

# Creativity



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ordained servant

# *Ordained Servant Online*

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### **CURRENT ISSUE: CREATIVITY**

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### *From the Editor*

I remember the struggle, upon becoming a Christian, of reconciling the aspirations of the artistic, creative world in which I lived with my newfound faith. I had recently worked in the firm of Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius in Cambridge, Massachusetts—The Architects Collaborative. I had also worked for an architect who had done work for newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer III, with whom I once stayed. Eric Defty, an architect with whom I had briefly worked, had lived next to sculptor David Smith in Bolton Landing, New York, and was a pall bearer at the funeral of Jackson Pollock. This was a powerfully immersive environment that had little room for Christian faith.

The creative life of the family in which I was raised was at a much humbler level, but it inculcated a deep love of music, art, and architecture. My mother was a Japanese brush painter and architectural renderer, who designed two of the houses which we built and lived in. My sister and I spent much of our youth in art classes at the Currier Gallery of Art, now the Currier Museum of Art.

My mother became a Christian in a conservative Baptist congregation which ironically had little use for art, opera, or architecture. It was Francis and Edith Schaeffer who came to our rescue. Edith Schaeffer's *Hidden Art* was a lifesaver for my mother. Reading the Schaeffers' works and living at L'Abri was a lifesaver for me. So, reckoning on the place of creativity in the Christian life has been significant for me. The Reformed community, with its rich doctrinal and cultural heritage, has provided a wonderfully stimulating environment for my own creative endeavors.

People like Bill Edgar are a source of continual inspiration. His article on creativity introduces the topic of this month's issue of *Ordained Servant*. In the spirit of Edith Schaeffer, he defines creativity beyond the limited realm of fine arts. In the spirit of Francis Schaeffer, he demonstrates from Scripture the origin of creativity, including fine art.

Jazz drummer Stephen Michaud reviews Bill Edgars *A Supreme Love: The Music of Jazz and the Hope of the Gospel* in his review article "Jazz and the Gospel," integrating jazz and the gospel in a surprising and refreshing way.

I review *God in the Modern Wing: Viewing Art with Eyes of Faith* in my article "What

Do We Do with Modern Art?” This is a fascinating and compelling apologia for modern art in its relationship to religion in general and Christianity in particular, written by ten different authors, each involved in the art world.

On the Book of Discipline, Alan Strange continues his detailed “Commentary on the Book of Discipline of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Chapter 4A.” Stuart Jones, longtime expert on the Book of Discipline, offers a different perspective in “Ambiguities in Book of Discipline 9.1, Standing Revisited.”

An Older Elder offers a third letter of sagacious advice to a younger elder in “Letters to a Younger Ruling Elder: The Importance of the Devotional Life.”

I present the second chapter of my book (*The Voice of the Good Shepherd*) “Communicating in the Electronic World with a Christian Voice.” This is the second part of the introductory section of the book, “The Electronic World.” Next month I will present the first of two chapters on the history of preaching, “The Good Shepherd has Spoken in the Past.”

The poetry this month, “Beauty,” is by Alexander Pope (1688–1744) and fits our topic.

Finally, the cover is “Large Red Interior” by Henri Matisse (1869–1954), in the famous Red Studio in his house in Vence, France, where he painted from 1943–49.

Blessings in the Lamb,  
Gregory Edward Reynolds

## **CONTENTS**

### ServantLiving

- William Edgar, “Creativity”

### ServantWord

- Gregory E. Reynolds, “The Voice of the Good Shepherd: Communicating in the Electronic World with a Christian Voice,” Chapter 2

### ServantStandards

- Alan D. Strange, “Commentary on the Book of Discipline of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Chapter 4A”
- Stuart R. Jones, “Ambiguities in Book of Discipline 9.1, Standing Revisited”

## ServantWork

- An Older Elder, “Letters to a Younger Ruling Elder No. 3: The Importance of the Devotional Life”

## ServantReading

- Stephen M. Michaud, review article, “Jazz and the Gospel,” reviewing *A Supreme Love: The Music of Jazz and the Hope of the Gospel*, by William Edgar
- Gregory E. Reynolds, “What Do We Do with Modern Art?” review of *God in the Modern Wing: Viewing Art with Eyes of Faith*, Cameron J. Anderson and G. Walter Hansen, eds.

## ServantPoetry

- Alexander Pope (1688–1744), “Beauty”

### **FROM THE ARCHIVES “BEAUTY, ART”**

[http://opc.org/OS/pdf/Subject\\_Index\\_Vol\\_1-30.pdf](http://opc.org/OS/pdf/Subject_Index_Vol_1-30.pdf)

- Review of *The Good, the True, the Beautiful: A Multidisciplinary Tribute to Dr. David K. Naugle*, by Boone et al. (William Edgar) 30 (2021): 104–6.
- “Beautiful Truth” (Gregory Edward Reynolds) 24 (2015): 6–7.
- “Meredith George Kline: Artist-Exegete” (Gregory Edward Reynolds) 16 (2007): 6–9.
- Review of *River Grace* and *Refractions*, by Makoto Fujimura (Gregory Edward Reynolds) 20 (2011): 165–67.

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

# ServantLiving

## Creativity

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By William Edgar

We use the word offhandedly. We mean by it, innovation, or inventiveness. Sometimes the verb is turned into a noun: the artist is called a *creative*. I am uncomfortable with this usage, as it is elitist: some are “creatives” others are not. But we use the term loosely. An entrepreneurial business executive is said to be creative. An inventor, say, Thomas Edison, is said to be creative.

For many Christians, the equation is simple: God creates, and we, his image-bearers, create at our level. There is some truth to this. Our calling as a human race is to imitate God. The law of God tells us we should “be holy” as he is holy (Lev. 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7). Jesus quotes this principle, changing the word “holy” into “perfect” in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:48).

Likewise, human beings are to follow the divine pattern of work and rest. The Fourth Commandment focuses on the need to stop and rest one day out of seven. But it is also a commandment to work on the other six days:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. *Six days you shall labor, and do all your work*, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.  
(emphasis added, Exod. 20:8–11)

It can easily be forgotten that this is a commandment to labor and work, and not only to cease working on a given day.

The reason given for the human pattern is the divine one: “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day” (v.11a). Then it affirms, “Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it” (v.11b). So how did God work? By creating. Thus, how should we work? By creating.

But the parallel is not strict. God’s work is creating the world “out of nothing,” *ex nihilo*. The first words of the Bible are “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). The word “created” is a translation of the Hebrew word *bara* (בָּרָא). The meaning is that God originated the universe *from nothing*; in other words, he did not use previously existing material. As Cornelius Van Til used to remind us, there are only

two kinds of being: uncreated (God) and created (the universe). We cannot be like God in this fundamental, metaphysical sense.<sup>1</sup>

When we create, it is out of materials that already exist. Even when we boast about having “a new idea,” it is not strictly *out of nothing*, but belonging to the realm of human ideas.

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It may be helpful in order to distinguish our activity from God’s activity to refer to ours as *crafting*. We can fashion an object out of the materials at hand. If you have ever watched a painter at work, the artist may start with a design, then chooses different colors from the palette, and makes sure the light and shadows are right. Does this mean there is no room for inspiration? Not at all.

Perhaps the most familiar examples from the Bible of divinely guided craft are from the construction of the tabernacle, and then the temple. Exodus 31:1–6 and chapters 36 to 39 describe Bezalel as the chief artisan of the tabernacle. He, his colleague Oholiab, and scores of other craftsmen were called of God to design the interior of the tabernacle. They were filled with God’s Spirit, giving them the ability to work with different kinds of material with “intelligence.” Bezalel would later construct the Ark of the Covenant, a work of art if there ever was one (Exod. 37:1).

Moving into the New Testament, we see numerous examples of creativity. Jesus’s parables were artistic masterpieces. Decisions about an itinerary required creativity. Think of Paul’s avowals to the Romans about his travels. He began with general principles, such as respecting parity agreements: “and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, but as it is written, ‘Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand’” (Rom. 15:20–21).

But presumably, concrete decisions about where to stop first, what roads to journey, etc., were left to his creative wisdom. He did not always need to cite God’s direct authority for such decisions.

In any case, biblical authors always respected the distinction between God’s original, *uncreated* authority and the creativity of his image-bearers. It may be of interest to note that J. R. R. Tolkien wrestled with this problem. In his complex mythology, *Arda* was the *Quenya* name for the entire world. It was the home of elves, people, dwarves, and others, including Hobbits. These are in the realm of *subcreation*, a term used to distinguish the work of the *Origin* (God) from creatures. *Subcreation* meant for Tolkien the creation of great stories, or myths. As a believing Roman Catholic, he would not call the work creation. He was eager to safeguard the Creator-creature distinction.

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That is the easy part! The hard part is how creative people should think about their responsibility. There is no silver bullet, no one motivation or purpose for human creativity. Some artists have lofty metaphysical ideals. Paul Cézanne wrestled with ways to represent nature in his work, without either literalistically copying a scene or departing from it into abstraction. He once declared, “je vous dois la vérité en peinture” (“I owe

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<sup>1</sup> The word *bara* (בָּרָא) is used throughout the first few verses of Scripture. God created mankind in his own image (Gen. 1:27). God blessed the Sabbath because he rested from his work which he had created (Gen. 2:3). These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created (Gen. 2:4).

you the truth in painting”). He believed the natural world was the repository of certain truths, in shapes, in forms, in human qualities, and that it was his calling to make these invisible qualities visible.

Other artists believe they have a more direct public mission. Especially in the non-West, some of their voices are compelling. Take, for example, the work of First Nations painters Kimowan Metchewais and Wendy Red Star. Without falling into cheap propaganda, they articulate the values of Native Americans, which include a sense of exclusion from the dominant culture and the need to showcase the beauties of their world to outsiders. In one of Kimowan Metchewais’s imaginative photo albums, “Old Indians with Eyewear, Etc.,” he compiles photographs from the nineteenth century to today of Native men wearing glasses or goggles. There is humor here, but also a message: these folks are human and not just ethnographical objects, such as represented in *National Geographic*.<sup>2</sup>

Creativity may be exhibited at more ordinary levels than the visual arts. How you decorate your living room, what music you listen to, what clothes you wear, how you promote creativity in your neighbor, these count as examples of our calling to imitate God, without usurping his originality. Now, go and subdue the earth . . . creatively.

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<sup>2</sup> See the *New York Times* Guest Essay by Wendy Red Star  
[<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/03/opinion/kimewon-metchewais-native-american-art.html>]

# Servant Word

## The Voice of the Good Shepherd: Communicating in the Electronic World with a Christian Voice, Chapter 2

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By Gregory Edward Reynolds

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . He [John the Baptist] was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

—The Apostle John (John 1:1, 8, 14)

*Inundated by perspectives, by lateral vistas of information that stretch endlessly in every direction, we no longer accept the possibility of assembling a complete picture . . . a big picture that refers to human endeavor sub specie aeternitatis, under the aspect of eternity.*

—Sven Birkerts, *The Guttenberg Elegies*<sup>1</sup>

The New Covenant biblical preacher's task is embedded in the larger biblical doctrine of communication. A brief survey will help us as we seek to understand modern communication theory and its implementation in modern electronic culture. While brilliant secular theorists may “discover” many true and important things about communication and media, their theory of communication is always inadequate when it comes to foundational or ultimate things. The Christian theorist must begin with God himself. He is the original Communicator and the Creator of all human communication and all media of communication.

### **The Biblical Doctrine of Communication**

#### **The God of the Bible Is the Original Communicator**

Before the beginning, that is the creation, the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were communicating in eternity. Thus, the three persons of the Trinity are the original communicators (*opera ad intra*). All reality, meaning, and communication originate in the triune God. John 5:20 “For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is

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<sup>1</sup> Sven Birkerts, *The Guttenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Winchester, MA: Faber and Faber, Inc., 1994), 75.

doing.” The verb “shows” (*deiknusin* δείκνυσιν) means reveal or explain; the present tense indicates a continuous activity. John 17:4 refers to a covenant made in eternity between Father and Son to save God’s elect people: “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.” This is known as the Covenant of Redemption or *Pactum Salutis*. It is communication of the profoundest kind. Jesus says in John 17:8, “For I have given them the words (*ta rēmata τὰ ρήματα*) that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.”

The doctrine of the Trinity is the only metaphysical basis for communication. “God cannot be self-contemplating, self-cognitive, and self-communing, unless he is trinal in his constitution.”<sup>2</sup> Inter-Trinitarian love and glory is shared through eternal communication in the mysterious interpenetration of the divine persons. Communication is of the essence of the Godhead and central to the *opera ad intra* of the Trinity. The whole creation reveals his name and thus his omnipresence.

In the beginning God created all things (*opera ad extra*) by his spoken word of command (*fiat*): “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). This was followed by a series of commands creating all things in the universe. The Bible describes God creating all things out of nothing by *his word*—his spoken word of command. Furthermore, God gave all created things meaning by naming them: “God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night” (Gen. 1:5), an attribute that man made in his image would imitate in a profound but limited way.

## God Created Humans to Communicate

The original communicator created humans in his own image as finite communicators. It is of the essence of our humanity that we communicate. God gave Adam and Eve recreative powers to guard, cultivate, and name all of creation, and to worship their Creator. Adam was a priest in the Garden-temple, not first of all a farmer or gardener. It was a sanctuary of communion with God—the exercise of lordship over the created order for the glory of God: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15); “So out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” (Gen. 2:19). Adam asserted his God-given lordship over creation by naming the animals. We are called to imitate Trinitarian communication as social beings in both cult and culture.

The historic fall of Adam tragically distorted communication, perverting the gift of language. Instead of using language to reveal and glorify God, the serpent, and subsequently Adam and Eve, introduced falsehood into human speech, starting with distorting the content of the Covenant of Works, thus corrupting all human communication. Man thinks he can live without God and enjoy his world without honoring him. The visual seduction of fruit was made possible by the reinterpretation of its significance by the serpent.

So communication is not only essentially Trinitarian but also essentially covenantal. It is covenantal in nature because God spoke the terms of the Covenant of Life or Works to Adam in the Garden. This is the primary communication revealed in Genesis. The first human experience of communication was not social, but between God and man; God was the first to

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<sup>2</sup> William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1 (Repr., 1888, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 251.

speak. His speech was always by way of the sovereignly initiated and defined arrangement of his relationship with man, which the Bible calls a *covenant* (OT *berit* בְּרִית; NT *diathēkēs* διαθήκη). Since the fall, language is used either in covenant keeping or covenant breaking activity.

Sinful man's distortion of language is poignantly depicted in the Tower of Babel (Ziggurat) episode in Genesis 11. Fallen humanity sought solidarity through communication by defining (naming) itself above God, asserting human autonomy: "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:4). Communication is rebellious man's most important means of asserting his Tower of Babel agenda, which is the awful tendency of human culture.

Communication always has reference to God, either explicitly or implicitly. The act and mental environment of speech is a revelation of God's existence and omnipresence as Paul pointed out to the Athenians in Acts 17:27, "for in him we live and move and have our being." Fallen man seeks to suppress this knowledge (Rom. 1:18–20). Language forms culture as its gatekeepers control access to information as well as its meaning. But God is the great Gatekeeper to heaven's gate, with flaming angelic swords guarding the way to the Tree of Life. He guards and cultivates his kingdom through his covenantal Word.

Human communication has been in desperate need of redemption since Adam's fall. The Bible refers to the coming of the eternal Son as the beginning of a new creation: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). Christ is the first of a new humanity: "He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent" (Col. 1:18). He comes as the original communicator in human form, the Word made flesh.

In the beginning was the Word (λόγος), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. (John 1:1–4)

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col. 1:16–17)

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high . . . (Heb. 1:1–3)

Jesus Christ came to redeem communication, to save our tongues. The incarnate Son *is* God's ultimate communication. He came to restore fellowship, broken by the fall of Adam and sin, between God and his image-bearers, humanity.

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. . . . Let no corrupting talk come out of

your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. . . . Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.” (Eph. 4:25, 29; 5:4)

Preachers are heralds of the new creation in Christ via the preached Word of God: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

## Defining Communication

### A Secular Definition

While we may learn much from secular scholars in the field of communication studies, it is also an area to which Scripture speaks directly. Thus, secular definitions of communication and language will always be deficient and reveal the scholar’s ultimate loyalty.

Scholar James Carey defines communication as: “a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed.”<sup>3</sup> For Carey, meaning originates in human consciousness and is thus anthropocentric. People seek to create their own reality with words and actions. Carey grounds reality in the existence of communication itself. He comments,

I want to suggest, to play on the Gospel of St. John, that in the beginning was the word . . . Reality is not given, not humanly existent, independent of language and toward which language stands as a pale refraction. Rather, reality is brought into existence, is produced, by communication—by, in short, the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms.<sup>4</sup>

Carey simply suppresses his knowledge of the first Communicator: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom. 1:18). For the Christian, meaning and created reality originate, as we have seen, in the triune God.

### A Biblical Definition

Communication is first a divine reality, and only then may it be considered a human one as well. As Augustine demonstrated in his treatise *On the Teacher (de Magistro)*,<sup>5</sup> the certainty of human knowledge is based on the fact that all truth is grounded in the ontological reality, or being of God. Man’s communicative ability then is recreative rather than original.

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<sup>3</sup> James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 23.

<sup>4</sup> Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Saint Augustine, *The Greatness of the Soul; The Teacher*, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, trans. and ed. Joseph M. Collier (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1964), 122.

Communication originates in the eternal intra-Trinitarian communion of thought and is imitated by his image-bearing creature man in the construction of verbal symbols and the means of propagating them. This in turn enables him to fulfill the cultural mandate before the fall, his cultural instinct after the fall, and, for the Christian, his cultural calling in the various spheres of human life and society. As Augustine says in *De Magistro*: “when signs are heard the attention is directed to the realities signified.”<sup>6</sup> The Christian then begins with God himself as the original Communicator and the Creator of all human communication and all human ability to create media of communication.

The discipline of media ecology was historically developed in the thought of Jacques Ellul, Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and more recently Neil Postman and Joshua Meyrowitz, along with many others. Each of these mentioned is part of a Judeo-Christian environment of thought in one way or another and so have high respect for the “word” or verbal communication, and in some cases, such as Ellul, McLuhan, and Ong, the Word of God itself. For my analysis of these and other figures please see chapters 4 and 5 of *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures*.<sup>7</sup>

Ecology is from the Greek *oikos* (οἶκος) for house; it deals with management of households and other realms as interconnected environments or systems. What has developed as the academic discipline of media ecology involves two aspects: 1) the study of media as environments, how they affect human perception and the larger environment or cultural context; and 2) the management or stewardship which the analysis of these media environments warrants.

The Christian perspective on media ecology emphasizes the importance of media stewardship in the church or “house” of God, as well as in our personal, family, and cultural lives. It has to do with our relationship to God, his people, and the world for God’s glory. This quest is inherent in *being* the church. Biblical reflection on the specifics of our task is a mandate motivated by this larger purpose. Unlike most other areas of common culture, God has much to say about the use of language in his Word the Bible. Thus, theology has a direct impact on media ecology. It alerts us to ways in which electronic media tend to promote or eclipse the true and living God, and all other relationships. The naming or communication power the Triune God has given man is derivative, but powerful—with it comes awesome responsibility. An excellent example of Christian stewardship of media is seen in the Christian development of the codex (the book made up of leaves and signatures) in the third century. By 400 AD the codex had completely replaced the scroll, making the Bible and all literature more accessible.

Communication is based on communion more than the mere transmission of information. The word is rooted in the Latin word *communio*, a sharing of something held in common. The intimate sharing of thought in language is a profound reality, which goes far beyond mere information. Data is formed into information, which in turn is organized into knowledge, which in turn is applied to life by wisdom. The latter is largely eclipsed in the modern world as poet Edna Saint Vincent Millay laments in a portion of *Huntsman, What Quarry?*

Upon this gifted age in its dark hour

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<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *The Greatness of the Soul*, 115.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory Edward Reynolds, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Preaching in the Electronic Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 101–203.

Rains from the sky a meteoric shower  
Of facts . . . they lie unquestioned, uncombined.  
Wisdom enough to leach us of our ill  
Is daily spun, but there exists no loom  
To weave it into fabric.<sup>8</sup>

Speech is the incarnation of the inner lives of people. In turn we cannot think without language. A related word is conversation. Its origin in Middle English yields the idea of the intimacy of community. The King James Version of the Bible uses the word to communicate just that. Paul exhorts the Philippian Christians, “let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27). This involves one’s whole way of life, including, but not limited to, speech.

### **The Word of God Is a Multimedia Triad<sup>9</sup>**

#### **Media Balance**

General and special revelation refer to God’s communication as *non-verbal* and *verbal*. The multimedia triad begins with God’s communication to his people and is thus also verbal and non-verbal. The fact that writing is a relatively recent mode of verbal communication (third millennium BC) means that essentially speaking and seeing are *natural* to man. However, since writing and reading represent an interface between speaking and seeing, I have chosen to refer to these as a triad of *primary media*.<sup>10</sup> While writing and printing favor sequential, linear, logical thought, I do not believe that rationality came about due to writing and print, however much they may accentuate that aspect of man’s consciousness, but rather that writing and print developed because man *is* a rational creature. Even in purely oral cultures, stories have a beginning and an end. Thus, the intuitive and rational aspects of man are both inherent in man as God’s image, and both are reflected in man’s creation, development, and use of communication media. Thus, the triad of oral, written, and visual are *primary* in the sense that they are fundamental to most of man’s pre-electronic situation, especially in the history of special revelation. Each of these reappear in the secondary forms of electronic communication, which are *secondary media*. Walter Ong and Eric Havelock were the first to identify pre-literate cultures in terms of *primary orality*. Radio, since it was developed in a literate culture, is referred to as *secondary orality*. So also is all orality in a literary context.

Joshua Meyrowitz observes:

Electronic media bring back a key aspect of oral societies: simultaneity of action, perception, and reaction. Sensory experience again becomes a prime form of communicating. Yet the orality of electronic media is far different from the orality of the

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<sup>8</sup> Edna Saint Vincent Millay, *Huntsman, What Quarry?* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1939), Cited by Neil Postman in “Science and the Story We Need,” in *First Things* (January 2007): 29.

<sup>9</sup> This section is an abbreviated version of Gregory E. Reynolds, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Preaching in the Electronic Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 191–203.

<sup>10</sup> For the distinction between primary and secondary orality cf. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982); Eric Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

past. Unlike spoken communication, electronic communication is not subject to the physical limitations of time and space.<sup>11</sup>

Primary orality was a time-biased medium, whereas secondary orality is space-biased. The dramatic shift changes the way we think and the questions we ask: “The major questions are no longer ‘Is it true?’ ‘Is it false?’ Instead, we ask ‘How does it look?’ ‘How does it feel?’”<sup>12</sup> Therein lies the real danger of the electronic environment. Its relativizing tendency is immense. Its potential for undermining stability of every institution is enormous. The epistemology of critical thought and the boundaries of all the essential mediating institutions of common grace are radically threatened. Since secondary orality is the only kind of orality we can experience in the electronic situation, the Christian, and especially the preacher, must distinguish between the *mediated orality* of the electronic media and *unmediated orality* of face-to-face personal encounter. The unmediated orality of the preacher in the *local* church brings a time-bias to the medium, as we shall see, which is no small matter in preserving the identity of the church itself.

In *The Presence of the Word*, Walter Ong sometimes denigrates the written word;<sup>13</sup> but Ong also shows some appreciation for the “endurance and stability” of the written Word.<sup>14</sup> In his later work *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), written a decade and a half after *The Presence of the Word*, Ong goes so far as to state:

Orality is not an ideal, and never was. To approach it positively is not to advocate it as a permanent state for any culture. Literacy opens possibilities to the word and to human existence unimaginable without writing. . . . Both orality and the growth of literacy and the growth of literacy out of orality are necessary for the evolution of consciousness.<sup>15</sup>

Forging a dichotomy between written and spoken is contrary to what the Bible clearly teaches about the complementary relationship between the two. David’s meditation on the Word in Psalm 1, among dozens of other similar passages, demonstrates that private reading may also be a powerful vehicle for interiorizing, as Sven Birkerts has pointed out of reading in general. Furthermore, the public reading and preaching of the written Word seals what is written on the corporate consciousness and memory of the church, which has been entrusted with the deposit of the written Word of God, the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:15).

It is highly significant that the importance of God’s Word taking written form, as Scripture, appears in the history of redemption precisely at the time when the body of revelation became mnemonically impossible to handle. Since writing, or the codification of cultural realities, had been developed in common culture at least a millennium prior to Moses, it was, in the Providence of God, a perfect medium for the design and promotion of

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<sup>11</sup> Joshua Meyrowitz, “Taking McLuhan and ‘Medium Theory’ Seriously: Technological Change and the Evolution of Education.” Chapter 4 in *Technology and the Future of Schooling: Ninety-Fifth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, edited by Stephen T. Kerr. Part II. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): 96.

<sup>12</sup> Meyrowitz, “Taking McLuhan and ‘Medium Theory’ Seriously,” 97.

<sup>13</sup> Reynolds, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures*, 192–93.

<sup>14</sup> Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967. repr, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 191.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982), 175.

the typological kingdom of Israel, the nation. Written documents preserve oral realities, especially important for the infallible Word of God.

It is also an open question whether or not there are any purely oral cultures open to our historical inspection. One thing is certain, the Greeks were not the first literate culture as Havelock and Ong assert. Brandeis archeologist Cyrus Gordon has spent his career demonstrating the common origin of Greek and Hebrew cultures in a common Mediterranean civilization as well as the presence of phonetic literacy long before Greek civilization.<sup>16</sup>

Also, the presence of sin is entirely overlooked by the “oralist school.” Sin itself gives no small reason for the revelation of the Mosaic Covenant to be in written form. Thus, for the church awaiting the consummation of the kingdom, and in the midst of the development toward the apotheosis of the deification of human culture as the cult of man, it is critical to seek the proper balance between the written and the oral as well as the appropriate place of the visual in culture and the church.

### **The Incarnate Son Embodies the Perfect Balance among Media**

The incarnate Son provides us with *the* model for media criticism. In this regard Jacques Ellul points in a helpful direction when he observes that in Christ the word and the creation are united. Space, time, sight, and sound would have always been united in perfect balance were it not for the historic Fall.<sup>17</sup> McLuhan maintained that the Medieval failure to understand the Gutenberg technology could have been avoided had they “created a new synthesis of oral and written education.”<sup>18</sup> A synthetic approach will avoid the Scylla of the Luddite and the Charybdis of the technophile.

The Word of God is at once a written/read, an oral/heard, and a visual/seen medium. Any one of these isolated from the others leads to idolatry. The threefold mediatorial office of the firstborn of the new humanity is replicated in his people. The richness of this threefold office can only be properly appreciated and implemented as the Word of God is understood as a multimedia triad. God’s world of space-time, created reality is all of these at once for creatures made in his image, but only a proper understanding of the means of grace will enable the Christian to maintain the necessary balance among the three, and hence in relationship to all other media in our culture.

The three media or modes of communication given to us in speaking/hearing, reading/writing, and seeing/touching/tasting are the *primary* media of communication. They are fundamental to our being created in or as God’s image. The media balance in the means of grace prepares us to deal with all of what we might call the *cultural* or *technological* media. Because of sin, even when the three aspects are held in harmonious relationship, there will still be cursing and blessing present. In the worship of the church, the primary media are set apart or sanctified to be a unique blessing to God’s people.

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<sup>16</sup> Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugarit and Minoan Crete; The Bearing of Their Texts on the Origins of Western Culture* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966); *Homer and Bible: The Origin and Character Of East Mediterranean Literature* (Ventnor, NJ: Ventnor Publishers, 1967); *Before the Bible; The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations* (Plainview, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1973).

<sup>17</sup> Walter Ong, Review: *The Humiliation of the Word* (Jacques Ellul) in the *Journal of Communication* (1986): vol. 36, no. 1, 156–58.

<sup>18</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 51.

The visual, which is locked in space, demands the spoken and written words to give it meaning. The written, and especially the printed word, provides a transition between the visual and the oral. The written must be read by sight, but the meaning transcends sight. The spoken word gives special effect to the written and is prior to the written historically.

The incarnate Lord embodies this triad. Augustine understood that the eternal Second Person of the Trinity, the Word, is the “cause and pattern of all created truth and the light of all created intellects.”<sup>19</sup> He comes in history for all to see. He is seen dying on the cross and raised from the dead on the third day. He is the eternal Word made visible. His ministry is a teaching ministry. He preaches from the day of his baptism and installation as the Messiah until he breathes his seven last sayings on the cross. Then he preaches through his apostles, as he had spoken through his servants the prophets in the Old Covenant. All that he declares and accomplishes is a fulfillment of his inviolable written Word in the Old Testament: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). And all that he declares and accomplishes is written as his final revelation to mankind in the pages of the New Testament. In his incarnation the mediatorial Son “exegetes” (*exēgēsato* ἐξηγήσατο) the Father: “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1:18). In him we find visual, oral, and written communication in perfect harmony.

## Literacy and Orality Are Friends

There is a certainty attached by God himself to the written Word which functions in perfect harmony with the power of the voice in catechizing the church. Luke begins his gospel by stating his purpose in writing to Theophilus: “that you may *have certainty* (*epignōs* ἐπιγνῶς) concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4, emphasis added). *Instructed* or *taught* is the word for catechize (*katēchéō* κατηχέω), or to sound in the ear. Thus, ink and voice are friends not enemies and combined they cultivate certitude.

The general revelation of God in the visible world is the situation in which all knowledge and communication takes place. Created to reveal the invisible glory of the Creator in his “eternal power and divine nature” (Rom. 1:20), the visible world is both a medium of God’s communication to man and a medium of man’s communication to man. Used as a primary medium of culture building, when the visual is used as a tool to assert autonomy, it becomes a medium of idolatry. This covenant-breaking mode of existence is reversed by the counter environment of the visible revelation of the Covenant of Grace. Redemptive recreation of the visible world is central to the tabernacle and temple of the Old Covenant and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper in the New Covenant. Closely related to the visual is the tactile and olfactory perception of the created world. Thus, the visible world is restored to its original intention in the eyes of the believer.

Existentially, man is addressed by the oral Word of God. God conversed with Adam in the Garden of Eden and has spoken directly to his people throughout the history of special revelation after the fall. The immediacy of the oral *affects* people existentially. The power of the oral is revealed throughout Scripture. Gossip is like a deadly sword, and words of encouragement and truth are like nourishing ripe fruit. In sin the oral has enormous destructive potential. Preaching is the primary medium for restoring speech to its original intention: to express God’s thoughts after him.

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<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *The Greatness of the Soul; The Teacher*, 120.

In Jesus Christ we find the perfect balance of communication media. In Jesus Christ we find the perfect model for the preacher and the media critic. The media triad provides a structural reminder of the importance of a balanced sensorium in the service of God. Walter Ong observes: “Christian revelation has survived vast changes in the sensoria of the cultures in which Christians have lived.”<sup>20</sup> He further opines:

Indeed, the fact that the focal point of Hebrew and, even more, of Christian belief is found in a culture which for historical reasons makes so much of the word should be thoroughly reassuring for the believer: God entered into human history in a special fashion at the precise time when psychological structures assured that his entrance would have greatest opportunity to endure and flower. To assure maximum presence through history, the Word came in the ripeness of time, when a sense of the oral was still dominant and when at the same time the alphabet could give divine revelation among men a new kind of endurance and stability. The believer finds it providential that divine revelation let down its roots into human culture and consciousness after the alphabet was devised but before print had overgrown major oral structures and before our electronic culture further obscured the basic nature of the word.<sup>21</sup>

Is it not the threefold balance among written, oral, and visual that accounts for this resiliency?

## **The Written Word**

The written word is the incarnation of thought, an imitation of the Trinity and the incarnation of the Word. It is, as we have seen, an exercise of lordship. The fact of God’s writing the Ten Words with his own finger in Hebrew at Sinai (Exod. 31:18) and that he wrote words of judgment on the wall of Belshazzar’s royal dining hall in the diplomatic language of Aramaic (Dan. 5:5ff), demonstrates that writing is not an evolutionary cultural development. In support of the primacy of the oral, it is often asserted that Jesus taught but never wrote a book or even a word, as far as we know. What is missing in this simplistic observation is the place of the written Word in the ministry of Jesus. All the events of his birth fulfilled what was *written* by the Old Covenant prophets. He battled the Devil in the temptation in the wilderness with what was *written* in Moses and the Prophets (Matt. 4:1–10). He viewed his entire life and ministry as a fulfillment of what is *written*: “The Son of Man goes as it is *written* of him” (Matt. 26:24, emphasis added)

Most important of all, the Word incarnate is the author of all that is *written* in both testaments of the Bible.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news

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<sup>20</sup> Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 190–191.

to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Pet. 1:10–12)

Furthermore, Jesus told the Apostles in the upper room that they would be the instruments of written revelation after the resurrection. Peter received Paul's letters as Scripture during Paul's lifetime.

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. (2 Pet. 3:15–16)

For David, the written Word of God was fundamental, as he demonstrated in giving the plans and specifications for the Temple to Solomon, as David turned the throne over to him: "All this he made clear to me in writing from the hand of the LORD, all the work to be done according to the plan." (1 Chron. 28:19).

What is written is also always both oral and visual. We are to think of them separately only to understand their interrelationship. In reality they are never separate. The first written portion of Scripture is an account of the most astounding oral event in history, the creation out of nothing by the spoken commands of God. The preacher is always preaching to readers of the Word. When he reads the Word publicly, he speaks and is heard. When readers read privately, they hear the voice of the preacher. This is why it is dangerous to forsake the church and the means of grace, living in isolation from the public ministry of the Word.

What is written is also always visual. The reader of Scripture always brings his eyes to the text, not only as he sees the letters, but also as he brings his visual memory to the text. Genesis 1 is a feast for the eyes as the reader is confronted with the majestic power of *ex nihilo* creation. The created world is the context of Adam's viceregency as the image of God. Scripture is filled with metaphors which are rooted in our experience of God's world and the history and culture developed by his image bearers. Revelation 12 is a striking example of how all the history of redemption is viewed through several powerful and evocative visual images. Archeology is always pushing the date of writing back further and further. Languages such as Proto-Sumerian and Egyptian hieroglyphics use pictographs, which picture the visual reality or a symbol of it.

Written words are an incarnation of speech, just as spoken words are an incarnation of thought. The invention of the phonetic alphabet simply drew out the implications of language, i.e., that each distinct set of sounds has meaning. Phonetics codifies this meaning in an efficient storage and transmission system. This is part of cultural development for which man was created in God's image.

I would argue that the written is *foundational* to the life and worship of the church and informs the other two media. The oral and visual found in preaching, teaching, and the sacraments ingraft and seal the Word to the church in public worship. The fixity of print is essential to the covenant document of Scripture in a fallen world. This comports well with the aseity and eternity of God. Fixity and permanence communicate the faithfulness and immutability of God and his inviolable promises—"Writing is fixed in space, confined, bound, unvarying, subject to inspection and reinspection, and thus firm, controlled. ... *Scripta*

*manent.*<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the written Scripture liberates the church from the possible tyranny of the oral, what we might call the “heard” mentality seen in tribal cultures.

The nature of second millennium BC suzerainty treaties placed a strong emphasis on written documents (tablets).

The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” (Exod. 24:12)

when you obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that are written in this Book of the Law, when you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” (Deut. 30:10)

This list could be a very long one since the entire Bible exemplifies this balance of oral and written. Especially interesting in this last quotation is the juxtapositioning of the Lord’s “voice” and what is “written.”

It is eschatologically significant that the first written revelation established the typological kingdom of the Mosaic Covenant. The completed writings of the canonical Scriptures now foreshadow and assure the arrival of the consummated kingdom at the end of history.

The medium of the Word . . . relates to eschatology. Inscripturation marks the Word with a permanence and constancy that reflects eternity. In fact, the transition from the oral to the written Word proclaims the transition from this age to the age to come. In this regard it would be well to take exception to the “historicistic” claim for the primacy of the oral tradition. Not that the Scripture itself ever divides the speaking and writing of God’s Word in the manner some critics do. Still, the written Word bears a distinct eschatological stamp that grants it an elevated and even incomparable position for the people of God.<sup>23</sup>

In God’s providence, printing, as the “first mass medium,” ushered in a new era of gospel preaching which has spread throughout the world, as the church sojourns toward the promised eschatological consummation of history.

The immediacy of the oral is fixed and bounded by the written Word of God. Scripture as a medium promotes the concept of history. It is linear, moving from beginning to end. It is also essentially a narrative, the historical genre being primary. The poetry, wisdom literature, and epistolary literature are all rooted in the narrative of redemption. “In the beginning” signals the primacy of the historical perspective. The linear approach to history, the very idea of history itself, is rooted in the book. The linear nature of the written/printed word is appropriate to the historical movement of redemptive history.

The de-historicizing tendency of postmodernism idealizes the right-brain intuitive function. While it is certainly true that the institutionalizing and privatizing, or isolating

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<sup>22</sup> Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 94.

<sup>23</sup> Charles G. Dennison, “Thoughts on the Covenant,” in *Pressing toward the Mark*, eds., Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble (Philadelphia: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church), 12.

tendency of print can be a monumental problem in an idolatrous world, it is patently unbalanced to declare as Ong does that writing and print are “permanently decadent” compared with the oral medium. Quoting 2 Corinthians 3:6, “The letter kills but the spirit gives life,” only exacerbates the imbalance. Paul is distinguishing between the Mosaic and the new covenants, not the contrast between oral and written communication. Linearity and logic need not lead to Cartesian rationalism or its child, scientific materialism. If in fact the human brain reflects a polarity between linear and intuitive thought, it would seem wise to see the two, at best, as working in harmony to perceive and communicate the truth of God’s Word and the meaning of his world. This is clear in what Jesus tells his disciples about God’s gracious revelation of the truth to them.

Then turning to the disciples he said privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.” (Luke 10:23–24)

The disciples saw the miracles that Jesus performed in fulfillment of Isaiah 61 but could only understand them based on what they heard—the Word of God. Of course, this is a basic pattern in the history of redemption: The Lord performs mighty acts and then interprets them by giving his Word. Because we have not witnessed these mighty acts, which culminated in the ministry, death, and resurrection of our Lord, they come to us through the Word, read publicly and preached.

The privacy of print is important for the deep, meditative reading of God’s Word by his people in personal imitation of David (Ps. 1). This kind of reading cultivates reflection and thus expansion of the soul in relation to God, his church, and one’s culture. Ultimately God seeks residence in the hearts of his people, and thus he communicates inwardly. Private reading helps foster this. But this privacy is not meant to function to isolate the individual or to be used in isolation from the other media or the church.

The reading of Scripture aloud publicly forms a kind of covenantal juncture between private reading and preaching. The text of Scripture is a corporate or community document. Thus, the negatives of print, such as its privatizing and democratizing effect, are corrected by a biblical place for the preaching and public reading of God’s Word among the people. The written Word links the oral and the visual.

## The Oral Word

The oral Word, bounded by the *foundational* written Word, is *central* to the life and worship of the church. The primary means of grace is not the Word alone, but the *preached Word*. It applies the written Word as the living voice of God with all the immediacy and power unique to the spoken word. God is the God of the living and not the dead. On the Lord’s Day the living and true God addresses his people directly through his chosen servant the minister of the Word. While the prophetic voice is silent in the sense of providing fresh revelation, it is not silent in terms of God speaking to his people. McLuhan went so far as to say that orality “insures fixity” more than writing.<sup>24</sup> Surely writing tends to be easily forgotten if it is not read and reread, and especially read aloud. That we cannot do without the

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<sup>24</sup> McLuhan, *Counterblast*, 81.

oral Word is the assumption of every preacher who takes his calling seriously. I will explore this more fully in subsequent chapters.

## The Visual Word

The visual, which is locked in space, demands the spoken and written words to give it meaning. The written, and especially the printed word, provides a transition between the visual and the oral. The written must be read by sight, but the meaning transcends sight. As noted above, Ong often pits the oral against the visual. A Jesuit disciple of Ong, who is also a leading Ong scholar, Thomas Farrell, asserts,

Now, what did the visual analogues for intellection contrast with? For Ong, they contrasted with biblical expressions about “hearing” the word of God. Because of the visual analogues in Greek philosophy, Ong inferred that Greek philosophic thought manifested the impact of the written word (more so than biblical thought did). Ong worked all of this out before the publication of Havelock’s *Preface to Plato*.<sup>25</sup>

The Bible, however, is full of visual analogues for intellection: “So out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” (Gen. 2:19). “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!” (Ps. 34:8). “For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light” (Ps. 36:9). “Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” (John 3:3). “But I see in my members another law” (Rom. 7:23). The Bible reflects a perfect balance among the God-given media of visual, oral, and written.

The sacraments are the visual Word which are signs and seals of the written and oral Word in the life and worship of the church. They are informed by the written and preached Word. The presence of the preached Word along with the sacraments was a hallmark of the Reformation as over against the Roman Catholic tendency to place the visible at the center of public worship. The tendency toward idolatry is exacerbated by isolation of the visible Word.

The sacraments remind the church that it is redeemed in history, in space and time, through the incarnation, and presence of the Spirit of the risen Lord. After his resurrection Jesus ate fish with the twelve, reminding them that he, who had eaten the last supper with them, was the same person who was now resurrected as the heavenly Lord in his glorious body. He was not an apparition but the Lord of history and the first born from among the dead. The Apostle John testified:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1–3)

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas Farrell, “Visual Epistemologies?” Personal E-mail (18 March 2000).

So participants in the Lord's Supper see, smell, taste, and handle the elements of bread and wine. They see and feel the waters of baptism. Protestants have often been too hesitant to affirm the importance of the sacraments as sentient, historical experience. As visual, the sacraments represent a critical dimension of the environment which counters idolatry. The "neglect of the Lord's Supper may be responsible for a dangerous individualism that weakens its [the church's] witness."<sup>26</sup>

The visual element in the sacrament does not imply the use of other visual elements, such as drama, dance, or overhead projectors. The elements of worship, according to the Regulative Principle, are only those prescribed by express warrant in the written Word. As in the Mosaic Covenant, the visual means of worship are clearly prescribed by God in opposition to the idolatry of surrounding nations. The preaching of the Word is the medium prescribed for communicating the Word in public worship. While it may be debated whether or not bulletins, hymnals, and over-head projectors are elements or circumstances of worship, at least the Second Commandment calls us to consider the effect of the medium upon each element of worship. If we learn nothing from McLuhan and Postman, we should affirm their insight that the media of communication form a vital aspect of the messages they bear. Thus, the importance of the Second Commandment in the life of the worshipping community.

There is also a visual dimension to preaching. The appearance and gestures of the preacher are an aspect of the medium. A picture is worth a thousand words only if the Word is primary, prescribing, and defining the image.

As we step back from this discussion, it would seem that the task of Media Ecology was defined by Marshall McLuhan in terms of man's unique ability to reflect on his involvement with every medium and in so reflecting, taking responsibility for that involvement. We are not ultimately determined by media. Only when we fail to understand the environmental power of media do we become victims.

By keeping the primary media in balance through worship, we will be habitually reminded to duplicate that balance in the use of all other artificial media, especially the electronic media. By keeping the focus of communication on the communion of persons, both divine and human, we will be alert to the ways in which each medium either promotes or undermines our personal relationships with God and others and our commitments to the church, the family, and the community. The written, preached, and visible Word is the antidote to idolatry and cultivates the atmosphere of thought and life, which is the only anti-environment capable of withstanding the onslaught of our idolatrous culture.

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<sup>26</sup> R. William Franklin and Joseph M. Shaw, *The Case for Christian Humanism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 174.

# Servant Standards

## Commentary on the Book of Discipline of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Chapter 4A

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by Alan D. Strange

### Chapter IV The Trial of Judicial Cases

#### A. Rules for Those Involved

##### 1. Regarding the Judicatory

- a. At the beginning of every trial, the moderator shall announce:

This body is about to sit in a judicial capacity and I exhort you, the members, to bear in mind your solemn duty faithfully to minister and declare the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and to subordinate all human judgments to that infallible rule.

The announcement and the exhortation shall be repeated at the opening of each subsequent session of the trial judicatory. A session shall terminate as soon as the trial judicatory recesses, but a meeting is terminated only by adjournment.

- b. The judicatories of the church shall ordinarily sit with open doors. In every case involving a charge of heresy the judicatory shall be without power to sit with closed doors. In other cases, where the ends of the discipline seem to require it, the trial judicatory at any stage of the trial may determine by a vote of three-fourths of the members present to sit with closed doors.

- c. No person shall be deprived of the right to set forth, plead, or offer in evidence in any judicatory of the church the provisions of the Word of God or of the subordinate standards.

- d. If unusual circumstances require it, a judicatory may deny an accused person the right of participating in the Lord's Supper, or of performing the functions of his office, until the case is concluded.

- e. In a trial before the session if the accused refuses or fails to appear without satisfactory reason for his absence at the time appointed for the trial of the case, he shall again be cited, with the warning that, if he does not appear, it will proceed with the trial in his absence. The time allowed for the appearance on a citation shall be determined by the issuing session with due consideration for the circumstances.

In a trial before a presbytery if the accused refuses or fails to appear without satisfactory reason for his absence at the time appointed for the trial of his case, it will proceed with the trial in his absence.

**Comment:** BD 4 presumes that all the processes of BD 3 have been carefully followed and that the judicatory of original jurisdiction has found charges brought either by private parties (BD 3.7) or by the judicatory itself (BD 3.8) to warrant trial as determined by a full preliminary investigation. We thus begin in this chapter by

addressing the matter of the judicatory as it proceeds from its ordinary work to constitute itself as a trial judicatory and to proceed to a judicial trial.

Section a. then begins focusing on the working of the trial judicatory itself. The concern here is that at the beginning of every trial, and of each session of the trial, the judicatory is reminded by declaration of the moderator that the Word of God is that to which all are to submit, and everything must be actively subjected to that Word during the trial. Note here that all members of the judicatory are solemnly exhorted faithfully to minister and declare (as befits proper church power) the Word, which is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. The doctrinal standards, as cherished and useful as they are as summaries of God's Word, are not themselves infallible (only the Bible enjoys revisionary immunity), and in a trial the Word of God is that authoritative, necessary, sufficient, and perspicuous standard to which every other standard and all human judgment must submit (WCF 1.10).

The last sentence of a. points out that what is called a "session" of a trial terminates when the trial recesses (say, for lunch or for the day). A "meeting" of a trial, however, terminates only when it is adjourned. So a trial may have many sessions as part of a meeting. These "sessions" begin as part of the "Second Meeting of the Trial" and beyond. Judicatories may approach this matter differently. Some judicatories, as BD 4.C.2.b., below, may suggest, choose to denominate the second meeting of the trial as such and everything that follows it as additional sessions of the "Second Meeting of the Trial." In this scenario, the trial judicatory recesses to meet again on another date and in another session. (If it adjourns, instead of recessing, it should designate the next time it meets as a "meeting.") So some judicatories have many sessions as part of the second meeting, and others have third and fourth meetings with sessions ranging under them. This commenter thinks that regarding all meetings of the trial proper as Session X of the Second Meeting of the Trial is an advantageous way of proceeding and makes for cleaner references (all sessions being sessions of the second meeting and one need then not to bother with the nomenclature of meetings beyond the second).

Section b. sets forth an important tenet in our tradition. Unless there are good and necessary reasons for doing so, trial judicatories shall ordinarily sit with open doors. This means that the meetings and sessions of a judicial trial are customarily open to all members of the church. In the case of a charge of heresy, the judicatory is never, without exception, permitted to sit with closed doors. Heresy trials (trials involving serious doctrinal errors) generally involve those who hold the teaching office in the church and are promulgating teachings that undermine the faith. Since such is public, all teaching being a matter of public record, it is not fitting, and gives the appearance of an "old boys' club," for the church to close its doors to examine evidence and hear testimony in a heresy trial. Such should be conducted in the bright blaze of light for all to see so that the one accused of such can either be exonerated and proceed with his ministry or be convicted and suffer censure (BD 6).

The doors then can be closed only in matters of life, not matters of doctrine. In these cases of life, which would involve a charge of a sin like lying, adultery, etc., the doors should ordinarily remain open unless three-fourths of the presbyters present determine to close them and to go into executive session. A motion to close the doors can occur at any point in the judicial process but should only occur "when the ends of discipline seem to require it." This has historically been understood to mean things like protecting the good

names of others who may be victims of sin, allowing for testimony that may be highly sensitive (say, in an adultery case), and the like. The closing of the doors should neither be to afford undue protection to the accused nor to keep others from hearing testimony against the accused, particularly when the accused asks that the doors be kept open and is concerned that something like a star chamber proceeding may be afoot. Keeping the doors open to protect witnesses is one thing. Closing them so that all evidence against the accused can be kept secret or, on the other hand, so that scanty evidence can be hidden from a watching church, are both abuses of the practice of closing the doors and furnish reason for the doors usually being open unless a super-majority thinks otherwise.

Section c. ensures the rights of any persons to “set forth, plead, or offer in evidence” anything from the Bible or the Constitution of the church (doctrinal standards and the BCO). One may, on the one hand, argue that something violates God’s Word (though it may not be explicitly stated as such in the doctrinal standards) on the side of those bringing a charge or charges. One may defend oneself, on the other hand, with portions of God’s Word or the doctrinal and polity standards of the church in any and all cases. Machen was not allowed to defend himself from Scripture and the doctrinal standards in his judicial trial in the Presbytery of New Brunswick (PCUSA) but was convicted of not following the directive of the 1934 General Assembly.<sup>1</sup>

Machen argued that the Assembly’s directive was contrary to the Bible and the church’s constitution; but he was not allowed to present that as a defense, being told that he must simply submit to the church’s dictates.<sup>2</sup> The church, however, has power that is ministerial and declarative and cannot order her members to obey her dictates simply on her own authority: the church does not possess such magisterial authority but may only teach and preach consonant with the Word (“thus saith the Lord”) and its summary in the doctrinal standards.

Section d. permits a trial judicatory that has determined to go to trial (BD 4), or that has proposed censure (BD 6) for someone coming as his own accuser (BD 5), to deny the accused party the right of participating in special office and/or of communing at the table of the Lord immediately while matters are still in process. The conditions under which this may occur are described this way: “if unusual circumstances require it.” In other words, the judicatory must perceive that the prevalent circumstances of the case require the judicatory to deny the exercise of office and/or the Lord’s Supper to an accused right away because the sin is notorious, scandalous, or the like: perhaps someone has serious criminal charges against him, sinned publicly by attacking another, or any other number of sins, which to seek herein to catalog in the abstract is unwise. If the judicatory believes that immediate denial of the privileges of office and/or the table is warranted, it should record the unusual circumstances in its minutes so that it may justify its action if appeal is

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin H. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict* (1940; Repr., Philadelphia: The Committee for the Historian of the OPC, 1992), 103–14: The General Council (GC; an ad interim administrative board of the PCUSA) issued an opinion against the Independent Board of Presbyterian Foreign Missions (IBPFM), of which Machen was one of the founders, begun due to undisciplined heterodoxy in the PCUSA’s foreign mission program. The 1934 GA, based on the recommendation from the GC, ordered the IBPFM to cease soliciting funds within the PCUSA and demanded that all PCUSA ministers resign from the Board.

<sup>2</sup> Rian, *Conflict*, 115–28: Machen argued that the Assembly’s directive was a sheer assertion of church power and was contrary to the Scriptures and standards because the PCUSA’s Board of Foreign Missions placed its own programs and personnel above the truth, which it is the obligation of the church to believe and promote.

taken of the whole case, and part of the appeal is that the accused was unduly temporarily kept from the functions of his office or the right to the table.

Section e. provides for something differently handled in many Reformed and Presbyterian church orders: what does the judicatory do when the accused, without satisfactory reason, refuses to or fails to appear before the session when summoned for trial?<sup>3</sup> The trial judicatory determines whether a reason for absence is satisfactory, though an accused who contends that he has such reason might argue on appeal that he has satisfactory reason for his absence (perhaps he alleges abuse on the part of the accuser and is afraid to be in his presence in an ecclesiastical court, as opposed to a civil court, only the latter having coercive authority). The judicatory should carefully consider all such claims.

Once, however, it is determined that the accused has no valid (continuing) reason for his absence, he should be cited to appear a second time and warned that if he fails or refuses to appear again, the session shall proceed with trial of him in his absence. The time set for the second appearance shall be such that circumstances, as much as possible, will permit the accused, if he is willing and able to appear, to do so. If a willing and able accused person does indeed refuse to appear again, the session may proceed with his trial in his absence. BD 3.C.4. further details how a trial *in absentia* is to be conducted. That section should be consulted for such, and further comment thereupon will be reserved under the treatment of that section.

One might note that I have used the language of session and not presbytery thus far when referring to the judicatory in the case of proceeding to trial *in absentia*. This is because a minister, who is the party that a presbytery would try, is presumed to know the rules and to be in ready submission to them. When he is summoned by the presbytery and fails to show the first time, he is not summoned again, but the presbytery may immediately proceed to try him without further summons. This does assume that he has not provided an excuse for his absence that the presbytery deems satisfactory.

## 2. Regarding the Clerk

a. The clerk shall keep an accurate roll of the members attending each session of the trial judicatory. A session shall terminate as soon as the trial judicatory recesses.

b. The trial judicatory shall preserve a complete and accurate record of the trial. In the minutes recording the course of the procedure, the following shall not be omitted: (1) the charge and specifications; (2) objections made and exceptions taken at any stage of the trial; (3) a list of witnesses who testified and a summary of their testimony; (4) all rulings and decisions of the trial judicatory; and (5) the minutes of any private deliberations. Reproductions of part of the trial or the entire trial may be incorporated into the minutes of the trial judicatory. These minutes, together with all relevant papers, shall be certified by the trial judicatory and transmitted to the higher judicatory in cases of appeal.

c. Ordinarily all citations shall be served in person, but in case that is not possible, citations shall be sent by certified mail to the person cited.

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<sup>3</sup> The PCA *BOCO* (32.6; 33.3, 4) provides that when the accused does not appear for trial, the judicatory is to issue a summary judgment of “contumacy” (persistent refusal to submit to due authority) and may proceed to censure, ultimately up to and including deposition for office-bearers and excommunication for members. Only upon a return of the contumacious party in repentance is censure for that summary judgment lifted, and the judicatory free to proceed, if it wishes, with the original charges in an in-person trial.

**Comment:** The clerk for the trial (both moderator and clerk may be different from that of the ordinary judicatory if the trial judicatory so desires) shall keep an accurate roll of the members attending each session of the trial judicatory. This is important to determine eligibility to vote, particularly in any challenge that might be issued by the accused as to whether a voting party or parties were indeed present for every session of all the meetings of the trial, beginning with the Second Meeting of the trial. Absence from any part of the trial, except for the First Meeting of the trial, disqualifies potential voters for casting their votes for guilty or not guilty (see BD 4.C.2.b.) or for being counted as part of a quorum (though not from asking questions and the like). Thus, it is important to keep an accurate roll of members in attendance. A session of a trial terminates as soon as the trial judicatory recesses (for lunch, for the day, etc.).

The trial judicatory shall not only keep accurate attendance records but shall also preserve a complete and accurate record of the trial. Neither sessions nor presbyteries are required to record their trials and to provide a transcript of the same. But it seems easy enough these days to digitally record the meetings/sessions of a trial. Transcribing recordings is another thing and not inexpensive if such service must be hired. It seems wise, in any case, to have a digital recording of the whole trial that the clerk may have access to for aid in his producing proper trial minutes. This section then sets forth the sorts of things necessary to be recorded in the minutes of a trial.

The minutes of a trial must contain, first, the charge and specifications on which the accused is being tried (not previous charges, dismissed charges, and the like, which may prove confusing if they are in the minutes of the actual trial). Secondly, there must be an accurate record of all objections raised and exceptions taken by any party or parties at any stage of the trial. If rulings were made with respect to such objections or exceptions, either by the moderator or the presbytery, these shall also be recorded. Thirdly, there must be a witness list of those who testified and a summary of all their testimony. As far as the testimony of witnesses is concerned, present technology permits digital recording (and possible appeal suggests that the judicatory reduce this to a transcript). The making, or production, of recordings/transcripts that would be available is not presently required but seem to be a good idea given the current technology.

Fourthly, all rulings and decisions of the trial judicatory shall be duly recorded in the minutes. This would include all motions made and adopted by the trial judicatory. Fifthly, and finally, the minutes of any private deliberations shall be recorded. This has reference to the results of deliberation that are private, which is to say, are made secretly in executive session with closed doors. There must be a record of any and all actions adopted when the judicatory moves from public discussion to private deliberation. If, as has been recommended herein, a recording is made of the trial, any and all of that may appropriately be incorporated into the minutes of the trial judicatory. Any and all materials—minutes of the trial, together with other relevant papers—shall be certified by the trial judicatory for use of appellate courts and transmitted to such courts of appeal by the trial judicatory itself, which means from the office of the clerk. Lastly, as section c. notes, all citations to persons requiring them to appear before the court shall, as much as possible, be served in person. If that is not possible, the clerk shall send said citation by certified mail (return receipt requested) to the person cited.

### 3. Regarding the Accused

a. The accused shall be entitled to the assistance of counsel. No person shall be eligible to act as counsel who is not a member in good standing of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. The accused may not sit in judgment on his own case at any stage thereof, including the preliminary investigation. No person who is counsel in a judicial case may sit in judgment on the same case in any stage following the preliminary investigation.

b. The accused may take exception to any and all rulings or decisions made by the trial judicatory.

c. The accused shall be allowed one copy of the minutes at the expense of the judicatory. Additional copies may be obtained by him at cost.

**Comment:** Any accused party, regardless of the accusation(s), is entitled to the assistance of counsel. This commenter would observe that not only is there a right to counsel for all accused parties but also note that any accused party would be wise to employ such counsel. It is the case that accused parties sometime wish to have counsel who may not be a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. A judicatory may permit someone outside the OPC to serve as associate counsel, or the like, as long as the one identified as the designated counsel, in keeping with this section of the BD, is a member in good standing of the OPC.

The accused may not sit in judgment in his own case at any stage thereof, including the preliminary investigation. This means that if one is a member of a judicatory—the session or the presbytery—and a charge is brought against him, he may not sit in judgment even in the preliminary investigation, which is to say that he may not make motions and vote with respect to charges against him at any stage of the process. One who agrees to serve as a counsel in a judicial trial may not, at any point subsequent to the preliminary investigation, sit in judgment on the case, even though he may be a member of the judicatory. This does not mean that the counsel cannot lodge objections (since this is conceded herein at several points) or raise points of order (or like incidental motions), especially if a member of the body.

The accused, and/or his counsel, may take exceptions to any and all rulings or decisions made by the trial judicatory. Such exceptions shall be recorded in the minutes, as noted above, as well as any response made by the judicatory to such. It is especially important at such points to fully preserve the record of the case, particularly as such may be appealed, and a full and clear record is needed for appeal. A copy of the minutes is to be furnished to the accused at the expense of the judicatory. If he wishes to obtain additional copies from the judicatory, such may be done by the accused at cost to him.

#### 4. Regarding Witnesses

a. Any person may be a witness in a judicial case if the trial judicatory is satisfied that he has sufficient competence to make the affirmation required of witnesses in this chapter, Section A.4.b.

b. The moderator shall require each witness before he testifies to make the following affirmation: "I solemnly swear, that by the grace of God, I will speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth concerning the matters on which I am called to testify."

c. If it becomes necessary to obtain testimony from witnesses who are subject to the jurisdiction of another judicatory of the church, such testimony may be obtained either by the taking of depositions, or by having such judicatory, at the request of the trial judicatory, issue citations directing such persons to appear and testify before the trial judicatory.

d. The trial judicatory shall have power to direct that the testimony of witnesses be taken by a commission appointed by the trial judicatory when it concludes that unusual

circumstances require such a course. A representative of the trial judicatory and the accused, or his counsel, may examine and cross-examine such witnesses, and interpose objections concerning (1) the admissibility of any oral testimony, (2) the competency of the witnesses, (3) the authenticity, admissibility, and relevancy of any documents, records, and recordings identified by the witnesses. The commissioners must be communicant members of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. They shall record such testimony and objections as may be offered, and, without ruling upon the objections, shall transmit to the trial judicatory a complete transcript of the proceedings.

e. If a witness who is a member of the church fails to obey a lawful citation, he shall be cited again with the warning that if he does not appear, or give satisfactory reason for his absence, he may be charged with contempt. The time allowed for appearance on a citation shall be determined by the issuing judicatory with due consideration for the circumstances.

f. If a member of the church under the jurisdiction of another judicatory has been cited as a witness, and such person refuses to appear, the trial judicatory will communicate the facts to the judicatory having jurisdiction over the person concerned.

**Comment:** The question of the competency of a witness in a trial has several different dimensions to it. Obviously, a competent witness needs to have directly witnessed some aspect of the offense (and not merely know hearsay, except in rare cases in which such is historically legally permitted). Another indispensable aspect of the qualifications of a competent witness is the ability to take the oath in section 4b. of this chapter. Thus, section b. contains the actual oath to be administered: the would-be witness solemnly swears, by the grace of God, that he will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, with respect to the matters upon which he is called to testify. Such an oath can scarcely, especially in view of the appeal to the grace of God, be taken by one who openly professes anti-theism.

Some may maintain that none but a professing Christian can duly take such an oath. This commenter thinks that as things presently stand in the BD, it is the responsibility of the respective trial judicatories to determine who is qualified to take this oath. One could scarcely insist that one must be a member of the OPC to take it, but it would not be unreasonable to contend that one must be a professing Christian to take it. Other church orders require, minimally, that a competent witness in an ecclesiastical trial must affirm something like God and a final judgment, because one is not thought able to take such an oath if there is no fear of God before him.<sup>4</sup>

Section c. addresses the circumstances in which it is necessary to obtain the testimony of witnesses who are under the jurisdiction of judicatories of the OPC other than the trial judicatory. Such testimony may be obtained either by the taking of depositions or by having such judicatory, at the request of the trial judicatory, issue citations directing such persons to appear and testify before the trial judicatory. Thus, the trial judicatory relies on committees or commissions (in unusual circumstances) of the trial judicatory to go to the witnesses and take depositions or for them to come there at a convenient time and give depositions. Alternatively, the trial judicatory may request the proper judicatories of the prospective witnesses to issue citations to them that instruct them to cooperate with the trial judicatory.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Constitution of the Reformed Church in the United States*, for instance, in Article 141 permits a variety of witnesses in its trials, “except such as do not believe in the existence of God or in a future state of reward and punishment or have not sufficient intelligence to understand the obligation of an oath.”

Section d. authorizes the trial judicatory to employ when needed (in unusual circumstances) a commission to take the testimony of witnesses. A representative, or representatives, of the trial judicatory and the accused, or his counsel, should be a part of these proceedings. They may examine and cross-examine, as is appropriate, such witnesses and interpose objections concerning the following. First, the admissibility of any oral testimony. Is the testimony relevant, is it direct (as opposed to hearsay), and the like? Secondly, the competency of the witnesses may be called into question. We already commented at some length herein on the question of this matter (especially on BD 3.7, with respect to the Preliminary Investigation), which would include considerations of the age and mental capacity of the witness, their ability to take the prescribed oath, etc.

The commission may then consider the authenticity, admissibility, and relevancy of any documents, records, and recordings identified by the witnesses. Just as would the trial judicatory, the commission may consider such questions pertaining to evidence. To be clear, the BD notes at this point that the commissioners must be communicant members of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (they could not be members of another church which may be involved in such proceedings). The commission shall record all testimony and objections as may be offered and, without ruling upon the objections, shall transmit to the trial judicatory a complete transcript of the proceedings. The trial judicatory shall rule upon the objections, implying that judicatories, and not commissions thereof, are the bodies that should conduct judicial trials in the OPC.

Finally, sections e. and f. address two different circumstances pertaining to witnesses. In the first case, a member of the OPC (this is the meaning in this book of “a member of the church”) under the original jurisdiction of the trial judicatory, who is cited to appear as a witness and who fails to do so, may, after all the qualifications noted (no satisfactory reason, cited a second time, due consideration of circumstances), be charged with contempt. The second case has to do with a witness cited to appear who is under the jurisdiction of another judicatory of the OPC. The refusal of the witness to appear and the circumstances thereof shall be communicated by the trial judicatory to the judicatory having jurisdiction over the cited witness.

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# Ambiguities in Book of Discipline 9.1, Standing Revisited

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By Stuart R. Jones

OP minister Joseph Keller has helpfully brought attention to certain ambiguities in the Book of Discipline (BD) regarding complaints. An addendum is offered here to explain likely sources of the ambiguities, which in turn may provide understanding and potential guidance in resolving the problems of applying BD 9.1 to particular cases.

An examination of the 1934 PCUSA BD (a text is available in the 1934 GA minutes, *inter alia*) and the earliest OPC BD shows several significant changes to the rules on complaints, the two most relevant changes being these: 1) complaints in the PCUSA did not originate at the level of the judicatory said to have erred but were filed with the next “higher” judicatory (i.e. the appellate judicatory), just as an appeal of a judicial case is filed in the OPC today; 2) the 1934 PCUSA BD distinguished between memorials (effectively a “complaint” by a judicatory against a judicatory) and complaints (a “complaint” brought by qualified individual members).

## Personal Complaints

When the OPC came into being, the 1934 PCUSA BD served as an exemplar but was revised and sometimes simplified in textual language. Though the OPC BD was revised in the 1980s, the ambiguous portions in view here remained unchanged. The 1934 BD reserved the term “complaint” for what has been called a “personal complaint.” The relevant text follows:

A complaint is a written representation by one or more persons, subject to and submitting to the jurisdiction of a lower judicatory, to the next higher judicatory against a particular delinquency, action, or decision of such lower judicatory in the exercise of administrative discipline. (1934 PCUSA BD 12.8)

The Stonehouse Committee provided the text for the OPC BD prior to 1983, which showed a tendency to economize on the wording of the exemplar even when no substantive change is in view. Thus, the OPC BD simply states, “to which he is subject” rather than “subject to” and “submitting to” and omits the word “jurisdiction” until the scenario of a session complaint against presbytery is addressed. The 1934 BD, however, makes clear that jurisdiction of some sort is in view. It does not resolve the anomaly of denying standing to a pastor to complain who is not under the original jurisdiction of a session, but it also does not use the term “original jurisdiction” (as it does in BD 2.1).

The 1884 PCUSA BD (text in 1883 GA minutes) states:

A complaint is a written representation, made to the next superior judicatory, by one or more persons subject and submitting to the jurisdiction of the judicatory complained of, or by any other reputable person or persons, respecting any delinquency, or any decision, by an inferior judicatory. (1884 BD 9.84)

The latter part of this provision on standing was likely regarded as opening the door too widely, but it may reflect the view that complaints provide a corrective vehicle for guarding

the purity and good order of the church, even when a person is not personally injured by a judicatory decision. George Hill states that an inferior court may pronounce a judgment that “may do no wrong to any individual . . . yet the judgment may appear to some of the members of the court contrary to the laws of the church, hurtful to the interests of religion, and such as involves in blame or danger those by whom it is pronounced.” Such cases allow a right to record dissents and to bring complaints according to Hill. He states, “The members of every church judicatory are thus taught to consider themselves guardians of the constitution.”<sup>1</sup>

Hill’s view of complaints relegates standing to members of the judicatory. This is consistent with Keller’s “third view” and the general custom that I have seen in the OPC. The only thing added to Hill’s view is the power of members of the local church to complain against sessional acts. The language “subject to” is reminiscent of membership and ordination vows, and in the case of church disputes there is a necessity to respect the court where jurisdiction over the dispute is being exercised.

If the third view is generally agreed upon, better wording of the Book of Discipline is possible. Great care is needed in such an amendment, however. The text of the BD, which has survived since the OPC came into existence, may be anachronistically read in view of the Form of Government which was revised in 1978. The ecclesiology of that standard (FG 14.2) states that as the presbytery is the governing body of the regional church, “it consists of all the ministers and all the ruling elders of the congregations of the regional church.” Traditionally, a minister would likely be entitled to bring a complaint regardless of whether he had attended the particular meeting where a disputable act took place. This was less certain in the case of a ruling elder deemed to be a representative of his local church. The direction of the Form of Government revision was toward parity in the office(s) of ministers and ruling elders, so this question would need clarification. Though the regional church has a continuous existence, as does its officers, a judicatory has a more discrete existence.

### **Judicatory Complaints**

The OPC, probably in the interest of stylistic economy, made a major revision to the 1934 PCUSA BD provision on memorials by incorporating it into a wider conception of complaints. Chapter 14 is entitled: “Of Differences Between Judicatories.” It begins:

Presentation of a Memorial.—Any judicatory deeming itself aggrieved by the action of any other judicatory *of the same rank* [italics supplied], may present a memorial to the judicatory immediately superior to the judicatory charged with the grievance and to which the latter judicatory is subject, after the manner prescribed in the sub-chapter on Complaints (Chapter xii, Sections 8-15, Book of Discipline), save only that with regard to the limitation of time. (1934 BD 14.1)

Here the memorial/judicatory complaint clearly indicates that the complaining judicatory must be of “the same rank” but does not require an immediately common superior judicatory for the two equally ranked judicatories. Originally, the OPC BD apparently saw no need to clarify this point, which the passage of time now renders more remote and ambiguous.

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<sup>1</sup> George Hill, *A Compendium of the Laws of the Church of Scotland, Part I* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Edinburgh: 1837) 481–82.

# Servant Work

## The Importance of the Devotional Life

### Letters to a Younger Ruling Elder, No. 3

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By an Older Elder

Dear James,

So good to hear from you again. I know how busy you are. It sounds as though work at the hospital has suddenly picked up as well. Do not let that discourage you. Our enemy is frequently trying to distract or dishearten us with little things like that. A full workload is actually one of the ways you bless the church, not just financially, but by example. Keep in mind, most of the folks at church have jobs, too. Therefore, keep up your work with holy diligence, as unto the Lord (Col. 3:23). Pray for grace to do your job well. Your earthly job is as much a calling as your ordination. Do not forget that. Calvin said, “Every individual’s line of life, therefore, is, as it were, a post assigned him by the Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

You see, when the pastor is there at the Bible study, Sunday school, men’s meetings, and both worship services on a Sunday, church members (whether they admit it or not) are tempted to think, “Yeah, but that’s his job. That’s what he is paid to do.” But when you, the ruling elder, are there, they cannot hide behind that excuse very well. So, do not let a demanding job discourage you. The Lord knew about your career when he called you to this work. This was a part of his perfect plan.

Sorry. That was a rabbit trail I suppose. Let me get back to your question. You asked specifically in your letter about *a model for elder ministry*. I can tell you that one thing I have learned is the importance of walking close with the Lord yourself. Serving the church can quickly drain your spiritual tank. You need to keep filling it. A well-protected devotional life is so important. Paul’s words to the Colossians in general are doubly true for the elder, “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col. 3:16). Our old friend Spurgeon once put it this way, “Even the consecrated lamps could not give light without oil.”<sup>2</sup> Remember that. Develop a habit to ensure God’s Word is getting into you (Ps. 1:2). Interact with it. Read Scripture as the owner’s manual for life that it is. Ask the Lord each day to show you something in his Word by which to help you live for Him (Ps. 119:18). By the way, if you do this, you will rarely find yourself without something to share with

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, 3.10.6, ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 724

<sup>2</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, August 28 AM (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980).

the flock should you need it. The most effective way to serve the church as an elder is to mature as a Christian yourself.

Let me tell you something. I have seen the eldership ruined more times by men, not because they were poor elders, but, sadly, because they were poor Christians. Maybe they were ordained because they loved the doctrines of the church, or the history of the church. Some, I fear, were ordained because of a well-meaning, but over-zealous pastor that wanted to see their own work bear fruit. This rarely goes well. There are women who will marry a man in hopes of changing him. Pastors sometimes ordain elders with the same hope. Both are usually wrong. The most important thing you can do right now is to keep growing. That takes time in His Word.

I have found for myself that a little daily reading of some spiritually rich material alongside Scripture helps too. Maybe a little Spurgeon or something by J.C. Ryle. The Puritans have always ministered to my soul. A good Christian biography can help. But pick something because it speaks to your heart. No one human author suits every taste. You will want to build a little library of spiritual resources. Even Paul himself reminded Timothy to “bring the books” (2 Tim. 4:13).

And then there is prayer. Nothing will enhance your usefulness as an elder as your closet prayer life. *Prayer makes the elder*. Ask the Lord for his help with all that you do. James, this truth about the importance of prayer is something which you can only take by faith at this point in your life. You know what God’s Word says about the importance of prayer. You know the facts. But it is only after many years, and looking back, that the truth about prayer really sinks in. As I look back upon my own prayer life as an elder, I can say that the times of weakest prayer have been the times of weakest ministry. But when that prayer life is on fire, and the closet becomes a place of tears, cries, pleadings, longing, and closeness to the Lord, the entire rest of the work takes on new meaning, new opportunities, new joy.

I think I have said enough for this letter. I do so enjoy hearing from you.

Your soul’s well-wisher,

An older elder

# ServantReading

## Jazz and the Gospel

### A Review Article

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by Stephen M. Michaud

*A Supreme Love: The Music of Jazz and the Hope of the Gospel*, by William Edgar.  
Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022, xiii + 207 pages, \$24.00, paper.

At its best, jazz music is a profoundly enriching experience for anyone willing to wade through its remarkable sound world. While there are numerous books to guide the reader into a better appreciation of this vibrant art form, there are none to the reviewer's knowledge which seeks to bridge the connections between jazz and the gospel. Enter now this fascinating new book on that very subject by someone uniquely qualified in both fields as a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary and a practitioner of jazz piano: Dr. William Edgar. At the very least, the author hopes that his book will inspire those unfamiliar with jazz to investigate its treasures. But whether the reader is initiated or not in the world of jazz, Edgar's main purpose is to show that this music cannot be appreciated in its deepest sense without some understanding of the Christian message.

Perhaps for some readers, even those with a penchant for higher art forms, the topic might be approached with some skepticism. After all, what link (if any) could exist between the biblical story and the highly improvisational, harmonically complex, rhythmically swinging maelstrom that is jazz? Edgar would argue (to adapt the words of the apostle Paul), "Much in every way!" Not only is jazz a deeply meaningful style of music in its own right, but it also can help a Christian better appreciate the beauty of Christ's gospel, inasmuch that both the sadness and elation of jazz evoke themes sounded in the story of redemption.

To proffer this intriguing thesis, Edgar first helpfully defines for his reader the key characteristics of jazz, then lays out the groundwork for aesthetics. Counter to the notion that aesthetics must always set forth joy and imitate an idealized plane of beauty, Edgar argues, "An aesthetic quality is an artful way to understand a particular narrative" (12). Obviously, not all events and experiences in this fallen world are happy ones, but a good aesthetic will seek to portray in artistic form a variety of experiences, whether joyful or sorrowful, in a way that exhibits imagination and craftsmanship. Even if a jazz practitioner (or listener, for that matter) is not Christian, the powerful and varied themes of human experience conveyed in jazz are congruous with and indeed dependent upon the Christian worldview contained in the Scriptures. The author sets this notion forth even in the title of his book, *A Supreme Love*, really a pun on the landmark jazz recording by saxophonist John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme*—an album remarkable for its musical progression from sorrow to profound joy. With the awareness of both the history of jazz

and these key elements, the thoughtful listener will be led to reflect on the Man of Sorrows as he endures the agony of the cross leading to the joy of the resurrection.

In the first main part of the book, the author provides the historical context in which jazz was both born and developed, beginning with the heart-wrenching diaspora of the slaves in Africa and the songs which expressed the sadness and misery they experienced, beginning with the spirituals, then developing into blues and jazz. Edgar reminds the reader that Africa figured conspicuously into biblical history, offering the examples of Israel in Egypt, the Queen of Sheba and her visit to Solomon, Jesus's flight to Egypt with Mary and Joseph, and the Ethiopian eunuch in the Book of Acts, not to mention later church history. The author then offers a cogent, biblical critique of modern slavery as "man-stealing"—a practice severely forbidden in the Old Testament (see Exod. 21:16). The faulty justification for the horrific inhumanity of modern slavery, according to Edgar, is paternalism, which he describes as the "colonization of the soul": i.e., subjugating the slave in both mind and body, thus denying his human dignity under the assumption that the slave both needs and profits from a slaveowner; in actuality, this was a way for the slaveowner to maintain privilege. It was this very dehumanization, however, which found expression in such "Psalm-like" laments as the well-known, moving spiritual "Nobody Knows," a fitting example of the pained beauty which can emerge from bondage, very much like Psalm 137—a lament borne out of the forced captivity of the Jews, who were singing God's song in a foreign land. Edgar notes that while much of today's contemporary (mostly white) Christian music expresses "happiness," this is to be distinguished from the "joy" in much black music, which has protested oppression and affirmed survival through the crucible of suffering. As Edgar states the contrast so well, "One has tried to come directly to the banquet table, and the other has travelled there through the valley of the shadow of death" (45).

At this point, the author takes up the question as to the degree in which the gospel has infiltrated jazz in a more self-conscious way. While many times the intentions of white people in leading slaves to Christ were morally suspect, the influence of Christianity on the slaves has nevertheless been well documented. In support of this, Edgar quotes the scholar Dena Epstein, who, after a comprehensive investigation into the subject, concluded, "One can hardly overstate the importance of conversion to Christianity in the acculturation of blacks in the new world" (48).<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that biblical themes have always been applied uniformly by the black community; for example, Martin Luther King Jr. focused on redemptive themes chiefly as the basis for social justice, while Malcom X stated that "the gospel had become so *White* as to make rejection of the church a necessity" (53). But in Edgar's estimation, it was the story of the Son of God in His death and resurrection which was most responsible for drawing the black slaves to the gospel—a gospel which figured prominently in both the slave narratives and in Black music with its melancholic expressions of present misery coupled with the joyful hope of future freedom and ultimate rest in heaven.

In the second part of the book, Edgar covers the background genres of jazz, getting more deeply into the characteristics of jazz in its various forms. The author sees resilience as its key component, both in protesting oppression and offering "an alternative to a culture of White preeminence" (64). To the present reviewer (a drummer, no less!)

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<sup>1</sup> In Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 100.

one fascinating example the author provides of such protest is the use of spoons, washboards, and even the human body (“hambone” and eventually tap-dancing) to create rhythmic sounds after the “Black Codes” forbade the use of drums which had been part of the slaves’ former communal life in Africa. Humor also played an undeniable part in the protest, both in some of its lyrics and sounds (e.g., the “wah-wah” sound of a trumpet produced by a plunger or the quoting of other music sources during improvisation), but the author reminds the reader that this was to express joyfulness during suffering rather than to convey the trite notion of the “happy performer” (68).

Particularly moving to the heart of Christian readers will be Edgar’s chapter dealing with the advent of spirituals, giving poignant accounts of the “hush houses” or cabins in which the slaves would meet secretly to hear the preacher expound God’s Word. It is from these hush houses that some of the most mournful and affecting utterances of music were born. The author gives numerous wonderful examples, but, to whet the appetite, this reviewer will provide one example given in the book: from the spiritual “On Time God,” the following magnificent line appears, “God don’t come when you want him to, but he’ll be there right on time” (80). A separate genre to the spiritual is that of gospel music; whereas the former is more traditional and focused on the theme of misery, gospel music is a later development with more of the emphasis on joy, generally having a livelier and more “up-beat” character. Throughout this section, Edgar provides numerous examples which the reader can further investigate on his own. Yet another background genre covered in the book is blues, with its emphasis on faithlessness, abandonment, and loss. While hope is not always explicitly stated, the author nevertheless argues for the presence of hope “in the fact that one can sing at all” (91). While some would argue that blues music is entirely secular, having reference only to the sadness of severed bonds outside of church, the author would agree with Pierre Courthial, “There is no proper sacred-secular distinction, because everything is sacred” (97).<sup>2</sup> That is to say, even though blues music does not always directly reference the Christian worldview, it makes no sense apart from it, especially in the shared emphasis of both the permeating presence of sin in the world and the desire to rise above it. The author draws parallels between the blues and the “laments” in the biblical Wisdom literature; following Ruth Naomi Floyd, he even suggests that Jesus’s cry from Gethsemane that the cup of suffering might pass from Him “could be considered a blues prayer!” (99).<sup>3</sup>

The third and final section moves on from the background genres which shaped jazz to jazz itself. The author begins his evaluation of jazz history proper with ragtime, traces its development in New Orleans, moves on to its first legends (e.g., Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington), noting the Christian faith of several of them. The book then moves on to the phases of jazz (what the author terms its “midlife”), including both swing music (e.g., Benny Goodman and Glen Miller) and bebop (e.g., Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie). Although bebop, with its more complex harmonic structure and rhythms, was considered controversial at first, it still maintained a basic continuity with the song forms and “bluesy” elements of older jazz styles, while demanding a high degree of technical virtuosity in its improvisers. Attention is then given to the pioneering

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Courthial, emeritus dean of the Reformed Seminary in Aix-en-Provence, France, in personal conversation with William Edgar.

<sup>3</sup> See Ruth Naomi Floyd, “Blues,” in *It Was Good: Art to the Glory of God*, ed. Ned Bustard (Baltimore, MD: Square Halo, 2013), 191–98.

work of Miles Davis with his cool jazz / hard bop innovations, taking his leave from the diatonic (which is any stepwise sequence of the seven “natural” pitches—i.e., the white keys on a piano) and venturing into modal music. Unlike the older styles, with modal jazz there is no longer a need for the chords to resolve themselves. Eventually, Miles would experiment with electric music, fusing together elements of rock with jazz.

Upon giving this short but helpful survey of jazz, Edgar returns to his argument that jazz is best understood as reflecting in musical form the gospel of Christ. While obviously a jazz composer / performer might not be self-conscious of such a connection, examples are provided in the book of those who were more deliberate in accentuating the gospel in their music. He then highlights John Coltrane, that most preeminent figure in jazz, as one who achieved a spirituality unparalleled in jazz music. Although Coltrane himself seems to have been universalistic, Edgar favorably quotes the assessment of Salim Washington, “Coltrane’s music was ultimately a meditation upon the joy and beauty that is possible in human life through knowledge and understanding of reality and devotion to goodness” (157).<sup>4</sup> The bottom line for Edgar is that regardless of the particular style of jazz, there exists a powerful metaphor for the misery of the human plight, the cry for deliverance, and the joy at “the end of the road” (170); thus jazz, when appreciated, will resonate in those who desire to worship the living God in Jesus Christ.

In the very last chapter, the author surveys what he calls the “seven joys of jazz” (172): its bluesy ambiance, its strength, its invention (improvisation), its swing, its sense of conversation, its rural folk roots, and the influence of the Christian message, particularly in what the author calls its “resonance” between Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection with “the movement from sorrow to joy found in jazz” (172). The book ends with a helpful appendix of YouTube links providing an opportunity for the reader to listen to the various facets of jazz referenced in the book.

Dr. Edgar’s fascinating work fills in a significant gap in the literature dealing with jazz. For those looking to expand their cultural horizons in general, this volume will prove to be a stimulating read. For jazz aficionados who are also Christians, their sense of a sacred-secular dichotomy will be challenged, fostering the hearing of this music in a more meaningful, even “devotional,” way than before. Finally, this book could provide an excellent gospel contact with jazz fans who do *not* know the Lord. Its excellent explanations of aesthetics, coupled with its intelligent historical analysis of the black experience in America, transcend the topic of jazz and would be of great benefit to any reader. Highly recommended!

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<sup>4</sup> Salim Washington, “Meditations on Coltrane’s Legacies,” *Institute for Studies in American Music Newsletter*. Vol. 31, no. 2, (Spring 2002).

# What Do We Do with Modern Art?

## A Review Article

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By Gregory E. Reynolds

*God in the Modern Wing: Viewing Art with Eyes of Faith*, Cameron J. Anderson and G. Walter Hansen, eds., Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021, xvii + 193 pages, \$30.00.

I was raised in the context of art, much of which was modern, the modern wing of the Currier Gallery of Art, now the Currier Museum of Art. I took lessons there in drawing, painting, pottery, and sculpture during my elementary and high school years before entering architectural school. When viewing certain pieces of modern art when I was very young, I remember repeating the cliché, “I could paint that.” Sir Roger Scruton makes a helpful distinction between kitsch art and anti-kitsch kitsch art. Kitsch refers to anything in popular culture that is tacky, like plastic flamingos on the lawn. The Modernist art movement began as a protest against what it believed art had become, inauthentic, kitsch. Scruton explains this shift:

In a celebrated article, ‘Avant-garde and Kitsch,’ published in *Partisan Review* 1939, Clement Greenberg presented educated Americans with a dilemma. Figurative painting, he argued, was dead—it had exhausted its expressive potential, and its representational aims had been bequeathed to photography and cinema. Any attempt to continue in the figurative tradition would inevitably lead to kitsch, in other words to art with no message of its own, in which all effects were copied and all the emotions faked. Genuine art must belong to the avant-garde, breaking with the figurative tradition in favor of ‘abstract expressionism,’ which uses form and color to liberate emotion from the prison of narrative. In this way Greenberg promoted the paintings of de Kooning, Pollock and Rothko, while condemning the great Edward Hopper as ‘shabby, second hand and impersonal.’<sup>1</sup>

These were mostly very serious artists, but there have also arisen artists who trade on shock value alone, producing anti-kitsch kitsch art. But this should not move us to conclude that all modern art is itself an inauthentic protest against the hollowness of kitsch art. Nor should we conclude, as does Greenberg, that figurative art is dead and hollow; Edward Hopper proves him wrong. Scruton properly discerns the difference:

Kitsch deprives feeling of its cost, and therefore of its reality; desecration augments the cost of feeling, and so frightens us away from it. The remedy for both states of mind is suggested by the thing that they each deny, which is sacrifice. . . . Sacrifice is the core of virtue, the origin of meaning and the true theme of high art.<sup>2</sup>

As a young Christian I wrestled with the place of modern art in the Christian life, since the only believing churches near me were fundamentalists who largely rejected all art as worldly. Francis Schaeffer and Hans Rookmaaker were the only Christians I knew who

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 157.

<sup>2</sup> Scruton, *Beauty*, 160–61.

respected and understood modern art. While they were largely critical of this era of art as a sign of the deterioration of Western culture, they appreciated artistic ability and encouraged Christians to be aware of this aspect of culture and participate in the arts according to their gifts. Schaeffer largely used his knowledge of art for cultural apologetic purposes. However, he deeply appreciated artistic ability and argued for the place of artistic creativity in the Christian life in *Art and the Bible*.<sup>3</sup> The book's cover pictures Alberto Giacometti's bronze sculpture "Groupe 3 hommes II." The dedication page has this inscription: "The Christian is the one whose imagination should fly beyond the stars." This positive view of creativity and art was one of the great attractions to Schaeffer for those of us raised and trained with artistic interests and sensibilities.

Along lines with which Schaeffer would largely agree, Roger Scruton observes, "In an age of declining faith art bears enduring witness to the spiritual hunger and immortal longing of our species."<sup>4</sup> Schaeffer and Rookmaaker emphasized the relationship between a body of art and the worldview of the artist. This is a useful way to view art, as long as it does not lead to rejection of art that is inspired by non-Christian worldviews. God's gift of creativity and the fact that all artists live in God's world and are made in his image, should lead the Christian to appreciate art. That said, not all artistic creations are of equal value, because there are standards of aesthetic quality. That is a topic of another review.

Rookmaaker considered Francis Bacon, "whose images are horrible and haunt the imagination," a great artist. The cover of *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*<sup>5</sup> is Bacon's "Head VI," in which he reinterprets Velasquez's portrait of a pope, distorting the once dignified head and face, which is depicted being sucked upward through the top of a translucent box in which the man is sitting—his humanity is disintegrating. As in most of his paintings, he depicts "great cries of despair for lost values and lost greatness, for humanity deprived of its freedom, love, rationality, everything that the great humanist painters had celebrated for centuries as they drew off their Christian and classical tradition."<sup>6</sup>

In the spring of 1972, I had occasion to meet Francis Bacon in a pub in Soho on my trip home from L'Abri in Switzerland. The futility, horror, and despair portrayed in *Head VI* were verified in my conversation with Bacon. Hopelessness was written all over Bacon's melancholy face. My explanation of the gospel elicited only scorn. But Schaeffer had prepared me for this encounter. Bacon said this about his art,

Also, man now realizes that he is an accident, that he is a completely futile being, that he has to play out the game without reason. . . . Man now can only attempt to beguile himself for a time, by prolonging his life—by buying a kind of immortality through the doctors. You see, painting has become—all art has become—a game by which man distracts himself. ”<sup>7</sup>

I left that lunch deeply saddened.

Again, Scruton,

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<sup>3</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible: Two Essays* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> Scruton, *Beauty*, 156.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 173.

<sup>6</sup> Rookmaaker, *Modern Art*, 174.

<sup>7</sup> Rookmaaker, *Modern Art*, 174.

For us who live in the aftermath of the kitsch epidemic, therefore, art has acquired a new importance. It is the real presence of our spiritual ideals. That is why art matters. Without the conscious pursuit of beauty we risk falling into a world of addictive pleasures and routine desecration, a world in which the worthwhileness of human life is no longer clearly perceivable.

The paradox, however, is that the relentless pursuit of artistic innovation leads to a cult of nihilism. The attempt to defend beauty from pre-modernist kitsch has exposed it to postmodernist desecration. We seem to be caught between two forms of sacrilege, the one dealing with sugary dreams, the other in savage fantasies.<sup>8</sup>

So why the modern wing? Why should Christians be interested in modern art? How can God be there in this art? *God in the Modern Wing: Viewing Art with Eyes of Faith (GMW)* seeks to answer these questions. The Modern Wing is the name of the galleries of The Art Institute of Chicago, designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano. One of the two editors of this anthology, G. Walter Hansen, is a theologian who attends Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, located a mile from The Modern Wing. The interplay between the two locations and their missions is fascinating and forms the *raison d'être* of the book. In his Preface he describes an encounter with a woman who had read Rookmaaker's book. She said, "Modern art was done by artists who accepted Nietzsche's assertion that God is dead" (xii). *GMW* demonstrates that God is not as far from the subject matter of modern art as a surface glance might lead us to believe—Nietzsche's viewpoint is not the only one by far represented in the modern wing.

The variety of contributors are each involved in the art world, most are artists, and many are teachers of art or art history, and one is a curator. Since there is no logical progression in the content and arrangement of the essays, I will comment on salient elements to stimulate my readers' interest. I am hoping to encourage and expand those interests in modern art or perhaps spark an interest that did not exist before reading this review and the book itself.

Co-editor Cameron J. Anderson's introductory essay, "Being Modern," is a fascinating exploration of a very complex subject covering a wide range of artists. Religion in general, and Christianity in particular, have not been eradicated from the modern wing.

Matthew Milliner, assistant professor of art history at Wheaton, in his essay "Chagall's Cathedral," lists ten artists in The Modern Wing in Chicago who pursue religious themes (32). The top three are Edouard Manet, Vincent Van Gogh, and Paul Gauguin. Mark Chagall's *White Crucifixion* (1938) uses Christian images to depict Jewish suffering (36). Of The Modern Wing's Kandinsky he says, "many continue to be shocked by the painter's theological vocabulary" (33). Having seen a masterful exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City recently, I can attest to the veracity of Milliner's statement. I was shocked to learn in his essay that Salvador Dali (1904–1989) returned to the Roman Catholic Church in Spain, after declaring, "I fear I will die without faith" (44). He reimagined some of his earlier work "in a series of prints illustrating Dante's *Divine Comedy*" (44). In his 1951 *Mystical Manifesto* he commented, "The decadence of modern painting was a consequence of skepticism and lack of faith, the result of mechanistic materialism" (44–5). Milliner observes, "It was a messy conversion" (45). I note this not to make Dali a model of faith or to say that his understanding of Christianity would be

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<sup>8</sup> Scruton, *Beauty*, 160.

orthodox—only God knows this—but only to say that the modern wing can surprise us. Milliner has his own reservations (46–8). But as he also observes, “The fact that Dali’s life took such a turn enables us to look with hope on even the most hopeless pieces of art in the Modern Wing” (46).

Cameron Anderson’s second essay, “Transcendence and Immanence,” explores the presence of a longing for reality beyond the material world. Constantin Brancusi’s (1876–1957) *Golden Bird* is a graceful, polished, vertical sculpture that elicits this remark from Anderson, “In the Western mind and spirit this vertical line, the axis mundi in Brancusi . . . is consequential” (57). Alberto Giacometti was raised in a small Calvinist congregation in the Italian Swiss Alps (59). Although influenced by Sartre’s existentialism, he understands the frailty of humans, depicting them as wanderers and yet seeming to look heavenward for help (62–3).

One of the best chapters in *GMW* is painter and curator Bruce Herman’s “God in the Wasteland . . . and in the Seaside Paradise.” He explores the contrasting visions of two painters of whom I am not familiar: Phillip Guston (1913–80) and Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993).

Neither Guston nor Diebenkorn professed an articulate faith or settled belief in God. But Guston bore testimony to the perennial human dilemma, and Diebenkorn offered sensuous meditations on the complex and stunningly beautiful world of wonders we inhabit. (79)

In many ways this contrast sums up the thematic polarities of the modern wing. What makes this essay so insightful is that Herman is a practicing artist who studied under Guston. Herman explains, “I’d like to express my own faith in these painters and their love of light, color, and the human story; their love of making itself. . . . As a painter and a man of faith, these qualities always point me back to my Creator” (79).

By common grace we can appreciate the fact that art includes beauty and ugliness. Herman cites C. S. Lewis’s concept of the “miserific vision,” an inversion of the Thomistic beatific vision (80, fn). The very denial of beauty in a work of art “is a backdoor means to celebrate the good, the true, and the beautiful by showing that the absence of beauty or goodness is wrong, unjust, and cruel (80).

Herman’s teacher, Guston, while leading his students on a tour of Italy, once lamented, after weeping over seeing Renaissance painter Piero della Francesca’s fresco “Legend of the True Cross,” that “these Christians . . . they have a story. We don’t have a story” (81). Then he turned to his small gathering of students, including Herman, and said, “So, be like the early Christians. Paint whatever you consider important, no matter what it costs you. . . . Paint like your life depends upon it” (81). Guston himself had turned from a lyrical style to one depicting the problems of the human condition. His painting *Bad Times*, like Picasso’s *Guernica*, goes beyond a particular event to make a universal statement.

Linda Stratford stretches our imagination in her essay, “Theological Imagination,” on painters Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman. More surprises: we learn that Pollock insisted on a church wedding and saw his drip paintings as “energy and motion made visible,” a new kind of realism (92). Stratford insists the creative spiritual energy of “Pollock’s instantiate the spiritual metaphor ‘world without end’” (96). Newman’s *Stations of the Cross* (1958) is my least favorite work of art. He claims that Christ’s lament on the cross, “Lema Sabachthani,” is “the unanswerable question of human suffering” (100).

While there is truth to the general idea that suffering is often inexplicable, that is certainly not the case in Christ's suffering on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for his peoples' sins.

Makoto Fujimura's essay, "The Impossibility of Mark Rothko," presents an insight into Rothko's work that does seem impossible. He is the only author in this collection whose painting and writing I am familiar with.<sup>9</sup> Fujimura and Bruce Herman are the only essayists who have examples of their paintings in the book. Fujimura recommends "language training" in order to understand Rothko; this requires what C. S. Lewis in his *An Experiment in Criticism* declares a work of art demands: "surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way" (106).<sup>10</sup> Fujimura believes "that Rothko was trying to grasp the indescribable, to 'under-stand' the mystery of God" (107). "Rothko's paintings are non-representational fields of color floating on the surface of the canvas (he resisted the term 'abstract' to describe his works)." The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki deeply affected him, and so his work may be seen as a "visual lament." Fujimura describes his Rothko Chapel, a gallery in Houston, Texas, as "an unending black hole of emotion" (108–09). "Mark Rothko painted the abyss . . . [He] laid the ground to construct a language beyond despair" (112–13). Fujimura may be reading his own Christian aspirations into Rothko, but he certainly helps us look deeper into Rothko's work through his own paintings, rooted in the traditional Japanese Nihonga techniques. His *Mark—Water Flames* (plate 17) is alluding to the Gospel of Mark and is dedicated to Mark Rothko (113). Fujimura's layered pigments remind us of Rothko's technique. Eighty layers of vermilion create depth and luminosity. The flames of Hiroshima, Ground Zero, as well as Moses' burning bush, the flaming swords of the guardian cherubim, all are memorialized in *Mark—Water Flames* (114).

Art can be built on the assurance of things hoped for (Heb. 11:1) . . . My *Water Flames* seek to exegete Rothko and bring his paintings' somber import into Christ's dominion. May these works invite the viewer to understand, not just art, but the mystery of life and the mystery of the gospel. (116–17)

Rothko will prove challenging to those unfamiliar with modern art, and even for some of us who have been involved with it all our lives, but Fujimura is a reliable witness to help us understand what motivated Rothko and to guide us in how we can appreciate his work. Fujimura points us to the critical work of Thomas Crow, *No Idols: The Missing Theology of Art*.<sup>11</sup>

The impossibility of Rothko lies in the intuitive, improbable, and paradoxical journey into the mystery of reality that the modern postindustrial mindset rejects as an unreliable and insufficient form of knowledge. Crow brilliantly identifies that the core of such epistemology is our struggle to depict truth. Anything visible and representational can become an idol, whether it is an image of the Madonna with child or Moses' bronze serpent. Rothko's nonobjective work seems to avoid such issues. Rothko's paintings are a form of Zen Kōan for the modern condition: the question is presented not to seek answers, but to question our rational patterns of inquiry. This impossibility of Rothko is what intrigues us. (119)

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<sup>9</sup> Gregory E. Reynolds, review of *River Grace and Refractions*, by Makoto Fujimura. 20 (2011): 165–67.

<sup>10</sup> C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 18–19.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Crow, *No Idols: The Missing Theology of Art* (Sydney: Power, 2017)

David W. McNutt adds an important ingredient to our understanding of Andy Warhol in “Hidden in Pop: Andy Warhol’s Art as Modern Religious Iconography.” A superficial look at Warhol’s work may leave one with the impression that he was an artistic opportunist. This essay disabuses us of this notion. He begins with Hans Rookmaaker’s praise for Warhol and other pop artists bringing the figure back into art (121). Most know Warhol for his *Campbell Soup Cans*. His funeral in 1987 was held at Holy Ghost Byzantine Catholic Church in Pittsburgh. It turns out that there was a spiritual side to him of which few knew. After graduating from Carnegie Institute of Technology in 1949, he moved to New York City where he attended the Church of Saint Vincent Ferrer several days each week. He helped serve meals at a homeless shelter and said daily prayers in Old Slavonic with his mother (127–8). His religious work has not received the attention that it deserves. The most “religiously potent works are found in Warhol’s Last Supper series” (129). “Warhol evokes the entire tradition of religious iconography.” He seems to be commenting on the commercialization of faith (130–1). This represents a challenge to what or who we venerate. In his later career Warhol uses the Old Masters in works such as *The Last Supper* or *The Sistine Madonna* to synthesize his faith and artist skill. Museums are hesitant to acknowledge this aspect of Warhol’s oeuvre.

McNutt ends his essay with praise for Rookmaaker’s positive attitude toward artistic endeavor, focusing on the centrality of the Christian witness of the gospel in a fallen world (136). He quotes Arthur Danto in closing, “In Warhol’s work we may be surprised to find Christ, seated at a table with friends, extending an invitation to us, yet this same Christ willingly assumed human flesh, thus taking an entirely vernacular object of everyday life” (136).<sup>12</sup> We may be surprised to find God in the modern wing, “even among soup cans and the Marilyns” (136).

The penultimate essay, “Who Is My Neighbor?” by Steve Prince celebrates the art of black artists Elizabeth Catlett and Charles White, who “embodied the spirit of the parable of the Good Samaritan through their art” (138). “Catlett and White did not cloak themselves in hatred and disdain. Instead, they created art that spoke to the soul. They created works that championed the beauty of the self, affixed to a larger communal matrix” (148). Catlett especially provided a model for Prince, who, after graduation, dedicated his art and life to Christ (145).

If nothing else, developing a sensibility and understanding of modern art helps to put us in touch with the plight of modern people. We can also see how God has gifted people with artistic abilities that call us to ponder the meaning of life in a fallen world, to consider the good, the true, and the beautiful. The mystery of modern art calls us away from mundane activities and the electronic distractions that engulf us. A quiet hour in the modern wing of the local art museum can prove a real refreshment to our souls, as Christians whose hope in another world enables us to be useful in this present one. “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil. 4:8).

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<sup>12</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992).

# ServantPoetry

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Alexander Pope (1688–1744)

## Beauty

Christ, keep me from the self-survey  
Of beauties all Thine own;  
If there is beauty, let me pray,  
And praise the Lord alone.

Pray—that I may the fiend withstand,  
Where'er his serpents be;  
Praise—that the Lord's almighty hand  
Is manifest in me.

It is not so—my features are  
Much meaner than the rest; A  
glow-worm cannot be a star, And  
I am plain at best.

Then come my Love, Thy grace impart,  
Great Savior of mankind;  
O come and purify my heart  
And purify my mind.

Then will I Thy carnations nurse  
And cherish every rose,  
And empty to the poor my Purse  
Till grace to glory grows.