinness has described the wet blanket of modernity in several of his previous books. Here he underscores the fatal temptation of evaluating things with "measurable outcomes." He quotes former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg as saying, "In God we trust; all others bring metrics" (39). As a seminary professor, I am particularly sensitive to this critique, because in the years since I began my career I have seen various institutions whose putative call is to train ministers increasingly subject themselves to trends, measurable goals, large administrative staffs, strategic plans, and ever-improving computer technology. Guinness never suggests these are bad in themselves. But he states the obvious: you can measure the enormous tonnage of sheep and oxen sacrificed in Solomon's temple, but not what made God say he was sick of them (43).

How can all this change? The simple answer is the gospel, God's power unto salvation. The historical verification of this is what Guinness calls the two great missions to the West. They were completely unlikely, even impossible to human eyes. But they happened. The first was the conversion of the Roman Empire, followed by the taming of European barbarians by the cross of Christ. At the "Augustinian Moment," the Christian faith was moving from becoming merely legal (under Constantine) to becoming predominant (in the early Middle Ages). The second was when the "Irish saved civilization," in the language of Thomas Cahill. St. Columbanus and many others who loved the Bible rekindled the nearly extinguished light of culture to the European Continent. Eventually

followed the Reformation, the Awakenings, and the reforms against slavery, poor health care, and racism, led by believers such as William Wilberforce, Florence Nightingale, and Martin Luther King Jr. (49–50).

Guinness challenges us to engage in a third mission to the West. Such a mission would address issues such as secularization, pollution, civil disharmony, consumerism, Islamist extremism, and so many more. In short, Guinness calls us to look for a renaissance. He carefully explains that he is not inviting us to a return to the Renaissance which began at the *quattrocento*, which, though glorious, was only partly Christian. He likes this term because it literally means *rebirth*. If we so chose we could use other equivalents, such as renewal, reformation, restoration, revival (29). One of the great virtues of this book is that the author does not give us a method on producing a Christian culture. In fact, the kingdom of God most often leads to cultural benefits as a by-product rather than from a direct program (107). This reviewer would have been interested to know if Os Guinness has ever spent time seriously interacting with Abraham Kuyper, Klaas Schilder, or other so-called neo-Calvinists. While some of his emphases strongly resemble them, his language is less directly theological, and certainly less philosophical than theirs, which is not to say it is less learned.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the book is its balance between a devastating critique of modern cultural trends and a humble dependence on the Lord. He constantly warns against triumphalism, or trying to achieve results by strategies and five-year plans. He points out that the gospel came to Europe not by missions tactics, but by special supernatural intervention. “When that unknown rabbi (Paul) crossed unheralded from Troas to Philippi at the orders of the Spirit of God, it made more impact on world history than even the great sea battle of Actium a few miles away, the battle that settled the fate of the Roman Empire after the assassination of Julius Caesar” (102). This is not to say we do nothing, or “let go and let God.” Rather, what we *do* is to live faithfully before God, to respond against injustice, to create beautiful music,

lift up the family, fight for life, etc.

Os Guinness proclaims *hope* throughout this text. God will not forget his purposes. The darkest hour is just before dawn. If we look first to be living out the priorities of God’s kingdom, we can then wait for God to move. How and when he will do it are not easy to say, nor should we expend a significant energy doing so. But he will. The last chapter in the book is “An Evangelical Manifesto.” The brief document is a call to Evangelicals (in this case, particularly American Evangelicals) to reassert their proper biblical identity in the light of the various confusions and corruptions which plague them. The document is a robust appeal to be truly faithful to Christ as he is presented in the Scriptures. He asks that we be neither privatized nor politicized (171). He asks that the public square be civil, not “naked” (173). He asks that we follow the way of Jesus, not of Constantine, particularly in the light of the two great threats of *coercive secularism* on the one side and *religious extremism* on the other (174).

One added bonus in the book is that each chapter ends with a powerful prayer and then with discussion questions. A good use of it, thus, could be in small groups, which could read a chapter, pray over the issues, and apply the contents to their lives using the discussion questions. This marvelous book represents a summation of the years of study, reflection, and engagement that Os Guinness has lived. I would urge everyone concerned about the trends in the world, in the church, and in their souls, to read it and find themselves galvanized by Christian hope. ☺

**William Edgar** is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and serves as Professor of Apologetics and Ethics at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

# China's Reforming Churches

*edited by Bruce P. Baugus*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* January 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Mitchell R. Herring**

*China's Reforming Churches: Mission, Polity, and Ministry in the Next Christendom*, edited by Bruce P. Baugus. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2014, xii + 336, \$20.00, paper.

*China's Reforming Churches* grew out of the China's Reforming Churches Conference, held in College Park, Maryland, January 2–4, 2013. It is an engrossing read not only for those concerned about China, or even missiology, but also for those committed to the Reformed faith and how its distinctives impact church and society in the unique historical, political, and cultural context of China. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the Reformed faith is universally relevant in carrying out the Great Commission. Right from the introduction, the editor's deep conviction comes across concerning the "rich biblical and theological resources of the Reformed tradition and Presbyterian polity" (1), a theme which is repeated in various places throughout the text.

There has been a dramatic increase in the number of Christian believers in China over the last few decades. Part of that growth has been built on the work of early Presbyterian and Reformed missions in China, which is covered early in the book. This is a necessary and helpful inclusion, as this history has tended to get lost in the accounts of Chinese church growth during the last several decades. Even the history of earlier periods has often focused, not without merit, on the labors of Chinese evangelists and church leaders, such as

Wang Mingdao and John Sung, as well as those of Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission. But how many of us were aware, for instance, that the term "Three-Self," the government organization of officially recognized and supervised churches since the early 1950s, actually originated with nineteenth-century Presbyterian missionary to China John Nevius, as a sound model for indigenous church planting?

The book further offers an overview of Presbyterian and Reformed work in China today. Western misconceptions (and there are quite a few) about the Chinese church and its political and cultural context are dealt with. We see the distinctives of the Reformed faith spelled out regarding their relevance to the "on the ground" experience of Chinese church and culture today, particularly as they impact the life of the church and offer authentic biblical witness to the broader culture around her, under an authority that is still officially atheist. A particularly fascinating account of this experience is a conversation with two of China's leading reformers—one of whom is known to me—as they speak of the current state of church and society, the role of Reformed theology, efforts to develop an indigenous Presbyterian church polity, and the impact they foresee of Reformed Christianity on the wider society.

Another theme stressed throughout the book is that of great challenge and difficulty, yet through which there is also much opportunity, evident in the essay on the endemic social conditions in China today. The book contains several essays on the importance of church government, including a thoughtful study and insightful reflection on the Council of Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15, from which observations are drawn with implications not only for the church in China, but everywhere.

Finally, there is an overview of Christian publishing and theological education in China, both areas with which I am involved. It is suggested that, notwithstanding the establishment of Christian schools and hospitals of a bygone era, past neglect of Christian publishing, i.e., the publishing of solid, substantial books in Chinese, has cost the church dearly. Surprisingly, the great-

1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=459&issue\\_id=101](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=459&issue_id=101).



est obstacle to such publishing today is not the government, but lack of funds. What is needed is both accurate translation of solid theological works and the development of indigenous scholarship. The rise of Reformed “house-church” seminaries, while still in a formative stage, is an encouraging development to this end, as well as for the building of the church, yet not without its own restrictions and challenges. The authors emphasize that opportunities are before us now; and because of the political and social climate in China, things could change very quickly. Yet Chinese church reformers are growing stronger and are gently and respectfully pressing forward.

In summary, not all that was presented at the conference is presented here, and not all presented here was presented at the conference. The book is offered, however, as an extension to the conference, especially valuable to those who desired but were unable to attend, as well as a summary for those who were present. The standout themes are clear and relevant to all: the rich biblical and theological resources of the Reformed tradition and Presbyterian polity; circumstances that are at once formidable barriers and unprecedented opportunities; the need for biblical church polity in an environment of rapid increase in the number of believers, as essential for church growth and the work of the Great Commission; and finally, the ultimate goal: the long-term development of the church and church leaders, and the indigenization of Reformed Christianity in China and throughout the world.

God has revealed the eternal truth of the gospel and mandated a corresponding polity for the church. Yet, as one of the contributors put it, “our aim is not constitutional regularity” or “mechanical perfection” for its own sake. These have no power in themselves to prosper the church. This is the Spirit’s work. “It is to him, not to procedures, we must look as the source of the church’s life and blessing” (242), even as we seek to be faithful to God’s revealed truth, which the Holy Spirit has authored. And Baugus concludes:

Presbyterian and Reformed folk strive to

advance Reformed theology in China—or anywhere else in the world—only because we believe it is the purest and fullest exposition of the gospel of Jesus Christ that the church has yet achieved.... We do not hope to see presbyterianism established in China out of petty sectarian pride, but out of a desire to see God glorified through a deeper and fuller enjoyment of Him and His steadfast love for us in Jesus Christ. (306)

For me, there is deep joy in being a small part of this transcendent enterprise on behalf of his beloved servants laboring throughout that great land. And this book, as I read it, only served to sharpen that sense. ☺

**Mitchell R. Herring** is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church serving as the senior pastor of the Rochester Chinese Christian Church in Penfield, New York.

# Biblical Interpretation and Doctrinal Formulation in the Reformed Tradition: Essays in Honor of James De Jong

*edited by Arie C. Leder and Richard A. Muller*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* February 2015<sup>1</sup>

by Martin Emmrich

*Biblical Interpretation and Doctrinal Formulation in the Reformed Tradition: Essays in Honor of James De Jong*, edited by Arie C. Leder and Richard A. Muller. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2014, xvii + 338 pages, \$25.00, paper.

How has the Reformed tradition come to be? More precisely, given its commitment to theologically precise formulation, how can its trajectory from biblical exegesis to dogmatic statement be traced? This Festschrift of fourteen articles, in honor of James De Jong, attempts to provide an eclectic answer to the inquiry by examining a group of theologians and philosophers spanning a chronological spectrum from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. It is impossible to provide a fair appraisal of all the essays, the first of which consists of an appreciation of De Jong's life and work as a theologian and president of Calvin Theological Seminary. A brief synopsis of some of the contributions will have to suffice.

The introductory honorific essay is followed by four studies relating to Calvin. Joel Beeke's investigation into Calvin's notion of the doctorate

as a proper ecclesiastical office, yielding a fourfold ministry of pastor, teacher (cf. Eph. 4:11, "pastor and teacher"), elder, and deacon, explores the Reformer's influence on the Dutch Reformed tradition. The article raises questions of acute relevance for the contemporary Reformed church, which harbors a schizophrenic attitude regarding the doctorate. Is a professor of a theological institution a free agent in the kingdom of God, not unlike an NHL star, or does such a person hold a formal ecclesiastical teaching office with all the responsibilities and accountability that such a calling implies? In our contemporary Reformed circles, we are neither here nor there, failing to adopt a formal teaching office, yet lacking the courage to jettison the notion completely. Beeke's article offers a fine reminder that the doctoral office remains firmly anchored in biblical exegesis, such as Calvin's, and that despite its decline in the Dutch tradition and elsewhere, the Reformed church would do well in resolving one of its current problems.

Muller's essay interacts with Bouwisma's assessment of Calvin's sermons and commentaries. Contrary to Bouwisma, Muller finds Calvin's sermons ripe with amplifications and rhetorical extrapolations, while his commentaries evince a notably sparse and utilitarian style. Calvin's sermons show his awareness of the needs of a less educated audience, which translates into a homiletical rhetoric that edifies the hearers. Arguably, as Muller points out, his sermonic rhetoric can be compared to that of the biblical text itself, insofar as its patterns of speech and argument often lack the most flowery and eloquent oration for the sake of a clear communication of the divine message. In particular, preachers of the Word, who may be tempted to sound smart and educated rather than to set aside their own agenda for the benefit of the church, can emulate Calvin's practice.

For most readers, "Calvin's Lectures on Zechariah: Textual Notes" (Al Wolters), may only be of antiquarian interest, inasmuch as the essay deals predominantly with textual criticism. This is also a contribution that could come with the warning, "Don't read if your Latin is rusty," not to speak of those who never had the privilege of earning a

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=471&issue\\_id=102](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=471&issue_id=102).

*Latinum.*

Interesting exegetical details are reviewed in Stanglin's study of Calvin's interpretation of the "Maccabean Psalms." Stanglin places the Reformer in a time-honored tradition reaching from Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 340) to the Antiochene Father Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) and to several early and late medieval exegetes who assigned a Maccabean *Sitz im Leben* for Psalms 44, 74, 79, 85, 106, 123, and 129. Yet, although Calvin followed in the steps of his predecessors on a number of counts (most notably Psalm 44), he also disagreed with them, refusing to ascribe any of the said psalms to a tenth-century author. He believed them to be the products of the second-century Jewish community under the persecution of Antiochus IV. Such a late date raises the question of the so-called "silent period" or the cessation of the prophetic Spirit since the fifth century BC. Calvin based his conclusion on a strict grammatical exegesis, as he saw it. The use of the past tense, so Calvin says, indicates that the text relates a past experience, not a future event. Calvin's argument cannot be ruled out, but there are biblical examples, such as the prophets Daniel and Zechariah (think only of Daniel 11), who did predict future events in virtually historical terms. It, therefore, seems that his exegesis is ruled as much by the presupposition that predictive prophecy cannot or does not contain concrete historical details as it is by grammatical analysis. The presupposition itself can be traced to the Reformer's concern for application. If a Psalm relates what appears to be an actual life experience (as in the Maccabean persecution), a proper identification of the *Sitz im Leben* is the necessary foundation for applying the text to the reader's own situation. Calvin's concern for proper historical grounding when seeking to contextualize a biblical text remains an important hermeneutical principle. The question is whether Calvin or his predecessors have succeeded in demonstrating a Maccabean background for the Psalms in question.

Mark J. Larson's contribution deals with the Italian Reformed theologian Peter Vermigli's (1499–1562) position that a just war has three

constituents—proper authority, a just cause, and right intention. Vermigli is responsible for developing Reformed political thought in the sixteenth century, a time in which the question of the church's authority in relation to the state was heavily debated. Vermigli's work, Larson argues, shows that the Protestant Reformation did not hasten the decline of Scholasticism, as it draws on Aquinas's Thomist tradition.

I wish to highlight two of the remaining essays. Jay Shim's early seventeenth-century treatment of the interpretation of Christ's descent into Hades is of great interest because the Apostle's Creed's claim, "He (Jesus Christ) descended into hell," is one that the average church member hears often enough in our services. It stands to reason that not everyone who is used to reciting it has a clear understanding of what it means. The article reveals how nuanced the understanding of seventeenth-century theologians (Broughton, Lightfoot, Ussher) was regarding this article of the faith. Bringing to bear linguistic, textual, and cultural considerations, they were able to afford an interpretation that differed greatly from the dogma of the Catholic Church. Hades (the underlying Greek term for "hell") was, thus, not seen as a descent into the realm of the damned, but as the first act of exaltation: in his soul Christ, having paid the penalty for our sins, entered paradise, while his body was laid in the grave. Hence, Jesus' promise to the thief on the cross, "Today you shall be with me in paradise," meant what it said.

Finally, John Bolt's article chronicles a tragic case of ecclesiastical failure in three acts from the twentieth century. "Herman Hoeksema Was Right" revisits the CRC's 1924 Synod ruling on common grace. It was the common grace controversy that eventually led to the suspension of Herman Hoeksema by Classis Grand Rapids East. It would be unfair to say that the essay shows Reformed church polity at its worst; rather, it serves as a stark reminder that even with the best of intentions (which must be assumed on both sides of the common grace conflict), the truth does not always win. This last of the contributions, thus, demonstrates that failure to ground dogmatic construction

in sound biblical exegesis is a tale of one bad turn deserving another. May our Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on us! ☺

**Martin Emmrich** is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church serving as the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Corvallis, Oregon.

# Ordinary

by Michael Horton

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* March 2015<sup>1</sup>

by Dale Van Dyke

*Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World*, by Michael Horton. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014, 221 pages, \$11.76, paper.

*Ordinary*, by Michael Horton, is well worth the read. In an age that lauds the new, the radical and revolutionary, Horton extols the virtue, grace, and sustaining power of “ordinary” believers, nurtured by the ordinary means of grace, for truly meaningful and fruitful lives. While the title and cover appear to be a direct rebuke of David Platt’s widely read *Radical*, Horton never mentions him by name and casts a positive vision and tone throughout the book—even as he skillfully exposes the false motives and assumptions behind “radical” Christianity.

In keeping with his “Pilgrim Theology,” Horton contends that a “radical” faith is not a sustainable faith over the long haul. The central theme of the book is that God intends to perfect his saints

and accomplish his kingdom purposes through ordinary things: ordinary means of grace, ordinary ministers and ministries, and the ordinary, largely unnoticed acts of common saints.

This book is dedicated to all of the pastors, elders, and deacons whose service is as unheralded as it is vital to sustainable discipleship; to all of the spouses and parents who cherish ordinary moments to love and be loved, and to all of those believers who consider their ordinary vocations in the world as part of God’s normal way of loving and serving neighbors right under their nose each day. (27)

The book consists of two parts, roughly 100 pages each. Part One, “Radical and Restless,” analyzes the mistaken assumptions and societal influences behind the “radical” Christian movement. Horton highlights the contemporary infatuation with excellence, the expectation of quick, measurable results, and our society’s obsession with youth. Horton has a unique ability to read societal trends and connect sociological dots to provide helpful insights concerning the forces affecting the church today. For instance, the chapter on “The Young and the Restless” (chapter 3) should be required reading for any youth pastor or leader. Chapter 4, “The Next Big Thing,” is a helpful reflection on evangelicalism’s common infatuation with novelty, which is contrasted with the Reformed emphasis on the ordinary means of grace.

Horton is very good at expressing the extraordinary power and adventure of ordinary church:

Now, that doesn’t mean that what happens at church through these ordinary means in ordinary services of ordinary churches on ordinary weeks is itself ordinary. What happens is quite extraordinary indeed. First and foremost, God shows up. He judges and justifies, draws sinners and gathers his sheep to his Son by his Word and Spirit. He unites them to Christ, bathes them and feeds them, teaches and tends them along their pilgrim way. He expands his empire even as he deepens it. It is through this divinely ordained event that “the

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=475&issue\\_id=103](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=475&issue_id=103).

powers of the age to come” penetrate into the darkest crevices of this passing evil age (Heb. 6:3–6). (83)

In Part Two, “Ordinary and Content,” Horton argues that we need to “run from the frantic search for ‘something more’ to ‘something more *sustainable*.’ . . . We need to be content with the gospel as God’s power for salvation” (126). These chapters outline God’s methods and means of building his church. The analogy of the church as God’s garden, needing common fertilizing and pruning, is very good. In contrast to the radical, individual, and novel approaches to the Christian life, Horton highlights the common, communal, and confessional nature of true personal and societal transformation. Though most of what Horton says here will be familiar to Reformed pastors, I found it to be a very encouraging and motivating reminder of God’s extraordinary work through our “ordinary” gospel ministry. When the “super-pastor” down the road seems to be getting all the press and enjoying all the success, “ordinary” pastors will find food for the soul in these pages.

*Ordinary* is not a perfect book. It is a bit repetitive and wanders off the track from time to time. Horton also, at times, tries to establish principles from the thin air of personal preference. For instance, he argues that a multisite church, where the message is broadcast via video, “runs against the grain of the incarnation” (116) since the pastor isn’t present in flesh and blood. There may be valid reasons one could argue against the multisite church trend, but surely this isn’t one of them. I don’t see how Paul’s epistolary ministry could not be charged with the same incarnation infraction. Horton also argues that John 10:27, “My sheep hear my voice *and I know them*” (his emphasis), means that pastors need to be able to personally know each of their sheep. Practically, this would mean that no local church should grow beyond the capacity of the pastor to remember names. Is that really what Jesus meant to convey in John 10:27? The imperfections of *Ordinary* are, however, in an ironic way, evidence of the main thesis: God uses imperfect sermons (and books) from im-

perfect men to accomplish his extraordinary gospel purposes. And to that end, *Ordinary* is useful.

The strength of *Ordinary* is that it is a hopeful and grace-filled book. As it calls us away from our self-righteous, guilt-laden, and soul-wearying efforts to do more and be more for Jesus, it invites us into the wonderful good news of God’s own work accomplished for us and in us. We receive a kingdom rather than build one. We participate in God’s economy of grace—where we delight in God’s goodness and share his lavish gifts—rather than labor in the joyless, self-justifying economy of merit with its abundance of guilt and scarcity of rest.

There is a great need in the church for this message. So many believers (including pastors) wrestle with a lingering sense of inadequacy and failure. The truth is, we aren’t the Christians we want to be. There is a long list of things we aren’t doing well: evangelism, discipleship, family worship, etc. In our discouragement we can easily lose sight of the things that Christ values: resting in his finished work and freely loving others. Maybe all you did today was make lunch for your kids and offer an encouraging word to a friend. You smiled at a harassed mother in the store, accomplished some needed tasks in reliance on God’s grace and strength, and offered a prayer of tired thanksgiving at the end of an ordinary day—and the Father was pleased. That’s good news for harried Christians.

*Ordinary* could work fairly well for a small-group study, though I would take several chapters at a time. It has a few questions at the end of each chapter to generate discussion. ☺

**Dale Van Dyke** is the pastor of Harvest Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Wyoming, Michigan.

# On the Brink

by Clay Werner

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*  
Online March 2015<sup>1</sup>

by Stephen Magee

*On the Brink: Grace for the Burned-Out Pastor*, by Clay Werner. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014, 143 pages, \$12.99, paper.

This book is a call to ministerial endurance through the power of the cross of Christ. In two sentences from the opening paragraphs, Werner gives a good introduction to the message of this honest volume. The first is about the cross: “One look at Jesus hanging on the cross will teach you that if you make a conscious decision to deeply and sacrificially love sinners, it’s going to hurt something awful” (13). The second leads pastors to the cross again for the hope and strength they need to stay at their posts and even flourish in the Lord’s service: “One look at Jesus will also teach you that if God loved us even to the point of death on a cross, he’ll provide strength to endure and hope to persevere through the incredible and humanly impossible calling of loving *fellow* sinners” (13).

The author, a pastor in the PCA, makes it clear that the lessons that he writes about have been learned through personal adversity. In the midst of his own struggles, Werner received the help of trusted advisers. He also profited from the heritage of ministerial reflection handed down to the church from prior generations. Werner’s central message is the important truth that both pastors and their congregations need to find the “remedy of the cross” (73) as they seek to serve the Lord together. Their only help is in the Lord who not only died for his people, but also rose from the dead.

The truths of the Christian gospel are richly

illustrated and presented in an engaging way for suffering servants of our Messiah who may be struggling in the exercise of their calling. Though the author focuses especially on the anguish of conflict among church leaders, his message is also very applicable to those who are weary in well-doing because of other painful trials that they have faced in their lives.

The first part of the book presents the reader with the familiar territory of real pastoral life. From the experience of Moses to the writings of well-known contemporary pastors, the troubles common to the ministerial calling are outlined plainly. A brief consideration of living out the theology of the cross of Christ (based on Calvin’s *Institutes*, 3:8, “Bearing the Cross, A Part of Self-Denial”) provides the transition for weary servants of God who may wonder whether the pressures of church leadership today are just too much to bear. The second half of the book uses this good “theology of the cross” to direct all of the Lord’s children toward the power of the resurrection as they pursue fruitful ministerial opportunities in the Lord’s vineyard today.

The final chapter of the book reminds all who would stay in the battle that they need the strength that can only come from considering the faithfulness of almighty God. Because “the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever” (e.g. Ps. 138:8), pastors can honestly face the worst conflicts and the most wrenching personal providences with fresh courage. No experience in their lives is beyond the redeeming power of the Savior’s blood. No one needs to hide in shame or despair because of their troubles. God is able to give his ministers the grace of renewed faith and repentance. He can help them through their darkest hours by his Word and Spirit. ☺

**Stephen Magee** is the pastor of Exeter Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Exeter, New Hampshire.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=476&issue\\_id=103](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=476&issue_id=103).



# The Psalter Reclaimed

## by Gordon Wenham

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* March 2015<sup>1</sup>

by David A. Booth

*The Psalter Reclaimed*, by Gordon Wenham. Wheaton: Crossway, 2013, 205 pages, \$15.99, paper.

The production of a new Psalter-Hymnal underscores the obligation we share as ministers and elders to explain why we are singing the Psalms while rightly interpreting them to God's people. This is no easy task. We need a reliable guide who will show us not only why the Psalms have always been treasured by God's people but also how they can be used to shape our piety and worship in the twenty-first century. Ideally, it would be a non-technical work, yet attuned to the very best historical and biblical scholarship. It would be a volume that enlightens our understanding while inspiring us to draw nearer to our Lord in both public and private worship. This is that book.

Wenham begins by quoting the Scottish politician Andrew Fletcher: "Let me write the songs of a nation, and I care not who writes its laws." Wenham continues:

[Fletcher's] comment is the more intriguing in that as a member of the Scottish parliament he was very active in promoting legislation. Yet he recognized the power of song to capture and mold people's imaginations and attitudes to life. This insight, though, seems to have eluded most biblical scholars. The significance of the Psalms for biblical ethics has been surprisingly overlooked. (13)

The faith and piety of our congregations is formed more through the psalms, hymns, and songs that

we sing than through our official catechisms. Therefore, it makes sense to include the singing of God's Word as a regular part of our corporate worship.

The book is divided into eight fast-moving chapters: (1) What Are We Doing Singing the Psalms? (2) Praying the Psalms, (3) Reading the Psalms Canonically, (4) Reading the Psalms Messianically, (5) The Ethics of the Psalms, (6) The Imprecatory Psalms, (7) Psalm 103: The Song of Steadfast Love, (8) The Nations in the Psalms.

Wenham draws on church history to demonstrate how pervasively the Psalms were used in prayer for the first thousand years of the church. One striking example is the rule of St. Benedict, which "prescribed the reciting of psalms at the eight times of prayer each day. In this way the monks prayed every psalm at least once a week" (40). The rule of Benedict became very popular in the Middle Ages and many laypeople adopted the practice of praying all of the psalms once per week or once per month. The historic principle of *lex orandi, lex credenda* ("the law of praying is the law of believing") is clearly sounded. We should, therefore, expect that the regular singing and praying of the Psalms in ancient Israel and the early church would have shaped profoundly the faith and piety of God's people. Wenham persuasively argues that immersing ourselves in the Psalms through song and prayer would make a similar impact today.

One of the highlights of this volume is Wenham's robust defense of the messianic nature of many psalms. Commenting on the use of Psalm 72:8 in Zechariah 9:9–10, Wenham writes:

Whatever the exact date of Zechariah and the editing of the psalms, this quotation clearly shows that messianic interpretation of some psalms occurred long before the Christian era, because Zechariah is clearly prophesying a future ruler, not commenting on a past one. (83)

Wenham also points out the interesting fact that:

The early Jewish translations of the Psalms into Greek and Aramaic indicate that Jews understood the Psalms messianically too.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=478&issue\\_id=103](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=478&issue_id=103).

Again the date of these translations is a matter of some conjecture, but the Septuagint of the Psalms may date from the early second century B.C. and the Targum and Syriac a few centuries later. For example, the Targum paraphrases Psalm 21:1 as “King Messiah shall rejoice in your strength, O Lord,” and the Syriac heads Psalm 72 with the title “A Psalm of David, when he had made Solomon king, and a prophecy concerning the advent of the Messiah and the calling of the Gentiles.” (83)

Wenham follows Gerald Wilson in commending a canonical reading of the Psalter. Reading the Psalms canonically is the effort to understand the book of Psalms as a whole rather than simply as a collection of individual psalms. Just as we wouldn’t read Romans 9 without considering its relationship to Romans 1, 4, and 8, those who argue for reading the Psalms canonically insist that paying attention to the structure of the book of Psalms is an important tool for interpreting any individual psalm. Wenham makes numerous interesting observations about the organization of the Psalter. For example, the earlier psalms tend to focus on the nations as God’s enemies, while the later psalms tend to focus on the nations being gathered together with Israel to worship the true God. The transition between these two foci is Psalms 66–68. While acknowledging that the Psalter has been purposefully structured by an editor, this reviewer takes a more minimalist view and would see thematic parallels as being illustrative rather than determinative of the meaning of any particular psalm. Nevertheless, Wenham helpfully presents what is the majority view among contemporary Bible-believing experts on the Psalms.

The most disappointing chapter in the book is on singing the imprecatory psalms. Wenham provides helpful background material both for and against the Christian use of imprecatory psalms, but fails to make an unequivocal recommendation in favor of doing so. While many of us might be sympathetic to his struggle, it would have been helpful if one of the world’s leading Old Testament scholars had taken the risk of getting off the fence.

This is a very helpful and stimulating introduction to some of the issues around reading, singing, praying, and studying the Psalms. It is well suited for all officers, as well as thoughtful laypeople. Highly recommended. ☺

**David A. Booth** is an Orthodox Presbyterian minister serving as pastor of Merrimack Valley Presbyterian Church in North Andover, Massachusetts.

## Rediscovering Catechism

by *Donald Van Dyken*

---

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* April 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Everett A. Henes**

*Rediscovering Catechism: The Art of Equipping Covenant Children*, by Donald Van Dyken. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000, viii + 146 pages, \$9.69, paper.

“Why do you catechize?” This was a question that I received shortly after arriving at Hillsdale OPC in 2008. The inquiring college student had been raised in a Christian home and trusted Jesus for the forgiveness of her sins. She had read the Bible but had never delved into studying theology. She

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=480&issue\\_id=104](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=480&issue_id=104).

couldn't understand the purpose of catechism, and she's not alone. In answer to her question, I simply asked, "What is God?" After she thought about it for a few moments she responded, "I don't know; he's God!" I explained that this was the purpose for catechism and introduced her to question number four in the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

The topic of catechism continues to raise the eyebrows of those who have never been involved in it. To some, it seems legalistic as we teach our children these questions and answers. Sometimes it can feel that way to parents. What family hasn't had a family-worship meltdown as both children and parents became frustrated over the daily Q&A? To others, it looks like we are trying to indoctrinate our children. The challenge, from a practical and pastoral perspective, is heightened when we consider the number of people who are coming into Reformed churches from a non-Reformed background. With no history of catechism, the case for its importance must be made first.

This is where a book like *Rediscovering Catechism* can be helpful. The book itself is quite short, only 115 pages devoted to the topic, with two appendices covering a brief catalog of confessions and catechisms (Appendix A) and publishers (Appendix B). The chapters are divided between a very brief history and explanation of catechism (1–7) and the practice of catechism (8–16). The concluding chapter is one last defense of the practice under the title, "Battle Proven."

This book has the rare quality of being both a blessing and a frustration to the reviewer. From the outset, however, it must be said that the blessings far outweigh the frustrations. This is a book that you give new families for a small price. It offers a good explanation of the responsibility Christian parents have to catechize. Think of the baptism vow they must affirm, "Do you promise to teach diligently the principles of our holy Christian faith, revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and summarized in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church?"

The author does not content himself, however, with bare catechism. The goal is not just to memorize answers to questions so that a child's

name can appear in the next issue of *New Horizons*. The goal is to help children understand God's Word and to know God (56–57). In this way, the catechism questions are just the beginning (69) as parents, teachers, and pastors have the responsibility to follow up and make certain that the children understand what they have memorized. This is where Dyken's book is gold for pastors and catechism-class teachers. He gives insights into organizing, preparing, and teaching the classes.

What about those frustrations I mentioned? These might be more imagined than real, but I'll give just three. First, the nature of the book requires short synopses of subject matter. I understand that. However, devoting only six pages to biblical material on catechizing (and these are small pages) and less than four pages to the entire postbiblical history of catechism (the chapter is subtitled, "From Alexandria to Massachusetts") is an injustice to the very premise of the book: catechism is biblical and essential. Second, as a Presbyterian minister who doesn't have specific "catechism classes," there is much in this book that needs to be reworked in order to be effective for families (where much of catechizing is encouraged in many Orthodox Presbyterian congregations). Finally, there is little emphasis on prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of covenant children. Dyken writes, "Faithful instruction of the next generation is the normal mechanism God employs for the advance and growth of his people" (7). While I don't completely disagree with this statement, the emphasis on *mechanism* is clear throughout the book. Surely it is not the intention of the author to leave prayer out of the picture, but it comes across that way.

Even with these weaknesses, this book is a wonderful tool for those involved in the lives of covenant children. Perhaps it could be paired with a book that gives further examples of family-based catechism lessons, like Starr Meade's *Training Hearts, Teaching Minds*.<sup>2</sup> This, along with sound

---

2 Starr Meade, *Training Hearts, Teaching Minds: Family Devotions Based on the Shorter Catechism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000).

instruction regarding the place of prayer for and with our children, will aid us as we instruct parents to trust in and act upon the Lord's promise to be a God to them and to their children. ☺

**Everett A. Henes** is pastor of Hillsdale Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Hillsdale, Michigan.

## Grounded in the Gospel

by J. I. Packer and Gary Parrett

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* April 2015<sup>1</sup>

by James J. Cassidy

*Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way*, by J. I. Packer and Gary A. Parrett. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010, 238 pages, \$16.99, paper.

When I read the subtitle of this book, I was thrilled and could not wait to dive in. Finally, a book about discipleship that is not based on some Johnny-come-lately program that will be replaced within a decade with another trendy book. “Old-fashioned” is speaking my language!

And I was not disappointed—at least not at first.

The authors, one realizes quickly, are attempting to reverse a current trend in evangelicalism which moves the church's discipleship ministry

away from systematic, theological training. In the place of this trend, the authors propose the way of catechesis. They propose recapturing and advancing the notion of catechetical instruction as the primary way to disciple Christians. As a Reformed pastor and father, I could not agree more!

The value of the opening three chapters far exceeds the cost of the book. In these chapters, the authors shoulder the burden of showing how catechesis is both biblical and historical. Chapter 2 successfully demonstrates how catechesis is a biblical idea. The argument, however, is almost overdone. Can one make a case that is too biblical? Well, of course, nothing can be *too* biblically grounded! But the impression received by the end of the chapter is that the Bible is itself a catechism—everything in the Bible is catechetical! I believe practicing catechesis is a biblical notion, and the authors show that, but they also say more than they set out to prove. More helpful is chapter 3, where the book maps out the rich Christian heritage of catechesis. The church is at its strongest when it is catechizing, and so the church today does not need to come up with newfangled forms of “creative” discipleship.

However, despite this desire not to reinvent the wheel, there are many original elements throughout the remainder of the book (chapters 4–10). At this point, my excitement for the book began to wane. The rest of the book attempts to produce and organize theological material to be used catechetically. But given the rich catechetical tools of the faith (outlined so well in chapter 3!), why do the authors try to create something new? It seems as if the old-fashioned idea of catechesis suddenly gives way to a new-fashioned idea of how to produce and organize your own catechism. The authors could have shortened the book considerably by leaning on the old catechisms rather than trying to construct new ones. Furthermore, there is a sense that the authors want to promote a catechism of “mere Christianity.” We are exhorted to avoid those old catechisms which were polemic and militated against other churches, like Rome (e.g., 155–160, where we are told that Heidelberg Catechism answer 80 is “problematic to say the

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=481&issue\\_id=104](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=481&issue_id=104).

least”). If we can get all churches to do mere Christianity, we can help ecumenicity. We receive exhortations about making the gospel a priority (chapter 5), but how can we do that in league with other churches which our old catechisms regarded as denying the gospel? By the time one finishes the book, one gets the impression that a new ecumenical agenda is being smuggled in through an old-fashioned practice. In other words, for all its (right) criticisms of evangelicalism, the book remains indebted to the broadest evangelicalism there is.

This is not to say the book should be jettisoned altogether. If more evangelicals read the first three chapters, that would be good for Christianity at large. Doing catechesis is a good thing. If people are introduced to the benefits of catechesis in the tradition of the Reformed creeds and catechisms, then we might very well see a new reformation in our day. However, if the old-fashioned practice will be carried out with a new-fashioned mere Christianity, then believers will not be built up the way the authors hope. So, as in all things, let the reader understand and take what is helpful and let the rest go. ☺

**James J. Cassidy** is pastor of South Austin Presbyterian Church (OPC) and associate pastor of Providence Presbyterian Church (OPC), both in Austin, Texas.

# Confessing the Faith

by *Chad Van Dixhoorn*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* April 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Robert Letham**

*Confessing the Faith: A Reader's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, by Chad Van Dixhoorn. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2014, xxvi + 484 pages, \$30.00.

In his foreword, Carl Trueman correctly says that “Chad has spent more time and devoted more attention to the minutiae of the Confession than anyone else has ever done, excepting perhaps the Westminster delegates themselves. There is no safer or more learned guide to the Confession.” With that, this review could conveniently end. Nevertheless, for the sake of a fuller explanation we shall continue.

By now there can scarcely be a reader of this journal who is unaware of the massive work that produced the complete minutes and papers of the Westminster Assembly, published in five volumes by Oxford University Press. Chad Van Dixhoorn was the editor and driving force behind this, assisted by a range of others. It was based on his PhD. dissertation at the University of Cambridge, which—on top of the dissertation proper—extended to seven volumes that included the minutes and a large rediscovered section of the journal of John Lightfoot, a particularly learned member of the Assembly. Much of this material was produced from the virtually indecipherable seventeenth-century shorthand in which the records of Assembly debates were written. Paleographical assistance was required.

The final Oxford University Press volumes include all extant papers, correspondence and other incunabula, together with a range of indexes.

---

1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=482&issue\\_id=104](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=482&issue_id=104).

It has spawned a number of recent studies on aspects of the Assembly's theology, on the theology of the Confession and Catechisms taken together in context, and on the theological and historical background to the Confession.

None of this is evident in the commentary before us. The scholarship is hidden, the learning worn lightly. The book is what it claims to be—a guide for the reader of the Confession who, one must assume, has little time for the details that underlay its production. It is all the more valuable for that. Van Dixhoorn simply expounds the text; his learning is evident, for those able to recognize it, in the clarity, accuracy and astute nature of his comments. This is a work of vast scholarship, presented in the most judicious manner, without the trimmings. As such, it should become the standard work for consideration of the Confession and will be particularly needed for ministers, elders, and the general church member.

There have been other commentaries on the Confession over the years, some more scholarly, others designed for a popular readership. We know what they are; they have done yeoman service. However, none exemplify the rigor and accuracy of Van Dixhoorn's work. I made a number of spot checks on particular aspects of the Confession where a sophisticated treatment of historical context, theological nuance, seventeenth-century word usage, and the interrelationship of a range of theological coordinates is needed to pry open the intention of the divines. In each instance, Van Dixhoorn handles such questions clearly and deftly. This is not a critical edition, in the sense that he expounds the text rather than probe some of its weaknesses; the intent of the book and the nature of its readership govern the whole.

Here and there, on a very few occasions, one might differ, but usually only in a matter of nuance and presentation. Notwithstanding, one matter relates to the question of civil disobedience. Van Dixhoorn's exposition of the chapters on civil liberty and the civil magistrate inculcate obedience and submission to governing authorities. In this he echoes the words of the Confession in their surface meaning. He backs this up by reference to Paul in

Romans 13 and Peter in 1 Peter 2. Yet the Assembly was a commission of Parliament at a time when it was at war with the King. Clearly the divines believed in the rightness of taking up arms against Charles on the grounds that he had usurped powers that were not his; their participation in the Assembly was at the risk of their lives, knowing that if Parliament were to be defeated they would be liable to be tried for treason. There is a subtext to the Confession's comments on these matters. The adjective "lawful" in Confession 23.4 ("It is the duty of people ... to obey their lawful commands") carries enormous weight in this context. Charles, Laud, and their friends were seen as acting unlawfully; Parliament was free from this constraint. Moreover, Parliament was regarded as taking up arms lawfully in defense of its constitutional rights, which went back as far as Magna Carta in 1215.

That is all. I highly commend this book. As Carl Trueman states, it should be read and used by all elders, by Sunday school teachers, and church members. ☺

**Robert Letham**, *a minister in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales, teaches Systematic and Historical Theology at Wales Evangelical School of Theology, Bridgend, Wales.*



# The Heart Is the Target

by Murray Capill

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* Online April 2015<sup>1</sup>

by Shane Lems

*The Heart Is the Target: Preaching Practical Application from Every Text*, by Murray Capill. Phillipsburg: P&R, 2014, 272 pages, \$16.99, paper.

Writing and preaching sermons is tough work—and that’s an understatement! The preacher has to labor in the original languages, lexicons, and commentaries. He must know the background, context, structure, and flow of a text, not to mention the main themes and points found in the text. Then he needs to organize the sermon in a way that is faithful, clear, and easy to follow. After this, he has to actually preach the sermon in a pastoral manner to the congregation. And if he doesn’t apply God’s Word in his sermons, he still has not done his duty. Writing and preaching sermons is tough work indeed!

There are quite a few helpful books on preaching—with which many *Ordained Servant* readers are familiar. But there are not many solid books that detail biblical sermon application, so it is certainly worth pointing out a good one here: *The Heart is the Target* by Murray Capill. This book discusses the nuts and bolts of sermon application from a Reformed and biblical perspective. Capill says it this way: “Effective expository preaching takes place when biblical faithfulness and insightful application are inextricably bound together” (14).

The first part of the book is what Capill calls the “living” aspect of application. In this section, he explains how God’s word is living, active, and profitable. Capill writes that application involves the life of the preacher and the lives of the hearers.

To apply God’s Word to God’s people, God’s minister must know the Word, believe the Word, and be nourished from the Word himself. Capill also notes that biblical application aims at the heart of the hearer, which includes the mind, conscience, will, and passions. Furthermore, since people in the pews are all quite different, Capill devotes a whole chapter to show that “one size doesn’t fit all” in application (chapter 5).


In the second part of the book, the author explores how to apply Scripture. Here the topics of kingdom living, redemptive history, indicatives and imperatives, and a holistic approach to application are discussed. Thankfully, Capill purposely avoids legalism and moralism in his discussion on application since he constantly focuses on grace and the gospel. While I don’t necessarily agree with Capill’s brief notes on cultural transformation, I do appreciate his explanation that pastors must preach biblical truth in a way that is applicable for the various vocations to which God has called his people. At the book’s conclusion, there are some illustrations and helpful charts that summarize several of the outlines in the book.

I’ve read a good handful of preaching books before this one, but this one was more challenging and thought-provoking than most. There were some parts of the book that were so good that I outlined them on a separate sheet to help me do the work of application better. In fact, some outlines are even still on the whiteboard in my study as I type this review! One important thing I learned in the book is to be *proactive* about applying Scripture. That is, in sermon preparation and writing, I shouldn’t wait until the end to make application points. Rather, I should be thinking about application early on in the process.

There isn’t enough space to explain all the specifics of why I appreciate and recommend this book. One example will have to do. In chapter 6, Capill encourages preachers to do four things with a biblical truth: 1) state it, 2) ground it, 3) impress it, and 4) apply it. How do we impress and apply the truth in a way that “hits” the hearts of the hearers? In these various ways: 1) appeal to people’s own judgment, 2) anticipate and answer

1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=483&issue\\_id=104](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=483&issue_id=104).

objections, 3) give reasons, motivations, and incentives, 4) be specific, pointed, and direct, 5) use illustrations for clarity, 6) provide testimonies to the truth, 7) show what it looks like in practice, 8) use fresh and vivid words, and 9) speak personally and passionately. This is an excellent chapter because Capill explains in detail these various ways of applying God's truth in sermons.

If you're a pastor who would like some help applying God's Word in your preaching, do yourself (and your congregation!) a favor by studying this book. Even if you don't agree with every part of it, I'm certain it will be very helpful if you approach it with a teachable mind. As pastors, of course, we should always be students of homiletics. This book is a good teacher in that department! 

*Shane Lems serves as pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Hammond, Wisconsin.*

## From the Mouth of God by Sinclair Ferguson

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* May 2015<sup>1</sup>

by Stephen J. Tracey

*From the Mouth of God: Trusting, Reading, and Applying the Bible*, by Sinclair B. Ferguson. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2014, xi + 209 pages, \$13.50 paper. (Also available in Kindle and ePub formats.)

One old Scottish preacher, on visiting members of his congregation, would habitually ask, "What portion of God's Word did you read today?" It was a

---

1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=486&issue\\_id=105](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=486&issue_id=105).

wise question for two reasons. First, it was an open question, which would lead to conversation either on the struggle to read the Bible or on the fruit enjoyed in reading. There was no place for simply saying "Yes!" or "No!" And secondly, the anticipation of the pastoral question encouraged Bible reading. That pastor knew the place of Scripture in the Christian life.

One would not like to call the venerable Sinclair Ferguson an old Scottish preacher, but he is clearly cut from the same cloth. In this wonderful book's introduction, he states, "The conviction that lay behind writing about the Bible in the first place was that God's word is itself the worker in the life of the individual Christian and in the fellowship and outreach of the church" (xi).

This book is a revised and enlarged edition of *Handle with Care!* published by Hodder and Stoughton in 1982. Ferguson sets out to answer three questions. First, "Why is it that Christians throughout the ages have believed, with Jesus, that the Bible is God's mouth, from which his word is heard?" (x). The little qualification, "with Jesus," makes all the difference. In fact it is the essential strength of Ferguson's approach; he always turns our attention to Jesus. This section is no mere academic study of inspiration, accommodation, or concurrence. It is a study of these things, but always more. It stirs the affections for our Lord. This section clearly states a sound and orthodox doctrine of Scripture—but in it Ferguson exalts the Father and the Son and the Spirit. It is rich devotional theology.

The second question is "How should we approach reading the Bible in order to gain a better understanding and appreciation of its message?" (x). This is the largest part of the book. It is a master class on how to interpret Scripture. Ferguson provides five keys: 1. Context, 2. Jesus, 3. The Unfolding Drama, 4. Biblical Logic, and 5. Literary Character. This fifth section, on literary character, is then expanded to explain all the major genres of Scripture: prose, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, gospels, epistles, and visions. It is like a refresher course on exegetical theology. And it is very refreshing. More than that, at times it provides

a glimpse into Ferguson's approach to exegesis. The book is packed with preacher-style examples. While not a homiletics book, it provides profound homiletical help. There are nuggets of insight into parables and narratives and gospels, as well as extended examples of approaching the book of Ruth. Not that we think everyone should want to preach the way Sinclair Ferguson preaches. In the best preacher tradition, however, he is teaching the Bible reader how to preach to self. You'll never have the accent, but you can apply the Bible just as pointedly.

Ferguson sees the dominant plot line of the whole Bible to be "what God accomplishes through his Son, and in the power of the Spirit," and consequently, "from start to finish these sixty-six books tell a single, multifaceted story whose central character is Jesus Christ and what he does" (76). Of course, there are subplots within the plot. Ferguson calls these "The Grand Narrative," "The Big Picture," and "The Plot Line" (76). He looks at the various types of literature in Scripture and teaches us how to approach them. We are steered gently away from misguided and wrong interpretation, while all the while he picks up portions of Scripture and sweetly presses home his point. It is a kind of "Look, do it this way, not that way." And he always leads us to Jesus.

The third question is "How can we do this (that is, read the Bible) in a way that is well-grounded in Scripture and that actually helps us get to know the message of the Bible better?" (x). Using Scripture, Ferguson shows how to put all this to use. From 2 Timothy 3:16–17, he explains how Scripture is "profitable." From the Parable of the Sower he reminds us that the heart of the matter is the disposition of our heart. There must be plowing, rooting, and weeding.

This is a timely reprint of a wonderful book. The doctrine of the Word of God written (and in particular of the inerrancy of Scripture) seems to be always passing through heavy squalls. From the charge that Princetonian men invented inerrancy, to the recent controversy over the views of Peter Enns, we seem to be buried under four feet of heavy snow. The publication of this book is like

the arrival of a friendly plow guy. With a few sensible passes he clears your yard. Ferguson's pastoral sense makes this an eminently readable book. His theological skill makes this book profoundly helpful.

This is a great book. It is systematic theology, New Testament theology, Old Testament theology, hermeneutics, homiletics, all wrapped up in faithful, godly, pastoral expression. This is pastoral practice at its very best. ☺

**Stephen J. Tracey** serves as the pastor of Lakeview Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Rockport, Maine.

## Expository Preaching

### by David Helm

---

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* May 2015<sup>1</sup>

by T. David Gordon

*Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God's Word Today*, by David Helm. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014, 125 pages including appendix and indices.

(Full disclosure: David Helm was a student of mine at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, and my high regard for him may prevent my being entirely objective.)

I often tell my students that I evaluate a book by the criterion of "insights per page." This little volume (125 pages) satisfies that criterion very well, because it contains a remarkable amount of insight for its size. In its four chapters, it contains roughly equal coverage of: contextualization, exegesis, theological reflection, today (with intro-

---

1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=487&issue\\_id=105](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=487&issue_id=105).

ductory and conclusive thoughts). Books *could* be written, and indeed *have been* written, about each of these, and Helm does a remarkable job of saying the most important and pertinent things about each of these areas with great concision.

As its title suggests, the chapter on exegesis is pivotal, and it contains wonderful emphasis (and good examples) of contextual exegesis, on noticing the structure and emphases of the biblical author, and on the importance of recognizing and accounting for genre. There is almost no fat on the bones here, as Helm says what needs to be said (convincingly and clearly), without cluttering the chapter by chasing every smaller rabbit. It would not hurt the busy pastor to reread this chapter several times annually. The chapter on the danger of context overwhelming/overpowering exegesis is also critical to Helm's point, and his warnings are well founded and his points there are well taken. The chapter on theological reflection is a virtual survey of both biblical theology and systematic theology (and their respective roles in expository preaching), and yet it is done very concisely and wisely, with an unmistakable concern for their effect on expository preaching.

Stylistically, I ordinarily find illustrations/diagrams to be distracting, but I found these very helpful. As "them/then ... us/now" was introduced on page 40, then filled out later, I found this very helpful. Some readers will consider the mid-chapter summaries ("In this chapter we have looked at ...", 35) to be distracting; others will be helped by them. Helm probably did not wish to clutter the manuscript with bibliographic footnotes (though the ones that are there are helpful). But I thought I saw the unmistakable influence of Gordon Fee and Doug Stuart in the section about recognizing the importance of genre to exegesis (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*),<sup>2</sup> Meredith Kline when discussing the move from "creation to consummation"

---

2 Gordon Fee and Doug Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

(*Kingdom Prologue*),<sup>3</sup> and Edmund Clowney in the instructions about biblical theology (*Preaching and Biblical Theology*);<sup>4</sup> and, since I learned about Charles Simeon's counsel regarding the three goals of a sermon from professor Nigel Kerr, who was still alive and teaching when Helm was a student at Gordon-Conwell, I would be surprised if Helm did not learn about Simeon from Kerr. Perhaps Helm included attribution in the manuscript and the editors removed them to avoid/evade becoming too academic.

In the section on historical context, I believe Helm may have confused the historical-critical method with the grammatico-historical method. He says "historical-critical," but probably *means* "grammatico-historical" (65ff., 86). Most evangelicals and inerrantists object to the anti-supernaturalism ordinarily associated with the historical-critical method.<sup>5</sup> Everything Helm says here is true, helpful, and well within a commitment to inerrancy, but the designation employed would arouse the suspicion of those readers who were otherwise unaware of Helm's strong commitment to the authority and inspiration of Holy Scripture.

There are many good books on expositional preaching, but there are none—to my knowledge—which contain so much important insight per page as this one. Even the busiest preacher could find time to reread it annually, and his congregation would be the benefactors of his doing so. ☺

**T. David Gordon** is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and serves as Professor of Religion and Greek at Grove City College, Grove City, Pennsylvania.

---

3 Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, KS: Two Age, 2000).

4 Edmund Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973).

5 Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, trans. Edwin W. Leverenz and Rudolph F. Norden (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977); Archie L. Nations, "Historical Criticism and the Current Methodological Crisis," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36, no. 1 (1983): 59–72.

# Evangelical versus Liturgical?

by *Melanie C. Ross*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* May 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Matthew W. Kingsbury**

*Evangelical versus Liturgical? Defying a Dichotomy*, by Melanie C. Ross. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014, xv + 149 pages, \$17.00, paper.

In *Evangelical versus Liturgical?* Melanie C. Ross proposes to defy the commonly assumed dichotomy between evangelical churches and those that employ a high-church liturgy drawn from the historic Christian tradition. This project of challenging ecclesiastical categories, at least in theme, will be familiar to Orthodox Presbyterians who have been following our own D. G. Hart, especially his *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism*.<sup>2</sup> It may also challenge some of the dichotomies, and liturgical assumptions, of many OPC pastors.

In her introduction, Ross, a liturgical scholar at Yale Divinity School, references Gordon Lathrop's formulation of the dichotomy: the liturgical fourfold *ordo* of word, bath, table, and prayer versus the evangelical threefold *ordo* of warm-up, sermon, conversion (3).<sup>3</sup> Through a historical comparison of Charles Finney and George Whitefield (chapter 1), two case studies of evangelical congregations (chapters 2 and 5), and putting liturgical scholars in dialogue with evangelical theologians (chapters 3 and 4), she questions whether this formula, while convenient, accurately describes the lived experience of modern churches. Along the

way, the reader quickly observes it is also shorthand for a number of other assumptions, and these together create the challenge to today's confessional Presbyterian in America.

In fact, Ross explores less a dichotomy than a collection of overlapping dichotomies: evangelical vs. liberal (48ff.), an emphasis on theological content over liturgical shape (55), fundamentalist/evangelical vs. ecumenical (56), gnostic (or non-sacramental) vs. canonical (i.e., the visible church as divinely instituted by the means of grace, 88),<sup>4</sup> evangelical vs. mainline (126), evangelical vs. critical biblical scholarship (132ff.). Ross writes as a liturgical scholar for liturgical scholars, and these categories reflect the assumptions of the camp, which (unsurprisingly) are somewhat hostile to evangelical faith and practice. With varying degrees of success, Ross subverts and challenges these categories in an attempt to promote dialogue and mutual edification between the liturgical and evangelical camps. In this sense, Ross effectively defies the dichotomy and gives liturgical scholars reason to critically explore, rather than dismiss, the worship theory and practice of American evangelicalism. As this is the latest in the prestigious *Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies* series, she may even persuade some to do so.

If the OPC has liturgical scholars, they are the ministers of Word and sacrament serving our congregations, and those may struggle to orient themselves within the dichotomies listed in the preceding paragraph. That struggle, and its implicit challenge to our interpretive paradigms, offers a great help to pastors ministering within the context of American confessional Presbyterianism: "help" in the sense of at least three ways to reconceive our ministries and our place in the American ecclesiastical context.

Orthodox Presbyterians seeking a mooring for their identity in this book between the Scylla of Finneyite evangelicals and the Charybdis of liberal liturgists may find themselves in Robert Webber's distinction

1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=489&issue\\_id=105](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=489&issue_id=105).

2 This work is cited by Ms. Ross; Hart also gets a block quote on page 10.

3 In chapter 1, she traces this to the Second Great Awakening and Charles Finney (12–19).

4 This comparison is the subject of all of chapter 3 (77–103).



between “separatist” and “ecumenical” evangelicals. The former ... “define themselves over against Catholic, Orthodox, and mainline Protestant denominations....” The latter are those who campaign for “a return to weekly Eucharist, a recognition of real presence, [and] the restoration of the church year.”... Ecumenical evangelicals, Webber observes, are often repentant separatists.... (3)<sup>5</sup>

Historically, the OPC, along with our friends in NAPARC,<sup>6</sup> is decidedly on the separatist side. However, as the three specific liturgical reforms Webber cites are gaining traction in our circles among (relatively) younger ministers who are at least, if not more, committed to robust confession- alism than their immediate predecessors, we may be ready to shed our separatist impulses.

This leads to a second way in which to reimagine ourselves in the ecumenical landscape. The liturgical renewal movement was an ecumenical force which swept through mainline Protestantism after the Second World War, allowing divergent ecclesiastical traditions to work together on the basis of liturgical commonalities.<sup>7</sup> In principle, there is no reason this type of cooperation must remain the provenance of the doctrinally declined. As our congregation has followed *The Revised Common Lectionary* for several cycles now, I have discovered a point of contact with brethren in conservative Lutheran and Anglican traditions.<sup>8</sup> While I believe the liturgical reforms mentioned above are driven primarily by pastoral concerns, they can also turn us outward toward the “separated brethren” in our local communities.

---

5 Ross here cites Webber’s “The Impact of the Liturgical Movement on the Evangelical Church,” *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 21, no. 2 (1987): 111. Webber (1933–2007) was a theologian who focused on worship.

6 North American Presbyterian and Reformed Churches.

7 For example, I grew up in the United Christian Parish in Reston, Virginia, which was a cooperative endeavor between five liberal denominations. Beginning in 1973, it had three congregations served by pastors from three denominations, but with one order of worship followed by all.

8 This has also enabled me to speak both winsomely and evangelistically to Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox.

If we are to turn toward other confessional Protestants, we will, in the third place, have to turn away from our de facto embrace of evangelical liturgics. While the regulative principle of worship is a bedrock of confessional Presbyterianism, by itself it forms a weak practical foundation on which to build an order of worship.<sup>9</sup> Given the infrequency with which they celebrate the Eucharist or baptism, many of our congregations can hardly be said to follow the fourfold *ordo* of word, bath, table, and prayer. Instead, we come much closer to a threefold *ordo* of warm-up, sermon, and hymn. This is evidenced by congregations in which the first part of the service (which may contain a complex of formal elements such as an invocation, reading of the law, confession, and declaration of pardon) bears no thematic relationship to the sermon itself.<sup>10</sup> Further, how many of our pastors deliver what is in effect a second sermon when celebrating the Lord’s Supper because the sacrament is not perceived to be inseparably related to the Word preached? We would all do well to consider the examples of Eastbrook and West Shore churches (chapters 2 and 5), which, while they can justly be criticized on regulative principle grounds, nonetheless strive to make their worship services thematically coherent wholes out of a desire to both edify worshipers and glorify God.

To press the point home: what makes Christians into faithful lifelong disciples? For many of us, the answer would no doubt be personal appropriation of orthodox biblical doctrine, as taught in our confessional standards. However, Westminster Shorter Catechism 88 (but really through to 107) suggests disciples are formed primarily through the ordinary means of grace, especially as they are experienced in corporate worship: Word, sacrament,

---

9 How many of our ministers were required to take a class on liturgics in seminary? How many ordination trials include even one question on liturgics (as distinguished from defining the regulative principle of worship)?

10 I was once a member of a PCA congregation in which the first part of the service followed the Shorter Catechism’s exposition of the law, while the sermon (longer than the rest of the service combined) was a consecutive exposition of Scripture.



and prayer.<sup>11</sup> In other words, our own standards sympathize with liturgical concerns.

At the present moment, the OPC is neither evangelical nor liturgical, with all that both of those terms imply. As Melanie C. Ross explores those traditions and their relationship, she invites us, with them (as she quotes D. G. Hart), to return to the riches of the Reformed, Lutheran, and Anglican traditions where these matters have been defined and articulated and where worship is the logical extension of a congregation's confession of faith and lies at the heart of the church's mission (10). ☉

**Matthew W. Kingsbury** is the pastor of Park Hill Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Denver, Colorado.

# The Digital Divide

## edited by Mark Bauerlein

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* June–July 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **T. David Gordon**

*The Digital Divide: Arguments for and against Facebook, Google, Texting, and the Age of Social Networking*, edited by Mark Bauerlein. New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2011, xiv + 354 pages, \$17.95, paper.

Readers of *Ordained Servant* may well recall that Mark Bauerlein, in addition to teaching English Literature at Emory University, is the author of the influential 2008 volume *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone under Thirty)*. The present volume consists of twenty-seven essays by twenty-five authors, including essays by such well-known media ecologists as Todd Gitlin, Maryanne Wolf, Steven Johnson, Nicholas Carr, Sherry Turkle, Christine Rosen, and Maggie Jackson.<sup>2</sup> The twenty-seven essays are divided into three sections of nine each, arranged around “the brain, the senses,” “social life, personal life, school,” and “the fate of culture.”

The essays range across a significant amount of time; Sherry Turkle's is the oldest (1995), and

---

1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=495&issue\\_id=106](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=495&issue_id=106).

2 Todd Gitlin, *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms our Lives* (New York: Metropolitan, 2002); Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (New York: Harper, 2007); Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (New York: Riverhead, 2005); Nicholas Carr, *The Big Switch: Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google* (2008); *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010); Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic, 2011); Christine Rosen, many essays and editorials in *The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology and Society*, and Maggie Jackson, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2008).

---

11 In other words, the fourfold *ordo*. See Ross's discussion of this issue on pp. 53–55, which summarize chapter 3's case study of Eastbrook Church in Wisconsin.

the next-oldest is the paradigm-making 2001 essay by Marc Prensky, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants.” Most fall into the 2006–2010 time frame. The editor of *Ordained Servant* even wondered if the essays were not dated, in light of so many recent developments in the digital world, and he was/is right—who talks about “Web 2.0” anymore, for instance? But this editorial concern itself is instructive, because in almost no other arena could a book, only two of whose twenty-seven essays antedate 2002, already be “irrelevant” in some of its particulars. The digital world is a head-spinning, rapidly changing world. New words and expressions come (“Google it”) and go (“my favorite Usenet group,” “MySpace”) quickly in such a world. The essays in this volume are, therefore, both timeless *and* dated, if that were possible—timeless because the observations about digital alterations to social structures, consciousness, and cognition itself are indeed altered by the digital environment, and “dated,” because some of the particular software or hardware is already obsolete. But that is, of course, part of the point.

Some of these essays have become cultural bellwethers that will be read by media ecologists for years to come. Marc Prensky’s distinction between digital “natives” and digital “immigrants” will remain useful for the next couple of decades, as it helps to describe the “divide” between the two that is so different between the generational divide that existed between my 1960s generation and our parents. We were very self-conscious of our intentional rejection of the *status quo ante* that we inherited. Digital natives, by contrast, are virtually (pun intended) unaware of a pre-digital world. They do not rebel *against* a pre-digital environment, because they simply do not know it. They can no more push against it than a Venetian gondolier with a four-foot pole can push against a water bottom that is sixteen feet beneath the surface.

Among the important differences in point-of-view among the essayists are those between what I call inevitablists and non-inevitablists. For certain authors, the digital world is simply a given—like gravity—that must be accommodated; for others, it

is a given—like radon gas—that must be carefully monitored and limited, lest it become dehumanizing (my sympathies are more with the latter). It is beneficial to have that range of point-of-view present in a single volume.

All of the observations in this volume are insightful. Many are as pertinent now as when they were originally written, because they are observations about the rapidly changing, visually biased, language-contemptuous nature of the digital world *per se*. For students of media, the no longer pertinent observations are nearly as beneficial, because they remind us that we live in a world in which our capacity to develop new media is many times faster than our capacity to evaluate them. Readers who may be interested in media ecology *per se* will wish to familiarize themselves with evaluations of earlier media: orality, manuscript, typography, photograph, etc., but busy pastors, elders, and deacons who wish to understand the present digital environment may find no other single volume that covers that environment (and the differing assessments thereof) better than this one. ☺

**T. David Gordon** is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America serving as professor of Religion and Greek at Grove City College, Grove City, Pennsylvania.

# How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor

by James K. A. Smith

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* June-July 2015<sup>1</sup>

by Susan M. Felch

*How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, by James K. A. Smith. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014, xi + 148 pages, \$16.00, paper.

In *How (Not) to be Secular*, James K. A. Smith offers an atlas to Charles Taylor's 800-plus-page tome, *A Secular Age* (2007). Taylor's book itself is a richly detailed topographical map that charts the journey of Western culture from near universal belief in God to our contemporary age where it is possible "to account for meaning and significance without any appeal to the divine or transcendence" (141). Despite its erudition and detailed analyses, Taylor's book, Smith claims, might better be read as a novel (24), which is a useful way to approach its diagnosis, critique, and prognosis. One need not subscribe to all the particularities of Taylor's theory to appreciate his description of our current malaise. What Smith helps us to see is not an abstract philosopher, but a Christian thinker whose work has "existential import," because, as Taylor insists, "we're all secular now" (28). To be secular means that we live in "an age of contested belief, where religious belief is no longer axiomatic. It's possible to imagine not believing in God" (142).

It is that imagining which affects both believers and unbelievers alike. Our secular age is not just a world with God neatly subtracted from the equation, as many would have us think; rather, it is a world of rival stories and rival claims to how

meaning can—and should—be made. It is not so much an age of disbelief as "an age of believing otherwise" (47). In this contested "cross-pressured" space, Christians may find themselves unwittingly succumbing to a pernicious individualism and to arguments for God that circumscribe his transcendence. Smith and Taylor make the point, for instance, that modern concerns with theodicy are based on the presumption that, like God, we can see everything and therefore can "now expect an answer to whatever puzzles us, including the problem of evil. Nothing should be inscrutable" (52). On the other hand, those who are not Christians, especially musicians, writers, and other artists, may be haunted by a profound sense that there is "something more," despite their commitment to understanding all of life within the "immanent frame" of this present, tangle world.

Smith points us not just to Taylor's diagnoses, but also to his twofold constructive agenda: to show unbelievers that their dismissal of God is itself a "construal," not a neutral, unbiased, objective stance, and to tell them a better story, a story that more fully accounts for the richness, beauty, and heartbreak of this world. The language here is inflected by phenomenology and Taylor's Roman Catholic faith, but it resonates with Kuyper and Van Til's critique of neutrality and the biblical mandate to proclaim the gospel. Because Smith wants us not merely to understand the arguments in *A Secular Age*, but also to learn from it *How (Not) to be Secular*, he goes beyond Taylor to urge readers to restore the centrality of communal worship, Word, and sacrament to their own lives.

With a book as long, complex, and suggestive as Taylor's *A Secular Age*, it is handy to have a knowledgeable and articulate guide. Like all good maps, Smith's book has a key, the very useful glossary of terms at the back. In fact, the serious reader may wish to begin there, in order to familiarize him or herself with the basic terrain.

At times, Smith's atlas shows signs of its genesis in an undergraduate classroom (he wrote the book after teaching Taylor in a senior seminar). The occasional assumption that all readers are philosophy majors, some name-dropping, and references

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=496&issue\\_id=106](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=496&issue_id=106).

to 1990s popular culture may strike the reader as helpful, tangential, or slightly annoying, depending on age and preference. But these creases in a serviceable road map can be overlooked. ☺

**Susan M. Felch** is a professor of English and Director of the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and is a member of New City Fellowship (OPC), Grand Rapids, Michigan.

## Called to Be Saints

by Gordon T. Smith

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* August-September 2015<sup>1</sup>

by David A. Booth

*Called to Be Saints: An Invitation to Christian Maturity*, by Gordon T. Smith, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014, 256 pages, \$26.00, paper.

In an age of extended adolescence, both in the world and in the church, Christians need to respond faithfully to the Lord who is calling us to spiritual maturity. But what exactly is the biblical vision for pursuing Christian maturity? How does holiness relate to wisdom, love, education, vocation, and to our life together as the people of God? *Called to Be Saints* challenges believers to develop a vision for Christian maturity that is centered on union with Christ and to pursue the ramifications of this vision in every area of life.

Gordon appropriately begins at the end—the

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=501&issue\\_id=107](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=501&issue_id=107).

*telos*—of our salvation which he defines as “the fulfillment of the purposes of God in creation” (26). He then emphatically insists “that what makes the Christian a Christian is *participation* in the life of Christ Jesus, or union with Christ” (37). The remainder of the book consists of four chapters where the goal of salvation flows from our union with Christ to holiness in wisdom, vocation, love, and in our affections. There are two lengthy appendices on “Congregations and Transformation” and “Christian Higher Education.” The book is well organized for encouraging an integrated vision of Christian maturity rather than merely offering tips that might be helpful in some discrete part of a person’s life. The style is conversational and well suited for lay people.

There are many outstanding features to this book. Orthodox Presbyterians will appreciate how Gordon attractively presents the Christ-centered pursuit of holiness while clearly but charitably addressing the shallowness of much contemporary evangelical spirituality. Nevertheless, there are significant shortcomings in this work that make it appropriate for use by a competent teacher in a group setting but questionable as a stand-alone book to be given away or displayed on a church’s book table.

Our first clue that something is amiss is that Gordon relegates the church and the pursuit of Christian maturity to an appendix rather than giving it the central place it clearly has in the New Testament epistles. Furthermore, this appendix primarily focuses on how Gordon’s vision for spiritual maturity should remake congregational life rather than how our shared life together as the family of God is central to the pursuit of Christian maturity.

Second, while the conversational style of the book makes it easy to read, the volume is littered with statements that can at best be called theologically imprecise at exactly those places where precision would be most helpful. For example, Gordon writes:

In other words, we must affirm a strong link between justification and sanctification. If not, it makes God lie. How can he arbitrarily call

the sinner a saint? God can declare us saints in Christ if and only if we are truly made into saints by the power of God from our position in Christ sanctified through and through. (50)

Making justification dependent upon sanctification in this way is a denial of the Reformed and biblical teaching on justification based solely upon the imputed righteousness of Christ. One can only hope that Professor Gordon doesn't understand what his words are plainly teaching.

Third, the book truncates the biblical teaching on Christian maturity by pitting things the Bible affirms against one another. For example, Gordon minimizes the pursuit of being like Christ and of intellectual belief in order to emphasize communion with Christ as being "the heart of Christian formation" (58–59). In light of Paul's forceful call for us to imitate Paul as he imitates Christ (1 Cor. 11:1) and to "be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom. 12:2), it is better to see doctrine and the pursuit of Christlikeness as aspects of, rather than as competitors to, abiding in Christ.

Fourth, this volume conveys a surprisingly shallow understanding of the wickedness and power of sin in our lives and in the world. Given how this volume presents sanctification in terms of being in union with Christ through the power of the Spirit, it is remarkable that it lacks a forceful call to mortify sin by putting to death the deeds of the flesh or a serious discussion of Paul's robust presentations of the Christian life as a great struggle or battle. Particularly striking is that Gordon almost entirely ignores the Sermon on the Mount. The only references to our Lord's central teaching on kingdom living are passing references to our call to perfection (18) and to not worrying (161). Such omissions convey the impression that the Christian life is quite manageable and a rather nice addition to pursuing a comfortable middle-class American lifestyle.

While this is not Niebuhr's "Christianity without a cross," the low view of sin presented in this book may leave readers poorly prepared for the fierceness of the battle against Satan, the world, and indwelling sin that is part of the ordinary

Christian life. While it would be unfair to condemn a book simply because it doesn't say everything on a topic, there is a crying need to call our generation to take up the cross and follow Jesus and to mortify sin by putting to death the deeds of the flesh. The message of this book is ultimately less radical, less offensive, and less powerful than what is needed. It is a sign of how far North American evangelicalism has fallen that a book calling us away from adolescence to Christian maturity could still remain so shallow.

Regretfully, this book's many positive attributes are outweighed by its even more significant shortcomings. Not recommended. ☹

**David A. Booth** is an Orthodox Presbyterian minister serving as pastor of Merrimack Valley Presbyterian Church in North Andover, Massachusetts.

## Talking with Catholics about the Gospel

by *Chris Castaldo*

---

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* October 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Camden Bucey**

*Talking with Catholics about the Gospel: A Guide for Evangelicals*, by Chris Castaldo. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015, 192 pages, \$16.99, paper.

Two Roman Catholic churches are located within three miles of where my congregation assembles for worship. Many of my sheep frequently encour-

---

1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=507&issue\\_id=108](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=507&issue_id=108).

ter Catholics in the community, and others have Catholic family members or neighbors. Often I am asked for resources designed to help people gain a better grasp of contemporary Catholicism so they might know how to dialogue and evangelize intelligently. A little over a year ago, I was unaware of anything suitable for the task. The few resources that were initially promising missed the essence of post-Vatican II Catholicism. They failed to grasp the contours of contemporary Catholicism—often treating Catholicism as a monolithic whole rather than the variegated community it has become.

That all changed with the publication of Gregg Allison's *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* (Crossway, 2014), followed soon after by Chris Castaldo's *Talking with Catholics about the Gospel: A Guide for Evangelicals* (Zondervan, 2015). Although these books are similar, I encourage you to read both of them. Rather than being competitors, they serve as excellent complements that may be used in tandem to help our understanding of and outreach to Catholics. I suggest reading the introductions to both books, and then proceeding to read the remainder of Castaldo's volume before turning to Allison's.

Chris Castaldo serves as lead pastor of New Covenant Church in Naperville, Illinois. Raised an Italian Catholic in Long Island, his personal history helps him understand Catholics better than most do. His theological research, combined with his ongoing ministry to Catholics, affords him great depth in reflecting upon Catholic theology and developing strategies for interacting with Catholics.

In *Talking with Catholics about the Gospel*, Castaldo aims to speak the truth in love to Catholics, successfully proclaiming Christ while avoiding unnecessary strife. He emphasizes an approach of grace and truth (John 1:14), looking to the ministry of our incarnate Lord, who “responded with the utmost charity and discernment, refusing to allow a humanly engineered wedge to separate these virtues” (13). This important lesson underscores our understanding of gospel truth and the appropriate manner of communicating it. While we may assent to this idea at the conceptual level, it nonetheless

may prove difficult to know what specific form these interactions might take. Castaldo helps us immensely with practical examples and helpful suggestions based on years of firsthand experience.

In his chapter “Understanding Catholics,” Castaldo demonstrates a sensitivity to the diversity of Catholicism by offering a helpful taxonomy of different types of Catholics in America: traditional, evangelical, and cultural. This is the book's unique value and the author's greatest service to evangelical readers. Castaldo offers strategies for speaking with and reaching each type.

Toward the end of the book, Castaldo addresses the top ten questions about Catholicism. In this section he treats several theological issues including common misconceptions of the Mass and the relationship of the Protestant doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone to official Catholic teaching. He also addresses several important practical questions, such as whether Protestants and Catholics should marry and how evangelicals may be more welcoming of Catholics and former Catholics in worship.

Many of these sections are organized and formatted for quick perusal, which allows the book to be used as a handbook or field guide. Readers may return to applicable sections in times of need. Even so, the book is not reducible to such use. Castaldo provides a developed explanation of contemporary Catholicism, not merely a list of talking points.

Readers will benefit from chapters that treat Catholic history since the sixteenth century and the similarities and differences between Catholics and Protestants. In order to encourage fruitful conversations, we must understand how we have arrived at our present context. Catholic and Protestant relations have a storied history. Rehearsing this history will help us to affirm our shared concerns and beliefs, while also acknowledging our profound differences. This is requisite to the development of strong relationships through which the gospel may be embodied and more effectively proclaimed.

Our churches will be served well by reading *Talking with Catholics about the Gospel*, especially



if they act upon it. Castaldo is not concerned merely with transmitting information. He desires for us to put our newly gained knowledge to use for the sake of the kingdom. We must develop the relationships that communicate the grace and truth of our Savior, who is the cornerstone and head of his body, the church. ☺

**Camden Bucey** is pastor of Hope Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Grayslake, Illinois.

## Divine Covenants and Moral Order

by *David VanDrunen*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* November 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Carl Trueman**

*Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law*, by David VanDrunen. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014, 594 pages, paper, \$45.00.

David VanDrunen's *Divine Covenants and Moral Order* is a dense work of great learning and significance. One of the obvious implications of the collapse of (for want of a better term) "Christian values" in wider society is that the world in which we live is increasingly set in opposition to the traditional teaching of the Christian churches. This means that churches will need to justify better to their own people the ethical stands they take, and

that means that pastors will have to be much better versed in ethics than has previously been the case. Setting aside the chaos created by the politics of sexual identity, on any given day a pastor could be confronted with an ethical question of a complexity unknown to previous generations.

VanDrunen is well known both as an advocate of a Reformed version of natural law theory and as a proponent of Two Kingdoms theology. Both play their role in this book, which functions as the biblical-theological sequel to his earlier historical study of natural law in the Reformed tradition.

In Part One of the work, he looks at natural law in the covenant of creation and in the Noahic covenant. This provides the basis for what are, in effect, biblical case studies: the judgment meted out on Sodom and the justice in Gerar relative to the incident of Abimelech and Sarah, judgments against the nations in the prophets, and then natural law in Rom. 1:18–2:26. In Part Two, he examines natural law in the Abrahamic covenant, Sinai, the Wisdom literature, and the new covenant people of the church.

Perhaps the most vital foundation of VanDrunen's case is his interpretation of the Noahic covenant, a point that marks his special contribution to natural law theory. For him, this covenant is not salvific and, thus, not part of the overall economy of the covenant of grace. Instead, it is a covenant designed to preserve the human race via a minimalist ethic. One might say that it is, humanly speaking, a pragmatic move on the part of God to provide a basic framework for ethical behavior within fallen creation. This then allows human beings to coexist, to survive, and thus provide a context within which God's special people might operate and his larger purposes might be brought to fruition.

In rooting general human ethics in the Noahic covenant, VanDrunen does two things. First, he avoids making himself vulnerable to accusations of allowing ethics to stand somehow independent of God and his revelation. The image of God and the Noahic covenant both serve to underscore the fact that human beings are at no point to be considered independent of their creator. Second, VanDrunen

1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=518&issue\\_id=109](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=518&issue_id=109).

considerably narrows the basis for what we might call social ethics. Far from a theonomic imposition of even the case law of the Old Testament, there is here only a very slim ethical obligation. VanDrunen sees the three explicit Noahic obligations as a recapitulation of the terms of the original covenant of creation, and, thus, as connecting to the law of creation.

I find the case for the Noahic covenant as standing outside of the economy of grace to be persuasive. The connection with the creation mandate seems sound. The purpose is clearly preservation, with no reference, either explicit or even implicit, to any kind of eschatological consummation. Certainly, God saved Noah from the flood, and thus saved the human race, but there are no connections to any greater salvation. Its universal scope makes it a lasting ethical mandate.

Where many readers may find that they differ with VanDrunen is in his argument in Part Two that the Mosaic covenant is to be understood as the republication of the covenant of creation, specifically designed so that Israel might fail and, thus, to underscore the significance of the fall of Adam.

This is where I sense my own lack of contemporary systematic and biblical competence. I am not sure why Sinai needs to be reduced to republication, which VanDrunen seems eager to do. Certainly one function of the Sinai law is to bring Israel to its knees in humility before God, but it also seems that the law fulfills other functions. It is promulgated in the context of redemption from Egypt and against the background of the Lord carrying his people through the wilderness as a man carries his son (Deut. 1:31). Further, the use of the law in the New Testament as giving shape to the applications which Paul, for example, draws from the indicatives of Christ's life and work, would seem to me at least to require that Sinai is not reduced simply to a recapitulation of the mandate in the Garden and Israel to yet another piece of evidence of human depravity and failure.

In the final chapter, "The Natural Order Penultimized," VanDrunen develops his positive ethical thinking within the context of a Pauline "now and not yet" structure. He argues that in Christ

the church is freed in an ultimate sense from the natural law. However, because Christians live in two worlds—the world to come and the world as it is now—their lives must inevitably exhibit a certain tension.

It is within this tension that VanDrunen sketches out a basic ethic for Christians living in a non-Christian world. Heterosexual marriage is affirmed, as are the basic principles of justice, civil authority, the need to work as a member of society and to show a certain respect for the moral judgments of pagans. While some may find the latter theoretically shocking, it is surely the pragmatic reality of much of life. Christians do share a lot of moral convictions with, say, the common and Roman law codes and with many of our unbelieving neighbors. In addition, VanDrunen points to biblical foundations in Paul's thinking for such. This is not a naïve inclusivism or Pelagianism which he is proposing.

My one caveat in this is that the world in which we live is growing ethically ever more diverse and complicated. It does seem that each year brings less and less consensus on what might be deemed moral absolutes, or even moral preferences. In addition, ethical thinking today seems to have a profoundly aesthetic dimension to it where it has no need to offer any kind of publicly legitimate rationale, but merely appeal to taste—taste which is so often shaped more by the narratives presented in the televisual media than in anything approaching rigorous moral discussion or dialogue with long-standing moral conventions and traditions. In this new world of moral discourse, VanDrunen offers the Christian reader a good starting point, but I wonder whether the combination of the complexity of moral choices and the collapse of moral discourse will mean that the natural law and the Noahic covenant will prove too slender a foundation for believers to operate with confidence in the growing moral anarchy of the public sphere. Not that they are inadequate in themselves, but that the move from them to knowing how to respond to many modern ethical questions is not particularly straightforward.

This is an important book with which I have

much sympathy. Anthropology and ethics are set to be the two most pressing issues of the next twenty years for Christians, especially pastors and elders. VanDrunen is to be thanked for offering a profound contribution exemplifying one way of approaching these topics. ☺

**Carl Trueman** is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church serving as pastor of Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, Ambler, Pennsylvania, and as a professor of historical theology and church history at Westminster Theological Seminary, Glenside, Pennsylvania.

## A Clarification of the Review of *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* November 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **David VanDrunen**

*Editor's Note:* Carl Trueman had this gracious response to David VanDrunen's clarification of Trueman's review:

I am grateful to my good friend David for his critique of my review and for the clarification of his position. It seems evident to me that I did not present his view with the balance it requires and I am most happy to concede the point. The difference between us is one of emphasis rather than substance, it seems, and there is no real distance between friends here. I thus find myself in the oddly pleasur-

able position of being happy to acknowledge that I was wrong on the points concerned.

This is a model of how Christians ought to deal with misunderstandings and differences.

\* \* \*

I am grateful for Carl Trueman's thoughtful and generous review of my book, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law*. In most respects an author couldn't ask for a better critically appreciative review of a long and serious work.

I am writing this brief note of clarification, however, to correct a few of Trueman's comments describing my view of the Mosaic covenant. If this concerned a small matter of little interest to people, I would not bother following up in this way. But since *Ordained Servant* is a publication of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (of which both of us are ministers), and the General Assembly of the OPC has appointed a study committee to report on issues related to the Mosaic covenant, I believe I should make clear that I unambiguously disavow certain views attributed to me in the review.

When reading the review (which I saw only after it had been posted on [opc.org](http://opc.org)), I was initially disappointed to see it claim that I understand the Mosaic covenant "as" the republication of the covenant of creation. As a general rule, I avoid *identifying* the Mosaic covenant with such a republication, emphasizing that in its essence the Mosaic covenant is an administration of the covenant of grace. Thus, I made this point a number of times in *Divine Covenants and Moral Order* (e.g., pp. 12, 266–68, 284–85). I write, for example: "I consider the Mosaic covenant a covenant of grace (or, specifically, as an administration of the one covenant of grace spanning redemptive history), along the lines of the Westminster Confession of Faith (7.5–6)" (pp. 284–85). In fact, I purposefully did not use the term "republication" in *Divine Covenants and Moral Order* to describe the relationship of the covenant of creation and Mosaic covenant. Instead, I described a "recapitulation" of Adam's probation and fall as part of the larger purposes of the Mosaic covenant.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=519&issue\\_id=109](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=519&issue_id=109).

Of greater concern to me, the review states that in my book Sinai is “reduced to” republication and “reduced simply” to a recapitulation. I heartily reject such a view, and in *Divine Covenants and Moral Order* I tried to emphasize that fact. For example, on the first two pages of my chapter on natural law and Mosaic law (pp. 282–83), I use italics twice to add emphasis: “I argue that *one* of the chief purposes of the Mosaic covenant was to make Israel’s experience a recapitulation...;” and, “The Mosaic law served, *in part*, to govern Israel’s existence in a way that mirrored how the natural law governs all the peoples of the world in their identification with Adam.” My extended discussion on page 284 argues strongly against a reductionistic view of the Mosaic covenant. On the top of p. 285 I say again that I understand the recapitulatory aspect of the Mosaic covenant to be in service to the gracious work of redemption administered in this covenant. I quote the helpful statement of Geerhardus Vos, who summarized a prominent view in the Reformed tradition (with which I am in sympathy): “At Sinai it was not the ‘bare’ law that was given, but a reflection of the covenant of works revived, as it were, in the interests of the covenant of grace continued at Sinai” (*Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 255). While I understand that this view is disputed among Reformed theologians, it is anything but a reductionistic approach to the Mosaic covenant. ☺

**David VanDrunen** is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and serves as the Robert B. Strimple professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics at Westminster Seminary California.

# For the Glory of God

by Daniel I. Block

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* December 2015<sup>1</sup>

by David A. Booth

*For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship*, by Daniel I. Block. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014, 432 pages, \$34.99.

Worshipping the Lord is the most important thing that we do, so the Bible is filled with teaching that bears either directly or indirectly on individual and corporate worship. The vast quantity of scriptural material on worship, which includes every historical period and every genre, makes attempting a biblical theology of worship a daunting task. Therefore most books on worship focus on reclaiming aspects of the historical tradition, specific topics such as the sacraments, or pragmatic discussions designed to make worship more appealing to the communities in which we minister. While such studies may be of significant value to the church, surely those committed to the core Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* will want to develop a theology of worship that flows organically from the totality of what the Bible teaches. What we need is a work from a scholar with a profound understanding of the Old Testament and how it applies to modern Christians. Ideally, such a work would reflect the wisdom gained from decades of committed worship with God’s people. It would seek to reform our practices to bring them into greater conformity with God’s Word, and it would be crafted with clear prose that is a delight to read. *For the Glory of God* is that book.

This volume clearly owes its existence, in part, to Block’s deep concerns about many of the practices that pass for private and corporate worship in the evangelical world. Block agrees with

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=522&issue\\_id=110](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=522&issue_id=110).

the five maladies that professor Edith Humphrey<sup>2</sup> has identified as plaguing worship in the North American church:

- (1) trivializing worship by a preoccupation with atmospherics/mood (it's all about how worship makes me feel); (2) misdirecting worship by having a human-centered rather than God-centered focus (it's all about me, the worshiper); (3) deadening worship by substituting stones for bread (the loss of the Word of God); (4) perverting worship with emotional, self-indulgent experiences at the expense of true liturgy; and (5) exploiting worship with market driven values. (xii)

Although this volume is specific in its criticisms, the book is primarily a positive exposition of what the Bible as a whole teaches about worship.

The first chapter develops a working definition of worship: "True worship involves reverential human acts of submission and homage before the divine Sovereign in response to his gracious revelation of himself and in accord with his will" (23). This definition is unpacked throughout the book in twelve additional chapters along with three helpful appendices. Block rightly rejects the notion that "true worship" is mainly what takes place inside of the individual in favor of a holistic approach that involves the totality of our lives (5). The book is organized thematically. After developing "The Object of Worship" and the "Subject of Worship," Block discusses "Daily Life as Worship," "Family Life and Work as Worship," "The Ordinances as Worship," "Hearing and Proclaiming the Scriptures in Worship," "Prayer as Worship," "Music as Worship," "Sacrifice and Offerings as Worship," "The Drama of Worship," "The Design and Theology of Sacred Space," and "Leaders in Worship." The discussions are consistently and refreshingly theocentric. Confessionally Reformed Christians will appreciate how attentive Block is to listening to what the Holy Spirit is teaching us from the first three quarters of the Bible rather

than treating the Old Testament as though it were God's Word *emeritus*.

There are remarkably few weaknesses in this work, given the vast scope of the project and Block's willingness to consistently offer his best judgment on each topic rather than blandly acknowledging that committed Christians hold diverse interpretations. However, readers may wish to note three weaknesses in the book.

First, Orthodox Presbyterians will disagree with his views on baptism, which include immersion and limiting the sacrament to those who make a credible profession of faith. One surprise is that a scholar of Block's abilities would repeat the notion that Jesus coming up "out of (*ek* ἐκ) the water (Mark 1:10; cf. Acts 8:38–39) suggests support for the immersionist interpretation" (147), when it almost certainly refers to Jesus coming out of the water at the side of the river rather than standing erect after being immersed in baptism. This can be seen by looking at the parallel passage in Matthew 3:16 that uses the preposition *from* (*apo* ἀπό) for Jesus coming out of the water. While both *ek* and *apo* can be used for coming out of the side of the river, it is nearly impossible to see how *apo* could be used to refer to Jesus emerging from the Jordan after being immersed. Furthermore, Block compares the baptism of Jesus with the baptism of the eunuch in Acts 8:38–39 without noting the plural verbs. Yet, "they both went down into the water" and "they came up out of the water" clearly indicate the transition between water and land and not the mode of baptism.

Second, Block seems to confuse the doctrine of divine impassability with the erroneous notion that God lacks emotions. He, therefore, rejects WCF 2.1 for what it was never intended to teach (203).

Third, Professor Block's insightful and robust treatment of the Sabbath lacks an adequate presentation of the New Testament passages which make clear that the Sabbath day has been moved from the seventh day to the first day of the week. At one point he writes: "In Acts the apostles never suggest that the seventh-day Sabbath does not apply to Christians or that it is to be replaced by

---

<sup>2</sup> Humphrey is William F. Orr Professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.



an alternate day” (278). The lack of an express command in the New Testament to move the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day of the week apparently leaves Professor Block reluctant to bind anyone’s conscience to maintaining Sunday as the prescribed day of Sabbath rest. Orthodox Presbyterians, while recognizing the lack of an explicit command, would deduce the shift to a Sunday Sabbath as a good and necessary consequence of the Apostolic pattern and, therefore, obligatory for all Christians. These are relatively minor criticisms for such an ambitious book.

This volume is overflowing with extraordinary biblical insights presented in a clear and balanced manner. I picked up this volume expecting to learn a little bit more about worship. I put it down knowing the Lord and his Word better. What more could one ask? This is not only the finest book that I have ever read on worship, it is one of the best Christian books I have read in the past several years. I could not recommend this work more highly. ☺

**David A. Booth** is an Orthodox Presbyterian minister serving as pastor of Merrimack Valley Presbyterian Church in North Andover, Massachusetts.

## The Crisis of British Protestantism

by Hunter Powell

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* December 2015<sup>1</sup>

by Ryan M. McGraw

*The Crisis of British Protestantism: Church Power in the Puritan Revolution 1638–44* (Politics,

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=523&issue\\_id=110](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=523&issue_id=110).

Culture and Society in Early Modern Britain), by Hunter Powell. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2015, 264 pages, \$105.00.

This is likely the most significant work written to date on the thorny subject of church power in British Reformed orthodoxy. Powell focuses on debates over the nature of church power from 1638 to 1644 (2). He aims to redefine and to clarify categories related to debates over church government at the Westminster Assembly. He does so by treating primarily the views of the five so-called “dissenting brethren” in relation to the Scottish commissioners, setting both in their historical context. This is such a paradigm-shifting work that, in spite of its price, it is one of the most important books that anyone interested the Westminster Assembly and its theology could read. It shows how the Westminster debates over church government were not as neat and tidy as many have assumed and how the question of church polity fits into the broader context of Reformed orthodox theology.

This book challenges historical conceptions of Presbyterian polity at the Westminster Assembly. Powell modifies the common narrative of church government debates at Westminster, which often treats these debates as an exercise in how long it took the assembly to fall in line with the Scots. Instead, Powell shows how the Scots achieved a high degree of unity with the Apologists (Congregationalists who were known later as the Dissenting Brethren) over the question of the seat of church power.

While English Presbyterians in the assembly were divided over whether church power was seated in the local church and was then communicated to presbyteries, or whether church power was seated in presbyteries and was communicated to particular churches, the Apologists and the Scots agreed that Christ communicated church power to the congregation as a whole and to its elders directly and in two distinct ways. According to men such as Samuel Rutherford on the Presbyterian side and Jeremiah Burroughs on the side of the Apologists, the only significant difference that existed between them resided in the power of synods,



especially with respect to excommunication. The Apologists denied that synods could execute this censure, while the Scots affirmed that they could. However, many English Presbyterians opposed both the Scots and the Apologists by denying that the elders of local congregations could excommunicate members without a synodical act. This meant that both the Scots and the Apologists held minority positions at the assembly.

At the end of the day, the real “grand debate” at the assembly was not over Presbyterianism vs. Congregationalism, but between the assembly as a whole and Erastian opponents, which included debates among Presbyterians over the proper seat of church power. The Scots held the tenuous position of attempting to accommodate the Apologists on the one side and of preventing the fracture of the Presbyterian majority on the other side over the question of the seat of church power. The Scots agreed with the Apologists on church power, but they agreed with the Presbyterian majority on the governmental power of presbyteries.

This work gives us a unique window into debates at the Westminster Assembly. Part of the reason why Powell’s research creates such a seismic shift in how we read assembly debates on church government lies in the sources that he used. Previous research relied on pamphlets written by authors outside of the assembly, rather than on records of assembly debates and the writings of the Westminster divines. Powell guides readers by the hand through the assembly debates in a way that makes history come to life. The reader can virtually feel the tension in the air and recognize the temperaments and personalities of the divines in their proceedings. He shows that all primary sources are not equal and that we gain a different picture of events when we follow the actors in the story instead of the spectators in the crowd commenting on the play.

This does not mean that his historiography is flawless. In comparing the polity of the famed Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676) with the Congregationalists at Westminster and in highlighting Voetius’s enthusiastic endorsement of the Congregationalist John Cotton’s *Keys of the Kingdom*

(1644), Powell makes almost no appeal to primary sources. He also repeatedly refers to the Netherlands as “Holland,” confusing two Dutch provinces with the entire region. However, his treatment of the vital subject of church government at Westminster gives a picture of the development of varied versions of Presbyterian polity that Presbyterian ministers in particular bypass to their great detriment.

This book is just the kind of history that Presbyterian churches need. It forces readers to listen to the Westminster divines and to assess them on their own terms and in their own world. Modern readers may not always like what they find in reading books like this one. Yet, this work is necessary to help explain what the Westminster Assembly did and did not intend to say in its affirmation of Presbyterian polity. Presbyterians were not all cut from the same cloth, and not all Congregationalists were as far away from some forms of Presbyterianism as we may tend to think. Above all, this book provides us with an admirable example of how the Scots and the Apologists pursued catholic unity in their theology without threatening their distinctives. It also provides us with a model of doctrinal precision, spiritual maturity, and catholic charity that has potential to serve the church well today.

Ⓢ

**Ryan McGraw** is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church serving as an associate professor of systematic theology at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

# ✦ Servant Reading

## Review Articles

### Countercultural Spirituality

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* January 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Gregory E. Reynolds**

*Schaeffer on the Christian Life: Countercultural Spirituality* by William Edgar. Wheaton: Crossway, 2013, 206 pages, \$17.99, paper.

*Schaeffer on the Christian Life* is part of a Crossway series titled “The Theologians on the Christian Life,” which “provides accessible introductions to the great teachers on the Christian life gaining wisdom from the past for life in the present.” The series includes: Augustine, Bavinck, Bonhoeffer, Calvin, Edwards, Newton, Luther, Owen, Packer, Warfield, and Wesley. What makes Schaeffer unique is the context in which he taught and lived the Christian life—L’Abri Fellowship, a community where living and learning were intimately connected.

Bill Edgar is well qualified to write on this topic since he became a Christian through Schaeffer’s ministry and lived and worked with the Schaeffers at L’Abri. Edgar himself is an important thinker and apologist in the Reformed tradition.

The book’s ten chapters are divided into three parts. Following Edgar’s “Personal Introduction to

Francis Schaeffer” is the first part, “The Man and His Times,” a biographical account. The second part, “True Spirituality,” unpacks Schaeffer’s essential principles of the doctrine of the Christian life. Finally, in part three, “Trusting God for All of Life,” he focuses on prayer and guidance, affliction, life in the church, and engaging the world. Edgar’s personal biographical account is artfully woven into these topics.

Edgar begins with a personal introduction that forms an important ingredient in this account of Schaeffer’s ministry. Edgar first went to L’Abri at the urging of his Harvard professor and friend Harold O. J. Brown at the age of nineteen in 1964 (18–19). He was immediately impressed with the warm welcome he encountered. This inviting and intelligent community was the context where the Lord brought Edgar to genuine faith. He observed that prayer was not a ritual but a reality (22). Here was orthodox Christianity embodied in a true community. Furthermore, Schaeffer exhibited a love for people that attracted them to the love of God (23). “The extraordinary combination of community life and intellectual challenge was essential to the fabric of life in Huémoz” (25).

Schaeffer has often been criticized for simplistic generalization and a lack of academic carefulness. Edgar makes a strong case for his brilliance despite a lack of formal scholarship. He collected “insights from Scripture, people, articles, clippings, and his own hunches” (25).

He had a “nose” for generalizations. Occasionally they were over simple or even mistaken. But mostly he had a sense of what was reasonable and what was not, and would explore his ideas accordingly. He possessed a considerable knowledge of the arts and was able to converse about them or most any other subject with just about anybody who would come across his path. (25–26)

Edgar does not gloss over Schaeffer’s weaknesses, but emphasizes the ideas and practices that readers ought to consider and emulate. Nor is he afraid to discuss controversial aspects of Schaeffer’s thought. He recounts Edmund Clowney’s attempt

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=462&issue\\_id=101](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=462&issue_id=101).

at a meeting of the minds between Schaeffer and apologist Cornelius Van Til (29). Schaeffer believed Van Til did not give enough place to “evidences in arguments for the Christian faith. Van Til, on the other hand, worried that Schaeffer had slouched toward rationalism” (29). Edgar’s article “Two Christian Warriors: Cornelius Van Til and Francis A. Schaeffer Compared”<sup>2</sup> confirms that his appreciation for Schaeffer is not hagiographic. For example, in commenting on the documentary *How Should We Then Live?* which Schaeffer produced with his son, Franky, together with Billy Zeoli of Gospel Films, Edgar observes, “To be honest, it is not the best documentary ever produced. Various portions of it lack professionalism” (33). Yet, as Edgar goes on to say, nothing like this had ever been done in the evangelical world, and its wide viewing in American churches stimulated excellent discussion.

Chapter 2, “The Journey to L’Abri,” is a concise summary of Schaeffer’s development leading up to the L’Abri ministry. It is filled with many interesting and little-known tidbits like, “Machen gave his very last exam to Fran, who had to sit for it by Machen’s sick bed” (45). Most helpful is the array of influences catalogued by Edgar. Van Til, particularly in his critique of Karl Barth, shaped Schaeffer’s thinking about neoorthodoxy (44). While on an exploratory mission for the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions in 1947, Schaeffer either met or heard such luminaries as André Lamorte, Willem Visser’t Hooft, Reinhold Niebuhr, Ole Hallesby, G. C. Berkouwer, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones (49). And then there were the influence and friendship of surgeon C. Everett Koop (50) and art historian Hans Rookmaaker (51).

Edgar’s analysis of Schaeffer’s crisis of faith is very compelling. First, as suggested by biographer Barry Hankins, Schaeffer needed to move beyond the influence of mentor professor Allan MacRae. More significantly, it began to trouble Schaeffer that disagreement among the Reformed was often

not seasoned with love. “‘The Movement’ was stressing doctrinal gatekeeping at the expense of love” (54). Finally, a letter of sharp rebuke over Schaeffer’s critique of neoorthodoxy from Karl Barth must have troubled him, since Barth censured him for lack of an open mind and a loving attitude (54). These three elements combined to give Schaeffer a lot to think about.

Thus began a struggle to reconsider the very truth of Christianity. Over a number months he concluded that what he had believed was indeed true and began to enjoy a “newfound spiritual reality,” which formed the basis for his book *True Spirituality* (55).

In chapter 3, “L’Abri and Beyond,” the ministry of “The Shelter” is described. At this point especially, the writings of Edith Schaeffer become important. Her story of the founding of the ministry, *L’Abri*, her larger history, *Tapestry*, and her family letters, all form an intricate and interesting picture of the life of this community. Its purpose was “to show forth by demonstration, in our life and work, the existence of God” (62). Prominent in that life were daily discussions about life’s meaning (61).

The section on Schaeffer’s eclectic, and thus unique, apologetics is a useful summary of the way he approached people with biblical truth (64–67). His understanding of history follows the pattern of decline and fall, à la Edward Gibbons, and thus has its weaknesses, especially in Schaeffer’s identification of the “line of despair.” While I have always found Van Til’s rationalist-irrationalist dynamic approach a better lens through which to view all of history and man’s place in it, Schaeffer does properly identify a shift in the nineteenth-century view of truth.<sup>3</sup> Edgar makes the same point in the final chapter of the book, while suggesting that Schaeffer may have had in mind the shift from modernism to the “postmodern condition”

---

3 Edgar, “Two Christian Warriors,” 70. Edgar cites Robert Knudsen’s balanced assessment of Schaeffer’s view of history. Knudsen acknowledges the shift toward irrationalism in Hegel and Kierkegaard, but wonders why apostate philosophy was any better before the employment of dialectic.

---

2 *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 57–80.

(178). Schaeffer was also prescient in identifying postmodern relativism earlier than most cultural critics. And, although not a strict transcendentalist in apologetic methodology, he did believe in the importance of presuppositions at the foundation of a person's worldview.

Although he may not have used a fully transcendental method, he had an uncanny way of identifying the contradiction between a person's basic commitments and that person's real life, and thus the impossibility of living successfully in God's world with an unbelieving philosophy. (65)

The most well-known example used by Schaeffer was the inconsistency of the chaotic atonal music of composer John Cage, whose philosophy was that life was "purposeless play," and the orderly precision with which he picked mushrooms (26).

One area of possible disagreement with Edgar is the degree to which Schaeffer changed his views or emphases throughout his ministry.<sup>4</sup> Edgar tends to minimize the changes. Ken Myers distinguishes between an earlier "bohemian" (hippie) Schaeffer and a later "bourgeois" (activist) Schaeffer.<sup>5</sup> Biographer Barry Hankins contends that Schaeffer's ministry was not simply divided in two, but that Schaeffer's strength was to adapt to his environment through three distinct periods in his ministry. In the 1930s and 1940s he was an American Fundamentalist separatist; then during the 1950s and 1960s he was the European Evangelical apologist; and finally in the 1970s and 1980s he returned to America as a Christian Right activist (xiii). I tend to favor this taxonomy. In Edgar's favor he gives evidence that examples of the activist phase can be

---

4 Gregory E. Reynolds, "Francis Schaeffer: Reformed Fundamentalist?" OS 18 (2009): 152–58 [OSO Oct. 2009], a review article based on Barry Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

5 Ken Myers, "The Bohemian Temptation: Francis Schaeffer and the Agenda of Cultural Apologetics" (November 2004), 2, 8. This article was originally presented at a gathering to honor the twentieth anniversary of Schaeffer's death. The event was sponsored by the Witherspoon Fellows program of the Family Research Council, but the article is no longer available on their website.

seen in the apologetic phase. For example, Schaeffer lectured on theologian Rousas John Rushdoony, favoring his "conservative assessment of the American constitution" (75). Here Edgar does hint at a change in which political themes, while present in the middle phase of ministry became more prominent in his later ministry (75). Furthermore, Edgar reminds us that in the most political of his writings, *A Christian Manifesto* (1981), Schaeffer "carefully warned that 'we should not wrap Christianity in our national flag'" and that in his views on civil disobedience "he generally sides with the magisterial Reformers (Luther, Zwingli, Calvin)" (76).

Clearly the greatest contrast was between the early McIntire Fundamentalist phase and everything that followed. "More than ever, in his later days he insisted that church separation, if necessary, always be conducted with love and forbearance" (77).<sup>6</sup>

Part 2 considers true spirituality proper. The chapter titled "Fundamentals" begins with a quote from Machen, "If our doctrine be true and our lives be wrong, how terrible is our sin! For then we have brought despoilment upon the truth itself" (81). Schaeffer stressed the utter importance of sanctification, which is the process of growing in acting upon our knowledge of the person and the work of Christ (83).

At the foundation of the Christian life is the authority of the Bible as God's Word (85). I remember having a conversation with a rebellious minister's son who said Schaeffer was at heart a Fundamentalist because he believed that the Bible was infallible and that Christianity was the only way to God. I am thankful that Schaeffer never wavered from this core belief and demonstrated that legalism and a lack of biblical love, not biblical authority, were the problems with Fundamentalism.

One of Schaeffer's great strengths was his "worldview spirituality." Free of Christian jargon,

---

6 Schaeffer's vocal opposition to the merger of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1975 indicates that the separatist impulse had not entirely disappeared.

Schaeffer was able to communicate the Christian worldview in seven basic ways. 1) The triune God existed before creation, 2) the visible and invisible universe is God's creation, 3) the Fall radically changed the course of history, 4) the incarnate Son is central to all biblical truth, 5) people receive Jesus Christ as Savior, once-for-all, by bringing nothing but faith to trust him, 6) the Christian life of sanctification is a process, and 7) that process ends in glory (88–91). “All in all,” Edgar concludes, “Schaeffer was a Reformed eclectic” (92).

Schaeffer was above all a biblical realist. He believed that the Bible teaches us the way things really are in the visible and invisible realms, God being the final reality (92–94). “He was deeply concerned to experience the presence of God and then show others the way to live in that same reality” (95).

Among the realities, for Schaeffer, was freedom in the Christian life. Here is where he parted company from Fundamentalism in the sharpest way. But in emphasizing freedom, he did not wander into the perilous territory of antinomianism as the two sections of the thirteenth chapter, *True Spirituality*, reveal: 1) “Freedom Now from the Bonds of Sin,” and 2) “Freedom Now from the Results of the Bonds of Sin” (98). The Ten Commandments, therefore “represent the law of love” (99). Growing in sanctification means that we become what God intended us to be as his image bearers (105). Here Edgar perceptively shows that Schaeffer could have used a strong dose of the eschatology of Geerhardus Vos. Schaeffer was unclear that redemption is not a mere restoration, but an eschatological giant step forward in the maturity of God's image bearer. The new heavens and the new earth are far more than a return to the original Edenic state, but rather a consummation of God's original purposes beyond Eden, as symbolized in the tree of life (105–6).

In the final chapter of this second section, “Applications,” Edgar fleshes out five implications of true spirituality. While eschewing perfectionism, Schaeffer believed that the separation from self cause by sin can be substantially overcome through the application of the finished work of

Christ. But this does not mean that we should take sin lightly. We may achieve practical victory now (110–11). Schaeffer praised John Wesley's serious quest for holiness of life, but he rejected his perfectionism. He was also critical of what he called “cold orthodoxy” in some Reformed people. Although Edgar understands what Schaeffer was getting at, he wisely corrects misunderstanding when he cites the Reformed ideal as “a marvelous marriage of high orthodoxy and warm piety” (112).

A second implication is the importance of the inner life. The centrality of the mind in Schaeffer's view of the Christian life at times “seems an overreach” observes Edgar. However, he also emphasized that truth is more than merely rational and that even the mind has been effected by sin (113). Although Schaeffer does not comment on the effect of cultural forms in influencing the thought-life in terms of the sociology of knowledge, his emphasis on the importance of community and the church in Christian formation demonstrated that he understood the Christian life to be an embodied life (115).

Along with the importance of living concretely in the present (a third implication), while trusting God, we may also learn from unbelievers. While Schaeffer does not use the term “common grace,” he does refer to having common cause on certain issues with unbelievers, that is, “cobelligerence” (117).

After a fourth implication on “substantial healing” psychologically, he concludes with the importance of loving our neighbor. Schaeffer detested the impersonal approach of much evangelical evangelism. He believed that each person should be treated as a human being, made in God's image (121). Only an authentic spirituality will have any worthwhile effect on the culture in which we live (122).

In Part 3, “Trusting God for All of Life,” Edgar covers the major terrain of prayer and guidance, affliction, the church, and the world.

Edgar's devotion of an entire chapter to the subject of prayer is simply a reflection of its importance in Schaeffer's life and ministry. “Besides the intellectual content and warmth of the commu-



nity, what struck most visitors, including this one, in the early days of L'Abri was that everything was bathed in an atmosphere of prayer" (125). This was especially notable in the writings of Edith Schaeffer, but something that both she and Fran believed to be foundational to the Christian life, and the only explanation for L'Abri's existence, because prayer connects the believer with the "God who is there." Prayer is a constant and urgent necessity (129). But it must not be reduced to a psychological reality (130).

Directly connected with prayer is guidance. The Schaeffers believed that God would guide them in particular situations, not with direct revelation, but by giving them wisdom to act in particular ways (136). This was always mixed with simply trusting God in what they were doing. At times the Schaeffers' approach to funding seems pietistic, but it was probably more a reaction to some of the gimmicky fund-raising techniques they had observed and soundly rejected. Furthermore, they did not recommend their way of approaching funding as the only way, but set a profound example of the importance of really trusting God to provide the means of ministry (137).

Edith's book *Affliction*, which articulates the Schaeffers' convictions on this difficult subject, deals in biblical realism, affirming both God's sovereignty and human freedom. One thing is certain, "evil is utterly real" (142). Schaeffer challenges modern existentialist thinking in his first book, *The God Who Is There* (1968), as Edgar explains:

In a manner suggestive of Cornelius Van Til, Schaeffer states that there are really only two possible explanations for the problem of evil. The first is that evil has a metaphysical cause. That is, our basic problem is our finitude. The other is that it is a moral issue. If our problem truly is a metaphysical one, then we are without hope, for there is no real way out of finitude, and no real cure for cruelty, because there is no way to identify something as cruel or not cruel. (142–43)

For Schaeffer this was a life-and-death issue. There can be no social justice without absolutes (144).

But this denial of the historic Fall, which leaves people stuck in the reality of man in his fallenness, should lead us to compassionate humility. We should weep for sinners. The world the way it is is not normal, Schaeffer insisted (145). While some may think Schaeffer's Calvinistic diagnosis of humanity's fallen condition is harsh, "the effect is really just the opposite. The new theology's approach and the pantheistic response, in which evil is an illusion, are in fact the cruel ones, offering no way out" (146). This aspect of Schaeffer's apologetic is one of his greatest strengths.

The penultimate chapter deals with life in the church. While Schaeffer's ecclesiology was not perfect, nor was it systematically articulated, he was seeking the church's return to spiritual authenticity. He called the church to do the Lord's work in the Lord's way, which is the title of one of his most famous sermons. He criticized the American church for compromising its identity with middle-class affluence and lifestyle (148). He was also critical of the church's lack of appreciation for beauty in worship and everyday life. He demonstrated that orthodoxy and creativity are not at odds (149–50). Furthermore, the church is a community of loving fellowship in which honest questions may be asked and should be answered, where genuine love is exhibited, especially through the exercise of forgiveness as an attitude toward others, and the ability to deal graciously with differences (151–54).

The message of the church must be biblical truth. "For Schaeffer, liberal theology resulted from following the trends in secular culture, only using religious language to express them" (155). "True truth," a Schaeffer coinage, was central to his quest for reform. Ever since the Western world had crossed the "line of despair," especially with the synthetic dialectical approach of philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, truth became relative (156). So Schaeffer believed that it was important to make sure people understand what we mean by truth as we set forth the claims of historic Christianity. Otherwise faith is meaningless (157).

While Schaeffer was not a theonomist, he did believe that the Mosaic civil law provides "a pattern and a base" for modern countries. Edgar



observes that Schaeffer is less supersessionist than the Westminster Confession, which refers to the expiration of the Mosaic civil laws (159). Thus, I would contend, when back in the American context, he became something of a moderate transformationist.

For the structure of the church, Schaeffer believed that there must be freedom within the bounds of biblical form (160–61). Edgar goes on to enumerate eight “structural norms that govern the visible church” in Schaeffer’s thinking (161–63). “His main interest ... is minimalism, that is, finding a few rules so as not to bind the Holy Spirit’s work in giving us freedom ... liberty to innovate wherever the Scripture does not speak” (163). The international church he helped found in 1954 was essentially New School Presbyterianism, although Edgar does not use this historical label for what he describes. I would agree with Edgar’s plea that we should not evaluate Schaeffer’s work by his ecclesiology, as Edgar suggests that Schaeffer was a revivalist and an evangelist first and foremost. But perhaps the Old School’s stricter ecclesiology, which does not compromise its principles in the face of the exigencies of the mission field, would have made a very good thing even better. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church has sought to do this in both the foreign and home mission fields.

The book concludes with Schaeffer’s engagement with the modern world. Schaeffer helped liberate many from the Bible-believing church’s separatist disdain for cultural and creative activity. The Schaeffers embraced the natural and eschewed plastic. Creativity in everyday life was encouraged. Edith’s book *Hidden Art* beautifully portrayed and encouraged such a life. For those raised with these values, acquired by common grace, it was very important to learn that the Bible didn’t require us to reject those sensibilities (167–69).

Under the heading “Revolutionary Christianity,” Edgar compares and contrasts Schaeffer with Abraham Kuyper, but most helpful is his description of Schaeffer’s revolutionary Christianity. First, it must be “hot,” as Marshall McLuhan defined that term. Rather than the cool, suggestive, subliminal messages of Madison Avenue, it must com-

municate simply and directly the historical, factual truth of the Bible (172–73). Edgar mistakenly claims that McLuhan “touted” cool communication (173), whereas he was actually a critic; after *The Mechanical Bride*, he claimed to be a mere observer of culture, simply seeking to navigate the new electronic world, and not a critic. Second, revolutionary Christianity must be compassionate. Schaeffer was especially concerned with racism among white evangelicals (174–75).

Schaeffer believed that the world could only be effectively transformed through revival and reformation. He often cited the social benefits that the revivals of Wesley and Whitefield produced. Reformation itself is a deeper transformation of culture (175). For Schaeffer did not envision a theocracy but a cultural consensus that respected God’s law (176). Edgar points out that Schaeffer’s contrast between the benefits of the Reformation and the liabilities of the Renaissance, which depended heavily on Jacob Burckhardt’s historiography, has been challenged by recent historians (176 n33).

Edgar’s section titled “Revival and Reformation” is a very helpful analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of Schaeffer’s apologetic, especially his critique of the situation on this side of what Schaeffer called “the line of despair.” Schaeffer’s main burden was to prophesy against the decline in Western civilization (177). Rather than placing religion at the center of this decline, as Kuyper did (171), he begins with philosophy (178). Science comes next, with existentialism and art following close behind (179). Then society itself breaks down. Edgar points out the difficulty of verifying Schaeffer’s taxonomy of decline, especially in the arts (179). However Schaeffer’s analysis of particular problematic themes, such as relativism and the dangers of social engineering, has proved very helpful in alerting the church to its need of developing critical skills. Schaeffer, unlike Van Til, was a nonacademic cultural critic and prophet, not an academic philosophical apologist.

Edgar points out that while Schaeffer was not fully Kuyperian in his approach, they did share the recognition of “the need for every portion of life to

be redeemed” (181). He goes on to briefly describe Schaeffer’s application of this idea to the spheres of family, business, the arts, the sciences, and politics (182–86). Schaeffer was “remarkably prescient about the contextualization in the arts,” encouraging artists to develop a style “appropriate to one’s own culture” (183). Regarding politics, Edgar observes, “Because he is a prophet, not a social analyst, Schaeffer’s material borders on the alarmist” (185). But in the end, Schaeffer is most concerned about “the increasing loss of humanness.” Schaeffer never wanted people to “be divided into a spiritual and a secular self” (186). While I balk at the idea of redeeming anything but people, I think Schaeffer was speaking in a more general way about both thinking and living as Christians in every arena of life, rather than seeking to make the arena of life Christian.

What we should take away from the Schaeffers’ teaching and example, and indeed from the ongoing work of L’Abri around the world, is that Christ is Lord of all of life, and because of that, there is no realm of life not subject to our scrutiny and to our calling as Christians in the world. For many, this message and this practice represent what is so wonderful, so exciting, about the Schaeffer legacy. (187)

The afterword concludes with six essential aspects of this legacy (189–92). They include: 1) “He loved his family.” 2) “He was passionate about serving the Lord.” 3) “Cultural interests and pursuits” are an important part of life. 4) He had the “uncanny ability to look deeply into a person’s heart” in order to “carry out the principles of presuppositional apologetics in actual practice.” 5) His “greatest spiritual rediscovery was the present value of the blood of Christ.” 6) “He cared very deeply about human beings.” Schaeffer was not without his faults. “He was human, very human, in the worst way and the very best way . . . Truly, Francis Schaeffer’s life was authentic, and his legacy will endure. He was no little person” (192).

This lovely book is the best all-around introduction to the life and ministry of Francis Schaeffer of which I am aware. Edgar’s personal

knowledge of Schaeffer, along with his critical assessment of his life, ministry, and thought, provide a thorough primer on Schaeffer. What Schaeffer set out to do, and what the Lord molded him to achieve, were truly remarkable. Edgar captures this in a most admirable composite of what made him what he was—a spokesman, uniquely suited to our generation of confused radicals, and who introduced so many to the Reformed tradition. For this I am in his eternal debt. ☺

**Gregory E. Reynolds** serves as the pastor of *Amoskeag Presbyterian Church (OPC)* in Manchester, New Hampshire, and is the editor of *Ordained Servant*.

## Science as God’s Work: Abraham Kuyper’s Perspective on Science

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* January 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Douglas A. Felch**

*Wisdom and Wonder: Common Grace in Science and Art*, by Abraham Kuyper. Translated by Nelson D. Kloosterman. Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library Press, 2011, 191 pages, \$14.99, paper.

### Introduction: Framing the Issue

#### The Supposed Conflict between Christianity and Science

John William Draper, in his *History of the*

1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=463&issue\\_id=101](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=463&issue_id=101).

*Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874), asserted that the history of science “is a narrative of the conflict between two contending powers, the expansive force of the human intellect on the one side, and the compression arising from traditional faith, particularly Catholicism, on the other.”<sup>2</sup>

Andrew Dickson White, in his *The History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896), reinforced this view. White argued that religious intervention in science has always been detrimental to both science and religion, although he thought Protestantism and Catholicism both shared equal blame.<sup>3</sup>

Science historians David Lindberg and Ronald Numbers contest these claims, arguing instead that “recent scholarship has shown the warfare metaphor to be neither useful nor tenable in describing the relationship between science and religion.”<sup>4</sup> James Moore concurs. He believes that the warfare metaphor has not only outlived its usefulness but “has made historians ‘prisoners of war’ by preventing a more objective and subtle reassessment of the relationship between science and faith.”<sup>5</sup> Despite these correctives, the warfare metaphor persists and many Christians and non-Christian alike view science as being on a collision course with historic Christianity.

In the context of this debate, Abraham Kuyper offers an alternative perspective that is as simple as it is profound: You can’t drive a wedge between science and God because science is not simply a human enterprise. It is first and foremost a work of God, rooted in the divine decree, and manifested in the providential unfolding of history. Kuyper

defends this thesis in a series of magazine articles on common grace, recently translated and published under the title *Wisdom and Wonder: Common Grace in Science and Art* (hence WAW). This review will focus on his discussion of science.

## Abraham Kuyper’s Life and Work (1837–1920)

### Recent Interest in Kuyper’s Thought

Renewed interest in Abraham Kuyper’s thought has produced a number of books, translations, and articles on his life and work.<sup>6</sup> WAW is the first fruit of a larger-scale Kuyper Translation Project beginning with the publication of his writings on common grace.

The name Abraham Kuyper is well-known within the Reformed and Presbyterian community for his Stone Lectures delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898 (subsequently published as *Lectures on Calvinism*).<sup>7</sup> His is a household name within the Dutch Reformed community, and his intellectual legacy has been disseminated to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church through the writings of Dr. Cornelius Van Til (who freely admitted his debt to Kuyper), and by those who have sought to continue the work of Kuyper and Van Til in the area of Christian worldview, apologetics, and epistemology.

### Abraham Kuyper, the Man

Some have described Kuyper as a nineteenth-century “reincarnation” of John Calvin.

---

2 John William Draper, *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874; repr., New York: D. Appleton, 1897), vi.

3 Andrew Dickson White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (New York: D. Appleton, 1896; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 1:130.

4 David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, “Beyond War and Peace: A Reappraisal of the Encounter between Christianity and Science,” *Perspectives on Science and the Christian Faith* 39 (September 1987): 141.

5 James R. Moore, *The Post-Darwinist Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to Come to Terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America, 1870–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 48.

---

6 For example, James D. Bratt, ed. *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013); Jan De Bruijn, *Abraham Kuyper: A Pictorial Biography*, trans. Dagmare Houniet (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014); James E. McGoldrick, *Abraham Kuyper: God’s Renaissance Man* (Darlington, U.K., and Carlisle PA: Evangelical Press, 2000); Richard Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

7 Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). Delivered at Princeton University in 1898 under the auspices of the L. P. Stone Foundation.

That's an exaggeration, but unquestionably he was a genius and a man of many talents. Kuyper was a theologian, a university professor, a preacher and pastor, and a man of deep personal piety. He was also a prolific writer with a staggering literary output. He produced approximately 2,200 devotions and over 20,000 newspaper articles. A published annotated bibliography contains 692 pages of listings.<sup>8</sup>

He was also a Christian activist. He established Christian newspapers, developed Christian labor unions to address the plight of workers, and was involved extensively in politics. That involvement eventually led to his becoming the Prime Minister of the Netherlands (1901–5).

Finally, he was also a man of great personal intensity. He experienced three nervous collapses or breakdowns in the course of his life, and could at times be extremely authoritarian and unkind towards his adversaries. This reminds us that genius can be a hard stewardship and that we bear the treasure of the gospel in earthen vessels.

## Four Primary Elements of Kuyper's Thought

To facilitate the discussion of Kuyper's treatment of science in WAW, it is helpful to survey the four core concepts of his thought for the benefit those who may be unfamiliar with them.

### 1. The Lordship of Christ over All of Creation

Kuyper summoned Christians to acknowledge the universal lordship of Christ over all of life, culture, and society. This is captured in his oft-cited declaration, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!"<sup>9</sup> Jesus is not only the savior of souls (although he certainly is that), but also the king over the earth and all that it contains. This emphasis on

the sovereign lordship of Christ over all creation and Kuyper's attempt to develop its implications for all of life is the engine that drives much of his work.

### 2. Principial Psychology

Everything that a person believes or does emanates from root principles or fundamental commitments that comprise the way he or she looks at the world. This means everyone has a worldview. It also implies that no one's understanding or perspective on the world is value-free or religiously neutral. There are no uninterpreted facts. Every object of study involves a perspective. This is why Kuyper is often considered the founding father of the Christian worldview.

### 3. Sphere Sovereignty

A sphere is a societal institution, an area of life, or a dimension of existence in our society. Examples include family, church, education, government, science, and art, to name a few. These spheres are structures embedded in the fabric of the creation according to God's purposes and governed by different rules of his making. This makes them independent from each other and "sovereign" in their own sphere. It also means that the rules governing one sphere ought not be confused with another (e.g., you should not run a family like a business, or the church like the government), and one sphere should not dominate another.

### 4. The Principle of Antithesis

Kuyper refers to the opposition in this world between God's kingdom and Satan's kingdom since the Fall as the "Antithesis." This conflict is not between the church and the other spheres (which might result in a sacred/secular distinction). It pertains to the battleground that emerges within each sphere as Christian and non-Christian worldviews offer rival perspectives on art, science, education, business, etc. Indeed, it becomes our responsibility to develop a Christian worldview perspective in the various spheres of life.

8 Tjitze Kuypers, *Abraham Kuyper: An Annotated Bibliography, 1857–2010* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

9 James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper, A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

## Kuyper's View of Science

### 1. In His Other Writings

Kuyper left no systematic treatise on science. Much of his thinking must be gleaned from a number of his writings.<sup>10</sup> His views on evolution are mentioned in the Ratzsch article, and spelled out in his rectoral address, "Evolution." In that address, while Kuyper appears open on the question as to whether God might have used some divinely guided process to bring about life in all of its variety and complexity, he completely and unrelentingly excoriates naturalistic evolution.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that "science" for Kuyper has a broader referent than simply the natural sciences, and would include other forms of *scientia* or knowledge that have been a part of human discovery. Nevertheless, what he says about "science" and most of the examples he chooses, are directly applicable to what we would normally think of as natural science.

### 2. In His Discussion in *Wisdom and Wonder*

In a nutshell, Kuyper argues (a) that science is a realm of human endeavor independent of church or state; (b) that it is a God-authored enterprise entrusted to human beings as his image-bearers; (c) that it unfolds in history through the work of a community of scientists, according to God's eternal and providential purpose; (d) that it generates true and useful knowledge through common grace, despite the effects of sin on the endeavor;

---

10 His discussion of science in *Principles of Sacred Theology* is nicely summarized in a journal article by Del Ratzsch. See "Abraham Kuyper's Philosophy of Science," *Calvin Theological Journal* 27, no. 2 (1992): 277–302. The 1898 Stone Lectures, published as *Lectures on Calvinism*, contain lectures on a variety of subjects, including science and art. These lectures are commented on by Peter Heslam in *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). A helpful commentary on some of the material translated in WAW is provided by Clifford Blake Andrews, "A Canopy of Grace: Common and Particular Grace in Abraham Kuyper's Philosophy of Science," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 24.1 (2003): 122–40.

11 Abraham Kuyper, "Evolution" (Free University Rectoral Address delivered 1899), trans. and repr. *Calvin Theological Journal* 31, no. 1 (1996): 11–50.

(e) that it is a spiritual activity governed by thinking and not reducible to materialistic empiricism; (f) that it is subject to worldview considerations that differentiate Christian and non-Christian science; and (g) that the need to develop a Christian perspective on science suggests the importance of establishing Christian educational institutions in which Christian science can flourish unhampered.

## Kuyper's Treatment of Science in the First Five Chapters of *Wisdom and Wonder*

### Chapter 1: Wisdom

#### The Independent and Divine Nature of Science

Consistent with his concept of "sphere sovereignty," Kuyper insists on the independent character of science: that it must stand on its own as a discipline and "may not be encumbered with any external chains" (WAW 33). This level of autonomy is not an accident of history or development, but science "possesses this independence by divine design" and would abandon its divine calling if it surrendered this independence to either church or state (34–35).

Further, says Kuyper, science has its roots in the creation (35). Even if there had been no sin, there would have been science, although its development would obviously have been different (35). It is as much a part of the creation order as are marriage, family, or the Sabbath. But because it is of the creation, it has a calling separate from either church or state (35).

#### Science and Image-Bearing

Science depends on the ability of human beings, who bear his image, to think God's thought after him (36). God is the primal thinker who through the divine decree has imbued all created things with a wisdom that reflects his own independent thought (36–38). There is nothing in the universe that fails to express or to incarnate the revelation of God's thought (39):

The whole creation is nothing but the visible



curtain behind which radiates the exalted working of this divine thinking. Even as the child at play observes your pocket watch, and supposes it to be no more than a golden case and a dial with moving hands, so too the unreflective person observes in nature and in the entire creation nothing other than the external appearance of things.

By contrast, you know better. You know that behind the watch's dial, the hidden work of springs and gears occurs, and that the movement of the hands across the dial is caused by that hidden working.

So, too, everyone instructed by the Word of God knows, in terms of God's creation, that behind that nature, behind that creation, a hidden, secret working of God's power and wisdom is occurring, and that only thereby do things operate as they do. They know as well that this working is not an unconscious operation of a languidly propelled power, but the working of a power that is being led by *thinking*. (39–40)

This thought of God, which brings about the development of all things, is directed toward a purpose and a goal according to fixed rules. As a result, all of creation has proceeded from the thought, consciousness, and Word of God, as established by his divine decree (40).

Not all creatures possess the capacity to rethink the thought of God, not even angels, but only humans (40). As image-bearers of God, they possess the ability of discerning the wisdom embedded in the creation. This ability is not an add-on, but belongs to the foundation of human nature itself (41). Kuyper summarizes:

In this way, then, we obtain three truths that fit together: First, the full and rich clarity of God's thoughts existed in God from eternity. Second, in the creation God has revealed, embedded, and embodied a rich fullness of his thoughts. And third, God created in human beings, as his image bearers, the capacity to understand, to grasp, to reflect and to arrange within a totality these thoughts expressed in

the creation. The essence of human science rests on these three realities. (41–42)

### **Science as a Communal Activity**

However, this work is not assigned to every human being. The breadth of this task is far too great for that, and the capacity of individual persons is much too limited. It is realized only in the combination of the talents bestowed upon specific persons in the course of history (42).

Science in this exalted sense originates only through the cooperation of many people, advances only gradually in the generations that come on the scene, and thus only gradually acquires the stability and that rich content which guarantee it an independent existence, and begins to appear only in this more general form as an influence in life. At the same time from this it follows directly that Science can acquire significance only with the passing of centuries, and will be able to develop in its richest fullness only at the end of time. (44)

### **Science as a Temple of Knowledge Created by God**

Kuyper uses the metaphor of temple building to describe how the scientific enterprise, guided by God, results in the beautiful construction of an edifice of knowledge:

Science is not the personally acquired possession of each person, but gradually increased in significance and stability only as the fruit of the work of many people among many nations, in the course of centuries.... Working separately from one another, without any mutual agreement and without the least bit of direction from other people, with everybody milling about, everyone going their own way, each person constructs science as he thinks right. Through that endless confusion ... a temple emerges.... At this point it will not do to suggest that this most beautiful result emerged by accident, without plan, all by itself. Rather we must confess that God himself

developed his own divine plan for this construction.... (45–46)

Seen this way, however, science is then also an invention of God, which he called into being, causing it to travel its paths of development in the manner he himself had ordained for it. What does this mean except to say and to confess with gratitude that God himself called Science into being as his creature, and accordingly that Science occupies its own independent place in our human life. (46)

## Chapter 2: Knowledge

In this chapter, Kuyper examines how we can embrace with confidence the knowledge produced by this divinely authored task discharged by his image-bearing agents. This might seem counter-intuitive, given both that Scripture often condemns human knowledge and, reciprocally, the way many scientists criticize Scripture and Christian belief (49–50). But while Scripture condemns knowledge that is falsely called such, it distinguishes between true and false knowledge and inspires love and respect for the former (50). False knowledge arises because of sin, which lures and tempts people to place science outside of a relationship with God, thereby stealing science from God, and ultimately turning science against him (51). Nonetheless, no one can deny that in the disciplines of astronomy, botany, zoology, physics, etc., a rich science is blossoming. Although being conducted almost exclusively by people who are strangers to the fear of the Lord, this science has nevertheless produced a treasury of knowledge that, by common grace, we as Christians ought to admire and gratefully use (52–53):

Consequently, we are confronting the fact that outside the Christian orbit a science has blossomed that, seen from one angle, supplied us with genuine and true knowledge and yet, seen from another angle, has led to a philosophy of life and a worldview that run directly contrary to the truth of God's Word. Or, to

state it differently, we are really confronting a science that has arisen from the world, a science that lies very definitely under the dominion of sin and that nevertheless, on the other hand, may boast of results from which sin's darkening is virtually absent. We can explain this only by saying that although sin does indeed spread its corruption, nevertheless common grace has intervened in order to temper and restrain this operation of sin. (53)

It is clear that Adam originally possessed the ability to think and understand the world as a coherent whole (e.g., naming the animals) (57). It is this coherence that Kuyper believes that empirical science has lost and needs to recover (59).

## Chapter 3: Wonder

Since sin has affected our ability to perceive the systematic unity of things, this has led secular science post-Fall to attempt to make science simply a matter of objective empirical observation. Kuyper believes this to be a mistake. Science is more than what can be objectively weighed and measured. By removing subjectivity from science you reduce the higher work of the mind (thinking) that comes from making sense of our observations in an integrative way:

We will sense how deeply this penetrates the essence of science when we consider that science without reflection is unimaginable, yet *thinking* itself is a spiritual activity. The very instrument that serves as a trowel in the construction of the edifice of science belongs not to the external but to the invisible, and the law governing this thinking can never be discovered through hearing, seeing, measuring, or weighing, but manifests itself in the human spirit. The contradiction arises immediately that our thinking cannot help but enquire about the *origin*, the *coherence*, and the *destiny* of things, whereas observation neither can or does teach us anything about these. (68–69)

## Chapter 4: Sin

The attempt to remove the subjective element from science elevates the material over against the spiritual (which includes thinking). In response, Kuyper asserts the need for the autonomy of the spiritual to be preserved over against the material. In support of this he makes two points:

First, by preserving the religious worldview perspective, people obtain a larger unity, harmony, and coherence of life that is not obtained by simply observing data. Failure to do so not only draws people away from God, but also results in the destruction of the personal self as nothing more than matter in motion:

Neglecting already at one's starting point to maintain the independence of the spirit over against *matter* will eventually lead one, by the time the destination is reached, from worshiping man ultimately to idolizing the material. Applying the scientific method to the higher sciences makes it impossible to maintain the independence of the spirit. Any science choosing this route will wander further and further away from God, and will finally deny him entirely. In this connection the scientific researcher who takes his starting point in the world around him, and stakes his honor on grasping for neutral objectivity, is doomed by his very method to seeing the independent existence of his own ego finally perish. This is why we are insisting so vigorously that the subjective starting point once again be honored in science. (77)

Second, we need to consider the scriptural emphasis on common grace if we are to pursue scientific academic study that provides genuine knowledge and insight about the way things really are beyond the knowledge that leads to salvation:

It is of highest importance, however, that we place clearly in the foreground the fact that this strengthening [of the light of common grace] came from special revelation. Had it

been the case that special revelation restricted itself to only what, strictly speaking, concerns the salvation of the sinner, and ignored the rest, we would lack the requisite data for building a temple of science that rested on a Christian foundation (83).

## Chapter 5: Education

In this final chapter, Kuyper provides his apologetic and vision for Christian higher education. The worldview forces that draw a contrast between Christianity and secular science are only going to intensify, and the desire on the part of secular science to remove Christianity entirely from the realm of science will only increase. This, Kuyper argues, is the engine that ought to drive Christians to develop Christian institutions of higher learning:

Confessing Christianity cannot suffice with its faith-confession, but like every human being, the Christian also needs a certain understanding of the world in which he dwells. If for this he receives no guidance from a Christian science, then he can and will have no choice but to adopt the results of unbelieving science. In so doing he lives with a world-and-life-view that does not fit his faith, but one that irreconcilably contradicts his confession at numerous points.... That destroys the unity of his thinking, and also weakens his power. The inevitable result is that gradually his faith begins to yield to his scientific view, and without noticing it, he slips into the unbelieving mode of viewing the world. (93–4)

Kuyper's description of the rise of secular science seems, in retrospect, almost prophetic. But for Kuyper, while on the one hand, this development is to be lamented, on the other hand, the pressure it exerts has the potentially desirable effect of forcing thinkers to do what they ought to be doing anyway—developing a Christian perspective on learning and higher education:

With escalating determination, unbelieving

science substitutes a completely atheistic worldview for ours, and makes our continued lodging in her tents increasingly impossible. This, after all, is how it will increasingly press Christians to take a stand within their own territory. And what Christianity would never have done on its own impulse it will finally accomplish under the pressure of an increasingly bold unbelief that denies all that is sacred. All of this means that Christians will begin to perceive the inexorable need to begin pursuing science independently on the basis of their own principles, leading them to strive for a university life that honors the mystery of all wisdom and all science in Christ. (103–4)

### Assessment

What should we make of this? On the one hand, it must be admitted that Kuyper is painting with a broad brush, which makes it difficult to know how precisely to translate his vision into particular implications and applications of what might constitute a Christian view of science or “Christian science” which he is advocating. On the other hand, Kuyper’s discussion of science in WAW reminds us of two items of immense and immediate value for current discussions of the tension between Christianity and secular science.

First, it forcefully asserts that the work of science is ultimately God’s work, rooted in the divine decree, grounded in the creation order, and providentially unveiled in the course of human history. This is a much-needed and powerful antidote to the simplistic notions of conflict between science and the Christian faith often raised today. Although sin (and the apostate motives it brings) has complicated the development of science, we should not for a moment yield to the temptation of viewing science as the work of Satan and his minions. It is God who in the cultural mandate commands the human race to engage God’s world and develop its potentials. We must never forget this, and we ought to encourage our sons and daughters who are so gifted to engage in scientific vocations as *Christian* vocations. It is *sin*, not *science*, that is

the problem.

Second, it reminds us of the significance of worldview assumptions in discussions related to science. Kuyper is keenly aware of the importance of presuppositions in the work of Christian science and secular science, respectively. The former understands the world to be governed by an infinite, personal God, who has endued the creation with wisdom, order, and latent potentials, and who has given to human beings the capacity of discerning that wisdom and developing those potentials. The secularist denies this, and asserts that there is no God, that nature is all there is. This naturalistic worldview, more often than not, reduces the world to nothing more than matter in motion—with devastating consequences. As Kuyper wisely points out, it leads not only to the loss of purpose, but to the loss of the personhood, the loss of the self. But note well: this is not a science-faith conflict, but a faith-faith conflict in which naturalism has pitted itself against theism. While science and faith are not at war, naturalism and theism, as rival worldview perspectives, most certainly are. Kuyper is keenly aware of this antithesis in the sphere of science.

Understanding the importance of presuppositions helps to distinguish things that differ. That is why, on the one hand, Kuyper can be open to the concept of evolution, and even say nice things about the genius of Darwin, while at the same time be implacably opposed to and devastatingly critical of the naturalistic evolution Darwin advocates.

The Kuyper Translation Society and the Acton Institute have done a great service to the Christian and Reformed world by making available, in new and fresh translations, Kuyper’s works on common grace. If you are interested in learning more, this brief introductory work is a wonderful place to begin in anticipation of additional volumes to follow. ☺

**Douglas A. Felch** is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as professor of theological studies at Kuyper College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

# True Theology

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* February 2015<sup>1</sup>

by John V. Fesko

*A Treatise on True Theology*, by Franciscus Junius. Translated by David C. Noe. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2014, lii + 247 pages, \$40.00.

Seldom am I giddy about the release of a new book, but the translation and publication of Franciscus Junius's *A Treatise on True Theology* is certainly an exception to my otherwise dispassionate appreciation of books. Many Reformed readers are likely unfamiliar with Junius's work and instead come into contact with its substance through the writings of other theologians, such as Herman Bavinck or Louis Berkhof. In their respective treatments of theological prolegomena (the presuppositions to one's theological system), Bavinck and Berkhof both employ the distinction between archetypal and ectypal theology.<sup>2</sup> Archetypal theology is God's perfect, infinite knowledge of himself and ectypal theology is the true but finite shadow or copy of the divine archetype. But Bavinck and Berkhof were not the first theologians to employ this distinction. Rather, they gleaned it from seventeenth-century Reformed Scholastic theologians. Franciscus Junius first borrowed the distinction from medieval theologians and employed it in his treatise, *On True Theology*. In the past, anyone who wanted to learn more about the distinction could only access it through Junius's Latin original or the small body of English-language secondary literature.<sup>3</sup> This has all changed with the transla-

tion and publication of Junius's treatise.

Given the fact that much of the twentieth-century spotlight has fallen disproportionately upon John Calvin and his theology, other important contributions from the likes of Junius have been forgotten or ignored. Yet Junius was one of the most esteemed theologians of his day, evident by how widely his archetypal-ectypal distinction was employed among the Reformed as well as even among Lutheran and Remonstrant theologians (xi). Theologians such as John Owen, Richard Baxter, Jacob Arminius, Francis Turretin, Johannes Wollebius, Petrus van Mastricht, Johannes Cocceius, Gisbert Voetius, and many others employed Junius's distinction (xliii–xliv). In fact, Willem van Asselt notes that the archetypal-ectypal distinction was “assumed by nearly every Reformed author” (xlii–xliii).

This new translation offers several beneficial features, such as a preface by Richard Muller and a historical-theological introduction by Willem van Asselt, two of the most accomplished authorities on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed theology. Van Asselt's introduction, one of his last published writings before his death, offers a first-rate overview of Junius's life and influence as well as the significance of this treatise. Beyond the preface and foreword, the translator, David Noe, professor of classics at Calvin College and OPC ruling elder, has done a tremendous job translating this work. He offers a very readable annotated translation. Moreover, along the way, Noe provides readers with very helpful editorial annotations that explain the classical references and allusions that Junius makes throughout his treatise.

As for as the treatise itself, its form is likely a bit foreign to readers used to the discursive pages of Calvin's *Institutes*. Junius presents his treatise in thirty-nine separate theses that he then defends at greater length. For example, thesis 5 states: “Theology is wisdom concerning divine matters” (85). In thesis 11, Junius writes: “The theology, which we call that of union, is the whole wisdom of divine

1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=467&issue\\_id=102](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=467&issue_id=102).

2 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–8), 1:212; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology: New Combined Edition* (1932, 1938; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 94.

3 See, e.g., Willem J. van Asselt, “The Fundamental Meaning of Theology: Archetypal and Ectypal Theology in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Thought,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 64 (2002): 319–35; Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed*

*Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1:229–37.



matters, communicated to Christ as God-man, that is as the Word made flesh, according to His humanity” (86). Junius, therefore, argues and defends the claim that wisdom about God (theology) is chiefly revealed through the incarnation. These two theses form part of the logical foundation in Junius’s later claims that supernatural theology (revealed theology) is a mode of knowledge beyond human reason (88). These theological points rest, of course, upon the archetypal-ectypal distinction. In thesis 10, Junius explains the significance of the distinction vis-à-vis revelation to finite human creatures: “But theology that is relative is the wisdom of divine matters communicated to things created, according to the capacity of the created things themselves. It is, moreover, communicated by union, vision, or revelation” (86). Junius’s point is that God has designed human beings to receive revelation—a knowledge that is appropriately suited to their finite capacity. While some of Junius’s theses may seem obscure, one of his chief goals is to defend the idea that “the primary or highest end of theology is the glory of God, for theology shows this glory for all to behold, and also all good men by a right use of this wisdom render that glory confirmed, just as wisdom is justified by her children” (207). Hence, as technical as some of his points are, Junius’s goal is ultimately practical and pastoral. His goal is to give doxology to our triune God and these presuppositions act as guardrails to keep his theological system on an exegetical and orthodox path.

Beyond these observations, three reasons commend the purchase and study of this treatise: (1) the importance of understanding theological prolegomena, (2) the crucial nature of one of Reformed theology’s most fundamental and classic distinctions, and (3) recognizing the connections among contemporary Reformed theology from Bavinck and Berkhof, to seventeenth-century Reformed expressions, and their medieval predecessors.

First, for many fans and students of classic Reformed theology, Calvin’s *Institutes* constitutes the definitive theological statement. But when readers compare Calvin’s work with others, such as Turretin’s *Institutes* (1679–1685), or Bavinck’s

*Dogmatics* (1881), or Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology* (1932, 1939, combined edition 1996), there is a noticeable difference: Calvin does not treat prolegomena, whereas the latter three do. What is theology? How is theology defined? Is theology a speculative or practical discipline? What is the relationship between faith and reason? How can finite creatures relate to an infinite God? What is the nature of language about God—is it univocal, equivocal, or analogical? These are all typical questions that fall under the category of prolegomena.<sup>4</sup> Pastors and theologians often do theology, but do not give explicit thought to these important theological presuppositions. The sixteenth-century Reformers, such as Luther and Calvin, never gave great attention to these questions, so subsequent generations addressed them. Some might think that such questions are pedantic or unnecessary, but they become quite relevant when someone in your church asks, “What does the Bible mean when it says that God is love?” Prolegomena assists pastors to think through these knotty issues so they can answer in what way God is love.

Second, understanding the archetypal-ectypal distinction is one of the most fundamental presuppositions to doing sound theology. We must recognize that there is both a quantitative and qualitative difference between God’s knowledge of himself and our knowledge of God. As finite creatures we cannot comprehensively know God otherwise we would be God. But the fact that we cannot comprehensively know God does not mean that we cannot have a true but nevertheless finite apprehensive knowledge of him. The archetypal-ectypal distinction guards the idea that God is the creator and we are creatures and that all of our knowledge about him is divinely revealed. This distinction acted as a bulwark against both rationalism and mysticism. In the recent past, apologetes, such as Cornelius Van Til, employed this creator-creature distinction, but appear to have been unaware of the classic archetypal-ectypal distinction.<sup>5</sup>

4 Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:86.

5 On the affinities between Van Til and the classic archetypal-ectypal distinction, see Jeffrey K. Jue, “*Theologia Naturalis*: A

The archetypal-ectypal distinction would have been helpful, I believe, in assisting the OPC in the Clark-Van Til debate, which was chiefly about the nature of our language about God—matters that relate directly to prolegomena.

Third, the popular narrative that I often hear in the church is that the Reformation was a complete break with the theological past. The Reformers started with their Bibles and a blank slate. The real story, however, is significantly different. When Junius was writing his treatise on prolegomena, he raided the Catholic Church's treasury of knowledge. He went back to medieval theologians because they had done extensive work on prolegomena. Junius did not merely seek these medieval works for pragmatic reasons but wanted to learn from them and expose others to good theology. This does not mean that Junius believed that all medieval theology was orthodox. Rather, he gleaned valid and true insights and employed them in his own theological work. Junius's treatise is an excellent exercise in studying Catholic theology. In this vein, Herman Bavinck once wrote:

Irenaeus, Augustine, and Thomas [Aquinas] do not belong exclusively to Rome; they are Fathers and Doctors to whom the whole Christian church has obligations. Even the post-Reformation Roman Catholic theology is not overlooked. In general, Protestants know far too little about what we have in common with Rome and what divides us. Thanks to the revival of Roman Catholic theology under the auspices of Thomas, it is now doubly incumbent on Protestants to provide a conscious and clear account of their relationship to Rome.<sup>6</sup>

Junius interacts with numerous sources from antiquity and a diverse cross section of theological voices to construct his treatise.

---

Reformed Tradition," in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2007), 168–89.

6 Herman Bavinck, "Foreword to the First Edition (vol. 1) of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*," trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2010): 9–10.

There is much to learn from Junius's engagement of sources. Moreover, Junius's work just might encourage readers to conduct their own theological raids to plunder our Catholic heritage. Sadly, the twentieth-century Reformed tradition took a decidedly negative view regarding our common theological heritage, and this was often done apart from consulting primary sources. Scholasticism of every stripe, medieval and Reformed, was written off as speculative and syncretistic. At a bare minimum, readers can now wrestle firsthand with the exegetical and theological claims in Junius's work and determine whether his thought is genuinely speculative or syncretistic. My hope is, however, that readers will come away with a different evaluation, one where they have a greater appreciation for Junius's clarity, insight, and orthodoxy. Such was the appraisal of Bavinck and Berkhof, among others. In fact, Abraham Kuiper believed that Junius's work was so important that he edited a modern edition of his select works in Latin.<sup>7</sup> In addition to this, with Junius in hand, readers can explore the connections, for example, between Bavinck and Junius in their respective prolegomenas to see to what degree the former employed the latter.

Anyone interested in studying Reformed theology should purchase a copy of Junius's treatise. I especially encourage seminarians and pastors to purchase a print edition of this work. Read it, mark it up, enter into a dialogue with Junius in the margins, and even tuck it under your pillow at night. The church owes David Noe and Reformation Heritage Books many thanks for making this influential work available in English translation. Maybe this new translation of Junius will foster a second wave of influence among Reformed theologians to the edification of the church. Given his theological acumen, the widespread influence he had in his own day, the use of his insights by twentieth-century Reformed theologians like Bavinck and Berkhof, and the exegetical-theological impor-

---

7 Franciscus Junius, *Opuscula Theologica Selecta*, ed. D. Abr. Kuiperus (Amsterdam: apud Fredericum Muller cum soc. et Joannem Hermannum Kruyt, 1882).

tance of the archetypal-ectypal distinction, students of the Bible would do well to study carefully Junius's treatise. ⑤

**John V. Fesko** is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as professor of systematic and historical theology and academic dean at Westminster Seminary California in Escondido, California.

## True Paradox

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* February 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **William Edgar**

*True Paradox: How Christianity Makes Sense of Our Complex World*, by David Skeel. Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 2014, 175 pages, \$15.00, paper.

We are witnessing a veritable renaissance of Christian apologetics. Religious book catalogues from many perspectives advertise more and more titles on apologetics. Schools and institutes dedicated to training apologists can be found throughout the world. There is a multiplication of both institutions and online resources dedicated to this discipline. Some are quite specialized, such as the Zwemer Center for Muslim Studies in Columbia, South Carolina. Others are more wide-ranging, such as the Oxford Centre for Apologetics. Perhaps the long hibernation of apologetics, due in no small way to the theology of Karl Barth, is over.

The causes for such a renaissance are mixed. Certainly factors such as the rise of Islamism and the vocal boldness of the so-called “New Atheists” have stimulated responses from their opponents, Christian or not. Perhaps also the post-everything culture of our times has meant greater freedom for believers to state their views. One trend which promises to have an important future is the post-secular movement. It could be an opportunity to speak of the impossibility of consistent materialism. Also, the fact that today, unlike a few decades ago, many of the most prominent philosophers are professing Christians, has given a boost to apologetics.

Not all of this renaissance is positive, however, at least from my point of view. Some of its advocates employ methods and arguments that are either irrelevant or simply heterodox. Some of the material is good in some parts, but not so good in others. Some of it is creative, some is humdrum.

David Skeel's new book is anything but humdrum. It is imaginative, full of learned allusions, and elegantly written. The book's basic thesis is that the Christian faith is commendable because of its complexity. While, to be sure, the heart of the Christian message is simple: Jesus Christ is God, and he died and was raised from the dead to secure our reconciliation with God (12), we should not shy away from complex issues such as the Trinity and the problem of evil. If the resurrection is the central *sine qua non* which makes Christianity different from any other view, there is also laudable paradox. The introduction sets up the problem. Most skeptical arguments against the faith suffer from a wrong kind of simplicity. But so does much of contemporary apologetics, making its narrow arguments a “grand distraction” in the larger theater of the world.

Thus, Skeel believes that both arguments for the faith, as well as many arguments against it, are fatally simplistic. In pleading for the plausibility of the Christian faith's complexity, he is in good company. G. K. Chesterton argued in *Orthodoxy* (1908) that complexity is not an enemy but a friend of true religion: “When once one believes in a creed, one is proud of its complexity, as scientists

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=468&issue\\_id=102](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=468&issue_id=102).

are proud of the complexity of science.” It may not be coincidental that Chesterton often made use of paradox in his apologetics. Similarly, C. S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity* (1952), asserts that it is no good looking for a simple religion, since reality is not simple.

Still in the introduction, Skeel rehearses a debate between the brilliant Christian philosopher William Lane Craig and the atheist physicist Lawrence Krauss. Craig basically used one of the traditional theistic proofs. With a great deal of deference and respect for Craig, our author declares his rationalist strategy to be “counterproductive.” His use of a pure syllogism which moves from the assertion that everything that exists has a cause to the explanation for the existence of the universe being God may be logically valid, but it is not persuasive, because it does not take into account our human inclinations beyond the narrowly logical, particularly the artistic and moral sensibility. Skeel also points out that to call the first cause God may resonate well with our Judeo-Christian sensibilities, but it is not a necessary connection. Logical arguments, such as Craig’s, will be perceived by many non-Christians as simplistic and even manipulative (25).

A second popular kind of apologetics Skeel respects but finds lacking in impact is the “courtroom model.” A lawyer himself, Skeel has an insider’s understanding of the method consisting of putting both unbelief and the Christian faith on trial. He reviews the remarkable work of Philip Johnson whose book *Darwin on Trial* (1991) likely set off the current interest in Intelligent Design (ID). Johnson accuses the presumption that evolutionism is true to be disingenuous because it rests on very thin evidence. And yet, says Skeel, despite establishing that evolutionism can be reasonably doubted, very few are really persuaded. In a courtroom the lawyer must only demonstrate the absence of indisputable evidence, not the actual innocence of the accused. After all, strictly speaking, truth is not the objective of a criminal trial, but only the presence or absence of reasonable doubt. People believe in evolutionism because they want to, and it would take far more than a

Johnsonian strategy to dissuade them.

It works the other way. A parallel procedure in the defense of the Christian faith is also weak principally because it does not allow the Christian faith to speak from the strength of its own evidences, which are far more than a few measurable proofs. Materialists and other skeptics bound by the scientific method will accept only measurable or quantifiable evidence. Intangible factors such as love or grace are not interesting to them. Even the growing consensus for a universe with a beginning, rather than the eternality of matter, may be a victory in a particular battle, but hardly the end of the war (32–34). Skeel does not consider apologetic efforts such as Craig’s or Johnson’s to be altogether without value. He finds them narrowly “cosmological” rather than able to solve the truly great puzzles of existence, such as our sense of beauty, and the universal acknowledgement of morals and law.

If not cosmology, where should the Christian apologist begin? Skeel’s answer is human consciousness. In this he is not alone. Although they are possibly not aware they are doing so, some of the apologists in the Talbot School, particularly J. P. Moreland (*The Soul: How We Know It’s Real, and Why It Matters*),<sup>2</sup> utilize an argument from human consciousness. In his own way so does the unique Francis Spufford (*Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*).<sup>3</sup> Actually, a proper understanding of human consciousness is an important component of Cornelius Van Til’s apologetics, though in a very different manner than Moreland, Spufford, or, for that matter, Skeel (a subject for another occasion).

The rest of *True Paradox* is an exploration of how to recognize and engage a series of features that preoccupy our souls with the Christian message: beauty, suffering, justice, life, and the after-life. The author handles them with great sensibility

---

2 J. P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know It’s Real, and Why It Matters* (Chicago: Moody, 2014).

3 Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2012).

and is greatly persuasive. We do not have space in this short review to go over all of them. I have read and reread the book and plan to read it again, as it contains riches and beauties which indeed commend the Christian faith in a way the limited tactics of pure logic and pure courtroom tactics cannot.

At the same time, there is a serious problem with Skeel's approach of *true-because-paradoxical*. His evidences are mostly presented without a foundation. To put it technically, he rarely acknowledges the transcendental conditions whereby anything, including his views on the Christian faith, can have meaning or value. As a Christian, he obviously believes in revelation and in the authority of God's self-disclosure. Indeed, he often alludes to the biblical basis for his conclusions. But he almost never forthrightly sets them within the worldview which begins with a self-attesting Christ. As a result, we are given extremely attractive arguments for the validity of the Christian religion, many of which I have used myself in different settings. But at some point the intelligent interlocutor is going to ask, Why paradox? Why these criteria? What are your foundations?

A couple of examples will have to suffice. The first chapter is a study of how ideas and ideamaking tend to verify universally acknowledged moral standards—not because they all state the same values in the same way, which clearly they do not—but because they acknowledge, even when arriving at different applications, that humans all know what is fair and just, deep down in their conscience. Materialist accounts of our ideas cannot explain why this is so. Skeel does not engage naively in a pure form of natural law. He does come around to heralding the Christian account of our moral awareness. In a nice part of this discussion he shows how the biblical standards are, on the one hand, stricter than those of materialist relativism, and, on the other hand, more liberating than those, say, of Middle Eastern law. Still, the Christian approach turns out to be true because it passes the test of the paradox: ideals must be plausible to all people everywhere, and yet they must critically put into question the wisdom and practices of vari-

ous societies (49). But why should we accept this test? Ironically, the same objection to Craig's use of syllogism could be launched against this sort of neutral criterion: it lacks a transcendental anchor.

The same sort of procedure characterizes Skeel's argument from beauty. In the excellent chapter "Beauty and the Arts," he shows great sensitivity and deep acquaintance with aesthetics. But as he deconstructs the materialist account of beauty, he can only manage to say that to dismiss the subjective experience of beauty is "something deeply unsatisfying" (67). And his retort to the pantheist view (that it fails to perceive the paradox of why some things are beautiful and others are not) is this: "But it seems more likely that the universal experience of beauty as real but incomplete, as something we know only in glimpses, is not mistaken" (73). To be fair, he does get around to presenting the Christian alternative as a "teaching," one that celebrates the paradox of complexity and tension within a good art object. He even helpfully alludes to the New Critical view of the need to reconcile opposites in a poem as proof of its integrity, something parallel to the paradox of the Christian faith. But in the end, his claim is only that "Christianity provides a uniquely satisfying explanation of why we find these particular qualities as alluring" (79).

Earlier I stated that Skeel's evidences are mostly presented without a foundation. The word *mostly* is an important qualifier. He does here and there allude to underpinnings. In his chapter on justice, he discusses human rights. He admits that many materialists can be deeply committed to human dignity, as are believers in different religions. The principal difference, though, "is the foundation of these beliefs. While materialists may allude to the "trappings of consciousness," such as our ability to choose, as the basis for human rights, Christians believe in something deeper: "Our dignity comes from being loved by the God who created the universe," which truly makes for equality in a way materialists cannot justify (127).

Actually, throughout the book Skeel invests considerable time to simply describing the biblical account of whatever particular point he is trying



to argue, even making it quite clear that this is what he strongly believes. In his lovely chapter on life and the afterlife, he counters the “cosmic bribe” critique of materialists with several strongly biblical emphases to the effect that the heavenliness of heaven is not principally its particular joys (although looking forward to those joys hardly discredits the faith, as long as they are used to frame life on earth, not as merely sensuous rewards for good works). Rather, the central experience of heaven is the enjoyment of permanent reconciliation with God.

Readers of this review should not get the wrong impression. I have not said that the neglect of more clear connections to the transcendental foundation is a fatal flaw in the book. It would be ungrateful and ungenerous to dismiss the power of this book because the author does not more often explicitly connect each of his arguments to the authority of revelation, at least as often as he might. In his own way, he makes it clear that the connection is there. But he is diffident about it. What we need today, if I may be so bold, is a renaissance of Christian apologetics that is both transcendently (biblically) based and also persuasive. By reworking some of the arguments in *True Paradox* so that they are well founded, not spoken louder, like someone trying to make himself understood to a foreigner, but spoken wisely and persuasively, we would have an even better presentation of the gospel. Skeel’s is already very good. It could be even better. ☺

**William Edgar** is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and serves as Professor of Apologetics and Ethics at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

# New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* February 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Stephen M. Baugh**

*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Second Edition, edited by Moisés Silva. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 3,535 pages in five volumes, \$249.99.

This large reference work is a complete revision of the earlier *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (NIDNTT), edited by Colin Brown in 1975–78, which was itself a translation and reworking of an earlier German *Theologisches Begriffslexikon* (“Theological Concept-Lexicon”). This version is yet another complete reorganization and expansion of NIDNTT by Moisés Silva and is now abbreviated with the even more unwieldy “NIDNTTE.”

Although I had looked at the earlier work edited by Brown in the past, it was a seriously flawed work, and I never really consulted or recommended it to students or pastors. It discussed an incomplete collection of Greek terms under English “topic” words. For example, under “Blood” one finds various Greek words referring to “blood,” “sprinkle,” and “strangle.” Why not “atonement,” “body,” or “sacrifice” also? One never knew if the topic was covered with any depth or with sound linguistic method, as Silva admits in the introduction to this version, when he says that it had “considerable variation and inconsistencies” (1.5).

If anyone has the ability to display depth and sound linguistic method for studying the Greek

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=470&issue\\_id=102](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=470&issue_id=102).

New Testament (NT), it is Moisés Silva. The question before us then is whether Silva has accomplished the herculean task of turning an essentially flawed reference tool into something which is worthy to add alongside an indispensable Greek lexicon or two, a Bible dictionary, and a sound systematic theology. This question is heightened when Silva admits that “theological dictionaries of biblical words are odd creatures and, as such, susceptible to being misused” (1.7). They are indeed odd ducks, but “being misused” implies the problem is with the reader. Is there not also a flaw in the whole concept and design of theological dictionaries which contributes to this misuse?

One obvious problem with a dictionary approach to theology is that it is not established by an examination of individual scriptural words across their range of meanings, but by a careful, exegetical reading of biblical *statements* in their various contexts. As just one example, we read in Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this [τοῦτο, *touto*] is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” It is helpful to study “grace,” “saved,” and “faith” here, but how Paul combines these words together is the foundation for his theological conception. And a key word here is the neuter demonstrative pronoun “this,” which refers not only to “faith” but to the whole statement as God’s gift: grace, salvation, and faith (cf. Phil. 1:29; WLC 71). Yet demonstrative pronouns are not “theological words” and don’t appear in theological dictionaries, including NIDNTTE.

So the question again is whether Moisés Silva has fixed the shortcomings of this theological dictionary to make it worth the investment. First, this is a very well-produced publication. There are four large volumes to the dictionary proper, consisting of about 750 pages each; they are surprisingly lightweight, and seem to be well bound. The fifth volume of nearly 400 pages is a complete index volume which primarily indexes Scripture and the other literature referenced from the Greek and Jewish worlds. It ends with a curious “Strong to Goodrick-Kohlenberger Number Conversion Chart” (see below). All five volumes fit into an at-

tractive cardboard box.

Volume 1 begins with Silva’s brief, ten-page introduction and description of the work, accenting the changes in this version. There follow abbreviations, a list of contributors (which are no longer given at the end of each entry), and a topical List of Concepts arranged alphabetically: “Abolish, Nullify” to “Madness (cf. Astonishment; Think),” to “Zeal.” Very helpfully, this topical list is included at the beginning of each of the four volumes (not the fifth index volume) and is marked out with a gray stripe at the edge to make it very easy to find. This List of Concepts is needed because Silva has completely rearranged this dictionary around Greek words presented alphabetically rather than around English topical words.

Each volume contains entries of lead Greek words and sometimes many others subordinated to it. For example, under δύο (*duo*, “two”), one finds seven other Greek words included in that entry such as δίστομος (*distomos*, “double-edged”) and δωδέκατος (*dōdekatos*, “twelfth”). This means that to find δίστομος (*distomos*) you would need to look it up in the index volume (volume 5); you will not find the entry alphabetically. This is not a terrible problem, and an electronic version of the work will probably make using it more efficient. The entry for δύο (*duo*, “two”) does have a nice, brief discussion of the connotations of “two-edged” in a place like Revelation 19:13, where Christ wields a “sharp, two-edged sword” (1.784). However, one wants a bit more on military technology and swords to understand the “feel” this weapon gave to the original audience. For example, we are told in NIDNTTE that “two-edged” connotes the sword is effective for stabbing (the Roman army’s specialty), but it can also be used with either a forehand or backhand swing and is therefore a *supremely* efficient, dangerous, and terrifying weapon in the hands of a hard-charging horseman. The treatment in NIDNTTE is helpful for being so brief, but more could be said.

Each entry in NIDNTTE contains at least a paragraph each for the lead Greek word’s use in earlier Greek and Jewish literature before surveying its use in the NT and then briefly discussing

the other words included under this head. For example, ἀκούω (*akouō*, “I hear”) includes seven other words from the same root (ἀκοή, διακούω, εἰσακούω, ἔπακούω, παρακούω, παρακοή, and προακούω). This is like an English dictionary which has one entry for “author” that also includes discussion of “authority,” “unauthorized,” “reauthorize,” and “authoritarian.” Sometimes the words under one entry have little to do with one another in meaning except a shared origin. Despite Silva’s best efforts, NIDNTTE is still susceptible to “being misused” by those who want to define terms around their root or to illegitimately inject meaning into one term from a different word that has a common origin.

What should be clear is that one does not use NIDNTTE as a Greek lexicon to replace those of Danker (BDAG) or Liddell-Scott (LSJ). It does not include all the NT Greek words, and it is not arranged for this purpose. Instead, because of the topical index, NIDNTTE can provide an interesting session of study of biblical words and concepts. For example, the entry “Height/Depth” lists four Greek words but cross references to “Above/Below” (with five Greek words), Heaven (another five Greek words), and Hell (six Greek words and further reference to concepts Death, Judge, Fire, Punishment, and Satan). Or take the concept “Possessions.” This topic alone lists twenty-eight Greek words spanning seventy-three pages and connects to other concepts such as “Avarice,” “Desire,” “Need,” “Poor,” and “Tax” with their own Greek terms and more cross references. One could spend a profitable day just browsing around here.

In the end, this reference tool will appeal to those who want a relatively quick and accessible alternative to the classic *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT; “Kittel’s”).<sup>2</sup> I should also note that there are many references to Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic words in NIDNTTE which

---

2 Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–78). Cited as TDNT.

are not transliterated but instead have reference to a number in Zondervan’s equivalent of the old Strong’s concordance numbers giving original words behind the NIV. This means that the reader who is weak in biblical languages will have to buy other Zondervan titles to do thorough research—though I wonder how much profit would be derived from it by readers without at least a fair grasp of these languages. Furthermore, there are many references to scholarly books and articles in the body and select bibliographies for each entry in German, French, and Spanish, as well as in English.

I have enormous respect for Moisés Silva, and the NIDNTTE represents a huge investment of work on his part. It is certainly a significant improvement on the earlier incarnation. I must admit, though, that I probably will not use it. TDNT still seems a much better resource despite its well-documented methodological problems simply because of the sheer volume of extra-biblical material it provides.

I also long for one resource that is still needed despite some passing attempts in NIDNTTE: a really sound and complete reference work for Greek synonyms and antonyms which includes words not found in the NT but which the NT authors would have been likely to have known. Access to these words are easily recovered from literary sources and even more directly from over one million extant Greek inscriptions that have hardly been touched by lexicographers for study of Greek words. Until such a truly significant and needed resource for Greek students and Bible interpreters comes along, NIDNTTE will serve as a fairly helpful starting point for those launching into their study of Greek and the theology of the NT. ☉

**Stephen M. Baugh** is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as professor of New Testament at Westminster Seminary California in Escondido, California.

# Calvin's Company of Pastors

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* March 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Glen J. Clary**

*Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609*, by Scott M. Manetsch. Oxford Studies in Historical Theology. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 428 pages, \$74.00.

Scott Manetsch has done a tremendous service to the church by providing a detailed account of pastoral ministry in Geneva from 1536 (the year of Geneva's political and religious revolution) to the end of the first decade of the seventeenth century. *Calvin's Company of Pastors* is brimming with scholarly research that considerably advances our knowledge of religious life in Geneva during these crucial years of the formation and maturation of the Reformed church. Both the academy and the church will benefit from this work, which was clearly the author's aim.

Manetsch distills essential pastoral lessons from his research and suggests various applications to the modern church. Without any romantic notions of recovering and reliving the glory days of Calvin's "perfect school of Christ," Manetsch urges Protestant churches to renew their commitment to the theological vision of the Company of Pastors for the sake of the health and well-being of the church. I will have more to say about this at the end of the review.

The central purpose of the book, writes Manetsch, is "to examine the pastoral theology and practical ministry activities of [the] cadre of men who served as pastors in Geneva's churches during nearly three-quarters of a century from 1536 to 1609" (2). In so doing, Manetsch hopes "to trace

out in detail Calvin's pastoral legacy and the efforts of his successors on the Venerable Company who were committed to preserving it" (8). By using the Reformers' own writings; the registers of the city council, the Company of Pastors, and the Consistory; and other archival material, Manetsch is able to create a rich mosaic of the color and texture of "religious life in early modern Geneva, offering intriguing insights into some of the particular difficulties, dilemmas, and demands that Geneva's pastors encountered as they proclaimed the Word of God and shepherded their Christian flock" (2).

The book is divided into two sections. Part One (chapters 1–5) "explores the history and nature of the pastoral office and details the personnel who belonged to the pastoral company from 1536 to 1609" (9). Here one finds intriguing information about the pastors' family relationships, their financial conditions, and the general rhythm of pastoral work in the three city churches and in the dozen countryside parishes surrounding the city.

Part Two (chapters 6–9) examines in more detail the specific duties of Geneva's pastors, including preaching, church discipline, writing books, and providing pastoral care to their members through the sacraments, catechesis, visitation, and spiritual consolation. The members of the Venerable Company conducted worship, preached the Word, baptized infants, catechized children, examined youth for admission to the Lord's Table, conducted household visitations, comforted the sick, and consoled people preparing to die (306). In their weekly consistory meetings, they also endeavored to apply the "medicine" of "church discipline in the hopes of achieving repentance, healed relationships, Christian understanding, and spiritual growth" (306).

The Company of Pastors consisted of eight to ten ministers from the three city parishes, four professors from the Genevan Academy, and another ten to eleven ministers "who served the small parish churches in the surrounding villages under Geneva's jurisdiction" (2). During the 1540s,

Calvin organized this group of ministers into a formal church institution known as the Com-

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=474&issue\\_id=103](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=474&issue_id=103).

pany of Pastors [or the Venerable Company] which met every Friday morning to examine candidates for ministry and discuss the theological and practical business of the church, both locally and internationally. (2)

[B]y the final years of his life, Calvin had succeeded in creating a pastoral company in Geneva that was intensely committed both to the reformed faith and to his theological leadership. More than simply the architect and recognized leader of the church, Calvin had become both a theological guide and a spiritual father to many of Geneva's ministers. (300)

From the beginning of Geneva's reformation in 1536 to the end of the first decade of the seventeenth century, more than 130 men belonged to the Venerable Company. The overwhelming majority of them were French refugees, and most of them "have received little scholarly attention and are all but forgotten" (2). Next to Calvin, the most well-known member of the Company was Theodore Beza, who succeeded Calvin as the recognized leader of the group and perpetuated Calvin's theological legacy. The ministers of Geneva (including Calvin and Beza) recognized and advocated parity of ministerial office, though Calvin and Beza were clearly the most influential members of the Company.

Though, in principle, all of Geneva's ministers possessed equal authority within the church, in point of fact Calvin's star was the brightest light in Geneva's ecclesiastical firmament during his pastoral career, serving as moderator of the Company until shortly before his death in 1564 without election or serious discussion. (62)

At the same time, "Calvin's authority within the Company was never absolute, and he routinely submitted to the collective will of his colleagues on daily matters of lesser importance" (62). Calvin's Company of Pastors "was never Calvin's per se" (63).

After Calvin's death, Beza persuaded the

Company to choose its moderator by an annual election to "protect the church" from "ambitious men who might aspire to become perpetual bishops" (63). The Company elected Beza as moderator for a one-year term and reelected him each year for the next sixteen years (63). The civil magistrates would have had Beza continue as moderator permanently because they found him easy to work with, unlike some of the other ministers, including Calvin, who lacked Beza's irenic spirit and political wisdom. "Whereas Calvin by temperament had been brilliant, uncompromising, independent, and decisive, Beza was more cultured, sympathetic, collaborative, and politically astute" (63). Under Beza's leadership, the Company enjoyed "a more constructive, less combative, relationship with Geneva's magistrates" (64). This did not always sit well with certain pastors who had a more prophetic edge to their preaching and who often criticized the magistrates from the pulpit.

On April 28, 1564, as Calvin lay dying of tuberculosis, he summoned the Venerable Company to his residence to give them final instructions (1). He warned them "to be on guard against all religious innovation in the future" (1). Calvin begged them to "change nothing" and to "avoid innovation" not because he was "ambitious to preserve" his own work but because "all changes are dangerous, and sometimes even harmful," he explained (1). The Company of Pastors was eager to defend and preserve Calvin's theological vision and over the next four decades successfully resisted "efforts to modify church doctrine and practice" (301). One of Manetsch's goals is to explore "the degree to which Geneva's ministers after Calvin obeyed his admonition to 'change nothing'" (3).

Manetsch demonstrates that "no change was permitted [by the Company] to Geneva's public theology as expressed in the *Confession of Faith* and Calvin's *Catechism*" and that "though revisions to Geneva's liturgy and practice of worship were sometimes proposed, they were rarely adopted" (301). The Company even resisted changes to homiletical forms that deviated from Calvin's unadorned style of preaching. Thus, Beza and his colleagues were defenders and preservers of Cal-



vin's theological, liturgical, and homiletical legacy.

On the other hand, it would be wrong to see them as mindless imitators of Calvin. They did, in fact, introduce some changes in custom to religious life in Geneva, but those changes were in keeping with Calvin's theology. They were more than mere defenders and preservers of an established tradition, for they endeavored to work out the practical implications of Calvin's theology for ecclesial ministry. They were, as Manetsch put it, "more consistent than Calvin himself in working out the practical entailments of the reformer's pastoral theology" (301). Manetsch writes:

[R]eligious life in Geneva and the texture of pastoral ministry did change during the generation after Calvin due to a variety of political, religious, social, and polemical factors. In some cases, Geneva's magistrates forced religious change upon the Company of Pastors through negotiation, or even intimidation, in an effort to extend their jurisdiction over church policy in the city. On other occasions, reforms were initiated by the ministers themselves, as they attempted to work out the implications of Calvin's ecclesial program and theology in the face of new religious contexts and challenges. Even if Calvin's legacy loomed large over Geneva's church throughout the period, the theory and practice of pastoral ministry changed in subtle ways during the half century after Calvin's death in 1564. (3)

The first wave of Reformed pastors in Geneva consisted mostly of foreigners who received their theological education in other parts of Europe, but after the founding of the Genevan Academy in 1559, the majority of Geneva's pastors "received at least part of their theological training in Geneva where, in addition to studying reformed doctrine at the feet of Calvin and Beza, they were shaped by a common religious culture that included daily preaching services, academic disputations, and rigorous moral discipline" (300). To maintain unity in theology, liturgy, and polity, all ministers were required to subscribe to Calvin's *Confession*

*of Faith*, Calvin's *Catechism*, and the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* and to follow Calvin's liturgy. Even Calvin's *Institutes* was eventually given quasi-confessional status (75, 300).

Each Friday morning, the pastors met to study Scripture together in a meeting called the Congregation. One of the ministers would read a selected passage of Scripture in its original language, translate it into French, and give an exposition of the text. The other ministers would then evaluate his exegesis and discuss the theology related to the passage. Thus, the Congregation "served to regularize the ministers' interpretation of Scripture" and "forged a common theological outlook" among them (300, 305). Calvin and his colleagues believed that biblical interpretation and theological development should take place in community. Calvin even used the weekly Congregation to vet his interpretation of Scripture before publishing his commentaries on the books of the Bible. Thus, Calvin's commentaries do not represent his own private interpretation of Scripture, but the interpretation that was hammered out by the Venerable Company as they met in the weekly Congregation.

The Company also participated in a quarterly meeting known as the Ordinary Censure, which was tied to the quarterly celebration of Holy Communion.

Four times a year, on the Friday before the Lord's Supper, the ministers of the city and countryside, and professors from the Academy met behind closed doors to air their grievances and offer fraternal correction on matters of doctrine and personal moral character. As a visible sign of their unity, the ministers concluded the Ordinary Censure by sharing a meal of soup together. (128)

Just as the Congregation promoted collegiality and unity in theology and biblical interpretation, the Ordinary Censure promoted collegiality and unity in ministry by "providing a regular venue for Geneva's ministers to air doctrinal disagreements and address interpersonal conflicts" (305). Thus, each member of the Venerable Company was accountable to the Company as a whole, just as

the members of the church were accountable to the Consistory, which met every Thursday at noon “for the purpose of overseeing public morality and doctrine, and admonishing and disciplining people guilty of flagrant sin” (29).

Calvin’s *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* established the office of lay elder. And the civil magistrates held an annual election to choose twelve men “from among the three levels of Geneva’s civil government: two from the Small Council, four from the Council of 60, and six from the Council of 200” (29) to serve as elders on the Consistory for a one-year term. Thus, the Consistory was made up of these twelve elders (who were civil magistrates) plus the city pastors. The Consistory had “no power to impose corporal punishment; it had authority to wield only ‘the spiritual sword of the Word of God’” (29). The ecclesiastical discipline carried out by the Consistory was “intended to serve as a form of pastoral care, administering spiritual ‘medicine to bring sinners back to our Lord’” (29).

The fact that more than half of the members of the Consistory were councilmen chosen by the magistrates is indicative of the close relationship between church and state in Geneva. One of the biggest battles Calvin faced in Geneva was over the balance of power between church and state. After Calvin’s death, Beza was able to relieve some of this tension, but it was not uncommon for conflicts between the Company and the magistrates to flare up during the remainder of the sixteenth century, usually due to the overreach of the magistrates in governing ecclesial affairs. Soon after Beza’s departure, the magistrates “commenced an aggressive campaign to expand their jurisdiction over religious life” (303). They insisted on having the right to appoint ministers to vacant pulpits rather than allowing the Company to choose new ministers. The magistrates even went so far as to reverse the Consistory’s excommunication of certain members “effectively breaking the Consistory’s monopoly over church discipline—a prerogative that Calvin had worked so hard to achieve fifty years earlier” (303).

Manetsch does a superb job of demonstrating

that preaching was the primary task of Geneva’s pastors. On Sundays and Wednesdays, the sermon was part of the full service of worship outlined in the Genevan Psalter. On the other days of the week, the sermon was not accompanied by the Psalter or the long prayers of confession and intercession in Calvin’s liturgy. The average city pastor preached around 250 sermons per year. New Testament books and the Psalms were preached at the morning and evening services on the Lord’s Day (catechetical sermons at the noon service), and Old Testament books were preached on weekdays. Preaching was always *lectio continua* except during Christmas or Easter when ministers sometimes interrupted their series “to preach weekday sermons from gospel texts related to Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection” (151).

Manetsch also covers other aspects of pastoral ministry including baptism, prayer, catechesis, the Lord’s Supper, church discipline, and home visitation. I was particularly impressed by how much emphasis the Company placed on the necessity of pastoral visitation. For example, Beza said:

It is not only necessary that [a pastor] have a general knowledge of his flock, but he must also know and call each of his sheep by name, both in public and in their homes, both night and day. Pastors must run after lost sheep, bandaging up the one with a broken leg, strengthening the one that is sick.... In sum, the pastor must consider his sheep more dear to him than his own life, following the example of the Good Shepherd. (281)

Manetsch concludes the book by endeavoring to glean some insights from his study of the Company of Pastors for ecclesial ministry today. First, he observes that since pastoral ministry is often a difficult vocation that entails heavy workloads, financial constraints, incessant criticism, congregational apathy, and various other hardships, to be an effective pastor requires “courage, a clear sense of vocation, thick skin, a generous dose of humility, and solid Christian faith” (304–5).

Second, Manetsch agrees with the Company of Pastors that no minister should hold preemi-

nence in the church but that all ministers should be accountable to the collective judgment of their colleagues (305). Collegiality and mutual accountability in pastoral ministry is beneficial both for the ministers and for the church as a whole. The church would benefit from having a culture where ministers depended on one another, learned from one another, were subject to one another, and forgave one another (305). This is one of the great insights of the Venerable Company that we seek to embody in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. We agree with Manetsch that “Contemporary Protestantism, with its infatuation for robust individualism, celebrity preachers, and ministry empires, has much to learn from the example of Geneva’s church” (305).

Third, Manetsch urges the modern church to recover the primacy and centrality of the Holy Scriptures in worship and in Christian living. The “path to spiritual renewal for moribund churches and tired saints in the twentieth-first century involves, at least in part, recovering the central place of Scripture in the church’s ministry” (306). Since the role of preaching played such a prominent role in Manetsch’s treatment of the Company of Pastors, I think he could have developed this third application a bit more. It would have been especially encouraging to see him argue for a recovery of Calvin’s doctrine of Scripture as well as his theology of preaching, as the path to ecclesiastical renewal.

Finally, Manetsch urges the church to recover the practice of pastoral care, which the Venerable Company valued so highly. The wholehearted commitment of pastors to personally shepherd each member of the flock from cradle to grave is a glaring omission in current pastoral ministry. Manetsch writes, “In our modern world where men and women so often struggle with spiritual dislocation, fractured relationships, and deep-seated loneliness, Calvin’s vision for pastoral oversight that includes gospel proclamation *and* intense relational ministry appears especially relevant and important” (306).

In *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, Manetsch does a superb job of describing pastoral ministry

and religious life in Geneva from 1536 to 1609. His scholarship is first-rate. One rarely finds such meticulous research in a book that’s so engaging and enjoyable to read. I was happy to discover that Manetsch encourages his readers to consider the vital lessons that one may learn from the Company of Pastors and apply them to pastoral ministry in our day. The application section of the book, however, is pretty weak and needs to be fleshed out considerably. It is left to the reader to struggle with how to apply the numerous insights into pastoral ministry to his own ministry context. I strongly encourage all ministers and elders in the OPC to study *Calvin’s Company of Pastors* and consider areas of ministry in their local churches and presbyteries that might be enhanced by recovering the Reformed customs and traditions of the Venerable Company. ☺

**Glen J. Clary** is associate pastor of Providence Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Pflugerville, Texas.

## A Biblical Theology of Mystery

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* May 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Sherif Gendy**

*Hidden but Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery*, by G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014, 393 pages, \$27.00, paper.

G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd worked on the topic of mystery, to some degree, for their doctoral

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=488&issue\\_id=105](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=488&issue_id=105).

work. Beale, an OPC minister and J. Gresham Machen Chair of New Testament and Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Glenside, Pennsylvania, worked on, among other things, how the book of Daniel's conception of "mystery" connects to areas of Judaism and the book of Revelation. Gladd, an assistant professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, was a doctoral student of Beale's at Wheaton College and wrote a dissertation on how mystery in the book of Daniel influences early Judaism and 1 Corinthians.

In *Hidden but Now Revealed*, Beale and Gladd combine their research and trace the biblical theme of mystery in the New Testament with its foundational background in the book of Daniel. Throughout the book, the authors explore all the occurrences of the term *mystery* and unpack the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, highlighting issues of continuity and discontinuity. Their hermeneutical approach considers the function of the biblical concept of mystery in its original Old Testament context and in Jewish background and writings. In doing so, Beale and Gladd define mystery as the revelation of God's partially hidden wisdom, particularly as it concerns events occurring in the "latter days."

The authors' two primary goals in this book are: 1) to define the Old and New Testament conception of mystery and to grasp its significance, and 2) to articulate those topics that are found in conjunction with the term "mystery" in its various uses throughout the New Testament. From the outset, the hermeneutical presuppositions that control the study are laid out: the divine inspiration of the entire Bible, the unity of the Bible, and the accessibility of divine authorial intentions communicated through human authors to contemporary readers (intentions that can be sufficiently understood for the purposes of salvation). Inner-biblical allusion receives much attention in this book, and the authors attempt to give an explanation for literary connections and their significance in the immediate context, making use of Richard Hays's six criteria for discerning and discussing the

nature and validity of allusions.

Nine occurrences of the term "mystery" are identified in the canonical Old Testament (in the book of Daniel), and twenty-eight occurrences are identified in the New Testament. Early Judaism is indebted to Daniel's conception of mystery, employing the term a few hundred times. The authors discuss each occurrence in the New Testament and pay close attention to the surrounding Old Testament allusions and quotations that occur in association with the uses of mystery to unlock the content of the revealed mystery. They first examine the immediate New Testament context of each occurrence, then explore the Old Testament and Jewish background to show how it stands in both continuity and discontinuity with the Old Testament and Judaism. This method shows how the New Testament incorporates Old Testament quotations and themes but expresses them in new ways, though still retaining some continuity with the Old Testament.

Chapter 1 deals with the use of mystery in the book of Daniel and forms the backbone of the entire volume. In Daniel, the term "mystery" encapsulates both the symbolic form of revelation that comes in dreams, writing, and visions mediated by either an individual or angel, and the interpretation of this revelation. This twofold structure of mystery is associated with an end-time element that accompanies the content of the revelation. The authors argue that the revelation of mystery is not a totally new revelation, but the full disclosure of something that was to a significant extent hidden. A proper understanding of mystery in Daniel requires analyzing its connection with Daniel's concept of wisdom. Therefore, in Daniel, the revelation of a mystery is God's full disclosure of wisdom about end-time events that were mostly hitherto unknown (cf. Dan. 2:20–23).

Beale and Gladd limit their analysis of mystery in the Old Testament to the book of Daniel. They make no effort to consider other Old Testament places where mystery plays a role in redemptive history. While the exact terminology may not be used, the concept of mystery is found in places like the fall narrative in Genesis 3, where the promise

of the seed of the woman is an eschatological mystery that is revealed in the coming of the Messiah (v. 15).

Having covered the concept of mystery in the book of Daniel, the authors consider in chapter 2 how mystery is featured prominently in early Judaism. What is surveyed here are primarily the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Targums. Through representative sampling, Beale and Gladd show how mystery retains its eschatological and twofold characteristics of a revelation that is partially hidden and, subsequently, more fully revealed.

Chapters 3–10 focus on New Testament mystery texts at different levels. Chapter 3 discusses Matthew 13, which presents mystery as it relates to the end-time invisible kingdom of God that is already installed through the work of Christ but without consummation.

Chapter 4 covers mystery in Romans 11 and 16, where Paul details the order in which people groups participate in the end-time kingdom. In chapter 5 the authors discuss the mystery of the cross in 1 Corinthians 2, which discloses the exalted, kingly, divine Messiah who is affixed to the cross, reigning at the same time defeated and accursed. Closely related to mystery in 1 Corinthians 2, the revealed mystery in 1 Corinthians 15 is the transformation of believers both alive and dead into an escalated, eschatological Adamic condition.

In chapter 6, the authors turn to Ephesians and examine four main passages. In Ephesians 1 the scope of the unveiled mystery is Christ's rule over the cosmos, his death is the instrumentation of achieving this rule, and the cosmic unity of all things in Christ is the result of this rule. The mystery in Ephesians 3 pertains to the manner in which Jews and Gentiles are united as true Israel, namely, through Christ. The marital mystery in Ephesians 5, which is organically tied to Genesis 2:24, deals with the theme of unity. The "mystery of the gospel" in Ephesians 6:19 describes how the inaugurated rule of the Messiah is established through the centrality of suffering, the resurrection of only one righteous Israelite, and the already-and-not-yet nature of the kingdom.

Chapter 7 looks at mystery in three passages in Colossians. In Colossians 1:26–27, the mystery entails two organically related topics, namely, the theocratic kingdom as reconstituted in Christ and the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Mystery in Colossians 2:2–3 is Christ himself who is the true "wisdom and knowledge" of God, and believers share in such understanding by virtue of their identification and union with him. In Colossians 4:3, Paul's prayer request is for an opportunity to proclaim the mystery that pertains to Christ. This mystery is the welcoming of the Gentiles into end-time Israel through faith alone.

While it is certainly true that Gentiles are invited to Christ through the preaching of the gospel as they come by faith alone, the authors state that Paul's conviction in Colossians is to preach a "Torah-free gospel" to the Gentiles (213). But is this articulation of the content of the gospel Paul preached biblically justified? The gospel is indeed rooted in the Torah. The content of the gospel, the person and work of Christ, is foretold in types, figures, and shadows in the Torah. In fact, Christ tells us that Moses wrote of him (John 5:46), and Paul indicates that the gospel was preached to Abraham (Gal. 3:8). Elsewhere Paul declares that the sacred writings, the Torah, are able to make one wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15; cf. John 5:39).

Chapter 8 covers 2 Thessalonians, where the latter-day antagonist, the man of lawlessness, presently exists invisibly and corporately in the false teachers and persecutors of the church. Yet this latter-day tyrant has not come in bodily form since his coming will precede Christ's return. The two-staged arrival of the antichrist fulfills the prophecy of Daniel 11 mysteriously, since "the mystery of lawlessness is already at work."

Mystery in 1 Timothy is discussed in chapter 9, where the hymn in 1 Timothy 3:16 constitutes the content of the mystery. This content includes Christ being made known as the object of faith and trust, and the revelation of his new-creational state of existence through his physical resurrection body.

Chapter 10 covers the book of Revelation and



how it contributes to the study of mystery. Rooted in the apocalyptic book of Daniel, the use of mystery in Revelation is either an unexpected time of fulfillment (Rev. 10:7) or an unexpected manner of fulfillment (Rev. 1:20; 10:7; 17:5, 7) for that which was apparently prophesied in Daniel.

After covering mystery exegetically through biblical texts, the authors in chapter 11 explore mystery theologically as it relates to New Testament topics including resurrection, Christological understanding of the Old Testament, Jesus's relationship to the temple and new creation, inaugurated eschatology, and the gospel.

Chapter 12 compares and contrasts the Christian mystery to pagan mystery religions to show how conceptually they do not have a lot in common. The mystery religions are marked by extreme secrecy, since mythical rituals and rites remain sealed from outsiders. Biblical mystery, however, has a strong public and evangelistic component.

The last chapter (13) is a conclusion summarizing the authors' survey of the biblical theology of mystery. Some hermeneutical implications of the New Testament use of the Old Testament are highlighted including the hiddenness of meaning and the Old Testament authors' intended meaning. Significant practical implications are also provided, for mystery involves living a cruciform lifestyle that entails mirroring Christ's life.

Finally, Beale includes his essay on the cognitive peripheral vision of the biblical authors as an appendix for a further hermeneutical reflection on how mystery functions in the New Testament use of the Old Testament.

Rich in its footnotes, this book covers many biblical topics related to the concept of mystery and provides hermeneutical principles for biblical theology that take into consideration the full witness of the Scripture's two testaments especially in the area of the New Testament use of the Old Testament. The authors do an adequate job in showing how the New Testament writers, without exception, use the Old Testament contextually by respecting the Old Testament writers' meaning in the original context. The excursions provided at the end of chapter discussion present further

insights into the chapter's subject by connecting it to other related contextual texts, Old Testament background, or early Judaism.

Beale and Gladd make a distinction between the two levels of hiddenness that mystery appears to possess: "temporary hiddenness" and "permanent hiddenness." By "temporary hiddenness," they mean the partially hidden nature of revelation that is undisclosed over a period of time and that eventually gives way to a final, more complete form of revelation. "Permanent hiddenness," on the other hand, is more concerned with the ongoing hidden nature of mystery. While this distinction is helpful, the authors argue that "permanent hiddenness" entails that which will never be removed for intractable nonbelievers. Believers, since they are indwelt with the revelatory Spirit, are able to perceive and understand the content of the revealed mystery. The Scriptures, however, seem to teach that there are revealed mysteries or secrets the significance of which is known only by the Lord, and they remain hidden even to believers (Deut. 29:29). Paul's knowledge was in part as he declares that believers see in a mirror dimly, as in an *αἰνίγματι* "riddle" (*ainigmati* 1 Cor. 13:12). When the disciples asked Jesus about the time he will restore the kingdom to Israel, Jesus replied, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:6–7). Certainly no one knows the hour of Christ's return—not even believers, nor the angels, nor the Son (Mark 13:32; cf. Job 36:26).

Other than a footnote on page 94, what is lacking in this study is a more comprehensive discussion on relevant terms like "secret" and that which is "concealed" and their uses in the Bible in places like Ecclesiastes 12:14; Matthew 10:26; Mark 4:22; Luke 8:17; 12:2; John 7:4; Romans 2:16; Ephesians 5:12–13.

Although mystery is a key component of apocalyptic genre, it is also closely related to wisdom literature. Therefore, another missing discussion in this book is the concept of mystery in relation to biblical wisdom literature. Even though the technical term may not be used, the concept and its significant implications are found in books

like Job and Proverbs.

Comprehensive and accessible, this book is a model of intertextual exegesis and hermeneutics for the sake of biblical theology. Much of the argument is conducted by demonstrating verbal and conceptual similarities to show that a particular allusion is intended by an author and, therefore, is theologically significant. Inevitably, some are more convincing than others, and so minimalists may find a cumulative argument based on the sheer number of allusions sometimes does not ring true. In sum, serious Bible students will find in *Hidden but Now Revealed* a helpful, detailed intertextual analysis of the way in which mystery in the book of Daniel is interpreted, adapted, and revealed in the New Testament. ☉

*Sherif Gendy is a member of the Mission Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota, a licentiate in the Presbytery of the Midwest (OPC), and a Ph.D. student at Westminster Theological Seminary in Glenside, Pennsylvania.*

## Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* August-September 2015<sup>1</sup>

by Sherif Gendy

*Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives*, edited by Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014, 352 pages, \$26.99, paper.

Divided into four parts, this book contains fifteen chapters with an introduction and postscript, writ-

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=499&issue\\_id=107](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=499&issue_id=107).

ten by different scholars. It presents a theological, biblical, and scientific case for the necessity of belief in original sin and the historicity of Adam and Eve in response to contemporary challenges. Here is a summary with assessment for each chapter.

The “Introduction: Adam under Siege: Setting the Stage” by Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves points to the contemporary discussion on the historicity of Adam and the practical impact this issue has on evangelical and Reformed scholars including Bruce Waltke, Peter Enns, and Tremper Longman. It is worth noting that much of the current discussion circles around three key areas: the epistemological status of natural science for theology, historical criticism of the Bible, and church tradition.

### Part One: Adam in the Bible and Science

#### 1. “Adam and Eve in the Old Testament,” by C. John Collins

This chapter argues for the coherency of Genesis 1–11 as a connected narrative, with Genesis 2 serving as an elaboration of Genesis 1. While Collins shows from a literary and linguistic perspective that Genesis 1–11 contains a historical core, he cautions against reading them too literalistically. Based on other OT passages and Second Temple Jewish literature, Collins argues that the writer of Genesis was talking about what he thought were actual events, using rhetorical and literary techniques to shape the readers’ attitudes towards those events. A discussion on Adam being a covenant head and federal representative could have strengthened the argument in this chapter.

#### 2. “Adam in the New Testament,” by Robert W. Yarbrough

In this chapter, Yarbrough exegetically considers eight of the New Testament’s nine Adam passages (Luke 3:38; Rom. 5:14; 1 Cor. 15:22, 45; 1 Tim. 2:13–14), with little to say about Jude 14. He makes two concluding observations. 1) In his Adamic theology, Paul was deeply cognizant of Jesus’s teaching and heritage, and he did not

distort but faithfully represented Jesus’s intent and commission. 2) There are two approaches to the New Testament’s representations of Adam and his importance—post-Christian Western minimalism and African-majority world maximalism. Yarbrough is very brief in his exegetical analysis of the New Testament passages. Although he touches on 1 Timothy 2:13–14, he does not mention anything about verse 15 and Paul’s important statement that the woman/Eve “will be saved through childbearing.”

### **3. “Adam and Modern Science,” by William Stone (a pseudonym)**

In this chapter Stone places Adam in conversation with crucial evidence from paleoanthropology to show how Adam’s historicity and the human fossil record are not in conflict. He provides evidence to confirm the expectation of a discontinuity between the genus *Homo* and the australopithecine genera and places Adam at the root of genus *Homo*. One concern that Stone leaves unaddressed is reconciling the conventional chronology that would make Adam live about 1.8 million years ago with our reading of the genealogies of Genesis 4–5.

## **Part Two: Original Sin in History**

### **4. “Original Sin in Patristic Theology,” by Peter Sanlon**

In this chapter, Sanlon focuses on Augustine and his vision of God, humanity, and ethics that was thoroughly informed by his understanding of original sin. For Augustine, had Adam not been a historical person, then the reality of original sin, which shaped God’s grace and its conception, would collapse. Thus, the nature of salvation offered through the second Adam is inextricably tied to the historicity of Adam. Although Sanlon presents a thorough understanding of the Augustinian view of original sin and grace, he does not mention any other fathers. The title of this chapter should have specifically restricted the patristic theology to Augustine.

### **5. “The Lutheran Doctrine of Original Sin,” by Robert Kolb**

Kolb highlights the relational aspect of Luther’s definition of original sin, which is the breaking of the bond between Creator and human creature. At the heart of Luther’s definition of the original sin—at the beginning of human history in Eden and in every individual’s daily experience—is doubting of God’s Word, denying of his lordship, and destruction of love for him and trust in him. Kolb traces the development of Luther’s understanding of original sin through Philip Melancthon, the Formula of Concord, Martin Chemnitz, and Philipp Jakob Spener. What is missing in this chapter is a discussion of Luther’s view of justification in relation to original sin.

### **6. “Original Sin in Reformed Theology,” by Donald Macleod**

Macleod summarizes the Reformed view of original sin, which is in agreement with the Augustinian doctrine, that all human beings are born with a propensity to sin, and by nature are incapable of loving God, repenting of sin, or believing in Christ, apart from the new birth. Macleod explains the covenant of works, Adam’s federal relationship to his posterity, the imputation of Adam’s guilt, and our inheritance of corruption. Macleod clarifies the two views of imputation: 1) the immediate imputation, where the guilt comes first and corruption is its penal consequence; and 2) the mediate imputation, where the corruption comes before the guilt. Much could have been said regarding whether the depravity of all human beings is justified by Adam’s federal headship or the biological connection.

### **7. “But a Heathen Still”: The Doctrine of Original Sin in Wesleyan Theology,” by Thomas H. McCall**

In this chapter, McCall offers an overview of the Wesleyan doctrine of original sin, which historically held to federalism but later modified it. Significant changes were made in Wesleyan theology in the nineteenth century that later led

to the rejection of original guilt. It is interesting to know that Wesley defended the federalism of the Westminster Confession. McCall presents an honest assessment of the departure in contemporary Wesleyan doctrines of sin and salvation from early Methodism.

#### **8. “Original Sin in Modern Theology,” by Carl R. Trueman**

Trueman surveys the highly diverse phenomenon in modern theology of original sin. He reviews six mainline theologians who have been influential on various strands of modern thought and stand in continuity with certain aspects of Enlightenment critiques of classical orthodoxy. Trueman shows that in modern theology, the relevance of the historicity of Adam is rejected and, therefore, any notion of humanity standing guilty before God because of the imputation of an alien guilt of the historical Adam is repudiated. This results in five treatments of original sin: 1) There is no movement from innocence to guilt, rather, creation was imperfect from the beginning. 2) Human nature in itself is always fallen, and Adam functions as a paradigm to which we all conform. 3) Christological focus has priority in discussions of sin. 4) The nature of sin is attenuated, where sin is primarily done against other people rather than God. 5) The view of alien guilt as being unjust and unethical is not solved by modern reconstructions. Trueman’s conclusion that one’s understanding of original sin is necessarily and decisively connected to the structure of one’s theology as a whole is true and valuable.

### **Part Three: Original Sin in Theology**

#### **9. “Original Sin in Biblical Theology,” by James M. Hamilton**

Taking the Bible as a coherent story, Hamilton argues in this chapter that biblical theology is the attempt to discern the interpretative perspective that the biblical authors employed in order to adopt it as our own. This perspective includes a first man, Adam, whose sin had ramifications for

all humans and universal consequences. Hamilton spends much time interacting with Peter Enns’s book, *The Evolution of Adam*. This time could have been spent more effectively in dealing with hermeneutical issues related to biblical theology, including the New Testament use of the Old Testament, authorial intention, and divine meaning.

#### **10. “Threads in a Seamless Garment: Original Sin in Systematic Theology,” by Michael Reeves and Hans Madueme**

In this chapter, Reeves and Madueme demonstrate that a gospel that omits Adam and original sin is far less good news, if good news at all. These biblical doctrines show how kind and good God is and what good news is, therefore, offered to the weak and helpless sinner. The authors argue for a historical, originating sin, which affirms that God is not the author of evil; rather he is faithful to his creation and redeems it. They also argue for a consequential, originated sin, which shows that Christ is truly a Savior and not just an example. The authors offer a helpful explanation for the problem of the existence of evil. They argue that when God’s creatures turned away from him, evil existed.

#### **11. “‘The Most Vulnerable Part of the Whole Christian Account’”: Original Sin and Modern Science,” by Hans Madueme**

In this chapter, Madueme acknowledges that science is an aspect of God’s general revelation, and Christianity is a revelatory faith with divinely revealed doctrines including original sin. Yet at the same time, Madueme sees conflicts between widely attested scientific claims and Christian doctrines, and is not satisfied with human attempts for harmonization. For Madueme, full harmonization will ultimately and certainly happen in the eschaton. One wonders, if science and Christianity are divinely revealed, is there true conflict between them? Or, is conflict happening due to evil intentions of fallen humanity that corrupt divinely revealed science, causing it to be in conflict with Christian doctrines? Madueme does not present any attempts for reconciling science with Christi-

anity that take into account their divine origin.

## **12. “Original Sin in Pastoral Theology,” by Daniel Doriani**

Doriani discusses original sin in relation to pastoral call, evangelism, church leadership, and pastoral care. Realizing that sin creates all of man’s problems, Doriani points out its pervasive effects on the mind and emotions. Doriani rightly argues that the doctrine of original sin leads upward to Christ and is central to gospel preaching and discipleship since it insists that we place our hope and trust in Jesus alone.

### **Part Four: Adam and the Fall in Dispute**

## **13. “Original Sin and Original Death: Romans 5:12–19,” by Thomas R. Schreiner**

In this chapter, Schreiner argues that the most plausible reading of Romans 5:12–19, both exegetically and theologically, supports the doctrine of original sin and original death. Interacting with Henri Blocher, who rejects alien guilt, Schreiner is rightly convinced that sin, death, and condemnation are the portion of all people because of Adam’s one sin and his covenant headship. Just as we receive alien guilt in Adam, we receive alien righteousness in Christ. Schreiner sees the human race functioning as one organic whole. He is in favor of John Murray’s treatment of the subject. However, he points out Murray’s fundamental weakness of interpreting Romans 5:12–14 to say that the sins of those who lived between Adam and Moses were not counted against them (v. 13). Schreiner touches on those who bring up the question of infants, who die lacking mental capacities to make choices, but he does not work out all the details of their arguments or counterarguments.

## **14. “The Fall and Genesis 3,” by Noel Weeks**

Weeks deals with the difficulties of searching for earlier texts or sources behind Genesis 3. Then he turns to what the text itself says, working his way through some of the crucial exegetical

puzzles before making sense of the sequential narrative. He concludes that the biblical text presents an explanation of crucial elements of the world. He affirms the reality of Adam’s sin and relative relationships of God, Adam, Eve, and the animals. Weeks dismisses symbolic interpretations of the text that interpret the text non-historically as being purely arbitrary. However, he does not make a case to support his conclusion.

## **15. “Adam, History, and Theodicy,” by William Edgar**

In this chapter, Edgar argues that the historicity of Adam is crucial in theodicy. It explains why God is not the accountable cause for evil in the world. In fact, as Edgar shows, there is no intrinsic reason why God’s goodness could not allow evil, as long as it will one day be eradicated. For Edgar, believing that Adam is the first man, the covenant head of humanity, while perhaps not answering all questions about God’s relation to evil, is a far better option than attempting to answer David Hume’s dilemma of reconciling God’s goodness and power with the existence of evil. Edgar does not, however, work out all the details of God’s good purposes in allowing evil in the world and dealing with it in Christ and his redemptive work.

## **16. “Postscript,” by Michael Reeves and Hans Madueme**

This postscript reaffirms the traditional doctrine of Adam’s fall and original sin as the most theologically mature and cogent option in today’s debate. The Bible in its two Testaments does not support a mythological or purely figurative reading of Adam and Eve. Biblical theology has a coherent story and systematic theology a coherent framework only with a historical Adam.

The essays in this volume are timely and much needed in contemporary discussion on the historicity of Adam. It is not just the doctrine of original sin, with all its explanatory power, that is affected by the Adam question. The goodness and mercy of God, the coherence of the Scripture, and the finished work of Christ, cannot remain



unscathed by the mythologizing of Adam. The historicity of Adam and original sin are essential, irremovable, relevant, and credible elements of the Christian faith. ©

**Sherif Gendy** is a member of the Mission Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota, a licentiate in the Presbytery of the Midwest (OPC), and a Ph.D. student at Westminster Theological Seminary in Glenside, Pennsylvania.

## The Antidote to Juvenilization

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* August-September 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Gregory E. Reynolds**

*From Here to Maturity: Overcoming the Juvenilization of American Christianity* by Thomas E. Bergler. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014, xiv + 175 pages, \$20.00, paper.

This book is the follow-up volume to Thomas Bergler's unique study of the twentieth century development of youth groups, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*.<sup>2</sup> In that volume, Bergler identifies some significant problems with youth ministry by tracing the history of American youth ministry from its inception in the early twentieth century to the present. The problems he identifies are summarized under the rubric of juvenilization, which is an American sociocultural problem. This present volume offers some thoughtful solutions, expanding significantly upon the brief conclusion

of the former book. Bergler is the perfect critic because he has been involved in youth ministry and teaches on the subject as a professor of ministry and missions at Huntington University in Huntington, Indiana.

*From Here to Maturity* (FHM) functions as a guide for church leaders to deal with the problem of juvenilization, especially in terms of teenagers and emerging adults, but fostering spiritual maturity generally is the broader concern. Bergler makes clear at the outset that spiritual maturity is not the same as an unattainable perfection; nor is it an inaccessible magical process (xiii–xiv).

Chapter 1 surveys the terrain of juvenilization, summing up findings from *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*, with the apt chapter title “We’re All Adolescents Now.” The “irony is that institutions adults created to move young people toward maturity also teach them to revel in immaturity” (5). Bergler identifies five areas in which American society is not preparing young people to become healthy, productive adults: 1) Moral reasoning lacks ethical standards. 2) Life aspirations are no higher than the consumerism of the American dream. 3) Many abuse alcohol and drugs. 4) Sex is taken lightly. 5) There is little participation in politics (6). Adulthood is depicted in various media as “boring, restrictive, and inauthentic” when compared with the excitement of youth. In short, youth is worshipped as an ideal (8). The self-centeredness fostered by the “culture of adolescence” undermines essential traits of mature adulthood, like self-denial and faithfulness in commitments (9). Thus, spirituality follows a similar trajectory—“It’s all about me”—yielding the “moralistic, therapeutic deism” that Christian Smith uses to sum up his research on the spirituality of American teenagers (12–14). Add to this the low esteem in which doctrine and the institutional church are held (17–19), and American Christianity faces what appears to be an insurmountable problem. Thankfully Bergler is hopeful that intentional reforming efforts can make a difference.

Chapter 2 explores what the Bible says about growing in maturity. What is clear is that God’s Word is more interested in holiness than happi-

1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=502&issue\\_id=107](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=502&issue_id=107).

2 Thomas E. Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012). See my review article “The Apotheosis of Adolescence,” *Ordained Servant Online* (Nov. 2013), [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=389](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=389); *Ordained Servant* 22 (2013): 151–57.

ness. The latter turns out to be the fruit of holiness rather than an end in itself (27). Bergler nicely contrasts biblical, self-denying discipleship with the popular self-help message of so many churches. He gives a succinct definition of the Good News as it relates to sanctification (Bergler uses “spiritual transformation” throughout):

The Good News is that Jesus died and rose from the dead in order to transform everything in the world to become more and more the way God wants it to be—and that includes all parts of you. (31)

This chapter is loaded with analysis of biblical evidence, especially from the New Testament. He is careful to paint a portrait of Christian maturity as he analyses each passage. He is especially concerned that juvenile spirituality does not prepare people for hardship in the way that the biblical model does. “Mature Christians persevere in love, even through hard times” (38). Bergler zeros in on Ephesians 4:11–16 and concludes: 1) “Spiritual maturity is central, not incidental, to God’s plan.” 2) Christ gifts leaders to guide people to spiritual maturity. 3) “Maturity includes unity with other believers, knowledge of Christ, and being like Christ.” 4) Spiritual maturity requires doctrinal soundness (41).

Bergler perceptively distinguishes between the status of holiness and the process of growing in holiness. We use the labels definitive and progressive sanctification. Not only is spiritual maturity achievable in this life (47), but, “far from being the endpoint of spiritual growth, spiritual maturity is the base camp from which the ascent of the mountain of holiness can begin in earnest” (48). Leaders need to communicate the content of Christian maturity. “In all of this, mature Christians are living a Christ-focused, cross-and-resurrection-shaped life. They are not engaged in a self-help project” (49). Sadly, many Christians are stuck in spiritual immaturity because they are in churches that are “emotionally obsessive” (53).

Chapter 3 is designed to show leaders how to help adults mature. Bergler begins with a discussion of the “centrality of the human heart in the

process of spiritual transformation” (55). He understands the heart in its biblical dimensions of mind, feelings, and will. At this point, I wish the Puritan and Reformed concept of the affections replaced the words “feelings” and “emotions” in Bergler’s discussion. He is very helpful in pointing out the danger of pitting the heart, understood as only the emotions, against the head (69). “Emotional patterns are shaped by our deepest loves” (73). At this point, I wish Bergler had given more biblical evidence for his understanding of the centrality of the heart in spiritual formation.

Churches should provide information describing what spiritual maturity looks like based on their faith tradition (56). Here confessional churches have a distinct advantage, but we need to communicate this information regularly to our congregations. Bergler suggests that in order to move forward, the strategy must include: 1) a profile of spiritual maturity, 2) a process for growth, 3) a plan of implementation, 4) and communal practices to foster implementation (57).

Here, Bergler becomes too programmatic as he explains Dallas Willard’s VIM (vision, intention, means) model for spiritual formation (58). But scattered throughout his discussion is much wisdom (58–64). Bergler’s more broadly evangelical approach means that some oddities will appear, but these are incidental for the discerning reader. In a chart on pages 62 and 63, for example, the spiritual discipline of “prayer walking” is mentioned. Several times he refers to “listening to the Spirit” (136), without cautioning the reader that such listening must take place in the context of studying God’s Word. But then he makes the important point that “in the case of spiritual disciplines, more than our human effort is at work” (63). He even reminds the reader that spiritual disciplines are what we used to call “means of grace” (64). These are not a menu of choices, but a core of essential elements in the Christian life: “prayer, learning God’s Word, Holy Communion, serving others, corporate worship” should be part of every Christian life (66–67).

Chapter 4 focuses on the benefits of youth ministry in maturing the whole church. But the

whole church must be committed to youth ministry. The goal should be to help “teenagers become agents of spiritual maturity, not passive consumers of juvenilized programs” (86). Thus, youth ministry must be intergenerational. In this chapter, especially, we see Bergler relying heavily on the important work of sociologist Christian Smith<sup>3</sup> and the Exemplary Youth Ministry (EYM) Study.<sup>4</sup> He also refers to many other helpful resources. EYM provides lists of congregational assets that should be present in a healthy congregation (88–90). Bergler points out that extensive lists can be overwhelming, and I agree. One of the important ingredients in congregational life is older, more mature Christians mentoring the young people. A Reformed congregation in New York City, where I worshipped, has just such a group called OWLS, older, wiser, leader servants. One study shows that young people long for deeper conversations than they are likely to find in their youth group (100). The inclusion of parents is essential in healthy youth ministry (101).

Teenagers are not the only subjects of contemporary youth ministry, but also “emerging adults,” a category discovered and labeled by Christian Smith. This includes adults in their twenties. This cultural phenomenon of extended adolescence has bled over into the church and includes a whole generation of youth group Christians who were not equipped to face the challenges of twenty-first-century American life. Thus the church needs to make sure it is especially welcoming to this age group (107).

Chapter 5 provides ways of assessing and implementing changes in a congregation in order to promote spiritual maturity. Again, while this may

seem too programmatic, and thus overwhelming, there are many good ideas imbedded in the lists and charts. At the very least this chapter presents appropriate questions for church officers and youth leaders to ask about all of the ministries of the church. But instead of surveys, Presbyterians have a better way of assessing congregational attitudes and needs. Pastoral and ruling elder visits with a specific list of questions developed by the session keep a regular finger on the pulse of the congregation. Bergler introduces his cyclical process for ministry discernment: observe, interpret, evaluate, act (124). He unpacks these four elements, which are common sense elements in good leadership, in a very thoughtful way to help us be more careful about the way we go about this process.

Bergler emphasizes the importance of Sunday activities, especially public worship. This is the place to focus on spiritual maturity (121).

What is fascinating about this section is that he guides us through the four steps by using the example of congregational singing. He uncovers the typical mistake of equating worship with music (125–26). Then he takes aim at the genre of contemporary Christian music he calls “slow dance worship music,” by uncovering the “North American culture of romantic love” behind it (126). This is a brilliant challenge to evangelical conventional wisdom on this issue. Furthermore, he gets the form/content relationship perfectly: “youth leaders typically held naïve views of the relationship between cultural forms and the messages they communicate” (128). This particular form of Christianized popular culture simply promotes adolescence. He is brave to choose such a controversial topic, and his wisdom in handling it, although we might not agree with his conclusion, is exemplary.

This book is an essential companion to *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*. Both should be required reading for sessions and youth leaders. ☺

**Gregory E. Reynolds** serves as the pastor of *Amoskeag Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Manchester, New Hampshire*, and is the editor of *Ordained Servant*.

---

3 Christian Smith with Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Christian Smith with Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

4 Roland Martinson, Wes Black, and John Roberto, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry: Leading Congregations toward Exemplary Youth Ministry* (St. Paul, MN: EYM, 2010).

# Knowledge and Christian Belief

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* October 2015<sup>1</sup>

by James D. Baird

*Knowledge and Christian Belief*, by Alvin Plantinga. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015, xii + 129 pages, \$16.00, paper.

The recent rise in the perceived respectability of Christianity in American philosophical circles is astounding. Not sixty years ago, the title “Christian philosopher” seemed like an oxymoron. Back then, organizations now thriving, like the Society of Christian Philosophers and the Evangelical Philosophical Society, never would have gotten off the ground. We have many great Christian philosophers to thank for this contemporary tolerance of Christian belief, not the least of which is Alvin Plantinga.

*Knowledge and Christian Belief* is a synopsis of Plantinga’s magnum opus, *Warranted Christian Belief*<sup>2</sup> and is 387 pages shorter. Consequently, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* reads like an entirely new book, and will undoubtedly appeal to a new, more popular audience.

In *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, Plantinga’s chief topic is the “question of the rationality, or sensibleness, or justification, of Christian belief” (vii). Plantinga wants to investigate the claim made by the New Atheists (e.g., Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens) that Christian belief is irrational, insensible, or unjustified, whether or not it is true. In short, Plantinga argues that this claim is simply mistaken.

In chapter 1, Plantinga clears the way for

the rest of the book by showing that the Kantian objection that we cannot speak or think about God because he is a member of the unapproachable noumenal realm is self-defeating. In chapter 2, he seeks to tease out what else might be wrong with Christian belief. Plantinga notes that a belief can be false (*de facto*) or it can be otherwise inappropriate (*de jure*). Plantinga then attempts to find a *de jure* objection against Christian belief “that really does apply to Christian belief, and isn’t trivially easy to answer” and “is independent of the *de facto* objection—that is, is such that one can sensibly offer the objection without presupposing or assuming that Christian belief is false” (9). Plantinga concludes that the best candidate to meet these criteria is the objection that Christian belief is irrational or unwarranted—more precisely, that Christian belief is not formed by properly functioning mental faculties.

In chapter 3, Plantinga proposes what he calls the A/C model. This model is centered on the idea (present, in one form or another, in the writings of Aquinas and Calvin) that all human beings have a natural capacity to form properly basic beliefs about God—that is, beliefs that are rationally formed in us without any evidential basis. Plantinga further contends that if Christianity is true, then the A/C model is highly probable.

In chapters 4 through 6, Plantinga extends the A/C model to include Christian belief. He contends that if Christianity is true, then it is highly likely that God instituted a “three-tiered cognitive process” (53) for informing us about his great plan of redemption: Scripture, the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit, and faith. Brought together, these three elements constitute the way we form properly basic beliefs about the gospel.

If Christianity is true, therefore, the objection that Christian belief is irrational or unwarranted falls flat. The only way to sustain this objection is to take for granted that Christian belief is false. In other words, one cannot cogently criticize Christian belief for being irrational or unwarranted without first showing it to be false. As Plantinga puts the issue, “What you take to be rational or warranted depends upon what sort of metaphysical

1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=506&issue\\_id=108](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=506&issue_id=108).

2 Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

and religious stance you adopt” (40).

In chapter 7, Plantinga skillfully responds to some possible objections to his formulation of the extended A/C model. The remainder of the book is an engagement of three types of defeaters for Christian belief. According to Plantinga, defeaters are “reasons for giving up a belief” (90). In chapter 8, Plantinga examines whether historical biblical criticism is a viable defeater; in chapter 9, he examines pluralism; and in chapter 10, he examines the Achilles heel of Christian belief: the problem of evil. With erudite precision, Plantinga shows that each of these alleged defeaters fails to rebut or undercut Christian belief.

*Knowledge and Christian Belief* is an excellent book. Plantinga masterfully sets forth his A/C model and its extensions with clarity and philosophical rigor. Pastors needing an aid responding to the kind of objections to Christian belief permeating the modern-day intelligentsia would do well to turn to this resource. It would be helpful in this respect to most philosophically minded Christians, as well. However, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* has some concerning elements along with some serious methodological flaws.

Overall, the kind of Christian belief Plantinga defends is Christian belief taken broadly, not the rich Christian belief taught in the Reformed confessions. Moreover, Plantinga’s construal of the *sensus divinitatis* in the A/C model is as a *capacity* for the knowledge of God, not as *actual* knowledge of God like what Paul argues for in Romans 1. One might also question whether Plantinga’s model logic is consistent with traditional Christian theism.<sup>3</sup>

The most disappointing feature of *Knowledge and Christian Belief* is its lack of a positive philosophical case for Christianity. Plantinga writes in the book’s closing paragraph:

But *is* [Christian belief] true? This is the really important question. And here we pass beyond

---

3 See James Douglas Baird, “God, Propositions, and Necessary Existence,” *Reformed Forum* (April 13, 2015), <http://reformedforum.org/god-propositions-necessary-existence/>.

the competence of philosophy.... Speaking for myself and not in the name of philosophy, I can say only that it does, indeed, seem to me to be true, and to be the maximally important truth. (126)

Notice, it is Plantinga’s conception of the bounds and limits of the discipline of philosophy that explains his pseudo-fideism. We as Reformed Christians should wholeheartedly disagree with Plantinga at this point. If we let the New Testament shape our understanding, as we always should, we will view the nature of philosophy and philosophical proof in quite a different manner.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear from Paul’s writings and ministry that the greatest philosophical proof available is the proclamation of Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected (Acts 17:22–31; 1 Cor. 2; 2 Cor. 4:5–6; Eph. 3:8–10; Col. 2:2–4, 8). Preaching the gospel of Christ imparts eschatological light, knowledge, assurance, wisdom, and truth. What more could the Christian philosopher desire? Surely, when God speaks to us, whether in nature or in the good news of his Son’s death and resurrection, that divine speech is more than enough philosophical proof.

Plantinga has made many wonderful contributions to Christian philosophy, and he has fought many battles under its banner. We as Calvinists, however, should not shy away from setting Calvin’s model in stark contradistinction to the model of philosophy that Plantinga assumed and implemented. As Cornelius Van Til points out, “Calvin’s theological effort was to set the biblical view of man and God squarely over against every form of man-centered philosophy.”<sup>5</sup> Plantinga has unsuc-

---

4 See Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R, 1980), 20: “Above all, [the Bible] contains, if I may so call it, a divine philosophy of the history of redemption and of revelation in general outlines. And whosoever is convinced in his heart of the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures and reads his Bible as the Word of God, cannot, as a student of Biblical Theology, allow himself to reject this divine philosophy and substitute for it another of his own making.”

5 Cornelius Van Til, “Calvin as a Controversialist,” in *Soli*



cessfully distinguished between God-centered philosophy and man-centered philosophy. He has failed decidedly to follow Calvin in setting forth a philosophy that is “a conceptual expression of what Christ, in Scripture, has told him about the past, the present, and the future”<sup>6</sup> because he has let what “everyone or nearly everyone” agrees upon define what philosophy can and cannot prove (126).

We should not settle for a philosophical method that seeks to accommodate the blind opinions of natural man. Indeed, we should accept our brothers espousing philosophies similar to Plantinga’s with appropriate Christian warmth and fellowship. But, we should oppose their philosophy, despite whatever respectability it may gain us in the academy; for, to use the words of Paul, it is according to human tradition and not according to Christ (Col. 2:8).

In *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, Alvin Plantinga offers much to the Reformed Christian by way of philosophically astute responses to the modern-day challenges to Christianity. Plantinga is a man with strong Christian convictions, and he should be respected as such. Nevertheless, his philosophical method falls short of the biblical imperative. His new book subsequently will leave the Reformed Christian longing for a more robust case for the full-orbed truth of Christianity. For such a robust case, I would gladly point the Reformed Christian to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church’s most esteemed apologist, Cornelius Van Til. In the writings of Van Til, the Reformed Christian will find the happy marriage between defense and offense—between philosophical critique and gospel proclamation—that is painfully lacking in many of Plantinga’s writings. ©

**James D. Baird** is a member of Grace Presbyterian

---

*Deo Gloria: Essays in Reformed Theology: Festschrift for John H. Gerstner*, ed. R. C. Sproul (Nutley, NJ: P&R, 1976), 6. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, LCC, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 1.5.12.

6 Van Til, “Calvin,” 6.

*Church of Lookout Mountain (PCA) in Lookout Mountain, Georgia, and is a student at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.*

## The Song of Songs

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* October 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Sherif Gendy**

*The Song of Songs: An Introduction and Commentary*, by Iain M. Duguid. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015, 160 pages, \$18.00, paper.

This volume is number nineteen in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series. Iain M. Duguid offers a general introduction to the Song of Songs with a discussion of its title, authorship, date, approaches of interpretation, canonicity, themes and message, and structure and unity. This introduction is then followed by an analysis, translation, and commentary on the text.

Duguid touches on issues related to arguments for and against Solomonic authorship, which correspond to early and late dates, respectively. He concludes that a date after the exile may be regarded as more likely, and that Solomonic authorship is not necessary. For Duguid, it seems more plausible that the authorship is unknown.

Duguid spends some time laying out the variant hermeneutical approaches to the Song. Taking the book as a love song, Duguid briefly discusses the allegorical, natural, typological, and the three-character interpretations. He does not, however, mention the Song’s history of interpretation and

---

1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=508&issue\\_id=108](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=508&issue_id=108).

how it was understood in Jewish tradition and through the early church fathers. Duguid adopts as his hermeneutical approach the twofold interpretation, combining natural and spiritual meanings. He argues that the book should be read against the backdrop of wisdom literature, and as such, it is designed to show us an idealized picture of married love in the context of a fallen and broken world. Yet at the same time, Duguid regards the book as “parabolic,” in that it speaks of our imperfection as humans and as lovers and thus it drives us into the arms of our heavenly husband, Jesus Christ.

While Duguid does not rule out the typological reading of the book, he prefers to couple it with the allegorical interpretation where both comprise the spiritual meaning. He then wishes to divorce this spiritual interpretation from the book’s literal meaning—what Duguid calls “natural” reading. One is left wondering, to what extent can we divorce the spiritual and natural readings? Is it even possible to separate the two at all? And what constitutes the “natural” reading of any Scripture if it does not include any typological or spiritual sense?

A more helpful hermeneutical approach is the analogical and canonical reading, which seriously takes into consideration the book’s immediate context and literary genre as wisdom literature. According to this reading, the book is read following Proverbs and Ruth in the Hebrew canon. Proverbs 31:10 speaks of אִשֶׁת־חַיִל (*’eshet hayil*) “virtuous woman” (cf. Prov. 12:4), and then comes Ruth as an example and embodiment of this virtuous woman, thus she was called אִשֶׁת חַיִל (*’eshet hayil*) (Ruth 3:11). The Song of Songs follows this motif as it presents the celebration of the virtuous woman’s love with her lover. Proverbs describes the ideal wife, which Ruth is. Song of Songs describes the bliss of love and applies it to Boaz and Ruth by its canonical proximity. This canonical consideration sets the stage for the analogical reading, once we consider the wider canonical context. In this context, we learn that Yahweh’s relationship with his people is often couched in the language of the covenant of marriage. This is one of the primary ways this relationship is portrayed in the Scripture.

Thus, when the Song is taken canonically, and by analogy, it speaks of this divine-human marriage relationship. This relationship finds its ultimate expression through the covenant mediator’s work on the cross.

Duguid summarizes the main themes and message of the book, which are centered on love and sex within a committed marriage. The Song also speaks against asceticism. Once the book’s message is identified through natural or literal reading, Duguid wishes to see a message beyond marriage that looks to the heavenly bridegroom through the work of Christ.

Although not arguing for a strict narrative behind the Song or a chiasmic structure, Duguid sees a broad development and logical flow where there is a movement that leads up to and away from the marriage. Duguid rightly observes that the Song leaves the couple (and us) at the end longing for something more complete.

The second major part of this book has an analysis (in which Duguid outlines the book), Duguid’s own translation of the book, and then a commentary. The commentary discusses the *context* of each passage at hand, then Duguid offers *comment* on the passage, highlighting some key phrases and words, and finally there is the *meaning* that explains the passage from a practical perspective with spiritual life applications.

Duguid offers some helpful considerations from the Song’s title. The compound form “Song of Songs” is best understood as a superlative title, like “King of kings” or “Holy of Holies.” The title introduces and guides interpretation, identifies the book, and provides a frame of reference that orients the reader to the material that follows. The singular form, שִׁיר (*shir*) “song,” suggests that this book consists of a single song, rather than being a diverse collection of disparate materials. It also focuses our attention on the unity and the genre of the book. It tells us that what follows is a song rather than some other genre of writing, such as a proverb, a prophetic vision, or a historical narrative. Although the book is a poetic song in its genre, this does not negate the possibility that it might reflect a story that took place in history. In

other words, it could be a historical account written poetically in the form of a song, in the same way Genesis 1, for example, is written in a poetic style but communicates history.

An important discussion on the poetic style of the text is missing in Duguid's treatment. One expects the author to spend some time analyzing the poetic features of the Hebrew terse utterances, cola, which are generally grouped in pairs (bicola) or triplets (tricola). These in turn form larger constellations: the strophe and the stanza. This kind of Hebrew textual analysis highlights the main message of a given passage and explains its function within the whole book.

Another genre fallacy that Duguid appears to have fallen into is assuming that poetry does not communicate doctrine and does not have logical connections. This is shown when Duguid quotes C. S. Lewis's comment about the Psalms (72).<sup>2</sup> If the Song of Songs is taken as Scripture, then it must communicate theological truths. As Scripture, the Song cannot simply be devoted to the joys of physical love with no theological significance. As Christians, we do not approach the Song of Songs as "a code to be cracked," or with the belief that its imagery needs to be subordinated to a general interest. Rather, we approach the Song with the presumption that it is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). To come away with the idea that the Song is a poem about human sexuality appears to shortchange the interpreter of Scripture.

Duguid takes the approach that the man in the poem is an idealized figure, a poetic persona rather than a historical individual. For Duguid, the focus of the Song is not on the specific identity of the lovers so much as it is on the nature of their love. He understands אֲשֶׁר לִשְׁלֹמֹה ('*asher lishlomoh*), "which is Solomon's" (1:1), not as designated authorship, rather as possession. Thus, according to Duguid, the Song's title suggests that this book is in some general sense about "that

which belongs to Solomon."

This book is good for pastors and preachers. It is not academically technical as one might expect, but rather is practical and handy. It relies on many resources and ancient Near Eastern comparisons. Closing comments or a conclusion is missing in this book. It ends with a discussion on the last two verses of the Song (8:13–14).

While there are spiritual applications, this book lacks a coherent presentation of the Song's contribution to biblical theology. Since Duguid adopts the view that Solomon is neither the subject of the Song, nor its author, he sees the Song's primary significance as describing human relationships. He fails to read the Song canonically in its final shape and place within the canon. This canonical hermeneutic operates within a theologically articulate interpretive method that opens the door for reading the Song, which belongs to Solomon, in light of the Davidic covenant and the promise for David's son and everlasting throne (2 Sam. 7). The Song also has images borrowed from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2–3) that one cannot neglect if we are to understand it canonically. These images not only connect the Song to the first garden, but also look forward to the consummate garden in the new heavens and new earth.

Failing to read the Song canonically means failing to read it as Christian Scripture. Only the canonical reading would allow one to see the Song's messianic hope. This hope is rooted in the soil of the promise that the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent, watered by the expectation of a king from the seed of Abraham via Judah, and fertilized by anticipations of an eschatological return to the Garden of Eden. ☉

**Sherif Gendy** is a licentiate in the Presbytery of the Midwest (OPC), a Ph.D. student at Westminster Theological Seminary in Glenside, Pennsylvania, and is serving as Arabic Theological Editor for Third Millennium Ministries in Casselberry, Florida.

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 3.

# Do We Need a Better Country Now More Than Ever?

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* October 2015<sup>1</sup>

by Darryl G. Hart

*The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years*, by Steven P. Miller. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, viii + 221 pages, \$24.95.

When did Christian America end? That is a question on the minds of many Christians in the United States since *Obergefell v. Hodges* (June 26, 2015). The court's decision to declare unconstitutional laws that prohibit marriage between persons of the same sex has not only provoked various degrees of discouragement but even prompted some commentators, like journalist Rod Dreher, to propose the Benedict Option. This refers to Benedict of Nursia's determination after the fall of the Roman Empire to form a monastic community—in other words, to withdraw from the decay of the larger society and preserve the distinct beliefs and patterns of life prescribed by Christianity. Dreher himself is not literally suggesting the formation of monasteries. But he believes that Christians need to recognize the impossibility of preserving Christians standards in the wider society and that this may require finding ways of being Christians that are intentionally in opposition to or isolated from the wider culture. This Benedict Option looks increasingly plausible now that the United States' highest court has opened the Pandora's Box of marriage and family life.

Steven P. Miller argues in *The Age of Evangelicalism* that the recent period of American history has witnessed the end of one version of Christian America and that it was happening even before the

debates over same-sex marriage. Between roughly 1975 and 2008, the United States experienced what Miller calls its “Born-Again Years.” From the Jesus People who offered a sanctified alternative to drugs, sex, and rock ‘n roll, to George W. Bush’s presidency, evangelicalism was the lens through which pollsters, scholars, journalists, and political operatives evaluated religion in the United States. *The Age of Evangelicalism* as a history of born-again Protestantism from the 1970s on offers very little new material. Miller assembles the usual suspects—Billy Graham, Hal Lindsey, Jimmy Carter, Jerry Falwell, Rick Warren, Pat Robertson, Jim Wallis, and Ralph Reed—not primarily to add to a subject that arguably has received more attention than any other aspect of American Christianity. Instead, Miller’s point is subtler than that. He uses the standard evangelical narrative to demonstrate how born-again Protestantism, even though its adherents thought of themselves as a minority fighting against the secular majority, dominated discussions of religion in the United States during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Miller’s point is worth pondering, and it makes sense of the Red State–Blue State divide of recent electoral politics. But the book also leaves out what makes evangelicalism tick as a religious faith. Born-again Protestantism did have a large influence on American politics, and that in turn transformed evangelicalism into a partisan faith. But Miller’s account almost completely ignores evangelicalism’s religion—debates about inerrancy, the rise of the megachurch and its effects on worship, and the decline of dispensationalism. In fact, readers may well wonder if evangelicalism would have received all the attention it has if it were primarily a means of evangelizing and cultivating a desire for holiness in converts.

Curiously enough, Miller observes that evangelicalism rose to prominence precisely at a time when American civil religion experienced a crisis of faith. Billy Graham was, of course, the icon of evangelicalism. At the beginning of the 1970s, he was a reliable supporter of American patriotism and regularly appeared with and counseled President Richard M. Nixon. But the Watergate scandal

1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=509&issue\\_id=108](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=509&issue_id=108).

tarnished Nixon's overt brand of civil religion. (Does any American remember worship services in the White House?) Still, Graham escaped the cynicism that fed the efforts to impeach Nixon, and evangelicalism emerged as the vehicle that transported America's Cold War civil religion past the troubles of Vietnam and objections to the arms race into the Reagan and Bush years. Miller himself does not connect the dots between the 1950s mainline Protestant project of sustaining an America "under God" and the later evangelical effort to defend and maintain a Christian nation. Still, the book supplies important evidence for understanding where the God-and-country enthusiasm of the 1950s went—an enthusiasm which put "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance and "In God We Trust" on coins. The Christian nationalism that mainline Protestant leadership abandoned during the 1960s over discomforts about race, gender, and sex found a home in 1970s evangelicalism, of course, with help from Republican Party operatives. Born-again Protestantism may have infused the GOP with electoral vigor, but after three decades it came to an end with the 2008 election of Barack Obama. Miller interprets the Democratic president's victory as a rejection of the "excesses of the Christian Right and the Republican Party that seemed bound to do its bidding," as well as an indication of the evangelical left's resurgence (154). Jim Wallis and Tony Campolo, thought to be the future of evangelical political engagement in the 1970s, had finally come into their own after three decades of the Moral Majority and family values. Whether the Obama administration is what the evangelical left had in mind is another matter. Campolo may applaud the legalization of same-sex marriage, but Wallis is decidedly uncomfortable with federal funding for Planned Parenthood after the recent release of videos about the agency's trafficking in fetal body parts.

Aside from Miller's intriguing proposal to name the period between 1975 and 2005 as "the evangelical age," the book repeats the highlights of recent evangelical history that are well known to most people who either follow the news or U.S. religious history. Even so, Miller's book is

also provocative for considering the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's relationship to the wider evangelical world. Prior to the 1970s, the OPC was ambivalent about evangelical leaders and institutions. The church refused to join the newly formed National Association of Evangelicals in the 1940s and continued to find ecumenical outlets that were intentionally Reformed. In less institutional ways, Orthodox Presbyterians also expressed caution about the new evangelicalism. Think of E. J. Young's refusal to serve on the editorial board of *Christianity Today* because the magazine included mainline Presbyterians. Consider also Westminster Seminary's determination in 1961 not to cooperate with Billy Graham's Philadelphia crusade. Then there is Cornelius Van Til's critique of neo-evangelicalism in a small manuscript from 1964. Evidence like this suggests that the OPC's founding generation saw itself as maintaining and defending a form of Protestantism—Reformed—that was distinct and in some ways opposed to the born-again Protestantism that became popular after World War II.

But that ambivalence about evangelicalism changed in the 1970s when the OPC experienced a crisis of identity. There at the beginning of Miller's "evangelical age" the second generation of Orthodox Presbyterians began to think that militancy was no longer the best stance for the church. Instead, the OPC needed to be positive, reach out, and implement new ways of worship and evangelism. The New Life churches were one example of this, but so was the OPC's desire to join other denominations, first the RPCES and then the PCA. In effect, the old reasons for being Orthodox Presbyterian were obsolete. New times called for new reasons. And with the rise of the Religious Right, some Orthodox Presbyterians felt even more compelled to identify with evangelicalism. Here was an opportunity to belong to something bigger than the small communion the OPC represented. It was also a chance to do something that could affect the health of the nation.

Nevertheless, the appeal of evangelicalism, still there in some ways, did not overwhelm the OPC. As the church recovered a sense of its own



history, as New Life congregations realigned with the PCA after the failure of Joining & Receiving in 1986, the OPC recovered some of the older militancy that had characterized the founding generation. The church is still not part of the NAE, is still ambivalent about cooperative endeavors that would compromise its Calvinist theology, and is still wary of identifying the gospel or church with partisan politics. A useful reminder of the OPC's self-awareness as a distinctly Reformed communion was its General Assembly's 1956 report on the Boy Scouts of America. Here was an institution as wholesome and as American as apple pie. Yet the advice the committee report gave to sessions and presbyteries was to avoid sponsoring troops within OPC congregations. The reasons were a defective understanding of God, an attitude of tolerance that discouraged maintaining and defending doctrinal truth, a fusion of patriotism and piety, and a belief that boys (and people more generally) were capable of keeping God's moral law apart from regeneration. Well before evangelicals carried on the old civil religion that had infused mainline Protestantism in different versions going back to the Second Great Awakening, Orthodox Presbyterians understood that a healthy nation was different from a faithful church and that to preserve the latter, loyalty to the former needed to be qualified.

Now that America has entered its post-Christian stage of life, or as Miller would put it, the nation's post-evangelical years, Orthodox Presbyterians have good reasons for not being surprised or despondent. Since its founding in 1936, the OPC (along with a number of other Protestant communions) has known existentially the meaning, in Peter's words, of being "aliens" and "strangers" (1 Pet. 2:11). This understanding emerged in the context of the first generation's leaving behind tall-steeple churches and well-appointed manses to hold services in schools, store fronts, and homes. It grew stronger from the biblical exposition of Geerhardus Vos and John Murray, whose biblical theology recognized that Christians in this age between the advents of Christ, in the words of the writer to the Hebrews, "seek a better country." This outlook avoided both the despair of dispensational-

ism and the over-confidence of postmillennialism. Now that the United States national government has rejected certain Christian norms, some pundits are calling for different strategies—like the so-called Benedict Option—for believers to regroup and create enclaves where they can cultivate and pass on their faith to the next generation. Orthodox Presbyterians should not need disappointing rulings by the federal courts to consider Christian existence and witness on the cultural margins. Since its founding, the OPC has been aware of the discrepancy between Christian faithfulness and broader trends in American society. Steven Miller's book is yet one more reminder of the ambivalent relationship between the gospel and the United States—an ambivalence that has long been familiar to Orthodox Presbyterians. ☺

**Darryl G. Hart** is distinguished visiting assistant professor of history at Hillsdale College in Hillsdale, Michigan, and an elder in Hillsdale Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Hillsdale, Michigan.

## Insightful Fool's Talk

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* November 2015<sup>1</sup>

by Ted Turnau

*Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion*, by Os Guinness. Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 2015, 270 pages, \$29.95.

Apologist, cultural analyst, and prolific Christian author Os Guinness tells us that *Fool's Talk* was forty years in the making. As a young man, he made a promise to God that he would actually *do* apologetics before writing *about* apologetical method (38). And so he has (see his *Long Journey*

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=513&issue\\_id=109](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=513&issue_id=109).

*Home* and *Unspeakeable*<sup>2</sup>). He is best known for his incisive cultural and social critiques (he was a student of sociologist Peter Berger), and the reader will find plenty of interesting cultural critique here, especially how modernity and postmodernity shape the ways we see reality. As always, Guinness's prose is crisp, colorful, and bristling with practical insights. At one point, he labels the theological revision of the gospel the "Gadarene plunge" (217). Emphasizing the passion of apologetics, he asserts, "Christian advocacy is a lover's defense" (57). The man certainly can turn a vivid phrase. He is also incredibly well read, always ready with an illuminating quote from thinkers as diverse as Plato, Bertrand Russell, Augustine, Camus, C. S. Lewis, and Japanese Haiku master Issa. The overall effect is to make one feel as if he's overhearing a sparkling after-dinner conversation with a brilliant raconteur.

But such a characterization risks trivializing his work. Guinness has a heart as well as a brain, and he is passionate about apologetics (what he calls "creative persuasion") and about repairing the shabby state of the church's witness in the world today. It has been replaced by "just evangelize" on the conservative side or "just dialogue" on the liberal side (212–17). Or worse, it has been turned into a sterile, intellectual game by the apologetics wonks, and it has been drained of its humanity, its creativity, its compassion, and its focus on the cross. These critiques, and his holistic definition of apologetics that resists scripts and "the imperialism of technique" (46), are well-worth heeding.

The title of the book refers to both the foolishness of unbelief that we must answer (gently and with respect) and also the "foolishness" of God that subverts the cleverness of the wise through the apparent folly of the cross (41). By aligning ourselves with the Jesus who was mocked, we become "holy fools" who paradoxically have tapped into the wisdom of God that exposes the pretensions of

modern unbelief (ch. 4, "The Way of the Third Fool") and shows a better way. This is the work of apologetics.

The style of apologetics that emerges is a type of worldview critique that will feel familiar to those familiar with Reformed apologetics, and with the works of Francis Schaeffer in particular (it was at L'Abri that Guinness caught a vision of cultural apologetics). And through Schaeffer, one can feel the indirect influence of the apologetics of Cornelius Van Til, especially in his advocacy of the *reductio ad absurdum*, where the unbeliever is asked to think through the implications of his presuppositions to their logical (and disastrous) conclusions (see ch. 6, "Turning the Tables"). This negative, or critical, movement in apologetics must be accompanied by a positive movement of turning the unbeliever's attention to the clues and whispers of God's existence, or what Berger called "signals of transcendence" (see ch. 7, "Triggering the Signals"). In addition, Guinness emphasizes the need to go beyond simply bare, logical argumentation to use story, humor, and irony. And he devotes whole chapters to the attitude and demeanor necessary to engage unbelievers with compassion and grace, and the necessity for apologetics *within* the church in order to battle theological drift. All in all, this book counts as welcome guidance in worldview apologetics from a seasoned veteran.

So let me be clear: I think this is a great book that will benefit the church. If you feel a bit at sea when thinking about apologetics, this book will serve as a good orientation. For those who have some apologetical experience, this book will serve to put some of the debates in historical context, as well as to provide helpful advice and correction.

However, I do have four criticisms.

1. *The book needs some practical examples.* I wish that the book had more practical applications for the novice. At times, Guinness's erudition may be off-putting to the beginner. "Good insight!" he may say, and then scratch his head and wonder, "How do I use it?" No doubt Guinness wanted to avoid any scripts or any easy, step-by-step, how-to instructions. After all, his second chapter is entitled "Technique: The Devil's Bait." In an age

---

2 Os Guinness, *Long Journey Home: A Guide to Your Search for the Meaning of Life* (New York: WaterBrook, 2001); *Unspeakeable: Facing Up to the Challenge of Evil* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

of cookie-cutter apologetics, such a warning is laudable and needed. To riff on Schaeffer, there are no cookie-cutter people. Each person's needs, the configuration of their particular pattern of unbelief, demands a flexible, personal approach that seeks to reach that person's unique heart. I get that and give a hearty "Amen!" Still, for the sake of the newbies, I would have welcomed a few illustrations drawn not from literary, philosophical, sociological, or classical Greek sources, but rather from actual conversations Guinness has had with non-Christians. I think he could have thrown out a few of those lifelines without being accused of caving in to the "imperialism of technique" (46).

2. *The book should have responded to worldview-discourse skeptics.* A second criticism concerns the worldview-centric orientation of his apologetic. I have no problem with worldview apologetics; the apologetics of Schaeffer and Van Til is powerful and has helped many, and Guinness follows in their footsteps. But there are those even in Reformed circles who question the need for engagement at the level of worldview. James K. A. Smith's *Desiring the Kingdom* comes immediately to mind. For Smith, the real story of faith happens pre-cognitively, in the imagination as it is shaped by action. Worldview is merely a retrospective articulation of our habits of the heart. Worldview is not where the real action is.

Though Smith has many interesting insights, I wonder where such comments leave apologetics. Is it worth doing anymore? Does anyone benefit from worldview discussions? Or should we just include non-Christians into our rituals and wait for the change to happen as their repeated actions slowly change their imaginations (which will later be reflected in a different articulation of worldview)? Given the radical challenge to worldview thinking and discourse coming from Smith and others, I would have appreciated some engagement on that topic from Guinness. I think Guinness's push-back would have been incisive and insightful.

3. *There is a problem with the dilemma/diversion polarity (missing the dilemma in the diversions).* A third criticism has to do with his analysis of unbelief and the scope of apologetics. At the

beginning of the book, Guinness lays out the true ambition of persuasive Christian witness: not just to reach the open and interested, but to engage those who are "closed," those who are "indifferent or resistant to what we have to say" (18). In these days in North America, that's a lot of people. In chapter 5, the "Anatomy of Unbelief," Guinness gives a masterful reading of Romans 1 (though not without problems—see below) in terms of self-deception. Unbelievers are made in God's image, live in God's world, but believe otherwise. That creates an indefatigable tension within. Guinness further analyzes the unbeliever's response to this tension in terms of a polarity: dilemma versus diversion (96–98). Those at the dilemma end of the pole seek to live out their unbelief more consistently, and so they feel the tension more acutely. Those at the diversion end of the pole seek the comfort of inconsistency: they believe in things (like the value of human beings) that they have no right to, given their God-denying worldview. But they simply ignore the tension: they try to drown out the tension by distracting themselves, understanding the world as if God were there, even while denying him.

Guinness says neither the dilemma folks nor the diversion folks are necessarily closer to God (96), and yet it is clear to me that Guinness feels drawn to the dilemma people. Indeed, his apologetic method is designed to provoke and invite those who feel the dilemma. They bear a striking resemblance to what he later calls "seekers," those who have taken the first tentative step away from false faith and (perhaps) toward genuine faith in God (see 233–37). By contrast, though he says that the diversion pole is "more crowded, but less understood" (99), and though he gives a lengthy biblical analysis of diversion (99–105), he ends up giving little guidance about how to engage with the diverted, except to point out the banality of diversion itself. I was hoping for more, especially in light of his challenge that we need to engage the indifferent. Doesn't that include the diverted and distracted?

It seems to me that "diversion" is perhaps an altogether flat category, especially if you are going

to consign the majority of non-Christians to it. And that flatness has to do with a dismissive attitude toward popular culture that perhaps stems from cultural critics like Kenneth Myers and Neil Postman. If you want to engage the diverted, perhaps you need to engage their diversions. And then you might discover that even diversions house dilemmas, that the stories, images, songs, and games that we label “diversions” themselves bear witness to the tension of being a rebellious, idolatrous human made in God’s image and living in God’s world. But Guinness never gets there. He cites one film, but apart from that, writes as if the only culture worth engaging is written in books—and written some time ago. In short, I think his apologetic could be strengthened and broadened by a close examination of contemporary entertainments, seeing them as something more than diversions and distractions.

4. *Guinness’s method would benefit if he self-consciously couched his terms in the context of revelation.* My final criticism: certain key terms such as “truth,” “reality,” and “signals of transcendence” contain ambiguity and require definition in terms of their theological weight. This is more than a semantic problem, for such ambiguity can lead to inconsistencies. “What is truth?” asked Pilate. Certain apologists say that truth is correspondence with reality, that is, states of affairs that actually pertain. In other words, “truth” and “reality” are neutral terms that can be used unproblematically with anyone. And sometimes Guinness seems to use these terms that way (84, 115). On the other hand, a biblical definition of “truth” and “reality” would have to say that truth and reality are what conforms to God’s revelation, that there is no neutrality to truth. And sometimes Guinness seems to go this path as well, in affirming that “all truth is God’s truth” (40), that is, tied to his revelation (especially in Christ, see 67).

Without a precise grounding in the context of revelation, sometimes Guinness’s formulation of the unbeliever’s knowledge is less than accurate. For instance, reflecting on Paul’s assertion in Romans 1 that the unbeliever suppresses the truth in unrighteousness, Guinness talks about how

the unbeliever creates worldviews that deny God: “they are philosophical or sociological fictions—or *worlds within the world that provide a world of meaning apart from God and against God*” (94, emphasis his). This is actually a brilliant characterization of unbelieving thought. But then he later applies Romans 1 to say that the unbeliever has a worldview that is “partly true and partly false” (112). That’s not exactly what Paul said. Non-Christians don’t have a half-true worldview that simply needs completion; they’ve mangled truth beyond recognition and need a whole worldview renovation. They don’t have a half-true interpretation of reality; they have a wholly false interpretation of reality that they use to suppress the wholly true revelation of God’s being and character. The “partly true” part of their worldview isn’t, properly speaking, their worldview at all. It refers to the places where non-Christians are inconsistent with their own worldviews to accommodate God’s wholly true revelation of himself (seen, for instance, in a non-Christian’s valuing of human rights). In other words, it would have been more accurate to say that the non-Christian’s perspective contains God’s truth held captive by unbelieving worldview assumptions.

The same ambiguity plagues Guinness’s use of Peter Berger’s “signals of transcendence” in chapter 7. Obviously Guinness knows that these signals come from God to reveal him. But, following Berger, he characterizes these signals phenomenologically (that is, from the point-of-view of the non-Christian) as hints that whisper that there might be “something more” than visible reality (134). This “something more” can be explained using any number of interpretations, or it can be ignored entirely (144–47). I understand that Guinness is attempting to acquaint us with a phenomenology of unbelief and its inconsistencies, of what it must feel like to live in God’s world without acknowledging him. You’d just get whispers, hints, and so on. On the other hand, why not just come out (for his Christian audience) and label these “signals” as they really are: revelation stemming from common grace whose ultimate function is to turn the eyes to God?

What is the point of the fuss and theological nitpicking? What is the practical cash value of making such distinctions (for Guinness is nothing if not resolutely practical)? Simply this: the apologist ought to know where things stand vis-à-vis unbelief in terms of biblical and theological categories. The “signals” have a given theological vector: to draw sinners into the knowledge of God. The unbelieving worldview also has a certain theological vector: to draw sinners away from God, to smother and constrain God’s general revelation of himself as much as possible. By paying attention to those common grace, general revelational elements suppressed in unrighteousness (and knowing that’s what they are), the Spirit can use us to fan those embers into a flame that can (potentially) burn through the cage that the unbeliever has put that revelation in.

Guinness knows all this, and it resonates throughout his system, but he never really comes out and uses those categories. Thus, he leaves open interpretations of his method that would be more amenable to supposedly neutral terms like “truth in general” or “reality in general,” when in fact such generalities are chimeras. There is only God’s truth and God’s reality, and we’re either in agreement with him or in rebellion against him. Everything is revelation. It all points to God to inspire worship, or would do so if our own sin didn’t muck things up. That seems a much clearer (and more clearly biblical) picture of the shape of the unbeliever’s mind and heart: dealing with the pressure of God’s revelation, and doing his level best to shove it down and keep it down through his own twisted worldview.

Just to be clear, I still believe that this book makes a valuable contribution and that any budding apologist should have it and read it. It is bursting with insights, including some sociological insights into the structure of belief and unbelief (and unbelieving culture) that will enrich our own perspective on these matters. He raises issues that should be discussed in churches about how best to witness to people shaped by a deeply post-Christian society. This is a book worth having and savoring. No fooling. ☺

**Ted Turnau** is a teaching fellow with the academic missionary organization *Global Scholars*. He teaches cultural and religious studies at *Anglo-American University* and *Charles University* in Prague, Czech Republic.

## Interpreting the Prophets

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* November 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Sherif Gendy**

*Interpreting the Prophets: Reading, Understanding and Preaching from the Worlds of the Prophets*, by Aaron Chalmers. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015, 173 pages, \$20.00, paper.

In this book, Aaron Chalmers looks at the nature of both the prophetic role and prophetic books in Israel. He considers three key “worlds” of Israel’s prophets—historical, theological, and rhetorical—which provide the basic context for interpreting these books. He concludes with a helpful chapter that provides guidelines for preaching from the Prophets—including advice on choosing the texts, making appropriate analogies, and the potential problems and common pitfalls to avoid. The book is divided into six chapters with a bibliography and indices. Here is a summary with assessment for each chapter.

### **1. What Is a Prophet and What Is a Prophetic Book?**

In this chapter, Chalmers provides an overview of the role of the prophet in Israel as well as the nature of prophetic books. According to Chalmers, the prophets are members of the divine

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=514&issue\\_id=109](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=514&issue_id=109).



council. As such, they function as observers of the council, “advisers” to God, and envoys for the council. Fundamentally, the prophets were intermediaries, called by God to stand between him and human realms. They were communicators of the divine will. The prophetic book is the written record of the divine revelation mediated to the people of God through the prophet. For Chalmers, the process by which the largely spoken words of the prophets became the written books involves three distinct movements in the formation: 1) from oral words to written words, 2) from written words to collected words, and 3) from collected words to a prophetic book.

Chalmers is right in asserting that our primary focus should be on exegeting the text in its final form, rather than trying to explain the exact process behind the written text. At this point it is important to understand that what counts as history is not merely origins, but also effects. In other words, the prophetic witness as it stands within the canon presents a history on its own terms. Critical scholars assume that one could truly get at the Bible’s meaning by adopting a vantage point outside the Bible itself. There is a tendency to reconstruct the Prophets historically and treat them in supposed temporal sequence instead of trying to understand them as they are within the biblical witness. In this chapter, Chalmers neglects that the canonical presentation of the Prophets is its own kind of theological and historical statement. It is a statement in its own form.

## 2. The Historical World of the Prophets

Chalmers acknowledges that the historical context of a prophetic book may not be clear. He also recognizes the challenge that a single book may address multiple historical contexts. He seems sympathetic to the critical view of the presumed Isaiah’s three distinct historical horizons: pre-exilic or Proto-Isaiah (chaps 1–39), exilic or Deutero-Isaiah (chaps 40–55), and post-exilic or Trito-Isaiah (chaps 56–66). For Chalmers, one needs to seriously consider the secondary sources to gain understanding for the occasional nature of the pro-

phetic literature and historical context. He calls for reconstructing the historical world of the Prophets to obtain a richer and more accurate understanding of the message of Israel’s prophets.

The aim of the historical reconstruction of the prophetic book is seeing the text in its historical and cultural context (*Sitz im Leben*). The higher-critical view of the Prophets has given them a kind of distinctiveness that makes it difficult to relate them to one another or to understand them as an associated movement. Thus, higher critics have “decanonized” the Prophets by placing them in a context other than the canon in order to get at their “real” meaning.

Against the critical view of Isaiah’s authorship, the traditional view, which regards Isaiah son of Amoz (Isa. 1:1), the eighth-century prophet, friend, and confidant of Hezekiah, as the author of the entire book, seems more plausible. The superscription of the book bears Isaiah’s name as the author. Moreover, the New Testament bears witness to the unity of the book. Isaiah is cited by name about twenty times in the New Testament, and such citations include references to the three parts of the book.

## 3. The Theological World of the Prophets

In this chapter, Chalmers discusses two key traditions that are particularly important for interpreting the Prophets since they form the background to—and provide the basic shape for—much of the prophetic proclamation. Essentially, these traditions center on the two great mountains in Israel’s story: 1) Sinai and the establishment of a covenant between the Lord (who is portrayed as a mighty suzerain) and the Israelite people (who are portrayed as the Lord’s vassal) and 2) Zion and the establishment of a covenant between the Lord (who is portrayed as the great King) and the Davidic king (who is portrayed as the Lord’s regent).

The second part of this chapter focuses on the exegetical implications of the prophets’ use of pre-existing traditions. Chalmers analyzes theologically “loaded” words and phrases, utilizing tradition criticism, which seeks to discern what an

author presumes, intends, and insinuates through the use of traditional language. Chalmers speaks of the prophets changing some pre-existing traditions found in the Scripture in order to communicate their message. He lists Amos 5:17 with possible allusion to the Exodus tradition and the events associated with the first Passover. It might be helpful to speak of the prophets invoking their audience's memory by using well-known traditions in different contexts to make their point clear. It is not a matter of changing traditions as much as using and applying traditions in different context.

#### **4. The Rhetorical World of the Prophets**

In this chapter, Chalmers discusses the rhetorical world of the prophets to inquire how they used language effectively to persuade and influence their audience, and how they shaped their material to communicate their message in a compelling fashion. Chalmers's analysis of the prophets' rhetorical world takes place on two levels. First, he considers the rhetorical structure of the individual prophetic units of speech. This process involves identifying the various units within a passage and focusing on the structure and movement within these (the forms include prophecy of judgment, salvation, prophetic lawsuit, vision reports, and symbolic action reports). Second, he analyzes the rhetorical features of Hebrew poetry (including parallelism and the use of images) and the various literary and rhetorical devices the prophets employ (including metonymy and synecdoche, irony and sarcasm, hyperbole, merism, and hendiadys). Chalmers understands the limits of approaching prophetic rhetoric in a scientific fashion and calls for a balancing approach that keeps the interpreters contemplative by ruminating over the text to enter into the experience of the text and allow it to capture their imaginations.

#### **5. From Prophecy to Apocalyptic**

Here Chalmers focuses on interpreting the apocalyptic texts from the Old Testament. Although related to prophecy as a subset, apocalyptic is generally recognized as a distinct genre with its

own emphases and set of literary "rules." An awareness of these can help the reader avoid some of the common interpretive mistakes associated with this challenging genre (including historicizing and decontextualizing). Chalmers suggests that when we read apocalyptic texts we need to focus on the big picture, interpret images within their original historical context, and focus on the paradigms the texts embody.

In an attempt to define apocalyptic literature and its literary features, Chalmers unpacks a few of the key ways in which apocalyptic texts differ from prophecy. Apocalyptic literature emphasizes a visionary mode of revelation. This revelation is often mediated by a third party—an angel. Moreover, apocalyptic texts often have a narrative framework and are literary compositions. These texts focus on the end of history by describing a decisive, climactic act of God which will bring a violent, radical end to history through the triumph of good and the final judgment of evil. The purpose of apocalyptic literature is to encourage its readers in the midst of their trials and during times of crisis. Finally, in apocalyptic literature the course of history is completely predetermined by God. These texts are more deterministic, with kingdoms and empires rising and falling by the sovereign will of God.

#### **6. Guidelines for Preaching from the Prophets**

In this chapter, Chalmers considers how to preach from the Prophets in an authentic, faithful, and responsible fashion. He lays out some guidelines for bridging the "chasm" between the world of ancient Israel and the contemporary world. Chalmers calls for a focus on the theology of the text rather than a heavily didactic, morality-focused approach. He also wants to consider the witness of the New Testament.

There are two potential problems that Chalmers identifies that we should avoid when preaching from the Prophets. First, he cautions against the contemporary fulfillment approach, which assumes that the promises and warnings we find in the prophetic books must come true and be

fulfilled in a literal sense. This hermeneutical method ignores the text's dynamics by flattening all prophecies into one time period (the now). Second, Chalmers rejects the promise-fulfillment approach, which sees Jesus as fulfilling various Old Testament prophecies. For Chalmers, this method fails to hear the prophetic word as it was intended and renders the proclamation from the Old Testament irrelevant. Furthermore, due to its Christological emphasis, this approach leaves little room for the contemporary listener in the text.

Chalmers questions the typological interpretation and wishes to read the Old Testament Prophets in a way that allows them to speak beyond the Christ event. He insists that by taking the Old Testament prophecies as being fulfilled in the person and work of Christ we fail to grasp their ongoing significance for our life. In making this argument, Chalmers sets up a false dichotomy. The New Testament bears witness to the centrality of Christ in the Old Testament as a whole (Luke 24:27, 44). In fact, Moses wrote of Christ (John 5:46). It is only by our union with Christ that the Old Testament prophecies have significance to us. The blessings of the Old Covenant, as well as the new, are mediated to us through Christ. Any application of the Scriptures for our contemporary life that does not find its root in the finished work of Christ is a superficial application to say the least.

Apart from Chalmers's rejection of typology as a valid hermeneutical method for interpreting the Prophets, his suggested approach of considering the historical, theological, and rhetorical worlds of the Prophets is unique. Chalmers's presentation of reading and preaching the Prophets is comprehensive and organized. The "Going deeper" sections that Chalmers offers throughout the book provide in-depth information related to the topic at hand. Although these sections are helpful, their position in the middle of the page may interrupt the flow of the discussion and disturb the main argument. Chalmers provides a list of books for further reading at the end of each chapter. In sum, this book could be used effectively as a seminary textbook for introductory classes on the Prophets. ☉

**Sherif Gendy** is a licentiate in the Presbytery of the Midwest (OPC), a Ph.D. student at Westminster Theological Seminary in Glenside, Pennsylvania, and is serving as Arabic Theological Editor for Third Millennium Ministries in Casselberry, Florida.

## To Persuade or Not to Persuade

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* November 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Gregory E. Reynolds**

*Paul's Theology of Preaching: The Apostle's Challenge to the Art of Persuasion in Ancient Corinth*, by Duane Litfin. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015, 392 pages, \$40.00, paper.

*Persuasive Preaching: A Biblical and Practical Guide to the Effective Use of Persuasion*, by Larry R. Overstreet. Wooster, OH: Weaver, 2014, xiv + 298 pages, \$24.99, paper.

Litfin and Overstreet address the idea of persuasion in the Bible's theology of preaching, but they are addressing very different issues, even though Overstreet offers several criticisms of Litfin. I will summarize the two books, compare them, and respond to Overstreet's criticisms of Litfin.

### Overstreet

In the first chapter of Part 1, "Issues Facing Persuasive Preaching," Overstreet writes that he seeks to add to homiletical literature a "discus-

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=516&issue\\_id=109](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=516&issue_id=109).

sion of exactly what persuasion is” (13). Chapter 2 offers a brief description of what he believes are the problems that persuasive preaching faces in modern culture. Oddly, while he correctly identifies rationalism and relativism, he never mentions the electronic environment as a challenge.

In Part 2, “Biblical Support for Persuasion,” Overstreet provides much useful biblical material on the centrality of persuasion among the biblical prophets, writers, and preachers. Chapter 3 explores what Overstreet believes to be a challenge to persuasive preaching from Duane Litfin which I will analyze below. He quotes several homileticians, including Jay Adams and John Broadus, who favor Overstreet’s thesis that we need a revival of persuasive preaching. In *Preaching with Purpose*, Adams asserts, “The purpose of preaching, then is to effect changes among the members of God’s church.”<sup>2</sup> Broadus uses the word “urging” to describe what the preacher must effect beyond “mere exhortation”<sup>3</sup> (31).

Overstreet’s survey of the biblical language of persuasion is often quite helpful. In the second part of chapter 3 he explores the uses of the *πίθω* (*peithō*) word group in Greek literature and the New Testament. (Appendices A–C expand the coverage of Greek literature and Appendix D does so for the New Testament.) He emphasizes Paul’s usage because he wants to make the concluding point that much of the present wariness about using persuasion in preaching, such as is found in Litfin, is a reaction to the manipulative character of contemporary advertising (39).

In chapter 4, Overstreet zeroes in on persuasion in Paul’s epistles under the categories of persuasion as “winning over, obedience, confidence, being convinced, faith or trust, and emphatic declaration.” He concludes by taking on Litfin’s interpretation of 1 Corinthians 2:4, where Paul

says “my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.”

Chapter 5 seeks to develop “A Pauline Theology of Preaching” by an extensive analysis of the Greek words associated with preaching in Paul’s letters. These word groups are ἀγγέλλω (*angellō*), καταγγέλλω (*katangellō*), εὐαγγελίζω (*euangelizō*), κηρύσσω (*kēryssō*), μαρτυρέω (*martyreō*), νουθετέω (*noutheteō*), παρακαλέω (*parakaleō*), and παρρησιάζομαι (*parresiazomai*). He summarizes the results under the heading “Principles for Persuasive Preaching” (83): 1) maintain a didactic element, 2) proclaim with boldness, 3) keep the proclamation specific, 4) present the gospel, and 5) encourage believers.

Chapter 6 explores “Paul’s Proclamation Exhortations” in terms of the credibility, integrity, or the *ethos* of the preacher. This was a major concern of all of the best ancient teachers of rhetoric, such as Aristotle, Cicero, Demosthenes, and Quintilian. Overstreet provides excellent and useful expositions of 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12 and 2 Timothy 2:14–26, covering the godly minister’s conduct and preparation.

In chapter 7, Overstreet attempts to sum up his biblical exegesis with a definition of persuasive preaching that seeks to revive what he says was the practice of homileticians until the mid-nineteenth century. Trained in classical rhetoric, they taught preachers to be persuaders not merely explainers, consecrating ancient rhetoric for homiletical use (107). He then proceeds to explore five Old Testament Hebrew verbs for persuasion: בָּרַחַ (*bahrah*), חָזַק (*chazaq*), סוּחַ (*sooth*), פָּחַזַר (*pahtzar*), and פָּחַתַח (*pahthah*). He insists in his conclusion that “persuasion can be accomplished” through logical argument, emotional appeal, personal character, style of speaking, and the message itself (114–15). He then sums up his explorations of persuasive preaching with a six-part definition:

Persuasive preaching is: (a) the process of preparing biblical, expository messages using a persuasive pattern, and (b) presenting them through verbal and nonverbal communica-

2 Jay Adams, *Preaching with Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 13.

3 John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, ed. Jesse Burton Weatherspoon (1870; repr., Nashville: Broadman, 1982), 214.

tion means (c) to autonomous individuals who can be convicted and/or taught by God's Holy Spirit, (d) in order to alter or strengthen (e) their attitudes and beliefs toward God, His Word, and other individuals, (f) resulting in their lives being transformed into the image of Christ. (115–16)

His section on the work of the Holy Spirit in preaching is a necessary corrective to the absence of this topic in many contemporary homiletics textbooks.

Part 3, “Structuring Persuasive Messages,” is divided into four chapters dealing with: motivated sequence, problem-solution, cause-effect, and refutation. (Appendix E provides examples of various sermon types.) I found these suggestions about various types of persuasive sermons and examples less helpful than his lexical surveys. The “motivated sequence” is structured in the sequence: attention, need, satisfaction, visualization, and action (122). This is based on Alan Monroe's original work, which has been updated in 2012 in *Principles of Public Speaking*<sup>4</sup> (122), which in turn is based on a similar sequence in ancient rhetoric as noted by Litfin: “attention, comprehension, yielding, retention, and action” (29).

Overstreet further applies this sequence to the entire book of Romans in a way that is plausible, if not entirely persuasive. He concludes with a sermonic example from Ephesians 1:3–6 comparing typical (instructing) approaches with a motivated sequence approach. He helpfully observes that what is lacking in each of the three typical approaches is an answer to the question “So what?” (127). His example of a motivated sequence outline for the same text is less convincing, although helpful in assisting the reader to think through the importance of application. He concludes this chapter with a section on audience analysis and ad-

---

4 Alan H. Monroe, *Monroe's Principles of Speech* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1945). Overstreet is confusing here since on page 122 he attributes this five-step sequence to Alan Monroe, whereas on page 29 he says that Litfin gets this sequence from William McGuire. It seems like a common usage in communication circles. Cf. fn. 8.

aptation in which he asserts that “for the persuasive preacher, the task is not only to communicate well, but to persuade the hearers to respond favorably to the message” (130).

Overstreet comes close to succumbing to a kind of contextualization that falls into the category of what Litfin calls “audience-driven” rhetoric, altering the message in the service of persuasion. In explaining audience adaptation, Overstreet presents his modification of a chart by Raymond S. Ross in *Persuasion: Communication and Interpersonal Relations*.<sup>5</sup> The problem is that he fails to give an example of how this approach would apply to a biblical text. The perennial danger of compromising biblical truth through audience analysis and adaptation should, however, not lead us to forget the importance of understanding our audience. Clearly Paul preached differently to the pagan Lystrans in Acts 14 than he did to the synagogue Jews in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13. As a minister in a cosmopolitan culture, Paul also sets this principle before us in 1 Corinthians 9:22: “To the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.”

Chapter 9 explores the value of a second approach to persuasive message structure: problem-solution, which proceeds in the sequence problem, cause, and solution (136–37). Overstreet points to 1 Corinthians as an example of Paul's use of this approach. He concludes this chapter with a particular kind of problem-solution sermon: “Life Situation Preaching.” By beginning with the selection of a life situation problem, he causes the reader to wonder whether this is an example of the classic problem of using a text as a pretext for choosing an application of our choice rather than one that emerges from the text of Scripture itself.

Chapter 10 explores a third approach to sermon structure: cause-effect, with biblical examples from Ephesians, Genesis, and Judges.

Chapter 11 is the final chapter in this part. It expounds the refutation approach to sermon struc-

---

5 Raymond S. Ross, *Persuasion: Communication and Interpersonal Relations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 182.



ture with biblical examples from Acts 26: 24–29, Romans 6:1–14, and Jonah.

The final section of the book, Part 4, is made up of three chapters and covers “Pertinent Applications in Persuasive Preaching,” the first two of which are very helpful. Chapter 12 contrasts “Persuasion versus Manipulation.” Overstreet insists that “since we believe the Bible to be the true Word of God, we must preach that Word regardless of the current mindset of our listeners” (163). He insists that, just as the best ancient rhetoricians taught and practiced persuasion without manipulation, so must we (164). The ends and the means must both be ethical in accord with Jesus’s summary of the law: love of God and one’s neighbor (166). Overstreet gives the eight principles of ethical persuasion from Hanna and Gibson’s *Public Speaking for Personal Success*,<sup>6</sup> and concludes by noting Aristotle’s insistence on ethical means for virtuous ends (168).

Chapter 13 is one of the best in the book, “The Holy Spirit in Preaching.” Overstreet observes that “only He can turn our ‘speaking’ into true preaching which will have a persuasive spiritual impact” (171). There is nothing new here for those in the Reformed tradition, but it is a timely reminder of one of the chief conceits, and thus temptations, of our age: that we can solve all problems given the proper technique.

It is, thus, ironic that Overstreet’s final chapter of the book is a defense of some form of visible invitation at the conclusion of sermons. This indicates Overstreet’s deep fundamentalist training in this unbiblical form of persuasion<sup>7</sup> and perhaps contributes to his misunderstanding of Litfin’s thesis, to which I now turn.

## Litfin

Litfin’s book is a revision of his *St. Paul’s Theology of Proclamation* (1994) and a major contribution to our understanding of Paul’s defense of his

6 Michael S. Hanna and James W. Gibson, *Public Speaking for Personal Success*, 3rd ed. (Dubuque, Brown, 1992), 359.

7 Cf. Iain Murray, *The Invitation System* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967).

preaching in the Corinthian church. The 1994 version is the one listed in Overstreet’s bibliography. The scholarship in this book is of a higher caliber than Overstreet’s, due to Litfin’s research into—and understanding of—Paul’s rhetorical situation, as well as his exegetical skills in unpacking 1 Corinthians 1–4.

Litfin prefaces the book with a fascinating account of the scholarly journey that brought him to view Paul’s theology of preaching in a new way that has little precedent in New Testament scholarship. In the introduction, he observes that while 1 Corinthians 1–4 is not a systematic treatment of Paul’s theology of preaching, it functions as a *locus classicus* on the subject (41, 49). The recent explosion of rhetorical analysis of the New Testament text itself has overlooked a thorough investigation into the rhetorical *Sitz im Leben*, especially of the Corinthian situation. What we have in 1 Corinthians 1–4 is nothing less than a “philosophy of rhetoric” (41) that distinguishes between a “natural paradigm” and a spiritual or “Pauline paradigm” (47). A problem arises when the natural gift of rhetoric, championed by the great rhetorical teachers of the ancient world, which clearly has an important place in law and politics, is advocated uncritically by preachers and homileticians. Augustine, in *de Doctrina Christiana*, the earliest manual of Christian rhetoric, baptized Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* as useful when employed in the interests of biblical truth as if Paul’s critics were manipulators or practitioners of bad rhetoric. According to Augustine, the preacher is called to instruct, charm, and persuade (52). Litfin is convinced that the “Pauline paradigm” is Paul’s alternative to the best ancient rhetoric, not because that rhetoric doesn’t have a place in the natural order of common culture, but because it is inappropriate for the message of the gospel.

The book is divided into three parts: 1) Greco-Roman Rhetoric, 2) 1 Corinthians 1–4, 3) Summary and Analysis. Part 1 is a brilliant and extremely useful survey of ancient rhetoric, consisting of nine chapters.

Chapter 1 explores “The Beginnings.” Prior to Paul, the study and practice of rhetoric had existed

for centuries (57). The development of democratic civil order in Athens spawned the earliest consciously crafted forms of persuasive rhetoric. The sophists developed rigorous training in rhetoric (58–61). Plato’s opposition to the sophists was not primarily due to their persuasive techniques as their relativistic epistemology (64). Litfin explores the development of rhetorical theory in Isocrates, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian.

Chapters 2–4 cover the goal, power, and reach of rhetoric. The art of persuasion developed as a democratic alternative to coercion (70). It is designed to produce belief in the listeners. Thus, orators must understand human motivation (73). Rhetoric was considered an almost magical power (*δύναμις dynamis*), like “a great torrent” according to Quintilian (75, 77). Thus, “the people of the Greco-Roman world luxuriated in public speaking. Fame, power, wealth, position—all were available to the orator” (81).

Chapters 5–8 cover the genius, appraisal, hazards, and rewards of rhetoric. Audience adaptation was always a central concern for the orator, but, as Aristides asserted, the orator cannot please the people and convince them of his point of view (87). The orator must understand his audience thoroughly (89) and wisely adapt his oratory to them by implementing various techniques of persuasion (90). In the end, the audience is the judge (95–96). Orators are always being evaluated by the audience (101). Thus, the audience is always feared by the orator since it is always suspicious of rhetoric (103). Hence, the attitude of Paul’s Corinthians critics. The success promised to the ancient orator made him extremely ambitious. So Quintilian warned that the orator, especially in the court of law, must not let desire for applause interfere with the prosecution of his case.

According to chapter 9, “The Grand Equation of Rhetoric” involved “three primary parts: the audience, the desired results, and the speaker’s efforts (113). The high demands of rhetoric come to their fullest expression in Quintilian’s *Institutes of Oratory* (*Institutio Oratoria*, ca. AD 95). Quintilian was a late contemporary of Paul (114). Encyclopedic knowledge on a wide variety of subjects was

required. “First-century orators were required to be craftsmen of ideas and language” (115). Litfin concludes with a segue into Part 2:

These are high demands indeed. They are in fact demands the itinerant Apostle could not meet. Nor did he aspire to. As we shall see, Paul’s goals as a missionary preacher were not those of the Greco-Roman persuader. They were the goals of a simple herald, goals that were dramatically different from those of the polished orators of the Greco-Roman world of the first century. (116)

The first two chapters of this Part, chapters 10 and 11, explain the attitude toward rhetoric in Corinth and the setting of 1 Corinthians 1–4 in Corinth. Corinth was a cosmopolitan city at a major intersection of travel and trade in the empire.

The delight in rhetoric that characterized the rest of the Greco-Roman world characterized Corinth as well, and the association of eloquence with fame, power, status, and wealth was as obvious and deep-seated here as anywhere. (124–25)

Litfin states his assumptions about Paul’s letter clearly at the outset. 1 Corinthians 1:10–4:21 introduces the theme of the nature of Paul’s preaching that is foundational to the letter as a whole. This passage “is correctly, even if not exhaustively, to be characterized as an apology for Paul’s apostolic ministry” (131). Paul understood his ministry to be one of public speaking (133, 1 Cor. 1:17). He was entrusted with stewardship of a message from Christ (133). He accounts for the negative evaluation of his preaching by a significant segment of the congregation as a problem with “worldly standards of judgment” (134). Paul is frank in reporting the nature of the criticisms: “For they say, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.’” (2 Cor. 10:10). “Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things” (2 Cor. 11:6). It is largely the form or manner of Paul’s preaching that is under attack (137). His lack of eloquence was an embarrassment. Thus,

Paul is forced to explain his *modus operandi* as a preacher (141).

In one of thirty-three excursuses, Litfin rejects the idea that the rhetoric which Paul opposes is the deceitful and self-aggrandizing sort.<sup>8</sup> Rather Paul was concerned that the persuasive techniques of good rhetoric, fine for the natural purposes of the state, would produce merely natural rather than spiritual results in preaching (152). Paul's alternative is the proclaimer or witness, rather than "the results-driven dynamic of Greco-Roman persuasion itself." "The Corinthians were for the most part little people with mere pretensions of culture and status" (153). "For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Cor. 1:26).

Chapters 12–16 analyze Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 1–4 by working seriatim through the passage. This is very rich material.

"Paul argues that he could not pour the gospel into the mold of Greco-Roman eloquence without thereby emptying the cross of its power (1 Cor. 1:17)" (159). The results of his preaching were dependent not on his persuasive powers but the "power of God" (*δυνάμει θεοῦ dynamitheou*, 1 Cor. 2:5). The Corinthians had not abandoned the message of the cross, they only failed to grasp its implications for preaching. The centrality of Christ stands in sharp contrast with the Corinthians' personality centered approach. "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power" (1 Cor. 1:17). "It is precisely this human dynamic ... that Paul is here disavowing" (177). The weight of the orators' ability was for Paul shifted to the message and its application by the Holy Spirit. The theocentric nature of the gospel has "a persuasive dynamic of its own" (178). "Paul seemed to conceive of these two persuasive dynamics—that of the rhetor and that of the cross—as mutually exclusive" (179). Faith is not a human possibility open

8 There are three excursuses on the topic of "Good Rhetoric versus Bad Rhetoric" on pages 150, 260, 294.

to the influence of the orator, but a divinely given ability dispensed by the Spirit through the hearing of the word of the cross (181).

God uses means that the world considers weak, foolish, and unimpressive—that is Paul's *modus operandi* in preaching (182–83). Paul's use of word groups to describe his preaching, such as εὐαγγελίζω (*euangelizō*), κηρύσσω (*kēryssō*), καταγγέλλω (*katangellō*), and μαρτυρέω (*martyrēō*), "are decidedly non-rhetorical" (184). Paul's task was not to create a message to persuade but to deliver a message already given—a decidedly humbler task (185).

Paul's use of πείθομεν (*peithomen*) in his statement in 2 Corinthians 5:11 "Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others," simply refers to the agency of the preachers, not their rhetorical strategies (189). In Acts 17:2–4; 28:23–24, we should observe that

Paul's rhetorical approach drew not on the orator's repertoire of persuasive strategies designed to engender πίστις, but on authoritative, Scripture-backed witness to the crucified Christ. (190)

In 1 Corinthians 1:21, "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of κηρύγματος (*kērygmatos*) to save those who believe," the ESV translates κηρύγματος (*kērygmatos*) as "what we preach," removing the dual emphasis of form and content in the word (193). This narrowing of the meaning of the word to refer to the message alone began especially with C. H. Dodd's *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, published in 1936 (195).

This [the narrowing of the meaning] is why a lexicographer such as Gerhard Friedrich, in his article on κήρυγμα in *TDNT* (1965, p. 714), concludes that the word "has a twofold sense ..., signifying both the result of proclamation (what is proclaimed) and the actual proclaiming. In other words, it denotes both the act and the content." (200)

Litfin defines the persuader as one who

implements “the discovery, shaping, and delivery of ideas so as to engender belief in one’s listeners” (205). The herald or proclaimer, on the other hand, is a “spokesman . . . bound by the precise instructions of the one who commissions him . . . an executive instrument” (205). He had no control over the audience response. The Roman *praeco*, or herald, was an oral proclaimer who did not enjoy a high social standing (206–7). But the audience was “dethroned from its proud role as judge” (212). The root of the problem in Corinth was the pride of which Corinthian factionalism and the criticism of Paul’s preaching were merely symptoms (219). They were mistakenly judging Paul by the world’s public speaking standards. Christ and him crucified is the point of preaching, not the preacher.

In Part 3, Litfin presents a summary and analysis. He distinguishes between the model of the orator, the natural paradigm, and Paul’s model of the preacher, the Pauline or supernatural paradigm, by contrasting the two in terms of the audience, plus the speaker’s effort equals the results (270–71). For both classical rhetoric and Paul, the audience is a fixed given. But, whereas the speaker’s effort is variable for the orator, it is a fixed constant for the preacher as evidenced by Paul’s declaration in 1 Corinthians 4:1–2: “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.” The results are an “independent variable” for the orator, since the audience shapes the speaker’s effort (262), but a “dependent variable” for the preacher, where the dependence is on the work of the Holy Spirit in commending the constant of the “word of the cross” to human hearts (270).

Appendix 3 is a brilliant summary of Paul’s epistemology. Appendices 4 and 5 provide useful implications for preaching, as well as broader concerns exemplified by Litfin’s interaction with the Church Growth Movement.

### **A Response to Overstreet’s Criticism of Litfin’s Thesis**

Overstreet challenges Litfin’s work on the

distinction between persuasion and proclamation. He uncritically advocates the best ancient rhetoric as a model for preachers and maintains that the rhetoric that shaped the Corinthian criticisms of Paul was from the Second Sophist movement (Overstreet, 52), implying that it was bad, or manipulative, deceitful rhetoric that Paul was opposed to in Corinth. Litfin, in contrast insists, “[I]t is not just the corruptions of this tradition that Paul calls into question for the purposes of preaching; it is the essence of the tradition itself” (Litfin, 273). While it is clear that Overstreet read the 1994 version of Litfin’s book, it seems that, due to the publication date, Litfin has not read Overstreet. Overstreet does not sustain a cogent engagement with Litfin’s work on the background of Paul’s controversy with the Corinthian church and, thus, his exegesis. He also fails to take Litfin’s apologetic goals into account. Despite Overstreet’s fine survey of New Testament uses of the *πειθῶ* (*peithō*) word group, it seems that he has misunderstood Litfin’s basic point about the dangers of persuasive rhetoric yielding a purely human or natural result. When Overstreet asserts that Litfin bases his critique of preaching as persuasion on three Scriptures (Zech. 4:6, Ps. 127:1, and 1 Cor. 2:4–5), one wonders if he has actually read Litfin’s book (Overstreet, 29, cf. Litfin, 280–82 “The ambiguity of ‘persuasion’”).

Overstreet’s assertion that Litfin limits Paul’s theology of preaching to 1 Corinthians 1–4 is unfounded. Litfin clearly states that he understands that this passage is not exhaustive on the subject of preaching.

We discover the principle (Paul’s insight that informed his preaching) at work throughout Paul’s preaching and writings, but it comes to its fullest expression in the passage we have explored at length: 1 Corinthians 1–4 and 1:17–2:5 in particular. (Litfin 131, 260)

Overstreet critically quotes Litfin as asserting that the preacher “is not called upon to persuade the hearers to respond” (30). Yet, Litfin is not saying that there is no need to apply the truth of the proclamation to the lives of the hearers. Rather, Litfin insists:

We need not refrain from urging, entreating, exhorting or beseeching our listeners to follow Christ. The essence of the gospel is invitation, and some of the terms used in Scripture—for example παρακαλέω (Acts 2:40) and δέομαι (2 Cor. 5:20)—clearly portray this aspect of the preacher’s ministry. Nothing we have said is meant to deny the validity of straightforward encouragement or exhortation to receive the gospel. After all, invitation in and of itself can scarcely be viewed as a persuasive technique designed to induce, rather than simply be the agent of, *yielding*. (348)

Overstreet responds to an earlier version (1994) of this quote by complaining that Litfin doesn’t demonstrate the difference between the exhortation he approves and the persuasion he opposes. First, Litfin reminds us that the issue Paul is “addressing in 1 Corinthians 1–4 is primarily the proclamation of the gospel to unbelievers” (339). But he further states that “the insights of 1 Corinthians 1–4 remain relevant” as well to believers who already possess the Holy Spirit (Overstreet, 340). Litfin wants to stop after the first two steps in the process of persuasion (attention, comprehension, yielding, retention, and action)<sup>9</sup> because “yielding” is the internal work of the Holy Spirit (347). Overstreet insists that mere comprehension is not what Paul aims at, as if scholars like Litfin do not advocate yielding or action as the result of proclamation (41). He fails to distinguish between the actions of the agent of proclamation (the preacher) and the agent of yielding, retention, and action, which is the Holy Spirit.

Litfin is using persuasion in a technical way to describe the ancient audience-driven mode of rhetoric, which he sees appearing in modern form in preaching in, among other things, the Church Growth movement. He would also see it in Overstreet’s own advocacy of the invitation system.

---

9 Based on a modern analysis of human persuasion in William McGuire, “The Nature of Attitudes and Attitude Change,” in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. G. Lindzey and E. Aronson, 2nd ed. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969), 3:136–314, at 173. It may also be found elsewhere. Cf. fn. 3.

Litfin distinguishes between two types of audience adaptation:

Training in ancient rhetoric was designed to help the speaker mold his efforts to the needs and values of the audience so as to produce the desired response. The Christian preacher, on the other hand, molds his efforts to his audience for a different reason: to ensure that they comprehend the King’s message. The preacher should use all the techniques at his disposal to put the message in terms his audience can understand, to break through the hearer’s defenses so as to confront him or her with the truth. (347–48, cf. 279)

Litfin gives a very helpful list of practices that he believes Paul’s theology of preaching would have us avoid:

- Gatherings centered on a charismatic, pseudo-celebrity communicator who revels in the spotlight.
- Styles of preaching or music that tend to rev up the emotions but short-circuit the listener’s engagement with the gospel.
- Sentimental story-laden messages that captivate the audience but fail to direct them to Christ.
- Empty, anthropocentric pulpit therapy that draws the listener in by purporting to deal with life’s issues while lacking the gospel’s biblical and theological substance.
- Interminable invitations designed to wear down resistance until someone, anyone, responds.
- Such techniques as asking people to raise their hands to be prayed for and then urging all who raised their hands to come forward. (349)

After all, Litfin *does* believe in persuasion—it’s just that he attributes persuasion to the Holy Spirit, which is clearly the biblical emphasis (Overstreet, 30). But in Overstreet’s discussion of persuasion in Paul’s epistles, he quotes Litfin’s identification of the force of the persuasion verb in 2 Timothy



1:5, “Because Paul was persuaded that Timothy possessed true faith (v. 5), ... he urged the young minister to fan into flame (or perhaps, “keep at full flame”) his God-given ability for ministry” (Overstreet, 45). His footnote indicates that Overstreet thinks this shows Litfin’s inconsistency. Again, however, I think Overstreet misunderstands Litfin’s more precise use of “persuasion” and confuses the use of persuasive verbs by the Apostle with his own theory that the persuasion comes from the preacher.

Overstreet’s own emphasis on the Holy Spirit’s work in preaching, and, in particular, persuasion, is precisely what Litfin identifies in limiting to the kind of preaching Paul was advocating—proclamation—in contrast to the rhetorical expectations of the Corinthian church.

In the end, both Litfin and Overstreet believe in the central importance of the Holy Spirit in the act of preaching and in its effect on the hearers. They both believe in the supernatural power of biblical preaching and its message. Litfin, however, gives a more consistently biblical account of Paul’s theology of preaching.

The preacher is called, not to a results-driven, but an obedience-driven ministry (317).

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Cor. 5:20)

For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 4:6) ⑤

**Gregory E. Reynolds** serves as the pastor of *Amoskeag Presbyterian Church (OPC)* in Manchester, New Hampshire, and is the editor of *Ordained Servant*.

# The Importance of Orality in Preaching

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant Online* December 2015<sup>1</sup>

by **Gregory E. Reynolds**

*Preaching by Ear: Speaking God’s Truth from the Inside Out*, by Dave McClellan, with Karen McClellan. Wooster, OH: Weaver, 2014, xvii + 171 pages, \$15.99.

Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (AD 35–96), building as he did on those who went before him, has influenced homiletics more than any other ancient rhetorician. His influential magnum opus, *Institutio Oratoria*, was published near the end of his life (ca. AD 90–95). In AD 68, he was called from his birthplace in Spain to Rome by the Emperor Galba to establish a school of rhetoric (39). “The oral world of Cicero and Quintilian is the oral world of the New Testament” (39).

The great value of McClellan’s work is his extensive application to preaching of Quintilian’s pioneering treatment of the principles of rhetoric in *Institutio Oratoria*. He uses Quintilian to establish the vital connection between the heart and the mouth in order to encourage preachers to consider the oral nature of preaching (31). As with Aristotle and Cicero, the virtue of the speaker (*virtus bono*) is inextricably connected with his message. Included in this virtue is the insight of the speaker into the nature of man and his motivations (41–43). For the preacher, this means he must “have an identity before God and the people that is deeper than the preaching role. We must be lovers of God first” (45).

This fine work on orality connects the interior life of the preacher with his preaching. It refers to excellent sources of ancient rhetoric, as well as media ecologists such as Walter J. Ong, Marshall

1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=524&issue\\_id=110](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=524&issue_id=110).

McLuhan, and Jacques Ellul. McClellan applies Ong's nine characteristics of oral communications to homiletics.

McClellan insists that preachers must learn to distinguish between oral and written communication. As preacher and homiletician he reminds us:

In the last three hundred years we can trace a move away from oral roots toward an increasing literary structure of the sermon.... While reading and writing were certainly not rare skills in the first century AD, their purpose was fundamentally different. Communication was primarily oral with literacy serving in a backup role. To a large degree those tables have turned. We now think of generating sermons in literacy and then converting them to some form of orality on Sunday. (36, 38)

The greatest problem for the seminary-trained preacher—few men can do without such training—is rigorous literary training, which often translates into an academic approach to the preparation and the act of preaching. We are book, text, and lecture oriented. Lectures are content heavy and meant basically to inform, not to move or persuade. J. C. Ryle emphasized this point: “English composition for speaking to hearers and English composition for private reading are almost like two different languages, so that sermons that ‘preach’ well ‘read’ badly.”<sup>2</sup>

McClellan works with a dimension of Quintilian that largely has been ignored: the place of improvisation in rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> The function of memory in preaching must not be confused with memorizing a sermon text, but rather, as McClellan insists, remembering the pathway of the sermon like the main points of a story, which can then be told without notes (97–98, 132, 136–37). Quintilian observed, “[T]he crown of all our study and the

greatest reward of our long labours is the power of improvisation [*ex tempore dicendi facultas*].”<sup>4</sup> For Quintilian, improvisation was the *sine qua non* of oratory, “The man who fails to acquire this [faculty] had better ... abandon the task of advocacy.”<sup>5</sup> But improvisation for Quintilian was a learned and high art, acquired only after years of disciplined study and practice, never to be confused with the effusive efforts of mere talent.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, McClellan takes on the perennial debate concerning the use of notes or manuscripts in the preaching moment. He pleads for an oral form used in the pulpit in a way that does not impede a vital visual and personal connection with the congregation. Something else a manuscript should not restrict is the openness of the preacher in the preaching moment to add or subtract from the manuscript as the moment demands. McClellan quotes Quintilian's observation that student orators who have been exposed to good examples of rhetoric “will have at command, moreover, an abundance of the best words, phrases, and figures not sought for the occasion, but offering themselves spontaneously, as it were, from a store treasured within them” (148n4).

McClellan insists:

A reader may be a good reader but can never match the communicative intensity of an orator discovering out loud.... To preach well we need to be in a sort of discovery mode, which is categorically different than a reporting mode. (106)

Quintilian insisted that “premeditation is not so accurate as to leave no room for happy inspiration [*fortunae locus*]: even in writing we often insert thoughts which occur to us on the spur of the moment.”<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, one of the great weak-

2 Iain Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1990), 345.

3 Chris Holcomb, “‘The Crown of All Our Study’: Improvisation in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2001): 53–72, cited in McClellan, *Preaching by Ear*, 147n1.

4 Holcomb, “The Crown of All Our Study,” 53; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 10.7.1, 133.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, 56–58.

7 Holcomb, “The Crown of All Our Study,” 66; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 10.6.5–6.

nesses of preaching without notes is the tendency to stray from the theme of the text and expand minor points in a distracting way. It is all too easy to become so enamored of one's own facility in speaking without notes that one forgets that his expanding the sermon may lose or even bore his hearers in the process. McClellan recommends with Quintilian an "artful spontaneity" (147n1).

It is foolish to try extemporaneous preaching without careful preparation and experience. Richard S. Storrs's *Preaching without Notes* is a classic on the subject.<sup>8</sup> Extemporaneous preaching requires as much, if not more, careful preparation as does preaching with a manuscript, just a different kind of preparation. We should distinguish between two kinds of extemporaneous preaching. Some write out a full manuscript and then memorize it word for word. A better way is to memorize the outline, markers guiding you in the right direction, and leave articulating the content to the preaching moment, based on one's study of the text. But, if one uses a manuscript, what kind should it be? As McClellan notes, Quintilian insists that sticking to a manuscript does "not allow us to try the fortune of the moment" (149). For the preacher that fortune, of course, is directed by the Spirit. McClellan sums up his thoughts on the subject: "It is this balance of both preparation and spontaneity that Quintilian upholds as our standard" (150).

McClellan, in his quest for true extemporaneous preaching, takes issue with homiletician Clyde Fant's "sermon brief,"<sup>9</sup> as resembling an outline, which McClellan views as artificial. Instead, he advocates for a "road map as the visual and iconic sense to the thought blocks that portrays a sense of destination toward a specific end, and the resultant ease of transfer to memory" (133n11). I think he overstates his rejection of outlines, since his road maps function in a similar way. Fant seeks a slightly different means to achieve much the same

---

8 Richard S. Storrs, *Preaching without Notes* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1875).

9 Clyde E. Fant, *Preaching for Today* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 166–69.

end, which is a truly oral set of notes that maps a progression of thought. But this is what a good outline does.

Another of Quintilian's contributions that McClellan observes is that he "provides the basis for the Western liberal arts education when he advocates devotion to subjects as impractical as music" (47n15). For example, Quintilian asserts the vital connection in antiquity between music and rhetoric. Music, poetry, and philosophy were considered to be of divine origin. "The art of letters and that of music were once united."<sup>10</sup> Music, particularly vocal music, has a direct bearing on rhetoric:

Now I ask you whether it is not absolutely necessary for the orator to be acquainted with all these methods of expression which are concerned firstly with gesture, secondly with the arrangement of words and thirdly with the inflexions of the voice, of which a great variety are required in pleading.<sup>11</sup>

McClellan's contribution to the subject of orality in preaching is significant and much needed in today's pulpit. I highly recommend this book. ☺

**Gregory E. Reynolds** serves as the pastor of *Amoskeag Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Manchester, New Hampshire, and is the editor of Ordained Servant.*

---

10 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 1.10.18, 169. He deals with the place of music in the training of orators in 1.10.9–33.

11 *Ibid.*, 1.10.22, 171.

## EDITORIAL POLICIES

1. *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.
2. *Ordained Servant* publishes articles inculcating biblical Presbyterianism in accord with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and helpful articles occasionally from collateral Reformed traditions; however, views expressed by the writers do not necessarily represent the position of *Ordained Servant* or of the Church.
3. *Ordained Servant* occasionally publishes articles on issues on which differing positions are taken by officers in good standing in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. *Ordained Servant* does not intend to take a partisan stance, but welcomes articles from various viewpoints in harmony with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

## ORDAINED SERVANT

Cover and layout designed by Christopher Tobias, Tobias' Outerwear for Books, Inc.  
Printed and bound by D. S. Graphics, Lowell, Massachusetts.

Composed in Requiem, Helvetica Neue, and Electra.  
Printed on 70# Offset Smooth Text.  
Bound in 80# Velvet CVR.