

Ordained Servant

May 2017

# Watch Your Language



# *Ordained Servant Online*

## *A Journal for Church Officers*

E-ISSN 1931-7115

### **CURRENT ISSUE: WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE**

**May 2017**

### *From the Editor*

Even as a child the secular proverb, “sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me,” never made any sense to me, because I found hurtful talk, well, hurtful. God’s Word teaches the opposite of that proverb: “A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit” (Prov. 15:4); “There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (Prov. 12:18). So, Ryan McGraw’s “Cultivating Christ-Honoring Speech in Church Courts (Proverbs 15:1–4)” is a welcome corrective to our sinful natures.

Elder Jonathan Looney brings a helpful perspective on the staging of public worship. In a culture that prizes spontaneity, it is refreshing to have some wisdom shed on the importance of the kind of decorum that Scripture requires in the performance of those who lead in public worship. Yes, it is a performance shaped by a sincere desire to guide the congregation in the worship of almighty God.

Again, in this five hundredth year of the celebration of Luther’s historic inauguration of the Reformation, we have two offerings in the history department. Denominational historian John Muether offers the fifth installment of Reformed Confessions with “The Scottish Confession of Faith (1560),” as we see Reformed orthodoxy develop in its creedal statements. Danny Olinger presents the eighth chapter of his biography of Geerhardus Vos, “The Biblical Theology,” exploring Vos’s most enduring contribution to biblical studies.

Dave Holmlund digs deeply into Post-Reformation theology in his review of Johannes Cocceius’s *The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God*. Cocceius was “one of the greatest of the seventeenth-century Scholastics who systematized orthodox Protestant theology in the period between the Reformation and the rise of rationalism.”

The poem this month, “Time and the Bell,” is a reflection on TS Eliot’s “Burnt Norton” from *The Four Quartets*.

The cover picture this month is the view from the porch of Camp Shiloh, where the Shiloh Institute is held each June, in Jefferson, New Hampshire.

Blessings in the Lamb,  
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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## FROM THE ARCHIVES “WORSHIP”

[http://opc.org/OS/pdf/Subject\\_Index\\_Vol\\_1-22.pdf](http://opc.org/OS/pdf/Subject_Index_Vol_1-22.pdf)

- “Re-Forming Presbyterian Worship.” (D. G. Hart & John R. Muether) 9:4 (Oct. 2000): 84–85.
- “Suggestions Toward Reflecting and Reinforcing Principles of Biblically Reformed Worship in Our Church Buildings.” (Larry Wilson) 10:4 (Oct. 2001): 87–88.

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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.

# ServantRealms

## Cultivating Christ-Honoring Speech in Church Courts (Proverbs 15:1–4)

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by Ryan M. McGraw

It is important to be mindful both of what we say in church courts and of how we say it. John Kitchen wrote of two models of speech, “Speech has the potential to quiet a riot or to fan the embers of anger (Prov. 12:18; 15:18; 25:15).”<sup>1</sup> On this side of glory, Christians, including presbyters, often display a mixture of both models. While through sanctification of the Spirit we shine in Christ from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18), we can often unintentionally set our light under a basket by shading it through indwelling sin in our speech. Proverbs 15:1–4 can set healthy parameters around how we should conduct ourselves in debates in church courts. The burden of this essay is to show, in light of this text, that we must learn as presbyters to moderate our speech so as to honor Christ and to edify his church. Doing so will enable us better to promote the glory of our Savior and the peace and purity of the church. In order to explain and to illustrate these principles, I have extracted the parts of Proverbs 15:1–4 into a list of positive exhortations and negative injunctions, highlighting distinctly the principle of accountability found in verse three. Since no man spoke as Christ did (John 7:46), and because the Pharisees condemned themselves out of their own mouths (John 9:41), both examples are useful to illustrate vividly the principles taught in this text. This article concludes with some directions designed to help presbyters speak well in church courts.

### Speech to Cultivate

“A soft answer turns away wrath.” (v. 1)

Cultivating a “soft answer” is vital in promoting the church’s wellbeing. It is not enough to be right. We must cultivate what Kitchen calls, “a conciliatory tone.”<sup>2</sup> A “soft” or “gentle” answer yields great fruit. Kitchen notes, “A ‘gentle answer’ can quench even white hot anger.”<sup>3</sup> All of the principles given in Proverbs 15:1–4 presuppose disagreement among the parties involved. What would a presbytery or a general assembly be without healthy disagreement and debate? This is not wrong in itself, but it can be either helpful or hurtful depending on how we conduct ourselves as presbyters. We know the experience of watching movies or reading books where a levelheaded and calm mentor brings a hotheaded student into check. The mentor puts his pupil to shame and

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<sup>1</sup> John A Kitchen, *Proverbs: A Mentor Commentary* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2006), 325. Kitchen will serve as a useful and simple guide to this passage throughout the material below.

<sup>2</sup> Kitchen, *Proverbs*, 325.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

reins him or her in by responding calmly, patiently, and gently in the face of angry retorts. While presbytery and general assembly debates are not simply about winning, it is rare for someone who is visibly angry, and who uses inflammatory words, to win many votes. Remember that “with patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone” (Prov. 25:15).

“The tongue of the wise commends knowledge. (v. 2)

This proverb concerns the form of our speech more directly.<sup>4</sup> How we say what we say is as important as what we say. This strengthens the point made by verse one. It includes when we speak, what words we use, and our tone of voice.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes it is not the right time to speak. We can apply this principle by hearing out others’ arguments fully before responding to them. Our words must always be full of wisdom as well. This involves saying the right thing, at the right time and in the right way. Even Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor both with God and men (Luke 2:52).

We may, however, speak at the right time and use the right words, but say them with the wrong tone. To illustrate, I once took a seminary student to his first meeting of a particular presbytery. Within the first hour of the meeting, a presbyter spoke to an issue over which he was particularly agitated. Without knowing the man or his background, the student was surprised by the man’s red face, breaking voice, and vigorous gestures. We must be more self-aware than we often are regarding how others perceive our speeches in church courts. Having the right thing to say and knowing an appropriate way to say it still may not suffice to say it well. If one cannot do so, then one should remember the biblical adage, “Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent” (Prov. 17:28). While we cannot remain silent over moral issues, we should consider both how we speak to issues and whether we are in a fit state to do so wisely. You may need to speak regardless of these considerations, but sometimes it would be better to let someone in a better state of mind do it instead. In the OPC, chances are that someone else will speak to the issue. Remember that our aim is Christ’s glory through the peace and the purity of his church. Whether or not we communicate wisely can help or hinder these goals.

“A gentle tongue is a tree of life.” (v. 4)

A “gentle tongue” is a “soothing” tongue. This verse adds the idea that a gentle tongue has healing power. A verbal parallel to the Hebrew text is Jeremiah 8:15: “We looked for peace, but no good came; for a time of healing, but behold, terror.”<sup>6</sup> Our speech in church courts should aim to heal divisions rather than to justify them on the pretense of a good cause. Remember that this does not touch on the substance of a debate, no matter how serious it may be. It reminds us instead of our goals in a debate and how such goals affect the words that we use and how we use them.

The effect of a gentle or healing tongue is a clear allusion to the Tree of Life from the Garden of Eden. While the angel with the flaming sword teaches us that man can never

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 327.

regain access to the Tree of Life through keeping the covenant of works, Christ both merits and purchases for us the promise embodied by the tree (Rev. 22:2). In relation to our text, however, this reminds us of Jesus's warning that by our words we will be justified and by our words we will be condemned (Matt. 12:37). In theological terms this entails the justification of our works rather than that of our persons (James 2:17–18). Nevertheless, such good works are found in the way to life.<sup>7</sup> In the context of Proverbs, Kitchen reminds us that wisdom of speech (Prov. 3:18)<sup>8</sup> is related organically to righteousness of life (Prov. 13:12).<sup>9</sup> Life results from right desires and hopes, which stem from right faith and practice (e.g., Ps. 37:3–6).

Healing words can promote life to others as well.<sup>10</sup> Surely this is part of what Paul had in view when he wrote, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16). Personal godliness and sound doctrine are twins. They are born together and they grow up together. James applied explicitly his teaching on works justifying the faith of justified persons to how we speak to and about our brothers (James 3:1–13). Aim prayerfully to promote spiritual health and personal godliness with your speech in church courts.

### **Illustrations from Christ**

Christ is both the foundation of our justification and the pattern of our sanctification. This includes our speech, even when dealing with others who are in error or who simply disagree with us. Jesus dealt gently with Martha before raising Lazarus by responding with the right words, at the right time, and in the right way, even when she implicitly questioned his actions and motives (John 11:21–27). Jesus answered her gently, and he wept with her and her family (John 11:35). When his disciples found it unthinkable for him to go away, even though it proved necessary for their salvation and for ours, Jesus explained what he was doing and how to follow him (John 14:1–11), what they should do after he left (vv. 12–14), and how the Spirit would enable them to do it (vv. 15–31). Upon his ascension into heaven, when his disciples still fostered false hopes that Christ would liberate the nation of Israel from the Romans, he patiently told them that such things were not for them to know, but that they must wait for the coming of the Spirit (Acts 1:6–8). Jesus urged the multitudes, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:28–29). If Christ spoke so wisely in the midst of such confusion, then let us imitate his soft answer, wise speech, and life-giving words in our labors in church courts. Let us not make church courts laborious and our fellow presbyters heavy laden.

### **Speech to Avoid**

“But a harsh word stirs up anger.” (v. 1b)

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<sup>7</sup> See Westminster Confession of Faith 16.2, 6.

<sup>8</sup> “She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed.”

<sup>9</sup> “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.” See Kitchen, *Proverbs*, 327.

<sup>10</sup> Kitchen, *Proverbs*, 327.

To face the facts, presbytery and assembly debates can become tense. All of us have likely been guilty at some point of inferring wrongful motives to others or of assuming the worst outcome at a meeting. Pregnant suspicions and emotions often give birth to harsh words. Kitchen observes, “Unguarded words escalate any ill will that may be already present.”<sup>11</sup> While wise words are designed to promote debate and to add clarity to issues, harsh words are designed to wound the other person. We should guard our hearts so as not to take disagreements personally. Losing a debate, even an important one, is also rarely the end of the ecclesiastical world.

This warning applies poignantly to the particular words we use. Kitchen adds, “How many arguments, rifts and fights could have been avoided by simply refraining from a single word!”<sup>12</sup> Avoid saying things such as, “in response to Bob,” “this course of action is thoughtless or foolish,” “this is unloving,” “no one doubts the innocence of the accused,” etc. Such responses are harsh in that they can come across as attacking people instead of arguments, they impute wrongful motives, and they bully those in opposition to your position.

“But the mouth of fools pour out folly.” (v. 2b)

Kitchen’s summary of this clause is apt: “The fool simply opens wide his mouth and lets flow whatever comes to his lips.”<sup>13</sup> This is a weakness that can grow out of a healthy concern in the OPC to let everyone have a say. Instead of speaking because we can, we need to ask whether our speech is helpful and adds to the current discussion. I once witnessed a presbytery “debate” in which there were roughly ten speeches in a row in favor of an action. The ensuing vote was unanimous. This appears to be an example of unintended folly because it is hard to see how this “debate” was not a waste of time. Such practices give the impression that we are more concerned that our voices are heard than that the action is approved. Remember that, “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent” (Prov. 10:19).

Conversely, we can act foolishly in a debate due to thoughtlessness and a lack of prayer before speaking. Kitchen says of the man in view here, “He speaks whatever comes to his mind and cares not for those who don’t like it.”<sup>14</sup> The intent of the speaker is not in view in this proverb as much as the attraction or repulsion that each kind of speech described brings. If we need to say things that are unattractive or unpopular, then let us at least aim to say them in an attractive way to the body we are speaking before.

“But perverseness in it breaks the spirit.” (v. 4b)

Perverseness involves twisted or crooked speech. This is possibly the worst abuse listed in these verses; “Twisting words to serve our own evil intent ‘crushes the spirit’ of those we are in relationship with.”<sup>15</sup> This kind of speech aims to achieve our own ends without regarding explicitly Christ’s glory or the edification of others. While we should

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 325.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

never assume or imply that others are doing this during a debate, is any of us above temptation in this area?

For instance, if you have had a long-standing doctrinal or personal dispute with another presbyter who is brought under moral charges, could you not be tempted to use the occasion to try to “get rid of him?” In such circumstances some assume guilt before hearing the details of the case. Whether such a man is guilty or innocent may or may not be connected directly to the doctrinal dispute that you have with him. We are liable to show our prejudice against a man in how we speak to an issue related to him. This example can go the other way. We can defend the actions of a presbyter due to an established friendship with him, blinding us to the evidence relevant to the debate at hand. We must show no partiality; neither must we be respecters of persons. Isaiah’s verbal parallel, in which he addresses God’s enemies, illustrates strikingly the result of this kind of speech: “Behold, my servants shall sing for gladness of heart, but you shall cry out for pain of heart and shall wail for breaking of spirit” (Isa. 65:14).<sup>16</sup> This counsel demands becoming self-aware before weighing in on an issue. Let us neither grieve the church nor the Spirit through perverse speech, whether intentional or not.

### **Illustrations from the Scribes and Pharisees**

The Pharisees were masters of harsh and foolish words, as well as of perverse speech. Strikingly, this led them to refuse to hear evidence and to twist evidence in a debate. When the blind man whom Christ healed presented the evidence of what the Lord had done, the Pharisees concluded, “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?” (John 9:34). The disciples had asked whether the man was born blind for his own sin or that of his parents (John 9:1–2). Jesus told them that it was neither (v. 3). Based on the evidence, the formerly blind man concluded that Christ was from God (vv. 30–33) and later that he was the Christ (v. 38). Yet the Pharisees would hear none of this. They determined the outcome of the case before hearing the evidence. It should not surprise us, therefore, that they later hurled insults at Nicodemus when he urged them to give Jesus a hearing before rejecting his teaching (John 7:51). Taken to its extreme, this led them to distort evidence when they had none to go by. They voted to crucify Jesus on the pretense that he threatened to destroy the temple and raise it in three days (Matt. 26:59–62), even though he spoke of the temple of his body (John 2:19). After the resurrection, their persistent prejudice against Christ led to bribery and outright lying when they instructed the guards at the tomb to tell people that Christ’s disciples stole his body at night (Matt. 28:11–15). Lest these examples seem to be outlandish and beyond us, remember that they witness to the fact that lesser sins give birth to greater sins. Harsh words promote foolish speech and foolish speech gives rise to perverse speech. “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

### **A Principle of Accountability**

“The eyes of the Lord are in every place.” (v. 3a)

The children’s catechism teaches us, “I cannot see God but he always sees me.” The author of this proverb draws the implication from divine omniscience that if God sees all

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 327.

things, then he also hears all that one says.<sup>17</sup> God knows all that we do and why we do it. He is more aware of us and of our motives than we are of ourselves. We must labor to speak with a good conscience before God and men (Acts 24:16).

“Keeping watch over the evil and the good.” (v. 3b)

God examines the speech of all kinds of people. God’s knowledge is a terror to the evil and a comfort to the good.<sup>18</sup> God’s knowledge of all should alarm the evil and bring the good to repentance and obedience. Paul applied this idea to the evil when he said,

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:30–31)

He applied it to the good, when he wrote, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others” (2 Cor. 5:10–11a). No man is justified on the ground of his works before God (Rom. 3:20), but those who are justified must give an account of their service to God in Christ.

God’s knowledge of us should help us participate in church courts rather than paralyze us from participating in them. David exemplified this in Psalm 139:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it. (Ps. 139:1–6)

We will never be entirely free of sinful speech on this side of glory, but we have potential to do much good with our speech when we speak in God’s presence, through faith in Christ, with the Spirit’s help.

### **Illustrations from Christ and from the Scribes and Pharisees**

Two statements from Christ serve to illustrate this principle of accountability. Christ said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34). Later in the same gospel, he said, “And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him” (John 8:29). Note the connection our Lord makes between maintaining God’s presence and doing God’s will.

The Pharisees, by contrast, did their righteous deeds to be seen by men (Matt. 6:1). They made sure that everyone was aware when they gave alms to the poor (Matt. 6:2–4). They prayed so that men would notice and help them promote their reputation for piety

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

(Matt. 6:5–6). They disfigured their faces and maintained a sad countenance when they fasted (Matt. 6:16–18). They neither did God’s will nor enjoyed his gracious presence.

How can we apply these examples to how we speak at presbytery? We should ask ourselves several pointed questions: Am I speaking on the floor simply because I want my voice heard, or does my speech add to the substance of the debate at hand? Am I afraid to speak when others expect me to take their side in a debate and I disagree with them? Am I persuadable, listening to the arguments of others, or do I simply plan to vote as others expect me to? We should seek to do good through speaking in church courts, rather than simply enjoying the good privilege of speaking.

### **Concluding Directions for Presbyters**

Kitchen’s conclusion to this section of Proverbs is a fitting summary of the content of this article. He wrote, “We are endowed by our Creator with the capacity to bring either genuine, substantive help to those around us or to inflict incalculable lasting harm upon them—all of that by simply opening our mouths!”<sup>19</sup> A few directions can help us apply further the teaching of Proverbs 15:1–4 in church courts.

1. Don’t take things personally and don’t make things personal. Speak to the moderator and leave previous speakers anonymous. Robert’s Rules of Order requires this procedure for good reasons.
2. Beware of imputing wrongful motives to your brothers in debate. Assume the best of them rather than the worst.
3. Pray throughout debates, asking the Lord not only for what to say but how to say it well. It is alleged that during the Westminster Assembly debates over church government, George Gillespie, who was a heavy hitter in those debates, wrote repeatedly on his paper, “*da luce domine*,” which means, “Lord give light.” Whether this story is real or apocryphal, it is a useful reminder to pray at all times.
4. Remember that those with whom you disagree are not Scribes and Pharisees, but fellow presbyters and brothers in Christ. Love Christ by speaking the truth to them in love.
5. “Let your gentleness be evident to all, for the Lord is at hand” (Phil. 4:5).<sup>20</sup> Reformed Christians have not always cultivated the fruit of gentleness well, but our Lord did. Let us imitate his character by grace even as we long to see his face in glory. Let us be gentle in our speech.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>20</sup> ἐπιεικὲς (*epieikeis*) bears the connotation of yielding, gentleness, or kindness.

# Servant Worship

## The Importance of Stagecraft for Worship Services

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by Jonathan Looney

Several years ago, a fellow ruling elder in our church asked me if we could stop sitting in front of the congregation when serving the Lord's Supper. As we discussed it, and he tried to explain the reasons for his request, he finally said, "I never know where I am supposed to look." He was simply uncomfortable being in front of a large crowd in that situation. Quite frankly, his discomfort may be appropriate: it is correct to take leadership in a public worship service seriously. And, any time we are on the platform<sup>1</sup> (or, arguably, any time an elder is present in a worship service, regardless of his seating location), we are leading the congregation in worship.

A worship service is a dynamic stage. Like the best dramas of the theater, elders invite the congregation to join us in what is occurring on the platform. As we worship, we want to draw God's people to worship God with us. Like a stage drama, we work with emotions that are a natural part of our worship. (And, more than in a stage drama based in fiction, the emotions in worship are a genuine response to profoundly important matters.) As we marvel at the wonder of God's glory, we invite the congregation to marvel with us. As we are utterly saddened by the badness of our own sins, we invite the congregation to grieve with us. And, as we feel the incredible joy of knowing God's forgiveness for those sins, we invite the congregation to rejoice with us.

There are a few principles that are worth reviewing. First, what we do on the platform *does* matter; therefore, it is important that our facial expressions, dress, tone of voice, and actions be intentional (not occurring without thought) and be intentionally designed to lead the congregation in worship. Second, we can have a positive or negative impact. Our goal is not just to avoid making mistakes; rather, our goal is to have a positive impact in encouraging the congregation to worship. Third, our goal is to *lead* the congregation in *genuine* worship. We can aid this by modeling our genuine worship for them.

Stagecraft can be learned. I am deeply indebted to many over the years (particularly, Bruce Montgomery, director of my college's glee club) who taught me the basic skills I use to this day. I hope to pass along some of those skills to you through this article.

### Preparation

As you walk up to the microphone (or even just sit on the platform), many questions may go through your mind: "What am I supposed to say? Who is that man staring at me from the

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<sup>1</sup> Different congregations have different physical arrangements. Sometimes there is a platform on which the worship leaders stand. Sometimes there is no platform, but the worship leaders stand at the front on ground level. I've even been to one worship service where the worship leaders stand in the middle and are surrounded on all four sides by the congregation. You know when you are in the location where those leading worship usually stand, whatever the physical arrangement may be. I am using "on the platform" as a simple way to refer to this location.

fourth row? Did I remember to zip my fly? Did I remember my notes for the prayer? Did I remember a bulletin so I know what songs to announce?” Which of these questions is supposed to prepare your mind for worship?

It is critical that you spend adequate time preparing for the worship service so that you will not be distracted by extraneous things. Moreover, I would recommend that you adopt a routine to ensure you do this preparation every time. The routine will both ensure that you actually are prepared, and also may provide some comfort for you.

Your preparations should cover these general areas: dress (make sure your dress is appropriate and is properly buttoned/zipped/tied), personal care (go to the restroom prior to the service; take any necessary medicine; and, drink/eat enough to fuel yourself), tools (ensure you have any necessary notes and a Bible; ensure that you will have access to a song book while on the platform; ensure you know how to use the microphone; and ensure you have any other “tools” you will need), mental (review what you will do; identify and address any areas where you are unsure about your role), and emotional (free your mind of outside emotions or distractions; recognize, and take steps to address, your anxieties).

This list probably seems long, but I assure you it is just a summary. If you think about your own circumstances, you may find items you want to add. If it helps, make an actual checklist that you use in your preparations. In my opinion, the greater danger for many people is in under-preparing, rather than over-preparing.

Suffice it to say that adequate preparation is (humanly speaking) a prerequisite for intentionally making a positive impact on the worship service. But, of course, in God’s gracious providence, I have gotten through worship services where I was under-prepared. So, we must not despair when we realize our preparations have fallen short.

## Facial Expression

Have you ever been to a choir concert and thought, “Those people aren’t enjoying themselves?” Instead, it may actually be the case that they simply paid too little attention to their facial expression. Our inner emotions are not always displayed in our facial expressions when we are in front of a large group of people.

It is hard to have a good facial expression while leading a congregation in worship. Our tendency is to be so focused on not making a mistake (or, to put it positively, so focused on the thing we are doing), that we pay too little attention to our facial expression. And, yet, this is so critical to getting people in the congregation to participate with us in the natural emotions of the worship service.

The very first thing we must do is to look interested. Even if we can’t express any other emotion, we must express that one. Otherwise, the people in the congregation may wonder (whether consciously or subconsciously) why they should be interested in worship. Note that it is not enough to *be* interested in the worship service; rather, you must also *express* this emotion. And, contrary to what you might think, your facial expressions do not automatically express the reality of your emotions (and, this may be especially true when you are in front of a large group of people).

Thankfully, it is *easy* to look interested. You convey most emotion with the eyes,<sup>2</sup> and this one is no different. Simply raising both eyebrows a slight amount can convey interest.

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<sup>2</sup> As an experiment, try having someone crop some photographs of people so you can only see the area around their eyes. See if you can accurately guess the emotions shown in the full photographs from the images of the eyes. Another interesting experiment is to try showing emotion without involving the eyes. I think you'll find it is very hard to do that.

Look in a mirror and try this. Get a second opinion from your wife or another elder. And, then, use a mirror to practice this for a while. (And, you do need to practice this. Your eyebrow muscles may hurt if you try to do this for an hour straight with no previous practice.) Ideally, you should get to the point where you instinctively put on your “interested face” at the start of the worship service and don’t release it until the end. Even if you allow your mind to wander, you don’t want to model that mind-wandering for people in the congregation. Practice is essential in maintaining that “interested face” in all circumstances.

Once you have mastered showing interest, you may want to practice other emotions, as well. Remember that the aim is not to convey false emotion; however, when there is genuine emotion, we must be able to convey it to the congregation. How are they to rejoice with us when they don't see us rejoicing? How are they to sorrow with us if they don't see us sorrow? Leading the congregation in worship includes leading them in appropriate emotional responses to the content of the worship service.

If you usually rehearse the things you will speak in the worship service, you should include your emotions as part of your rehearsal. We tend to do things the way we practice them, so it is important that you include the critical element of emotions when you practice speaking. Spontaneous emotions are good and should not be suppressed—that is not the goal of the practice I suggest. However, it is important that you prepare for this particular facet of leading the people in worship and not merely rely on the emotions that come to you (or may fail to come to you) in the moment.

Singing seems to present some interesting challenges in showing emotion. Certainly, that is not because songs are void of emotions. (For example, what Christian can sing “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” without being moved to sorrow, thankfulness, and, perhaps, even wonder?) And yet many people seem to have trouble showing emotion while they sing. The answer to this is practice.

I think many people have trouble showing emotion while they sing because they are trying to show the emotion in their mouths—the same mouths they are trying to use to sing. However, recall that you convey emotion in your eyes, so it is possible to convey emotion with your eyes while your mouths are fully engaged in singing.

It also should be easier to show emotion while you sing if you are fairly familiar with the song. If you are concentrating on a new tune or unfamiliar words, you may be so focused on merely getting the words or notes correct that you completely miss the emotion of the song and are not able to model any emotion for the congregation other than concentration. This is yet another way in which good preparation can help you.

## **Focus**

Anytime someone else is speaking, you should focus on the speaker. By doing so, you both draw the congregation’s attention to the speaker and subconsciously communicate to them that you think it is worth paying attention to the speaker. By contrast, if you look away from the speaker, others may try to follow your gaze to see what you found more interesting than the speaker. Or, if you simply stare into space, others may subconsciously assume that you find what the speaker is saying to be uninteresting or boring, and you may lead them to have similar thoughts.

Because of the arrangement of our church, when I am on the platform, I am often situated where I cannot easily see the pastor’s face when he is speaking. During the Lord’s Supper (when the elders sit in front, facing the congregation), he is behind me enough that I would need to turn my body to be able to see him. In these cases, I imagine an invisible line

extending forward from his nose and I focus on that line. I am not actually looking “at him”, but the effect on the audience should be similar. Other times that I am on the platform, he may be in front of me such that I cannot see his face. Again, I simply pretend that I can see his nose through his head and focus on that. In these cases where you cannot actually see the speaker’s face, it seems easier to get distracted. Therefore, it is that much more important to focus on showing proper emotion (beginning with “interest”).

When you are the speaker, you should focus on what you are doing. It is good to make eye contact with the congregation, shifting your gaze from person to person. If possible, it is good to cover the entire width of the sanctuary so no one feels like they are in an isolated part of the congregation, or are somehow disconnected from the worship.

Obviously, none of this changes the fact that the actual focus of the worship service is God. It is up to the session to order the worship service such that the focus of the service is the worship of God. When that is done, drawing the congregation to focus on those leading the worship service should in turn draw them to focus on the worship of God (and, therefore, to God himself, who is the object of our worship).

## **Distractions**

Distractions are an inevitable part of life. When they occur in a worship service, it is often best to acknowledge them, deal with them, and then return to worship (as best you are able).

Distractions can be big or small. I've been in a worship service where someone fainted and we had to call the paramedics to help her. In another worship service, a man who was having a bad reaction to a medication a doctor had recently prescribed stood up and began to talk during the sermon. Those qualify as “big” distractions. Your instincts will probably already guide you on what to do in those circumstances: you need to address the distraction and assess what path forward will produce the result most conducive to the worship of God. In some cases, the best choice may be simply to break into a prayer service.

However, other distractions can be subtler. Perhaps, the classic example of this is when everyone knows that something is wrong and they are waiting for someone to address it. What if the pastor gets up to speak and his fly is down? Someone needs to pass him a note quickly; otherwise, many people (if not everyone) will be distracted while they wait to see how the situation will be resolved. Things dropped on the platform can also serve as distractions. If the speaker drops his handkerchief, a pencil, or a notecard, you will likely find that people keep looking at it, waiting for someone to pick it up. Even though this seems like a minor thing, it can distract the people's attention, so it should be resolved quickly—even if that means that someone goes to the platform to pick up the dropped item.

Microphone or other audio-visual problems can also be distracting. While the situation is unresolved, people may be distracted as they wait to see what will happen. In these cases, it is probably better just to address the situation head on and quickly announce a resolution than to leave it unresolved or to search too long for a solution. So, if your microphone stops working, it may be better just to say, “We’ll continue without microphones for the rest of the service, so please move forward if you are having trouble hearing.” This will probably produce a better result than trying to speak while someone continues to search for a solution.

It is almost inevitable that distractions will happen. When they do, you should address them, “resolve” them (even if the resolution is that you will simply work around the problem), and then, if appropriate, return the people’s focus to the worship of God.<sup>3</sup>

## **Microphones**

Microphones are worthy of special mention because of their ability to be a very prominent distraction. Remember that microphones can always be on, so you should always treat them that way. If wearing a lapel or over-the-ear microphone, take it off (or, if that is not possible, at least double-check that it is completely disabled) before going to the bathroom. Likewise, be careful about having private conversations anywhere near a microphone (whether a lapel microphone or a fixed microphone).

If using a microphone with batteries or a wireless microphone, it is good to have an easily accessible backup microphone (hand-held or on a stand) which you can easily start using if the batteries on your primary microphone stop working or the wireless microphone encounters interference. Advanced planning like this can help minimize the distraction that occurs when these devices encounter problems.

## **Final Thoughts**

It is normal to feel nervous in new situations, but I fall back on my practice to get through them. (Note that word “practice.” You should practice these skills.) On the other hand, it is also possible to become complacent when you are too comfortable. This can cause you to appear to lack interest in what is occurring around you, whether that is accurate or not. Again, the antidote is practice. It may be helpful to ask someone (such as your wife or another elder) to keep you accountable for expressing appropriate emotions in a worship service.

You must also be intentional about directing the focus of the people to the speaker. And, try to plan ahead to minimize distractions, and do not let distractions that do occur (no matter how seemingly insignificant) go unresolved for long.

When done well, these things really can make a difference. Whether on the platform or in your seat, and whether you are speaking or not, you can help lead the congregation in the worship of God by showing appropriate emotions, directing their attention to the speaker, and preventing (or minimizing) distractions.

And these things aren't just important for your normal congregants. The next time you are in a worship service, ask yourself this question: If I were an outsider and knew nothing about Christianity, what would I think about this worship service? Does it look like this is an interesting, emotional, and profoundly important meeting? Or, does it appear that this is merely a matter of rote obligation? We know the reality is the former. Let's all aim to show that.

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<sup>3</sup> Obviously, distractions caused by people in the congregation (for example, talking on a cell phone during the sermon) may require some discretion or delicacy. Use your best judgment in addressing these.

# ServantHistory

## Geerhardus Vos: The Biblical Theology

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by Danny E. Olinger

During the first semester of his middler year at Princeton Seminary, J. Gresham Machen took Geerhardus Vos's course in biblical theology. Machen and Vos would go on to spend twenty-three years together on the faculty at Princeton from 1906–1929. They would also share active membership in the Presbytery of New Brunswick from Machen's ordination in 1914 until Vos's retirement in 1932. But, in September 1903, Machen was just a second-year seminary student writing down everything he could from the lectures of Vos the professor. Machen's handwritten notes from the class have been preserved. There are loops and circles at the top of pages and doodling throughout in the Greek alphabet. But, there is also Machen's declaration in capital letters prior to the final exam, "I FLUNK VOS!"<sup>1</sup>

Machen did not flunk the course, and thankfully, his understanding of Vos improved as a student at Princeton to the point where he was writing his mother in praise of Vos. After hearing Vos's sermon "Rabboni" on John 20 during his senior year, Machen wrote his mother.

We heard this morning one of the finest expository sermons I ever heard. It was preached by Dr. Vos, professor of Biblical Theology in the Seminary. It rather surprised me. He is usually too severely theological for Sunday morning. Today, he was nothing less than inspiring. His subject was Christ's appearance to Mary after the resurrection. Dr. Vos differs from some theological professors in having a better developed bump of reverence.<sup>2</sup>

Machen's appreciation for Vos would grow over the years. Once Machen began serving with Vos on the Princeton Seminary faculty, Machen told a fellow professor, "If I knew as much as Dr. Vos, I would be writing all the time."<sup>3</sup> When Vos couldn't find a publisher for his book *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus*, Machen wrote letters in the summer of 1926 to publishers on Vos's behalf, including one to the eventual publisher, the George Doran Publishing Company.<sup>4</sup>

But, Machen as a student was scrambling to keep up with Vos's lectures and writing down every word he could decipher from Vos's heavy German brogue. Machen's extensive

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<sup>1</sup> The notebook was a gift from the Machen family to Westminster Seminary senior John Galbraith for serving as a pallbearer at J. Gresham's funeral on January 5, 1937. It is now in the Grace Mullen Archives Room of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

<sup>2</sup> Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 1954), 72.

<sup>3</sup> H. Henry Meeter, "Professor Geerhardus Vos: March 14, 1862–August 13, 1949," *The Banner* (Sept. 2, 1949): 1046.

<sup>4</sup> The letters to the publishers can be found in the J. Gresham Machen archives at Westminster Theological Seminary.

notes reveal the close connection between what Vos was teaching in 1903 and his *Biblical Theology* published in 1948. The recording of a day's lecture of Vos in Machen's notebook often closely matches the content of a chapter in the book. Occasionally paragraphs are shuffled from where they appear in the lecture and where they appear in print. However, the exegesis and teaching are remarkably consistent.

### **Biblical Theology**

A comparison of Machen's notebook with *Biblical Theology* reinforces the fact that the book was the compilation of Vos's class lectures. In the *Eerdmans Quarterly Observer* promoting "Outstanding Theological Volumes in Work," for release in the fall of 1948, the anticipated title is listed as *Old Testament and New Testament Notes on Biblical Theology*. The flyer also said:

Despite the fact that these notes have never appeared in book form, the work is of such outstanding character that it is famous in seminary circles throughout the United States and Canada, and students who have sat in Dr. Vos' classes at Princeton have treasured and passed on copies of these notes for many years. All of the material has now been thoroughly edited, annotated, and indexed by one of the author's sons, the Rev. Johannes Vos, who has simplified certain portions and enlarged others. In this work he has had access to the private files of his father, who is now in retirement. The work will carry an introduction by the author.<sup>5</sup>

What is also timely with Machen's 1903 notes is that Vos's short article "The Nature and Aims of Biblical Theology" had just been published in 1902.<sup>6</sup> Whether Vos drew the article from his lectures, or wrote the article and then added it to his lectures, we do not know. But, a deep connection exists among the article, the lectures recorded in Machen's notebook, and the book. Vos lifted the concluding paragraph of the article and placed it in the preface to *Biblical Theology*. He concluded the article:

In the foregoing the question has not been raised in how far the name Biblical theology fits the discipline we have endeavored to describe. It cannot be denied that this name lies open to serious objection, although it may be impossible to displace it, now that it has become almost generally adopted. The appropriation of the adjective "Biblical" would seem to call in question the Biblical character of the other theological disciplines, which, from a Protestant point of view, would be tantamount to denying their right of existence altogether. If the usual division of theology into the four departments of Exegetical, Historical, Systematic, and Practical Theology is to be retained, the designation of a subdivision of one of these four by a phrase constructed on the same principle as the names of the main divisions, must inevitably lead to confusion of thought. These difficulties can all be obviated by substituting for Biblical Theology the

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<sup>5</sup> "Outstanding Theological Volumes in Work," Dr. Geerhardus Vos' *Notes on Biblical Theology (Old and New Testament)* in *Eerdmans Quarterly Observer* (1948): 12.

<sup>6</sup> Geerhardus Vos, "The Nature and Aims of Biblical Theology," *Union Seminary Magazine* 13, no. 1 (February-March 1902): 194-99, reprinted in *Kerux: A Journal of Biblical-Theological Preaching* 14, no. 1 (May 1999): 3-8.

name, “History of (Special) Revelation,” which has actually been adopted by some writers.<sup>7</sup>

In the preface to *Biblical Theology*, Vos expanded the single paragraph to two paragraphs and changed the wording slightly.

The present volume is entitled *Biblical Theology*—Old and New Testaments. The term “Biblical Theology” is really unsatisfactory because of its liability to misconstruction. All truly Christian Theology must be *Biblical Theology*—far apart from General Revelation the Scriptures constitute the sole material with which the science of Theology can deal. A more suitable name would be “History of Special Revelation,” which precisely describes the subject matter of this discipline. Names, however, become fixed by long usage, and the term “Biblical Theology,” in spite of its ambiguity, can hardly be abandoned now.

Biblical Theology occupies a position between Exegesis and Systematic Theology in the encyclopedia of theological disciplines. It differs from Systematic Theology, not in being more Biblical, or adhering more closely to the truths of the Scriptures, but in that its principle of organizing the Biblical material is historical rather than logical. Whereas Systematic Theology takes the Bible as a completed whole and endeavours to exhibit its total teaching in an orderly, systematic form, Biblical Theology deals with the material from the historical standpoint, seeking to exhibit the organic growth or development of the truths of Special Revelation from the primitive pre-redemptive Special Revelation given in Eden to the close of the New Testament canon.<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting that Vos added in the preface a description of the organic growth of the development of special revelation, particularly that biblical theology must start with an understanding of primitive pre-redemptive special revelation given in Eden. As early as his 1891 address, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,” Vos had argued that the Reformed faith rightly grasped the goal set before man from creation, full communion with God on a higher estate. This understanding of the pre-Fall communion goal distinguished the Reformed faith from Lutheranism, Arminianism, and Roman Catholicism. In *Biblical Theology*, Vos built upon this contention exegetically. It was the eschatological strand that undergirded and connected the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation.

### **Pre-Redemptive Special Revelation**

Vos explained this foundational concept in chapter two, “The Mapping Out of the Field of Revelation,” and chapter three, “The Content of Pre-Redemptive Special Revelation.”<sup>9</sup> Vos argued that it would be “a mistake to think that the sole result of the fall was the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. [*Kerux* reprint], 8.

<sup>8</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), v-vi.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Dennison believed chapter three, “The Content of Pre-Redemptive Special Revelation,” was the programmatic chapter in understanding Vos’s thought. He stated, “It sets out the foundation of Vos’s essential hermeneutic. Missing him here means plainly missing him. Although a generation of Vos readers have missed the point, we find no other adequate entrance into Vos’s writings.” Comments to author, Coraopolis, Pennsylvania, July 22, 1991.

introduction of a supernatural revelation.”<sup>10</sup> God communicated to man by both general and special revelation prior to the Fall into sin. General or natural revelation is present in the inner core of man and also comes outside of man from nature. Special revelation is the supernatural self-disclosure of God that cannot be derived from nature.

The possibility and necessity of pre-redemptive special revelation flowed from the nature of religion itself, communion with the living God. The face-to-face communion that Adam enjoyed before the Fall was by special revelation, which transcended the indirection of the natural knowledge of God. Vos elaborated:

Religion means personal intercourse between God and man. Hence it might be *a priori* expected that God would not be satisfied, and would not allow man to be satisfied with an acquaintance based on indirection, but would crown the process of religion with the establishment of face-to-face communion, as friend holds fellowship with friend.<sup>11</sup>

Adam was created upright, but this original estate of innocence, although good, was not the higher estate of glory. This higher estate, where full communion with God is without end, was held out to Adam as a goal. Vos continued:

The same conclusion may be drawn from the concrete purpose God had in view with this first form of supernaturalism. This is connected with the state in which man was created and the advance from this to a still higher estate. Man had been created perfectly good in a moral sense. And yet there was a sense in which he could be raised to a still higher level of perfection. On the surface this seems to involve a contradiction. It will be removed by closely marking the aspect in regard to which the advance was contemplated. The advance was meant to be from unconfirmed to confirmed goodness and blessedness; to the confirmed state in which these possessions could no longer be lost, a state in which man could no longer sin, and hence could no longer become subject to the consequences of sin.<sup>12</sup>

God extended to Adam the prospect of this higher life, the perfecting of the communion bond with God, and pre-redemptive special revelation, the word that God speaks in Genesis 2:16–17, communicated this to Adam.<sup>13</sup> God supernaturally revealed “the principles of a

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<sup>10</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* Lane Tipton comments, “What is in view with Adam prior to the Fall is a movement not from sin to life everlasting, but from innocence (life very good but not perfect) to a life that is perfect. Vos wants us to see this eschatological goal of perfected communion and life beyond probation as the deepest structural strand of biblical revelation when it comes to our relationship with the Lord.” See, Lane Tipton and Camden Bucey, “The Content of Pre-Redemptive Special Revelation, Part One,” May 2, 2014, on *Reformed Forum*, <http://reformedforum.org/ctc331>. Tipton and Bucey’s “Vos Group” on *Reformed Forum*, <http://reformedforum.org/resources/vos/> offers the clearest and most penetrating analysis of Vos’s *Biblical Theology* online or in print.

<sup>13</sup> In *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1986), Vos makes the exegetical case for this understanding from the Apostle Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 15:44–49. On page 169 (n.19), he writes that the Apostle in these verses “was intent upon showing that in the plan of God from the outset provision was made for a higher kind of body (as pertaining to a higher state of existence generally).” In affirming Vos’s understanding of Genesis 1–2 and 1 Corinthians 15:44–49, Richard B. Gaffin Jr. observes: “This correlation of protology and eschatology does not necessitate attributing to Paul the notions that creation is

process of probation by which man was to be raised to a state of religion and goodness, higher, by reason of its unchangeableness, than what he already possessed.”<sup>14</sup> This prospect of leaving the probation state behind and entering into a higher estate was due to an act of God’s condescension. There was nothing inherent in man’s creation or God’s justice that bound God to extend this provision to man.<sup>15</sup>

The tree of life symbolized the hope of advancement beyond probation and indirect communion with God. If Adam had obeyed, the higher, unchangeable life marked by full communion with God and symbolized in the tree of life would have been secured. However, if Adam had eaten from the tree of life prior to the passing of the probation, he would have been confirmed in an estate where the fellowship goal with God on a higher estate could not be reached. According to Revelation 2:7, the tree of life is reserved for the overcomer, that is, the one who passes the probation.

The translational goal of man communing fully with God was also sacramentally symbolized by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If the tree of life was the “exaltation tree” of life with God in full, then the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was the “probation tree,” the God-appointed instrument to lead man through probation to that state of highest blessedness.

Behind the probation was that which is good, the advancement of the communion bond between God and man. Behind the temptation was that which is evil, the destruction of the communion bond between God and man. The question connected to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was whether Adam and Eve would choose God for God’s sake alone.

Satan wanted Eve to distrust God’s Word. This is seen in his approach to Eve. She had not personally received the prohibition from God, as Adam did. Satan questioned the fact that God had spoken in this manner (Genesis 3:1). Eve responded by affirming that God had spoken and issued a prohibition. But she also added to God’s Word. She said that God said that the fruit of the tree could not be touched. Vos commented, “In this unwarranted introduction of the denial of the privilege of ‘touching’ the woman betrays a feeling, as though after all God’s measures may have been too harsh.”<sup>16</sup>

Satan seized upon this opening and declared, “Ye shall not surely die” (Genesis 3:1, KJV). Vos noted that in the Hebrew, the negative is placed at the beginning, which had the effect of charging God with lying. When she ate the forbidden fruit, Eve placed the tempter in the place of God. The result is a reversal in which she called good (the Word of God) evil and evil (the word of Satan) good.

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inherently in need of redemption or that the works of creation and redemption are identical. These are plainly excluded by what he says in these verses and elsewhere. What this passage does teach is that the eschatological prospect held out to Adam (and which he failed to attain) is realized and receives its specific character *de facto* by the work of the last Adam. The following three propositions define the limits of further dogmatic reflection on these verses: (1) Eschatology is a postulate of protology. (2) Soteriology is *not* a postulate of protology. (3) Soteriology is eschatology (*Resurrection and Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 82, n. 14. On the latter point that soteriology is eschatology, Gaffin believes that it is important to note that salvation brings to the eschaton a Christological cast or complexion that would not have been present apart from the Fall. Comment to author, April 20, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Although Vos did not directly reference Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 7, “Of God’s Covenant with Man,” it is clear that he agreed with the chapter and used it as a guide at this point.

<sup>16</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 35.

Vos then provided examples of the careless exegesis of those who argued from Scripture that humanity did not become subject to death through sin. Some argued that since man had not partaken of the tree of life, man was not yet endowed with life and consequently was subject to death. This view failed to distinguish between the life man possessed by virtue of creation and the higher unlosable life to be possessed through the passing of the probation that the tree of life represented. Man's having not eaten of the tree of life did not signal the absence of life in general that would bring about the necessity of death.

Adam and Eve were immortal in the sense that they were created upright with souls that would last forever. However, they did not possess immortality in the highest sense of unlosable communion. After the Fall into sin, they are mortal as death works in them. Immortality comes to them and their seed as a result of the redemptive person and work of Jesus Christ.

### **The Patriarchal Period**

In his examination of the patriarchal period, Vos's later influence upon Machen, particularly Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923), was apparent. Vos argued there was a difference between historic Christianity (true religion) and modernistic Christianity (false religion). True religion was not about moral uplift, but the Lord's redemption of a particular people. The historicity of the biblical figures and the truthfulness of the biblical account were not incidentals to be cast off. Vos explained:

We must first of all emphasize that the historicity of the patriarchs can never be, to us, a matter of small importance. The religion of the Old Testament being a factual religion, it is untrue that these figures retain the same usefulness, through the lessons that can be drawn from their stories, as actual history would possess. This prejudices the answer to the fundamental question, what religion is for. If, on the Pelagian principle, it serves no other purpose than to teach religious and moral lessons from example, then the historicity is no longer of material importance. We can learn the same lessons from legendary or mythical figures. But, if according to the Bible they are real actors in the drama of redemption, the actual beginning of the people of God, the first embodiment of objective religion; if Abraham was the father of the faithful, the nucleus of the Church; then the denial of their historicity makes them useless from our point of view. The whole matter depends on how we conceive of man's need as a sinner. If this be construed on the evangelical principle we cannot without serious loss of religious values assign these given figures to the region of myth or legend.<sup>17</sup>

The modern critics separated ethics and redemption, but a right understanding of revelation in the patriarchal period taught that ethics are the product of redemption. What shapes Abraham's conduct is the thought of El-Shaddai, the one who fills his life with miraculous grace and before whose presence he walks.<sup>18</sup> Vos concluded, "Thus morality is put on a redemptive basis and inspired by the principle of faith."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 17:1.

<sup>19</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 88.

Vos believed that the principle of election also came to the fore with the call of Abraham. One family is chosen out of the existing Shemitic families. This choosing upsets Rationalists “because the God of Rationalism was at bottom simply the God of nature, and nature is universal, therefore His self-disclosure must be as wide as nature.”<sup>20</sup> Such a position, however, does not account for the abnormality of sin. The covenantal promise to Abraham was built upon God’s grace, and saving grace is always a differentiating principle.

Revelation in the patriarchal period also demonstrated the objectivity of the gifts which God’s revelation bestowed. Here Vos explained two bedrocks of Reformed biblical theology, the relationship between the objective and subjective aspects of religion, and the historical-progressive character of religion. Vos said, “The keynote is not what Abraham has to do for God, but what God will do for Abraham. Then, in response to this, the subjective frame of mind that changes the inner and outer life is cultivated.”<sup>21</sup> What unites the objective and historical-progressive elements in revelation is God’s supernatural imposition and activity. The result is a religion that is thoroughly supernatural and eschatological in its outlook. Abraham’s supreme blessedness consisted in the possession of God himself. But, to secure God and his promises, Abraham had to renounce his own effort and to look entirely by faith to the supernatural work of God.

### **The Mosaic Era**

In chapter 8, “Revelation in the Period of Moses,” the largest single chapter in the book, Vos repeated many of the arguments from his first published book, *The Mosaic Origin of the Pentateuchal Codes*. Critics viewed the Old Testament revelation from a naturalistic standpoint. Consequently, they believed that Moses and his teaching was an imaginary construct of the later prophets cast back upon the biblical record. Vos countered that a supernatural factor was at work. According to Hosea, by a prophet—Moses, not a school of prophets—the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt (Hosea 12:13). Occupying the dominant position that he does in the religious development of the Old Testament, Moses “is placed not merely at the head of the succession of prophets, but placed over them in advance. His authority extends over subsequent ages.”<sup>22</sup> Moses was set over God’s house (Numb. 12:7), and as such, he prefigured Christ to the extent that “nearly all the terms in use for the redemption of the New Testament can be traced back to his time.”<sup>23</sup>

The relationship between Moses and Christ, and the parallel of the relationship of Moses to Israel and Christ to the church was not lost upon the Apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 10:1–3, Paul declared, “Our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” The mighty acts of redemption that God worked through Moses pledged Israel to faith in him. So, in baptism, the believer and Christ are brought into an intimate relationship based on Christ’s saving work.

The theocracy in Israel was the union of religious lordship and national kingship in the one person of Jehovah. This demanded God as king, and not a human king, because only in God are the two spheres interwoven. But the relationship between the religious and civil in the land was such that the religious sphere had the pre-eminence. “The chief end for which

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 104.

Israel had been created was not to teach the world lessons in political economy, but in the midst of a world of paganism to teach true religion, even at the sacrifice of much secular propaganda and advantage.”<sup>24</sup> The theocracy, the abode of Israel in Canaan, typified the perfected kingdom of God, the consummate state of heaven where there no longer will be a distinction between church and state.

The Decalogue, which contained no ceremonial commandments, illustrated the redemptive structure of the theocracy. Like the theocracy in general, the Decalogue hovered above Israel as an ideal never realizable. Still, as a revelation of God, the Decalogue descended into and condescended to the abnormalities of Israel. Vos wrote:

The most striking feature of the Decalogue is its specifically religious character. It is not an ethical code in and by itself, resting, as it were, on the bare imperative of God. The preamble brings the affection to Jehovah, in view of what He has done redemptively for the people, to bear through a responsive affection upon their conduct. If we may apply the term “Christian” thus retrospectively to the Decalogue, we should say, what it contains is not general but Christian ethics. Ethics is represented as the redemptive product.<sup>25</sup>

Vos gave special emphasis to the first four words that dealt with the relationship between God and man. The first three words protest against the sins of polylatry (worshiping more than one God), idolatry (worshipping the creature rather than the Creator), and magic (seeking to manipulate God through the use of his name for personal gain). The fourth word “consists in this, that man must copy God in his course of life. The divine creative work completed itself in six days, whereupon the seventh followed as a day of rest for God.”<sup>26</sup> Vos stressed the eschatological character of the fourth word.

The Sabbath brings this principle of the eschatological structure of history to bear upon the mind of man after a symbolical and a typical fashion. It teaches its lesson through the rhythmical succession of six days of labour and one ensuing day of rest in each successive week. Man is reminded in this way that life is not an aimless existence, that a goal lies beyond. This was true before, and apart from, redemption. The eschatological is an older strand in revelation from the soteric. The so-called “Covenant of Works” was nothing but an embodiment of the Sabbatical principle.<sup>27</sup>

The significance of the Sabbath is that it points forward to eternal issues of life and history. Vos wondered if the church of his day had lost sight of this eschatological meaning by making Sabbath observance an instrument of religious propaganda at the expense of the day’s eternity-typifying value.

The tabernacle embodied the eminently religious idea of the dwelling of God with his people, a fellowship made possible by God’s condescension. “Since the Israelites lived in tents, the idea of God’s identifying His lot with theirs could not be more strikingly

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 140.

expressed than by His sharing this mode of habitation.”<sup>28</sup> The materials for the tent came from the free-will offering of the people, which symbolized their desire to have God dwell with them. This is why the fellowship takes place in the “tent of meeting.” The meeting did not refer to a general meeting of the people in an accidental manner, but to the special meeting of God with his people. Vos wrote:

The word that is rendered “meeting” does not designate an accidental encounter, but something previously arranged. It implies that Jehovah makes the provision and appoints the time for coming together with His people. The idea is of importance, because it is one of the indications of that conscious intercourse between God and man which characterizes the Biblical religion.<sup>29</sup>

The tabernacle was also instructive in that it provided a clear instance of the co-existence of symbol and type in the Old Covenant. Vos defined a symbol in its religious significance as “something that profoundly portrays a certain fact or principle or relationship of a spiritual nature in a visible form.”<sup>30</sup> The symbol pictures that which has a present force and application. A type “relates to that which will become real or applicable in the future.”<sup>31</sup> Symbolically, God met with his people in the tabernacle, a present redemptive reality. But, typically, this communion between God and his people pointed to the final embodiment of salvation in the Christian state.

### **Prophetic Epoch**

Vos next moved to the second part of the book, six chapters that covered the prophetic epoch of revelation. Israel’s sinful turn to worshipping the Baals left the prophets feeling as if they were living among a people who did not treasure the same things that they did. Consequently, the prophets looked to the future for what the present denied them. But, they did so on the basis of the Word of God. The divine message that they heralded was “not to bring out of chaos and dissolution of sin the return simply of the former state of affairs but the attainment of a higher order of things.”<sup>32</sup> Their message further marked “the religion of the Old Testament as a religion of conscious intercourse between Jehovah and Israel, a

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Lane Tipton summarizes Vos’s argumentation that in making a free will offering and constructing the tabernacle “Israel by redemptive grace, as a blood bought nation, express[es] the deepest desire of the Christian religion, “God dwell in our midst.” They are not asking God, this is the thing about covenantal condescension, to be present in the way that he is present everywhere else in the world. They are asking him to be present in this unique, distinctive, intimate, sovereignly-enacted communion bond. That they long for this is probably what underlies the *‘ohel mo’ed*, the tent of meeting. The idea that God comes to meet with his people, and they by virtue of his condescension, in response to his condescension, they give these offerings so that they can meet with him. Granted, their meeting with him is not the fullness and directness of access that will be opened up with Christ. Nonetheless, it is a redemptively-revealed, redemptively-secured approach to God that has communion with him at its core . . . [As Vos] says at the bottom of page 149, ‘The idea is of importance, because it is one of the indications of that conscious intercourse between God and man which characterizes the Biblical religion.’” Lane Tipton and Camden Bucey, “The Tabernacle,” February 17, 2017, on *Reformed Forum*, <http://reformedforum.org/ctc477/>.

<sup>30</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 144.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 189.

religion of revelation, of authority, a religion in which God dominates, and in which man is put into the listening, submissive attitude.”<sup>33</sup>

In dealing with the prophets of the eighth century, Vos argued that their orientation was God-centered. Vos quickly added, “This is but another way of saying that it is religious, for without that, no religion deserving that name can exist.”<sup>34</sup> The finest product of religion is a passion for God and his glory that is not only clearly-recognized, but also shared with others. Vos explained, “God is not a philanthropist who likes to do good in secret without its becoming known; His delight is in seeing Himself and His perfections mirrored in the consciousness of the religious subject.”<sup>35</sup>

God originated the covenant union with Israel in history. In this bond, Jehovah gives himself personally and fully. He woos Israel and draws her to himself, and unlike the Baals, he extends in the covenant loving-kindness, mercy, and faithfulness. “He is personally present in all His favours, and in them surrenders Himself to His people for never-failing enjoyment.”<sup>36</sup>

What attitude of the people was expected in response to such divine love? Not sacrifice, but righteousness and the knowledge of God were expected. The knowledge of God, with its character-forming influence, was intended to make Israel like God.

## The New Testament

In the final part of the book, Vos looked at the New Testament. The teaching of the New Testament revealed that Jesus Christ is the great fact to be expounded. “To take Christ at all He must be taken as the centre of a movement of revelation organized around Him, and winding up the whole process of revelation.”<sup>37</sup> A continuity existed for believers living between the first and second coming of Christ. “Still, we know full well that we ourselves live just as much in the New Testament as did Peter and Paul and John.”<sup>38</sup>

In the chapter “Revelation in the Probation of Jesus,” Vos exegeted Satan’s temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Vos said:

In our case temptation chiefly raises the question of how we shall pass through it and issue from it without loss. In Jesus’ case, while this consideration was not, of course, absent, the higher concern was not avoidance of loss, but the procuring of positive gain.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 303. Richard Gaffin and Charles Dennison both saw this statement as a distinguishing character of Vos’s biblical-theological approach. Gaffin wrote, “The exegete comes to see himself, despite every cultural and temporal dissimilarity as standing in principle (i.e., in the terms of the history of redemption) in the same situation as the writers of the New Testament and, therefore, as involved with Paul (and the other letter writers) in a common interpretative enterprise.” See, Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Information Service, 1991), 19. Dennison wrote, “Here is the genius of biblical theology in its orthodox expression, the heart of our Reformation heritage. It insists we find ourselves, not so much by describing the biblical text or even by “applying” it, but by living in and from it.” See, Charles G. Dennison, “Some Thoughts About our Identity,” *New Horizons* 13, no. 6 (June/July 1992): 2.

<sup>39</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 333.

Luke in his account carried the genealogy back to Adam, and then subjoined to it the probation of Jesus, the second Adam. Adam began with a clean slate. In the case of Jesus, he had to remove pre-existing sin before the positive act of procuring eternal life for his people. For Jesus as second Adam, then, the temptation involved suffering and humiliation, not just obeying.

Satan wanted Jesus as the Son of God to bypass humiliation, but Jesus existed as Messiah in a state of humiliation. After Jesus passed through the humiliation, he would enter into a state of exaltation where that which was offered to him as temptations would become perfectly normal and allowable.

Jesus regarded the movement of the Old Testament “as having arrived at its goal in Himself, so that He Himself in His historic appearance and work being taken away, the Old Testament would lose its purpose and significance.”<sup>40</sup> Jesus held the Scriptures in the highest regard. Jesus’s underlying supposition when engaged with others was that the Word of God was unbreakable, that not believing it involved an attempt to break something God had declared sure.

## Reviews

When *Biblical Theology* appeared in print, Westminster Seminary professors John Murray and Cornelius Van Til praised its appearance in Eerdman’s promotional literature. Van Til wrote:

The publication of Dr. Vos’ *Biblical Theology* marks an event of great importance in the field of Biblical and theological learning. These notes represent the ripe fruit of a lifetime of labor on the part of a great linguist, a profound theologian, and a humble believer. In a unique and penetrating fashion they trace the gradual development of God’s revelation to man in both the Old and New Testaments. As such they form an excellent help for combatting modern evolutionary views. The minister who uses them for background study will find that his preaching becomes less stereotypical and more truly Biblical.<sup>41</sup>

Murray said that Eerdmans had performed “an incalculable service” by making available the ripe fruit of the sanctified and erudite labor of Vos.<sup>42</sup> He continued:

Dr. Vos is in my judgment, the most penetrating exegete it has been my privilege to know, and I believe, the most incisive exegete that has appeared in the English-speaking world in this century. His work in Biblical Theology is quite unique. It is safe to say that no one has written on this branch of exegetical theology who has exhibited a comparable grasp of the significance and character of Biblical Theology as the department of biblical science which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 358.

<sup>41</sup> Inside jacket cover of 1948 edition of *Biblical Theology*.

<sup>42</sup> *Eerdmans Quarterly Observer*.

<sup>43</sup> Both *Eerdmans Quarterly Observer* and inside jacket cover of original edition of *Biblical Theology*, Eerdmans, 1948.

Murray would also review the book for the *Presbyterian Guardian*. Murray acknowledged that some rightly recoil from the discipline of biblical theology and the concept of progressive revelation because of liberal misuse of it. Murray countered:

But the abuse of a concept is never a reason for the rejection of the concept as such. The abuse and distortion place the student under greater obligation to frame a true conception and to apply it properly. This is the great service performed by Dr. Vos.<sup>44</sup>

Vos recognized that while the self-revelation of God is progressive, the content of that self-revelation is deposited entirely in the Scriptures, which closed with the completion of the New Testament canon.

Murray lamented the incompleteness of the section on the New Testament, which ended with “The Revelation of Jesus’ Public Ministry,” but said that Vos’s teaching on the rest of the New Testament is available in articles and books.<sup>45</sup> Murray closed with a glowing tribute to his former teacher.

Although, Dr. Vos, because of his advanced years, is not now able to enrich us with the fruits of his theological erudition, we rejoice that we now have this new memorial to the graces and gifts with which God has so singularly endowed him. Those of us who have been privileged to sit at his feet wish with all the depth and warmth of esteem and affection that in his declining years the candle of the Lord may shine upon his head and the secret of God abide upon his tabernacle.<sup>46</sup>

After its appearance in print, *Biblical Theology* became a standard text for Reformed institutions of higher education. At Murray and Van Til’s own Westminster Seminary, fellow professors E. J. Young and Ned B. Stonehouse assigned major portions of the book in their classes. Richard Gaffin Jr., who studied Vos under these men before becoming a faculty member at Westminster himself, sees Vos in his *Biblical Theology* as putting forward the biblical methodology called for by the Bible itself. Gaffin writes:

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the biblical-theological method, or better, the redemptive-historical orientation exemplified by Vos is, to date, the most fruitful and pointedly biblical realization of the Reformation’s insistence that Scripture interprets Scripture.<sup>47</sup>

Gaffin’s dependence upon Vos in teaching biblical theology at Westminster can be seen in the reading assignments from Gaffin’s New Testament Biblical Theology course. Gaffin required the students to read in the following order:

G. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, pp. 11–27

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<sup>44</sup> John Murray, review of Geerhardus Vos’s *Biblical Theology* in *Presbyterian Guardian* 17, no.16 (December 1948): 274, [http://www.opc.org/cfh/guardian/Volume\\_17/1948-12.pdf](http://www.opc.org/cfh/guardian/Volume_17/1948-12.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> Proportionally, Vos spent 293 pages (74 percent) on the Old Testament and 103 pages (26 percent) on the New Testament.

<sup>46</sup> Murray, Review of *Biblical Theology*, 274.

<sup>47</sup> Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “Introduction,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), xviii.

R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament, II*, pp. 237–251.  
G. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, pp. 321–327  
G. Vos, *The Kingdom and the Church*  
G. Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus*, pp. 39f., 44–56, 105–302  
G. Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, chapters 1–4, 6, 8–12  
O. Cullman, *The Christology of the New Testament*, pp. 1–10, 315, 328.<sup>48</sup>

Regarding the subject matter of Scripture, Gaffin argues that Vos’s basic point “is that revelation is the interpretation of redemption. God’s word invariably has his redemptive deeds for its subject matter.”<sup>49</sup> The burden of Vos’s biblical theology is to orient “biblical interpretation to the history of redemption in a pointed and programmatic fashion.”<sup>50</sup>

The influence of Vos’s *Biblical Theology*, however, is not limited to Westminster Seminary. Wilbur Smith at Fuller Theological Seminary praised the work in the promotional material for the release of the book. He wrote, “A real work on Biblical Theology is exceedingly rare. Dr. Vos is one of the finest authorities on this subject in our country. He is truly a great scholar as well as a remarkable teacher.”<sup>51</sup> John Bolt notes that for three decades (1955–1985) at Calvin Seminary, Martin Woudstra, professor of Old Testament, annually led the students through Vos’s *Biblical Theology* in class.<sup>52</sup> The same could be said for E. Clark Copeland, professor of Old Testament at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

Charles Dennison believed Vos’s unique contribution in the *Biblical Theology* was the consideration of Scripture with the end of God’s purpose always in view.<sup>53</sup> This is why Vos could say that biblical theology yields the highest fruit of practical theology.<sup>54</sup> It points the believer to life with God in heaven, which is the goal set before humanity from the beginning.

Vos would further develop this insight in his articles and particularly his 1930 book, *The Pauline Eschatology*. He would also proclaim it regularly in the sermons that he preached at Princeton’s Miller Chapel.

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<sup>48</sup> Richard B. Gaffin Jr., Syllabus for 2222 New Testament Biblical Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary third quarter, 1969. According to Gaffin, the inclusion of Bultmann and Cullman in the required reading list was for the purpose of providing a contrast to the various positions taken by Vos. Comments to author, April 19, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Gaffin, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, xvi.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

<sup>51</sup> Dust jacket to 1948 edition.

<sup>52</sup> John Bolt, “From Princeton to Wheaton: The Course of Neo-Calvinism in North America,” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 42, no. 1 (April 2007): 72.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Dennison, comments to author, September 5, 1993. Gregory Reynolds expressed the same thought that in a proper study of biblical theology, one must read the text from the conclusion. See, Gregory E. Reynolds, *A Word is Worth a Thousand Pictures* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 66.

<sup>54</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 18.

# ServantReading

## The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God *by Johannes Cocceius*

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*The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God*, by Johannes Cocceius. Translated by Casey Carmichael. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2016, xxxviii + 408 pages, \$50.00.

by David R. Holmlund

Last year Reformation Heritage Books published a brand-new English translation of one of the classics of Reformed covenant theology—Johannes Cocceius’s *The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God*—a fitting selection to stand as the third volume in their Classic Reformed Theology series. Casey Carmichael translated Cocceius’s work from the original Latin text *Summa Doctrinae de Foedere et Testamento Dei* (first published in 1648) into a form which is quite useful in English while also maintaining Greek and Hebrew citations for biblical exposition along with English renderings. The introduction to the book and a short biographical sketch is supplied by Willem J. van Asselt, the world’s leading expert on Cocceius and one of the finest scholars of Post-Reformation theology in the past generation. All of those involved in producing this fine volume deserve to be highly commended for what is now available to the English reader interested in the history of covenant theology.

Cocceius—while lacking some of the name recognition belonging to other theologians of the Post-Reformation period—is one of the greatest of the seventeenth-century Scholastics who systematized orthodox Protestant theology in the period between the Reformation and the rise of rationalism. A native of the north German city of Bremen, he studied and taught in the Netherlands first in Franeker and later at Leiden—centers of world class scholarship and international influence in the era. With a mastery of Hebrew and Semitic languages, Cocceius was fundamentally a biblical exegete whose voluminous writings stretched from philology to biblical exposition to systematic formulation.

As a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, Cocceius subscribed to the Three Forms of Unity and remained in good standing in the church throughout his life. However, particularly today, his name is also synonymous with sometimes controversial assertions of the nascent field of federal (covenant) theology among those who were confessionally orthodox in the Post-Reformation period. His great rival in the Dutch Reformed Church of the seventeenth century was Gisbertus Voetius of Utrecht, who—as something of a Dutch expression of that century’s puritan theology—believed

Cocceius's theological methods undermined important aspects of Christian doctrine and ethics. Their clashes over justification and Sabbath requirements in the new covenant were not unlike similar controversies across the English Channel, although it is possible to argue that the clearer theological argument happened in the Dutch context. With Roman Catholicism officially removed from the Dutch Reformed Church by the start of the seventeenth century, this era now affectionately known as the *gouden eeuw* (golden age) in the Netherlands had its greatest theological controversy in the clashes between the Voetians and the Cocceians throughout the latter half of the century.

The structure of *The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God* is not vastly different from other more recent books of covenant theology which are more widely known today. He defines what a covenant is; he argues for the covenant of works with Adam; then he gives a full elaboration of the covenant of grace, which shows continuity and discontinuity over the whole course of redemptive history. And yet, as a book, it is decidedly different in its flavor and content than Vos, Robertson, Clowney, Horton, and the rest.

One difference is that Cocceius gives frequent reminders of his seventeenth-century context. He spends considerable time interacting with theological opponents like Robert Bellarmine (a Roman Catholic controversialist) or Hugo Grotius (an Arminian sympathizer and perennial critic of the Reformed orthodox) even though Cocceius clearly stands in the mainstream of the Reformed tradition. This reminds us that polemics was a large part of systematic theology in the Post-Reformation era, as any reader of other Post-Reformation texts has already discovered.

The other difference is crucial to understanding the importance of the book. Beyond simply contrasting the covenant of works with the covenant of grace established through the second Adam, Cocceius argues that the covenant of grace unfolds as the series of five "abrogations" of the covenant of works throughout redemptive history (nicely summarized on pages 58–59 as well as in the book's chapter divisions). In the first abrogation, which precedes the inauguration of the covenant of grace, the possibility of receiving eternal life and blessedness through obedience is removed through the event of Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden. By the second abrogation, the consequence of condemnation for sin is overturned through the first proclamation of the Gospel and the gift of faith for believers. In the third abrogation—by far the most controversial both in the seventeenth century and today—the terror and bondage of sin under the law is removed with the arrival of the new covenant following the finished work of the Savior. Through the fourth abrogation, sin's corruption expires at the death of the believer in Jesus Christ. Fifth and finally, the general resurrection is understood as an abrogation of all that remains from the covenant of works so that the course of redemptive history is entirely framed by the passing away of the covenant of works through participation in the benefits of life in Christ until believers share only in the covenant of grace forever.

The thoughtful reader is forced to wonder what bearing Cocceius's formulation ought to have upon our covenant theology today. Cocceius goes into considerably greater detail than one would find in either the Westminster Standards (WCF chapter 7 and various catechism answers) or the Three Forms of Unity. Moreover, apart from a few obscure books in the Dutch Reformed context, the Cocceian approach is quite different from what is taught in the Reformed community today on the topic of covenant theology in which the covenant of works is generally *contrasted* with the covenant of grace—not *phased out*

with the gradual arrival of the benefits of Christ, as in Cocceius. This book raises anew that old question about just how important historical theology *is* for systematic theology.

The appearance of this work in English is a timely reminder that good historical theology helps us to appropriate the best of biblical interpretation as we arrive at the best systematic formulation possible. This is where Cocceius is so useful. For example, in the third abrogation with the new covenant, he has some very good passages about the role of the law written on the hearts of God's people in the new covenant (243–45). He also argues for a contrast between the *paresis* (passing over) of sins in the old covenant and the *aphesis* (full remission) of sins with the arrival of the new covenant, contrasting Romans 3:25 and Matthew 26:28 (227–30). He even offers a short examination of the doctrine of the Christian Sabbath, as opposed to the Sabbath of the old covenant, in the context of Christ's fulfillment and the greater measure of grace which is now known in the new covenant (226).

When a theologian starts probing into questions of Sabbath practice or discontinuities in justification or finer points to the covenant of works, it can become controversial very quickly. Indeed, some of the same fault lines of Reformed covenant theology remain roughly the same some three and a half centuries after Cocceius because our secondary standards are rather sparing on the topic of the discontinuities which emerge over redemptive history. Because the confessions are so restrained, we end up with various expressions of Cocceians and Voetians continuing to battle it out in every new generation of the church.

Knowing Cocceius's monumental *Summa Doctrinae* is part of the hard work of understanding the Reformed exegetical tradition. Yet, the more we do this as a church, the better we will be able to understand our Reformed heritage, articulate the fault lines of historic debates, and discern the possibilities for consensus in holding to the riches of covenant theology as a united church. I therefore recommend adding Cocceius to the body of required reading for Reformed covenant theology in the OPC and in other similarly confessional bodies of like faith and practice.

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# ServantPoetry

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G. E. Reynolds (1949–)

## Time and the Bell

“Time and the bell have buried the day,  
The black cloud carried the sun away.”

—TS Eliot, Burnt Norton, “The Four Quartets”

The bell rings, and rings as the  
Night promises the snow, the snow  
To fall at blizzard strength to envelop  
The brown earth in its solemn sleep.

O yes, this promise of time present  
Buries the world in a white cloud  
To picture time future in its pure  
Form, a Paradise of purity.

But the dark earth is ever with us  
To make us listen, to the bell,  
The bell ringing to call the snow;  
We must ever be attentive.

Attentive to hear the Word that  
Whistles in the stern wind, ranging  
Around the corner of my world,  
Calling me to a future time.

Words like this speak in a  
Different way to say, to say  
No words can tell of time future  
Fully, for eye hath not seen.