

# Dogmatic Theology



Ordained  
Servant

August-  
September  
2015

# *Ordained Servant Online*

## *A Journal for Church Officers*

E-ISSN 1931-7115

**CURRENT ISSUE: SYSTEMATIC AND DOGMATIC THEOLOGY**

**August-September 2015**

### *From the Editor*

Systematic and Dogmatic theology are not, as many assume, synonymous. “Systematic” is a more popular term, perhaps because “dogmatic” is used as a pejorative word in the modern world, wedded as it is to relativism. Systematic theology focuses on the organizing of biblical materials topically. Dogmatic theology does the same, but the accent is on what the church asserts to be the absolute truth, especially as it faces the thought-forms or *zeitgeist* of the culture. Pastor Scott Meadows demonstrates the value of dogmatic theology for the pastor and his flock in “The Doctrine of Divine Simplicity: A Pastor’s Appreciation.”

Sherif Gendy continues to offer some of the fruit of his Old Testament doctoral studies as he reviews *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives*, edited by Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves, and Matthew Schlimm’s *This Strange and Sacred Scripture: Wrestling with the Old Testament and Its Oddities*. Robert Dick Wilson, a first generation Westminster Theological Seminary professor, believed that Reformed pastors and theologians should not be afraid to engage a wide range of scholarship that is not necessarily Reformed. Gendy follows in that tradition with appreciative and incisive critical analysis.

Finally, two reviews on the subject of Christian maturity. David Booth gives a mixed review of Gordon Smith’s *Called to Be Saints: An Invitation to Christian Maturity*. I review a book by Thomas Bergler that follows up on his unique study of the twentieth-century development of youth groups. In the former volume Bergler identifies a significant problem in youth ministry. This volume, *From Here to Maturity*, offers a thoughtful solution.

For poetry this month George MacDonald offers a pair of poems, “Sonnets Suggested by St. Augustine,” that turn theology into doxology, the place to which theology ought always to lead.

Blessings in the Lamb,  
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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

# Servant Truth

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

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by D. Scott Meadows<sup>1</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>2</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 Dr. James Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness*.<sup>3</sup> Now I wonder how and why its subject matter is so generally absent or grossly truncated in theological

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit Sermons* (1856; repr., Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications), 1:1.

<sup>3</sup> James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011). Dr. 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.

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 significantly addressed 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>4</sup>—but my 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 at this point to introduce it to others, while directing them to sound and substantial treatments like Dr. 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>5</sup>

My modest ambition in this presentation is to answer briefly two basic questions: 1) What is the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS)? 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>6</sup> Tersely, 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>7</sup>

Thomas Aquinas’s treatment of the DDS (exposition and defense) is particularly important on account of its fullness and its influence upon Protestant scholastic theology at the heart of the Reformed doctrinal tradition. The classical theism of Roman

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., The Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 2.1; The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1677/1689 (1689 LBCF) 2.1

<sup>5</sup> Alexander H. Pierce, *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 32.1 (Autumn 2014): 104–106.

<sup>6</sup> Dolezal, 31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

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>8</sup>

Classically, the DDS rests upon a discussion of “parts” with some relation of “act” and “passive potency” in a thing.<sup>9</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.”

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>10</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>11</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

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<sup>8</sup> 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).

<sup>9</sup> I am also greatly indebted to unpublished lecture notes of Dr. 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.

<sup>10</sup> John Owen, *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, in *Works* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1966), 12:72.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 1.18, <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/ContraGentiles1.htm#18>.

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.

### **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, absolutely 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>12</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

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<sup>12</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 121.

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>13</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 personally, 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:

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<sup>13</sup> George Hayward Joyce, *Principles of Natural Theology* (London: Longmans Green, 1923), 260–61.

## **1. For Understanding Theology Proper in our Reformed Confessional Heritage**

The form of sound words concerning God 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 clearly understood 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 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 for 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 may 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 Dr. 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>14</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).

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<sup>14</sup> Dolezal, 92.

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 assert that 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 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 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.

# ServantReading

## Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin

A Review Article

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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, written 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 worthy to note 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 contain 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 Melanchthon, the Formula of Concord, Martin Chemnitz, and Philipp Jakob Spener. What is missing in this chapter is a discussion on 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 and of 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; and 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 ramification 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 Christianity 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.

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# ServantReading

## This Strange and Sacred Scripture

A Review Article

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by Sherif Gendy

*This Strange and Sacred Scripture: Wrestling with the Old Testament and Its Oddities*, by Matthew Richard Schlimm. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015, 272 pages, \$22.99, paper.

In this book, Matthew Richard Schlimm addresses some theological questions raised by the Old Testament, providing pastoral insights alongside his biblical scholarship. He offers strategies for reading and appropriating these sacred texts, showing how the Old Testament can shape the lives of Christians today and helping Christians appreciate the Old Testament as a friend in faith. Schlimm discusses twelve theological and biblical issues found in the Old Testament. Here is a summary with assessment for each chapter.

### **1. IS THE OLD TESTAMENT AN ENEMY, STRANGER, OR FRIEND TO THE CHRISTIAN FAITH?**

In this chapter, Schlimm shows how the Old Testament, despite its age, can give the church fresh ways of thinking about God, humanity, and creation.

### **2. OUR FLEETING MOMENTS IN PARADISE**

Many in the evangelical world would disagree with Schlimm's argument in this chapter as he tries to make the case for reading the stories in Genesis 2–4 symbolically rather than being historical narratives. For Schlimm, trying to read the narrative historically would completely miss the point. According to Schlimm, the characters of Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel are simply mirror images of ourselves as representatives of humanity as a whole. Therefore, these chapters tell a story about us. This conclusion seems to go against the way in which the rest of the Scripture understands these chapters and their characters.

### **3. DARKNESS OVER THE FACE OF THE DEEP**

Schlimm argues here that the Old Testament critically borrowed ideas from surrounding cultures. Therefore, Christians should be critically open to evolution and see science as a friend to Scripture. The question that Schlimm does not address is to what extent Christians should be open to evolutionary theories and scientific discoveries that plainly contradict the Scripture? Who determines the truth of the matter, the God-given Scripture or man-made theories? While Scripture and science can in fact be friends, this can only happen under some firm terms. These terms must make science subordinate to Scripture and always allow science to be shaped by the truths of the Scripture, rather than

changing the truths of the Scripture, which is infallible, to allow it to be conformed to the discoveries of science, which are fallible and change all the time.

#### **4. THE R-RATED BIBLE**

In this chapter Schlimm explores different ways interpreters have wrestled with the Bible's morally questionable stories. He discusses different approaches including, on the one hand, searching for saints in the text to uphold them as examples to follow, and on the other hand, the "pursuing paradigms" approach which admits that no human in Scripture provides a perfect model for us to emulate. Another approach is searching for ethical principles that undergird the stories. Schlimm is not satisfied with any of these. Instead, he argues that reading stories well requires us to understand the story experience, which reflects real-life experiences. The problem with this approach is that it moralizes the purpose of these stories without looking deeper to their contribution to biblical theology as they are situated in redemptive history.

#### **5. KILLING ALL THAT BREATHES: VIOLENCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Schlimm in this chapter seeks to correct some mistaken premises when one reads the Old Testament violence. These assumptions involve imitating the characters' actions, God's actions, applying the text directly to life, or trying to find answers to every question raised by disturbing texts. He makes helpful hermeneutical observations that description is not prescription, we should not imitate God, we should not apply such texts directly to our daily lives, and we should not read individual passages in isolation from other passages. According to Schlimm, we need to admit that we do not have all the answers. Rather, we need to approach biblical passages with humility and prayerfully question violent texts. For Schlimm, the Old-Testament-as-our-friend-of-faith model gives Christians permission to question the Bible and disagree, and clash, with some texts about violence to the point of not seeing the usefulness of them in our own lives. This approach does not seem to be helpful to those who are committed to the sacred status of the Bible. Rather, one needs to seriously consider these passages in light of their purposes in redemptive history and as they point to the finished work of Christ on the cross and the consummation of this work in his second coming.

#### **6. MALE AND FEMALE, GOD CREATED THEM: GENDER AND THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Building upon the assumption that the Bible uses ancient languages and reflects ancient ideas of gender, Schlimm suggests we should be honest about scars that patriarchy has left on the text. This approach requires rejecting biased interpretation and seeking gender equality. He suggests counteracting male-centeredness by questioning troublesome texts and by recovering neglected texts that work against male domination. This approach, however, does not consider the Bible's own voice and assumes that there are texts that speak against male domination while others reflect patriarchy. Thus, it blames the Bible for not being consistent on gender issues.

#### **7. GOD COMMANDS US TO DO *WHAT?*! THE STRANGE LAWS OF THE BIBLE**

In this chapter Schlimm lays out some laws that seem strange in the Old Testament, including dietary, purity, and ritual laws. He discusses three approaches Christians take to these laws: splitting grace and law (Old Testaments commandments are outdated and obsolete), dividing the law into categories (moral, ceremonial, and judicial; with only moral commandments abiding on the church), and sticking with it (turning these laws to different angles and considering them in different lights). Schlimm suggests that we read these laws with sympathy and openness, paying attention to culture's customs and relating particulars to the whole. While Schlimm seeks to relate some of the Old Testament laws to the culture of that time, he does not try to read them in light of their divine purpose and the person and work of Christ.

## **8. IS THE LAW ENGRAVED IN STONE? THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF GOD'S LAW**

Schlimm invites us to think of the Old Testament as a law professor in whose class we encounter issues that invite serious theological reflections—matters like holiness, poverty, disgust, food, sacred space, and sacrifice. This law professor reminds us that God's law is alive and dynamic, changing as the living God interacts with the different needs of his people. It is true that the Lord's laws are alive and dynamic; however, the dynamic nature of these laws does not necessary call for thinking of them as changing. It is because the Lord is unchanging that his laws are unchanging. The applications of these laws might be different based on time and place in history, and certainly as they point to the finished work of Christ.

## **9. TRUTH IS MANY SIDED**

Schlimm deals with the question whether the Old Testament contradicts itself. He admits that there are many sorts of theological and ethical tensions within the Bible. He argues that since God is transcendent, his truths in the Bible are much bigger than we are and are presented to us as conversations about who God is and what he wants from us. According to Schlimm, these conversations continue, extending beyond the pages of Scripture into our own lives. A better way of formulating this is to say that these inspired conversations speak into our lives since they communicate God's self-revelation. While it is true that the Bible often presents many perspectives on certain topics, instead of speaking of these perspectives in terms of contradictions or even tensions, it is helpful to seek their purposes in light of the larger biblical and theological picture.

## **10. DROWNING IN TEARS AND RAGING AT GOD**

Schlimm reflects on the prayers of complaint in the Bible to highlight their acknowledgment of the grief, anger, and anguish that normally accompany life. But there is also hope: that night shall end, and a brighter day shall arrive. We can learn from the Old Testament, which thoroughly incorporates human emotions into the life of faith, how to pray when prayer is most difficult. Amid tragedy, we can speak with full honesty to God, and then wait as he shows up and gives us songs of joy. This chapter addresses human emotions and how biblical prayers present them. What it lacks is the basis on which one can overcome these emotions. It is through Christ, who himself experienced grief (Isa. 53:3), anger (Mark 3:5), and anguish (Heb. 4:15), that we conquer them and find our ultimate hope.

## 11. GREAT AND TERRIBLE IS THE WRATH OF THE LORD

In this chapter Schlimm seeks to explain God's anger, which is complicated, to show how the Old Testament reveals a God who is deeply concerned about evil—but also slow to anger. He argues that God's anger exists in uneasy tension with his love. Looking at the matter from a different perspective reveals that it is in fact because God loves his creation and his people that he is angry at the evil that seeks to destroy them. True love necessitates righteous wrath. Schlimm concludes that the Old Testament shows four characteristics about God's anger: 1) it is real; 2) it needs to be taken seriously; 3) God is slow to anger; and 4) This anger does not endure. Schlimm is not clear in this chapter about his views of God's eternal wrath being poured righteously on the wicked in hell.

## 12. THE OLD TESTAMENT'S AUTHORITY

Schlimm presents three ways of thinking about the Old Testament's authority: 1) no or limited authority; 2) the drill-sergeant model (the Old Testament tells us what to do, and we do it); and 3) the inerrant-infallible model. Rejecting these ways, Schlimm offers his model, which controls his arguments throughout this book—the Old Testament is our friend in faith. According to this model, the Old Testament offers an invitation to a richer, fuller, and more faithful life. The main criticism for this model, however, is that it does not have room for seeing Christ as the center of the Scripture. Rather, it sees man as the focus of the Bible, and the Bible itself becomes a manual for a happy or godly life. It also does not take seriously the Bible's own witness but seeks to interject its understanding of how things should be done.

## APPENDIX: A LITERAL TRANSLATION OF GENESIS 2:4B–4:16

Schlimm provides his own translation of this passage based on the Hebrew text. Worthy of note here is Schlimm's translation of the Hebrew names אָדָם (*adam*) “earthling” (2:5), עֵדֶן (*eden*) “Delight” (2:8), חַוְוָה (*havvah*) “Life” (3:20), קַיִן (*qayin*) “Spear” (4:1), and הֶבֶל (*hebel*) “Fleeting Breath” (4:2).

This book touches upon important issues that cause trouble to some as they read the Old Testament. It seeks to invite Bible readers to see the Old Testament as a friend of faith, thus it becomes accessible, personal, and practical. The book incorporates multiple voices and includes breakout boxes intermittently with quotations by scholars about the topic at hand. Each chapter ends with a list of annotated books and recommended resources for further study.

Working under the false assumption that the Old Testament is an enemy, Schlimm tries to make a friend out of it. The weakness of Schlimm's suggested model is not recognizing that the Scriptures primarily bear witness to Christ and his work (Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:39). Thus, any reading that dismisses Christ and his work from its focus misses the purpose of the Old Testament and its role as a Christian Scripture.

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# ServantReading

## Called to Be Saints by Gordon T. Smith

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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 *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 merely offering a few 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 numerous 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 one to be 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, this 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 Christ-likeness 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 and parcel 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.

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# ServantReading

## From Here to Maturity *by Thomas E. Bergler*

### A Review Article

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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>1</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 socio-cultural 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 an 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” Christian Smith uses to sum up his research on the spirituality of American teenagers (12–14). Add

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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 happiness. 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 the way that the biblical model does. “[M]ature 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).

At this point Bergler becomes a bit 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>2</sup> and the Exemplary Youth Ministry (EYM) Study.<sup>3</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 that I worshipped with in New York City 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> 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).

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.

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# Servant Poetry

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George MacDonald (1824–1905)

## Sonnets Suggested by St. Augustine

### I

WHAT love I when I love Thee, O my God?  
Not corporal beauty, nor the limb of snow,  
Nor of loved light the white and pleasant flow,  
Nor manna showers, nor streams that flow abroad,  
Nor flowers of Heaven, nor small stars of the sod:  
Not these, my God, I love, who love Thee so;  
Yet love I something better than I know:—  
A certain light on a more golden road;  
A sweetness, not of honey or the hive;  
A beauty, not of summer or the spring;  
A scent, a music, and a blossoming  
Eternal, timeless, placeless, without gyve,  
Fair, fadeless, undiminish'd, ever dim,—  
This, this is what I love in loving Him.

### II

This, this is what I love, and what is this?  
I ask'd the beautiful earth, who said —“not I.”  
I ask'd the depths, and the immaculate sky  
And all the spaces said—“not He but His.”  
And so, like one who scales a precipice.  
Height after height, I scaled the flaming ball  
Of the great universe, yea, pass'd o'er all  
The world of thought, which so much higher is.  
Then I exclaimed, “To whom is mute all murmur  
Of phantasy, of nature, and of art,  
He, than articulate language hears a firmer  
And grander meaning in his own deep heart.  
No sound from cloud or angel.” Oh, to win  
That voiceless voice —“My servant, enter in!”