

Guidance 1

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CURRENT ISSUE: MAKE GOOD CHOICES

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From the Editor

Andy Selle gives us the fruit of his many decades of ministry as a pastor and counselor in his two-part article on guidance: “Make Good Choices,” in which he presents three unbiblical views of guidance (this month), and then the wise biblical understanding and practice of guidance (next month).

David C. Noe offers “Beza on the Trinity, Part 4.” This translation reminds us of the careful linguistic and theological reasoning of the early orthodox theologians. Theodore Beza (1519–1605) is a sterling example.

David VanDrunen reviews Martin C. Spadaro’s *Reading Matthew as the Climactic Fulfillment of the Hebrew Story*, providing an important perspective on Matthew as a kind of last chapter of the Old Testament.

Gerry Malkus’s review of Vitringa’s *The Spiritual Life* reminds us of the once hidden treasures, of hitherto little-known theological giants coming to light regularly through translation. Charles Telfer has applied his considerable scholarly and linguistic skills to translating this wonderful work of Reformed spirituality. Vitringa’s work is a testimony to the true telos of Protestant Orthodoxy: to glorify God and enjoy him forever in the great tradition of Calvin’s treatment of the Christian life in the *Institutes*. Learning and piety go hand in hand for Vitringa. For him there is nothing more important or beautiful than the spiritual life in communion with God. I highly recommend this superb exploration of “the work of the grace of God in the hearts of men.”

I review a new biography of the King of the Cannibals, John Paton. While nothing can replace Paton’s riveting and inspiring first-hand account in his autobiography, this new summary of his life adds many personal aspects not present in his autobiography. Adding to the value of this new book by Schlehlein is the lessons from Paton’s life and work which occupy half the book.

Our poem this month, “The Waterfall,” is from an almost forgotten metaphysical poet, Henry Vaughan (1621–1695). Harold Bloom, who is normally not a fan of devotional poetry, has words of high praise for Vaughan,

After the incomparable George Herbert and John Donne’s transcendental poems of faith, Henry Vaughan seems to me a devotional poet unmatched in the seventeenth century, original beyond the poignant contributions of Robert Southwell, Francis Quarles, Richard Crashaw, Thomas Traherne, and the American Edward Taylor.¹

¹ Harold Bloom, *The Best Poems of the English Language: From Chaucer through Frost* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 193.

Leland Ryken comments on the combination of natural and special revelation in the metaphysical poets, “For Christian poets like these, nature is more (but not less) than a physical phenomenon. It is also a signpost to spiritual reality.”²

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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

² Leland Ryken, ed., *The Soul in Paraphrase: A Treasury of Classic Devotional Poems* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 152.

ServantLiving

Make Good Choices and Avoid Stupid Ones— Together!

by Andrew H. Selle

Part 1: Defective Views of Guidance¹

We who follow Christ want to *know* God’s will and *do* it; we want both *guidance* and help to *act* on that guidance by making good decisions. We will roll these together with the word “choices.”² This article deals primarily with guidance, and specifically with three defective views. A subsequent article will develop a positive and biblical view of guidance and decision-making.

First an important observation: we who breathe the air of Western culture tend to read Scripture through the lens of the Enlightenment. Among other myopias, this predisposes us to *individualism* and casts into shadow the overwhelmingly *corporate*³ and *covenantal* emphasis of the biblical story line and biblical ethics. Nowhere is that bias more evident than with the topic of choices.⁴ A more biblical view is that corporate guidance, given by

¹ In order to crystalize the issues, these positions are described baldly, without any of the nuancing that their proponents might offer. It is important to the author to express appreciation for other believers with whom I disagree, yet from whom I have learned many lessons of faith and love. I hope my comments about the strengths often evident in those who hold other views will demonstrate that humility and teachability necessary for gaining wisdom! “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7).

² The topic of decision-making presupposes a prior question, “How do we know God’s will?” The ethical question (“What shall we do?”) flows from the epistemological one (“How do we know?”). These are distinct disciplines, yet since they become intertwined in our experience, we combine them in these articles. Daniel M. Doriani poses four classes of questions: “What should I do?”, “What should I be?”, “Where should I go?”, and “How can I see?” (*Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001], 9, 98). It is a lovely ditty, and useful as long as we concede that ethical issues are considerably more complex than these four questions, especially if we change the singular “I” to the plural “you.”

³ The term “corporate” is used here in its general sense of “pertaining to a group” (Lat. *corporatus* “to form into a body”). Our concern is “Christians acting together,” broadly defined. It could be a church on any level (local, regional, or denominational), a parachurch organization or executive board, an extended family, a nuclear family, or a married couple. And, as a framework for the new humanity, there are useful applications outside the church. Paul’s use of the term “body” for the church is grounded in our federal union with Christ, whose literal body represented the church on the cross (Eph. 2:16). The Apostle draws out the rich implications for “body life” within the church (1 Cor. 12:12–31), yet we must not lose sight of the fact that his concern is first theological, and secondarily practical.

⁴ In a survey of the raft of Christian literature about guidance, it is rare to read anything at all about corporate guidance, other than a nod to the need for wise counsel as a means of gaining help in making one’s personal (individual) decisions. Yet it is a worthy topic dealt with by several authors. I recommend: Kevin DeYoung, *Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God’s Will* (Chicago: Moody, 2009); Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application*

means of corporate wisdom, is the big circle and individual guidance a subset of it. Generally speaking, God chooses to give wisdom for decision-making to the *church together*, and in that context, to individuals. The people of God together are the ordinary locus of receiving wisdom from God and making choices that honor him.

In the extended metaphor⁵ of a cross-country bus trip, we will probe the subject of guidance, and illustrate three sub-Christian views of guidance, with a view toward developing a biblical alternative. Let us, then, begin our cross-country journey—with the entire church together on a bus for the long ride. How do you⁶ get to your destination?

1. The Discovery View (“Figure it out!”)

The Story: On the bus you have stacks of maps, primary and secondary drivers, and some intelligent riders. You also meet knowledgeable people in restaurants along the way who give advice about local shortcuts: “Don’t go that way! Take Route 18A over the hill to Westfield Center.” This was clearly no chance meeting, as you find yourself breezing along a nice road parallel to the clogged interstate before you turn up into the hills. You’ll need all the specialized knowledge and expert advice you can get. You must read the signs correctly in order to discover the *one correct route*—and avoid disastrous wrong turns. Occasionally you see small crosses along the road memorializing the poor souls who drove off a cliff. Who decides what roads to take? Sometimes the driver just chooses where to turn. Sometimes the bus tour’s administrative team huddles together and makes the calls. At other times, everyone on the bus takes a vote, and the majority wins (minority loses). Often it’s not even clear who should decide, or how to decide. At least you know where *not* to turn when you encounter a “Road Closed” sign. But those signs make people anxious: “Did we miss the correct turn hundreds of miles ago?” Things get especially difficult when you hit construction delays, and especially if you’re involved in an accident. That’s when arguments break out and relationships fray. You lose some passengers along the way; some get off the bus in Grand Rapids, some in Las Vegas. You hope your bus will get to its destination, but you know that if it does, it will arrive late, and minus quite a few people.

(Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001); Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Discovering God’s Will* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982); Sinclair B. Ferguson, *From the Mouth of God: Trusting, Reading, and Applying the Bible* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2014); Garry Friesen, *Decision-Making and the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980); Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002); J. I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom, *God’s Will: Finding Guidance for Everyday Decisions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); James C. Petty, *Step by Step: Divine Guidance for Ordinary Christians*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999); Dave Swavely, *Decisions, Decisions: How (and How Not) to Make Them* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003); Bruce K. Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, 2002). Two other works that at least attempt to address church-wide guidance, but badly falter because of a faulty doctrine of Scripture: Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1997); Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983).

⁵ Perhaps it is an allegory; let the grammarians choose.

⁶ In the bus stories, read all the “you” pronouns as plural.

This is the Discovery View, which may be the most common one among Evangelicals.⁷ God has one perfect plan and he wants the church to discover it. You will find it if you read all the clues correctly—reading the right Bible verses at the right time, correctly interpreting the circumstances around you, feeling your inner promptings, encountering “open doors,” listening to others, experiencing answers to prayer, and seeing positive results after a decision is made. And, of course, feeling inner peace.

How, then, do we assess this Discovery View of guidance? We may affirm the following: first, we must appreciate the strong biblical convictions that motivate those who hold this position. They believe they ought to find, understand, and follow God’s will. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and they believe he will lead them step by step. He does. They pray, and God answers. They take steps of faith and obedience—“faith working by love”⁸—and often the Lord richly blesses them.

Second, we acknowledge that most proponents of the Discovery View stake their lives, explicitly or implicitly, on the biblical doctrine of God’s Providence. “God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things.”⁹ “Surely, then, we should seek to discover that plan and live according to it,” they might say. In such good soil of faith, good fruit will inevitably result, in spite of other errors in doctrine and life.

We must criticize the following: The foundational error of this approach is confusion about “the will of God.” No believer will deny the biblical requirement to obey God’s commands—his revealed, “preceptive will.” However, Discovery View proponents go beyond this and seek guidance about his perfect will for the future—his hidden “decretive will.”¹⁰ Certainly, we may understand some aspects of God’s will of decree by looking in life’s rearview mirror, for nothing that has already happened was ever out of his control; he is Lord over every detail of history. Yet only the Lord truly understands the past, and certainly he alone knows the future. Bruce Waltke even raises a provocative question in the subtitle of his book *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?*¹¹ Ancient religions, and some modern ones, specialize in devising clever schemes to play the gods, coaxing them to reveal their secrets and manipulate them to our advantage. In a dangerous and chaotic world, we can understand craving after the certainty pagan oracles offered—and why the Lord severely warned Israel against their enticements.¹² Yet Yahweh does not

⁷ So says James C. Petty, *Step by Step: Divine Guidance for Ordinary Christians* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999), who calls this the “traditional” view. But I wonder if the prayerless, functional deism of the Self-Sufficient View (no. 3 below) has nudged into first place. Views 1 and 2 (and the “wisdom view” of a future article) are similar to those Petty describes from an individual perspective, and I have recast them corporately for the church context.

⁸ Galatians 5:6, part of a crucial text for Pauline ethics.

⁹ WCF 5.1.

¹⁰ Reformed theologians always make this important distinction. “God’s decretive will cannot be successfully opposed; what God has decreed will certainly take place. It is possible, however, for creatures to disobey God’s preceptive will—and they often do so.” John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 528–38. Although the preceptive will is usually described as obedience to God’s commands, I would add “believing God’s promises” given in his Word.

¹¹ Bruce K. Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, 2002).

¹² Leviticus 19:26, 31; Deuteronomy 18:10–12; 2 Kings 17:17; Isaiah 8:19. Gideon’s fleece oracle (Judges 6,7) resonates with pagan practices and is a mark of his immaturity and unbelief, not faith. The account does not provide us an example to follow, but it certainly demonstrates God’s grace, patience, and

give to his covenant people secret knowledge; he gives them himself as the great Shepherd who leads them through every dark valley.

Herein lies the confusion for many believers: they operate on the mistaken assumption that our God expects us to wrest out of his mind the one “perfect will” for our lives, that one correct route along the journey. They seek unknown information that Scripture does not reveal or even promise to reveal. “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”¹³ God’s omniscience shatters our sinful pride; every Tower of Babel built to reach the heavens is doomed to failure. Rather, we must rest in the reality that the Lord is God—and humbly accept that we are not.¹⁴ If we want true guidance, we must begin with the doxology, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”¹⁵

As suggested by the Tower of Babel allusion above, the Discovery View does not bode well for life in the body of Christ. Disagreements are bound to develop over how to figure out all those divine “signs.” And if you miss that one perfect plan, the alternative is God’s “second best”—or third, fourth, fifth, sixth . . . ! The stakes become enormous even for relatively small decisions. It is no wonder, then, that Christians feel so threatened and fight so vigorously for their opinions. Intense church conflicts develop because God is on *everyone’s* side.¹⁶ “Since your opinion derails our church from its one perfect path, there is no good reason to listen to you. I’m right, and that settles it.” The quest for hidden knowledge leads us to demand an unrealistic level of perfection in decision-making, which, in turn, torpedoes our trust in one another and our fellowship together. We quickly forget our “in-Christ” mindset along with all the “one-another” relationship commands rooted in that fundamental identity. We deny our desperate need for every member of the body of Christ—*especially* those with whom we disagree. It has been said, “If both of us agree about everything all the time, one of us is unnecessary.”¹⁷ Do we really believe that? We should, for Scripture assumes that God is at work in every member of the body, and therefore we expect to learn his ways from each other. That is the way of wisdom.

The next view we will consider includes elements of the Discovery View but takes them to a more extreme conclusion. It is the Immediate Direction View.

determination to deliver his people from oppression, in spite of their unbelief—a theme developed in the prophets and fully in the New Testament.

¹³ Deuteronomy 29:29; cf. Isaiah 46:9–11.

¹⁴ “Our activities and *plans*... will be no less our own for being His: only less burdensome..., and better made.” Derek Kidner, commenting on Proverbs 16:3, “Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established.” Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1964), 118.

¹⁵ Romans 11:33.

¹⁶ One will never hear believers in a conflict say, “I know this is dead-wrong, but let’s do it anyway!” We do, however, label our opinions as right—as the biblically correct ones—and opposing views as incorrect, even sinful.

¹⁷ Source unknown. Interestingly, research in the area of decision-making errors identifies “groupthink” as a major culprit in disastrous choices. Consultants for business and government actually create structures to foster “constructive conflict.”

2. The Immediate Direction View (“Follow the Voice!”)

The Story: This is sooo simple. Use your GPS all the way! There’s one driver, and perhaps a couple assistants. You just hope the driver is paying close attention to the voice coming out of that little box, because you want him to make all the correct turns. But sometimes the route seems so erratic you begin to wonder. You also notice a major problem developing: nearly everyone on the bus has their own cell phone with various mapping apps. Some passengers become vocal about it and continually tell the driver where to turn. Those who express their opinions don’t all agree, of course, so they push conflicting directions. The whole scenario becomes terribly irritating to the driver who shuts them out—and sometimes boots them out. The ride certainly feels more pleasant after they leave; but you miss your friends who got off. In the end, the only people left on the bus are those who agree with the driver or feel too intimidated to say anything. But at least there’s no more unsettling conflict—for now.

This is the Immediate Direction View. It is most often associated with charismatic circles,¹⁸ but in fact, elements of it are common across a wide swath of biblically conservative churches. In its pure form, this view believes that God communicates immediately, directly, and verbally to the leaders, usually pastors. The rest of the church is expected to follow without question. Those who do raise questions often end up leaving the church and sometimes starting another one with its own prophetic leader. In the more generic version of this approach, one leader (or a very small group) makes all the decisions because he reputedly knows God’s will for the church. Whether or not that church believes in continuing prophetic revelation, the leader behaves as if he does.

We may affirm the following: We must remain charitable by acknowledging the work of God among many who hold to this position. Behind it is a strong conviction that the Holy Spirit is powerfully at work in the church today. God has not abandoned his people, but is immediately present to shepherd and guide them. Doctrine is no mere abstraction, safely flying at thirty thousand feet, but comes right down to street level—our street, our trenches, our struggles. God speaks to the church and moves it to trust Christ and to serve him right where we are, concretely in our situation. They believe in the Lord Jesus who promised to be with us always, even to the end of the ages. He is forever “Immanuel,” God with us.

Second, we grant that many who hold this position have a high view of ordained church leadership and its special role, especially those in teaching positions. In a culture that has become toxic in its resistance to all authority, we must honor those who want to lead the church in Christ’s name as his “undershepherds.” And on the congregational side, an attitude of faithful submission to godly leaders is not to be despised.¹⁹ In the best cases, such a church uses its spiritual gifts effectively and unites together with common purpose and direction. They accomplish great things for the kingdom.

We must criticize the following: the matter of continuing special revelation through prophesy has been thoroughly refuted by many since the Reformation, so little will be said about it here, other than to observe the unique foundational role of “the apostles and

¹⁸ Not all who identify with the tag “charismatic” hold to this view. And, as stated previously, I have learned a great deal from my brothers and sisters in such churches. Please read my critique in that light.

¹⁹ 1 Peter 5:1–7; Acts 20:28; Hebrews 13:17

prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.”²⁰ Foundations are laid only once. Our concern is certainly not to deny the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, or to dictate how he chooses to act,²¹ but to defend the doctrine of *Scripture as exclusively apostolic, special, and written revelation*. As such, it is our only final and sufficient authority for truth and life—a fact that all orthodox Christians affirm. Our fear is that any claim of an immediate “word from God” *functionally* eclipses Scripture, and the hard work of studying and expositing it, as the church’s means to know God and receive his guidance.”²²

A second problem with the Immediate Direction View shows up when we consider the church’s identity as the *one people of God*, a doctrine that carries profound implications for church leadership. Even the apostles were not separated from or above the rest of the body. Paul himself asks for prayer, submits to other church leaders, and personally exemplifies the “humility of wisdom.” Paul and Peter are “fellow elders,” and James (our Lord’s earthly half-brother!) calls himself a “servant.” Together they address the global church with the words, “the apostles and elders, your brothers.”²³ Any church leader who functionally repudiates the equal status of every member, and the church’s corporate adoption by the Father,²⁴ will drive the bus into a quagmire.

Third, if a church locates the source of guidance narrowly with one leader, it misses the *normal process* of gaining corporate wisdom within the body. Every believer is taught by God, and therefore must be heard. The Philippians must hear the concerns of others (2:3–4) because every believer enjoys the same “fellowship” with Christ and has the “mind” of Christ. If I am not hearing them, I am not hearing God either. If a leader acts as though he is the sole agent of divine revelation, he denies the Spirit’s promise to build the church in Christ’s likeness “as each part does its work.”²⁵ We rob the church of the spiritual gifts given by her Lord.

²⁰ Ephesians 2:20; cf. 1 Corinthians 3:10–11; Revelation 21:14. One of the most compelling arguments for a closed canon is the biblical role of *written* revelation in establishing covenants, drawing on the ancient covenant treaty form that was available (in God’s providence) to Moses and later biblical authors.

²¹ A dynamic view of God’s providence acknowledges that God may work in extraordinary ways in certain times and places. We think, for example, of reports about Muslims in closed countries receiving guidance in dreams, hearing Scripture and trusting the Savior. Such accounts, if true, pose no threat to the doctrine of biblical sufficiency. These are not experiences the church expects, or demands, or needs for discerning wisdom and carrying out its mission. Yet if, in the Lord’s wise providence, he chooses to give such experiences to some, that is his prerogative.

²² “Guidance is discerning God’s moral and spiritual preferences as they apply to our life situations. It is not a detailed plan to be discovered or communicated by God in extra scriptural communications.” James C. Petty, *Step by Step: Divine Guidance for Ordinary Christians*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999), 101.

²³ Philippians 2:8–10; Ephesians 6:91–20; James 3:13, cf. Proverbs 11:2, 15:33; 1 Peter 5:1; James 1:1; Acts 15:23; cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:10.

²⁴ The church is God’s adopted family “in Christ.” The reality of corporate adoption has massive and practical implications for church leadership. For example, the day before a man’s ordination to the pastoral ministry, he is a “brother” to every other church member. The day after his ordination... he is *still* a brother to every other church member. That fundamental relationship never changes, and his need for the rest of the body never changes. In fact, all the New Testament “one another” commands apply to him in heightened and intensified ways, because leaders must be models for the entire flock in how they love, and listen, and learn, and fellowship with others.

²⁵ Ephesians 4:16; James 1:17–19, 3:17. We hear that “wisdom from above,” “every good gift and every perfect gift, comes down from the Father of lights,” by listening to our sisters and brothers.

Fourth, when a church places vast power in one person it *distributes authority too restrictively*. Any Christian body, regardless of its doctrine and polity, errs when its leadership becomes authoritarian and too proud to listen to the concerns of its members. Those with “haughty eyes” will “sow discord among brothers.”²⁶ The Reformation’s *sola Scriptura* heritage proclaims that “all church power is only ministerial and declarative,” not “magisterial and legislative.”²⁷

Inevitably, a defective view of unique biblical authority allows human pseudo-authority to usurp it, leading to *legalism*. Usually it is the kinder, gentler variety—not the damnable sort that the Apostle Paul cursed,²⁸ but a sanitized version we will call “applicatory legalism.”²⁹ It elevates human opinion to the level of God’s Law. It binds believers’ consciences not with the Word but with particular *applications* of the Word, thus undermining Christian liberty. And we note also that legalism can be self-originated in the flesh, not necessarily driven by authoritarian leaders.

In our quest for guidance, we ought never to tie up God’s people with the spiritual knots of legalism! We believe the Lord of the Church whose Word declares, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (James 1:5). The means of that wisdom, the fountainhead of that wisdom, will be the Word of God that stands forever. Anything less—or anything more—puts the bus on a bumpy road going in the wrong direction. We will now consider the “less” approach—the Self-Sufficient View.

3. The Self-Sufficient View (“Good luck!”)

The Story: The bus takes off and follows the roads that look best because no one has any hard information, except the general compass points. You’re on your own, but everyone has read articles and heard lectures about bus travel, and you’re feeling pretty confident. With some careful observations of what’s around you, and with a little luck, the bus should get to your destination. Or perhaps a different destination. It all depends on who’s driving and the latest book he’s read. The young man currently behind the steering wheel often glances down to the volume on his lap, *Getting There: How to Successfully Drive a Bus*. Every so often you feel the vehicle drifting onto the rumble strip, and you wish the driver would just keep his eyes on the road.

²⁶ Proverbs 6:16–19. The “haughty eyes” of the troublemaker “manifest a denial of the LORD’s authority . . . and a disregard for human rights. . . . No vice stands in sharper opposition to wisdom than pride (Isa. 2:11–17), and no virtue stands closer to them than humility and modesty.” Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1–15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 346.

²⁷ Authority is “ministerial,” meaning that church leaders serve Christ and his people, not themselves. It is “declarative” in that leaders are permitted to declare and apply only what God’s Word demands. Of course, we want to apply biblical principles wisely to particular people in their unique situations.

²⁸ Galatians 1:8–9. This is the heresy of the Judaizers who required converts to become Jews as a prerequisite for becoming Christians. It was a spurious attempt to add meritorious human works to the finished work of Christ, in effect declaring “Jesus’s blood and righteousness are not good enough; you need to improve on this provision in order to be saved.” The lesser forms of legalism move in the same direction, with negative, but much less severe, consequences.

²⁹ This is my term. Daniel M. Doriani sees four types of legalism. Class-one legalists are the outright heretics. But “class-four legalists can preach sermons in which every sentence is true, while the whole is oppressive.” *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 280.

But no matter, it won't be long before someone else takes over. Each driver seems to follow his nose, or go in whatever direction seems to fit with the latest theories of travel. When everyone on the bus is getting along, it's an interesting ride, and lots of new passengers get on board at every stop. Others get off—mainly the ones who don't like the stops, the drivers, or the other people on the bus. And when people argue, the chaos becomes so bad that you might drive right off the highway into the ditch. When that happens, the trip is done.

The Self-Sufficient View usually involves no consistent plan at all, at least not one derived from Scripture. Decisions are based on the opinions of various experts, secular research, and sound management principles. No one asks God for guidance or, if they do, they do not expect it. The leaders do not need it anyway and are self-confident that they can lead the church and its members, achieving successful results based upon their own training, skills, and resources.³⁰

We may affirm the following: when we critique this approach, it is frankly more difficult to keep a charitable stance, although it helps if we admit that every believer and every church is tempted in this purely pragmatic and rationalistic direction. Consider the strength of the temptation. We live in a highly ordered world, and that order is observable and discoverable, especially (we are supposed to think) by experts using the scientific method. And let's face it, they really are very good at what they do. No one denies that God reveals himself through the general revelation of an exquisitely designed³¹ universe that operates with consistency. Wisdom grows as we understand how things work in God's world and gain practical skill to live in it.³²

A proper understanding of science has rich implications for our study. The irritating hubris of academia notwithstanding, we should raise no objections to impartial research into social processes, decision-making methods, organizational growth, and other fields, to help us discover best practices within our cultural context.³³ Christians, of all people, are equipped for this task. "We have categories to reframe every tiny bit of secular thinking so it functions as a comprehensible part of the God-centered world. We know

³⁰ That is the *optimistic* version of the "Good Luck!" method, which persists as long as everything is going well. The *pessimistic* form kicks in when the church faces failures, trials, or conflicts, exposing the reality that all their self-guided planning and human effort accomplished nothing. At that point, some people give up on the church, and sometimes on their faith. That version is fatalistic and unequivocally non-Christian. It is atheistic to its core, hopeless, and in the end plays well into individualism. With no God in the way, the only thing left is your own godlike desire to control, get your will done, and make others do it—or despair because you know you never will.

³¹ Or just the impression of design, if one is trying to distance oneself from any notion of "Intelligent Design."

³² In fact, the entire scientific enterprise was God's idea, as he commissioned our first parents to name, to understand, to categorize, to explore, to nurture. Wise people learn everything they can from creation, including knowledge of the Creator himself. Lazy people should learn from the ants (Prov. 6:6; 30:25). Isolated or divisive people should learn from the locusts (30:27). All people should learn from the galaxies (Ps. 8; 19:1–6; Rom. 1:20). The roots of science go deep; the prototypical "cultural mandate" to Adam and Eve now demands that God's people allow no area of human endeavor to escape Christ's Lordship, as world history moves inexorably toward the New Creation.

³³ For example, there is an extensive and provocative body of research about decision-making in business and political contexts, dealing with topics such as cognitive biases, decision-making errors, framing, stimulating constructive dialogue, collaborative negotiation, conflict resolution, best-practices for various goals, systems theory, etc.

what they are *really* looking at.”³⁴ Everything we see, and everything atheists see, must be radically recast into a Christian and biblical worldview. Only then do we understand reality accurately.

We must criticize this view, having affirmed what we may about the Self-Sufficient View, by grappling with its glaring defects. We know what we believe; it is all written down on the back pages of those dusty hymnals, right? But have these truths become mere abstractions—beliefs that barely rise to the level of that New Year’s resolution to get more exercise? At best, our Bible reading and prayer serves to give us greater inner peace, and perhaps even communal peace in family and church. But when it comes down to the practical stuff of *choices* we fall back on pragmatic considerations of what will be most likely to “succeed”—decisions devised from “expert” opinions, straight up, with a few Bible verses sprinkled on top.

Yet the most severe criticism is this: if the Immediate Direction View errs by demanding what God has not promised, the Self-Sufficient View does worse, by failing to ask of God what he *has* promised. James’s condemnation is well deserved. “That person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.”³⁵ This attitude betrays a prayerless, functional deism, that does not need God or expect much from him because we have everything we need in ourselves. In its extreme form, this approach truncates biblical scrutiny to narrow areas such as personal morality and the “end times”—but thinks that if we *really* want to understand *people* and their *choices* we must employ the methods practiced by business executives, social psychologists, and perhaps mental health care professionals. Thus, we capitulate to a cadre of secular prophets and high priests and sanitize Word ministry out of the church right at the very point it is most needed. The church must ask itself some penetrating questions: Are we being intentional, expectational, faithful, and prayerful in seeking wisdom from God? Or will we by our unbelief be among those who “do not receive because (they) do not ask”?

Against the backdrop of these sub-Christian approaches to choices—the Discovery View, the Immediate Direction View, and the Self-Sufficient View—Part 2 will develop a more biblical approach: The Wisdom View (“Just drive! But Listen!”).

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³⁴ David C. Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2010), 257.

³⁵ James (1:7) coins a term δίδυχος (*dipsychos*), a “double-souled” man, the opposite of the faithful believer who displays “a wholehearted, consistent, and integral faith commitment to God.” Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 62.

ServantClassics

Beza on the Trinity, part 4

by David C. Noe

The following excerpt was translated from Theodore Beza's *The Unity of the Divine Essence and the Three Persons Subsisting in It, Against the Arians' Homoiousios*, published in Geneva, March 19, 1565 (the fourteenth day before the calends of April). It is a five-page introduction to his *Theses or Axioms on the Trinity of the Persons and Unity of the Essence*, with which it was published. The text is from *Tractationes Theologicae Bezae, Volumen I*, Jean Crespin, Geneva 1570, 646–50.

A letter to the most illustrious Prince Nicholas Radzvilas,¹ the supreme Marszałek² of the great Duchy of Lithuania.

Most illustrious Prince, I received two letters from your Excellency at the same time: one addressed to Mr. John Calvin of blessed memory, and the other to myself. Both of them were written beautifully and with refinement. Because I am replying so tardily, I ask your Excellency not to think this is due to any disregard, nor to any other reason than that there was a shortage of couriers traveling from here to Tubingen, the place where your letters to us originated. These are the reasons why my reply is so brief even though this is a quite serious and urgent matter.

I have read, and not without absolute terror, some comments which Gregorius Pauli,³ Casanonus, and several others who have been enchanted by Biandrata and Gentile⁴ wrote in different treatises. They are converting⁵ the three persons or ὑποστάσεις into three numerically distinct⁶ οὐσίας or essences. In their writings I have found so many things that are both opaque and even contradictory that not even at present do I have full clarity as to their doctrinal positions and arguments.

But your letters, although they were written far more lucidly, nevertheless—if I may speak frankly with your Excellency—do not fully make up for my simple mindedness.⁷ This is especially the case in your explanation of that third conciliatory statement which, if I understand it correctly, I think is hardly at all different from the position of either Gentile or Pauli.

¹ Cf. *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence*, by Anatol Lieven (Yale University Press, 1994), 47–48.

² This is the title of a very high-ranking official in the Polish court, a top adviser to the king.

³ d. 1591.

⁴ Giorgio Biandrata (1515–1588) and Giovanni Valentino Gentile (c.1520–1566), two famous, Italian born anti-Trinitarians.

⁵ *transformantes*.

⁶ *numero*.

⁷ *ruditati*.

And so, because there is not yet much agreement between us concerning the substance of these issues, and far less even with respect to the arguments of our opponents, we can't help but be legitimately afraid that we could seem to be working in vain over these much disputed topics.⁸ Or that we are not adequately precise in attacking our opponents' position. This circumstance could inflame these already unfortunate debates rather than extinguish them. And furthermore, even the debate itself shows, with so many written documents flying back and forth, that the controversy is increasing rather than diminishing, while each man does not allow what he has just written to be adequately grasped.

Therefore, before I publish a fitting answer to the individual arguments, I demand⁹ this from you, your Excellency, in the name of Christ: you must compel¹⁰ those who do not agree with this proposition—Father, Son, Holy Spirit¹¹ are one and the same God—to do as follows. They must write out, point by point, clearly and distinctly, their own entire dogma both on the essence and on the hypostases,¹² in definite and clear theses. Then they must provide their own positions as derived both from the Word of God and from the writings of the Greek and Latin fathers. Finally, if you have no objection, they must supply refutations of our arguments, which they know full well.

Part 2

Now I shall finally have the opportunity to answer both more candidly and more concisely. This is something that we would have done voluntarily even if your Excellency, in keeping with your own zeal for your country and even more for the whole church, had not petitioned us. But now, since your Excellency has specifically appealed to us, we have decided without reservation to complete this task much more willingly and carefully, with the small measure of grace granted us by the most great and mighty God.

Yet in the meantime, so that some people do not conclude that we have delayed our response because we have retreated from our position or because of duplicity, we assert openly before your Excellency, most illustrious Prince, that by God's grace we persist in the true and orthodox position. Not only that, we have also been greatly strengthened in our position by reading their falsehoods. We hold that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three truly distinct persons, and nevertheless one and the same God according to essence. For what could be more inappropriate, no, what could be more irreligious than to multiply in number the most simple¹³ infinity? And so we must recoil from the blindness of the Jews, who removed the distinction between

⁸ The syntax here is deliberately convoluted as Beza seeks to come to the point without offending the Prince. I have broken up a very long and hypotactically beautiful sentence into manageable English portions.

⁹ *flagitamus*, a very strong word.

¹⁰ *adigas*.

¹¹ The conjunction here is omitted, a figure of speech called asyndeton, to stress the unity of the persons in the Godhead.

¹² Here Beza uses Latin instead of Greek, which he employs interchangeably.

¹³ *simplicissimam infinitatem*; simple here means “uncompounded,” without “parts or passions” as WCF 2.1 states.

persons, and likewise abhor Sabellius's insolence. He recognizes the persons but only distinguishes between them verbally, not in fact. The Arians' blasphemy is also reprehensible. Some of them regard Christ as of a different substance, others as of like substance.¹⁴ The Macedonians are similarly detestable for attacking the deity of the Holy Spirit.

But we think that all these, however loathsome they are, have nevertheless said things less absurd than the Severians¹⁵ once did and those with whom we are now dealing. For they retain the fundamental point that God is one as his essence is one, since the Word of God alone declares the real distinction of the essence into three persons without any division. But they have refused to reason soundly from that foundation. Thus it is no wonder that they have not held onto the distinction of persons. But what in the end will they leave intact in the foundation of religion if the divine essence has been torn apart into three gods?

Nevertheless, they would readily persuade us that they avoid a multiplicity of gods if they would only say that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one, i.e., in one divine nature or essence. But even if, for example, Peter, John, and James should be described as one in *species*, they are not for that reason constituted as three men. So what value is there in retreating from their position? Why have they not instead freely and sincerely maintained what directly follows from their dogma, namely that yes, there is one deity but three gods? And that they are not equal to one another, because to exist from a separate origin¹⁶ is greater than to possess one's own existence from another's existence,¹⁷ or to be God transiently?¹⁸

Certainly they must hold that God is either one in number or many. If one, then why are they fighting so fiercely? But if many—and evidently they believe that the Son's essence has been propagated from the Father's essence so that there are in number two essences—how will they so boldly dare to deny that they posit numerically multiple gods? Therefore, if we believe them, then those ancient idolaters¹⁹ should not have been charged with merely worshiping multiple gods, but with worshiping multiple gods in three persons, and indeed false gods. This multiplication of the divine essence into two gods (for we have also heard that some of them erase the Holy Spirit) or into three gods, how is this consistent with their other dogma, that whatever things are predicated in the Scriptures of the one and only God must not be understood of the Son or Holy Spirit? For if the Father is the one and only God, it follows that the Son either is not God, or that he is God by another *genus* of deity than the Father. That is the Arians' error. If when Abel was born Adam was the one and only man, his son Abel either was not man or was endowed with another human nature than his father's, and thereby differed from him in *species*.

Part 3

¹⁴ Beza uses Greek here without Latin gloss, ἑτεροούσιον (*heteroousion*) and ὁμοιούσιον (*homoousion*) respectively.

¹⁵ This is a second century gnostic sect also known as Encratites.

¹⁶ *esse aliunde*, as the Father on this theory.

¹⁷ *habere suum esse ab alterius esse*, as the Son on this theory derives his existence from the Father.

¹⁸ *precario esse Deum*, as the Holy Spirit, on this theory.

¹⁹ I.e., the Trinitarian orthodox.

As for their reply, that the Father alone is “very God,”²⁰ i.e., according to their interpretation that he has his being from himself and for that reason can alone be called God, is this not an absurd expression? For the fact that one’s existence derives from oneself or from another does not constitute a separate species of nature. And therefore the Father cannot nor ought to be designated the one and only God for the reason they offer, but rather the one and only Father. Just as the Son is designated the one and only Son because he is only begotten. Nor did anything like what these men invent ever occur to the Apostle when he called the Father the one and only God, and Jesus Christ the one and only Lord.²¹ And we will, God helping us, explain this more fully on some other occasion.

Now, moving on to their accusation that we are Sabellians, what justification do they really have for doing this? Sabellius, who confounded the terms essence and person, held Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to be one, while we hold that there are three, truly and really distinct by their incommunicable properties. So what similarity is there really between him and us? I would say the same as exists between darkness and light, since these two statements are not synonymous: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one; and Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God. The first statement confounds the persons, and that is Sabellian. But the second teaches that the persons are distinct in such a way that the individual persons are one, and the same is the whole divine essence. And likewise, the individual persons are not only one deity but also the one and same God. Of this threefold subsistence in the one God the order begins from the Father and ends in the Holy Spirit. Therefore, since these men mock us as though we were saying things that are contradictory—because we maintain that the three are one—they barely deserve a reply. For we do not with Sabellius hold that the three persons are one, but we distinguish the hypostases in one essence according to the Word of God by their properties and numerically.

“All the same,” our opponents reply, “you do not say ‘one thing’ but ‘one God.’”²² Quite the contrary! We do not simply say “one” but “one God.” This is plainly with reference to the one and same essence, in all which these three²³ so subsist that they are neither divided, nor at all conjoined or *synousioi*.²⁴ Instead, they are really distinct in their own incommunicable properties such that any one of the three according to hypostasis is different than the other two. And nevertheless, because the one subsists in the entire and same essence, therefore he is the one and same God as the other two.

The understanding of the Council of Nicea was no different when it wrote “God from God,” even though the phrase is somewhat vague. This was done not in order to establish two Gods or to derive any kind of deity from deity. Rather, it was simply to establish against Arius the identity of essence in two persons. Thus John writes that “the Word which was God was with God in the beginning.”²⁵ So he makes plain not that there are two numerical essences but two persons subsisting in the one and same

²⁰ αὐτόθεος (*autotheos*).

²¹ I Corinthians 8:4.

²² The distinction here is between *unum*, neuter and referring to one entity, and *unus*, which as masculine refers to Deus, i.e., God.

²³ Not persons (the form is masculine), but Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

²⁴ συνοῦσιοι, i.e., unity of substance that does not admit distinction.

²⁵ John 1.1; Beza uses his own Latin paraphrase here, not the Vulgate.

essence. Hilary forcibly emphasizes the same sense in his well-known statement “One from One, Whole from Whole, Perfect from Perfect,” though he is the one author these men approve.²⁶ But Hilary’s purpose is not only to deny the existence of a twofold deity, but also to deny the existence of two gods numerically. Because obviously the Son is other than the Father, and therefore second in order (but not in degree of Godhead)²⁷ with respect to the fact that he is begotten. And yet because the Son wholly subsists in the one and same essence, he is one and same as the Father with respect to the fact that he is God.

Part 4

But as for the reason why the same relationship does not obtain among created species, Your Excellency should also consider the following. Created species, like a person, although they cannot be divided as to form, nevertheless because they are constituted of quantitative individuated elements (as I would express it), they are in fact divided according to their quantitative extension.²⁸

Consequently, let us use the following as an example: Although Peter, John, and James are one in terms of both their universal and specific²⁹ form, they are not, however, one individual but are referred to as three. There can really be no doubt that they are not only distinguished by their incommunicable properties but also divided by their quantitative extension. Similarly, we not only say that Gabriel, Raphael, and Michael are three distinct hypostases of one angelic nature. We also hold that they are three spirits. Even though they are not limited by corporeal extension, still, bound by the peculiar quality of their substance they are truly separated one from another. But in the divine essence that is most simple in every respect, and most infinite in act,³⁰ there can be no place for either division or composition, but for distinction only. This is something that neither flesh nor blood has revealed to us but the Son himself. Moreover, the same logic that applies to a subject’s nature also holds with respect to those things that are predicated of that nature absolutely. And so likewise, the individual Persons are the one and same eternal, immeasurable, infinite, and omnipotent God.

And so, when we read in the work of that man who is both in substance and name “Gentile,”³¹ i.e., in his pamphlet against Athanasius, that there are multiple “eternals and omnipotents,” we realized that what the Apostle had foretold had been fulfilled in him. I mean that men of this type were given over to a reprobate mind, to a mind devoid of all reason and judgment.³² Now we must take a different position on those

²⁶ I.e., of Poitiers, c. 310–367 AD The quote is taken from his work *De Synodis Fidei Catholicae Contra Arianos*, chapters 12 and 13. Beza may well have consulted for Hilary Erasmus’s Basil edition of 1523, though the phrase was a commonplace.

²⁷ Beza writes simply *gradu*, which I have interpreted.

²⁸ *secundum quantitatem*

²⁹ This is to be taken in the derivative sense, i.e., relating to species, and not in the colloquial way used today.

³⁰ *actu infinitissima*.

³¹ Giovanni Valentino Gentile. Beza here, for polemical purposes, is calling him gentile in the sense of barbarian or reprobate.

³² Romans 1:28.

properties that are predicated by relation, and that one in particular which they describe as ὑφισταμένην ιδιότητα (*hyphistamenēn idiotēta*).³³ Because, as Tertullian correctly explains in his work *Against Praxeas*, the nature of the relations³⁴ is that they can be neither the same nor can one differ from another.

Finally, how can they be so outrageous as to ascribe to us what they call a “quaternity”? For they dream that we posit that God exists in himself (and this is a topic that Hilary discusses at length yet without clarity in book 4 of his work) by some unknown kind of separate οὐσία (*ousia*) anterior to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, they claim, we hold that there is a kind of fourth “shared” God³⁵ to whom those three persons are adjoined, leaving four gods as the result. Or, at the least, that we hold that those three persons like parts of a whole constitute that one “shared” being.

But the basic experience common to the created order teaches us just how stupid their invention is. For those things that are called universals do not exist in themselves but only the hypostases that subsist in them exist. Unless perhaps these men count human nature apart from its own individuated properties as a singular entity.³⁶ Applying this concept to individuated properties results in an increase in the number of such singular entities.³⁷

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³³ Underlying quality of individuation.

³⁴ *relativorum*, scilicet, in the godhead.

³⁵ *communis Deus*.

³⁶ *unum quidpiam*; the idea is that human nature does not exist except as realized in individual persons. It makes no sense, therefore, to talk of a human nature and predicable properties apart from individuals, even though the shared qualities of all human beings considered conjointly constitute human nature. Beza is asking if his opponents want to deny this point.

³⁷ For example, saying that a man is wise does not mean that the quality of wisdom exists as *unum quidpiam* (a separate, individuated entity) apart from particular individuals. Such a position leads to the absurd expansion of meaningless, unpopulated metaphysical categories.

ServantReading

Reading Matthew as the Climactic Fulfillment of the Hebrew Story *by Martin C. Spadaro*

by David VanDrunen

Reading Matthew as the Climactic Fulfillment of the Hebrew Story, by Martin C. Spadaro. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015, 299 pages, \$34.00, paper.

Scholars commonly call Matthew the most Jewish and pro-law Gospel in the canon. Matthew was composed, they say, for a predominantly Jewish community of Christians who continued to observe the Mosaic law. Many scholars see serious tension between Matthew and the Apostle Paul on this issue: Matthew was pro-law and Paul anti-law. A few have argued that Matthew wrote explicitly to counter Pauline influence in the early church. While more conservative interpreters obviously refuse to set one biblical writer against another, many of them adopt a milder version of the same perspective. They typically interpret Matthew as if Jesus is simply refuting the Pharisees' misinterpretation of the Mosaic law and showing his followers how to obey it according to its true intentions.

While such approaches can be (and, I believe, ought to be) challenged on several fronts, Martin Spadaro has opened a new front, presenting an innovative and stimulating study that claims Matthew does something much more drastic and grander than these approaches contemplate. Spadaro, a Presbyterian minister in Australia, argues that Matthew wrote to advance and complete the Old Testament story as a whole. In short, Matthew presents Jesus as coming to terminate the Mosaic covenant and thus to decommission Israel's temple and priesthood, and in their place to establish the prophesied New Covenant. This gospel thus serves as a prophetic indictment, documenting the grounds that justified this judgment and describing the work of Christ that brought about this radical development in redemptive history.

Although not a comprehensive study of Matthew, Spadaro works his way through the main points of its storyline to establish his case. Matthew 1–4, he argues, presents Jesus as the “heir apparent,” the true Israel and well-qualified Messiah. These chapters also describe the opposition that arose against Jesus from the beginning (39). Then, in Matthew 5–7, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives his “mission statement” (88). He is not just critiquing contemporary applications of the law, nor is he laying the ground for a law-observant Christianity. While it also indicates the character of the new-covenant community, the sermon chiefly presents Jesus as the fulfiller (not abolisher) of the law and prophets (Matt. 5:17) in terms of settling accounts with Israel and foreclosing on their unpaid debt.

Spadaro next considers John the Baptist's important role in the Gospel. Although Jesus proclaimed “good news” for those who followed him, John proclaimed a wrathful Messiah and the “bad news” he also brought. God sent John before Christ to purify the nation for his arrival, and to reject him was to reject the whole of the law and the prophets.

Spadaro next considers Matthew 8–12. Here, he explains, Jesus carries out a mission of compassion, mercy, and amnesty to various sections of the Hebrew community. Nevertheless, the response was appalling, and Jesus's ministry was largely rejected, making the community vulnerable to judgment. The parables that follow, in Matthew 13 and later in the Gospel, serve

as “instruments of indictment” (146–47). Matthew capitalizes on the indictment of Isaiah 6:9–10 far more than the other Gospels do, and he considers God’s charge in Isaiah to be “unfinished business.” Given that “the severest images of future punishment found in the Christian Bible are attached to these Matthean parables” (184), Spadaro believes these texts contribute greatly to his broader case.

The book then makes the case that the concept of Jesus as Messiah, in Matthew, has to do with his priesthood as well as his kingship. Here, Spadaro considers a number of texts throughout the Gospel that highlight the failure of Israel’s priests under the law and present Jesus as a new and better priest who could meet the people’s needs. This discussion leads Spadaro to his final main topic, the concluding events in Jerusalem in Matthew 21–28. He argues that Matthew presents the story of Jesus’s passion as judicial action against the Levitical priesthood, which effects “the termination of the Mosaic administration” (236) as well as providing salvation for those believing in Jesus.

In my judgment, Spadaro’s study is well worth reading for those preaching or teaching the Gospel of Matthew, or for those who simply love this first book of the New Testament. Spadaro’s volume has limitations, to be sure. It is not a commentary and should not be viewed as a substitute for use of commentaries and journal articles that provide detailed studies of particular texts. It also makes many claims that are arguable and that cut against prevailing views of Matthew. No reader will come away convinced by all of Spadaro’s suggestions. And it’s good for readers to keep in mind that this book is an argument for the importance of a particular theme in Matthew, and thus does not give as much attention to other themes that are also undoubtedly important in this Gospel (as Spadaro himself would acknowledge). Preaching or teaching Matthew emphasizing only the theme Spadaro’s book emphasizes would be imbalanced.

But this book is very helpful for several reasons. For one, it helps to explain something that every attentive reader of Matthew notices: there is a lot of divine wrath and judgment in this Gospel. Spadaro makes a plausible case that this pervasive theme of judgment is not tangential to the main message of Matthew but something quite central to its message.

Furthermore, this book helps readers to appreciate that Matthew’s vision was big, not small. Matthew was not writing to a small community of Jewish Christians or trying to carve out a place for Torah-keeping within early Christianity, as many scholars portray it. Rather, Matthew wrote with the whole of the Old Testament in mind, with a view to God’s purposes in and faithfulness to the Old Testament covenants, and in defense of Jesus as the effective Messianic priest of a New Covenant community. To whatever extent one might (inevitably) disagree with some of Spadaro’s particular claims, his reading of Matthew from this big-picture perspective is very helpful.

Finally, Spadaro’s work provides a healthy antidote to the many works that present Matthew’s Jesus as sort of tidying up some mistaken uses of the Mosaic law so that Christians can be better Torah-keepers than the Pharisees. Spadaro brings out something that is true of Matthew as well as of Paul and other New Testament writers: although holy, righteous, and good, the Mosaic law was ultimately a ministry of condemnation that brought the Old Covenant people under just condemnation. While it remains essential to affirm the deep continuity of God’s redemptive work throughout the various administrations of the covenant of grace, it is also crucial to recognize that with Jesus’s earthly ministry the Old Covenant has become obsolete (Heb. 8:13), and the people of God now enjoy many things that are wonderfully new. This idea is not just present in Matthew; it is prevalent in Matthew.

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The Spiritual Life, *by Campegius Vitringa Sr.*

by Gerald P. Malkus

The Spiritual Life, by Campegius Vitringa Sr., translated and edited by Charles K. Telfer. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2018, xli + 226 pages, \$20.00, paper.

Charles Telfer of Westminster Seminary California introduces to the reader, in a very reader-friendly translation, one of the many volumes written by Campegius Vitringa (1659–1722). Vitringa, who was born and labored in Friesland, in the North of the Netherlands, became grounded in the original biblical languages as a young student, and this work reflects the very valuable combination of biblical exposition, solid doctrine, and the practical application of a pastor’s heart. This volume comes to us from an obvious desire of a humble servant of Christ to build up the disciples of Jesus and to strengthen the church. An introductory essay, “The Life and Work of Campegius Vitringa Sr. (1659–1722)” (xxiii–xli), provides a very helpful and interesting summary of Vitringa’s life and labors. Telfer provides an extensive bibliography. The Foreword by Richard Muller gives an excellent defense of Reformed Orthodoxy and summary of the value of Vitringa’s work.

The Spiritual Life begins with four general chapters outlining the nature of the spiritual life, its origin, its causes, and how it is produced in the believer. I must acknowledge that having grown up in a thoroughly Presbyterian home, being early grounded in the vocabulary of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, I found it a bit difficult, though in the end helpful, to read some different categories in Vitringa. Chapter 4, “The Way Spiritual Life is Produced in Man,” employs the notions of *generation* and *regeneration*. It took me a couple of readings to understand. (I will admit that was more my problem than his categories.)

In the second section, his outline of the three parts of the spiritual life uses the summary of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 16:24: self-denial, cross-bearing, and following Jesus. I found his accurate exposition of the virtue of self-denial to be both convicting and heavy: “renouncing all the vices of the corrupt nature of every sort . . . renounce anything delightful to the flesh” (44). I understand the validity of the teaching, but I found too little of the comfort of grace in these sections.

Section three, “The Challenges of the Spiritual Life,” frequently employs the metaphor of the stages of ordinary human life from infancy to adulthood, and from adulthood to maturity. Obviously limited in exact parallel, nevertheless he does show how it is that God carries his people through the difficult stages of life into full spiritual life.

Especially helpful was a discussion of eight general occasions for sin and vice to come into the life of the believer. He then quickly makes the transition to those wonderful gifts that God has granted to the believer to “progress in the race, to confirm and promote his spiritual standing, and to bring his sanctification to completion in the fear of God” (113).

Using *our* language a bit more freely, he identifies seven “means of promoting sanctification” (113), including prayer and the Word of God, but adding singing, worship,

fellowship, self-examination, and the chastening hand of God. I found the sections on singing and worship especially helpful and perhaps worthy of an independent publication to hand out to our congregations as a concise expression of a better attitude toward these benefits.

In the final section, “The Goals of the Spiritual Life,” I became a bit confused, because the first chapter of the section (ch. 16, “Spiritual Death”) is a vivid description of the estate of sin and misery. I don’t think that is one of my “goals” as a disciple. Nevertheless, the succeeding chapter outlines six concise characteristics of the Christian life.

The Spiritual Life ends with chapter 18, “Eternal Life.” If it is anything like what Vitranga describes, the culmination of our life in Christ is going to be very nice. I only wish that the author would include more of what we refer to as the *already, but not yet* of what we now possess in Christ.

Altogether I found this treatise on the spiritual life to be clear, challenging, and helpful in terms of giving an outline for study or discussion of the Christian life.

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John G. Paton: Missionary to the Cannibals of the South Seas, *by Paul Schlehlein*

by Gregory E. Reynolds

John G. Paton: Missionary to the Cannibals of the South Seas, by Paul Schlehlein. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2017, xix + 186 pages, \$11.00, paper.

The “King of the Cannibals,” John Gibson Paton, was born in Scotland on May 24, 1824. His autobiography was first published in 1889, edited by his brother James, eighteen years before John’s death on January 28, 1907. The most complete edition was published with a third part covering the years 1895–1907. My copy was published in 1907 by Fleming H. Revell, totaling 869 pages. I first read this autobiography in the Banner of Truth edition, based on the 1907 three-part edition, which they still publish.¹ The firsthand account of Paton’s pioneering work among the cannibals of the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu in the South Seas) is riveting. I felt that I was accompanying the author on this frightening and grand adventure that brought countless lost souls to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing can replace his detailed and unique account. But in our age of shortened attention spans a much briefer treatment is welcomed. And it is briefer with a difference: half the book deals with lessons from Paton’s life and work.² Also many personal aspects of Paton’s life, not present in Paton’s autobiography, are brought into Schlehlein’s account based on the newly republished letters of Paton’s second wife, Margaret Whitecross Paton (55–64).³

The book is usefully divided into two equal parts: “Paton’s Life” and “Lessons from Paton’s Life.”

The seventy-five-page account of Paton’s life outlines the best of the Scottish Covenanter tradition of zeal for spreading the gospel through the whole counsel of God. Paton had an uncanny sense of the urgency of his mission to the perishing (12). This is especially poignant given the fact that the field to which he was called, the New Hebrides in the South Seas (present day Vanuatu), was inhabited by cannibals, who had claimed the life of missionary John Williams two decades earlier (19). When warned of this danger, Paton famously replied, “I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honouring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by cannibals or by worms” (19). A year after arriving on the island of Tanna, his nineteen-year-old wife and newly born son died of malaria (27). From this point on, the story is one of God’s sustaining grace and strength enabling Paton to endure countless trials. But along the way Schlehlein writes frankly of Paton’s frailties, including discouragement that lead him to wish that he had died with his first wife (38). Such realism is more inclined to encourage real trust in God than are the rose-colored success stories often

¹ *John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides* (1907; repr. as *The Autobiography of the Pioneer Missionary to the New Hebrides (Vanuatu)*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965, 2016).

² See, Gregory Edward Reynolds, “Seven Lessons for Missionaries from the Ministry of John Paton,” *Ordained Servant* 20 (2011): 20–24.

³ Margaret Whitecross Paton, *Letters and Sketches: The New Hebrides* (1894; repr. as *Letters from the South Seas*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003).

required by missionaries for fundraising. When the struggles are covered up, rookie missionaries are ill prepared to meet those challenges and often leave the field in discouragement. It was decades before Paton saw real fruit, but by his life's end he was blessed to see thousands come to Christ (74).

Part two, "Lessons from Paton's Life," is comprised of six chapters. "Paton's Godly Home" looks at the strong spiritual influence of his parents. Daily Bible-based devotions were lived out in the simple piety of his parents.

"Paton's Clear Calling" impresses the importance of the clarity of a call to mission work: "the impetus to world missions is complex not simple. Correct motives in missions are vital, as they will lead to greater endurance and less discouragement" (90). The clarity of the call, is a call to the clarity of the message that warns men of the coming judgment, of the realities of hell, and of the magnificent mercy of God in the crucified and risen Christ as the only means of escape (92–93). Such a calling must not be taken lightly.

"Paton's Undaunted Courage" makes clear that only those with a high degree of trust in the Lord venture upon dangerous mission fields (104). Schlehlein's discussion of cannibalism as revenge, rather than normal diet, is illuminating (108–10).

In "Paton's Pensive Risk" Schlehlein helpfully discusses the nature of thoughtful risk, offering an alternative to what he calls "Camp Caution" and "Camp Courage" (120). Paton refused to give in to either extreme. Schlehlein sums this up nicely, "Faith is the root of pensive risk, presumption is the root of thoughtless chance" (124).

"Paton's Gospel Strategies" enumerates the methods of the early church, which focused on the power of preaching and the Holy Spirit's work in the hearts of sinners. There were four paths to reach this goal: language study, church planting, financial aid, and social reform (136). Paton was skilled at learning a language that had no written documentation. He worked feverishly at translating the Bible into the native language from what he learned. As a student of Nevius's three-self principles (self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating, 143), he found that establishing strong indigenous leadership was a constant challenge, but a goal from which he never wavered (143).

"Paton's Relentless Evangelism" movingly documents Paton's passion to spread the good news. "Paton's belief in a sovereign God, coupled with his resolve to win the natives to Christ no matter the cost, no matter the sacrifice, no matter the loss, and no matter the penalty, is in the end what brought the whole island to faith" (164). There is no more inspiring example of faithful mission work than Paton's life and work. This little book is a wonderful introduction to it.

This book should serve as an instructive motivation for genuine missions, coming as it does out of our Reformed tradition. Schlehlein's first goal for his book is "to infuse in the reader the kind of unflappable courage and indefatigable moxie for which Paton was known" (xvi). For freshman missionaries, it would make a good companion volume to John L. Nevius's *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*,⁴ a book it appears Paton certainly read (65, 143). It would also make an excellent text for an adult class on missions. It goes to the heart of the matter and the heart of the reader.

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⁴ John L. Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches* (Manchester, NH: Monadnock, 2003).

ServantPoetry

The Waterfall

Henry Vaughan (1621–1695)

With what deep murmurs through time's silent stealth
Doth thy transparent, cool, and wat'ry wealth
Here flowing fall,
And chide, and call,
As if his liquid, loose retinue stay'd
Ling'ring, and were of this steep place afraid;
The common pass
Where, clear as glass,
All must descend
Not to an end,
But quicken'd by this deep and rocky grave,
Rise to a longer course more bright and brave.

Dear stream! dear bank, where often I
Have sate and pleas'd my pensive eye,
Why, since each drop of thy quick store
Runs thither whence it flow'd before,
Should poor souls fear a shade or night,
Who came, sure, from a sea of light?
Or since those drops are all sent back
So sure to thee, that none doth lack,
Why should frail flesh doubt any more
That what God takes, he'll not restore?

O useful element and clear!
My sacred wash and cleanser here,
My first consigner unto those
Fountains of life where the Lamb goes!
What sublime truths and wholesome themes
Lodge in thy mystical deep streams!
Such as dull man can never find
Unless that Spirit lead his mind
Which first upon thy face did move,
And hatch'd all with his quick'ning love.
As this loud brook's incessant fall
In streaming rings restagnates all,
Which reach by course the bank, and then
Are no more seen, just so pass men.
O my invisible estate,
My glorious liberty, still late!
Thou art the channel my soul seeks,
Not this with cataracts and creeks.