



Running the Session meeting

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CURRENT ISSUE: HOW TO RUN THE SESSION MEETING

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From the Editor

Enamored by the sensational and exciting as we Western moderns are, a good dose of detailed practicality is always in order. In many areas of modern life order is out of fashion, especially in human relations. Well-run meetings foster healthy relations not only among those in the meeting, but also among those they serve. Alan Strange has become our resident expert on parliamentary procedure. His article “How to Run the Session Meeting” should help us all improve the running of our regular session meetings. The newly ordained minister should especially profit from this wisdom.

Nothing reflects the disorder of our fallen world like death. In Ecclesiastes death is the ultimate vanity or expression that human existence is not according to design. “No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death” (Eccles. 8:8). Brad Winsted brings us the second part of his moving personal chronicle, “A Road of Grief: Hitting the Stone Wall: Reflections on a Biblical Marriage.”

Anyone who has followed the unique research of sociologist Christian Smith on teenagers and emerging adults will want to read the results of his latest research. In this issue T. David Gordon reviews Christian Smith’s *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*. Our fallenness disorders everything. At certain points in history the disorder is amplified in particular areas of culture. In this case, the problem with emerging adults is that they are not emerging with the adult characteristics that have hitherto defined adulthood.

In another area of disorder, David Booth reviews Anthony Selvaggio’s *7 Toxic Ideas Polluting Your Mind*, reminding us that not only do the forms of culture alter our thinking but the forms themselves originate in the ideas of those who form culture. The noetic effects of sin call the Christian to bring every thought captive. Selvaggio reminds us, in contemporary terms, of how important this calling is.

The disordered soul is always within the poet’s purview. John Donne’s “Holy Sonnet 14” is a sharply crafted prayer, asking God to dramatically order our sinful lives anew.

Blessings in the Lamb,

Gregory Edward Reynolds

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- “How Do You Run a Session Meeting?” (J. J. Peterson) 2:3 (Jul. 1993): 70–72.
- “Sessional Records: The Importance of Maintaining Complete and Accurate Church Records.” (Luke E. Brown) 7:1 (Jan. 1998): 22–23.
- “Biblical Theology and the Session – Part 1: Redemptive History and the Church’s Confession of Faith.” (James S. Gidley) 9:2 (Apr. 2000): 35–38.
- “Biblical Theology and the Session – Part 2: Redemptive History and the Church’s Discipline.” (James S. Gidley) 9:3 (Jul. 2000): 50–54.
- “Biblical Theology and the Session – Part 3: Redemptive History and the Character of the People.” (James S. Gidley) 9:4 (Oct. 2000): 72–76.

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 endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

Servant Work

How to Run the Session Meeting

by Alan D. Strange

There are a variety of ways to run the session meeting, the ordinary composition and work of the session being set forth in *Form of Government* 12.4–10. The meeting usually begins with a devotional time (that may or may not involve training; for more on this, see below) and a time of prayer. While presbytery and general assembly meetings are generally open, unless meeting for cause in executive session, session meetings in many of our churches tend not to be open, at least in practice (though perhaps not formally closed). This is generally because the meetings address matters relating to families of the church more particularly than occurs in the higher judicatories. Sessions may want to consider being open and inviting church members to attend (without privilege of the floor, of course) and restricting what needs to be private about counseling, member concerns, discipline, and so forth to an executive session. It is helpful and encouraging to the membership to provide access to the meetings of our judicatories, which is to say the parts of those meetings appropriate for members to hear.

In the early part of the meeting, after the devotional and prayer, it is common to adopt the docket (the schedule to follow in the meeting), give privilege of the floor to any non-elders (we commonly do this for deacons in attendance at our session meetings), adopt orders of the day (e.g., the time for interviewing prospective members, adjournment, etc.), approve the minutes of the previous meeting, and read communications. It is typical in reading communications to commit these to some latter place on the docket or to give them to a committee (e.g., announcement of an upcoming youth meeting may be committed to the youth committee).

As noted, deacons may be at the session meeting, as there are often matters of interest common to both the elders and the deacons. With respect to this, it should be noted that not only does the session have regular oversight of the deacons through reading of their minutes (FG 6.5), but that the session is also encouraged to meet with the deacons “at regular intervals to confer on matters of common responsibility” (FG 6.6). It is my observation that fruitful interaction with the deacons is often a weakness for many of our OP sessions. The continental Reformed churches tend to be much better at this, with the elders and deacons meeting regularly in the council for matters of mutual interest. It seems that one helpful way of addressing this would be to have sessions not only read the minutes of the deacons quarterly but also to meet quarterly with them to address matters of common interest. Another place of fruitful interaction between elders and deacons may occur in the practice of house visitation. Rather than have two elders visit members annually, it might be helpful to have an elder and deacon visit. The deacon could particularly address needs, even advising as to budgeting and the like (helpful in the more

difficult economic times that many of our people have experienced, along with our society, in recent years).

With respect to committees, it is common in our churches for the session to have various committees chaired by elders (and/or deacons) that report at the session meeting through the elder representing that committee. Typical committees are an evangelism/outreach committee, a missions committee, a Christian education committee, a youth committee, a fellowship committee, a hospitality committee, and the like. The strength of such an approach is that it allows the session to take proper leadership of all the parts of the work of the local congregation, and it allows the members of the local church an avenue of ongoing and focused service as a proper part of their exercise of the general office of believer (FG 3.1). If an area belongs exclusively to the elders (worship and discipline, for instance), then the “committee” for that is the session itself. But it is good to enlist the members in outreach and fellowship and other areas of service. Many of these areas may also come under the ladies’ fellowship or whatever the women’s society may be called. For example, some churches have women’s missionary societies or other auxiliary groups that send cards and flowers at time of bereavement or provide meals for those in need of such. Such organizations should have an elder representative ideally who can interact with them and bring their concerns to the session, as well as provide sessional oversight.

An important part of sessional oversight involves finances: the pastor’s salary, financing and maintaining facilities, the church’s benevolent giving, etc. There are various ways of doing this: some churches commit this largely to the diaconate, who reports to the session either through a deacon or elder who is liaison to the session. Some churches handle this through trustees (FG 31). Others have a treasurer who is a session member and reports to the session. The session has general oversight of this work, however it chooses to carry it out. It is perhaps best that the details of this work, like the details of other work (say, the fellowship committee), not occur in the session meeting but be reported to the session for its approval.

The session meeting can be used for officer training. Take a half-hour to an hour and discuss what you’ve read through or read through it together. It could be a devotional work, like Owen on mortification or Hallesby on prayer. It could be a book focused on the work of the eldership, like Tim Witmer’s *The Shepherd Leader*. Or you could study books of the Bible or work through the Westminster Standards (recommend the Larger Catechism) or systematics (Bavinck, Berkhof, Hodge). You could use this time to work through the *Book of Church Order* or parts of *Robert’s Rules of Order, Newly Revised* (11th ed.) (RONR). There’s so much one can do to train elders and deacons, and some prefer to use some part of the session meeting to do that.

Many of our sessions are smaller than twelve, and RONR indicates that a smaller body may wish to operate informally rather than formally. This means not requiring seconds (the purpose of which is simply, in the larger body, to ascertain that someone other than the mover wishes to discuss the motion). It also means that the moderator can speak without leaving the chair. This last one only works, however, when the moderator is a reasonable man who will not abuse that privilege and completely dominate the meeting.

Who should the moderator be? The FG says only that the session “shall choose its own moderator annually from among its members” (13.4). This is, in many if not most of

our sessions, the pastor. If the pastor is not the moderator, the pastor needs to draw up the agenda, because no one knows the congregation and its needs like the pastor. Elders are said to “share in the rule of the church” with ministers (FG 5.3) and also to “have particular concern for the doctrine and conduct of the Minister of the Word and help him in his labors” (FG 10.3). While an elder may moderate the session, it is the duty of elders to “help” the pastor “in his labors.” Whatever elders do is to be done with this in view and to this end, like Aaron and Hur upholding Moses’s arms (Exodus 17).

It is commonly—and wrongly—thought that moderators do not have the vote. If, however, “the moderator is a member of the body over which he presides, he may vote in all the decisions of that body” (FG 18.3). If it is thought advisable for a session to call in a neighboring pastor for counsel, that pastor can moderate the session meeting, though he will be without vote (FG 13.6). If, however, a pulpit is vacant, a ministerial advisor, jointly approved locally and by the presbytery, may not only moderate but vote (FG 13.6). Sometimes, when a church does not have a pastor and the ministerial advisor is unavailable, and the situation demands action, a session may meet and conduct its business without a minister. However, “the grounds for the call of such a meeting shall be reviewed at the next meeting at which a minister is present” (FG 13.6). This reflects that a proper session meeting should have at least one minister and elder present, or at least two elders if there are three or more (FG 13.5), reflecting both the preaching and ruling offices. A minister, as member of a particular session, retains the right to debate, make motions, and vote. He usually does not exercise such rights when in the chair, because it is unnecessary. It is only necessary to do so, ordinarily, either to make something a tie (and thus defeat it) or to break the tie (so that the motion carries). Let us be done with the question in our sessions, presbyteries, and general assemblies—does the moderator possess the right to vote? Yes, though he does not ordinarily exercise it on a voice vote, such not being necessary.

It is the case in a larger body (presbytery and general assembly, certainly) that the moderator leaves the chair if he wishes to engage in debate. He stays out of the chair the entire time the particular question and its allied motions are under consideration. This is to maintain both the appearance and the reality of impartiality on the part of the moderator. Even the moderator of the session, though permitted to speak to issues from the chair because of the more informal occasion, should not be overly partisan. It is wise even for sessional moderators to leave the chair if they wish sharply to contend for something and/or if their remaining in the chair seems too domineering to the proceedings.

Perhaps the session does wish to operate more narrowly according to RONR, either because it’s a larger session or simply prefers to operate more strictly according to the rules of order. The right use of Robert’s in all the judicatories of the church guarantees the rights of both minorities and majorities, seeking to avoid the tyranny of either. Most of the apprehension about Robert’s arises from having suffered under an abusive use of it by some person or persons who knew it well (or claimed to know it well) and used it to achieve their own ends to the detriment even of the good of the body. But such need not be the case. A right use of Robert’s begins with the understanding that such procedural rules are not inimical to the achieving of desired goals but are needed for such worthy ends, so that all will be done in equity and with effective time usage. The end of the use of rules of order in running a meeting is so that each might show proper respect and

honor to the other (Phil. 2:1–4) and that the business of the meeting be conducted in such a way that principles and not personalities prevail. One might say, the rules of order allow you to attack the issues and not each other.

Some examples of a wrong use of Robert's might be helpful in getting a handle on its right use. One may not, for instance, use the motion "to lay on the table" to kill a main motion. "To lay on the table" is only to be used to set aside an issue so that something that needs to be considered first can be taken up (e.g., folks needed to address a certain issue have to leave the meeting early and it's moved to lay on the table so that the matter that pertains to them may be taken up first). To lay on the table is not debatable and it's inequitable (not fair) to seek to kill a main motion (that's debatable) through a motion that's not debatable (another motion should be used for this—"to postpone indefinitely"—which is debatable). If there is any doubt on the part of the moderator as to the intention of the mover of the motion "to lay on the table," he should ask the mover what his motives are—specifically, whether he intends to kill the motion. If that is the mover's intention, the moderator should rule the motion out of order and tell him that the correct motion here would be to postpone indefinitely.

Another abuse of Robert's is the use of "point of personal privilege" to malign an assembly for an action that it has taken. Sometimes after a vote, someone rises to a point of personal privilege and continues further to argue the case: "What we just did was wrong," or the like. One may use it to say, "In the debate that we just had, I was intemperate and ask the body's forgiveness," or more prosaically to say, "I can't hear the speaker," or "It's too hot in here." There is also the practice in some circles of someone yelling "question" or "call for the question" to demand a reading of the main motion followed by an immediate vote thereon. There is no provision for such a preemptory ending of debate in Robert's (there must be agreement by vote or consent to end debate). It is also an abuse of moving "the previous question" to propose such immediately after a motion has been made or opportunity for debate given only to one side. Similar to this is a motion to close nominations immediately after only one nomination has been made. One last misuse that I will mention at this point is a dilatory motion, something that is unnecessary and simply has the effect of slowing the meeting down—like calling for division when the vote was evident or calling for it when the business has moved on after the chair declared the vote. It's these misuses that give Robert's a bad name and make people think that the rules of order are there for obstructive people to use to impede the flow of business, rather than well-meaning folk to use so that the business might be handled without rancor and with dispatch.

What if you are moderator, especially in a larger meeting (this would include, of course, presbytery and general assembly)? If you are a member of that body, you always have a vote (as noted above), though you should not ordinarily choose to exercise it except to make or break a tie or when a ballot is being cast. Maintain proper impartiality, ordinarily leaving the chair to debate. Seek common consent for uncontroversial motions. Pay careful attention to moderating and learn. Be prepared to give brief tutorials at the beginning of meetings and from time to time. Require men to rise and address the chair and know the rules for proper recognition of someone seeking the floor. Always give the mover the right of first speech. Call on those who have not spoken in preference to those who have when two rise together. Alternate "for" and "against" speeches where appropriate. Know the relevant bylaws and standing rules. Pay close attention to the

debate and appropriately indicate where matters appear to be (“We heard extensive argumentation on both sides; are we ready to vote?”). You are, under the Lord, running the meeting. Be properly directive and prompting (not wrongly controlling: servant leadership). A pause in debate—“No further debate? I see no one seeking the floor. I am about to put the question. I will put the question . . .” Know what to do at the point of the vote to the final declaration thereof.

Pay attention to speech lengths (Robert’s permits two speeches at ten minutes each, though no one is to speak a second time before all wishing to speak a first time have had such opportunity) and rule clearly on points of order as to whether the point is well taken or not. Parliamentary aid may be sought, but he is always advisory. When appeal is taken, it must be seconded, and you get first and last speech (all others get one). Moderators must always keep in mind that the bodies they chair may have bylaws or standing rules that differ from Robert’s. For example, the standing rules of general assembly allow only five minutes for a second speech and “if any member consider himself aggrieved by a decision of the Moderator, it shall be his privilege to appeal to the Assembly, and the question on the appeal shall be taken without debate” (SR 8.4). Just remember that what may seem forced and unnatural about all of this will show itself not at all to be as you gain experience in moderating and participating in meetings.

What if you are not in the chair but participating as a member of the judicatory? Address the chair properly; address all comments to the chair or through the chair; never use first names but say “a previous speaker.” The purpose of all this is to focus on the issues and not personalities, so that the truth may be honored and so that you may walk in as colleagues and walk out as colleagues. The purity of the church is not to be sacrificed for its unity, but neither is peace and unity to be sacrificed for a misguided purity. We need a good dose of humility, and deliberative assemblies are likely to inculcate it (or else harden us). Be aware of what you can and cannot do in the course of debate. If you see the rules being violated, either by the chair or by a member, rise to a point of order. Appeal a decision that you think would be detrimental if left unchallenged. Do not fail to make a parliamentary inquiry if you do not know how to accomplish your righteous goal.

Robert’s is not, as some seem to think, some book of unfathomable procedural mysteries. It is really nothing more than applying common sense and logic to the meeting, tempered by Christian sensibilities. General Robert was a churchman and developed his manual in no small measure to help in church meetings. Thus, as you study Robert’s, look for the logic:

Motions that would end, limit, or modify debate (including to “lay on the table”) are themselves undebateable. Privileged motions are undebateable.

Motions that would in some way amend, refer, or postpone consideration (either definite or indefinite) are debatable.

Motions that would limit debate (but not, in this case, “lay on the table”) require a two-thirds majority. This includes the “objection to the consideration of a question” which must be moved immediately after seconding or the stating of the question before debate has begun. It does not require a second and is undebatable. Pay attention to the other motions that require two-thirds (adopt or amend bylaws; make

special orders of the day; close nominations).

Some incidental motions may interrupt the speaker and do not require a second (points of order) while others may not interrupt and require a second (to divide a question).

Once a motion is decided, it is improper to bring it up, unless on reconsideration (which can be done only by someone on the prevailing side).

Dockets for session meetings vary in their construction. Typically it would involve all the kinds of things that we have discussed here, roughly in this order: opening devotional and prayer, call to order and roll call, minutes, correspondence, old business, financial report, diaconal report, pastor's report, new business, committee reports, elders' concerns, membership matters, time of prayer, adjournment. That's a rough order and sessions may wish to add or take away as they see fit. If the meeting is open, the session would likely reserve membership matters to the end when that and other sensitive issues may be treated in executive session.

The thought that should be uppermost in the mind of all at a session meeting is that of washing the saints' feet (John 13). The members of the session should seek to wash one another's feet, i.e., should engage one another in a lowly, servant mode. And the members should remember that they are all called to wash the saints' feet in the place to which God has called them in service. Here's how the thinking should go: We in this meeting ought to consider the other better than ourselves and humbly serve each other in the greater service to which we are all called—humbly serving God's people in this place. While the offices are not the same—ministers administer the Word and sacrament, engaged in leading in the church's central task, worship—both ministers and elders govern the church, and they do so in a servant mode, in imitation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, as head of the church, washed his disciples' feet. If we would keep this in mind and prayerfully seek to act in this way, our differences would be manageable, and likely would be minimized, as we all seek to have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5–8).

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ServantLiving

A Road of Grief, Part 2

Hitting the Stone Wall: Reflections on a Biblical Marriage (August 2010)

by Brad Winsted

Last December I wrote a short article “When Sorrow Strikes Home” about my wife’s (Fawn Winsted) being diagnosed with a particularly aggressive cancer.

On June 27, 2010, after an eight month struggle fighting this dreaded disease, she passed into the presence of her Savior. She was fifty-six years old. The family, during her struggle, kept thinking that the medicines and procedures had removed the tumor and cancer, but her doctors warned that it would come roaring back. It did. I was actually out of town when my wife called on her doctor and was told the cancer was now in her liver and that she had days to live.

Needless to say, the flurry of events over the next two weeks did not give me time to think about anything, even my grief. We had been married for thirty-two warm, fulfilling years, actually celebrating the thirty-second anniversary in her hospital the Thursday before her death.

We fulfilled our vows daily as God gave us grace to do it. We have eight children, ranging in ages from twelve to thirty. They all walk in faith. And, thankfully, they all were able to talk with Fawn at length before her death. This was no small doing as they were literally all over the world (one in Europe, one in Africa, two had just come home from the Middle East). It was indeed providential that their presence at her bedside worked out as well as it did.

The memorial service for Fawn was extraordinary; she had planned it out in detail the week before. Her favorite hymns were sung; the pastor gave a stirring sermon on the eternal reward of those who love the Lord and contrasted it to the living death that awaits those who don’t know Christ and are not saved.

The testimonials of my wife’s love and faith were breathtaking, as person after person told of how Fawn was a mother, a best friend, a person who was always available, a servant who made the person she was talking with the most important. At the end of the service, the pastor told me it was one of the most remarkable memorial services at which he had ever officiated, and he had been doing them for forty-five years.

But now the relatives have left, the sympathy cards have all arrived and are slowly being answered, much of Fawn’s personal effects have even been cataloged and moved, but what of my sorrow? My grief is real, ongoing, and overwhelms me.

I've just put down C.S. Lewis's book *A Grief Observed*.¹ In the first half of this short book Lewis found that in mourning for his wife he could not think straight; had hard feelings about God; doubted his own faith; was sullen and angry and possessed several other "unchristian" behaviors and thoughts. I can truly relate to him.

Lamentations 3:8–9 sums it up: "Though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer; he has blocked my ways with blocks of stones; he has made my paths crooked." I often feel like an uncaring God has done his worst, and I have no where to go but into my own sorrow, tears, and remorse. God says in Psalm 56:8 that he records our lament, listing our tears on his scroll—my tear account has exploded over these past weeks.

One thing our marriage had that many don't anymore, was a written record. Sadly today, most couples have no written record of their love other than an occasional birthday card with little said. I was in the Navy during the first third of our marriage and, therefore, on cruises/deployments/assignments that took me away from home for long periods of time. Because of that, Fawn and I carried on an active letter writing relationship.

These long, love letters are treasure houses of caring; she was an excellent writer who could express herself well, and boy did she! These letters flooded my heart and caused my passion to soar again, but what to do now that they belong to a dead person? More pain—will it ever end? I am thankful for them, but do they simply cause more anguish?

Her many journals, which were private (I did not see them during her life), held her remarkable notes for her Bible studies and daily devotions, personal reflections, and frustrations. Of course, we hurt the people nearest to us the most. Our marriage was no exception. In reading her journals my heart ached for the pain I had caused her over the years by my churlish, insensitive ways.

I was raised in a critical home, she in a warm, sharing household. Feelings were rarely, if ever, demonstrated in my home while I was growing up, for a variety of reasons; the opposite was shown in Fawn's home. Yes, this took "getting used to" for my warm and affectionate wife in dealing with this "cold fish" of a husband. This was only the beginning of our adjustment problems while married. Therefore, in reading the journals, much remorse set in for me, leading to despondency and more painful sobbing.

These journal comments were, of course, snapshots of feelings, many of which Fawn would later confess to herself were wrong, arrogant, self-centered, and overdone on her part, but they were like stabbing swords into my soul. As I read them and remembered the particular incidents, I continually asked myself between sobs of pain, "How could I have said such things, done such things; why wasn't I more caring, loving, and serving?"

My pastor finally asked me, after I shared with him about the entries, if Fawn would have really wanted me to read these journal entries so close to her death. I shook my head no. He then asked, "Were you able to confess these faults to her over the years?" Yes, I thankfully did ask her to forgive me, and she did on repeated occasions, but the black and white reality of past sins was too much for me. He followed up with, "Have you asked God to forgive you?" Yes, I had. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). The enemy was using these entries to undermine my faith and hope in God. I have put the journals away for now.

Remorse and regret are common characteristics after the death of a loving spouse. I was in full swing with these feelings. She had always told me, even to her deathbed that I

¹ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber, 1961).

was the man of her dreams, that she loved me above all others, and that her heart always jumped for joy when I entered the room. We were in love to the end. But remorse for not living day-to-day for my wife was real and excruciating.

God's comfort is really the only comfort for a pain such as mine—I know this. No, it won't bring Fawn back, but it does give me a new perspective on heaven, where we will eventually be reunited. She has no pain there, and because I would want her to be in paradise with her Lord whom she loved so much, there is comfort in this.

But, I am left behind, a broken man who is a walking, wounded victim of a death I never thought I would see (I was five years older than she was). I know it will take much time to heal my soul. Many who have gone through similar situations confirm this with me. Part of me has died, for we were one in Christ. At the same time, I must take solace in knowing that he will never leave me nor forsake me (Heb. 13:5–6); that he is acquainted with grief and sorrow (Isa. 53); that he is the father of compassion and the God of all comfort (2 Cor. 1:3); and that he desires for me to come to him with a broken and contrite heart, casting all my anxiety on him because he cares for me (1 Pet. 5:7).

Yes, this is “head knowledge” at this point; I pray soon it will be heart knowledge. I am in the midst of Psalm 42, panting for God for relief; the roar of the waves break over me and have swept me away; I have put my hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

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ServantReading

Lost in Transition

by T. David Gordon

Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood, by Christian Smith with Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog. New York: Oxford, 2011, 284 pages, \$27.95.

Two of Christian Smith's previous volumes have been reviewed here in *Ordained Servant*.¹ Smith, a sociologist and Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at Notre Dame, has emerged as one of the premier students of adolescents and "emerging adults," eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds, though the focus of this volume is on the eighteen- to twenty-three-year-old age range. The two previous volumes addressed the religious/spiritual character of young people; this volume deals with more general realities. In all three, Smith et. al. join others² in noting the phenomenon of delayed adulthood; adults "emerge" later than they once did, and most marry at about five years later than they did just a generation ago (from 1960 to 2006, women's marital age went from 20.3 years to 25.9, men's from 22.8 to 27.5).

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. (231)

This volume is not alarmist, nor does it deny the good traits of this demographic group:

And many emerging adults we have studied are interesting, creative, and sometimes very impressive people. But the happy part of emerging adulthood is already well documented and only part of the story. There is a dark side as well . . . the truth we must report is that underneath all of that is for many a dark underbelly of disappointment, grief, confusion, sometimes addiction. (3, 228)

Methodologically, Smith et al. employ what they call "sociological imagination," an approach that

¹ *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, by Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), reviewed by Gregory Reynolds in *OS* 16 (2007): 136–39; and *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, with Patricia Snell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), reviewed by John Muether in *OS* (2011): 100–103.

² e.g., Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty-and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

seeks to understand the *personal experience of individual people*, on the one hand, and *larger social and cultural trends, forces, and powers*, on the other, by *explaining each in terms of the other*. (4, emphasizes his)

The book is the result of surveys that were conducted first with 3,290 individuals aged thirteen to seventeen (followed by personal interviews with 267 of them) in 2001, and follow-up surveys and interviews with the same individuals (insofar as possible) in 2007–8. Based on their surveys and interviews, the authors are persuaded that “to be in one’s twenties today is not the same experience as it was decades ago” (227). Values-wise, Smith et al. deny that such a study can be value-free, so they name five “goods” that inform their evaluation of emerging adults, to each of which a chapter is devoted:

1. To be able to think coherently about moral beliefs and problems.
2. To have values that transcend material acquisition.
3. To avoid routine intoxication.
4. To have healthy sexual relations.
5. To be aware of the broader social, cultural, institutional, and political world.

The “dark side” of emerging adults in America is that these five goods are remarkably lacking, and the authors believe that some of these areas “without exaggeration, are matters of life and death” (17). Many readers (such as myself) will not be at all surprised to learn that the first, third, and fourth are significant issues for emerging adults, but I was both surprised and chagrined by the second and fifth categories.

As a “baby boomer” myself, reared in the sixties and educated at college in the mid-seventies, I recall my generation’s fairly self-conscious suspicion of “the system,” which certainly included suspicion of the economic/commercial system. Though many of the ideals championed by young people in our generation (free love, communalism, seeking “enlightenment” via drugs) may have been unwise or immoral, they were at least ideals, and “the good life” was self-consciously sought outside of mere material/consumerist well-being. If anything, our parents regarded us as too idealist, as too unconcerned with the pragmatic realities of material well-being. Current emerging adults are the mirror opposite; their primary (and, in some cases, only) goal in life is materialist/consumer well-being:

Few emerging adults expressed concerns about the potential limits or dilemmas involved in a lifestyle devoted to boundless material consumption. Most are either positive or neutral about mass consumer materialism. Only a few have reservations or doubts. (71)

While each of the major chapters in the book is disturbing, this one (“Captive to Consumerism”) was surprisingly so, and bleak at that.

Equally surprising was the fifth chapter, “Civic and Political Disengagement.” Regarding their engagement with the broader culture and its institutions around them, the survey revealed six categories: apathetic (27%), marginally political (27%), distrustful (19%), uninformed (13%), disempowered (10%), and genuinely political (4%). These figures are even more disturbing when one considers how generously “marginally

political” was defined: “In most instances, it appears that their definition of being ‘involved’ mostly means watching the news on television or reading the paper” (206). Only 4% of emerging adults are “genuinely political,” or interested in the broader public beyond their circle of friends or family. Contrast this with our 1970s protests, sit-ins, bra-burning, flag-burning, etc., and the difference is staggering.

The more predictable chapters (moral confusion, routine intoxication, sexuality) are not more pleasant for being more predictable. Though the chapters are written with the necessary clinical detachment required of sociologists, for the reader they are nonetheless bleak and often heart-breaking. Beneath all the frenetic texting, partying, and mall-hopping is a disturbing amount of pain, disappointment, and emptiness.

Not surprisingly, these sociologists describe six “macrosocial” changes (13–15) in the last several decades that have retarded the emergence of adulthood and contributed to the near-absence of the five goods noted above:

1. The dramatic growth of higher education.
2. The delay of marriage.
3. Changes in the global economy that undermine stable, lifelong careers.
4. Parental support continues well into the twenties.
5. Widespread and reliable birth control technologies have disconnected human sexuality from procreation in the minds of many.
6. The powerful influence of postmodernist and poststructuralist thinking.

There may be other cultural changes at work here also; the authors expressly deny that their work is (or could be) entirely comprehensive: “We do not pretend to have it all figured out, and we certainly are not prophets or reformers” (231). When they say, “One of the striking features of emerging adulthood is how structurally disconnected most emerging adults are from older adults” (234), I immediately thought of digital media, for instance, because, as Mark Bauerlein has demonstrated, the digital media have effectively “ghetto-ized” adolescents.³ I have observed the same trend anecdotally, as someone who has been involved in higher education for almost thirty years. I could not agree more with Smith:

Most emerging adults live this crucial decade of their life surrounded mostly by their peers—people who have no more experience, insight, wisdom, perspective, or balance than they do. It is sociologically a very odd way to help young people come of age, to learn how to be responsible, capable, mature adults. (234)

The five chapters that constitute this work disclose a disturbingly “dark side” of emerging adulthood. As a parent of two emerging adults (and a college professor who deals with them daily), I experienced many sharp pangs of sympathetic pain as I read about how bleak their generation’s experience and outlook actually is. As a Christian, I was grateful at how directly, almost prophetically, the authors challenged the hegemony of mass consumer capitalism in our culture, a force that parasitically feeds off of American individualism while also exerting its own tyranny, so that

³ *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone under Thirty)* (New York: Tarcher, 2008).

one form of external authority (“the obligations of town, church, extended family, and conventional morality”) has been displaced by another, much more insidious and controlling external authority—all done in the name of individual self-determination. (235)

While this book is interesting and illuminating to anyone interested in contemporary American culture, it is nearly imperative reading for educators, parents, and churchmen (especially those who work with youth). We have not (as a culture) served emerging adults well; but we can begin to repair some of the damage by understanding them now, in order to serve them later. Good diagnosis always precedes good treatment; if we desire to serve emerging adults well, we will find such diagnosis here.

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ServantReading

Review of Selvaggio's 7 Toxic Ideas Polluting Your Mind

by David A. Booth

7 Toxic Ideas Polluting Your Mind, by Anthony Selvaggio. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011, 126 pages, \$11.99.

God cares about our minds and calls us to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Yet, while Christ is renewing our minds with his Word, the world is polluting our thinking through words and ideas of its own. What makes these worldly ideas so dangerous is that they are frequently taken for granted. Anthony Selvaggio, an RPCNA minister and visiting professor at Ottawa Theological Hall, wants to put an end to that. He has written this short book to expose the toxic ideas of our culture to the light of God’s Word. The seven toxic ideas that he examines are technopoly, neophilia (an inordinate love for what is new and a disregard for history and tradition), egalitarianism, individualism, materialism, consumerism, and relativism.

Selvaggio writes in an engaging manner and peppers the text with apt quotations and illustrations. The book rightly maintains that the root of worldliness is in our minds and emotions:

While external behavior practices do matter, the real battle to avoid worldliness occurs internally, in our hearts and minds. While we have been consumed with external matters, worldliness has gained a foothold in our thought processes. Satan has been very successful in getting us to *think* like the world. (11)

The chapters on technopoly and consumerism are particularly strong, and all of the topics addressed are worthy of careful consideration. Every congregation would benefit from grappling with the subject matter of this book.

Regretfully this work bears the marks of being hastily written and contains occasional, presumably unintentional, theological lapses. For example, Selvaggio asserts that “our present earthly bodies are not as important as our souls because they have different destinies” (86). By contrast, historic Christianity confesses the resurrection and glorification of the body rather than its disposal and replacement. Our bodies and souls share identical ultimate destinies. This book also reflects an eighth toxic idea which is polluting our minds: the belief that complex subjects can be treated in ever shorter and simpler ways. Trying to address topics like neophilia or egalitarianism in less than ten

minutes may comfort the already convinced, but it is unlikely to bring about meaningful change in anyone's thought or behavior. Furthermore, this approach easily moves from simple to simplistic with the result that opposing viewpoints are distorted beyond recognition. For example, Selvaggio asserts that "egalitarians genuflect before the idol of equality. For them, equality is all that matters, even if equality must be enforced by the iron fist of the state" (53–54). While that may describe some egalitarians, it is difficult to imagine prominent Christian egalitarians, such as Gordon Fee, F.F. Bruce, and Roger Nicole, being so sanguine about "the iron fist of the state." Due to these shortcomings, it is difficult to commend this book as one to be handed out or placed on a literature table in the back of the church.

In spite of the above reservations, this book provides an excellent framework to help a minister or elder teach through these well chosen topics. It would be extraordinarily time consuming and utterly unnecessary to prepare a series on these topics from scratch simply because this tool is less than perfect. It would be even worse for a congregation to leave these topics unexamined while waiting for a better book on the subject to come along. The pastor or elder who lightly edits the contents of this book and then supplements that with the Larger Catechism's teaching on the Ten Commandments will bring great blessing to those he teaches.

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Servant Poetry

John Donne (1572–1631)

Holy Sonnet 14

Batter my heart, three-person'd God; for you
As yet but knock; breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp'd town, to another due,
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.