



suicide watch

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Ordained Servant

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CURRENT ISSUE: SUICIDE WATCH

April 2020

From the Editor

Suicide is a growing problem throughout our nation and one to which the church is not immune. For Christians it is a sensitive subject because we know suicide is sin and is never looked at positively in the Bible; we also know that we should do everything in our power to prevent it. However some mistakenly believe that a believer can never commit suicide or that it is an unforgivable sin. Retired pastor and counselor Doug Felch, who has many decades of experience dealing with suicide as a counselor, presents a nuanced biblical assessment of suicide and provides wise advice on how to counsel someone considering suicide. Every church officer should read “Suicide Watch.”

David Noe and Joseph Tipton give us part 3 of “Chrysostom’s Commentary on Galatians.” This new translation offers a fascinating insight into the intellectual and spiritual mindset of ancient church history.

Alan Strange begins a “Commentary on the Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.” His long experience on the general assembly Committee on Appeals and Complaints will make this commentary very useful to church officers. Eventually it will be printed as a book, along with a commentary on the Book of Discipline.

Carl Trueman’s review of J. V. Fesko’s “*The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*” reminds us how important these doctrines are, especially when they are related to each other. They are competently expounded and related in a very readable form.

Richard Gamble’s review of Peter C. Mancall, *The Trials of Thomas Morton* presents a compelling story of a very gifted man who had a vision of the New Israel of New England quite different from that of the Pilgrims and Puritans. While his ideas did not win the day he made a significant mark on the early history of that region.

David VanDrunen’s review of Ron Dart & J. I. Packer, *Christianity and Pluralism*, gives a brief insight into the present state of Anglicanism and the evangelicals within that divided fold.

The cover this month is a picture I took recently in February during the skiing day of a lifetime. On one day Robin and I, with our son Chris and his wife as guides, took two gondolas and a tram to Plateau Rosa Testa Grigia (11,417 ft.) and then skied around and past the Matterhorn, one of Machen’s favorite mountains (see “Mountains and Why We Love Them”), to Trackener Stag in German-speaking Switzerland. Robin and I took a gondola all the way into Zermatt. On the way I was able to take many pictures of the Matterhorn, one of which is the cover of OS this month. On the way back over to Italy we took a tram to the Klein Matterhorn, known as “Matterhorn Glacier Paradise” (12,840 ft.). On a plaque by the lookout Psalm 104:24 was quoted in the KJV: “O LORD, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches.” This was

a very moving experience and reminds me of what David Winslow recounts in his wonderful feature article from mid-March titled “Fortieth Annual Backpacking Adventure: Mountains and Why We Still Love them.” In 1980 ruling elder Mac Laurie had the idea of getting young people in southern California out into mountains of the Sierra Nevada range with this reasoning, “Get them out of their comfort zone, get them away from the lights, the TV, the amenities, the music, the culture. Get them deep into the ‘book’ of general revelation where they can see and hear its voice in a new, fresh, and overpowering way! And you might be able to do some serious ministry with our presbytery’s young people.” That voice spoke loud and clear to us that day.

Don’t miss Henry Vaughan’s wonderful “Easter Hymn.”

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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FROM THE ARCHIVES “SUICIDE”

http://opc.org/OS/pdf/Subject_Index_Vol_1-28.pdf

- “Suicide: A Complicated Grief” (Gordon H. Cook, Jr.) 22 (2013): 49–54.

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

Servant Work

Suicide Watch: Ministering to Christians Who Despair of Life

by Douglas A. Felch

Introduction

Suicide is a major and increasingly pervasive problem in our country and ought to be on the ministry radar of ministers, elders, and deacons. Statistics tell us that 42 percent of the population has considered taking their lives at some point. Of that figure 25 percent have actively planned to do so. Of that number 12 percent have at one time or another procured the means and selected a date.¹ It is the tenth leading cause of death for all ages, the number two cause of death for people ages 15–23 (after automobile accidents) and an increasing problem for adolescents and people over sixty-five. Women are four times more likely to try to end their life. Men are four times more likely to be successful.²

Our flocks are not immune from this problem. Nor are ministers, officers, or their families. During my forty years of ministry, I know of three OPC ministers and four OPC ministers' wives who have ended their lives. There may be others of whom I am unaware or which occurred earlier in our history. I am also aware of two ministers from other Reformed denominations who have recently committed suicide.

Almost everyone knows of someone who has committed suicide or whose family has been affected by one. Two people in the congregation we attend have experienced suicide in their extended families. As I was drafting this article, my wife received notice that a student at her university took his life while on an excursion with two of her colleagues and several classmates. The experience has been traumatic—as it uniformly is. The sorrow is palpable. As I was completing this essay, I was grieved to learn of another suicide in the OPC community (the second in the last six months). This makes the topic both current and exquisitely tender. It requires both a compassionate but forthright conversation that comforts those who mourn and hopefully avoids further anguish.³

Personal Background

I am an OPC minister and have served two congregations as pastor for nine years each as well as eighteen years as a college theology professor. I have had seminary and post-seminary training in pastoral counseling and have engaged in an extensive counseling

¹ This information was taken from an unpublished syllabus from Larry Crabb's Institute of Biblical Counseling, 1987. The syllabus does not cite a source.

² These numbers are consistent with a variety of sources in print and on the internet. I took these from James T. Clemons, *What Does the Bible Say about Suicide?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 1.

³ For an excellent discussion of ministering to survivors see Gordon H. Cook, Jr., "Suicide: A Complicated Grief," *Ordained Servant* 22 (2013): 49–54. While my discussion will overlap his, my focus is on ministering to those who are tempted to end their life.

ministry. I do not consider myself an expert in this area, but I have had some experience, both vocational and personal.

I have struggled with melancholy all my life and am no stranger to depression. Surprisingly, this has proved a gift in pastoral ministry. I can often quickly identify individuals who are troubled or in need. This enables me to come alongside them, gently probe them, and be of encouragement.

However, since strength and weaknesses are often coupled, this intuition has proved a two-edged sword. The same sensitivities which assist me in shepherding can also weigh me down emotionally. The temptation to depression and despair of life always lies at the door. Those unfamiliar with depression may be perplexed as to why someone might be tempted to take their life. I am not one of them.

My sophomore year at college was exceedingly difficult. I went through a humiliating and humbling experience that left me disoriented, perplexed, and deeply depressed. I struggled with suicidal despair the second half of that year, through the summer, and into my junior year. This provoked a spiritual crisis and caused me to question what I thought was a developing call to the ministry.

I remain forever grateful for a college roommate who encouraged me in my despair, provided helpful counsel and prayer, and enlisted me to become active in ministry. His kindness inaugurated a slow but steady recovery. While I was understandably cautious about my call to the ministry, I completed seminary training, became licensed, served as stated supply for several years in a church plant, and eventually became ordained.

Of course pastoral ministry is a difficult stewardship for a person vulnerable to depression. Through the years I have had many anguished moments and a number of dark nights of the soul. However, I have tried to use my temperament for a positive pastoral purpose while at the same time taking steps to restrain it from becoming destructive. I have also been privileged to minister to others who were troubled or despaired of life.

Most rewarding was a middle-aged parishioner who urgently asked to meet with me and confided that she was seriously contemplating ending her life. She was experiencing real and genuine sorrow and hurt, most of it imposed upon her. We had a wonderfully free and frank discussion which relieved the immediate crisis and inaugurated an excellent pastoral relationship between us. Only later did I discover how really close she was to taking her life that evening and how our conversation was a major turning point for her.

In addition as pastor and professor I have been privileged to counsel scores of parishioners and students who have struggled with periods of deep depression or despair. It has been one of the joys of my life to be able to comfort others with the comfort with which I have been comforted.

1. The Bible and Suicide

Given the prevalence of suicide in modern life, it is surprising that Scripture says remarkably little about it. It describes about a half-dozen occurrences, all with very little comment.

Biblical Examples

King Saul, defeated in battle and fearful of dishonor and torture by his enemies, fell on the point of his own sword. His armorbearer followed suit (1Sam. 31:4–6). A young man who reported this to David either tried to take credit for Saul's death or participated in finishing the job at Saul's request. David executed him on the spot (2 Sam. 1:3–16).

Ahithophel, David's wisest counselor, who had abandoned David for Absalom, took his own life when his counsel was rejected by Absalom in favor of the counsel of Hushai, David's mole. Once his counsel was rejected, Ahithophel recognized there was no hope for himself or Absalom's reign. He went home, put his affairs in order, and hanged himself (2 Sam. 17:23).

In 1 Kings 16:15–20, Zimri reigned only seven days as king of Israel. He had killed the previous king, Elah, and exterminated the house of Baasha, Elah's father. When the Israelites heard of the murders, they proclaimed Omri king and besieged Tirzah where Zimri was living. Once he knew that all was lost, Zimri burned down the palace on top of himself and died.

Judas Iscariot, full of remorse (but apparently not repentance), hanged himself after realizing the enormity of what he had done in betraying Jesus (Matt. 27:3–5).

The Philippian jailer was about to take his own life to avoid almost certain execution because he believed that the prisoners for whom he was responsible had escaped. Paul prevented this action by calling out to him not to harm himself for they were all there. That same evening the jailer and his household were converted and baptized (Acts 16:25–33).

An uncertain example is Samson, who died when he brought about the collapse of the temple where the Philistines were feasting. He killed three thousand as well as himself—more than all the enemies of God that he had killed in his life (Judg. 16:28–30). While this may have been an act of suicide, it appears more likely that Samson sacrificed himself to defeat the enemies of God. Since the LORD grants his request to restore his strength for this one last act, it would appear that the LORD permitted him to die in fulfillment of his mission as a judge of Israel.

Examples of Despairing of Life

Scripture also records the experience of various individuals who experienced dark days of the soul and longed for death. Moses, the “man of God,” overwhelmed by the burdens of ministry and despairing of life, prays the prayer of the discouraged pastor: “If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin.” (Num. 11:15, NIV). The LORD does not grant Moses's request for death. Instead he provides elders to share the burdens of ministry with him.

Elijah, the prophet of the LORD, exhausted after his contest with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel and under threat from Jezebel, echoes Moses's petition of the discouraged pastor and asks the Lord to end his life (1 Kings 19:4). Again, the LORD declines. Instead, he feeds him food and drink, gives him rest, gently but firmly counsels and encourages him, and returns him to ministry. But he also provides for him an assistant, Elisha, who will later become his successor when the Lord finally does relieve him of his stewardship.

Job, who endures a difficult stewardship of sorrow and bereavement, initially responds with strong trust in the LORD. Despite huge losses of family, friends, and wealth, he submits to these hard providences (Job 1:20–22). But as the suffering persisted and increased to unrelenting physical suffering, he began to fray at the edges. He challenges the LORD, despairs of life, and wishes he had never been born (Job 10:1–2, 18–19).

David, throughout the Psalms, frequently laments in words which reflect despair of life. Psalms 22, 69, and 42–43 find David apparently overwhelmed by his circumstances. The first two are recognized as anticipating the experience of suffering of the Lord Jesus himself. Psalms 42–43 find David's soul cast down for reasons he cannot discern. But he speaks to himself and to his readers to hope in God. He does not view his downcast state as

permanent, but trusts he will yet again praise the LORD. However, sometimes David knows precisely the roots of his despair. In Psalms 32, 38, and 51 he admits that his unrepentant sin has led to despondency and he pursues relief (and finds it) by seeking God's grace and forgiveness.

Jonah, bitterly angry because God had not destroyed the Ninevites as promised, and frustrated over the loss of a temporary shade bush, pleads for the Lord to end his life. Even though Jonah is frustrated by the LORD'S compassion, the LORD does not slay his grumbling prophet. Instead he extends that same compassion to Jonah. God reasons with him and points him to the need to have compassion and to value life both human and animal (Jon. 4:5–11).

A Biblical Perspective on Suicide

These examples reveal that the Bible recognizes suicide, and the despair of life that may tempt a person to it, but says little else. Surprisingly, the subject of suicide is not found in the case law of the Old Testament. Does this mean the Bible is neutral about suicide?

The answer is no. In the several examples of suicide surveyed above, none of them are commended (with the possible exception of Samson). Likewise, requests for death from Moses, Elijah, David, Job, and Jonah come in the context of despair. They are portrayed realistically and compassionately, but not positively. The LORD ministers to their sorrow but does not grant their petitions.

Despite the lack of elaboration and reinforcement given in the case law, taking one's life clearly violates the principles of the Sixth Commandment. The Bible teaches that the LORD is the one who gives life. He also preserves and protects it. In the Noachic covenant God preserves life by declaring the one who takes another person's life potentially forfeits their own. The reason provided is that such an act defaces the divine image of God with which he has created humankind (Gen. 9:6–7).

Not all taking of life is forbidden. When a soldier kills in the context of battle, this is not murder. When a person kills to protect himself or others, this is not murder. When a murderer who has been found guilty (according to a clearly defined process and very restrictive rules of evidence) in the Old Testament is put to death, this is not "state-sanctioned murder," it is God-sanctioned justice.

However, there can be no unauthorized taking of human life and suicide is not authorized. Nowhere in Scripture is it permissible to take one's own life unless it is done to lay down one's life for another in battle or out of love (John 15:13). Suicide is a form of murder. The difference is those who commit it make themselves both the perpetrator and the victim. To deface the image of God in this way is really a sign of rebellion. It is a rejection of the life that God has given. Suicide is a sin.

Suicide and Salvation

Does this mean that a professing Christian who takes his or her own life is not saved? This is not a simple question, but the short answer is no. The reason it is not simple is because none of us have access to another person's heart or motives. That is why we receive people into the membership of the visible church on the basis of a credible profession of faith. It is all we can do. It may be a person who makes a profession of faith is not a Christian in their heart. And, if they subsequently commit suicide, that could be evidence of their unbelief.

Nonetheless, if a person takes their own life it should not be viewed as proof positive that they were not believers. As we have seen, many godly individuals at certain points in their life and ministries have despaired of life. Two of them, Moses and Elijah, respectively inaugurated and restored the prophetic office in the Old Testament and later showed up on the Mount of Transfiguration! Is it possible for a Christian in a low moment of despair to end their life? Absolutely. Just as it is possible that a person like David, a man after God's own heart, might succumb to adultery and a murderous cover up. Or a man like Peter, who really loved Jesus, might, in a moment of crisis, swear with an oath that he never knew him.

To be sure, taking one's life is sin. It involves rejecting the gift of life that God has given. It disbelieves that God is able to sustain us in difficult circumstances. It denies that God will not tempt us beyond what we are able to bear. It is contrary to God's will. *We ought neither to contemplate it, nor do it.* But this does not mean that a person who commits it does not belong to the Lord. Scripture speaks of only one unforgiveable sin. Suicide is not it.

All of us will die with unconfessed sin without jeopardizing our salvation. No one is justified by their obedience. Our only hope on the day of judgment is what Christ has done on our behalf. Salvation has always been dependent upon the Lord and his ability to sustain us. It has never rested upon our ability to sustain ourselves spiritually or physically.

This is true of all of us who know the Lord and who, sadly, sin every day. It is also true of all who know the Lord and who, sadly, take their lives. We have every reason to believe that a Christian who commits suicide remains a Christian despite this sin, and, being joined to Christ, experiences the forgiveness of Christ's atoning work in regards to it. I also believe we can comfort those who have been left behind with those words, and ought to do so.

However, here as elsewhere, we are not to presume upon the grace of God. We are not to sin that grace may abound. While "to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21), and to "be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8), we are never encouraged to accelerate this outcome. Those who are despairing of life should seek help, not death.

The Aftermath of Suicide

While taking one's life does not rob the person of their salvation, it can produce other tragic consequences. Sadly, despite what we just discussed, suicide can carry with it a lingering doubt in the minds of those who are left behind about the spiritual state of the one who died. Further, the trauma of suicide greatly amplifies and complicates the grief of those who are survivors. Many spend the balance of their life trying to cope with its aftermath. Finally, ending one's life carries with it the potential of causing others to stumble: Those who have been contemplating suicide may be emboldened by the example of others to proceed with their own plan to end their life. These are all powerful additional reasons for not committing suicide.

2. Ministering to Those Who Despair of Life

Suicide is an uncomfortable topic, and its discomfort might tempt us to shy away from ministering to those we encounter who are contemplating it. We should not do so. Even if you do not have formal training, you know more than you think you know, and you can be more helpful than you might expect.

Many people are ambivalent or conflicted about taking their life. This is in our (and their) favor. A kind word, or the sharing of hope, can make a huge difference. I mentioned

how my college roommate helped me work through my own period of despair. I also reported how my parishioner was relieved of the temptation to end her life by a serious, but encouraging, conversation. Remember the LORD himself did something similar to Moses, Elijah, Jonah, David, and Job. He did not shy away from their despair. He ministered to it. So should we.

Myths and Misunderstandings

Several urban myths that surround suicide need correction. For example it is often stated that if a person talks about suicide they will not do it. This is patently false. Seventy percent of successful suicides have made at least one comment about taking their life before they do it.⁴ The reason is that almost all suicides are purposeful. Those contemplating it are agonizing over what they perceive to be real problems in their life, and they are viewing suicide as some kind of a solution. Usually they have been thinking about suicide for some time. However, they are also conflicted. Many do not really want to take their life, but they feel they have no other choice to end their personal or physical pain. If a person should share their secret plan, this should be taken seriously and followed up. It should never be dismissed or ignored.

A second myth is if a person tries and fails, they will not try again. This is incorrect. Most successful suicides have had at least two prior attempts. They are four times more likely to succeed the second time.

A third myth is that you can insert the idea of suicide in someone's head by talking to them about it, thus increasing the risk of its occurrence through the power of suggestion. Untrue. *Never hesitate* to ask someone if they are contemplating ending their life. Suicide is rarely a rash or spontaneous act. If someone is suicidal, it is likely that they have been thinking about it for some time. If they are not suicidal, and you ask them the question, they will likely simply deny being so. If they are, it may be a tremendous relief to be asked and to be able to share their secret burden. Indeed, they may be exceedingly grateful that someone has taken them seriously enough to raise the issue.

A fourth misunderstanding is that suicide is hereditary. Not true. Suicide is a highly individualistic act. However, depression, which can predispose a person to contemplate suicide, can be a family trait. Further, if a person has experienced the sorrow of a friend or family member escaping their struggles by taking their life, that person may be tempted to follow suit. Such an experience can lead to an unhealthy preoccupation with dealing with life's problems this way. However being close to someone who has committed suicide does not inevitably lead to a parallel destiny.

Some Reasons Why People Take Their Own Lives

Suicide is a very personal and highly individualistic matter. While there may be some common elements among those who commit it, there is no cookie-cutter pattern. The reasons are as unique and numerous as the individuals themselves.

Nonetheless, certain patterns of thinking may be discernible, many of which should elicit empathy. Many suffer personal pain that has persisted over a long period of time (as in the example of Job). Personal emotional pain is very difficult. It feels like bereavement. Persistent physical or emotional pain can be a recipe for despair, and those who suffer from

⁴ Karen Mason, *Preventing Suicide: A Handbook for Pastors, Chaplains, and Pastoral Counselors* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 52–53.

it may believe that suicide will release them from it. They have lost any sense of volition. They feel they have no other option or choice. The examples of despair of life in the Bible mostly reflect this view.

Some believe they are a burden to others or that they have behaved so badly that ending their life will relieve friends or family of some of their pain. They justify it by convincing themselves, "They would be better off without me."

A few years ago a childhood friend took his life. He had been laid off as a professional older worker with dated skills and had difficulty finding new employment. He struggled to provide for his family and to retain a vocational identity. Crushed with a sense of failure, he convinced himself that by taking his life he would once again be able to provide for his family, looking to insurance to reduce financial pressures. Unfortunately, he did not share his misguided plan and did not reach out to anyone who might have dissuaded him. His death took his wife and extended family completely by surprise. He did not understand the loss of his presence was far greater than the monetary gain of an insurance policy. The sorrow was immense and his "solution" caused much anguish. Suicide does not end personal pain, it simply passes it on to the survivors.

Some contemplate suicide because of anger, frustration, or a desire to get back at someone. Taking their life is designed to make another suffer for what they have done as in, "I'll show them! They'll be sorry when I'm gone!" This reasoning can be a special temptation for teens who are shunned or bullied. Some may leverage the threat of suicide to control their situation and manipulate others to do what they want. Jonah's death wish may contain some of this element.

Others are tempted to end their lives when they feel they have committed some great sin. A person may be traumatically afraid of being shamed if they are guilty of sexual sin or are exposed after committing a crime. Others may feel they need to be punished or make atonement for their failure. Ironically, people who are spiritually sensitive can especially be vulnerable at this point. We need to be better at embracing and restoring those who have been shamed. As churches and Christians we should always lead with grace.

One major contributing cause of suicide is depression. This is a huge and complex subject, which would require a separate article to do it justice, but a few words are in order. Depression exists on a spectrum ranging from mild to moderate to severe. Depression is a real and serious state, especially in its severe form. It can be provoked by experiential factors such as trauma, severe loss or bereavement, or chemical changes stemming from medical conditions, medications, or sudden hormonal changes. The last category includes postpartum depression which can be genuinely risky for women and should be carefully monitored.

Severe depression robs people of joy, hope, motivation, and pleasure and can lead to overwhelming feelings of guilt, sadness, weariness, and a despair of life that can tempt people to end their lives. Medical intervention may be necessary and should be actively pursued if required. The use of certain modern medications, coupled with counseling and personal support, often leads to substantial recovery. However, there is no magic bullet and relapses can occur.

Ministering to a Suicidal Person

There is no "one size fits all" approach for talking with someone who may be despairing of life. What follows is not a procedure. It is simply of one a number of things to keep in mind, especially if you never had such an encounter. Recognize that in a single

conversation you will not be able to touch on all of them, let alone go into depth, and you should not try. You also need not proceed in the order they are discussed below.

Things to Avoid

First, there are some obvious approaches to avoid. Do not ridicule, be skeptical or harsh, or overly preachy. Try not to be uptight or anxious. If you have never encountered this situation before, you may need to put on the best theatrical performance of your life! Be kind, empathetic, and concerned, while at the same time remaining calm. Agree that the situation is serious, but encourage the person that there are many alternatives to ending one's life. Do not focus on how sinful suicide is unless a person directly asks you if suicide is a sin. Emphasizing the sin of suicide may only add to the pain which you are trying to alleviate. Likewise, never get into a power struggle with them ("I don't think you have the courage to do it!"). It might push them over the edge.

Second, when you encounter someone despairing of life do not be quick to provide advice. It is likely you do not really know what is going on in their minds. The most obvious problem may not be the issue that is tempting them to flee this life. The path to despair can be a long and twisty road, and many have traveled it some distance prior to their sharing with you.

Encourage Them to Share

Try to get them to talk, while you listen. Do not pressure them, but encourage them to share the things that are troubling them. Take the time to get a better sense of why they are contemplating ending their life and why they understand it to be a solution to their problems. See if you can discover what they are hoping to accomplish. What they share may sound strange or even humorous. But take it seriously. Gently suggest to them that whatever they hope to accomplish will not be achieved by ending their life. Remember, they are viewing suicide as a solution to some problem. Point out calmly, not harshly or argumentively, that what they hope to achieve will not be realized and that there are much better solutions.

Remember, people tend to be conflicted about suicide. Use that to advantage by encouraging them to talk about their pain and to move them away from the edge. Let their ambivalence rise. Let them know you care about them and want to help them. Those who want to kill themselves need alternative choices. They have been likely stewing in their own gravy for a long time and that has colored their perception of what is happening in their life. Encourage them to look at their situation through your eyes, the eyes of others, and the eyes of God and Scripture.

If you can, try to identify specific events or circumstances that have precipitated this crisis and encourage them to share as much as they can. This may help you get to the real engine that is driving them and the real pain with which they are suffering. A concern about damaging the family car may reveal an ongoing struggle in their relationship with their parents. A disappointment about not being asked to the prom may uncover a deep sadness about being alone, or unattractive, or being ostracized from others. Personal despondency may be rooted in serious problems in marriage or family. Despair over whether or not they are really Christians may uncover a sexual or substance addiction or some serious transgression.

As a general rule in counseling I frequently urge those who are struggling with a problem to pursue a less radical, rather than a more radical, solution. For example it is

better to get a tutor or seek extra help from a teacher rather than to quit school. It is better to try to change your attitude toward a job situation and make it better than to simply resign and find a new one. It is better to try and sort out the problems in a marriage and seek reconciliation rather than to divorce. Suicide is the most radical solution of all. Press the point that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. It is far better to pursue alternatives and there is hope and help available. This may provide some traction for further ministry.

Assess the Risk

Try to discover how great the possibility is that they will do themselves harm. Ask them point blank if they are planning to take their own life. If they admit they are tempted, ask them what means they have in mind, if any. Try to discern if they have a specific plan, if the means of taking their life are accessible, and how lethal they are. Try to confiscate pills or remove firearms, car keys, or anything else they might identify as a means.

Find out if they have a medical condition. Ask them if they have been abusing any substances like drugs or alcohol and if they are presently under the influence of any medications. If this is so, it greatly complicates your ministry to them because you are speaking to the abused substance not the person. But encourage them that help with the substance problem is available; and that they are not in any condition to make such a serious decision while they are under its influence.

If you are talking to a person on the phone, try to get them to reveal where they are. If they are reluctant to tell you, try to weave into the conversation comments or questions that might help you figure that out: “Are you with someone?” “If so are you at their house?” This could be vitally important in case they hang up and you need to direct emergency help to them.

Offer Them Biblical Hope

This is vitally important. Point out that others have despaired of life and been tempted to take their life and have been delivered (1 Cor.10:13). Give examples from Scripture or life. Encourage them that you are there to help them handle their present crisis which you believe is serious and painful, but manageable. Remember they are taking a risk in revealing their vulnerability. Be steady. If you are unable to handle the crisis, they may not believe they can trust you.

Remind them that grace is available. Jesus’s experience of enduring temptation makes him a merciful high priest who can sympathize with their struggles and give them the mercy and help that they need (Heb. 4:14–16). The accessibility of grace is especially important if they are despairing of life because they feel they have committed some terrible sin. Pray for them.

Make a Covenant with Them

After you have gained some insight into the situation, ask the individual if they want you to help them. If they are willing, press for a commitment or try to make covenant with the person to promise they will not harm themselves. Explain that you are making a commitment to them and that you want them to make a commitment to you. If they are reluctant, seek a lesser covenant that they will not harm themselves without talking to you first and face-to-face. Make sure that any means of harming themselves are removed or disposed of. If you are talking on the phone, make sure that someone will be with them in

person within the hour (you, if no one else). *Within 24 hours try to have them counseling with someone.*

Avoid getting drawn into an unhelpful covenant. Many persons who share deep private thoughts will want to swear you to secrecy and make you promise you will not share what they have said with anyone. Inform them that you cannot swear to promises that might put them at risk or keep them from getting the help and encouragement they might need. But also make it clear you have no intention to gossip about them or humiliate them or encourage anyone else to do so.

Even if you have made a covenant and the immediate crisis subsides, be alert to any unusual change of mood. If people who have been depressed and despairing suddenly have a new outlook on life, it could be a warning signal that they have made the decision to take their life. Their mood may have shifted because they are relieved of the agony of making the decision and are in the process of carrying out their plan. This needs to be addressed and quickly.

What to Do If You Are Suicidal

Much of what I have said about ministering to others also applies to ourselves if we are despairing of life. First and foremost, talk to somebody. This is non-negotiable. Do not trust your own perceptions of the situation. You have been confined to your own thoughts for too long. You need some objective input outside of yourself. Reach out to someone. It may be a family member, a trusted friend, pastor (or fellow pastor), or counselor.

Have hope. Remember the question of Psalms 42 and 43: “Why are you cast down, O my Soul?” The Psalmist is depressed. He does not even know why. But he speaks to himself to hang on and to hope in God. Why? Because he will again praise him. How we feel at any given moment is not a predictor of how we will feel tomorrow. Remember, “Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.” This testimony is true. Do not forget it. Do not end your life. Ask for help. Reach out to somebody.

If your despair of life flows from feelings of anger or revenge, remember what the Bible teaches about that. We need to deal with our anger, not by killing ourselves or someone else, but by repentance. Grace gives us both the means and the motivation to be reconciled, to offer forgiveness and receive it, and to bring healing to broken relationships. Bitterness only destroys our inner life.

Remember that while suicide might seem to relieve our personal pain, it does not remove it. It only passes that pain on to those who are left behind. If you love your family, why would you want them to suffer as you have suffered?

Make a covenant with someone you trust. If you feel that you might be at risk of harming yourself in the present or in the future, reach out to someone and make a covenant with them that you will never do so without speaking to them. It is not uncommon for ministers to make a covenant with another friend or minister to gain support and have a contact person if they ever find themselves in a situation of temptation or compromise. This is a wonderful instrument of protection and accountability. Extend it to the potential of despair or self-harm. It can even be with the same person.

Minister to your body. Remember that before God addressed Elijah’s despair, he gave him lots of good food and rest. If you are struggling with depression and are tempted to harm yourself, get a general medical checkup to determine whether there might be some underlying hormonal or metabolic condition that might be contributing to it such as thyroid

problems, diabetes, or anemia. Bad eating habits, lack of exercise, or insufficient quantity or quality of sleep can also be a significant factor.

Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship leader Paul Little once offered this wonderful practical advice: “Never commit suicide until you have had at least 12 hours of sleep!” Remember these words. They are words to live by! I have often had the opportunity to apply them to myself and to share them with others.

Some Final Comments

Remember, not all people who are despairing of life actually want theirs to end. They want hope. Offer it with strength and calmness. They are like sheep without a shepherd. Shepherd them, and seek to point them to the Great Shepherd. As officers in the church of Jesus Christ, we have both the obligation and privilege to minister to troubled people. We do what we can. But we are limited in what we can do. There are many who are conflicted about ending their lives. Unfortunately, there are some who are committed to it. As in all helping professions, it is very possible that someone to whom you are ministering may commit suicide on your watch. It may even be a family member or someone else very close to you.

This is a terrible thing to cope with. However, if it happens, there are several things to remember. First, there is nothing we can do to prevent a person from taking their life if they are intent on doing so. We can try to put obstacles in their way and reach out and offer them hope and alternatives, but we cannot prevent it.

Second, there is nothing you have done or failed to do that is the ultimate cause of someone’s suicide. It is not your fault. It is their choice. Most likely you did what you could. It is not wrong to wish that things had turned out differently, but it is not fruitful to punish yourself with vain regrets or “If only” scenarios. This, of course, is much easier to say than to embrace. If you struggle with a sense of failure, remember there is grace for you as well.

Finally, it is pure hubris to think that we can control someone else’s life. We cannot live other peoples’ lives for them. We are not even able to sustain our own. We must trust God for both ourselves and others.

While we may not have special training, there is still much we can do to promote a ministry of encouragement to those who struggle in our congregations. We have the gospel. We have the Word of God and prayer. We have a testimony. We have love and hope to give. We should share it generously. Be hospitable to those who are lonely or distressed. In this way you can do more than you think in ministering to your congregation in general, and to those who may at times despair of life, in particular.

There is much more that could and should be said. But let me close with this. As officers of the church, we are called to shepherd the flock and minister to those who are troubled by binding up the brokenhearted. This includes those despairing of life. “The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (Ps. 34:18).

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ServantClassics

*The Commentary of John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople and our Father among the Saints, on the Letter to the Galatians*¹

Parts 1–3

by David C. Noe and Joseph A. Tipton

Part 1

This introduction teems with much passion and great fervor. In fact not only the introduction, but indeed the whole letter, so to speak, is like this as well. For those who always speak calmly to their students, when the students require sternness, this is characteristic not of a teacher but of a corrupter and an enemy. Consequently, even our Lord, though he often spoke gently with his disciples, sometimes used a more rough style, at one time blessing, at another rebuking. So, when he announced that he will lay the foundations of the church on Peter's confession, he said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon bar Jonah."² But not long after these words he said: "Get behind me, Satan. You are my stumbling block."³ And in another passage, again, he said, "Are you also so completely foolish?"⁴ Moreover, he inspired them with such fear that even John said that when they saw him conversing with the Samaritan woman and reminded him about eating, yet: "No one dared to say to him, 'What are you looking for?' or 'Why are you talking with her?'"⁵ Paul understood this, and following in the steps of his teacher he varied his speech with an eye to the need of his students, at one time cauterizing and cutting and at another applying a gentle salve. Thus, to the Corinthians he said: "What do you want? Should I come to you with a rod, or in love and the spirit of gentleness?"⁶ Yet with the Galatians he took a different tack, "O you foolish Galatians."⁷ And not just once but even a second time he employed this sort of threatening. He upbraided them at the end of the work, saying, "Let no one cause me troubles."⁸ And again he seeks to minister

¹ This translation is based on the text provided in *Sancti Patris Nostri Joannis Chrysostomi, In Divi Pauli Epistolam Ad Galatas Commentaria*, Oxford 1852, Field.

² Matthew 16:17.

³ Ibid., v. 23.

⁴ Matthew 15:16.

⁵ John 4:27.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 4:21.

⁷ Galatians 3:1.

⁸ Galatians 6:17.

gently as when he says, “My little children, whom I again bring forth with labor pains.”⁹ There are in fact many such expressions as these.

But it is evident to all, even on a first reading, that this letter is full of passion. So, we must explain what it was that had aroused Paul’s anger against his students. For it was no minor issue, nor something trivial, since Paul would not have employed such a marked thrust.¹⁰ Becoming angry in the face of misfortunes is typical of cowardly, cruel, and miserable men, just as losing nerve at major obstacles is the habit of those more sluggish and dull. But Paul is not such a person. So then, what was the particular sin that had stirred him up? It was something great and excessive, and something alienating them all from Christ, as he himself said a little further on: “Look! I Paul tell you plainly that if you submit to circumcision, Christ will do you no good at all.”¹¹ And again, “Whoever of you seek to be justified by the law, you have disqualified yourselves for grace.” So, what in the world was this sin? We must identify it rather precisely: those of the Jews who had come to faith were at the same time both holding to their former commitment to Judaism and inebriated by empty doctrine. And wanting to arrogate to themselves the prerogatives of teachers, going to the people of Galatia they began to teach that it was necessary to be circumcised, and to keep sabbaths and new-moons, and not to tolerate Paul who was removing such practices. “For Peter, James, and John (the first¹² of the apostles who were with Christ),” they say, “do not forbid such practices.” And truly they did not forbid them. Yet in doing this they were not presenting it as authoritative teaching, but rather accommodating the weakness of the believers who came from the Jews. But Paul, because he was preaching to the Gentiles, had no need of such accommodation. Therefore, when he was in Judea, he himself also employed this sort of accommodation. But his opponents, in their deception, were not stating the reasons why both Paul and the other apostles were making an accommodation. Instead, they deceived the weaker brothers in claiming that they should not tolerate Paul. For he had shown up “yesterday and a moment ago,” while they had been with Peter. He had become a disciple of the apostles, while they were disciples of Christ. And he was by himself, while they were many and the pillars of the church. So, they were casting at him the charge of hypocrisy, alleging that he was himself abrogating circumcision, “though he has clearly made use of such things elsewhere and preaches one thing to us, but differently to others.”

Therefore when Paul saw that the whole gentile world was aflame, that a troubling fire had been lit against the church of the Galatians, and that the whole structure was tottering and ran the risk of falling, he was gripped on the one side with righteous anger and on the other with despair. He made this very clear indeed when he said, “I wanted to be present with you then, and to change my tone.”¹³ He is writing the letter to respond to all this. And from these opening comments he refers to that which they were saying while undermining his reputation, saying that the others were disciples of Christ, though Paul himself was a disciple of the apostles. Thus, he began like this: “Paul, an apostle, not

⁹ Galatians 4:19.

¹⁰ The vivid metaphor Chrysostom employs here is military. *καταφορά* (*kataphora*), prevalent in the Roman historians Polybius, Josephus, and others, is typically used to describe the sudden downward stroke of a sword.

¹¹ Galatians 5:2.

¹² *πρῶτοι* (*prōtoi*) indicates both chronological priority and preeminence.

¹³ Galatians 4:20.

from men nor through men.”¹⁴ For those cheats were saying (as I mentioned before) that he was the last of all the apostles and had been taught by them. For Peter and James and John were called first, and were the main leaders of the disciples. They received their teaching from Christ, and thus more obedience was owed them than him. They, moreover, did not forbid circumcision nor keeping the law. Thus, making these claims and others like them, Paul’s opponents were seeking to diminish him and were at the same time exalting the glory of the other apostles. This they did not in order to extol them, but that they might deceive the Galatians by inappropriately persuading them to pay attention to the law. So, naturally he began in this fashion. For because they were treating his teaching with contempt, saying that it was from men, while Peter’s was from Christ, he immediately, from the introduction, set himself against this notion, stating that he was an apostle “not from men, nor through men.” For Ananias baptized Paul,¹⁵ but he had not freed him from error and did not lead him to faith. Instead, Christ himself after ascending sent that astounding voice to him, through which the Lord caught him like a fish. For while Christ was walking along the sea, he called Peter and his brother and John and his brother. But Paul he called after ascending to heaven. And just as the other men did not need a second voice but immediately, dropping their nets and all their other affairs, followed him, so Paul also from that first call ascended to the most important position, was baptized, and undertook an implacable war against the Jews. And it was in this respect most of all that he surpassed the other apostles. “For I labored more than they,” he said.¹⁶ But for the time being he does not argue this. Rather, Paul is content in claiming equality with the other apostles. For he was eager not to show that he surpassed them, but to refute the premise of the error. Thus, his first statement, “not from men,” was common to all men. For the gospel has its origin and root from above. But the second statement, “not through men,” is particular to the apostles. For Christ did not call them “through men,” but of his own accord “through himself.”

Why did he not mention his call and say, “Paul, called not from men,” but instead mentioned his apostleship? It is because his whole argument concerned this point. For his opponents said that the apostles had been entrusted with this teaching by men, and thus it was necessary for him to follow them. But Luke made clear that it was not delivered to him “from men” when he wrote: “And while they were worshipping and fasting before the Lord, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now set apart for me Paul and Barnabas.’”¹⁷ From this it is clear that the authority of the Son and the Spirit is one. For Paul says that in being sent by the Spirit he was sent by Christ. And it is clear from elsewhere that Paul attributes the things of God to the Spirit. Thus, when he is speaking to the elders of Miletus he says, “Keep watch for yourselves and for the flock over which the Holy Spirit has set you as pastors and overseers.”¹⁸ And yet he says in another letter, “Those whom God has established in the church, first apostles, second prophets, then pastors and teachers.”¹⁹ So,

¹⁴ Ibid., 1:1a.

¹⁵ Acts 9:18.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:10.

¹⁷ Acts 13:2.

¹⁸ Cf. Acts 20:28ff.

¹⁹ Chrysostom has here conflated, whether deliberately or as a consequence of quoting from memory, two different passages: Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Corinthians 12:28. From the latter he took the words οὗς μὲν ἔθετο ὁ θεὸς ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ πρῶτον ἀποστόλους, δεύτερον προφήτας (*hous men etheto ho theos en tē*

he uses this expression indiscriminately, saying that the things of the Spirit are of God, and those of God are of the Spirit. And in another way he also stops up the mouths of heretics, saying, “through Jesus Christ and God his Father.”²⁰ For because heretics say that this word was attributed to the Son as though he were lesser, see what Paul does: he uses the word in the case of the Father thereby teaching us not to apply any principle whatsoever to an inexpressible nature, not to establish measures or degrees of divinity between the Son and the Father. For after he said, “through Jesus Christ,” he added “God the Father.” If in mentioning the Father by himself he had said, “through whom,” then they would have devised some sophism,²¹ saying that this expression “through whom” is applied to the Father, since the works of the Son reflect on him. And yet Paul mentions the Son and the Father at the same time; and in applying this expression to them jointly he no longer allows their argument any place. For he does not do this as though attributing now the deeds of the Son to the Father. No, he shows that this expression admits no difference in substance whatsoever. And what then would those say who, with respect to baptism, consider it somehow lesser because one is baptized into the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit? For if the Son were lesser than the Father, then what would they say now that the apostle here begins with Christ then moves on to the Father? But we shall speak no such blasphemy. We must not in contending with them depart from the truth. No, even if they should rage ten thousand times, we must keep our eyes on the standards of piety. Therefore, just as we would not say that the Son is greater than the Father simply because he mentioned Christ first—for that would be the very height of absurd foolishness and consummate impiety—so neither would we say that because the Son is placed after the Father we must suppose that the Son is lesser than the Father.

Next we read “who raised him from the dead.”²² What are you doing, Paul? Though you desire to lead the Judaizing men to faith, you do not bring before them any of those great and brilliant expressions such as you wrote to the Philippians. You said, for example, “Though being in the form of God he did not consider equality with God something to be laid hold of.”²³ You also later said to the Hebrews that “He is the radiance of God’s glory, and the express image of his nature.”²⁴ And then the son of thunder in his introductory words shouted forth that “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”²⁵ Many times Jesus himself, when discussing²⁶ with the Jews, used to say that he is as powerful as the Father, and that he

ekklēsia prōton apostolous, deuteron prophētas), while he finished the quote with a portion from Ephesians 4, namely ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους (*poimēnas kai didaskalous*).

²⁰ Galatians 1:1b.

²¹ Chrysostom uses here the verb σοφίζω (*sophizō*), “to act like a sophist.” In this he alludes to a long tradition stretching back to Gorgias, Prodicus, and other opponents of Socrates in the Platonic dialogues who made the weaker argument the stronger.

²² Galatians 1:1c.

²³ Philippians 2:6.

²⁴ Hebrews 1:3.

²⁵ John 1:1.

²⁶ Chrysostom uses here the somewhat unusual participle φθειγγόμενος (*phthengomenos*). This is done apparently *variationis causa*, since he has in previous sentences made use of a range of synonyms including γράφω (*graphō*), λέγω (*legō*), ἀναφωνέω (*anaphōneō*), and ἀναβοάω (*anaboāō*).

possesses the same authority.²⁷ But do you, Paul, not say here any of those things? Instead, omitting them all, do you mention Christ's dispensation according to the flesh, making his cross and death the main point? "Yes," he says. For if Paul were addressing people who had no grand conception about Christ, then saying those things would be called for. But since those who believe that they will be punished if they depart from the law are opposing us, Paul thus mentions the acts through which Christ abolishes the need of the law. I mean, to be precise, the benefit that arose for all from his cross and resurrection. For the statement "in the beginning was the Word," and "He was in the form of God" and "making himself equal to God" and all such—these would suit someone demonstrating the divinity of the Word, not someone adding anything to the present topic. But the statement "who raised Him from the dead" is characteristic of someone calling to mind the chief point of the kindness on our behalf, the very thing that serves Paul's purpose for the question under discussion. For many people are in the habit of not attending to words that represent God's majesty as much as they are to those that manifest his kindness toward men. Therefore, declining to say those kinds of things he spoke about the kindness that was done for us.

Part 2

But then heretics counterattack, saying, "Look, the Father raises the Son." But now that they have become diseased, they are willingly deaf to lofty doctrines and select the lowly doctrines as well. And these statements were expressed this way: 1) for the sake of the flesh, 2) for the Father's honor, or 3) for some other purpose. The heretics, by selecting from among these and scrutinizing them one by one, disparage themselves (for I would not say that they succeed in harming the Scriptures). Such persons I would gladly ask, "Why do you make such claims? Do you want to prove that the Son is weak and not strong enough for the resurrection of a single body?" And truly, faith in him made even the shadows of those who believed in him raise the dead.²⁸ Then those men who were believing on Him, though remaining still mortal, by the mere shadow of their earthen bodies and from the shadow of the clothes that were attached to those bodies raised the dead.²⁹ And yet Christ was not strong enough to raise himself? So then how is this lunacy not obvious and the intensity of this madness? Did you hear him saying, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up?"³⁰ And again, "I have the authority to lay down my life, and I have the authority to take it back again?"³¹ Why then is the Father said to have raised him up? To show that the Father does all the same things as the Son. And yet this is especially said for the sake of the honor that is due the Father and for the weakness of the listeners.

²⁷ In his use of the terms *δύναται* (*dunatai*) and *ἐξουσίαν* (*exousian*), Chrysostom registers the long-held distinction between ability and authority and ascribes both to Christ. This distinction is perhaps more common to students of the Latin language, where it is represented by the terms *potentia* and *potestas*. Though the two do not mutually entail the other, in the persons of the Trinity the distinction is not consequential.

²⁸ Acts 5:15.

²⁹ Acts 19:12.

³⁰ John 2:19

³¹ John 10:18.

Paul says, “And all the brothers that are with me.”³² Why has he never once done this elsewhere in the course of his letter writing? In other places he provides only his own name, or that of two or three others by name. Here he speaks in terms of a whole group and consequently does not mention anyone by name. So why does he do this? His opponents were slandering him as the only one who was preaching as he did, and that he was introducing something new into his doctrines. Thus, because he wanted to remove suspicion and show that he counted many who shared his opinion, he wrote the “brothers.” By this he makes clear that the very things he is writing he also writes in accordance with their judgment.

Next he adds “to the churches of Galatia.”³³ For this fire of false teaching was spreading not just to one city, nor two or three, but to the whole nation of the Galatians. Look with me here how Paul felt so much indignation. For he did not say, “to the beloved,” nor “to the saints,” but “to the churches of Galatia.” This expression was indicative of someone irritated in spirit and exhibiting his distress, that is, not addressing them by their names with love nor with honor, but by their assembly only. And he does not address them as the churches *of God* either, but simply “the churches of Galatia.” In addition he hurries to engage the rebellious element. Therefore, he also used the name “church,” shaming³⁴ them and drawing them into unity. For since they were divided into many factions, they could not be addressed by this title. For the designation “church” is a designation of harmony and concord.

“Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”³⁵ Paul everywhere uses this tag by necessity, but he especially does so now when writing to the Galatians. Since they were in danger of falling from grace, he prays that it might be restored to them yet again. Since they made themselves God’s enemies, he beseeches God to lead them back again to that same peace. He says, “God our Father.”³⁶ And here the heretics again are easily caught. For they claim that when John in the introduction to his Gospel says, “And the Word was God,”³⁷ he says this clause without an article for this reason: so as to diminish the divinity of the Son. And again that when Paul says the Son is “in the likeness of God,”³⁸ he did not say that concerning the Father because of the fact that this too is used without the article, what answer would they make here when Paul says, not, “from God”³⁹ but, “from God the Father”?

Then he calls God “Father,” not with a view to flattering them, but vigorously upbraiding and reminding them of the reason why they have become sons. For it was not through the Law but through the washing of regeneration that they were counted worthy of that honor. Therefore, he sows the traces of God’s kindness everywhere, even in his introduction, as though he were saying, “How is that you, who were slaves and enemies and estranged from God, suddenly call him Father? Surely it is not the Law that gave you this kinship? Why then indeed, abandoning the one who has led you so close to him, are

³² Galatians 1:2a.

³³ Ibid., 1:2b.

³⁴ The word Chrysostom uses here, *ἐντρέπων* (*entrepōn*), Paul employs in a similar context in I Cor. 4:14.

³⁵ Galatians 1:3.

³⁶ Ibid., 1:4.

³⁷ John 1:1.

³⁸ Heb. 1:3.

³⁹ Here the article τοῦ (*του*) is used with θεοῦ (*theou*), while in the subsequent clause it is anarthrous.

you running back to your tutor?”⁴⁰ It is not only in the case of Father, but also in that of the Son that these titles suffice for demonstrating their benefaction. For the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, when carefully examined, clearly shows all his kindness. Indeed, he shall be called Jesus for this reason, it says, “Because he will save his people from their sins.”⁴¹ And the appellation “Christ” calls to mind the anointing of the Spirit.

We come next to the phrase “who gave himself for our sins.”⁴² Do you see that he did not merely submit to the service of a slave nor a compulsory service, nor was he handed over by someone else, but rather “gave himself”? Consequently, whenever you hear John saying that the Father gave his only-begotten Son for our sakes, do not for this reason disparage the value of the Only-begotten, nor suspect anything merely human is meant. Even if the Father is said to have given him up, this is not said in order that you should consider his service that of a slave, but in order that you might understand that this was also acceptable to the Father. The very thing Paul here makes clear when he says, “According to the will of our God and Father.”⁴³ It is not “according to a command” but “according to the will.” For since the will of the Father and the Son is one, whatsoever the Son desired, these things also the Father willed.⁴⁴ Next we read, “For our sins.”⁴⁵ We pierced ourselves, he says, with a thousand evils and were liable to the harshest punishment. And the law did not free us but condemned us in rendering our sin more manifest and not being able to free us or turn God away from his anger. But the Son of God both made possible that which was impossible – doing away with our sins and turning us from enemies to his friends – and gracing us with myriad other good things.

So, Paul next says, “That he may free us from this present evil age.”⁴⁶ Other heretics again snatch at this phrase, casting aspersions on this present life and using Paul’s testimony to do so. “For look,” the heretic says, “Paul has dubbed the present age evil.” And tell me, then, what is an age? Time, measured in days and hours. So what? Is the mere passing of the days evil, and the course of the sun too?⁴⁷ No one would ever say that, even if he veers to the extremes of stupidity. “But he did not say, ‘time’,” the heretic says, “no, he called the present life evil.” And to be sure the actual words do not say this. But you do not stop at those words which you twisted into an accusation: instead, you are hacking out a path for your own interpretation. You will therefore permit us also to interpret what has been said, all the more so since what we say is pious and reasonable. So, then what should we say? That none of those evils would ever be responsible for good things, and yet this present life is responsible for thousands of crowns and such great rewards. The blessed Paul himself, at any rate, unmistakably praises this life when he says as follows: “If my living is in the flesh, this is for me fruitful labor; and as to what I shall chose, I do not know.”⁴⁸ And as he sets before himself the choice between

⁴⁰ Chrysostom here references Galatians 3:24, in which Paul compares the Mosaic Law to a tutor, leading the underage Israel to himself.

⁴¹ Matthew 1:21.

⁴² Galatians 1:4a.

⁴³ Ibid., 1:4c.

⁴⁴ Chrysostom here varies the vocabulary in each clause, from ἐβούλετο (*ebouleto*) in the first to ἠθέλην (*ethelen*) in the second. Presumably this is to demonstrate both the unity and distinction of the will of the Father and Son in their intra-Trinitarian relationship.

⁴⁵ Galatians 1:4a.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1:4b.

⁴⁷ Chrysostom means here that by which the days are measured, i.e. the sun’s rising and setting.

⁴⁸ Philippians 1:22.

living here and casting off this life to be with Christ, he prefers to pass through the present life. But if it were evil, then he would not have said such things in his own case, nor would anyone else be able to make use of it for the end of virtue, no matter how zealously intent on doing so. For no one could ever use wickedness and turn it to a good end. Such a person could not use prostitution as a stimulant to self-control nor envy as a goad to friendliness.

For indeed, Paul says about the presumption of the flesh that “it does not submit to the law of God, nor can it do so,”⁴⁹ he means this, that wickedness which remains wickedness cannot be virtue. Consequently, whenever you hear “wicked age,” understand that it means that its deeds are wicked, that its will has been corrupted. For neither did Christ come in order that he might kill us and lead us away from the present life, but that, when he has freed us from this world, he might make us ready to become worthy of dwelling in heaven. For this reason he said while speaking with his Father: “They are also in the world, and I am coming to you... I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one,”⁵⁰ that is, from wickedness. And if you are not content with these words, but still persist in holding that this present life is evil, you should not criticize those who commit suicide. For just as he who extricates himself from wickedness does not deserve reproaches but rather commendation, so also the man who ends his own life by a violent death as through hanging or other things like that would not, according to you, deserve to be blamed. But as it is God punishes such persons more than murderers, and all of us, quite appropriately, find such persons loathsome. For if it is not a good thing to destroy other persons, it is much more ignoble to kill oneself. Yet if the present life is evil, we ought to reward murderers because they free us from that evil!

Still, apart from these things, they also trip themselves up because of what they themselves say. For when they claim that the sun is god, and after that the moon, and they worship these as the causes of many good things, they make mutually contradictory statements. For the use of these and other heavenly bodies does nothing else but contribute to the present life for us, which they call evil, sustaining and illuminating various objects and bringing fruits to their ripeness. So how then do those who are gods in your view introduce into the composition of an evil life such a great public benefit? But neither are the stars gods—heaven forbid; they are the works of God made for our use—nor is the world evil. But if you object to me that there are murderers, and adulterers, and grave robbers, I answer that these do not at all pertain to the present life. For such are not sins that come from life in the flesh, but from a corrupted will. Because if these were the deeds of the present life, as part and parcel with it, nobody would be free nor pure. Yet see how it is impossible for anyone to escape the peculiar qualities of life in the flesh. What are these? I mean things like eating, drinking, sleeping, growing, being hungry, thirsty, being born, dying, and all things similar to these. Nobody would be exempt from these things—not the sinner, not the righteous man, not a king nor private citizen—but we all are subject to the necessity of nature. Consequently, no one would escape the performance of even sinful acts if such were apportioned to the nature of this life, as such actions are not.

Do not tell me that the those who succeed are scarce. For you will find that no one has ever overcome these natural necessities. So, until even one person succeeding in

⁴⁹ Romans 8:7.

⁵⁰ John 17:11a, 15.

being virtuous is found, your argument will not be at all diminished. What do you mean, you wretched and miserable man? Is the present life evil, when in it we have come to know God, in it we philosophize about the things to come, in it we have gone from being men to angels, and join in the chorus of the heavenly powers?⁵¹ And what other proof will we look for that your understanding is evil and corrupted?

“Why then,” our opponent says, “did Paul say that the present age is evil?” He was using a common manner of speaking. For we are quite accustomed to say, “I had a bad day.” We mean by this not the time itself but lay the blame on what transpired or the circumstance. Thus, Paul used a common expression when he blamed acts of the wicked will. And he shows that Christ has both freed us from our former sins and secured our future. For by saying, “who gave himself for our sins,” he made clear the former. And by adding “that he might free us from the present evil age,” he indicated safety for the future. For the law was weak compared to the one, but grace has proven effective against them both.⁵²

Next we read, “according to the will of our God and Father.”⁵³ For because they thought that they were disobeying God, as the one who had given the Law, and they were afraid of abandoning the old covenant and come to the new, he also corrects this assumption of theirs by saying that these things also seemed good to the Father. And he did not say simply, “the Father,” but “our Father.” So, he uses that word immediately, reprimanding them by saying that Christ has made his Father our Father.

Part 3

There follows this: “To whom be glory forever. Amen.” This expression is also unfamiliar and strange. For we find the word “Amen” placed nowhere at the beginning or the introductory remarks of a letter, but rather after many other words. Then, showing that the things he used already are a sufficient charge against the Galatians, and that his argument is adequate, he added this preface. For incontrovertible charges do not need a long build-up. So, reminding them of the cross and resurrection, of the ransom for sins, of security for their future, the intent of the Father, the will of the Son, of grace, of peace, of all God’s gifts, he ended his argument with a doxology. Paul did this, not only for the reason I just mentioned, but also because he was contemplating what God did in a single blow and in the smallest amount of time to us, given who we were.

These ideas, which he was unable to set out plainly in argument, he summarized with a doxology—offering up praise on behalf of the whole world. It was not one worthy of the subject, but simply what he was able to express. Therefore, he afterward used an even more forceful expression, just like one greatly inflamed by consideration of God’s kindnesses. For after Paul says, “To whom be glory forever, Amen” he embarks on a quite pointed rebuke. So, he says, “I am astonished that you are so quickly moving away from him who called you in the grace of Christ for another gospel.”⁵⁴ Because they supposed that they were pleasing the Father through keeping the Law, as the Jews

⁵¹ Chrysostom may have in mind such passages as Ephesians 2, where Christians are said to be “seated with Christ in the heavenly places.”

⁵² Sc. present and future.

⁵³ Galatians 1:4c.

⁵⁴ Verse 6.

thought when they were persecuting Christ, Paul first shows them that they are not provoking Christ alone in behaving this way but also the Father. For he says that in doing this they are defecting not just from Christ but also from the Father. In the same way that the old covenant is not only from the Father but also from the Son, so also grace is not from the Son alone, but also from the Father, and all things are held in common between them. “For all that belongs to the Father is mine.”⁵⁵

And yet when he said that they abandon even the Father, he posits two faults: that there was a change and that this change was very rapid. Yet surely the opposite is worthy of accusation as well, namely, to have abandoned the Father after a long time. But here his argument deals with a deception. For the one who abandons after a long time deserves accusation, and the one who falls at the first charge, and in the light skirmishes, furnishes a singular example of total weakness. He in fact charges them with this, saying:

What is this, that those who deceive you need no time at all, but a first assault was enough to subdue and capture all of you? So what sort of excuse do you have? For if this arose among your friends, I mean the accusation, and someone had abandoned his former friends and useful intimates, he would be worthy of reproach. But the man who runs away from the God who calls him, just think how great a punishment he would be liable to!

So, when Paul says, “I am amazed,” not only does he say this to upbraid them because—after such a great gift, after such a great forgiveness for their sins, and an extravagance of kindness—they deserted to the yoke of slavery. At the same time he is also showing what kind of opinion he holds about them, that it is a sort of serious and earnest one. For he would not have been surprised at what happened if he had supposed that they were the sort to be deceived easily. “But since you are of noble character,” he says, “and of the type that have suffered a good deal, this is why I am amazed.” This should have been adequate to regain them and bring them back to their former beliefs. Paul makes this clear in the middle of this letter when he says, “Did you suffer such serious trials in vain, if indeed it was in vain?”

Next Paul adds “You are changing your position.” He did not say, “Keep going,” but “you are changing your position.” In other words, “I do not yet believe, nor do I suppose that the deception is complete,” which itself also is, again, the statement of one who is recovering. Consequently, he makes this point more clearly later on: “I am confident in your case, that you will consider nothing else.”⁵⁶

Next Paul adds that they are departing “from the one who called you in the grace of Christ.”⁵⁷ The calling is of the Father, and the reason for the calling is the Son. For the Son himself is the one who reconciled and gave that reconciliation freely. For we were not saved according to works in righteousness.⁵⁸ But rather these belong to the Father, and those works belong to Christ.⁵⁹ “For my things are yours,” he says, “and yours

⁵⁵ John 16:15.

⁵⁶ Cf. Galatians 5:10.

⁵⁷ This is the continuation of v. 6 of chapter 1.

⁵⁸ Cf. Titus 3:5.

⁵⁹ Chrysostom very artfully employs here a concatenation of pronouns with specific referents to Father and Son in an interlocking ABAB order, also known as *synchysis* or sometimes *chiasmus*: *Μᾶλλον δὲ καὶ ταῦτα*

mine.”⁶⁰ And note that Paul did not say, “You are turning back from the Gospel,” but “from the God who called you.” For the latter expression was more likely to inspire horror; and he has used this to strike them more deeply. For those who were wanting to deceive them did not do this all at once, but while gently drawing them away from the idea, they did not draw them away from the terms. For this is how the devil’s cunning works: it does not set obvious traps. For if the deceivers had said, “abandon Christ,” of course they would have been on guard against such tricksters and corrupters. But as it is, allowing them to stay in the faith yet attaching the title of “gospel” to their deception, they were undermining the whole structure with great impunity. The speech concealed the wall-breakers, through their phraseology, like a curtain.⁶¹

Thus, since they were calling their own deception the “gospel,” Paul himself does well to fight back verbally and speaks quite boldly. He says, “You have gone over to another gospel, one which is not another gospel at all.” Well put! For there is not another one. But nevertheless, the very thing that those who are diseased suffer—that they are harmed by healthy foods—Marcion⁶² suffered. For he snatched at what was related here, saying, “Look, even Paul said that there is not another gospel.” For they do not accept all the evangelists, but only one, and they mangled and rendered them of no effect, however they pleased. So then, what about whenever Paul himself says, “According to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ”?⁶³ Therefore, the things they have said are really ridiculous, except that even if they prove to be ridiculous, it is necessary to disprove them for the sake of those who are easily beguiled. What then shall we say? That even if tens of thousands write gospels, and write the same things, these many are one, and the fact of their being one will not be at all harmed by the multitude of the authors. Therefore, just as if someone writes one thing and then on the other hand says something opposite, the things written would not be one. For what is one and what is not one is judged not by the number of those writing, but by the identity and difference of what is said. Thus, it is clear that even the four gospels are actually one gospel. For whenever four say the same things, they are not different things because of the difference of the persons, but there is one because of the complete harmony of the things they say. For Paul is not here speaking about the number but about the discordance of the things said. So if, then, there is one gospel in Matthew and a different one in Luke as far as the meaning of the contents and the sense of their doctrines is concerned, they rightly criticize the Word. But if these accounts are really one and the same, they should stop acting so foolishly and pretending that they do not understand things that are really very clear to mere children.

Next Paul says, “Unless perhaps there are some people harassing you and wanting to distort the Gospel of Christ.” This means, so long as you remain of sound mind, you will

ἐκεῖνου, καὶ ἐκεῖνα τούτου (*Mallon de kai tauta ekeinou, kai ekeina toutou*). Cf. H. W. Smyth, *A Greek Grammar*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), §3020.

⁶⁰ A paraphrase of John 16:5, quoted above.

⁶¹ The metaphor which Chrysostom employs is that of siegers and sappers seeking to undermine a city’s defenses. Concealing screens were carried by some, behind which the engineers sought to dig beneath the walls’ foundations in order to topple them.

⁶² Marcion of Sinope (c. 85–c. 160). Much of our knowledge of him and his thought comes from Epiphanius of Cyprus in the fourth century. Briefly, he held that the God of the Old Testament, whom he labeled a “demiurge,” was different than the God who sent Christ Jesus. This heretical view involved him in, among other things, a wholesale rejection of continuity with the church of the old covenant and a radically truncated canon of Scripture.

⁶³ Cf. Romans 16:25.

not recognize another gospel; so long as you look at things that are right and not imagine those that are perverted, those that do not exist. For in the same way that the eye mistakenly sees one thing for another, so also the mind, roiled up by an admixture of wicked arguments, typically suffers this same kind of disruption. So, for this reason, those who are addled in their wits, mistakenly imagine one thing for another. But this kind of madness is more troubling than what I just described: it is not the kind that produces harm in our sense perceptions but in the things we think about; not that kind which occasions destruction in the pupil of the eyes of the body but in the eyes of the understanding.

“And wanting to distort the Gospel of Christ.”⁶⁴ And surely they were introducing only one or two commands, instituting anew only the command of circumcision and of special days. But in showing that a whole, when slightly modified, is ruined, he says that the gospel has been rendered void. For just as in royal coins the one who cuts off a small part of the impress renders the whole coin counterfeit, so also the one who distorts even the least significant portion of a healthy faith thereby defiles the whole of it, moving away from the original toward things that are worse. Where then now are those who criticize us as lovers of strife on account of our disagreement with heretics? Where now are those who say that there is no gap between us and them but that the difference arises from a lust for power? They should heed what Paul says, that those who innovate even just a little bit have distorted the gospel. And these people⁶⁵ are not changing just a little. For how could they be, since they claim that the Son of God is something created? Have you not heard that even in the Old Testament someone who gathered wood on the Sabbath, violating only one commandment, and not even the greatest one, paid the ultimate penalty for it?⁶⁶ And when Uzzah steadied the ark as it was about to topple over, he immediately died because he touched a ministerial function⁶⁷ that was not permitted to him. Thus, both the transgression of the Sabbath and touching the ark when it was about to fall rendered God so indignant that those who dared such acts received not even a little leniency. So, the one who defiles the awe-inspiring and ineffable articles of the faith, will such a person find any defense or leniency? No, not so. But this very thing then is the cause of a whole host of evils, namely, when we do not become irritated over the small matters. For this reason greater sins were introduced among them because the lesser ones did not receive the required correction. And just as those who ignore the wounds in their bodies provoke fevers, putrefaction, and death, so also when it comes to souls, those who overlook even the smallest problems compound it with greater ones.

A certain person, one might say, stumbles over fasting, and it is no great concern. Another man is strong in the faith that is correct, but acting like he is not for the moment loses his confidence. Nor is this anything very terrible. Still another man became irritated and threatened to abandon the correct faith. But neither is this worthy of punishment. For he sinned in anger, one might say, and by impulse. And someone could find ten thousand such examples of sins introduced into the churches each and every day throughout the

⁶⁴ Verse 7.

⁶⁵ Sc. heretics.

⁶⁶ Cf. Numbers 15:32, 36.

⁶⁷ Cf. 2 Samuel 6:6ff. The noun Chrysostom uses, *διακονίας* (*diakonias*), is surprising, as one might expect here a reference to the actual object which Uzzah touched, *διακόνημα* (*diakonēma*). He apparently has in mind, however, not Uzzah's act of touching the ark but his usurpation of an office that did not belong to him.

churches. Therefore, we have become utterly ridiculous to both Greeks and Jews since the church is splintered into ten thousand pieces. For if those who were attempting at the beginning to turn away from the divine ordinances and cause some slight disturbance had met with a deserved rebuke, the plague that is present would not have arisen, and such a great storm would not have overtaken the churches.⁶⁸

Note that Paul at least says circumcision is an annulment of the Gospel. And yet now there are many among us that observe the same day of fasting that belongs to the Jews and similarly keep the Sabbaths. And we bear with these things generously, or rather like the wretches we are.⁶⁹ And why should I talk about the practices of the Jews since some of our people also observe many customs of the Greeks, like watching of omens, the flight of birds, signet-rings, the observance of days, an interest in genealogy and booklets, which when their children are being born, they compose to their own detriment.⁷⁰ In this they teach their children at the outset to give up efforts at virtue and lead them, for their part, under the yoke of the deluded tyranny of fatalism.

But if Christ is no benefit to those who are circumcised, how much will faith, in the end, work for the salvation of those who have carelessly involved themselves in such great wickedness? And though circumcision was given by God, nevertheless since it was defiling the gospel by not being performed at the proper time, Paul did everything so as to cut off⁷¹ circumcision. So, then since Paul showed such great zeal in the case of Jewish customs, when they were being observed in an untimely fashion, will we not cut off the Greek custom? And what sort of a defense might we have? Because of this our affairs are now in disarray and confusion, and those who are studying, filled with much presumption, upended the proper order. What was right side up has become upside down. If someone raises some small objection, they spit on their rulers, since we “trained them poorly.” And yet even if their superiors were quite wretched and filled with ten thousand evils, it would not be right for the student to disobey. For if Christ says about the Jewish teachers that since they sat in the seat of Moses it would be right for them to be listened to by the disciples⁷²—and yet they possessed works so evil that he ordered his students neither to emulate them nor to imitate those things they do—what leniency would they deserve, those that spit upon and tread underfoot the presiding officers of the church, they who by the grace of God live morally? For if it is not proper to judge one another, how much more improper it is to judge one’s teachers.

“But if even I, or an angel from heaven should preach to you something other than what you have received, let him be anathema.”⁷³ Notice Paul’s apostolic wisdom. For, so that someone won’t say that for the sake of self-aggrandizement he was cobbling together dogmas peculiar to himself, he even anathematized himself. And since they were fleeing for excuse to titles of dignity, that is James and John, he also mentioned angels. “Don’t talk to me about James and John,” he says. “For even if it is one of the firstborn angels

⁶⁸ Chrysostom perhaps has in mind here, in addition to the conflict in Galatia, Paul’s mention in 1 Corinthians 11:30ff. of those who had died as a punishment for their abuse of the Lord’s table.

⁶⁹ Note Chrysostom’s typical change of mind, for rhetorical effect, in the midst of conveying an exegetical point.

⁷⁰ This is a reference most likely to the composition of horoscopes.

⁷¹ Chrysostom here and in the next sentence introduces two puns for dispensing with circumcision, namely *περικόψαι* (*perikopsai*) and *περικόψομεν* (*perikopsomen*).

⁷² Matthew 23:2ff.

⁷³ Verse 8.

from heaven who corrupts this preaching, let him be anathema.” And he did not simply say, “from heaven,” but since the priests were called angels: “For the lips of a priest will guard knowledge, and they will seek out the law from his mouth, because he is an angel of the almighty Lord.” Now in order that you not think that priests are now called angels, he implicitly refers to the powers above with this addition “of heaven.” And he did not say if they proclaim things that are opposite or if they pervert the whole. But he said even if they preach something “just a little different” from that which we have preached, and if they disturb something minor, let them be anathema.

Paul continues, “As I have said before, I also say again now.” For lest you suppose that these are impulsive words or were said with exaggeration or a kind of haste, he uses the same things again a second time. Someone driven to say something in anger would likely soon have a change of heart. But the man who says the same things a second time shows that he spoke after weighing matters carefully, and after earlier becoming sure of it he stated it. Abraham, for example, when asked to send Lazarus, said, “They have Moses and the prophets. If they do not heed these, neither will they heed the risen dead.”⁷⁴ Christ introduces Abraham as saying these things thereby showing that he wants the Scriptures judged more valuable than those raised from the dead.

And Paul (and when I say, “Paul,” I again mean Christ) places Scripture on a higher level than angels descending from heaven, and quite rightly. For the angels, though they are very important, are but in reality servants and ministers. But the Scriptures were all delivered not by slaves but by God, master of all, to be written down. That is why Paul says: “If anyone preaches to you a gospel other than what we have preached to you.” And with a great deal of understanding and inoffensively, he did not say, “a certain so and so.” For why would it, after all, be necessary to mention peoples’ names since in employing such comprehensive language he includes all entities, both those above and those below? For through his anathematizing of evangelists and angels, he encompassed every rank. And through himself he included everyone similar and like unto himself. “Don’t tell me that your co-Apostles and others are saying these things. For I do not even exempt myself if I preach such doctrines!” And he does not make such comments as though he were condemning the apostles, nor as though they were turning aside from proper preaching. Far from it! “Whether we, or they,” he says, “this is how we preach.”⁷⁵ But he wants to show that he does not make allowance for persons whenever the message deals with the truth.

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⁷⁴ Cf. Luke 16:29–31.

⁷⁵ Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:11.

Servant Standards

Commentary on the Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

by Alan D. Strange

Preface

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church is governed by three sets of documents: its primary, secondary, and tertiary standards (cf. Form of Government, Chapter XXXII, Section 1). The primary standard of the Church is the Word of God, contained in the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments. Standing above the Church's constitution, the Word of God is "the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him" (Shorter Catechism, Q/A 2). Subordinate to the Word of God is the constitution, consisting of two sets of standards. The doctrinal standards of the Church (the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church) are its secondary standards, and the standards of government, discipline, and worship comprise its tertiary standards.

Comment: "Constitution" can be taken in different senses. In the civil sense the constitution (written, as in the USA context, and precedent-oriented, as in the UK context) means the document(s) or set of conventions that govern or constitute a society. The Bible certainly governs the church as the Word of God. The reason that it is not said to be part of the constitution of the church, but the basis for it (or "standing above the church's constitution"), is because the Bible is not subject to amendment or change, whereas any constitution, written or traditional, remains open to modification. The theological way of speaking of this is to say that the Bible, being inspired (God-breathed), is infallible (not capable of error) and thus actually contains no error (inerrant). Because of this, the Bible neither needs nor is capable of reform: in short, God's Word is irreformable.

The Roman Catholic Church, however, applies these attributes that pertain to the Bible also to the church and Rome argues that the church is infallible (the papacy, especially, when promulgating dogma) and thus irreformable. Protestants broadly and Reformed and Presbyterians particularly teach that the church, contrariwise, is quite open to reform by God's Holy Spirit; Reformed churches see themselves as *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, "the church that is reformed and always to be reforming," i.e., always to be reformed in accordance with the Word of God. Another way of putting this is to say that the Scriptures are the *norma normans*, the "norm that norms" the doctrinal standards and the church order. The secondary and tertiary standards are the *norma normata*, the "normed norms," the constitution of the church that can be amended as needed to be brought into closer conformity to the Word of God.

The vital link here is the Holy Spirit. The same Holy Spirit who gave the Word also progressively illumines the church to understand it. The church's understanding or interpretation of the Bible is not infallible but is, largely, correct over time because of the

gracious illumination of the Holy Spirit. For this reason the church has not, in the main, misread the Bible (over against liberals, who claim that it has). This is part of the reason that there have been so few amendments to our Reformed confessions and catechisms over the centuries: we have not mistaken our understanding of the Bible's teaching. There have been some minor revisions, to be sure, to our doctrinal standards; they are not, after all, irreformable.¹ Mainly, the revisions that we have witnessed have been to our church orders, i.e., to our tertiary and not to our secondary standards.² Never to our primary standards: the Scriptures are not open to revision because they are the unchanging Word of God. Our understanding of them is open to revision, however, as we, personally and corporately, grow in our understanding of them by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus the constitution of the church is open to revision as we come better to understand the Scriptures that provide the basis for and foundation of the church.

The book that you hold in your hand contains the tertiary standards of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church: its Form of Government, Book of Discipline, and Directory for the Public Worship of God. While printed separately from the secondary standards, they are not conceived, nor should they be used, in isolation from them. Several sections of the doctrinal standards refer directly or indirectly to worship and ecclesiology, such as those dealing with the sufficiency of Scripture, Christian liberty and liberty of conscience, religious worship and the Sabbath day, the civil magistrate, the church, the sacraments, church censures, and synods and councils.

Comment: The relationship between the secondary (doctrinal) standards and the tertiary (church order) standards is important to understand. The Scriptures contain a system of doctrine—a coherent body of belief revealed and articulated over time (declaratory word accompanying redemptive deed)—given expression in the doctrinal standards, the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. The relation of the tertiary standards to those secondary ones is this: the doctrine set forth in the secondary standards, based on God's Word, provides the basis for the polity, or government, of the church. In other words the Bible and the secondary standards contain principles, among other things, for the governing of the church, for how we should act together as a church in the carrying out of our Lord's Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20). The details of polity are not found, then, in the Bible; rather the Bible furnishes us with biblical principles pertaining to government that the church develops into the sort of detailed polity that we find in the FG and BD.

We believe that the Scriptures contain not only doctrine (teaching) about itself, God, man, Christ, the Holy Spirit and salvation, and the last things but also about the church

¹ There have been what the OPC regards as felicitous amendments from the original Westminster Confession of Faith (at 20.4, 22.3, 23.3, 24.4, 25.6, and 31.2), reflected in *The Confession of Faith of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church with Proof Texts* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2005), vii–xii for the history of these amendments. There were additional amendments adopted in 1903 that the OPC declined to adopt in 1936; a liberal, and quite interesting, take on this, might be found in Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church Since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), 39–89.

² These changes are chronicled below (in the penultimate paragraph of this Preface), found in *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2015 Edition* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2015), viii.

(and its worship), specifically, as the above paragraph sets forth. Scripture addresses both that which pertains to doctrine and that which pertains to polity, though the Bible addresses in detail that which pertains to doctrine and only in broader principles that which pertains to polity. The details of polity are thus not part of the secondary standards but the tertiary standards. In historic Presbyterianism, then, polity details are worked out in the church order, which is more amenable to change than the doctrinal standards. It is comparatively difficult to amend the doctrinal standards, requiring supermajorities of two assemblies as well as of the presbyteries; amendment of the church order requires only the majority of a given assembly and subsequently of the presbyteries.

This greater ease in amending the church order is due to the recognition that polity typically needs to be put into practice to gauge its workability and to identify areas of needed reform. For this reason polity has often, classically, been a part of the church history department in theological seminaries rather than taught in systematic or even practical theology. It is only in applying the biblical and confessional principles of church government in the actual outworking of them in the life of the church that the necessary details of polity emerge and successively clarify themselves. Thus church orders reflect historical application of polity principles, seeing what works well and what does not work. Polity is a mixture of the prescriptive and descriptive and never sees itself as exhausting the prescriptive, since the church is called and enabled to do all its work, whether or not every aspect of the church's work has been reduced to description in the church order.

The genius of Presbyterian church government lies in its appreciation for the value of such tertiary standards. They do not replace or compete with the Scriptures. Rather, they set forth rules and procedures by which the church corporately interprets and applies the Word of God. That is, this *Book of Church Order* provides the effective means by which the teaching of Scripture is applied to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's government, discipline, and worship. As Presbyterians have put this in the past, a book that rightly orders the church is not necessary for the *being* of the church (since there are true churches that do not follow these rules and procedures), but is necessary for the *well-being* of the church. The rules and procedures set forth in this book will promote and encourage the spiritual health of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

Comment: What was regarded as necessary for the being of the church, or what essentially defined the church as church before the Reformation, was the attributes of the church, as noted in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed: unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. During the Middle Ages declension occurred and confusion crept in, rendering certain marks necessary for the further defining of the being of the church. In the Reformation these necessary marks of the true church were further delineated as the pure preaching of the Word, the right administration of the sacraments, and the discipline of the church. Divine right Presbyterianism also developed during the Reformation teaching the parity of the clergy (over against episcopacy), the joining of lay rule (in the ruling eldership as representatives of the people) with the clergy in joint rule, and the connectedness of the church, with graded judicatories.³

³ J. Aspinwall Hodge, *What is Presbyterian Law as Defined by the Church Courts?* 4th ed. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1886), 10.

Some insisted that such principles must manifest for the true church to be present; Charles Hodge, and others, argued against this view, rightly warning that it would unchurch everyone not a Presbyterian and identify the church exclusively with the Presbyterian church, which Hodge saw as sectarian, a violation not only of the catholicity but also of the spirituality of the church (about which, below, in comments on FG 1–4). Most Old School American Presbyterianism agreed with Hodge, refusing to unchurch all other churches than the Presbyterian, and argued that, as felicitous as Presbyterian government was, it pertained not to the being, or essence, of the church but to its well-being.⁴

The differences in authority among the primary, secondary, and tertiary standards come to expression in two important respects. First, the language of the church officer ordination vows takes into account the relative weight of these standards. Ministers, elders, and deacons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church are required to believe the Bible as the only infallible rule of faith and practice, to sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in Scripture, and to approve of the government, discipline, and worship of this Church. There is a lessening of the required commitment to the lower levels of these standards. Second, the standards are distinguished by the processes by which amendments may be made to them. The primary standard of Scripture cannot be altered, the secondary standards of doctrine may be amended only with difficulty and rarely, and the tertiary standards of church order may be more easily and frequently revised.

Comment: The distinctions in the ordination vows with respect to the primary, secondary, and tertiary standards are quite important. They show the relative importance of the standards in view. That one vows, as he does to the primary standard, the Bible, shows that God’s Word is irreformable: it is not open to revision. Historically, certainly in the context of American Presbyterianism, one has been permitted to express scruples that do not impact the system of doctrine, with respect to the secondary standards (understanding that one does not customarily teach one’s scruple(s)).⁵

One is never asked about scruples, however, with regard to the tertiary standards, only whether one approves of such, with the implication being that while one may think that the church order warrants improvements, even significant ones, the candidate taking vows approves the church order, being willing to work within it and abide by it. In summary one cannot differ with the Scriptures, as they are of direct divine origin; one may differ only in minor ways from the doctrinal standards, given that they are the church’s expression of the system of doctrine contained in the Bible. One may, however, believe that the church order merits considerable revision, and yet approve of it if one is willing to work within it.

⁴ Alan D. Strange, *The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church in the Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publications, 2017), 162–174.

⁵ James R. Payton, Jr., “The Background and Significance of the Adopting Act of 1729,” in *Pressing Toward the Mark*, ed. Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble (Philadelphia: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 131–145. For another view on this, see David W. Hall, “Re-Examining the Re-Examiners of the Adopting Act,” in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, ed. David W. Hall (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1995), 263–291. See also, Gregory E. Reynolds, “The Nature, Limits, and Place of Exception and Scruples in Subscription to Our Doctrinal Standards,” *Ordained Servant* 23 (2014): 23–33.

This 2015 edition of The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church represents the current understanding of what this branch of the church believes the Scriptures teach about the government, discipline, and worship of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. It was in 1941, five years after the founding of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, that its General Assembly ordered the first edition of The Book of Church Order to be printed. In 1979 the General Assembly approved a substantially rewritten Form of Government. A major revision of the Book of Discipline was adopted in 1983. Beginning in 1995, further approved changes to these tertiary standards could ordinarily come into effect only in years ending in 5 or 0. And the General Assembly completed a sixty-two-year process of revising the Directory for the Public Worship of God by authorizing the publication of a special edition of these standards of government, discipline, and worship in 2011.

Comment: Presbyterians intend the Form of Government and the Book of Discipline to give expression to the biblical and doctrinal principles (from the primary and secondary standards) that address the polity of the church. They do not assume, however, that the FG and the BD are exhaustive expressions of all that the church should or may do in carrying out its duties. Rather, the FG and BD serve to reduce to writing the ways in which the whole church has agreed to act in concert. Such expressed agreement does not mean that all judicatories are bound in ways not enumerated in the church order in carrying out the duties of the church. The church has all the authority that it needs from the Lord to carry out its commission, whether specifically enumerated in the church order or not.

This point is a very important one and needs to be understood: the FG and BD neither contain all that the church may do or needs to do. What is there is binding but any given judicatory may (and will) face situations that this church order does not describe. This does not mean that the judicatory may not or should not act, but it must do so in keeping with the principles of the Word of God. The church order is understood to be an expression of the principles of the Word of God relating to polity, so that the Scripture should never be pitted against the church order or vice-versa. When one acts in accordance with the church order, one is assumed to be acting in accordance with Scriptures since the church order is merely the detailed expression of the Bible's principles of polity.

It should also be said that one may never claim to act in accordance with the church order if in so acting one clearly violates Scriptural strictures (e.g., a judicatory may not remove one from the rolls of the church, even if it is supposed to be in accordance with the church order, if it is done without the love and care that Scripture always enjoins). We agree how we will act together in the OPC on polity matters in the FG and BD. We also agree always to act biblically in all the work of our judicatories, whether the particulars of any given act are contained in the church order or derived from the Bible in cases in which the church order is silent.

This edition of The Book of Church Order has been prepared in accordance with instructions of the General Assembly, in consultation with the stated clerk of the Assembly. The Committee on Christian Education has taken on the responsibility of publishing and distributing the book. It contains all the revisions of The Book of Church Order that have been approved since 2011 and which take effect on January 1, 2015. In accordance with the Form of Government, Chapter XXXII, Section 2, this particular

edition of the book will remain in use in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church until at least 2020.

Ross W. Graham, stated clerk
Willow Grove, Pennsylvania
November 2014

Some Specific Considerations about the Relationship of the Form of Government and the Book of Discipline with the Directory for the Public Worship of God

Our Book of Church Order, as noted above, consists of the Form of Government (FG), the Book of Discipline (BD), and the Directory for the Public Worship of God (DPW). The first two of these, the FG and the BD, express Presbyterian polity, detailing how the church conducts its ordinary business as well as how it implements church discipline. The third, the DPW, addresses how the church believes that it is to carry out the principle of worship that governs the church.

With respect to worship, we affirm what has come to be called the regulative principle of worship: the Scriptures regulate the worship of the church, so that the elements of worship, though not its circumstances, must be positively taught in Scripture. This means that we may do in worship only that which the Bible enjoins; some follow a different principle of worship, often referred to as the normative principle of worship, which maintains that we are free to act as we please in worship, so long as what we propose to do does not explicitly contradict the Scriptures. It is important to note that our DPW seeks to give expression to this regulative principle of worship in keeping with what we hold biblical worship to entail, as expressed in WCF 21 and elsewhere.

We do not likewise affirm a regulative principle of government and discipline, requiring express scriptural warrant for all that we do in the government and discipline of the church. Rather we believe that the Bible contains the principles foundational to Presbyterian polity so that while we must act in accordance with such principles, there is freedom regarding the precise structures that we erect in the government and discipline of the church. For example must we have synods in addition to presbyteries and general assemblies? No, this is a practical matter that we have freedom to determine as long as it is in keeping with the Presbyterian principles of the Bible and does not violate any of the express teachings of the Word. Another example: may a judicatory employ a commission to do its work? It may, at its judgment, but might also find it wise to be careful in the instances that it chooses to delegate its authority and power.

So when we say that church order derives from Scripture, we mean that it does so as to its guiding principles, not as to its operational details. When it comes to operational details, judicatories have freedom and discretion, within the guidelines of biblical principles of polity. This was one of the differences in the debates that Charles Hodge and J.H. Thornwell had in the nineteenth century. Thornwell had articulated what Hodge had taken to be a regulative principle of government and discipline (just like we all affirm a regulative principle of worship).⁶ Hodge argued to the contrary, “The great principles of

⁶ James Henley Thornwell, “Church Boards and Presbyterianism,” *Collected Works*, vol. 4, in *Paradigms in Polity*, ed. David W. Hall and Joseph H. Hall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 559–584.

Presbyterianism are in the Bible; but it is preposterous to assert that our whole Book of Discipline is there.”⁷ Hodge recognized the problem here (elevating government and discipline to the level of doctrine and worship): Presbyterian polity does not pertain to the being of the church but to the well-being of the church. For example the attributes of the church (unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity) are essential to its being; the principle of parity of ministerial office, collegial rule of ministers and elders, graded judicatories and the like comprise its well-being. And as we noted above, to confuse these two leads to unchurching all who are not Presbyterian, which is parochial and contrary to proper ecumenism.

We joyfully embrace a regulative principle of worship: to worship the Triune God in the way that he has set forth in Scripture is true freedom. To do otherwise is base idolatry. We do so because God has clearly set forth the elements that comprise true worship. We do not, however, hold to a regulative principle of government. The Bible has not furnished us with the details of polity and to assert that it does is a denial of our true Christian liberty. Rather, we are called to discretion in a wise application of the principles of God’s Word in the development of our church order. Church order must always be in keeping with the principles of biblical church government and express the proper flexibility (not a set of ironclad rules) that is needed as the church goes into all the world to preach the gospel. We do not, however, hold to a regulative principle of government in the same way that we do a regulative principle of worship (granting that we may speak in some broader sense of such, acknowledging that God’s Word provides the patterns and principles for Presbyterian church government).

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⁷ Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity* (1878; repr. New York: Westminster Publishing House, 2001), 440.

ServantReading

The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption *by* *J. V. Fesko*

by Carl Trueman

The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption, by J. V. Fesko. Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, Christian Focus, 2016. xx + 414, \$29.99, paper.

John Fesko's study of the covenant of redemption is a most timely and helpful contribution to an important and contested topic. Given the recent resurgence of interest in classical Trinitarianism amongst confessional Protestants, this book touches on questions which will probably be preoccupying Reformed theologians for some time to come.

As a concept, the covenant of redemption refers to the arrangement, forged in eternity, between the Father and the Son which established the Son as the Second Adam. It thus stands in positive structural relationship to the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Indeed, it is the conceptual foundation for making the work of Christ efficacious.

It has nonetheless proved controversial over the years, as Fesko indicates. Criticism has ranged from the simplistic—"Where is the covenant of redemption explicitly mentioned in Scripture?"—to the more sophisticated and dogmatic—"Does the covenant of redemption not posit too great a division in God?" "Does it not neglect the Holy Spirit?" Fesko is aware of these criticisms and seeks to address them.

After a historical introduction, Fesko addresses the exegetical foundations of the doctrine in Part II. Drawing on Zechariah 6:13, Psalm 2:7, Psalm 110, Ephesians 1, and 2 Timothy 1:9–10. In this section, he demonstrates that the doctrine does not rest on a single text but seeks to synthesize the implications of a thread of teaching which runs throughout the Old and into the New Testament touching on the identity and the role of the Messiah. This is a sound approach consistent with the original work of the seventeenth century divines who first formulated the doctrine. Dogmatic constructs such as the covenant of redemption do not simply fall from the pages of Scripture or find explicit expression in one or two texts. Rather, these constructs attempt to synthesize the teaching of the Bible as a whole as it touches upon matters of ontological and economic importance. Rather like the covenant of works, which finds its primary motivation in the New Testament teaching of the relationship between Adam and Christ, so the covenant of redemption offers a synthetic concept which helps to make sense of Scripture's teaching as a whole.

In Part III, Fesko offers an account of the dogmatic significance of the doctrine, touching on issues of both ontology (the Trinity) and economy (the elements of the order of salvation). What emerges very clearly in this section is that the covenant of redemption

is that which connects the ontological Trinity to the economic Trinity. Indeed, one's understanding of the relationship between these two is going to be decisively reflected in one's attitude to the covenant of redemption.

It is in this section that Fesko addresses many of the standard concerns about the covenant of redemption but also engages in lengthy interactions with numerous modern theologians, most notably Karl Barth, but also Rudolph Bultmann, Hans Frei, and others. Particularly useful is his defense of the role of metaphysics in theological formulation over against the anti-metaphysical critiques offered by neo-orthodoxy and narrative theology. Yet even here Fesko models good scholarship through his concern to treat his opponents fairly by carefully expounding their critiques before responding.

There are a couple of areas which need further exploration—though I present them here not as a criticism of Fesko's book but rather as suggestions about how his work should be carried forward.

First, there is more work to be done on the historical origins of the idea. As he notes, the conceptual language emerges in the mid 1640s, although it receives brief mention by David Dickson in 1638. This is why the doctrine is not explicitly taught in the Westminster Standards. But, as Fesko notes, the concept is adumbrated in earlier Reformation work on Christ as mediator. The key here is that the Reformers argued that mediation is the act of a person, not a nature, and that Christ was mediator according to both natures. In doing this, they broke decisively with the medieval tradition which had posited mediation as an act of the human nature. This opened the Reformers to the criticism, made most powerfully by Cardinal Bellarmine, that they were doing damage to the doctrine of God by making God somehow mediator with God. That polemical background is important.

This then leads to a second point: the covenant of redemption raises acute questions about the inner life of God. Fesko addresses the issue of the unity of God's will; but I suspect that, in the light of the welcome recovery of classical Trinitarianism and renewed appreciation for the confessional doctrine of divine simplicity, more work needs to be done on how to understand the covenant of redemption in relation to the unity and simplicity of God. To posit a separate will for Father and for Son is, as Fesko sees, an illegitimate move; and yet for many ordinary Christians, this is an issue which will need further explanation and refinement. The rise of classical theism is to be welcomed; this will in turn raise the bar for discussions of matters such as the appointment in eternity of Christ as mediator.

This is a very good book which offers a straightforward yet learned introduction to its subject. For anyone wanting to know about the covenant of redemption and its dogmatic, historical, and exegetical underpinnings and implications, this is certainly the place to start.

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The Trials of Thomas Morton *by Peter C. Mancall*

by Richard M. Gamble

The Trials of Thomas Morton: An Anglican Lawyer, His Puritan Foes, and the Battle for a New England, by Peter C. Mancall. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019, ix + 278 pages, \$30.00.

In 2011, when Deval Patrick served as governor of Massachusetts, the former 2020 Democratic presidential contender and Obama protégée proclaimed March 1 to be “Thomas Morton Day.” Most Americans would be hard pressed to say who Morton was or why he ought to be so honored. Perhaps few people in the Bay State knew either. But Patrick praised the seventeenth-century colonist for his “respectful relationship with Native Americans,” “intrepid explorations,” and for writing the *New English Canaan*—“an invaluable ‘first chapter’ of Massachusetts history.”

The Pilgrims and Puritans would have been scandalized by this encomium. William Bradford and John Winthrop never intended for Morton’s notorious maypole to be celebrated, and they would have been baffled by the revelry depicted by governor Patrick as a symbol of “intercultural prosperity” and an invitation to “respect” and “cooperation.” But such is the state of cultural politics in the twenty-first century. The world of 1620 was not the world of 2020.

And yet it could have been. Or at least it could have been an experiment in an alternative New England not engineered by Separatists and Puritans—an alternative more respectful of Native Americans, more tolerant, and a little more fun. Historian Peter Mancall does not endorse everything Governor Patrick proclaimed, but he does ask readers to consider a provocative “what if?” that puts Morton at the center of the story instead of Bradford and Winthrop. In other words what happens if we recognize how precarious one version of New Canaan was in light of a competing commercial colonial enterprise more loyal to James I and Charles I and adhering to the established Church of England?

With the sense of inevitability removed from the story, the English settlement of North America becomes highly contingent, hanging by a thread on colonial and imperial politics, economic rivalry, and international competition, along with heavy doses of religious controversy in and out of New England. No one in the 1620s and ’30s knew the future, no matter how confident they were of their ability to read God’s special providences and their proclivity to run all their experiences through the grid of the Old and New Testaments. God’s New Israel was hard work.

To say that Morton was a colorful figure is an understatement. The word “trials” in the book’s title points to Morton’s career as an endlessly litigious lawyer and the ordeals that he himself and the New England magistrates put him through. Morton likely arrived in New Plymouth for the first time in 1622 and the second time in 1624. His trading post threatened the Separatists’ fragile economy and his arming of local tribes seemed to imperil their lives, property, and the very survival of their New World haven. Morton

seemed to relish his ability to scandalize the pious, and when he erected his infamous eighty-foot-tall maypole on Ma-re Mount (or Merry Mount) and danced around it with English and Natives, Bradford called him the “Lord of Misrule” and exiled him. Morton threatened to bring the corruption of the Old World into the New, the very thing the Separatists had fled. Undaunted, Morton returned and became a thorn in the side of Winthrop as well. Morton ended his days in Maine.

Morton and his company nearly succeeded in the law courts of London and in their appeals to the crown to secure their own charter claim to New England. To explain his vision for New England, Morton published his *New England Canaan* in Amsterdam in 1637, a sales pitch that was part amateur anthropology, part geology, part history, and part bitter, humorous, and satirical send-up of the (in Morton’s judgment) bigoted and insufferable Nonconformists. He painted them as religious and political subversives.

What fascinates Mancall is the way in which Morton “became an outlier in the triumphant narrative of the establishment of colonies in New England” (14). He became, and for years remained, the antagonist in somebody else’s story. Only a few copies of his book survived, and it was not rediscovered in any significant way until the nineteenth century. As the national story became the New England story writ large, Morton symbolized for many the would-be obstacles to America’s providential founding. Nevertheless, he had his sympathizers along the way, and when the nation turned against “Puritanism” he was remade into a symbol for free thinkers and even a proto-hippy.

Mancall’s book is lively, fascinating, and highly readable. His sympathies for Morton are clear, and his relativizing of the past (including religion) may turn off some readers. But it would be a mistake to dismiss Mancall’s book as just another exercise in politically correct revisionism. Mancall has meticulously reconstructed a neglected episode in colonial history and the twists and turns of the publishing, reception, and subsequent use of a mischievous book. His research has led him to conclude, with only slight hesitation, that Morton’s *New England Canaan* is “the second most important historical narrative” of New England colonization after Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation* (215).

Morton failed in his personal ambitions and the quest to build his vision of English colonization in the North Atlantic. As Mancall promises, his failure pulls us out of “the familiar narrative” (17). This is a tale of two visions. Bradford and Winthrop exiled Morton “because his dream threatened theirs. They were right” (172). Of course, the English colonies and the nation that followed were the product of more than these competing visions. The sheer variety of colonies in North America meant that many visions occupied the Atlantic seaboard by the eighteenth century. The Pilgrims and Puritans defeated Morton, but their vision of a New Israel remained an irritant to the Dutch in New York, the Quakers, the Anglicans, and more than few “Cavaliers” in the South.

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Christianity and Pluralism *by Ron Dart and J. I. Packer*

by David VanDrunen

Christianity and Pluralism, by Ron Dart & J. I. Packer. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019. xii + 70 pages, \$8.99, paper.

This is a book with an ecclesiastical context, and that context is not that of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. *Christianity and Pluralism* was originally published (under a different title) in 1998. A group of conservative Anglicans in Canada commissioned it as part of a response to *Mansions of the Spirit: The Gospel in a Multi-Faith World*, a book by Canadian Bishop Michael Ingham arguing that most of the major world religions share a deep though hidden unity, particularly as expressed in their respective mystical traditions. But although the three main essays comprising this short book have a special eye on the theologically divided Anglican world, the authors do argue that they are defending classical Christian faith and not simply a conservative brand of Anglicanism.

The first two essays are essentially book reviews of *Mansions of the Spirit*. The first, by Ron Dart, welcomes the publication of this book insofar as it challenges the church to consider more deeply what it believes. In a very irenic vein Dart offers ten short points that affirm some of what Ingham had argued but also critically engage him on other matters, hoping to “nudge” discussion in a better direction (2). The second, by J. I. Packer, also maintains an irenic tone but evaluates *Mansions of the Spirit* more trenchantly. Although Ingham is a “nice man,” says Packer, he “in effect abolishes what Anglicans generally, indeed Christians generally, understand Christianity to be” (9–10). In suggesting that there must be many routes of access to the Absolute, Ingham pushes his readers toward a “Gnostic occultism” (19). One rather odd feature of both essays is that they insist on referring to their interlocutor by his first name, “Michael.” Perhaps they do so in order to sound as kind and cordial as possible, out of fear that their critics will accuse them of being harsh for defending the view that Jesus Christ is the only true way to God.

The third essay, authored by Dart, is by far the longest. It describes and evaluates “four main models of inter-faith dialogue” (36). The first is “exclusivist,” which Dart hopes to rescue from its reputation for intolerance and fundamentalism. The second is “inclusivist,” which holds that different religions share many things in common but that ultimately one of them is better and incorporates the best aspects of the others. The third, the “pluralist,” supports religious inquiry, yet rejects “theological certainty” while embracing an “ethical pragmatism” (48). It purports to be non-judgmental but tends to be intolerant toward those who make truth claims about God. The final model is the “syncretist.” It believes that most world religions are heading toward the same final destination, while taking different paths, although it ends up ignoring aspects of each religion that are incompatible with this vision. Dart concludes by noting that Christianity came into existence in a pluralistic and syncretistic context but didn’t embrace either

model. He defends exclusivism of a sort but also speaks positively of inclusivism and pluralism when understood in a certain way.

To be frank, I do not think *Christianity and Pluralism* will be of much value to most readers of *Ordained Servant*. The third chapter may be of some help for understanding various approaches to the relationship of different religions. But while engaging non-“exclusivist” models critically, the authors take them more seriously than they deserve. Does it really require “inspection” to realize that pluralism has “drifted away from . . . historic Christianity” (22)? And isn’t saying that the liberal Anglicanism of recent generations “runs the risk . . . of leveling the religious playing field” (35) putting it rather mildly? Whether Scripture and classical Christianity are exclusivist is not a very difficult question. The issue is simply whether one embraces them or not. But engaging inclusivist, pluralist, and syncretistic views as serious options for the church is, I imagine, a price to be paid for choosing to remain in an ecclesiastical body that welcomes such views. Occasional positive references to Karl Barth and liberation theology (by Dart, not Packer) are also reasons to suspect this may not be the go-to book on religious pluralism for most readers of *Ordained Servant*.

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ServantPoetry

Easter Hymn

By Henry Vaughan (1621–1695)

Death, and darkness get you packing,
Nothing now to man is lacking,
All your triumphs now are ended,
And what Adam marred, is mended;
Graves are beds now for the weary,
Death a nap, to wake more merry;
Youth now, full of pious duty,
Seeks in thee for perfect beauty,
The weak, and aged tired, with length
Of days, from thee look for new strength,
And Infants with thy pangs Contest
As pleasant, as if with the breast;
Then, unto him, who thus hath thrown
Even to Contempt thy kingdom down,
And by his blood did us advance
Unto his own Inheritance,
To him be glory, power, praise,
From this, unto the last of days.