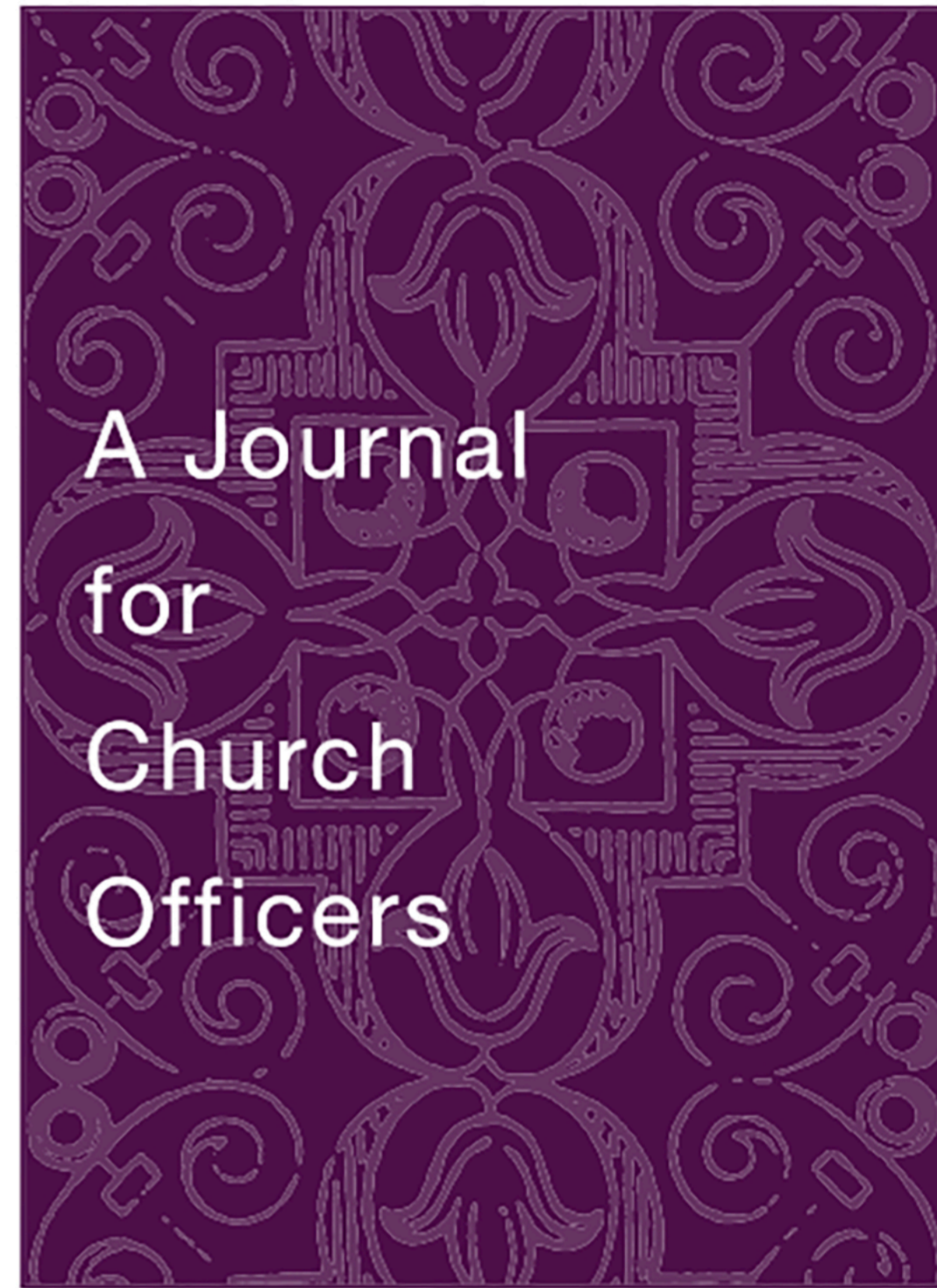


Ordained Servant

Volume 32
2023



Jackson Community Church in Jackson, New Hampshire / photo: Gregory E. Reynolds

published by:
The Committee on Christian
Education *of the*
Orthodox Presbyterian Church

Ordained Servant

A Journal for Church Officers

VOLUME 32, 2023

Ordained Servant

A Journal for Church Officers

A publication of the Committee on Christian Education
of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

ISSN 1525-3503

Volume 32 2023

Editor: Gregory Edward Reynolds • 827 Chestnut Street • Manchester, NH 03104

Telephone: 603-668-3069 • **Electronic mail:** reynolds.1@opc.org

Website: www.opc.org/os.html

Ordained Servant is published monthly online (except for combined issues June/July and August/September) (E-ISSN 1931-7115, online edition), and printed annually (ISSN: 1525-3503) after the end of each calendar year, beginning with volume 15 (2006) published in 2007. *Ordained Servant* was published quarterly in print from 1992 through 2005. All 53 issues are available in our online archives. The editorial board is the Subcommittee on Serial Publications of the Committee on Christian Education.

Subscriptions: Copies of the annual printed edition of *Ordained Servant* are sent to each ordained minister of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, each organized congregation, and each designated mission work, and are paid for by the Committee. Ordained elders, deacons, and licentiates of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church may receive copies gratis upon request. *Ordained Servant* is also available to anyone in the U.S. and Canada who wishes to subscribe by remitting \$10.00 per year to: *Ordained Servant*, The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 607 N. Easton Rd., Bldg. E, Willow Grove, PA 19090-2539. Checks should be made out to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, designated for *Ordained Servant* in the memo line. Institutional subscribers in the US and Canada please remit \$15.00 per year. Overseas individual and institutional subscribers please remit \$20.00 per year. All remittances should be made payable in U.S. funds. Subscriptions, both paid and gratis, may also be received through our website on the “Publications” page under “Resources” on the top right of the OPC.ORG home page.

Submissions: Chosen submissions will be published on the web and possibly chosen for the annual print edition. Please consult “Submissions, Style Guide, and Citations” on our website.

Copyright Information: All material in this periodical is subject to U.S. and international copyright laws and may not be reproduced without prior written approval. Please refer to “Submissions, Style Guide, and Citations” at our website once you have received permission. Interested parties are invited to obtain permission to reproduce material found in this publication by writing to the editor.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© Copyright 2023 by the Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. All rights reserved.

Ordained Servant

A JOURNAL FOR CHURCH OFFICERS

CONTENTS

5 From the Editor

Servant Thoughts

EDITORIALS

6 “Elf on the Shelf or Christ on the Cross?”

Servant Memorial

8 “G. I. Williamson: Encounters with the Life of a Faithful Servant of God” **James S. Gidley**

13 “G. I. Williamson’s Farewell Sermon” **Archibald A. Allison and G. I. Williamson**

Servant Truth

18 “Adam, Modern Anthropological Science, and Faith” **Jan Frederic Dudd**

Servant Word

22 “Textual Criticism” **T. David Gordon**

30 “Case for the Majority Greek New Testament Text” **Bruce A. Stahl**

35 “Case for the Eclectic Greek New Testament Text” **T. David Gordon**

40 “DO! DO! DO! Back to the Old Legalism Again!” **Allen C. Tomlinson**

Servant Standards

43 “The Bringers and Receivers of Complaints: OPC Book of Discipline 9.1” **Joseph A. Keller**

48 “Ambiguities in Book of Discipline 9.1, Standing Revisited” **Stuart R. Jones**

50 “Cross-Presbytery Complaints” **David G. Graves, Brett A. McNeill, and John W. Mahaffy**

Servant History

54 “A Guide to the Second Century Church” **Calvin R. Goligher**

58 “Francis Turretin (1623–1687): A Commemoration and Commendation” **J. Mark Beach**

65 “Theological Daylighting: Retrieving J. Gresham Machen’s *Christianity and Liberalism*” **Justin McLendon**

Servant Living

70 “Creativity” **William Edgar**

73 “Christians, Churches, and Public Aid” **David VanDrunen**

83 “Two Paths to Happiness, and Why Only One Can Lead to a Happy End” **Andrew S. Wilson**

Servant Work

89 “Letters to a Younger Ruling Elder” **An Older Elder**

Servant Mission

101 “The Epistle to the Romans: Profound Theology and Ethics for the Sake of Missions” **Marcus A. Mininger**

ServantReading

BOOK REVIEWS

- 107 *The Unfolding Word: The Story of the Bible from Creation to New Creation* by Zach Keele, **Christopher J. Chelpka**
- 108 *Illustrating Well: Preaching Sermons that Connect* by Jim L. Wilson, **Christopher J. Chelpka**
- 109 *Poetry of Redemption: An Illustrated Treasury of Good Friday and Easter Poems* by Leland Ryken, **Mark A. Green**
- 111 *Faith in the Wilderness: Words of Exhortation from the Chinese Church* edited by Hannah Nation & Simon Lee, **Anonymous**
- 112 “Teaching Your Children to Delight in the Lord’s Day,” review of *The Best Day of the Week: Why We Love the Lord’s Day* by William Boekestein, **Cynthia Rowland**
- 113 *The Holy Spirit* by Robert Letham, **John V. Fesko**
- 115 “Big Answers to Big Questions,” review of *The Great Quest and Signals of Transcendence* by Os Guinness, **William Edgar**
- 117 *Timothy Keller: His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation* by Collin Hansen, **William Edgar**
- 118 *Recovering Our Sanity: How the Fear of God Conquers the Fears that Divide Us* by Michael Horton, **Andrew S. Wilson**
- 120 *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction* by Cory C. Brock and N. Gray Sutanto, **David VanDrunen**

ServantReading

REVIEW ARTICLES

- 123 “An Attempt at Reconciling Paleoanthropology and Scripture,” review of *In Quest of the Historic Adam* by William Lane Craig, **Jan Frederic Dudd**
- 127 “What Is the Primary Mission of the Church?” review of *The Primary Mission of the Church: Engaging or Transforming the World?* by Bryan D. Estelle, and *Letter to the*

American Church by Eric Metaxas, **Alan D. Strange**

- 132 “Justification: A Lutheran Perspective,” review of *Justification by the Word: Restoring Sola Fide* by Jack D. Kilcrease, **John V. Fesko**
- 134 “Jazz and the Gospel,” review of *A Supreme Love: The Music of Jazz and the Hope of the Gospel* by William Edgar, **Stephen M. Michaud**
- 138 “What Do We Do with Modern Art?” review of *God in the Modern Wing: Viewing Art with Eyes of Faith* edited by Cameron J. Anderson and G. Walter Hansen, **Gregory E. Reynolds**
- 143 “Can Biblical Exposition Be Beautiful and Powerful?” review of *The Beauty & Power of Biblical Exposition: Preaching the Literary Artistry & Genres of the Bible* by Douglas Sean O’Donnell and Leland Ryken, **T. David Gordon**
- 146 “Secular Insight on Happiness,” review of *The Good Life* by Robert Waldinger and Marc Schultz, **Andrew S. Wilson**
- 149 “Muddying the Baptismal Waters,” review of *Washed by God: The Story of Baptism* by Karl Deenick, **Ryan M. McGraw**
- 154 “Real Differences: The Danger of Radical Individualism,” review of *Generations: The Real Differences between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents—and What They Mean for America’s Future* by Jean M. Twenge, **T. David Gordon**
- 159 “A Tale of Two Exegetes,” review of *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* by Michael S. Heiser, **Meredith M. Kline**
- 164 “The Trinitarian Theology of Cornelius Van Til,” *The Trinitarian Theology of Cornelius Van Til* by Lane G. Tipton, **Nathan P. Strom**

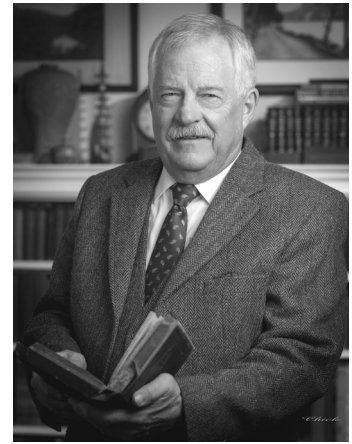
✦ From the Editor

This is the eighteenth annual printed edition of *Ordained Servant*, as we completed our thirty-second year of publication in 2023.

It has been very encouraging to me and the Committee on Christian Education that writers have not been difficult to find. The range of gifts, and interests, and areas of expertise is remarkable for such a small church.

The cover picture is the Jackson Community Church in Jackson, New Hampshire. The original congregation was Free Will Baptist, formed in 1803. The building was erected in 1847. In 1951 the Community Church was formed, affiliated with Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Churches. These two joined in 1957 to form the United Church of Christ (UCC). This represents a sad decline. The congregational church in which I was raised joined the UCC in the 1960s. I never once heard the gospel preached. We were taught to be nice and not naughty.

Once again, I would like to thank the Committee on Christian Education general secretary Danny Olinger, Alan Strange (Chairman of the Subcommittee on Resources for the Churches), and the Subcommittee on Serial Publications—Darryl Hart (chairman), Stephen Tracey, David VanDrunen, and David Winslow (retired)—for their continued support, encouragement, and counsel. I would also like to thank the many people who make the regular online edition possible: Ayrian Yasar, Linda Foh, Stephen Pribble, and the many fine writers without whom there would be no journal. Finally, I want to thank Paul Meyer for his meticulous editorial work on the final document, and Judith Dinsmore for her years of excellent final proofing and formatting of this printed volume. I would like to thank Jackie Oftedahl, who has taken this position beginning this year.



—Gregory Edward Reynolds
Pastor emeritus
Amoskeag Presbyterian Church
Manchester, New Hampshire

✦ Servant Thoughts

Editorials

Elf on the Shelf or Christ on the Cross?

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* December 2023¹

by Gregory Edward Reynolds

I sat in the living room near the Christmas tree, back when I was a young man. I thought of Santa Claus knowing whether I was naughty or nice. I never received coal in my stocking, but I knew I should have. Therefore, I thought well of Santa, because he overlooked my naughtiness, so it must be OK—but I still knew better. At the time I knew nothing about sin or the gospel.

Christmas has become the classic exemplar of the covenant of works. A cartoon recently showed a little girl standing before Santa Claus asking, “Isn’t there something in between naughty and nice?” The Elf on the Shelf, of recent commercial vintage, has become Santa’s spy, designed to get children to obey their parents. Christ may still be in the word Christmas, but Santa or the Elf have eclipsed him.

Wikipedia describes the Elf’s origin:

The Elf on the Shelf: A Christmas Tradition is a 2005 American picture book for children, written by Carol Aebersold and her daughter Chanda Bell and illustrated by Coë Steinwart.

1 http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=459&issue_id=101.

The book tells a Christmas-themed story, written in rhyme, that explains how Santa Claus knows who is naughty and nice. It describes elves visiting children from Thanksgiving to Christmas Eve, after which they return to the North Pole until the next holiday season.²

The bestselling Elf is not without his critics. Kate Tuttle in her *Atlantic* article “You’re a Creepy One, Elf on the Shelf” calls this “a marketing juggernaut dressed up as a tradition,” whose purpose is “to spy on kids.” She argues that one should not “bully [one’s] child into thinking that good behavior equals gifts.”³

David Kyle Johnston in *Psychology Today* calls it a “dangerous parental crutch,” commensurate with what he terms the “Santa lie.” Children are taught that “The elf is actually alive and moves around when you’re not looking. He’s watching you and you never know where he will turn up next. And if he sees you doing something wrong he reports directly back to Santa.”⁴ Johnston is most concerned about the perception by children that if there is no Santa or Elf, it will undermine trust in parents and raise doubts about what they teach about God.

Remember the lyrics to “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town”:

*You better watch out
You better not cry
Better not pout
I’m telling you why
Santa Claus is comin’ to town, gather ’round
He’s making a list
And checking it twice;
He’s gonna find out who’s naughty and nice
Santa Claus is comin’ to town
He sees you when you’re sleeping*

2 Wikipedia’s “The Elf on the Shelf” entry, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Elf_on_the_Shelf, accessed November 19, 2023.

3 Cited in “The Elf on the Shelf,” Wikipedia.

4 David Kyle Johnston, “Let’s Bench the Elf on the Shelf,” *Psychology Today* (December 19, 2012).

*He knows when you're awake
He knows if you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness sake!*

This is not good news for sinners, especially little ones.

More than this, Santa and the Elf undermine two important attributes of God: his omniscience and his mercy. The Devil will do everything in his power to undermine the sovereign holiness of God and the Good News of Jesus Christ, the free and sovereign grace that saves us from sin and death. He uses what is apparently good to do so. That guilt will make kids be nice and kind. It leaves them with hopeless hypocrisy.

Our God is omniscient; Santa is a fictional imitation: “He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see?” (Ps. 94:9). “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:13). The guilt this brings is what makes the gospel so glorious. In the incarnation we celebrate

the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. (Tit. 2:13–14)

We perform good works, not out of guilt, but as a response to the forgiveness of God based on the righteousness of Jesus Christ and his guilt-defeating sacrifice. What a message for the Christmas season! The cross alone engenders true kindness and giving. This is the covenant of grace.

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and

may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil. 3:8–11)

While I am not a fan of the Elf, neither am I a fan of the Grinch. Each Christian has the liberty to celebrate Christmas or not. The way I have found most compatible with my Christianity is to enjoy the festivity, during the cold and dark season, with family and friends. I seek to make opportunities to discuss and, for me as a minister, to preach about the incarnation. I also read “The Night before Christmas,” not as the truth, but as a delightful poem. The fictional gift giver is not Santa Clause, but St. Nicholas. He was the Greek bishop of Myra (now Turkey), who obeyed Jesus’s words to “sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Matt. 19:21). Nicholas used his whole inheritance to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering. He dedicated his life to serving God. He became known throughout the land for his generosity to those in need, his love for children, and his concern for sailors and ships. This is the fruit of the cross—the cross of Christ instead of the Elf on the Shelf. ©

Gregory E. Reynolds is *pastor emeritus of Amoskeag Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Manchester, New Hampshire, and is the editor of Ordained Servant.*

Servant Memorial

G. I. Williamson: Encounters with the Life of a Faithful Servant of God

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
December 2023¹

by James S. Gidley

I first met G. I. Williamson in the Logos Bookstore in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I think it was 1976 or 1977. The store was in an old house just a short walk south of Harvard Square, on the street leading to the Lars Anderson Bridge. Things change. The bridge is now the Anderson Memorial Bridge. The street is now John F. Kennedy Street;² I cannot recall what it was named then. And the store is not visible on Google maps; it's probably long gone.

G. I. was not present in the flesh but in spirit. I was among a small minority of evangelical students at Harvard, and I was moving toward an even smaller minority by becoming a Calvinist. At least one person at the store was sympathetic to Calvinism, and he recommended G. I. Williamson's *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*. Published in 1964 by the Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, it was a paperback volume with a plain blue cover. I have since obtained a copy of the second edition, published

1 http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=459&issue_id=101.

2 Google maps, accessed October 30, 2023.

in 2004. P&R at least had the decency to provide it with a glossy cover sporting an architect's rendering of Westminster Abbey.³

But the old plain-blue-covered edition had a delicious sense of subversiveness about it. It was so obviously not a slick production of a major publishing house. The type resembled the output of a typewriter. If only it were mimeographed and collected as loose pages in a plain manila envelope, the impression would have been complete that this was a publication the authorities would gladly have suppressed.

G. I. made a powerful impression on me. He engaged theological questions like Valiant for Truth in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. He could roar like a lion at great powers like the Roman Catholic Church. For example, he puts Rome and the Jehovah's Witnesses together in their insistence that authoritative interpreters — themselves — are needed to understand the Bible: "Rome and the Jehovah's Witnesses sect agree in their basic attitude toward the Word of God. The psalmist said, 'Your word is a lamp . . . and a light' (Ps. 119:105). But Rome and other false religions call that light 'darkness.'"⁴

G. I. not only grounded me in the doctrines of the Reformed Faith. He also contributed to my growing desire to unite with a church that held to the Westminster Standards. This eventually led to my joining the RPCNA congregation in Cambridge. When I graduated, married, and moved to Morgantown, West Virginia, my wife Betsy and I joined the OPC mission work there, which is now Reformation OPC.

At the time, I did not know much of G. I.'s life story. The bare outline is told on his Wikipedia

3 The Londonist, "Will Westminster Abbey Ever Get Its Spire?" <https://londonist.com/london/history/will-westminster-abbey-ever-get-its-spire>, accessed October 30, 2023.

4 G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 25. G. I. was not exaggerating; he had just quoted from *The Watchtower*, the principal periodical of the Jehovah's Witnesses, in which it was stated that one who studies the Bible alone, without Jehovah's Witnesses study guides, "goes into darkness."

page⁵ and on his own webpage.⁶ He was born on May 19, 1925. A member of the “greatest generation,” he served in the Army in World War II. I never heard him speak about his military service, but I did hear him speak about his love for playing his clarinet or saxophone. It was the “big band” era, and he particularly enjoyed playing together with others in the saxophone or clarinet section. He was converted at age 21, went to Hope College and Drake University, and attended Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary, from which he received a Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1952.

My life was eventually to intersect with G. I.’s, but I have come close to his path at both the beginning of my life and now as I draw near to its end. I have been living in western Pennsylvania for over thirty-three years, not far from where G. I. went to seminary, and not far from where he first began to minister as a seminary student. G. I. wrote the following account of his encounter with Miss Margaret I. Duff at the United Presbyterian Church in New Bedford, Pennsylvania:

I was serving as a student pastor there and have a vivid memory of Margaret who was then attending the New Bedford UP Church because she was there to help care for an aging aunt and uncle. I was then in the last year and a half of my time as a student of theology at the Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh. I attended classes and stayed at the seminary from Tuesday through Friday, and then taught a youth club on Saturday, preaching twice on Sunday. By that time in my study I was struggling with the effects of a lack of unity in doctrine among the professors there. I’m sure this must have been evident to Margaret, because she bluntly asked me one day if I would mind if she gave me written criticism of my preaching. Somehow God enabled me to say “Sure, I’d appreciate

it.” And she began to do this. She evidently felt that I might have a promising future with some better influences. I also remember that she gave me a few books by Machen and other Westminster Seminary men. Those proved to be life-changing, along with the discovery of a proof-text edition of the original Doctrinal Standards of the UPCNA (the Westminster Confession, Catechisms and Testimony of 1858). I did challenge her to become a member of the New Bedford UPCNA, because I soon came to the conviction that the UPCNA was in need of doctrinal recovery, and I felt that her considerable influence would be enhanced further if she were also a member. Not long after these positive developments in the direction of my life, I was ordained at the Westminster United Presbyterian Church in Des Moines, Iowa where my parents (who both came from a UPCNA beginning in Pawnee City, NE), were members. And soon after that I received a call from the UPCNA in Fall River, Mass.⁷

Margaret Duff played a similar role in G. I.’s life to that of Pietje Balthus in the life of Abraham Kuyper.⁸ Each woman was unmarried, and each was well schooled in the Reformed faith. Their living faith impressed and influenced the men who for a time pastored them. The fruit of their faithfulness was greatly multiplied in the lives of the men for whom they played the role of Priscilla and Apollos.

I have felt a kinship to G. I. because of his brief pastorate in Fall River, Massachusetts. It was there that he developed the lessons that became

5 G. I. Williamson, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G._I._Williamson, accessed November 2, 2023.

6 https://web.archive.org/web/20180928121741/http://www.nethc.net/~giwopc/My_Web_Site/Home_Page.html, accessed November 2, 2023.

7 G. I. Williamson, email to Mrs. Margaret (Peggy) Graham Duff, wife of the Rev. Donald J. Duff, nephew of the Margaret Duff mentioned by G. I. I have silently corrected several typos and grammatical lapses in G. I.’s text. A shorter selection from the same text appears in Margaret Graham Duff, “Margaret I. Duff: A Life of Sacrifice and Prayer,” in *Choosing the Good Portion: Women of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, eds. Patricia E. Clawson and Diane L. Olinger (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2016), 139–46.

8 Abraham Kuyper, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Kuyper, accessed November 3, 2023.

The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes. Fall River is about twenty miles from my boyhood home in Fairhaven, Massachusetts. I was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, around the time when he was pastoring in Fall River.

While I was settling down in Morgantown, West Virginia in the early '80s, G. I. was ministering in a congregation of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand in Silverstream, NZ, his second pastorate in New Zealand, with a pastorate at an RPCNA congregation in the States sandwiched between. He would return to the USA for good in 1984 to become pastor of Bethel OPC in Carson, North Dakota, where he would serve until his retirement in 1993. He always spoke highly of the RCNZ (the “Z” must be pronounced “Zed” in the British style). He believed that the RCNZ had solved the problem of Reformed and Presbyterian ecumenicity by adopting the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism as their doctrinal standards, thus showing in ecclesiastical practice that the same faith was taught in the Presbyterian standards and the continental Reformed standards.

In due time I was ordained as an elder at Reformation OPC in 1985. I met G. I. in the flesh at the 1989 General Assembly at Geneva College in Beaver Falls, PA. Sort of. At the opening worship service in the Old Main Chapel, I saw someone who looked like he might be G. I. I do not know why I thought so, because I do not think I had ever seen a picture of him. This was the era before internet usage became widespread. There was no Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, and even email was relatively new. At any rate, I must have whispered to someone, “Is that G. I. Williamson?” and was informed that it was so. I did not realize at the time how much I had idolized him. I do not recall now whether I approached him to introduce myself. Probably not—he was too high above my station.

At that Assembly there was a bit of a shake-up in the membership of the Committee on Christian Education. I was nominated to the Subcommittee on Ministerial Training by Charlie Dennison, at that time the historian of the OPC and a well-

respected minister. Charlie had gotten to know me because he served on the session of Grace OPC, Sewickley, Pennsylvania, which was the overseeing session of the mission work that became Reformation OPC. I attribute my election to the SMT to the reputation of Charlie Dennison.

At any rate, being elected to the SMT put me in close contact with G. I. Williamson. Very close contact. At my first meeting of the SMT in October 1989, five or six presbyters were crammed into a small meeting room at the old denominational office building at 7401 Old York Road, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. My sitting in that small room with G. I. and the other brothers seemed to be an example of the Peter Principle: I had risen to the level of my incompetence. Whether for good or ill, I did not give up but entered into the business as well as I could, still in awe of G. I.

The only person I ever heard address him by any name other than G. I. was Tom Tyson, then the General Secretary of the Committee on Christian Education, who occasionally addressed him as “Jerry.” Tom used to tell a story about going to one of his professors at Westminster Seminary when he was nearing graduation. He was feeling unsure of his ability to expound the Word to God’s people. The professor attempted to bolster his confidence by saying something like, “You know much more about the Bible than they do.” Tom was less than encouraged.

Tom had gotten to know G. I. when they were both pastors in the RCNZ. As I recall, G. I.’s church did not have an evening service (at least for a time), and G. I. lived near enough to come to Tom’s church and listen to him preach. He gave Tom actual feedback about his preaching. The critique was often painful, but Tom, a humble man, received it and made changes. He said that G. I. had taught him how to preach.

By the time I began serving on the SMT, G. I. was already fired up about helping elders and ministers to serve God more faithfully. He admired the Canadian Reformed Churches for publishing a periodical for their officers, *Diakonia*. It had just begun publication a year or two earlier, and G. I. was chagrined that the OPC had not yet seen fit to

do something similar. G. I., elder David Winslow, and I ended up on a subcommittee to consider producing periodic study materials for elders and ministers. This subcommittee eventually recommended that the CCE should publish a periodical, the name of which, *Ordained Servant*, G. I. himself had chosen.

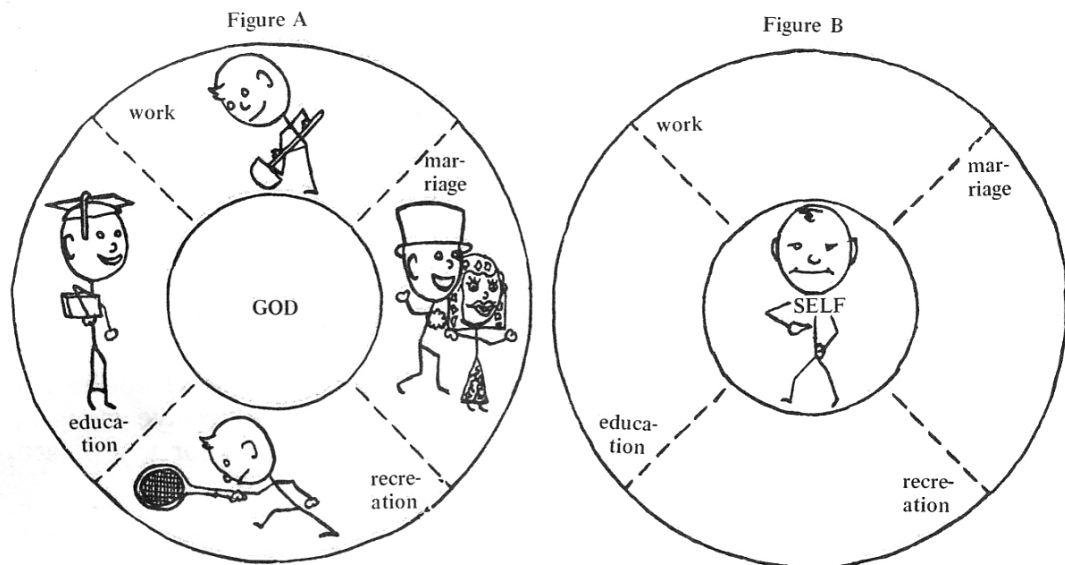
Diakonia was the template for *Ordained Servant*, both in layout and content. G. I. was most concerned to encourage elders to visit the members of the congregation, a well-established practice in the Dutch Reformed churches. He was the natural choice for editor, a post which he filled with distinction from 1992 to 2005.

During these years my sons were growing up, and in due time they were introduced to G. I.'s exposition of the Shorter Catechism, a book (originally in two volumes) that has aided many children—and adults—to grasp the essentials of the Reformed faith. There they encountered Shorty, the stick figure who illustrates a number of points of doctrine. I learned that Shorty had been drawn by Tom Tyson, but I am sure that G. I. was responsible for conceptualizing what Shorty would do.

In the mid-90s some presbyters in the OPC were wondering whether it was time for the OPC to establish a denominational seminary. As I recall, the Rev. Jack Peterson brought that question to the CCE as a newly elected member of the committee. Jack, G. I., and I were appointed to a subcommittee to consider whether a denominational seminary or some other means of assisting with the training of ministers would be feasible and effective.

We realized that to grapple with the issues involved would require a face-to-face meeting, and it was still the pre-Zoom era. Because Jack and G. I. were retired, and their schedules were more flexible, they offered to come to Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, where I was by that time employed at Geneva College. During their visit, Betsy and I entertained G. I. and Jack for dinner; it was the only time that either man was a guest in my house. I felt like we were entertaining royalty.

We met in their room in the Lark Motel, as I recall. We had set the meeting to begin in mid-morning, and when I arrived, Jack and G. I. said that they had decided to pass the time before the meeting by taking a stroll around the Geneva



Tom Tyson's illustration for Shorter Catechism question #1

campus. While there, they had run into the Rev. Robert Johnson,⁹ a minister of another Reformed denomination, who naturally had asked them why they were in town. I asked, “What did you say to him?” I cannot remember whether it was G. I. or Jack who replied, “You never tell Robert anything,” but it was the sentiment of both of them.

The three of us concluded that establishing a denominational seminary would require a substantial initial expenditure as well as a permanent increase in the Worldwide Outreach budget. So we recommended establishing an educational program that would offer specific courses at the seminary level to supplement seminary instruction, particularly in areas that we thought existing seminaries were not covering well. This became the Ministerial Training Institute of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Among the courses that we knew must be offered was a course on the Westminster Confession of Faith. And the SMT could think of no better instructor than G. I. Williamson. Beginning well into his retirement, he offered the course for about fifteen years and was always in demand.

I learned from G. I., Jack, and other fathers in the faith that the church should not be ruled by committees. We should do our committee work with a consciousness of serving the church. We should recognize that sessions, presbyteries, synods, and assemblies are the divinely ordained means of governing the church, and committees owe their existence to these judicatories. One outworking of this view was bringing major new initiatives to the General Assembly for approval. The 1999 GA approved the establishment of the Ministerial Training Institute of the OPC.

In the months leading up to that Assembly, my session and I had been going through a particularly trying time that took a personal toll on me. Even now, I do not think it is appropriate to go into any of the details, except to say that G. I. became aware of the situation. When I met him at the Assembly, he embraced me and spoke some simple words

⁹ I have changed the name to preserve a reputation and an ecumenical relationship.

of encouragement. It was an unexpected blessing, a light in a dark time.

G. I. was always a plain-spoken man in committee meetings. He could be counted on to speak up if someone suggested doing something that was not strictly above board. He was also conscious of the people he served in Carson, North Dakota, even as he was making decisions affecting denominational ministries. One year he objected to a proposed increase in expenditures—I think it was for staff salaries—because his flock in North Dakota, who were funding those expenditures through their contributions to Worldwide Outreach, were having a tough year and were not getting raises.

It is not that G. I. was always all business. At one meeting, it had been planned that the committee would go out to dinner at Williamson’s Restaurant, which was a modest but formal restaurant in the vicinity of the denominational offices. At the time, Paul MacDonald, an elder from Maine, had been serving for many years as the secretary of the committee. There had been some mix-up about the reservations, and someone made a quip about the possibility that we would have to go somewhere other than G. I.’s restaurant. G. I. said, “That’s ok, as long as we don’t go to Paul’s restaurant.”

I lost regular contact with G. I. after he retired from the CCE in the mid-2000s, except that I still heard reports of his work editing *Ordained Servant* and teaching for MTIOPC. In his retirement he had moved to Sheldon, Iowa, where he assisted in the establishment of a United Reformed church. I saw him twice more while attending GAs in 2015 and 2021 at Dordt University in Sioux Center, Iowa, less than twenty miles as the crow flies from Sheldon. He had come over to visit the Assembly. The last time I saw him, he was physically feeble and was assisted by the Rev. Archie Allison, his protégé. Yet he was still mentally sharp and solicitous about the state of the church.

G. I. entered into the presence of his Savior on April 12, 2023, a month short of his ninety-eighth birthday. His funeral was held on April 18, thirty years to the day after his final sermon at

Bethel OPC.¹⁰ Mr. Chris Campbell, who had profited from G. I.'s ministry there, composed a poem from the words of one of his sermons. It is a fitting epitaph:

“The Coming of the Son of Man”
based on a sermon on Matthew 24:27
by G. I. Williamson

*The sun goes down, it gets dark,
And there's not a cloud in the sky.
Then, at eleven or twelve or one o'clock,
The sky fills with light.*

*Seconds later you hear
The clap of thunder
Because sound doesn't travel
At the speed light does.*

*There's no warning, no sign:
Just a sudden flash
Over the plain from east to west,
And the sky is brighter
Than you've ever seen it,
Brighter than it ever was.¹¹ ©*

James S. Gidley is a ruling elder in Grace Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Sewickley, Pennsylvania. He serves as a professor at Geneva College, where he is chairman of the engineering department. He is also a member of the Committee on Christian Education and the Subcommittee on Ministerial Training.

10 Chris Campbell, personal communication, May 10, 2023.

11 Chris Campbell, personal communication, May 10, 2023.

G. I. Williamson's Farewell Sermon

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
December 2023¹

by **Archibald A. Allison and
G. I. Williamson**

When G. I. retired from Bethel OPC in Carson, North Dakota, he preached two farewell sermons on April 18, 1993, his last Lord's Day as pastor. Four members of the congregation present that day were also present thirty years later for G. I.'s funeral service on April 18, 2023, in Sanborn, Iowa. The author was one of those four and had the privilege of speaking on behalf of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church during the funeral service about one of those farewell sermons. Interest in those remarks has encouraged him to present that sermon more extensively here.

In the morning service, after reading Psalm 1 and 2, Revelation 22:8–17, and 1 Corinthians 16:13–24, G. I. preached a sermon on 1 Corinthians 16:22–24, “If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed. O Lord, come! The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you. My love *be* with you all in Christ Jesus,” (NKJV) entitled “Paul's Solemn Salutation.”

* * *

That is a remarkable statement because it brings together two things that seem so utterly in contrast with one another. On the one hand, you see the apostle Paul calling down the curse of God upon anyone who does not love the Lord Jesus, and on the other hand, immediately afterwards calling down the grace of Christ Jesus on all who love him. The problem is to understand why you have this remarkable conjunction. Why does the apostle say these two things in virtually the same breath?

1 http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=459&issue_id=101.

There are many today, including in the Reformed world, who blame it on the fact that Paul was brought up under the Old Testament and his mentality was affected by that imprecatory element in the Old Testament. Psalm 5, which we sang, is a good example of that. Psalm 109:6–13 is another example:

Set a wicked man over him, and let an accuser stand at his right hand. When he is judged, let him be found guilty, *and* let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few, *and* let another take his office. Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow. . . . Let his posterity be cut off, *and* in the generation following let their name be blotted out. (NKJV)

Many people say that is just not according to the mind of Christ. Something about that Old Testament revelation clashes with the words of Christ in the New Testament. Did not Jesus say, “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:44–45, NKJV)? They say that here Paul lapsed back into the old ways again, forgot for a moment, and then swiftly corrected himself in the last two verses.

That can be made to sound attractive, but it is nothing less than an attack on the authority of the Word of God. The apostle Paul cannot be dismissed that way. If any among you seems to be spiritual, he says, let him acknowledge that I speak for God. The holy apostles and prophets of God did not say or write anything of their own volition. Those holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. Anyone who dares to engage in this kind of criticism is simply storing up wrath for the day of judgment. I say to you that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable, that the man of God may be thoroughly furnished unto all good works (see 2 Tim. 3:16–17). It was Christ himself who said, “I did not come to annul or destroy or abrogate the Law. I came to fulfill it” (Matt. 5:17, G. I.’s translation).

The simple truth is that if we are biblical, we have to hold to both of these things at the same

time. So I say to you for the last time, if anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be damned, and I mean it. That is what anathema means—Let him be damned. O Lord, come! I also say to my congregation with all my heart, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you and my love be with you all in Christ Jesus.

That is always the way God has spoken to man made in his image. When God first created man and put him in the garden, he commanded him, “You shall not eat of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, for in the day that you eat thereof, dying you shall die” (Gen. 2:17, G. I.’s translation). Right from the beginning of human existence, God set before man two alternatives: fidelity and obedience to the living God and life, and disobedience and turning away from the living God and a death that only gets worse with time. That is what “dying you shall die” means. It does not come all at once, and it keeps getting worse. So there is life or death, blessing or curse. That is the way it has always been.

Moses said the same thing before the children of Israel when he was about ready to lay down his task, “I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, *that* I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30:19, NKJV). When his successor, Joshua, was about to die, he said the same thing, “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that *were* on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Josh. 24:15, NKJV).

The Book of Psalms begins with the same two alternatives, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, not stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful, but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in his law he meditates day and night” (1:1–2, NKJV). There are two alternatives. One is to stay close to God and have fellowship with him. The other is to turn away from God and delight in the counsel and fellowship of the ungodly.

No one ever made this clearer than our Lord Jesus Christ himself. He said, “Narrow is the way that leads to life, and few find it, but broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many walk therein” (Matt. 7:14, G. I.’s translation). An older member complained about a sermon on hell. What a sad and tragic thing that is because I am no minister of God if I do not warn God’s people about hell! The country is full of preachers who will not do it anymore, but it has to be done because there are two eternal destinies and one of them is hell. One way you keep people out of hell is to warn them about it. What kind of a pastor would I be to you if I did not warn you? Yet after nine years, an older member complains about hearing the truth about the dark side of God’s revelation. That is inexpressibly sad and tragic. Again, I say to you, if anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be damned.

That means love for the Lord Jesus Christ is the criterion of genuine membership in the kingdom of God. If you love the Lord Jesus Christ, you are in. If you do not love the Lord Jesus Christ, you are not. You are not saved by love. The Bible never says that. It always says, by grace you are saved through faith, not love. Your love is too puny and flimsy to ever save you or anybody else. So is mine. Paul says that you are only saved by faith in Christ, “and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8–10, NKJV).

If you really have faith in Christ and are saved from eternal damnation by the precious blood of Christ, then you are going to love him. You could not possibly have saving faith and not love Jesus. Therefore, in the Bible, love is the thing that certifies the genuineness of your faith and the reality of your salvation. That is why Christ said, “the first and greatest of all commandments is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Matt. 22:37–38, G. I.’s translation). He said that because it is primary. Love of Jesus Christ and his Father is first priority in the Christian life,

but it is only a response to his love.

“We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19 NKJV). The Lord says, I have loved you with an everlasting love. He chose us in Christ, before the foundation of the world, in love, that we might be holy and without blame before him. That is what Scripture says. In love from all eternity, God chose us to be his. The Bible says, even when we were hell-deserving sinners, he showed his love for us in sending his Son to die for our sins. Jesus showed his love for us in being willing to come and be obedient even to the accursed, terrible death that he died on the cross. He did it even though he knew that we deserve God’s wrath and punishment. You cannot possibly believe that, or even understand that, if there is no love in your heart for Jesus.

There were still some members in Corinth that needed to hear these solemn words. They had the second greatest pastor in history and needed to hear these words, “If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ,” let him be damned—and that means damned eternally in hell (1 Cor. 16:22). In Paul’s theology, which is God’s theology, there must be the absolute supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ. These words have to be spoken in the church, because for some people Christ is not supreme. Many other things are supreme rather than the Lord Jesus.

One of the most constant is love for relatives. That is why Jesus said, “If anyone comes to Me and is not willing to hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26, NKJV). The twentieth-century church has said, “We do not accept that.” Too bad for the twentieth-century church, because anyone who rejects that will end up in hell! How sad! When Jesus’s mother, brothers, and sisters came to Jesus, what did he say? He said, “Who is My mother and who are My brothers?” And he stretched out his hand toward His disciples and said, ‘Behold my mother and brothers! For whosoever will do the will of my Father in heaven, the same is my brother, sister, mother’” (Matt. 12:48–50, G. I.’s translation).

If you love your children more than you love God, you do not have it. If you are willing to compromise the claims of Christ for your dad, your mother, your sister, your brother, or any other relative, you do not have it, because the day is coming when there is going to be a great separation. You had better get ready because some of your relatives are going to be on the other side from you, and some of mine also. What is important is to be on the side of the Lord and his family, not our family's side.

Paul did not make this statement because he was an unloving man. Many people say that today. You would be surprised at the hard things I have heard against the Apostle Paul in forty-one years in the ministry from those who claim to be God's people. Paul was a loving man. Do you know that he once said, "I would even be willing to be damned myself if it could save my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:3, G. I.'s translation). The only other man in history that said something like that was Moses, as far as I know. He did have a condition: if it would be possible, I would do it. I have never reached that level of sanctification, but it does show that he was a loving man. He never manifested that love more faithfully than when he said to his people in Corinth, "If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be damned" (1 Cor. 16:22, G. I.'s translation).

There is no conflict here at all. You need to understand why there is no conflict. You say both of these things precisely because you love Jesus and you have compassion on people and you do not want them to perish but to have everlasting life. Many years ago I was very sick. I had terrible pains in my side, and I went to the doctor. He said, "You have echovirus. Do not worry about it. It is not much. You will get over it soon." I was happy, but I got worse. Finally, a nurse in my congregation said, "I know a doctor. You will not like him, but I want you to see him." I did, and I did not like him because he said things I did not want to hear. One of the things he said was, "You have a bad case of pneumonia, and you have cracked your own ribs coughing." I did not like that man, but he is the one that helped me. He is the one who did

me good, because he told me the truth.

That is what Paul is doing here, because the judgment day is going to happen. Every one of us here today is going to stand before the judgment seat of Christ. He is going to return. When he does, he is going to separate the sheep from the goats, and he is going to drive those on his left hand into outer darkness, and there will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth (see Matt. 25). Some of the people that will wail and gnash their teeth sat in church for fifty years. Can you believe it? That is the way it is going to be, and if Paul did not warn these Corinthians, he would be partly responsible if that is where they ended up. That is the only reason in this world why I keep saying these things to you people. I do not want you to end up there.

One of the things I have heard ever since I started to preach is that I am too heavy, too much on the dark side, too much about law, and not enough about grace. That is possible. I am not an inspired apostle. I do not claim to be without error. I do not claim that I have been entirely free from one-sidedness, but I have certainly tried not to be one-sided. But remember this: we are living in a day in which there is a great clamor for an easier gospel. The Bible says that in the last days there will be those who "will not endure sound doctrine" (2 Tim. 4:3). That day has come all over America. That is what is wrong with the country. That is why it is in the shape it is in morally and spiritually. People do not want to hear the true gospel, and they do not hear it either. They have the kind of teachers they want.

So far this has not happened to you. You had better be thankful it has not, and let me say that for the last nine-and-a-half years I have never one time knowingly corrupted or distorted or departed from the sound doctrine of the Bible, and I think you know that too. Some of you who do not like one word I have ever said, know in your heart-of-hearts that that is what I have been doing. I warn you that you are going to answer for it. The Bible says, "But He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of

darkness and will reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God" (1 Cor. 4:4–5, NKJV). I have my eye on that day. I hope you do too.

With all my heart, I would rather say to you, and I do say, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all, and my love be with you all in Christ Jesus. That is what I have labored for, and that is what I have prayed for, but if you do not want eternal life enough to love the Lord Jesus with a life-dominating love, then I have to say, "May you be accursed," for the one thing that matters to me above everything else is my own standing with Jesus Christ.

As I look at you, I am so grateful that I can say for most of you, "The evidence is there." Why do some of you drive seventy miles to this church and stay all day to attend both services? It is because you love Jesus. Why are you always here when there is a worship service called by duly constituted authority, which is the ordinance of God? It is because you love the Lord Jesus. Why has the giving of this congregation gone up so much? It is because you love the Lord Jesus so much that you not only give 10 percent but more than 10 percent of what God gives you. I know that. That is a fact. It cannot be denied, and it cannot be faked. People who do not love the Lord Jesus Christ do not do that. They do not even want to do that. You cannot even get them to do that.

In New Zealand, Dick VanderPyle fell in love with a girl named Addy Meyering. He would come home from a hard day's work, and what do you think he did? He quickly took a shower, dressed up, and walked several miles on foot to see Addy. He would stay there until pretty late and then walk all the way back, go to bed, get up, and work with a song in his heart and mouth. Do you know why? It was love. He will willing to do things that he never would have been willing to do before because he had love.

That is why some of you do these things. It is the only reason, and it is a wonderful thing to see, but it is just as clear to me that there are some of you who do not have that love in anything like that degree, to say the very least. Half the time you are

not even here when Christ meets with his people. That is not a human invention. That is a divine ordinance. You are called to be here to meet with Christ in the fellowship of the congregation of the saints, and you do not come. It is because you do not have the kind of love for Jesus that the Bible wants you to have. Why is it that some of you that have plenty of money in your wallets give such a stingy little contribution? I will tell you why. It is because you do not love Jesus the way you should.

It is as simple as that, and if that does not change, I have to say to you what Paul said to the Corinthians. Jesus did not do much, did he? He just came down from heaven to die a terrible death, to be accursed of God for sinners. That is not much, is it? That does not merit much love in your heart, does it? Of course, it does. Of course, it does!

One of you was telling me about his mother. She stayed in the liberal church. One of the things that offended her was the fact that for people like us, religion dominates all of life. Too right, it does! Amen and hallelujah, it does! Too bad that lady died in opposition to that concept of life because the Bible says, "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31)! If it does not dominate your life, something else does. You are in a bad way. So I exhort you for the last time, consider what you are doing. Do you really love the Lord Jesus? The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen. ☺

G. I. Williamson (1925–2023) was a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, serving as pastor of a number of Reformed churches. He was editor of *Ordained Servant* from its inception in 1992 through 2005, when he retired.

Archibald A. Allison is pastor of *Emmaus Orthodox Presbyterian Church* in Fort Collins, Colorado, and is the secretary of the *Committee on Christian Education*.

✦ Servant Truth

Adam, Modern Anthropological Science, and Faith

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
January 2023¹

by Jan Frederic Dudt

Scientific research continues to mount strong evidence against the idea that a single couple, such as Adam and Eve, could ever have been the ancestors of the entire human race. The evidence is profound and comes from a number of disciplines including paleoanthropology, anatomy, and modern genetics. For example, the bones of various species of extinct upright walking primates have been discovered and classified. The techniques used to reconstruct and categorize these specimens are similar to those associated with crime scene investigations. Data from these techniques, while not infallible, are considered valid. The data from the bones indicate that *Aridopithecus* (four million years ago) and the australopithecines, like the Lucy skeleton, (two to three million years ago) walked upright but were rather apelike in facial and cranial shape. The remains of others such as *Homo ergaster* (two million years ago) and *Homo erectus* (two million to at least half a million years ago) were associated with simple, hand-worked, stone tools. The bones of these *Homo* species looked surprisingly human from the neck down. Their faces and skulls were primitive compared to modern humans. Their brain cases were

intermediate between the earlier upright walkers (450 cc) and those of modern humans (1,300 cc).

Complicating the story is the strong evidence that some humanlike species were contemporary with early modern humans, *Homo sapiens*. Many of us are aware of the curious findings associated with the Neanderthals, Denisovans, the red deer people, and the dwarfed Hobbit men. Enough DNA has been salvaged from the bones of the Neanderthal and Denisovans to make whole-genome comparisons with modern humans. Genomic studies have led to the growing belief that both of these extinct forms produced a limited number of offspring with their modern human contemporaries about 50,000 years ago.

It is difficult to determine the relationship of these upright walkers to that of divine, image-bearing, modern humans. Reconciling the anthropological science (the interpretation of natural revelation) and theology (the interpretation of Scripture) is the challenge. Some, in order to accommodate the science, allegorize Adam, claiming that he is a figurative representative of humanity, not a historic individual. In other words, Genesis 1–3 is literary myth in the best sense of the term, conveying truth without having real characters doing things in real time. One Christian author draws the comparison of humans and baseball. Just as there was never a first baseball game, there was never a first human. Both have evolved.

However, this approach has significant pitfalls. The rejection of a historic Adam typically calls for departure from a number of traditional Christian doctrines. 1) The historic doctrine of original sin is recast into a story about every human's condition. Romans 7:24, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" is altered so that "this body of death" refers to my base instincts (those vestiges of humanity's evolutionary past). 2) The doctrine of the atonement (Christ's death as payment for the sins of many) is recast as Christ's defeat of sin through his conquest of his own base instincts. He is our example. And 3), the development of a neo-Pelagian theology, replacing Augustinian sovereign grace, that sees each of us having our own fall from our state of innocence in

1 http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=459&issue_id=101.

the struggle to be faithful image bearers.

The concept of Christ as “a ransom for many” (Christ’s words in Matt. 20:28) and the ideas of redemption and renewal suggest buying back and restoring to an original state. If sin is simply a struggle with the instincts and vestiges inherited from an earlier biological stage, then the idea of ransom, redemption, and renewal is not meaningful. Also, the rejection of a historic Adam leads to depersonalizing the direct confrontation between Satan and Adam and, by extension, depersonalizes the conflict between Satan and Christ. From Scripture we know that Christ, the human, was not being tempted by his evolutionary past. He was being confronted by the same tempter that confronted Adam. Satan, at it again, tried to derail God’s plan for defeating Satan. The thing to remember is that Satan’s attempt to derail the first Adam as redeemer or preemptor of Satanic expansion (Satan rebelled before the human fall) largely succeeded. However, Satan utterly failed in his confrontation with the last Adam.

The Genesis account could have delivered a story consistent with the notion of the fall as every unfallen individual’s internal struggle. Instead, Genesis 3 describes a fall from a paradise of moral innocence by one person, Adam, with implications for the rest of humanity. If one allegorizes the Adam and Eve story (Gen. 1–3), reducing it to a mythic narrative full of “truth” without real historic content, Paul’s New Testament references to the first Adam and the last Adam (Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15) become a reflection of his Hebrew education and not a comment on real history. At that point, Paul’s Christology can be called into question along with the entire redemptive picture as understood by historic orthodox Christianity.

The allegorists may have a point. The language of the Genesis account of the creation of humans and the subsequent fall does ring with allegory, or at least symbolism. Consider a crafty talking snake, a tree of life that shows up in Revelation 22, and a tree of the knowledge of good and evil, eating the fruit of which is an act of death-earning disobedience. The story has the flavor of fantastic myth constructed to teach valuable les-

sons, without the stories having actually occurred. However, allegorists seem to forget that allegory, symbolism, and history can go together. Consider Revelation 12. The woman clothed with the sun and moon, with twelve stars in her crown, is about to deliver. The dragon (serpent), whose tail swept out a third of the stars of heaven, waits to devour the newborn. The child is caught up to God’s throne, and the woman fled to the wilderness to a divinely prepared place. The story, in part, is a symbolic version of the Matthew 2 account of actual space/time history that involved Herod’s hunt for the Christ child and Joseph and Mary’s flight with the baby to Egypt. The protagonist is not a real dragon. The woman does not actually have a crown with twelve stars. What Christian familiar with Matthew 2 would not recognize parallels between the two stories? The dragon symbolizing Satan, the pregnant woman representing Mary, and the unborn Jesus. The conflict between ultimate good and evil is apparent. However, the Revelation 12 story, like the Matthew 2 version of the story, describes real characters and real events. The Revelation 12 account is a literary story that more clearly describes the behind-the-scenes struggle between spiritual forces. Again, the characters in both of the stories are real.

The Genesis 3 account of the fall makes sense if it is seen in a similarly symbolic way involving real characters and real events. The symbolic nature of the story is undeniable—a talking snake and trees of unknown taxonomy. However, to say that the characters and events are only allegorical or mythic flies in the face of the rest of Scripture. The rest of Scripture assumes real characters and real events. Genesis 3 can be seen as a similar narrative style to Revelation 12 without having a corresponding Matthew 2-type parallel account.

Where does this leave Adam? The situation in some measure is unresolved, especially for old earth creationists, people like Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, J. Gresham Machen, E. J. Young, and Francis Schaeffer. When did God first create Adam as an image bearer of God? What process did God use to create him from the dust? How long was Adam alone without a mate? Were Adam

and Eve recognizably modern humans? Can the information that science gives us regarding early up-right walkers be reconciled with the Scripture? The answers to these questions may require us to live by faith, with the science in some tension. We cannot deny the data. However, science cannot be the arbiter of truth concerning certain Christian doctrines. For example, science is unable to confirm *ex nihilo* creation, the virgin birth, the resurrection, and miracles in general, things that we knew and accept by the testimony of Scripture. It seems that the Adam issue is similar. Perhaps the best science can do for the historical Adam is to inform us of normal natural processes and enable us to more clearly understand when divine intervention is a departure from natural events. For example, even if the human body of Adam was created through some God-guided natural process (all natural processes are so guided), it is apparent from the narrative that the immaterial soul of Adam was not of the dust as his body was. A divine interventional miracle was the means of the creation of the immaterial soul. Again, if this special creation of Adam and Eve did not happen, the Creator would have said, “Let the *earth* bring forth man in our image” instead of saying, “Let *us* make man in *our image*” (Gen. 1:26, emphasis added). If we believe in the divine inspiration of Scripture, then we must admit that the narrative indicating special creation means just that.

We thank the Lord for special revelation to give us information we could not have discovered by studying nature. Seeing Adam as a special creation is secured by special revelation. For example, God has the earth bringing forth plants and animals on day three and six respectively. On day six God could have said, “let the earth bring forth man in our image.” Instead, he says, “let us make man in our image.” Apparently, the mode of creating humans is different from the other organisms. It involves both material (dust) and intervention (“in our image”). This does not eliminate the possibility of some kind of process in creating humans, but it does indicate that something quite special is going on. Notice in parallel that Christ, the last Adam, in his humanity is both the result

of material process (sharing humanity’s identity through Mary) and intervention (how did he get his Y chromosome?). Natural revelation combined with special revelation are telling us that the parallels between the first Adam and the last Adam may be more profound than we have previously thought.

So, is Adam the lone first image-bearing human as traditionally believed? Or as some now suggest, is he representative of all humans before and after him, just as Christ the redeemer is representative of those redeemed living before and after his earthly ministry? Difficulties are created by taking either tack. Certainly, serious theological issues are created if we say that the Adam in Genesis 3 is only allegorical or mythic. Consequently, reading Scripture in an unwise allegorical manner to make it comport with mainstream materialistic science seems like a new syncretism and an abuse of natural revelation.

There is a tendency among some Christians in the modern context to over-accommodate the claims of mainstream materialistic science. Natural revelation as interpreted by science does present some challenges for us, but we have been down that road before. The departure from geocentrism is a case in point. However, the shift to heliocentrism did not present the theological crisis that was initially feared in the sixteenth century. Another example might be the issue of whether or not there was any death before the fall. Special revelation certainly indicates that there was not death for humans before the fall. Some have assumed by extension that nothing died before the fall. However, this would stretch credulity if modern ecology has revealed something right about nature. It would be hard to conceive, even in a garden of Paradise, that no insects were inadvertently stepped on by large creatures, that no plants died, or that no bacteria were killed on the ground by being left high and dry. Ecology has shown us that the cycles of death and renewal are part of a healthy functioning ecosystem. Moving theologically from no death in the garden to ecological balance does not really cost us much.

The historic Adam issue is much more criti-

cal. The theological consequences of rejecting a historical Adam are devastating, as evidenced by those who hold to that position. As we keep trying to get natural revelation right, our interpretation of science will likely be wrong about some of the details. However, it will be a lot easier to correct that than to rewrite the errors of bad theology. ©

Jan Frederic Dudd *is a professor of biology at Grove City College in Grove City, Pennsylvania.*

✦ Servant Word

Textual Criticism

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
August–September 2023¹

by T. David Gordon

Cultures, perhaps like individuals, seek equilibrium. When the cultural left pushes further left, the cultural right tends to push further right. In my own lifetime, I may have observed this several times: mid-century communists probably birthed the John Birch Society, the hippies may have instigated the *National Review*, *Roe v. Wade* likely incubated Theonomy and the Moral Majority, and the woke left *yin* today appears to be provoking its Christian *yang* of biblicism (and revived theonomy).² Those who deny certainty provoke hyper-certainty. Whether for this reason or simply because nature abhors a vacuum, it appears to me that there is more discussion of biblical text criticism today than there has been in a half century or more.

As an individual with three graduate degrees in biblical studies, I welcome any intellectual effort directed towards Holy Scripture, especially since the late Peter L. Berger³ ruined my sleep by persuading me that, for most people, religion is not an intelligent concern. My Greek students for four

decades were fairly tolerant of Greek, and many of them liked it, but even my one-hour lecture on text criticism in second-year Greek appears to have moved them to alternate thoughts of suicide or murder, and I know for whom the latter was directed. For me, therefore, to encounter *any* interest in text-critical questions of the Bible is an oft-sought oasis.

Still, I wonder what is provoking a renewed interest in the once-boring field of text criticism. Thomas Kuhn thought that intellectual revival (especially in the empirical disciplines) was ordinarily provoked either by new tools (electron microscopes, MRI, et al.) or new paradigms. I have not witnessed any new paradigms in biblical text criticism, and few new tools have demonstrated significant promise. At any rate, the editor of *Ordained Servant* is not the only one who believes there appears to be renewed interest in the matter, so I will provide a few thoughts that may assist church officers who wish to address this issue.

By introduction, I would remind church officers of the need for humility regarding the matter. Few of us, even seminary graduates, are trained in text criticism beyond the introductory level. Further, even the late Bruce M. Metzger (1914–2007), who was perhaps the leading American expert in text criticism, expressed caution about the very discipline to which he devoted much of his professional life:

The range and complexity of textual data are so great that no neatly arranged or mechanically contrived set of rules can be applied with mathematical precision. Each and every variant reading needs to be considered in itself, and not judged merely according to a rule of thumb. . . . Since textual criticism is an art as well as a science, it is inevitable that in some cases different scholars will come to different evaluations of the significance of the evidence.⁴

1 http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=459&issue_id=101.

2 Scott Clark discusses what he calls “QIRC,” which stands for the Quest for Illegitimate Religious Certainty. Readers can search his Heidelbergblog to find his discussion of the general intellectual quest for such certainty. In my lectures, I have frequently argued that the original Edenic temptation was an example of this: “Then you will be like God, knowing” as God does, rather than as a dependent, mutable, and fallible creature does.

3 Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Recovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Doubleday, 1969).

4 Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), xxiv, xxviii. Hence TCGNT.

Exactly one century before Metzger, Robert Lewis Dabney, at the conclusion of a forty-three page discussion of “Doctrinal Variant Readings” in the Greek testament, also urged humility regarding the matter, saying:

If all the debated readings were surrendered by us, no fact or doctrine of Christianity would thereby be invalidated, and least of all would the doctrine of Christ’s proper divinity be deprived of adequate scriptural support. Hence the interests of orthodoxy are entirely secure from and above the reach of all movements of modern criticism of the text, whether made in a correct or incorrect method, and all such discussions in future are, to the Church, of subordinate importance. Yet they have their interest, and should receive the intelligent watch of the teachers of the Church. Absolute historical certainty of results is not to be expected, since so many of the documents of the primitive Church are gone forever; but probable conclusions are all which are to be expected.⁵

As the English Puritans frequently observed, there should be a direct correlation between light and heat; where we have little of the first, we should have little of the second. This adage probably confounds the American populist, who ordinarily holds the strongest opinions in areas of his least competence. For example, consider how heated some individuals become about a favored translation, individuals who often have studied

5 Robert Lewis Dabney, “The Doctrinal Various Readings of the New Testament Greek,” *The Southern Presbyterian Review* xxii:2 (April 1871): 234. For a systematic theologian, Dabney demonstrated a remarkable grasp of text criticism as it had been practiced to his day. His article reviewed, among others, the text-critical work of Richard Bentley (1662–1742), Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752), Johann Jakob Wettstein (1693–1754), Johann David Michaelis (1717–91), Johann Jacob Griesbach (1745–1812), Johann Leonhard Hug (1765–1846), Johannes Martin Augustinus Scholz (1794–1852), Karl Lachmann (1793–1851), Constantin von Tischendorf (1815–74), Samuel Prideaux (1813–75), and Henry Alford (1810–71). Unfortunately for Dabney (and for us), another decade passed before Brooke Foss Westcott (1825–1901) and Fenton John Anthony Hort (1828–92) published their influential, two-volume *The New Testament in the Original Greek* in 1881.

neither Hebrew nor Greek. I taught Greek for forty-one years, and there is no translation that I have any passion for, though there are many that I appreciate.

In the following, I would like to address several matters: the scale of the question, the “families” of manuscripts, and some counsel to church officers.

The Scale of the Question

The vast majority of variant readings in the original Scriptures have no consequence on interpretation and are merely variants of spelling, such as *elthato* or *eltheto* (ἐλθάτω or ἐλθέτω) in “your kingdom *come*,” in the Lord’s prayer. Such variation in the second aorist spelling is equivalent to variants between British and American spelling of words such as “colour” or “color.” Robert Lewis Dabney, in an article largely defending the *textus receptus* (RLD followed J. L. Hug in referring to it as *κοινή ἔκδοσις*), found only six variants that were doctrinally significant, which in total would hardly constitute two sentences. And, as we observed earlier, Dabney’s opinion was that “no fact or doctrine of Christianity would thereby be invalidated,” regardless of how we resolved those disputed texts.

The two significantly lengthy passages that have textual variants are the longer ending of Mark (16:9–20) and the *pericope adulterae* at John 7:53–8:11, neither of which would alter our understanding of what the Scriptures “principally teach,” namely, “what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man” (Westminster Shorter Catechism 3). The several things that the longer ending of Mark records in the post-resurrection narrative are affirmed later in other passages:

- in my name they will cast out demons;
- they will speak in new tongues;
- they will pick up serpents with their hands;
- and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them;
- they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.
- Acts 5:16 *The people also gathered . . . , bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.*

(also 8:7, 19:12)

- Pentecost
- Acts 28:3, 5. . . *a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. . . . He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm.*

Similarly, there is nothing in the disputed variant in John 7:53–8:11, properly understood, that would add anything to what is taught elsewhere. Contrary to popular opinion, Jesus did not encourage moral relativism but especially told the woman, “from now on, *sin no more*” (emphasis added). Nor did he, as people often think, use the expression “cast the first stone” metaphorically to mean something like “he who is without sin may evaluate life ethically.” Adultery was a capital crime in the Mosaic law, and Jesus knew that those who would have her stoned were probably guilty of similar sins themselves (and may have written their offenses on the ground) and were therefore precluded, by the Mosaic law, from participating in the trial. Stoning a person to death is not the same as respectfully differing on an ethical question.

Even in these two lengthiest variants in the Greek New Testament, nothing is added to or deleted from the teaching of the New Testament by including or excluding either passage (properly understood). “What man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man” (WSC 3) is unscathed by the inclusion or exclusion of either variant. In my judgment, little is at stake in resolving the text-critical issues. However, out of our high regard for God’s Word, we officers—especially pastors—do our “due diligence,” as it were, and attempt, whenever variants might influence interpretation, to do our best to resolve them.

Received Text v. Majority Text v. Eclectic/Critical Text: A Little History

Most church officers know what many laypeople have never even thought about: We do not have the original manuscripts of any part of the Bible. What we have is thousands (including the fragmentary evidence, about seven thousand) of manuscripts that contain all or portions of the

Greek New Testament. Unsurprisingly, no two of those hand-copied manuscripts is identical to another; on the other hand, there are not seven thousand different variants for each variation. There is widespread agreement among students of the Greek New Testament that there are three (possibly four) different “families” of textual variations. Within these families (Byzantine, Western, Alexandrian, and some recognize a Caesarean), most of the readings are the same. In any given passage, then, it is rare to have more than two or three minor variants, though there may well be thousands of particular manuscripts that represent one or another of the variants.

When people undertake a translation, they must first decide whether to regard some family variants to be the default or not. Do the translators work from representative manuscripts of the Byzantine family of texts, the Western texts, or the Alexandrian texts (or from an eclectic/critical text)? Obviously, a translation committee cannot re-argue such a basic matter every day; to the contrary, most translation committees have made their decision beforehand and agree to work one way or another, and their translations later reflect that choice. Here are the three options ordinarily considered.

The Received Text (*Textus Receptus*)

Desiderius Erasmus (1467?–1536) of Rotterdam published his *magnum opus* (1516), the first printed edition of the Greek New Testament (in contrast to handwritten manuscripts). He consulted Lorenzo Valla’s annotations on the New Testament, and he also consulted the biblical commentaries of the Church Fathers and published four editions of his Greek New Testament.⁶ Erasmus was a skilled and dedicated Renaissance humanist, but he had very few manuscripts to work from, as Bruce Metzger said,

For the book of Revelation he had but one

⁶ The primary manuscript he worked from, *Codex Basilienensis A. N. IV. 1*, known as *Minuscule 2*, resides today at the University of Basel.

manuscript, dating from the twelfth century, which he had borrowed from his friend Reuchlin. As it happened, this copy lacked the final leaf, which had contained the last six verses of the book. For these verses Erasmus depended upon Jerome's Latin Vulgate, translating this version into Greek.⁷

Several decades later, Robert Estienne (*Stephanus*) published editions of the Greek text in 1546, 1549, 1550, and 1551, revising the earlier edition of Erasmus, which had been printed from 1516 to 1535. Stephanus used fourteen other Greek Byzantine manuscripts along with the *Complutensian Polyglot* in his 1550 edition, and even two other Alexandrian Codices, which were given/loaned to him by Italian friends. These Byzantine manuscripts, not surprisingly, concurred with the edition of Erasmus, and the Stephanus edition is nearly identical to that of Erasmus. These printed manuscripts became the basis of nearly all of the European translations of the Reformation era (and the immediate post-Reformation, such as the King James Version).

Not too much later, the Elziver brothers (Leiden, 1633) printed their second edition of a Greek text, nearly identical to the texts of Erasmus and Stephanus, and the preface contained this: "*Textum ergo habes nunc ab omnibus receptum in quo nihil immutatum aut corruptum damus*" (Therefore you now have the text received by all, in which we give nothing changed or corrupted). From this preface, the expression "textus receptus" came, and from the Elziver brothers (borrowing nearly entirely the work of Erasmus and Stephanus) came the Greek text used for nearly all translations until the nineteenth century.

A small misnomer exists here, because, in fact, the so-called "received text" is no longer "received" by all individuals or traditions as sacrosanct; it ordinarily refers to the Stephanus/Erasmus text, which, we all know, was not based on a complete Greek manuscript. The concept of a "received text," however, is somewhat commendable, because,

regarding textual matters, it is similar to the "Vincentian canon" (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*, "what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all"). Perhaps this is what Robert Lewis Dabney meant when he said,

Let it be that the received text has usurped the position by accident, or been assigned to it by providence, the all-important fact is, that it holds it. It is far better for the interests of truth, that Christendom should recognize, as a commonly received Bible, a less accurate text, than that it should recognize none.⁸

To be sure, not every individual would agree with Dabney that a less-accurate text, approved by consensus, would be preferable to a more-accurate text, but his point is at least judicious. What should not be overlooked, however, is that Erasmus's text actually was an eclectic/critical text, even though he had many fewer manuscripts to work from than others (later) did.

The "Majority Text"

The Majority Text avoids the obvious problem that the Textus Receptus has, that Erasmus conceded that a portion of Revelation was missing from his primary manuscript, and he provided his own free translation from the Latin Vulgate. Majority Text advocates are not enslaved (or even beholden) to the Erasmus text. They do, however, show great deference to the "majority" of manuscripts, and the majority of manuscripts available today are from the Byzantine tradition. Most of those manuscripts are fairly late; manuscripts degrade over time, and, of course, we have more of the more-recent manuscripts than we do of the less-recent manuscripts.

Some (not all) advocates of the Majority Text argue providentially, that these are the manuscripts preserved in greater number than other types of text, and they were in fact the manuscript tradition from which the first Protestant translations were made (Dabney's "ecclesiastical" argument, men-

7 Metzger, *TCGNT*, xxi.

8 Robert Lewis Dabney, *Doctrinal Various Readings*, 199.

tioned earlier). Other advocates argue empirically that the “majority” of available manuscripts today happen to be Byzantine.⁹

Eclectic/critical Text

Many (probably most) academic scholars of the Bible adopt what is called an “eclectic” or “critical” text, basing their translations on a consultation of all the available manuscripts (including early versions and patristic sources), attempting to account for the variants. What kinds of mistakes did scribes typically make? What “families” of texts appear to be more reliable than others? Which variants appear in several “families” of texts? Printed editions of the Greek New Testament by the major Bible societies in the United States and Germany contain marginal information about the alternative readings and the manuscripts in which they are found, so that translators may make their own decision, or at least understand why the translators made theirs.

Advocates of the eclectic/critical approach may (or may not) have their own version of a providential argument, to wit: in God’s infallible providence, these are the kinds of errors that fallible humans make, and if God’s providence preserves some very ancient manuscripts, in which there is a lesser likelihood of numerous generations of copying errors, we should avail ourselves of that providential reality. Advocates of this approach make the same kinds of assessments of biblical manuscripts that students of the Greek classical literature make of Aristotle or Plato.

Advocates of the eclectic/critical approach also recall that the Received Text and the Majority Text are themselves eclectic/critical; Erasmus consulted the Vulgate (and himself, when he freely translated the Latin into Greek at the end of Revelation),

9 I honestly do not know what would happen to this view if, say, in a calendar year, throughout the globe, archaeologists found hundreds—perhaps thousands—of Alexandrian manuscripts. Would Majority Text advocates propose new translations based on the new majority? One advantage of the eclectic/critical theory is that it welcomes new manuscript discoveries and need not abandon its principles upon their discovery. By any orthodox theory of divine providence, it did not cease in the early sixteenth century.

and Stephanus consulted over a dozen Greek texts. Therefore, the difference in the three approaches is actually on a spectrum: The Received Text tradition consults very few manuscripts (possibly only one); the Majority Text (by definition) consults many texts (with a tendency to prefer the Byzantine manuscripts, since they are more numerous than the Western or Alexandrian manuscripts); and the Eclectic/Critical text consults any text it can find (as I put it: I consult any manuscript God’s providence makes available).

Readers of *Ordained Servant* will be interested in knowing how or whether our confessional standards address the matter, and especially the first portion of Confession of Faith 1.8, which reads:

The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them. (parentheses theirs)

Some portions of this are quite straightforward, especially the result clause at the end, “so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them.” This clause precludes the possibility of any given translation of the Bible having privileged status and was likely an implicit denial of the Roman Catholic Church’s adoption of Jerome’s Latin Vulgate as its authoritative Bible. Two other parts of the Confession’s statement require a little more work to determine their meaning: “singular” and “kept pure.”

“Singular care and providence” (emphasis added) is one of several quaint expressions found in the Westminster documents, and its quaintness assists in making it memorable. Consulting the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), one finds a movement from the absolute to the comparative sense of “singular.” The absolute definitions of the adjective employ the term in an almost-mathematical sense: “Alone; solitary. One only; one

and no more; single. Exclusive, sole. Forming the only one of the kind; unique. Separate; individual; single.” Note, then, the more-comparative uses:

Separate from others by reason of superiority or pre-eminence. Above the ordinary in amount, extent, worth, or value; special (“Common from 1550–1650, now rare”). Remarkable, extraordinary, unusual, uncommon. Hence rare, precious. Especially, particularly.

Westminster certainly did not employ “singular” in the absolute sense, because they affirmed at Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 5.1 God’s ordering of all things: “God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern *all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least*, by his most wise and holy providence . . .” (emphasis added). We may safely assume that the Assembly used the term in its comparative sense of “special, extraordinary, unusual, uncommon.”

Presumably, for instance, God’s providence also superintended the preservation of the writings of Plato and Aristotle, but the manuscript evidence for their writings is extremely scant, compared to the manuscript evidence for biblical texts. In the 1930 Loeb edition of Plato’s *Republic*, for instance, edited by Jeffrey Henderson, he lists only thirteen manuscripts available. Similarly, in Harris Rackham’s 1926 introduction to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* in the Loeb series, he lists only six manuscripts and says, “Other mss. have been collated by other scholars, but none has any authority. . . . Another witness, ranking *in importance next to the best mss.*, is the thirteenth-century Latin translation attributed to William of Moerbeke” (emphasis added).¹⁰ Rackham had only two reliable Greek manuscripts for the *Ethics*, and his next-most-reliable witness was a thirteenth-century Latin text. The Assembly would not have known of how great the discrepancy was between manuscript

evidence for the Bible compared to other ancient works, but they correctly knew God had a special/singular interest in the Scriptures, an interest so “singular” that we now know that the Assembly underestimated how “singular” God’s providence for the Scriptures was.

The Assembly’s “kept pure in all ages” is also mildly challenging to interpret. *OED* expends three pages (861–63) to list the varying uses of “pure.” To begin, we may rule out what the Assembly did *not* mean: They did not mean that there were no spelling, punctuation, accenting, or simple copying errors in the manuscripts of the Bible. Many (if not all) members of the Assembly would have been aware of the previous century’s text-critical activity, and they would have been aware of the publication of *The Complutensian Polyglot* in 1517. They probably intended one or more of these *OED* usages:

not having in or upon it, anything that defiles, corrupts, or impairs . . . Intact, unbroken, perfect, entire . . . without foreign or extraneous admixture; free from anything not properly pertaining to it . . . free from corruption or defilement . . . the genuine article, the real thing.

The Assembly probably meant that, despite the routine copying errors, nothing of substance has been lost or added to the biblical manuscripts. Some manuscripts contain only the gospels, and others contain only the epistles, but all sixty-six canonical books are there, in multiple copies, without “corruption or defilement” as to their substance.

Especially pertinent to our conversation is that the Assembly’s language was about the “Scriptures” in their entirety, as attested by several/many manuscripts; the Assembly did not refer to or endorse any particular *manuscript* (or group of manuscripts) of the Scriptures. They referred to “the Old Testament in Hebrew” and “the New Testament in Greek” but not to any specific manuscript of either. They made no claim similar to that later made by Joseph Smith, that he had the actual manuscripts of divine revelation, akin to the tablets

10 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Harris Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 73 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), xxvi.

Moses brought from the mountain at Sinai.

My preference for the Eclectic/Critical text is motivated by two things: First, since I believe God’s providence orders “all things,” said providence somehow includes the variety we find in different manuscripts (or in different manuscript traditions). Second, the Eclectic text is inclusive; the Textus Receptus and Majority Text are exclusive. An individual such as myself, working from an eclectic text (whether United Bible Society 4 or Nestle-Aland 28), could, in each case, decide that the TR or MT is the preferred reading. Indeed, these two major eclectic texts print all of the significant (and some of the insignificant) variants in the margins. By contrast, one who is committed to the TR or even the MT is committed thereby to blinding his vision from even considering some of the oldest extant manuscripts available to us. I at least have all fifty-two cards on the table, even if I only or ordinarily select the Byzantine cards. The alternative approaches remove some cards from the deck (a deck, I remind, that is here due to God’s “singular care and providence”).

Counsel to Church Officers

Whichever translation of whichever text is read from the pulpit or the pew, a conscientious reader will occasionally correct the translation. Even if we adopt/employ the “right” text (or group of texts), no one suggests that a given *translation* is inerrant (though some defenders of the Authorized Version [KJV] come very close to affirming such). Whichever English translation we adopt (on whatever grounds), there will be occasions where we will disagree with it. I use the ESV in the pulpit, but there are times where I correct it. Its translation of Romans 12:2 reads, “. . . that *by testing you may discern* what is the will of God . . .” (emphasis added), which is an ungainly mouthful; the RSV is simply (and correctly), “. . . *that you may prove* what is the will of God . . .” (emphasis added), which is a perfectly good way of translating the infinitive δοκιμάζειν (*dokimazein*).

As another example, Westminster questionably cited John 5:39 on two occasions. At WCF 1.8, they referred to “the people,” who “are com-

manded, in the fear of God, to read and search them [the Scriptures]” (emphasis added), and again at Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) 156, which says, “all sorts of people are *bound* to read it apart by themselves, and with their families: to which end, the holy Scriptures are to be translated out of the original into vulgar languages” (emphasis added). In each case, Westminster proof-texted the KJV (based on the Textus Receptus) of John 5:39: “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life . . .”. Every first-year Greek student, however, knows that the present active indicative and the present active imperative of the second person plural is spelled in identical fashion: ἐραυνᾶτε (*eraunate*). It is, of course, textually and grammatically possible that the verb is an imperative; it is equally possible, however, that the verb is a mere indicative, meaning something like, “although you search the Scriptures that testify about me, you refuse to come to me,” an irony very characteristic of John’s Gospel. The “you” in the passage is plural, retained nicely by the KJV “ye,” but Westminster understands the passage to teach that the “people,” *individually* understood, are required to read the Scriptures privately and in their families, which would have been impossible prior to the invention of the printing press and is impossible still today among the many smaller indigenous groups who are not literate or have no Bible in their language. So, even though the KJV used the “right” text, and Westminster employed the “right” translation of the “right” text, Westminster erred in both of its citations of the text.¹¹

11 I have always commended private and family reading of the Scriptures, because I believe there are many benefits to doing so. There is an important difference, however, between commending and commanding. Westminster commanded what is merely commendable and, in this case, commanded something that would have been impossible to have fulfilled for three-quarters of the church’s history (prior to the printing press). In defense of the Westminster Assembly, I should remind that a smaller sub-committee provided the proof-texts, and that, ordinarily, they did very fine work; and the prooftexts were not regarded as having any binding authority on anyone, lay or ordained, but were designed for whatever assistance might be derived therefrom. In these two particular cases, however, the Assembly did adopt, in the text of the Confession and Larger Catechism, language that imposed a

Ministers (and other interpreters) should be very cautious about making homiletical mountains out of text-critical molehills. Jesus had little good to say about religious leaders who abused their authority, especially when, in doing so, they made life difficult for those they ought to have served: “The scribes and the Pharisees . . . tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger” (Matt. 23:2–4). A robust understanding of divine providence includes the reality that we have more evidence for some ideas than we do for others, and there is nothing wrong with saying about some matters, “We do not have a compelling case.”

Pastors and elders of growing congregations face the occasional challenge of purchasing more hymnals or more pew Bibles: Should we purchase fifty more of what we now have, or should we purchase one hundred of an alternate? Sometimes, the question is fairly easily answered, because the session may have already noticed defects in the current hymnals or pew Bibles for some time. The 1990 *Revised Trinity Hymnal*, for instance, was superior, overall, to the one it replaced; many tunes were set in a lower key signature, to make them easier to sing, thus encouraging congregational singing. Similarly, both the notes and lyrics were printed in a larger, more-legible font. I would probably be far less likely to adopt a new pew Bible, unless it were one known to be more readable (NKJV, NASB, and several other good, accurate translations are extremely difficult to read aloud). Considering the expense involved in making such a switch, in most circumstances it would be better for the minister simply to “correct” the version as part of the sermon, as I routinely do if discussing (for example) the ESV rendering of Romans 12:2 (see above). Contemporary versions based on an eclectic text (e.g., NIV, ESV) routinely have marginal notes explaining the

binding duty where they did not have biblical authority to do so. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church revised the proof texts for the Confession and Catechisms (Confession of Faith, 1956; Shorter Catechism, 1978; Larger Catechism, 2001; all together in 2005).

differences in the manuscripts, and a thoughtful expositor could easily give his reasons for adopting the alternate in the sermon. Unfortunately, the alternative is not true; the translations based on the Textus Receptus (KJV, NKJV) will not ordinarily include the alternative readings (and the Majority Text has not yet been entirely translated into English).

Robert Lewis Dabney was neither the first nor the last to desire some common text or translation that would foster and preserve church unity, and such a desire is surely commendable. Church officers, therefore, should be alert to whether their denomination or denominational agencies (such as Great Commissions Publications for the OPC and PCA) employ a given translation for their publications. In most circumstances, church unity would be fostered by conforming to such practices at the local level.

We face an irony here, as we often do in a world precariously poised between divine grace and divine judgment: *deference* for the commonly known/received manuscript of the sixteenth century (the Textus Receptus), on the ground that it was the common version of the churches (an aspect of Dabney’s argument), has the effect of demonstrating a *lack of deference* for the commonly known or received manuscript tradition in the twenty-first century (the Eclectic text). Respect for the entire church—both then and now—might motivate us to prefer the Eclectic text, which always includes the Byzantine readings of the Textus Receptus and the Majority Text. ©

T. David Gordon is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and is a retired professor of religion and Greek at Grove City College in Grove City, Pennsylvania.

The Case for the Majority Greek New Testament

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* December 2023¹

by Bruce A. Stahl

The question that gives rise to my inquiry is, given the variant readings of the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament books, can we know without a doubt what is the Word of God to be translated into English?

When I first took my faith in the promises of God's Word seriously as a teenager fifty years ago, I began reading the Bible using the New American Standard Bible (NASB). It had numerous marginal notes that made me wonder whether we really had the Word of God. You too may have had questions in your own mind, perhaps when reading your own version silently while simultaneously listening to another person reading out loud from a different version. Not only is running into these differences disconcerting simply because differences suggest uncertainty, but sometimes the differences in meaning also seem material. When we read Colossians 2 with the New King James Version (NKJV) and the English Standard Version (ESV) side by side, we run into a different meaning in verse 18.

Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in *false* humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase *that* is from God. (NKJV)

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail

about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. (ESV)

A footnote in the ESV indicates that “about visions” could be translated “about the things he has seen,” and this shows clearly that the underlying text refers to something contrary to the underlying text that the NKJV translated. In the ESV, the Greek text is missing the word “not.”

While the primary objective of the exhortation for the two verses is not altered, one of the characteristics of the described spiritual enemy is much different. In the NKJV it is one who is inappropriately focused on something he has not seen, and in the ESV it is one who is inappropriately focused on something he has seen.

Another example of a changed meaning is found in Revelation 4:2–3. The NKJV reads:

Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and *One* sat on the throne. And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and *there* was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald.

The Majority (Byzantine) text omits “And He who sat there was,” so that it would be translated,

Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and *One* sat on the throne like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald.

The NKJV indicates that the One who sat on the throne was like a jasper and a sardius stone, while the Byzantine text describes the throne itself to be like a jasper and a sardius stone. This leaves two different impressions and is confusing to the reader.

¹ http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=459&issue_id=101.

The Authority of the New Testament Comes from God

The Bible itself seems to speak against confusion regarding what is the Word of God. Furthermore, the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) seems to support what the Bible says.

For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed *it* not *as* the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. (1 Thess. 2:13 NKJV)

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God. (WCF 1.4)

As with the Thessalonians, the writers of the Westminster Confession of Faith received the Word of God as it is in truth, and they built the whole of its system of teaching upon the Word of God. Their reception was true of the New Testament as well as the Old. They recognized that the authority of the Word was God himself. Focusing on the New Testament, Christ told the apostles that the Holy Spirit would remind them of all that he had taught them (John 14:26). Those who received the Word of God would have made sure that they kept good copies of it, because they understood that doing so was more important than any other book apart from the Old Testament Scriptures. As Peter suggested in the first chapter of his second epistle, the written word of eyewitness testimony made God's promises more certain.

Those who received the written New Testament as books or letters in its original language had confidence that what they were hearing was in fact the Word of God. They wanted to make sure that the churches had the Word of God available to them and they made numerous copies of it. The Bible repeatedly implies that the followers

of Christ have the Word of God. Colossians 3:16 is just one example where we read that believers are commanded to let the word of Christ abide in them, and they could not do so without the Word being available.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. (NKJV)

A Reason to Favor the Majority Family of Manuscripts

Not only were the original written documents inerrant, but from this perspective the churches also carefully copied the written Word. This premise seems to be expressed in the first portion of WCF 1.8:

The Old Testament in Hebrew . . . and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic; so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them.

The premise attaches to it the necessity that what was written in the original languages would be available to all ages by God's singular care and providence, with emphasis on God's governance over the process. As with God's providence in all of life, often using means within his creation to accomplish his ends, He used the activity of men to preserve the purity of the text. Objectively receiving the Word of God as it is, from God, we may consider the Greek New Testament as being accurately handed down through the ages.

Again, from this perspective, the New Testament in the original language was and is available to those interested in seeking it. The Greek New Testament is presumed to have been often copied on papyrus. When used frequently, the papyrus medium deteriorated much faster than the medium of paper today. People who had reliable

Greek manuscripts would have used them more than those manuscripts that were not reliable. The manuscripts that were relied upon, and therefore used, wore out. So as to continue using the Word, individuals copied more manuscripts, and this copying continued through the life of the church, most notably among the Greek churches because they had it in their own language. Those manuscripts that had errors were more likely to be set aside. Consequently, the old, unused manuscripts were more likely to survive because they did not wear out. Those copies the church relied upon through the ages would have had more manuscripts copied, and carefully copied. Today there are thousands of New Testament manuscripts in whole or in part available to the church. The majority of them came from the Greek-speaking region around the Mediterranean Sea with some also found in its southern and western regions.

Many of the thousands of manuscripts were lectionary in nature and used for reading in weekly worship. They support those manuscripts that are more comprehensive.

These Majority readings are not generally the oldest manuscripts, yet again, from this perspective, they likely represent the original documents (called *autographa*) because they were faithfully copied. Also, when there are visible spelling mistakes, they are easily identified due to the availability of many copies. This copying of the Greek text through the ages follows the premise stated in chapter 1 of the WCF and follows what the Bible itself attests regarding itself.

Within the past two hundred years, many Reformed theologians have been willing to rely more on a relatively very small number of manuscripts that date back to around 200 or 300 AD. In doing so they accept a premise that seems to me to be contrary to that which is stated in chapter 1 of the WCF. Because these few manuscripts do not always agree with the majority of manuscripts available and often disagree among themselves, they surmise that we do *not* know in full what the original Word of God is that was inerrant.

Presumably, whether intentionally or not, those who accept translations of Scripture that rely

more on a relatively small number of manuscripts accept the work of certain experts who place a large weight on the Vaticanus manuscript, which was rediscovered in the Vatican in the 1700s, and the Sinaiticus manuscript, which was rediscovered in the 1800s. (The Sinaiticus, or codex Aleph, was discovered in the mid-1800s and is on parchment or vellum rather than on papyrus.) Both manuscripts are recognized as being from the early time period of around 300 AD or before. Even though they each have observable copying problems, and even though the readings between them often disagree, the experts assign them a high weight of credibility on account of their age. Experts have put together a text that is eclectic, and it is sometimes referred to that way. The experts consider whether a particular variant reading is more appropriate than another in each case where variants exist. We refer to it here as the “eclectic text.”

Here and throughout this paper, I am not trying to downplay the value of experts to people who are not themselves experts. Rather, I am trying to emphasize whose authority we follow, that of God or the experts. The comparison is intended to be between God and experts, not between experts and other people.

So, from this perspective, the experts who sought to identify an eclectic text tried to follow specific rules in doing so, though the rules were complex. Simple rules do not work. For example, a simple rule may be that if a variant reading has fewer words, it is the correct one. But the experts will sometimes choose variant readings that include the greater number of words because they have other more weighty reasons to make an exception to this simple rule. For illustration, an eclectic text (UBS4, NA 28, Tyndale GNT, et al) includes a parenthetical phrase from 1 Corinthians 9:20, even though it is not found in the Majority texts.

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. (ESV)

The “experts” do not always agree on how best to follow rules in each case, and they ultimately conclude that the texts of the original *autographa* cannot be fully identified. Therefore, while the original manuscripts were “inerrant,” the experts do not agree that we know what that inerrant text was.

Many modern English Bible versions such as the ESV are translated from the Eclectic Text. When such an eclectic text is compared to the Textus Receptus that was used to translate the King James and the New King James versions of the English Bible, approximately 10 percent of the verses of the New Testament are affected. This is based upon the footnotes of the publisher of the NKJV, which appear to me to have already removed spelling variants unless they had to do with names such as Beelzebul or Beelzebub. In the footnotes, the majority text represented a consensus of the majority of the surviving New Testament manuscripts. Again, in the footnotes, what I refer to as the Eclectic Text was represented by the twenty-sixth edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament and the United Bible Societies’ third edition.

Measuring the Significance of Variants

This 10 percent figure needs to be handled carefully. It includes verses where one word may be different, even the use of the article “a” rather than “the” or the use of “we” rather than “he.” The meanings of these small words are different, but they do not necessarily alter the thrust of the meaning of a given verse. For example, the first portion of Revelation 14:1 in the Textus Receptus reads “a Lamb,” while the Eclectic and Majority Texts read “the Lamb.” “Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand . . .” (NKJV).

Sometimes the differences only alter the emphasis. For example, the Eclectic Text excludes “of God” from Matthew 22:30. “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven” (NKJV).

Other times they may be a bit more mean-

ingful. For example, the Eclectic Text has “up to salvation” rather than “thereby” in 1 Peter 2:2: “as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.”

In these cases, counting each verse that contains a variant reading seems to be excessive because there were many other words in each verse other than those effected. In a more extreme measure, one could say that 89 percent of the New Testament chapters are affected by the differences, because only one variation needs to be found in each chapter for the chapter to be counted.

On the other hand, it would be difficult to consider single words or even letters because the denominator is difficult to identify when sometimes the Eclectic Text has more and sometimes fewer verses. Sometimes entire verses are different, or large portions, and these may not receive enough weight in counting them only once as variants. Furthermore, counting letters or words is much more tedious.

If we select the number of verses affected, and understand what we mean by the count, we know what we are discussing. When using this 10 percent figure, remember that while it is helpful for comparison, it is likely overstated from what would be measured had we only used the counts of words or letters affected.

Significance of Variants to a Person’s Faith

Returning to the differences between the text, a willingness to place in doubt a specific meaning within 10 percent of the verses of the Word of God seems to me to be a dangerous premise because our faith relies on the written Scriptures being available to us and received as the Word of God.

Some English translations try to point out where variations exist. In doing so, they demonstrate that the readings of the Eclectic Text, and to a lesser degree the Textus Receptus, are ones that were constructed rather than known. The thoughtful reader is left with the notion that, not knowing the Word of God, we have no fully trustworthy source for following Christ. Rhetorically, one may ask, “Who is to say that we have the Word of God?” One could logically think that another, older

manuscript could be rediscovered and alter the perspective entirely. Hypothetically, if 10 percent is in question because of manuscripts rediscovered in the 1700s and 1800s, further rediscoveries in the future could jeopardize our understanding of another 10 percent of the verses.

The theologians who follow these experts hold to a second important premise. They often assert that regardless of not knowing the original text when collecting the thousands of manuscripts available to us in the Greek, no doctrine is altered by the various readings. This second premise seems noble, yet it also seems to ignore the previously referenced claims of the Scriptures and the first chapter of the WCF. Admittedly many Reformed theologians believe they follow the premises of chapter 1 of the WCF when applying or accepting textual criticism. As best I can discern, they think God preserved the teaching of the *autographa*, but not each word. I find this to be circular reasoning. We understand the teaching based upon knowing the Word of God, yet we cannot know for certain we have the Word of God of the original manuscripts that provided that teaching.

Also, accepting that we do not know the precise meaning of the whole of the New Testament, it seems as though only a portion of Scripture rather than “All scripture . . . is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness . . .” (2 Tim. 3:16–17 NKJV). Some of the variations may be interchangeable, which could suggest that either variation is profitable for doctrine, etc. This may be the case when two items in a list are switched in order. Yet such is not true for all variations where words are either added or deleted and where the meaning is entirely different.

The second premise also misses the practical implications within preaching. For one example, two different preachers teaching from John 8:59, one from the majority of manuscripts and one from an expert-selected text, are likely to draw two different conclusions for their congregation.

The NKJV, translating the “Textus Receptus,” says, “Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the

temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.” The ESV, relying primarily on the expert-selected manuscripts, says, “So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.” The preacher using the NKJV will conclude that Jesus was in control of the situation, hiding in such a fashion as to be able to pass through them, and consequently facing no threat until the time of his own design. The preacher using the ESV may be more likely to assume that Christ fled for his life, much as Moses fled when he became aware that his murder of an Egyptian became known to Pharaoh, as I in fact heard once during my many years of listening to sermons. (It was not the main point of the sermon by any means, but it was so described. Presumably, if a generally good minister can make the mistake, a reader with less education can make the mistake.) In each translation, Jesus removed himself from the situation, but one leaves open the possibility that Jesus fled. Depending on how the preacher uses this text, one can be left with a different emphasis about Christ’s ability to oversee the circumstances around Him.

Significance of Variants to Preaching with Authority

I am not a preacher, yet I wonder how a preacher can explain Scripture verses with the authority of God when there is a question about the text such as in John 8:59, or when we have a reasonable expectation to wonder whether another early manuscript is rediscovered.

Receiving the text as the experts tend to construct it with the Eclectic Text is to receive at least a portion of the text on the authority of these experts, not merely on the authority of God himself.

There are also differences between the Textus Receptus and the Eclectic Text. The Majority Text represents the Byzantine manuscripts, which are by far most numerous. The Textus Receptus relied upon the Byzantine text with the exception that Erasmus used some Latin variants in preparing the text for printing shortly after the printing press was invented. Those who hold strictly to the Textus

Receptus do not seem to be as consistent regarding the providential preservation of the text “in all ages.” They allow for a shift in the general acceptance of the Greek text, just before the Reformation, to a slightly modified version at the time of the Reformation. While the differences between the Textus Receptus and the Byzantine text are much fewer than between the Eclectic Text and the Textus Receptus, they still present the reader with a question of who has the Word of God. I estimate that the Textus Receptus has variations from the Byzantine text that affect 4 percent of the verses. Revelation accounts for 1.5 percent; without Revelation, only 2.5 percent of the verses are affected. Yet this difference is not expected when “All scripture . . . is profitable.”

Though not to the same degree, and likely with a different intent, those who hold to the Textus Receptus rely primarily upon one expert, Erasmus, who occasionally chose variant readings from Western manuscripts. They name a few other Reformers over the course of about a hundred years as well.

Differences in the premises behind the use of different Greek texts generate confusion for the thoughtful Christian trying to serve the Savior. Such confusion seems inappropriate and would not exist if the church relied upon the copied New Testament texts that had been available through the centuries.

Thoughts about Favoring a Family of Manuscripts

One may conclude, from reading the comparison between the Majority and Eclectic texts, that adherents of the Eclectic Text ought to be willing to use the Majority Text. They limit their concern to the teachings from God’s Word, and they imply that the Majority Text represents no difference in teaching. Yet perhaps they do not agree to that because they want to rely on what they believe are older manuscripts regardless of how badly copied they were, or because they choose to rely more on academia than on what came down through the ages.

If so, then perhaps they should consider what

readings the ancient orthodox theologians quote. According to the testimony of Theodore Letis in an audio recording, a proponent of the Textus Receptus (Received Text), J.W. Burgon of the nineteenth century, exhaustively compiled such a list. The quotes were readings that corresponded to the readings of the Byzantine manuscripts (Majority).

Work such as Burgon’s may be very useful for the church to consider in uniting on the text that represents the very Word of God. ©

Bruce A. Stahl serves as a ruling elder at *Covenant Family Church (OPC)* in Wentzville, Missouri.

The Case for the Eclectic Greek New Testament Text

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* December 2023¹

by **T. David Gordon**

Aristotle wisely cautioned us to avoid extremes by using “the golden mean,” the virtue that often resides between two extremes. I attempt to do so with textual criticism, by this paradoxical mini-creed: Text criticism is not unimportant; text criticism is not all-important. After Robert Lewis Dabney completed an extremely detailed and erudite discussion of “The Doctrinal Various Readings in the New Testament,”² he observed that not one significant doctrine would be affected by any text-critical conclusion. I agree with Dabney, both

1 http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=459&issue_id=101.

2 Robert L. Dabney, “The Doctrinal Various Readings in the New Testament,” vol. 1, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological* (1891; repr., Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1967), 350–90.

in my willingness to do text criticism whenever the interpretation of a given text demands it, and in agreeing that comparatively little is at stake. The gospel, for instance, is not at stake text-critically, nor is the “word of Christ,” or “the Word of God” at stake. The apostolic gospel existed and was proclaimed orally before there were any apostolic writings, much less twenty-seven of them. That same gospel exists today, and it is proclaimed orally today by missionaries in cultures that have no written language.

At the time Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians, the New Testament was still in the process of being formed; indeed, Paul was still writing letters himself. The “Word” that was available to them was the apostolic gospel, perhaps as summarized in 1 Corinthians 15:1–11. A brief argument *ad absurdum* may help see the point: How would we obey Paul’s command today in countries where the gospel has been preached, but the Bible has not yet been translated? The existence of the proclaimed gospel is not dependent upon individual believers owning or reading a Bible translated into their own language (assuming their culture *has* a written language).

Mr. Stahl writes: “Those who received the *written* New Testament as books or letters in its original language had confidence what they were *hearing* was in fact the Word of God.” Which was it? Did they *hear* the gospel/Word of God, or did they *read* it? Prior to the printing press, for fifteen centuries, the Christian church expanded nearly globally, without individuals owning Bibles at all. Indeed, most Christian churches did not have an entire Bible; they merely had copies of the lectionary readings for the year. It is anachronistic to assume that Paul wrote to people who owned Bibles; they did not. The only reason the Ethiopian in the chariot had access to a manuscript of Isaiah was because of his professional duties: “And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, *who was in charge of all her treasure*” (Acts 8:27, emphasis added). A hand-copied manuscript, whether on animal skin or papyrus, was indeed, in the first century, a “treasure,” and only one who had access

to such treasure would have had access to a manuscript.

The claim that “the churches also carefully copied the written Word” is a form of special pleading. We may not assume such a historical matter. Some churches may have had scribes; many, if not most, churches likely did not (especially those that were not in larger metropolitan areas). Note how expensive such manuscripts were in the ancient world: “And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver” (Acts 19:19). We do not know how many people were practicing black arts, but it may have been as few as the seven sons of Skeva, or possibly more, perhaps fifty. But fifty thousand pieces of silver is over a thousand times what Judas received for betraying Christ; considering that he took his own life in grief, even forty pieces of silver must have been of fairly substantial value. If books were readily available in the first century, Paul would not likely have needed Timothy to bring his from Troas: “When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments” (2 Tim. 4:13, and the “above all” here, *μάλιστα* (*malista*), should probably be “namely,” indicating which books were to be brought, distinguishing parchment—*τὰς μεμβράνας* (*tas membranas*)—from papyrus).

It is only plausible, not at all necessary, to interpret Westminster’s “kept pure in all ages” to mean “kept *equally* pure *in all places* in all ages,” which the comment appears to assume. Even Stephanus—a Renaissance scholar with access to libraries and *scriptoria*—did not have an entire Greek text to work with. His original was missing an entire page. It simply is not historically true that Greek and/or Hebrew manuscripts were available everywhere at all times. They probably intended only to affirm that, despite the wide global spread of the church, and despite occasional persecution, copies of original manuscripts survived (almost miraculously); and, insofar as they are available in any given generation, it is they (copies of the

autographa) that are authoritative, not the Latin Vulgate. “Authentic” is merely an archaic form of “authentic,” and it was sometimes used to distinguish an original document from a copy thereof. The Assembly knew that they did not have the “authentic” books in that sense; they did not have the autographs. “Authentic” in their context undoubtedly meant that it was the original/authentic sacred writings themselves, not a Latin translation thereof, that was to be considered authentic in the sense that “all controversies in religion” were to be resolved by “appeal unto them” (as opposed to the Vulgate). The Assembly knew about the kinds of imperfections characteristic in ancient manuscripts; they knew that one of them was missing an entire page. Their point was to settle “controversies in religion” by “appeal unto” copies of the original languages, not copies of translations of the original languages.

Neither I nor, I trust, anyone else either knows who Mr. Stahl’s “many Reformed theologians” are, or what difference it makes. Commitment to an eclectic text does not require commitment to any particular textual tradition. Westcott and Hort were (in)famous for their preference for Alexandrian readings, but successive generations have mostly become truly eclectic, preferring internal evidence to external evidence in most cases (and recall that Stephanus himself, the principal originator of the Textus Receptus, employed an eclectic text, even using a Latin text where his Greek manuscript was defective). Anyone who compares available manuscripts, and then selects the reading that is best explained by what we know by the process of copying, embraces an eclectic text, as Stephanus did.

Westcott and Hort are *not* representatives of the eclectic text tradition. They had strong, presumptive, commitment to Alexandrian manuscripts. Most today regard their viewpoint as naïve and make text-critical decisions based on internal evidence, not external evidence. Much of Mr. Stahl’s reasoning, therefore, may be a tilting at non-existent windmills.

I also regard all Mr. Stahl’s references to “experts” in the previous article as misleading, whether intentionally or not. The late Bruce

Metzger, himself an “expert,” was often in the minority of the committee that produced the UBS text, and the other “experts” permitted him to write the commentary on their work. His commentary demonstrates that there was a range of opinion among those “experts,” as is true in almost all cases where expertise is germane. The frequent references to such “experts” I regard not only as *ad hominem* but also as a somewhat crass appeal to American populism. Whether an expert or a bumpkin embraces a view is irrelevant to the question of the evidence and reasoning behind the view. Bumpkins are not always wrong, and experts are not always right (they were frequently wrong about Covid), but the frequent reference to unnamed “experts” mars the article with needless smoke through which the reader must cut. If an error is erroneous, its error should be refuted, without regard for its human origin.

I could wish that the matter were as simple as choosing between divine authority and human authority. Who *does not* prefer divine authority to human authority? Who would not prefer the *divine* Expert to *human* experts? But we do not have direct access to God himself (I recall something about a banishment from a garden . . .). We have access to several thousand hand-copied manuscripts of portions of Holy Scripture, every one of which has some demonstrable errors in it, and so we have basically three approaches to sorting through the matter: choose the right *family* of manuscripts (some Textus Receptus/Majority Text and Westcott and Hort, though they choose *different* families); choose the largest *number* of existent manuscripts (Majority Text); choose the reading that *accounts for the other readings* (Eclectic Text). God’s “singular care and providence” has preserved an enormous number of manuscripts, not one of which is free from obvious human error; respect for that providential care moves some of us to be willing to entertain the full range of what is providentially available.

Mr. Stahl’s statistical discussion of percentages was curious, and not pertinent to the question. Do we count all of the letters in the original manuscripts, and calculate how many have variants? An

individual with a speech impediment may have an erroneous articulation (an error?) in every word he speaks, yet speak with entire truth. When Dabney wrote about “The Doctrinal Various Readings” in the Greek text, he addressed only variants that might have a substantive consequence for what the Scriptures “principally teach,” namely, “what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man” (WSC 3, and also referred to as “faith and life” at WCF 1.2). I don’t recall a single arithmetic statement in his discussion; and he concluded that none of the various readings affected Christian duty or belief. Suppose, for instance, that every sentence in the Hebrew or Greek Bible had a variant in the textual tradition somewhere; would this mean that the Bible is 100 percent unreliable? No; it would merely mean that human copyists are unreliable. Attempting to quantify the matter would be an enormously difficult task (the equivalent of counting every letter in the Bible, then comparing each letter on each occasion to every known variant, a fool’s errand if ever there were one). It is also an entirely unnecessary task; if our goal is to find in the Bible what we are to believe and what we are to do, we already find more than we can handle, and the Westminster Assembly gave sage advice for reading said Bible: “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly” (WCF 1.9). Westminster candidly indicated that some places in Scripture spoke “more clearly” than others and had earlier noted,

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them (WCF 1.7).

Westminster seemed quite content to discover

what is “necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation,” and that if the entire Bible were consulted (in some place of Scripture or other), people could attain to a “sufficient” understanding of the matter. They said nothing about the “precise meaning” of individual texts or the “specific meaning” of individual texts; they were concerned with “faith and life,” with Scripture’s basic doctrine of salvation.

Neil Postman³ and Jacques Ellul⁴ were very wary about modernism’s movement toward numerical calculation in every intellectual endeavor; even without a thermometer, we can ordinarily tell whether our forehead, or a child’s forehead, suggests a fever; and the treatment for a fever is the same for 100.5 or 101.2. For Ellul and Postman, many/most of life’s important realities could not be calculated numerically but could be spoken of helpfully and meaningfully. Similarly, the Westminster Assembly was concerned with “faith and life,” with “what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man,” with what is necessary “for salvation.” None of their concerns were about 10 percent of this or 12 percent of that.

It should be noted that Mr. Stahl’s reasoning suggests that an inerrant manuscript text is necessary to one’s faith, and necessary to one’s faith in the gospel and God’s Word. This suggestion is neither psychologically nor biblically true. Psychologically speaking, “truth” and “accuracy” are not identical concepts. A wartime soldier might aim at an enemy’s heart with his rifle and hit the lung instead, with the same result, that the enemy is no longer a combatant. The soldier “truly” shot the enemy, though inaccurately. Indeed, one purpose for aiming at the heart is that it is nestled between the lungs, and the “heart-lung area” is referred to by some specialists in these matters as the critical target area. Similarly, a public speaker may

3 Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

4 Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Knopf, 1964). His frequently repeated thesis was that “the essence of technique is to compel the qualitative to become quantitative.” Cf. also his *The Technological Bluff*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986).

find himself reasoning with a series of negatives: “This is *not* to say that Paul was *not* concerned that the Corinthians may *not* give as generously as the Macedonians, resulting in saints in Jerusalem *not* having enough food.” In such a situation, at some point the speaker loses momentarily his Aristotelian logic and is not sure whether he has the right number of “nots” in his sentence, fearing that he may be off by one, inverting his intention. His hearers, however, understand his *thought*; they also may have lost the train of “nots” themselves, but they understand the *truth* of what the speaker intended.

After the printing press, the more-fluid nature of oral discourse or hand-copied manuscript was replaced with fixed type. The expectations of fixed type differed from those of oral discourse or manuscript, and, yes, when the “Adulterous Bible” was printed—regrettably omitting the “not” from “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” the Bibles were withdrawn from the public and reprinted at no expense to those who had purchased the original, mistaken version. The Holy Scriptures, both Old and New, were generated in that segment of human history in which the sacred writings were neither oral nor printed. For roughly three and a half millennia, oral discourse could be reduced to writing (to the chagrin of Socrates), but not to fixed print, where each individual copy is precisely like the others. It does not take a media ecologist to realize that, in this substantial era of human history, human sensibilities shaped themselves to the media they knew (orality and manuscript), not to media they neither had nor anticipated (fixed type). In the brief period when the “Adulterous Bible” was in print, some minister or lay reader must have read aloud the misprinted Decalogue during the liturgy, provoking only laughter, not widespread sexual infidelity.

It is possible that there are individuals today, over a half-millennium after the printing press, whose sensibilities differ from those of humans who preceded them; and perhaps Mr. Stahl is one of them. But his sensibilities are neither universal nor, in all likelihood, even humanly possible, prior to the printing press. And, as to the inference that

our faith depends on an inerrantly reconstructed printed product made from inerrantly copied manuscripts, I might suggest that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17, see also Gal. 3:2, 5), which, when Paul wrote these words, would have been a Word of God fallibly proclaimed orally or fallibly read orally from fallible manuscripts. Fallible apostles preached to fallible hearers, and the gospel nonetheless flourished.

An assumption throughout Mr. Stahl’s article is that we cannot function as faithful Christians unless we place our faith in an inerrant translation culled from errant manuscripts. This is not so; God requires of no generation that it do more than can be done in its own generation. Both Noah and David are described as having been faithful or obedient in his own generation (Gen. 6:9; Acts 13:36), suggesting that God only expects of us what can be expected in our specific moment in human history. But the characteristic trait God expects of us is faithfulness; his servants are routinely commended for being “faithful” (Matt. 24:45; 25:21; Luke 16:10; 1 Cor. 4:2, 17; Eph. 6:21; Col. 1:7; 4:7, 9; 1 Tim. 1:12; 2 Tim. 2:2; Heb. 2:17; 3:2, 6; 1 Pet. 5:12), not “accurate” or “precise.” Those who lived in those 1,500 years when one’s only access to Scripture was to hear audibly the lectionary readings for each Sunday of the church year could have been very “faithful” to what they heard each week. Those who, like Stephanus, freely translated the Latin of Revelation *into* Greek to the best of his ability were “faithful.” We who fallibly read fallible translations based on fallible Greek manuscripts can still be, by God’s grace, “faithful,” which is all that God expects of us. I am reminded of President Washington’s physicians, who treated him by draining blood from his veins, a practice common in the late eighteenth century. Their “treatment” hastened his demise. Their knowledge of medicine was imperfect, and a physician who did such today would lose, at a minimum, his license to practice. But the president’s physicians did the best they could with the best knowledge available in their generation and treated him as they would have treated an uncle, father, or son.

They were medically wrong but ethically right. Approximate knowledge is the only knowledge humans have, and we are judged for being faithful to what we know and for how diligently we went about pursuing it. We will hardly be found unfaithful by all-knowing God if our translation reads “color,” rather than “colour,” and the overwhelming majority of variants in the manuscripts of the Bible are merely such regional variations. ©

T. David Gordon is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and is a retired professor of religion and Greek at Grove City College in Grove City, Pennsylvania.

DO! DO! DO! Back to the Old Legalism Again!

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* November 2023¹

by **Allen C. Tomlinson**

There is a trend I have been observing over the last ten years or so in our Reformed circles, and now I have been hearing various voices from “the pew” expressing concern in this particular area. That is of a call for members of Christ’s church to be more active or to become busier for the work of the church/gospel. The people who have spoken to me regarding this have been people who already are very busy serving Christ in the home and in the church. Sometimes they have been among the busiest church members, faithful for years in witnessing, serving, showing hospitality, personal devotions in the Word and prayer, etc. These exhortations to be “up and doing” have felt like the leadership is putting more

pressure on those who are already faithful, while, as I have found to be “normal” in church life, the ones who almost never volunteer continue on as if these exhortations were “water off the duck’s back.” My concern is that this renewed emphasis on Christian activism is another avenue by which legalism, particularly legalism in one’s approach to sanctification and service, creeps back in, even in our circles where we preach sovereign grace. I would like to make a case for this being the wrong approach in our preaching. I would also like to recommend a better way to stir up God’s people to good works and love and hospitality and service.

I do not believe this approach, that of continually emphasizing the need for more hospitality ministry or more time spent in serving in the church, is effective in the long run. There are several problems with this approach. I would like to mention five.

First, it is the preaching of God’s grace in Jesus Christ that not only is used by the Holy Spirit to bring the elect to faith and so to justification in Christ alone, but it is also the motivating tool and source of power by which the Holy Spirit convicts believers to serve Christ and to serve one another. Preaching “do, do, do” does not work long term. Eventually those most sensitive to heeding pastoral exhortations will become worn out or will neglect their other duties at home or at work or, being driven by a sense of guilt, they will collapse under such a burden. Burn out, discouragement, dropping out, even bitterness, these are normal fruits of a legalistic approach to sanctification and service. Having come from a non-Reformed, middle-of-the-road evangelical background, I grew up seeing this. One of the original attractions for me to the historic Reformed faith was the holiness and loving service I saw in churches that emphasized grace. Grace truly motivates and empowers. Any return to a legalistic “do more, do more” will eventually de-motivate and weaken. Every time. In Ephesians 2:8–10, “by grace . . . through faith” is what produces good works.

My second argument is that the quality of service, hospitality, growth in piety, etc., when grace alone is the motivation is 100 percent differ-

1 http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=459&issue_id=101.

ent than the quality of the same when done out of a legalistic spirit. Grace, properly understood in the biblical gospel, will produce in me a greater love for God and for His people and even for the lost. I will *want* to witness to the lost, grow in my devotion to Jesus Christ, and show love to and serve my fellow believers. Though it will not always be easy or fun, yet it will be, increasingly, the desire of my heart to be pleasing to Him in these ways. When I do serve, it will flow from the heart and not just be a matter of checking off the items on the list or forcing myself to be “a good Christian” or “a good church member” by doing all this “stuff” the preacher tells me I ought to be doing. The source of my motivation and my power will make all the difference in *how* I go about growing in holiness, serving in the church, and witnessing to the unsaved around me.

My third argument flows from the second. Service to other Christians, witnessing to unbelievers, and growth in personal piety will see more positive fruit, as the normal rule, when it flows from a spirit of grace than it can from a spirit that smacks of legalism. My service to my fellow believers and my witness to unbelievers will be more “believable.” It will be seen as coming from a sincere love for the God of grace and for his people in Jesus Christ. When the Mormons and the Jehovah Witnesses came around to our door when I was a child, fulfilling their “duty” to earn their salvation (and both of these religions, when studied carefully, include such an attitude), it was totally unimpressive and even a “turn off.” However, I have been “witnessed to” by sincere believers who did not know that I was already a believer, and if (as it seemed) this flowed from their sense of wonder at the grace of Jesus Christ towards them, it was truly beautiful to see. I love it when this happens. I believe my response is not abnormal in this regard.

Fourth, the Bible speaks in both Old Testament and New regarding Christians finding “rest” in the New Covenant (e.g. Jer. 6:16 and Matt. 11:28–30). God’s people should not find their lives a heavier burden than they were before they found salvation in Jesus Christ. A “do, do, do” kind of preaching will produce a spirit of burden in the

hearts of some of our most spiritually sensitive listeners. Along this line, I believe a close examination of our historic Reformed confessions and catechisms would tend in the direction of emphasizing grace, with our response to the gospel always flowing out of a reciprocal love on our part to God’s free love and acceptance of us in his Son, not from us preachers trying to put more and more pressure on our flocks to do more, do more, do more.

Fifth, are we trying to do the Holy Spirit’s work at this point? Yes, we should make applications that truly flow from the text we are expositing, but is it our job to actually coerce action? Are we even capable of convicting, transforming, and empowering? Are we not conveyers of the truth, as earnestly as we know how, but especially as we believe in the sovereign grace of God in Jesus Christ? Do we not leave it to the God of grace to actually bring about necessary changes? Can we even see who is “doing all they can and should,” and who is being lazy? Perhaps there is one who does not seem to do much more than attend worship regularly and try to be a faithful spouse or parent or worker. If they have been given only “two talents” by the Master, they might be fulfilling all that He expects. Others may be poor stewards of their “ten talents,” but they do enough so that we are unable to read the heart and to know that they are not being fully faithful. “The last will be first, and the first last” (Matt. 20:16) might have many applications on judgment day.

What do I suggest? Preach every text faithfully. That is, when there is a command for Christians, make sure God’s people understand the command. When there is a promise, preach the promise. When there is a warning, preach the warning. But do not keep coming back to certain commands (be more hospitable, read your Bible more, serve in more ways in the church) time and time again, unless that command is truly in the text. Of course, every text, command or warning or promise or doctrine is ultimately about Jesus Christ and his work for us. It is our wonder in his work that will motivate and empower us to work.

What about those who seem to just come and sit? Get to know them better as their pastor.

Some you might find are doing more than even you as their pastor knows. I found this to be the case many times. It turned out they were busy in the kingdom but were very quiet and unobtrusive in how they served. Others can be appealed to on a person-to-person basis. In this way the faithful will not feel so overloaded from an overemphasis on “do, do, do” from the pulpit, and the unfaithful will be particularly and personally challenged in that area in which there is a lack.

We have such an incredible message in this gospel of grace. Let us not weaken our message and wear out ourselves and our faithful people by “do, do, do” kind of preaching. Let us be a joy and a cause of rest and refreshing to ourselves and our hearers. The result will be more lasting fruit, not less.

Appendix: Here is one more important reason to not preach a legalistic message of “do more, do more!” The above arguments I sought to base entirely on the nature of the gospel and how that plays out pastorally, as far as I could see during my forty-four years as a pastor. I would add this argument as an afterword: the need for Christians to take time for their other responsibilities—God-commanded responsibilities. If we keep making the faithful members busier and busier with church-related activities, this can wear them out physically and emotionally or cause them to neglect taking the proper time and giving the proper attention to their families (spouses and children) and to their earthly callings. I grew up in a small city in the Midwest that had probably at least thirty evangelical churches. Very few of the preachers’ kids were believers. Of those I spoke with, the failure of their minister father to take any time for them was one of their most frequent complaints. Later, in college, several of my evangelical professors around the age of my father warned us who were studying for the ministry that we needed to make sure we took time for our families. Those who did seemed more likely to have believing and serving children. Taking time to love our spouses and to train and care for our children must never be deemphasized because of an overemphasis on staying busy in church activities every

free moment. There must be a balance. ☺

Allen C. Tomlinson is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and pastor emeritus of the First Church of Merrimack (OPC) in Merrimack, New Hampshire.

Servant Standards

The Bringers and Receivers of Complaints: OPC Book of Discipline 9.1

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* February 2023¹

by Joseph A. Keller

At its January and May 2021 meetings, the Presbytery of the Southwest struggled to understand whether a non-officer could bring a complaint against the presbytery. At its June 2022 meeting, the General Assembly of the OPC discovered it disagreed as to whether a session had standing to bring a complaint against a session in another presbytery.

I spoke to both these issues and have combined my remarks into one article that deals with both of these questions with regard to Book of Discipline 9.1. I will not present the arguments set forth at General Assembly for a different view. I invite someone who argued for it to write an article that sets forth his viewpoint.

OPC Book of Discipline 9.1

A complaint is a written representation, other than an appeal or a protest, charging a judicatory with delinquency or error. It may be brought by an officer or other member of the church against the session or the presbytery

to which he is subject, by one session against another session, by a session against the presbytery which has jurisdiction over it, or by one presbytery against another presbytery.

Standing for Personal Complaints

The phrase “to which he is subject” is the ambiguous phrase, capable of being interpreted in several different ways. One interpretation, based on the prima facie (first sight) reading, is that it allows all officers and church members to complain against an action or decision of the session of their church and against an action or decision of the presbytery their church is in, because they are all ultimately subject to their jurisdiction, but not against other sessions and presbyteries, because they are not subject to their jurisdiction.

But there are problems with this view that make it highly unlikely that the authors and General Assembly had this in mind.

- First, while ministers and commissioned (voting) ruling elders can bring motions, debate, and vote in a presbytery meeting, other members of local churches have no standing to bring motions, debate, or vote in a presbytery meeting. Presbyteries do at times allow other individuals to address the body, but this does not give them privileges of the floor to make motions, debate, or vote.
- Secondly, while our Form of Government and Book of Discipline do trump Robert’s Rules, nevertheless, in order to allow a non-officer to bring a complaint against the presbytery, the authors of BD 9.1 would have had to intend for BD 9.1 to overrule the most basic law of deliberative assemblies, found in *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised* 1:4, which only allows members of the deliberative body to make motions, debate, and vote.

All of this makes it extremely likely the authors and the General Assembly that adopted this had some other view in mind.

¹ http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=459&issue_id=101.

A second view is that the phrase, “to which he is subject,” refers to the judicatory which has original jurisdiction to hear charges against the individual. This interpretation is far more likely than the first interpretation. This interpretation would allow church members and ruling elders to bring complaints only against their session, since it is the judicatory that has original jurisdiction over them (BD 2.A.1). And it would allow ministers to bring complaints only against their presbytery, since it is the judicatory that has original jurisdiction over them (BD 2.C.2). Local church members and ruling elders could only bring complaints against actions of their presbytery by means of persuading their session to bring a complaint against the action of the presbytery.

While this view makes more sense than the first view, nevertheless, the unlikeliness of this interpretation is revealed in that a minister would not be allowed to bring a complaint against his own session, simply because it is not his court of original jurisdiction. But his session is a body in which he has standing to make motions, deliberate, and vote, so there is no reason why he should not be allowed to bring a complaint against his session. For this reason, it is very likely that a third view is the best interpretation of this passage.

A third view is that the authors chose the looser and more general phrase, “to which he is subject,” to include two different kinds of subjection.

First, it includes the idea that all members (including ruling elders) of a local church may bring a complaint against their session because they are subject to the original jurisdiction of their session and that all ministers may bring a complaint against their presbytery because they are subject to the original jurisdiction of their presbytery.

But second, it also includes the idea that all ministers may bring a complaint against their session because they are subject to their session as “members of the session” (see FG 13.4–5), that is to say, subject to the session as members of that deliberative body. And it includes the idea that commissioned (voting) ruling elders may bring a complaint against their presbytery because they

are subject to the presbytery as “members of a judicatory” (BD 8.2), that is to say, subject to the presbytery as members of that deliberative body. The basis for this is found in FG 14.3, which states: “Meetings of the presbytery shall be composed, insofar as possible, of all the ministers on the roll and one ruling elder from each congregation commissioned by the respective sessions.”

This interpretation explains that ministers, ruling elders, and members of a local church may bring a complaint against their session. And it explains that ministers and commissioned ruling elders may bring a complaint against their presbytery without having to bring it by way of an action of their session.

BD 8.1 states:

Any member of a judicatory who is entitled to vote on a question and who votes against the action or judgment of the judicatory thereon may request that his vote be recorded in the minutes of the judicatory.

And BD 8.2 states:

Any member of a judicatory may file a written protest stating his reasons for objecting to an action or judgment of the judicatory.

Notice in both: “Any member of a judicatory.” If we view “member of a judicatory” as always referring to one’s court of original jurisdiction, then these statements would prohibit commissioned ruling elders from having their negative votes recorded and from filing a written protest in the presbytery.

Most certainly in this context, commissioned ruling elders are being included as “members” of the presbytery as a deliberative body (not in the sense of being under its original jurisdiction) and are entitled to participate in these actions. Why would they not be allowed to do so? BD 8.1 makes it clear that commissioned ruling elders were included among those who voted on the question.

Why would a commissioned ruling elder not be allowed to bring a complaint against his presbytery when he has standing to make motions, deliberate, and vote in a meeting of his presbytery? After

all, a complaint is essentially a motion to rescind an action or decision, and an appeal is essentially a motion to reconsider an action or decision.

(Note: Complaints and appeals are also needed in our standards because our church is not merely composed of one deliberative body/judicatory but many related deliberative bodies/judicatories, and therefore complaints and appeals are needed for our judicatories to gain access to other judicatories in our church.)

For all these reasons, I think this third view is the interpretation of BD 9.1 intended by the General Assembly that adopted it.

Now, I think it helpful to comment that none of the above denies non-officers access to the courts of the church. It simply means that they must seek to persuade their ministers and/or ruling elders to address their presbytery and the General Assembly concerning matters about which they are concerned, and that they must seek to persuade their local session regarding any complaints they think should be brought against sessions or presbytery.

Standing for Sessional Complaints

Can a session bring a complaint against a session in another presbytery?

At the 2022 General Assembly, the Committee on Appeals and Complaints proposed amending our BD 9.1 by the addition of the italic text in the following:

A complaint is a written representation, other than an appeal or a protest, charging a judicatory with delinquency or error. It may be brought by an officer or other member of the church against the session or the presbytery to which he is subject, by one session against another session *in the same presbytery*, by a session against the presbytery which has jurisdiction over it, or by one presbytery against another presbytery. (emphasis added)

Ground 3 of the Committee’s report stated: “The Committee thus wishes to add the four words (“in the same presbytery”) so that the matter is clarified in the direction that it believes to be correct.”

The Assembly was strongly divided on whether to amend it to read “in the same presbytery” or “whether in the same or another presbytery,” and no change to the text was adopted.

Ground 9 of the Committee’s report stated:

In each of the other three cases, the complaint may only be brought by a party subject to the same judicatory (the session, presbytery, or general assembly, as the case may be). In the case of a complaint from a session in one presbytery against one in another, there is no shared or joint judicatory.²

Notice that this argument states that in three of the cases, the BD clearly states that the party that brings a complaint against a judicatory must be “subject to the same judicatory.” Notice also that this argument states that if a session is allowed to bring a complaint against a session in another presbytery, this situation fails this requirement, because there is no “shared or joint judicatory.”

But what is the basis for this requirement? First of all, this is drawn from the principles of deliberative bodies. *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised* (12th ed.) 1:4 states that a person must be a member of the body in order to make motions, deliberate, and vote. That is to say, he must have “standing” before the judicatory in order to do these things. This paragraph in chapter one of *Roberts Rules* expresses the most basic and foundational principle of parliamentary law upon which all other principles in *Roberts Rules* and in our Form of Government and Book of Discipline rest.

Members of a local church may bring a complaint against their session because they are members of the local church and subject to the session’s discipline, even though they are not members of the session. Officers may also bring a complaint against their presbytery because they are members of the presbytery as a deliberative body and subject to it. Sessions may bring complaints against their presbytery because they are subject to its jurisdiction. Sessions may bring complaints against other

2 Agenda of the 88th (2022) General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1207.

sessions in the presbytery because both of them are subject to the jurisdiction of the same presbytery. And presbyteries may bring complaints against other presbyteries because both of them are subject to the jurisdiction of the General Assembly.

The writers of our Book of Discipline did not unambiguously state whether a session can bring a complaint against a session in another presbytery or only against one in their own presbytery. Evidently, the matter was obvious to the General Assembly that adopted it, but unfortunately, it is not obvious to us today.

If we answer the question as to why presbyteries in the same denomination can bring complaints against one another by saying that they are both subject to the jurisdiction of the General Assembly, then we have our answer that only sessions that are subject to the authority, oversight, and discipline of the same presbytery can bring a complaint against one another.

Notice that the first half of BD 9.1 deals with individuals bringing complaints, and the second half deals with judicatories bringing complaints, but the two are parallel.

Consider a situation in which a couple divorce and then attend different local churches in the same presbytery. One or both of them might have valid reasons to be upset over actions taken by the ex-spouse's session but cannot bring a complaint against it because this individual is not a member of that church, is not subject to that church's authority, and (except for the case in BD 3.6 when bringing charges that do not warrant a trial) cannot be disciplined by that session. In short, the individual has no standing to bring a complaint.

Notice that this situation involving two individuals in different churches is parallel to the situation of two sessions in different presbyteries that want to bring complaints against each other or their presbyteries. Our presbyterian forefathers clearly did not see the need to grant these two individuals standing to bring a complaint to a session where there is no shared or joint judicatory. It does not make sense to argue that our book grants standing to a session to bring a complaint against a session or presbytery where there is no

shared or joint judicatory.

Working These Things Out

But how then do we resolve such sticky issues between two such parties? Does this tie our hands from being able to resolve it? Does this make dealing with such situations terribly burdensome? No, it does not, for two important reasons:

First, this is not burdensome because both in the case of individuals and judicatories, handling such a matter should always begin with much informal conversation and discussion and peacemaking by the different representatives of the judicatories, before ever thinking about a complaint. Complaints and charges should always be viewed as a last resort, to be used only after all other steps of biblical conflict resolution have been pursued and failed.

BD. 3.5 specifically requires this in the case of charges. It says:

No charge of a personal private offense shall be admitted unless the judicatory has assured itself that the person bringing the charge has faithfully followed the course set forth in Matthew 18:15–17; nor shall a charge of a private offense which is not personal be admitted unless it appears that the plaintiff has first done his utmost privately to restore the alleged offender.

Our judicatories have a solemn responsibility to require that the parties diligently seek to work out their differences personally and privately before escalating the matter to that of a trial. Additionally, we should keep in mind that a trial is far less likely to result in reconciliation than is private face-to-face peacemaking effort; and, very sadly, a trial often even fails to convince the party that the court judges to have sinned that he ought to repent.

Likewise, in situations where complaints are often quickly brought, the respective parties ought to seek to sit down and work together informally to resolve the conflict before bringing a complaint.

Secondly, this is not burdensome because BD 9.1 deliberately puts pressure on us to respect

the oversight that is in place instead of trying to do their job for them. And this is a very important thing for us to recognize and do.

This prevents the rare, but very possible, abuse of a session bringing complaints against many sessions throughout the country. Even if only one complaint is brought against one session in another presbytery, we should realize that that session already has an overseer that is responsible to shepherd and correct it as necessary, namely, their presbytery. We should trust their presbytery to do their job or, if necessary, should informally encourage members of that judicatory to do their job, and then we should seek to show respect for their authority, oversight, and jurisdiction. Surely, if this is a serious error, there must be some officer in the other session or presbytery that we can persuade to address the matter.

It appears to me that allowing sessions to bring complaints against any session in the denomination is based upon a misunderstanding of the principles underlying our standards; damages the lines of Presbyterian authority, oversight, and jurisdiction that undergird our standards; and may impose a great burden upon the session to deal with multiple conflicting complaints.

To return to the example I gave above concerning two ex-spouses holding membership in different churches, notice that the rules for complaints in BD 9.1 deliberately place pressure on the individual to work through his own session and ask his own session to address the matter with the other session and, if necessary, that his session file a complaint against the other session. This pressure might also encourage the individual to seek someone in the ex-spouse's church (preferably an officer who understands our standards) to address the matter. This would wisely involve others, and especially officers, to examine whether this really is a wise idea or not before doing it. And it would also prevent the rare, but very possible, abuse when a disgruntled person brings many complaints against a session that does not have the oversight or authority or jurisdiction to shepherd the individual with regard to these matters.

Such situations like this are very messy and

may be referred to as a “perfect storm.” A perfect storm in church discipline occurs in situations when two individuals are at odds with each other and seek to carry their fight to the judicatories of the church but are under the oversight of different judicatories. And due to these circumstances, the two judicatories are very likely to each take the side of their own member, because there are plenty of wrongs for everyone to be upset about. The result is that the fight escalates through the sessions to the presbytery and the general assembly. And the result is that it is almost impossible to achieve reconciliation between the parties, or the judicatories.

In such perfect storms it ought to occur to us that the best way to handle such volatile situations is for the two sessions to informally sit down together and resolve to work together as one before Christ in order to seek the peace of the couple and the church. This can also be done in other difficult but similar situations. Representatives of two factions in one presbytery can informally sit down together and resolve to work together as one before Christ in order to seek the peace of the church. And representatives of two different presbyteries that are at odds can informally sit down together and resolve to work together as one before Christ in order to seek the peace of the church.

Even in cases in which charges have already been filed, there are still other possibilities. In one case in which the accused pled guilty to one of four charges, the moderator of the presbytery asked for a recess for the parties and their counsels to meet with him and talk. They repeatedly met together with the moderator serving as a mediator, and each party repeatedly met separately with their counsel. Over a period of eight hours they came to a resolution. The accused pled guilty to two charges, and the bringers of the charges agreed to drop the other two charges. A censure and conditions for its removal were agreed upon, and all of this was presented to the presbytery, which quickly adopted it. As a result, a case that might have taken a week to hear was resolved in one day's time, with everyone satisfied with the result.

I want to be clear that none of the above encourages us to turn a blind eye to sin but rather

encourages us to strive to work with our brothers, rather than against our brothers, in other jurisdictions.

It also helps us to avoid meddling in our neighbor's affairs unnecessarily. We should remember that "good fences make good neighbors." We should endeavor to stay out of our neighbor's business (1 Tim. 5:13). We are much removed from the details of what is going on and have very likely only heard a very incomplete and distorted account of the issues.

We can certainly offer advice and help if we are willing to spend the many, many hours listening to both sides of the story, but we should not try to get involved where our help is not requested. Just as our Lord said that each day has enough problems of its own for each of us to deal with (Matt. 6:34), so also each day has enough problems of its own for each of his judicatories to deal with. Let us not unnecessarily multiply them. ©

Joseph A. Keller serves as the pastor of Christ Covenant Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Dallas, Texas.

Ambiguities in Book of Discipline 9.1, Standing Revisited

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* March 2023¹

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:

1 http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=459&issue_id=101.

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.”²

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:

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

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. ©

Stuart R. Jones, is a retired minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He resides in Baltimore, Maryland.

Cross-Presbytery Complaints: Does the Book of Discipline Allow a Session to Complain against a Session in Another Presbytery — And *Should* It?¹

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
October 2023²

by **David G. Graves, Brett A. McNeill,
and John W. Mahaffy**

Does the Book Allow It?

In recent discussions the two questions in the subtitle have, unfortunately, often been conflated. Although some argue that the “language of ‘session against another session’ in BD 9.1 is open to two incompatible interpretations” (Report of the Committee on Appeals and Complaints to the Eighty-Ninth General Assembly, Minutes, 288), two general assemblies have answered that question. Both affirmed that the book allows a session to bring a complaint against a session in another presbytery.

A committee reporting to the Seventeenth (1950) General Assembly observed:

Particularly worthy of note is the provision of our Book of Discipline as to who may make a complaint and against whom a complaint

¹ This is a slightly edited form of a paper given to Advisory Committee 10 of the Eighty-Ninth (2023) General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and, with permission of that committee, distributed to the Assembly. The Assembly declined to adopt the proposed amendment to the Book of Discipline 9.1.

² https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1074.

may be made. Very few churches have a provision that even approaches this one in point of broadness. . . . [T]he provision of The Orthodox Presbyterian Church for complaints is broad indeed. Not only may complaints concern either administrative or judicial matters, but—what is extremely significant—complaints may in certain instances be made against judicatories to which the complainant is not subject. For example, one session may complain against another session and one presbytery against another presbytery. . . . Our Book of Discipline does not even restrict this right to sessions within the same presbytery. It simply says that a complaint may be brought “by one session against another session.”³

Note that membership of that committee included a member (R. B. Kuiper) of the committee that had earlier prepared the first Book of Discipline of the OPC—it understood the original intent of the document. Furthermore, the Seventeenth General Assembly urged the sessions and presbyteries “to apply in their instruction and discipline the approach recommended in the report submitted to the Seventeenth General Assembly,”⁴ thus underlining the Assembly’s agreement with the committee.

More recently the Eighty-Seventh (2021) General Assembly sustained a complaint on appeal that argued that the Presbytery of the Northwest erred when it refused to allow a session from another presbytery to lodge a complaint against a session in that presbytery, requiring the presbytery to apologize to the session whose complaints it found out of order.⁵ Edited versions of arguments on both sides of the question, as they had been presented in the presbytery involved, can be found as part of

3 Excerpted from the *Minutes of the Seventeenth General Assembly*, 27–31 (<https://opcgamminutes.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/1950-GA-17.pdf>).

4 *Minutes of the Seventeenth General Assembly*, p. 31.

5 *Minutes of the Eighty-Seventh General Assembly*, §111, §112, 29 (<https://opcgamminutes.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/GA-Minutes-2021-without-CFM-Report-or-Ministers-List-10.30.21.pdf>).

Overture 3 to the Eighty-Eighth (2022) General Assembly.⁶

The question, does the book allow cross-presbytery sessional complaints, has been asked and answered in the affirmative by two separate General Assemblies of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. To limit the ability of one session to complain only against sessions within their own presbytery, therefore, would amount to a *change* of polity, not a *clarification*.

Should the Book Allow It?

The issue before the Eighty-Ninth General Assembly was whether the Book of Discipline 9.1 should be amended. We focus briefly on several important points.

The grounds provided by the Committee on Appeals and Complaints made an argument from silence, suggesting that the explicit language of the BD 9.1, that a complaint can be brought “by one session against another session,” should be understood as being overridden by an implied, unstated principle of jurisdiction, prohibiting cross-presbytery complaints by sessions. The argument from jurisdiction seems not to have persuaded Advisory Committee 10 in 2021, which stated that “[e]very session in the OPC is subject to the jurisdiction of the General Assembly.”⁷

Original jurisdiction is important, but it does not create the water-tight compartments suggested in the grounds for the proposed amendment. A member of the OPC has standing to bring judicial charges against someone subject to a different judicatory. When he does so, he is warned by the latter’s judicatory that he may be censured *by it* if charges may not be instituted (BD 3.6). In bringing charges against someone in a different judicatory, the one presenting charges subjects himself to that judicatory for that limited purpose. Similarly, if a session appeals a complaint brought against a session in another presbytery, it brings the appeal

6 Pages 57–66 (<https://opcgamminutes.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/GA-Minutes-Yearbook-2022-Digital-Edition-No-CFM-Report-or-Ministers.pdf>).

7 *Minutes of the Eighty-Seventh General Assembly*, §101, 28.

to the presbytery of the complained-against session. That is the point of “the presbytery which has jurisdiction over it” in BD 9.5. If the book did not allow for cross-presbytery complaints, there could be only one presbytery involved and the phrase would be superfluous.

Cross-presbytery complaints appear to be rare in the OPC. We question whether the issue requires an amendment to the constitution of the church. The proposal seems to be a solution in search of a problem.

More to the point is to ask whether the current wording was intentional or just an inadvertent slip that ignored a basic presbyterian principle, that of jurisdiction. When the Seventeenth General Assembly made its decisions on this matter, it was not acting in ignorance of the principle of jurisdiction. Its committee, which included a member who had been part of developing the first Book of Discipline of the OPC, reported to it:

It is clear that *in both the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. and the Reformed Church in America one may complain only against the judicatory to which one is subject*, and in the former a Complaint may be made only in a matter of administrative discipline, while in the latter it may be made also in a matter of judicial discipline. *In comparison with these provisions, the provision of The Orthodox Presbyterian Church for complaints is broad indeed.* Not only may complaints concern either administrative or judicial matters, but—*what is extremely significant—complaints may in certain instances be made against judicatories to which the complainant is not subject.* (emphasis added)⁸

When the OPC adopted its own tertiary standards, while remaining thoroughly presbyterian, it self-consciously modified certain things because of events that contributed to its founding. It explicitly prohibited a judicatory from depriving a defendant of the right to set forth arguments from Scripture. It stated that ownership of the property of a con-

gregation lay with the local church. Similarly, as indicated in the quotation above, it broadened the standing of sessions to bring complaints against other sessions, self-consciously differing from the Presbyterian Church USA on this issue.

Why this broadening? Although Masonic membership may have been an issue at the Seventeenth General Assembly, that was not on the mind of our fathers in 1936. The burning issue, rather, was that of accountability in the church, seen in departures from Scripture and principles of presbyterianism, including, perhaps, the well-known sermon “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” by Harry Emerson Fosdick on May 21, 1922. Fosdick was a Baptist, not subject to presbyterian judicatories, and holding accountable the session that hosted the message was difficult. We would suggest that those who formed the OPC had seen their church drift away from Scripture, and they sought, where possible, to include ways of holding one another accountable. The PCUSA of 1936 was no longer the church of Charles Hodge, and the founders of the OPC were willing to modify *The Form of Government, the Book of Discipline, and the Directory for Worship* used by Hodge in 1870.

Furthermore, it is helpful to keep in mind that jurisdiction and standing, while related, are different concepts. First, that is evident in judicial process—a member of the church does not have to be immediately subject to the jurisdiction of the body with which he has standing to file charges. Second, a session in one presbytery can be harmed by an administrative decision of a session in another presbytery and ought to be able to resolve the issue in the most direct way possible. Third, as the minutes quoted above indicate, the Seventeenth General Assembly explicitly recognized the standing of sessions to bring complaints even against judicatories to whose jurisdiction they were not subject, one session against another session, even if not in the same presbytery.

Conclusion

The question before this Assembly was whether, on the basis of an implied principle of jurisdiction, to amend BD 9.1 in a direction that

⁸ *Minutes of the Seventeenth General Assembly*, 28.

makes mutual accountability on the part of sessions more difficult. In 2023 we are more distant in time from the founding of the OPC than our fathers in 1936 were from the book used by Hodge in 1870. The authors of this paper are deeply thankful that the Lord has preserved the OPC as a faithful church. Yet the danger of ecclesiastical drifting has not receded to the point of requiring less mutual accountability than our fathers built into the Book of Discipline. We are grateful that the Eighty-Ninth General Assembly decided *not to* propose an amendment to BD 9.1. ©

David G. Graves *serves as the pastor of Covenant Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.*

Brett A. McNeill *serves as the pastor of Reformation Presbyterian Church in Olympia, Washington*

John W. Mahaffy *serves as the pastor of Trinity Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Newberg, Oregon.*

Servant History

A Guide to the Second Century Church

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
August-September 2023¹

by Calvin R. Goligher

Church history is a source of encouragement and wisdom for serving God in our own day. Most Reformed Christians already have a keen interest in the subject. We especially love the bravery and insight of the Reformers and Puritans. Four and five centuries later, we still find that we can learn much from them.

The world has changed a lot since the Reformation, though. In that day, Christendom was tragically divided. Both sides of the Reformation conflict had much in common: the doctrines of God and Christ from the ancient councils, the basic moral vision of the Ten Commandments, a biblical understanding of the human person and of human life from the womb to the grave, and the hope of resurrection.

Today, that world is almost entirely lost, as Carl Trueman has documented in his history of the sexual revolution, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. At the end of that book, Trueman comments that Christians today should look to the church of the second century for inspiration and guidance, because they faced challenges much like our own:

In the second century, the church was a marginal sect within a dominant, pluralist society.

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1063.

She was under suspicion not because her central dogmas were supernatural but rather because she appeared subversive in claiming Jesus as King and was viewed as immoral in her talk of eating and drinking human flesh and blood and expressing incestuous-sounding love between brothers and sisters.²

For most Reformed Christians, the second century is unfamiliar territory. Where is one to begin? In this article, I will offer some suggestions about what to read and what to look for in this fascinating period of church history.

A Historical Overview

The best introductory history of the early church currently available is Donald M. Fairbairn, *The Global Church*.³ Fairbairn describes the early church's experience of persecution, its worship and fellowship, its authority structures, and its conflict with heresies. This book is especially good at showing the strong unity and consensus present in the church's teachings and practices, even across divisions of language, ecclesiastical custom, and various doctrinal disputes. The second century specifically is covered in chapters 3–6. These chapters show that, though the second-century church was not highly organized, as it would become a few centuries later, it still enjoyed a truly unified common life in Christ through the gospel of grace.

A more comprehensive treatment of the second-century church is Michael Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads*.⁴ Kruger's academic expertise is in the history of the biblical canon, which was one of the most significant issues for Christians in the second century. Today, many scholars maintain that there was no real canon in the earliest period of the church. On their view, the canon as we know it came about when one part of the church achieved enough power to

2 Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 406.

3 Donald M. Fairbairn, *The Global Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021).

4 Michael Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018).

require everyone to conform to their practice (a view made famous by Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code*). Kruger addresses this and many other issues very well.

To understand any period in church history, it is very important to know what doctrinal questions were being discussed and how these questions came about. We will be disappointed if we come to the second century looking for answers based on the Shorter Catechism. We must be prepared to think about different questions, asked in different ways, and answered without the benefit of centuries of refinement and reflection. This context is presented in a very readable way in Donald Fairbairn and Ryan Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions*,⁵ particularly chapters 2–4, which explain the background to the first two ecumenical councils and the Nicene Creed that they produced.

It is worth noting that there are many significant scholarly debates about the second-century church. These issues require discernment, both historical and spiritual. The perspective of the historian is often a significant factor: unbelieving scholars often explain things in a way that does not fit with the claims of orthodox doctrine. Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox scholars will often explain things in a way that Protestants would dispute. This is one reason to start with these three works. These are all written by evangelicals, so they provide “our” perspective on this history. They are not the only good overviews of the subject, but for Reformed Christians, they are a good place to start training one’s powers of discernment in these areas.

These overviews are also excellent preparation for diving into the primary sources.

Primary Sources

Reading old texts can be difficult, but there are good reasons to persevere. First, it is inexpensive! These ancient texts are all freely available online, though you may prefer to buy paper copies, and

5 Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

you may want to purchase more recent editions with better translations. Second, these texts offer a fascinating combination of the unexpected and the familiar. These authors lived many centuries ago, in cultures vastly different from our own, so there is much that will be unfamiliar. At the same time, it is amazing how much they have in common with us. They loved the same God that we love, and they studied the same Scriptures that we read and preach. Third, reading primary texts by great theologians is often easier than reading *about* them in more recent works. C. S. Lewis put it this way in his preface to Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*: “the great man, just because of his greatness, is much more intelligible than his modern commentator.”⁶

In the second century, there are only a few major authors whose writings have come down to us. Three are particularly important to know: Justin Martyr (100–165), Irenaeus of Lyons (140–200), and Tertullian of Carthage (155–220). These men were quite different in background, gifting, and temperament. Justin was a philosopher who reasoned with Greeks and Jews. Irenaeus was a pastor who expounded Scripture and warned against error. Tertullian was a lawyer who used his gift for argument to guard against spiritual and moral decline in the church. Together, these men show us three different aspects of Christian faith and leadership in the second century.

The Philosopher: Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr was a Greek-speaking Christian teacher from Samaria who died a martyr’s death in about the year 165 AD. He converted to Christianity after moving through a series of philosophical schools, including Platonism, which captured his imagination with its insights into immaterial reality. Sometime after his conversion to Platonism, Justin met an old man on a beach who told him that there were teachers even older than the Greek philosophers, with even profounder insight into ultimate reality. In fact, this old man said, everything that the philosophers knew, they learned one

6 St. Athanasius, *The Incarnation of the Word of God*, trans. A Religious of C.M.S.V. S.Th. (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 5.

way or another from these older teachers. These older teachers were the Hebrew prophets, starting with Moses himself. This man led Justin to appreciate not only the deep insight and truth of the Bible but also that Christ had fulfilled Old Testament prophecy, thus confirming its truthfulness. Justin converted to Christianity, his heart burning with a longing for truth. He kept his philosopher's cloak, though, signaling that he considered Christianity the fulfillment of his earlier search for truth.

The *First Apology* is Justin's appeal to the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius that he prevent Christians from being unjustly persecuted by local governors. Major themes in this work include the relation of Greek myth and philosophy to Christianity, the New Testament fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and the place of Christians in society. Along the way, Justin mentions some of the Gnostic false teachers (Simon Magus and Marcion) who threatened to unsettle the church's doctrine. Near the end of this work is an early description of Christian worship on the Lord's Day.

The *Dialogue with Trypho* is a record of Justin's debate with a Jewish critic of Christianity. It opens with the narrative of Justin's conversion, summarized above. It deals especially with the foundational question of the relation between the Old Testament and the New. Justin spends a good portion of the dialogue expounding various Psalms to show how they speak of Christ.

Justin Martyr's works are in volume 1 of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*,⁷ which is widely available in print and online. A more recent translation is available in the *Fathers of the Church* series.⁸

The Pastor: Irenaeus of Lyons

Irenaeus grew up in Asia Minor. His spiritual mentor was the aged bishop Polycarp, who was himself mentored by the aged Apostle John and who went on to minister for many faithful decades

before being martyred in the first half of the second century. So, Irenaeus was a spiritual grandson of the Apostle John. John said that he had no greater joy than that his children would walk in truth (3 John 4), and he would have found much joy in Irenaeus. As a young man, Irenaeus was sent to serve as the bishop of Lugdunum in the province of Gaul (modern Lyons in southern France). He must have been a promising leader, for he was soon chosen as the church's delegate to a synod in Rome.

This was a tumultuous time to be an up-and-coming church leader. While Irenaeus was away, the bishop of Lugdunum was martyred. Upon his return, Irenaeus was selected as his successor. He served as bishop for about two decades before his own death. During that time, he wrote the church's first big theological textbook and a small survey of the Bible. He probably wrote more than these, but these are the only writings that we still have.

Obviously, as with Justin, state persecution was a major issue for Irenaeus. But he focused his writing on combating false teaching, which he considered an even greater challenge. The church stood firm against violent enemies outside its doors, refusing to capitulate to coercion. Would it likewise stand firm against subtle corrupting influences in its pulpits, or would biblical teaching be fatally merged with elements of false religion?

Irenaeus was just the person to tackle this problem. First, he was painstakingly careful in his research into the various strands of Gnostic error. Second, he was profoundly insightful into Christian doctrine. Whereas Justin had habitually described the Son and the Spirit as lower beings than the Father (a type of mistake that was common enough at the time, the full implications of which would not be clear until such thinking grew into the heresy of Arianism in the fourth century), the antidote to this error did not need to wait for the Council of Nicaea. Only a few decades after Justin, Irenaeus already improved on his work by

7 Justin Martyr, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996).

8 Justin Martyr, *Fathers of the Church*, trans. Thomas Falls (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press).

describing the three persons as equally divine.⁹

Against Heresies is the first systematic theology and the first biblical theology of the Christian church. It is not always an easy read, partly because of its sheer size and partly because large sections are taken up with arguments against the various forms of Gnosticism.

It is entirely worth the effort, though, not least because Gnostic teachings persist in our society. Our culture devalues the human body much as the Gnostics did. This attitude leads us, as it led them, either to indulge every whim of our bodies or to mistreat our bodies severely. Another feature of Gnosticism that we see today is a political elitism shrouded in mystical knowledge. Such elitism is commonplace in history, but the Gnostic version of this is especially relevant because it involved co-opting the Bible to fit their political agenda, just as our nominally Christian leaders often do. Finally, Gnostics were very anti-institutional, though they were also very interested in holding positions of influence. This was a major reason that they wished to co-opt the church—it had an institutional strength that they could never build for themselves.

This work is available in full in a translation from the nineteenth century. This translation is in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* series (Vol. 1), widely available in print and online. The best way to start reading this book is in the condensed edition by James R. Payton Jr., entitled *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith*.¹⁰ This edition cuts out a lot of the detail about Gnosticism, putting the focus on Irenaeus's exposition of Christian truth from Scripture. The translation is also somewhat revised.

The *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* is a short work, discovered only about a century ago in a Syriac manuscript. The focus of this work is in showing that the Old Testament prophecy is fulfilled in the New Testament, thus confirming the message of the apostles. I have found it to be the most accessible patristic text available. It is

9 On this point see Fairbairn and Reeves, 31.

10 James R. Payton Jr., *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith: A Condensation of Against Heresies* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).

available in a lovely paperback edition in the Popular Patristics Series from St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.¹¹

The Lawyer: Tertullian of Carthage

Justin and Irenaeus were clergymen, working in Greek. Tertullian, on the other hand, was a layman working in Latin. In some respects, he is not the best representative of the church fathers. He had a very intense moral and spiritual vision that led him to some extreme views. For instance, he dismissed all non-Christian philosophy, denigrated the institutional church and its ministry, and embraced a charismatic movement marked by prophecies and miracles.

However, Tertullian did contribute a great deal to the church of his day. He was a lawyer, and he employed his legal mind in defending and articulating the faith. His prolific writing includes the first use of the word “Trinity” (*trinitas* in Latin).

Against Marcion is Tertullian's most important work. Marcion was a wealthy Christian teacher in Rome who was determined to influence the church but was kept out of the ministry. In response, Marcion founded a rival church and used this as a platform for spreading his distinctive ideas, which were in step with the Gnostic teachers of the day. The most famous characteristic of Marcion's false teaching was his claim that the Old Testament was about a lower creator-god, and the New Testament was about a higher God, the Father of Jesus. Tertullian shows the falsity of this claim by demonstrating the unity of the Bible.

Marcion rejected the Old Testament entirely, along with portions of the New Testament that he thought were sympathetic to the Old Testament. He thought of Paul as a standard-bearer for a form of Christianity that truly was a Gentile alternative to the Jewish scriptures. Accordingly, he acknowledged only the Pauline letters and the Gospel of Luke, and even in these books he cut out some material that he considered too favorable to the

11 Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, ed. Paul A. Boer, Sr., trans. J. Armitage Robinson (Yonkers NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2019).

Old Testament. For this reason, a good portion of Tertullian’s work is an extended commentary on Luke and on Paul’s letters, in order to show that Marcion’s view of things fails to understand the Scripture that he himself acknowledges.

One of the best parts of the book is Tertullian’s exposition of 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul teaches the doctrine of the bodily resurrection. This doctrine was profoundly distasteful to Gnostic sensibilities but was at the very center of the Christian faith. This doctrine is still profoundly counter-cultural, as Silicon Valley consultants dream of uploading the contents of our brains to an immortal cloud server.

Against Marcion is available in volume three of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*.

Conclusion

The church of the twenty-first century faces many challenges. Our world is awash in sexual immorality and false ideology, and our society holds a sharply negative attitude to the church. Inside the church, many are seeking to steer our institutions toward agreement with the world’s agenda. There is a chaotic aspect to the life of the church today that makes it relatively easy to accomplish that agenda. Many Christians have only a surface knowledge of biblical teaching on many subjects, so they absorb the prevailing cultural “common sense” and dress it up in biblical language—exactly what the Gnostics were trying to get Christians to do in their own day.

This happens in the realm of sexual morality, as Christians struggle to maintain a biblical sexual ethic over against hookup culture, easy divorce, homosexuality, and transgenderism. It happens in the realm of doctrine, as Christians hear from pulpits secular ideas—“Love is love,” “the right side of history,” “your truth”—dressed up in biblical terminology. Many Christians are quite ignorant of the Old Testament, and so they find it plausible that we should (in the words of megachurch pastor Andy Stanley) “unhitch ourselves” from it.

In light of all this, we should be thankful for second-century fathers who taught on the relation-

ship between philosophy and theology, the unity of the Old and New Testaments, and Christian worship, sexual ethics, and community life.

The main thing is not to read everything about the second century and its history, but to actually share in the spiritual and intellectual life of the great Christian teachers of that time. They loved the Bible and held to it against the trends of their society. They loved each other and found a way to build lasting communities of worship and charity. They loved the truth and pursued it not only in Scripture but wherever it could be found, thus offering an unexpected fulfillment of the human search for truth that was the heart of ancient philosophy. We may hope that what God accomplished through them he will accomplish again in our own time. ☺

Calvin R. Goligher is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian church and serves as the pastor of First Orthodox Presbyterian church in Sunnyvale, California.

Francis Turretin (1623–1687): A Commemoration and Commendation

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* October 2023¹

by J. Mark Beach

Turretin and His *Institutes*

Francis Turretin (François or Francesco Turretini, or Franciscus Turretinus) was one of the most distinguished Reformed theologians of the seventeenth century, being a notable representative of the “school theology” characteristic of

¹ https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1071.

that period. He was born on October 17, 1623, in Geneva, Switzerland. This year and this month, we arrive at the four-hundredth anniversary of his birth. It is fitting on this occasion to reflect a bit on his life, and particularly to ask the question about his importance for Reformed theology today.

Turretin was a pastor-theologian who zealously served the Reformed churches, particularly the Reformed cause in Geneva, until his death on September 28, 1687. He completed his studies at the Genevan Academy in 1644. Given his giftedness as a student, he pursued further studies in theology at Leiden, Utrecht, Saumur, Montauban, and Nimes (1644–48). He also studied philosophy with the Roman Catholic Pierre Gassendi in Paris (1645–46). From 1648 he served as minister to the Italian congregation in Geneva, and from 1653 until his death he labored as pastor of the French congregation in Geneva and as professor of theology at the Academy in Geneva. In 1650 he also served for a year as interim pastor at Lyons.²

During his life, Turretin produced a number of significant theological disputations, a couple of which have been translated into English. Turretin also published two volumes of collected French sermons, a few of which have also become avail-

able in English translation.³ However, his chief and most renowned work—indeed, his longstanding theological contribution—remains his three-volume *Institutio Theologiæ Elencticæ*, which appeared in 1679, 1682, and 1685.⁴ This work, contending for Reformed orthodoxy against all rival theologies, served as a textbook in theology during that time and subsequently. It was republished in 1847–48, along with a volume of his disputations, which revived its life as a theological textbook during the nineteenth century.⁵ More recently, Turretin’s *Institutes* found new life serving a new generation of Reformed students since its publication into English in the 1990s. This multi-volume work comes from an earlier handwritten translation by George Musgrave Giger a century earlier, which James T. Dennison subsequently edited and presented for publication.⁶

Among the most prominent dogmatical works in the history of Reformed theology, Turretin’s *Institutes* merits attention as expressing the consensus of Reformed orthodoxy that prevailed at that time, while also well displaying the scholastic method that shaped much of the dogmatical theology of the era. These two features of his work reveal the abiding importance of Turretin the theologian for today’s Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

Turretin’s Scholasticism and Elencticism

Turretin’s theology builds on the foundation laid by earlier codifications of Reformed theol-

2 See J. Mark Beach, “Reading Turretin: Some Observations on Francis Turretin’s *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 27 (2016): 67–84; idem, “Francis Turretin’s *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*,” *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology*, eds. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 280–94. For biography on Turretin, see “Funeral Oration of Benedict Pictet concerning the Life and Death of Francis Turretin,” trans. David Lillegard, in Turretin’s *Institutes*, vol. 3, 659–76; E. de Bude, *Vie de François Turretini, théologien genevois (1623–1687)* (Lausanne: Bridel, 1871); G. Keizer, *François Turretini. Sa vie et ses oeuvres et le Consensus* (Lausanne: Bridel, 1900); and James T. Dennison, Jr., “The Life and the Career of Francis Turretin,” in Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed., James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1992–97): III: 639–58; Nicholas A. Cumming, *Francis Turretin (1623–1687) and the Reformed Tradition*, St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History, ed. Bridget Heal (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020); and Zachary Purvis’s “Introduction” in *Justification by Faith Alone: Selected Writings from Theodore Beza (1519–1605, Amundus Polandus (1561–1610), and Francis Turretin (1623–1687)*, trans. Casey Carmichael, *Classical Reformed Theology*, vol. 6, ed. R. Scott Clark (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2023), xxxvi–xliii.

3 See, for example, the recent translation of Turretin’s “The Harmony of Paul and James on the Article of Justification,” in *Justification by Faith Alone: Selected Writings*, 183–216; also “Francis Turretin’s Seventh Disputation: Whether It Can Be Proven the Pope of Rome Is the Antichrist,” trans. Kenneth Bubb, ed. Rand Winburn (Forestville, CA: Protestant Reformation Publications, 1999). Turretin’s French sermons are *Sermons sur divers passages de l’Ecriture Sainte* (Geneva, 1676) and *Recueil de sermons sur divers textes de l’Ecriture Sainte* (Geneva, 1686). In certain disputations and sermons Turretin can be sharply polemical.

4 For the publishing history of Turretin’s *Institutes*, see Beach, “Reading Turretin,” 67, fn. 1.

5 The four-volume work was published in Edinburgh and New York. This edition has been reprinted as recently as 2010 (Nabu Press, Charleston, South Carolina).

6 See bibliography in footnote 1.

ogy, employing scholastic methodology to defend that theology from its multiple opponents.⁷ This scholastic theology, commonplace then, was pointedly academic in character. On a formal level, it is best understood as a method and approach to theological topics, using *quaestiones* to form theses or propositions that defend a staked-out position pertaining to those topics, seeking to defend against the many foes to the Reformed movement and to present this faith with intellectual vigor and biblical warrant. Turretin’s concern was to guard evangelical truth against error in its various guises and thereby safeguard confessional orthodoxy—specifically Dortian orthodoxy (the Canons of Dordrecht in 1618–19). Turretin’s most immediate field of concern was the Swiss and French Reformed churches. These churches were under increasing Roman Catholic threat, including the menace of armed attack. Turretin’s project, however, was targeted to assist the Reformed cause throughout Europe. Although Turretin labored during a period of high orthodoxy, the climate of change was already in the air, and his work, grounded in scholastic methodology, could not finally fend off the gradual demise of orthodoxy in Geneva or throughout Europe.⁸

Like John Calvin, his most renowned predecessor in Geneva, Turretin called his work an *Institutio*. The term refers to fundamental or foundational instruction. In adding the phrase *theologia elenctica*, Turretin reveals his intention to pursue the instruction of theology in an elenctic manner—for the latter term, “elenctic,” is derived from the Greek word ἐλεγχος, which means to expose error. An elenctic theology, then, seeks to teach truth by way of contrast to and

7 On Reformed orthodoxy and scholasticism, two important sources are Willem J. van Asselt, et al., *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism*, trans. Albert Gootjes (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011); and Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3–102.

8 M. I. Klauber, “Reformed Orthodoxy in Transition: Benedict Pictet (1655–1724) and Enlightened Orthodoxy in Post-Reformation Geneva,” in W. F. Graham, ed., *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies*, vol. 22 (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994), 93–113.

in refutation of error. For Turretin, and for his Reformed orthodox comrades, theology has the task to oppose heretical views or otherwise harmful theological opinion in the defense of the received catholic faith of the church, and specifically of the distinctive Reformed understanding of that faith. In the labor of theological education at Geneva, Turretin sought to expound Christian doctrine using the foil of error and heresy to explain and defend what he judged to be biblical truth. Thus, Turretin’s elenctic *Institutes* is deliberately disputative and polemical in form, zealously and soberly championing the Reformed confessional position while coupled with much positive exposition of theological topics as part of that project. However, neither the scholastic character of Turretin’s three-volume work nor its elenctic character embraced the emerging Christian rationalism of the late-seventeenth century. Rather, Turretin argues that “the theology of revelation”—being grounded in divine revelation of the supernatural sort—is a theology that transcends human reason and depends upon God’s grace as revealed in his Word (I.Q.2.7).⁹

Six Commendations of Turretin’s *Institutes* for Today

If readers are new to Turretin’s *Institutes*, they immediately discover that his writing does not have the rhetorical appeal of Calvin’s. Turretin’s argumentation is tight, his sentences long, and his vocabulary technical, with almost no rhetorical flourish. The learning curve is steep. Many give up rather than venture ahead, figuring they might do better to read a more contemporary source that is easier to digest. Certainly, that is an option, but there is no alternative to a work like Turretin’s for a student of Reformed orthodoxy (well, not unless the reader is fluent in theological Latin). Readers are amply rewarded by pressing on; and there are resources available that enable them to gain access to Turretin’s methodology and vocabulary, rendering the learning curve more manageable—such as Richard A. Muller’s *Dictionary of Latin and Greek*

9 References to Turretin’s *Institutes* are according to topic, question, and paragraph.

Theological Terms, 2nd ed., and Johannes Maccovius's *Scholastic Discourse*.¹⁰

I venture to offer six commendations of Turretin's *Elenctic Institutes* for today's students of Reformed theology.

Commendation #1—Turretin's Methodology Enables a Proper Engagement of Theological Controversy

For starters, Turretin teaches us how to engage in theological controversy. His *Institutes* are marked by a deliberate methodology that engages the many topics of the theological enterprise in a consistent manner. He employs the question-structure, somewhat modeled after the medieval scholastic *Summas*, as the principal format to address theological topics and subtopics, functioning as a textbook of theology for the benefit of students.¹¹ Even when the question-structure is not followed explicitly, the techniques of definition, distinction, logical reasoning, and refutation of objections are typical of Turretin's scholastic discourse. In following the model of "questions," Turretin's *Institutio* addresses most theological topics in a discernable order, presenting specific topics of theology (*loci*) in a clear alignment. Therefore, in each of the twenty *loci* that comprise his *Institutes*, Turretin subdivides the specific topic into its requisite distinct questions. In outline form, the topics are (usually) set forth as follows: (1) He begins, in most instances, with a question or questions, with an affirmation or denial or even a reply of distinguishing to properly answer the issue in dispute, which often names specific opponents, including who they are and what they specifically believe. If opponents are not directly mentioned, Turretin will usually define the doctrine under dispute succinctly and note where disagreement resides. Thus, it is not unusual for Turretin to attach gen-

eral introductory remarks after the question. These remarks take up the subject under discussion and can consist of a paragraph or two, but sometimes are much extended.

(2) Having accomplished the above, Turretin proceeds to delineate the question or questions at issue—thus follows the *status quaestionis*, wherein Turretin seeks to articulate the exact point needing exposition or that is under contest. The analysis of the exact question at hand reveals both what the question is and what it is not. The "state of the question," then, results in a clarification of where there is agreement (what is not in dispute) to arrive at the nub of disagreement—that is, where parties split into diverse camps. A further observation here is that it is not uncommon for Turretin, under the "state of the question," to enunciate the orthodox position by differentiating two extremes: those who err in excess and those who err in defect.

(3) Next, Turretin exposts his own stated position, presenting positive arguments in support of his view, though this is often done in light of an opponent's position. This section can be brief or quite elaborate, depending on the nature of the issue under discussion. Turretin's positive argumentation at this point, then, can be as short as a paragraph or extended for many pages.

(4) Last, there is a consideration and rebuttal of counterarguments, called "*fontes solutionum*" (often translated as "sources of solution" or "sources of explanation"). This section principally meets the counterarguments of opponents but may include a succinct summary of Turretin's own views, and it can serve as a "handy check for the reader to see if the discussion is understood."¹² Oftentimes Turretin does not so much state the counterarguments explicitly as he meets these objections as suppositions, which he then refutes.

We need hardly be reminded that much contemporary theological dispute would benefit from the disciplined and precise approach that Turretin practices in his *Institutes*.

10 Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 2nd ed. (1985; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017); Johannes Maccovius, *Scholastic Discourse: Johannes Maccovius (1588–1644) on Theological and Philosophical Distinctions and Rules*, eds. Willem J. van Asselt, et al. (1652; Apeldoorn: Instituut voor Reformatieonderzoek, 2009).

11 Turretin, "Preface to the Reader," in *Institutes*, I, xl–xli.

12 Willem J. van Asselt, et al, *Reformed Thought on Freedom: The Concept of Free Choice in Early Modern Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 172.

A further observation regarding Turretin's method is that he always seeks to ground his staked-out position in Scripture and to present biblical arguments for his view. Yet, besides bolstering his argument with the relevant Scriptural materials, he sometimes seeks support from the Church Fathers and medieval scholastic writers.¹³ Although Turretin appeals to Reformed writers by name from time to time, he generally avoids dependence on them to make his case. In his *Institutes*, if not always in his sermons and disputations, he shuns heated polemics in treating disputed issues, especially with other Reformed authors. Given the precarious nature of the Reformed churches in France, for example, it hardly would have helped the Reformed cause to assist Roman Catholic opponents by engaging in denunciatory polemics against the Amyraldians. It is noteworthy, too, that in dealing with those who oppose the Reformed position, Turretin is uninhibited in specifying their names or their writings.

Commendation #2—Turretin Is a Reliable Expositor of the Views of Opponents

The second reason to commend Francis Turretin is that his work well instructs us regarding the views of those who opposed Reformed theology. Since theological opponents figure prominently in his work, the views of these opponents (principally Roman Catholics, Socinians, and Remonstrants, along with various Lutherans, Anabaptists, and others) needed to be fairly and accurately presented in order to contest fairly and accurately the same. Turretin's scholastic theology, therefore, sought to defend the hard-wrought gains of the earlier codification of Reformed theology achieved by Calvin and his Reformed contemporaries, particularly against what was perceived to be the "Pelagianizing" acids that dissolved the primacy of divine grace and transgressed the right teaching of "catholic" Augustinianism (e.g., IV.Q.10.1; X.Q.1.1; XV.Q.51.). As such, Turretin is not interested in contending with marginal points of doctrine. His

¹³ See E. P. Meijering, *Reformierte scholastik und patristische theologie* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1991).

mission is to defend the Reformed confession of divine grace (*sola gratia*) robustly. In this regard, he is prepared to make common cause even with particular Roman Catholic thinkers who, with him, reject Jesuit deviations from the sovereignty of God's grace; he appeals to the tradition of the church and to scholastic Roman Catholic authors in order to help make his case.¹⁴ Certainly, Turretin's polemic against Pelagianizing tendencies is a constant refrain in his *Institutes*.

As a general observation, Turretin engaged in polemics in an irenic spirit and treated his theological rivals equitably. In fact, he was rather scrupulous to present the views of opponents correctly if only to refute their position more persuasively. In doing so, Turretin was predisposed to be "mainstream" in his Reformed convictions; he also sought, at times, to play the role of mediator between parties, i.e., to effect reconciliation (or at least understanding) among the Reformed where theological debate had become over-blown or otherwise misconceived. An example is his treatment of conditionality in the covenant of grace (see, e.g., XII.Q.3.15). To his credit, then, Turretin excels at stating opponents' views even-handedly and properly, and he resists *ad hominem* comments.¹⁵ This "school theology," with its polemical thrust, was no more fanatical or reactionary or intolerant than an earlier, less scholastic codification of Reformed theology. These negative traits mark personalities, not theological method. Once more, Turretin presents himself as an able example of how to engage in theological discussion and disputation.

Commendation #3—Turretin Is a Theologian's Theologian

Third, Turretin treats the foundational questions of theology in a classically Reformed manner—that is, before the onset of Christian rationalism, which was followed by the Enlightenment. Although Turretin's theology is obviously dated in certain respects and, just as obvious, does not

¹⁴ Van Asselt, et al., *Reformed Thought on Freedom*, 171–73.

¹⁵ Van Asselt, et al., *Reformed Thought on Freedom*, 172.

address certain contemporary issues and errors, it often supplies the requisite materials to better construct answers to contemporary questions. Turretin is a fine resource for treating foundational questions, like the relationship between faith and reason, the role and limitations of human reason for theology, and circumscribing natural theology and natural law. In fact, he handles with great care a host of theological questions. For example, he expositis with finesse and insight the question concerning the nature of the moral law, its several uses, and its abrogation in opposition to the Antinomians (XI.Q.2.1–34.; Q.22.1–18 and Q.23.1–15). It is fitting also to mention his treatment of the question regarding the first moment of conversion and whether humans take any kind of active role in such an event, such that the human will cooperates in some way with divine grace (see XV.Q.5.1–21). Likewise, he handles the question of creaturely merit before God in a superb fashion (XVII.Q.5.1–45, esp. 6–7). Although such commendations are selective, they serve to alert readers that Turretin proves himself to be a theologian’s theologian, and anyone who wrestles with his technical reasoning will be better for the effort. There is not a topic in which Turretin fails to stimulate and educate the reader. Thus, to offer another example, his treatment of the sacraments, from a Reformed perspective, is sterling, though the Giger translation has the unfortunate penchant to translate the Latin word *anima* too often as “mind” rather than “heart” or “soul,” which has a way of coloring Turretin’s presentation in an intellectualistic direction.

Commendation #4—Turretin Is a Potent Defender of Dortian Orthodoxy

A fourth reason we commend Turretin’s theology centers on, as adumbrated above, the way it defends the reformational concern for the doctrine of grace alone. Turretin persistently argues against Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian doctrines, even as he promotes the findings of the Synod of Dordrecht against the Remonstrants. Turretin’s work, then, constantly champions divine initiative in the face of human inability, divine mercy in view of human

guilt and demerit, and God’s sovereign accomplishment of salvation—persevering to the end—considering human instability and impotence. All the main canons of the Synod of Dort are discernably defended in Turretin’s *Institutes*; he expounds upon the doctrine of predestination, including unconditional election (even lining up with Dort’s infralapsarian orientation) (IV.Q.11), human free choice and its limitations (X.Qs.1–5), and effectual calling (XV.Q.4). He likewise explicitly takes up the topic of Christ’s penal substitutionary atonement, the scope of that atoning work (XIV.Q.14), as well as the doctrine of the perseverance of faith (XV.Q.16).

In addition, in advocating for the doctrines of Dort against Remonstrant objectors, Turretin similarly combated some in the Reformed camp (whom he considered “our men”), primarily the Amyraldians, the name being derived from Amyraldus, the Latinized name of Moïse Amyraut (1596–1664). Here we observe that Amyraldianism, Cocceianism, and Cartesianism form three chief aberrations that emerged among the Reformed in the seventeenth century. The philosophical program of Rene Descartes (1596–1650), with its subjectivistic method, became hotly debated in the Netherlands and beyond. However, Descartes’s thought did not immediately impact Turretin and his work in Geneva, so he does not address this movement. Meanwhile, only with moderation does he take on controversy with the Amyraldians and Cocceians. Turretin particularly disputes Cocceius’s views regarding Christ’s suretyship vis-à-vis Old Testament believers (XII.Qs.9–10).

It was the Amyraldians, however, who were Turretin’s topmost concern among Reformed writers, in part because some of Turretin’s theological colleagues at the Academy were sympathetic to Amyraldian views. Although the Swiss Reformed churches explicitly rejected distinct Salmurian doctrines in the *Formula Consensus Helvetica* (1675) (see especially Canons VI, X, XVI, XXV), that document’s life was short-lived in the Swiss churches, being set aside in 1725. For his part, Turretin rebuts Amyraldian teachings, for example, in IV.Q.17, IX.Q.9.4–6, XII.Q.12, and XIV.Q.14.6.

Commendation #5—Turretin Is a Trustworthy Expositor of Reformed Federal Theology

Fifth, Turretin should be studied because he is a fine exhibit of Reformed federal theology, sifting through intramural debates characteristic in the seventeenth century, and doing that with an irenic spirit.¹⁶ Although Turretin was a Reformed scholastic theologian, he was simultaneously a federal theologian. That designation is warranted since he developed his theology in the way of the twofold covenant scheme—namely the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, the latter being grounded in the intratrinitarian covenant of redemption or *pactum salutis* (see VIII.Qs.3–6; XII.Qs.1–12). For Turretin, the covenant of grace, Christ being the substance of the promise, included all the blessings of salvation (see XII.Q.2.18–25). All subsequent theological exposition detailing that redemptive work is really expounding features and dimensions of that gospel covenant. In other words, federal theology is woven into the whole fabric of Turretin’s work and is presupposed even when not specifically mentioned.¹⁷ Turretin proves to be an able teacher and a careful theologian in treating disputed questions surrounding the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. For example, he well presents the Sinaitic economy as being, in substance, one with and an expression of the covenant of grace (XII.Q.12.1–25).

Commendation #6—Turretin Is an Evenhanded Codifier of Reformed Theology

Sixth, we warmly commend Turretin, indeed, make much of him as a theologian, inasmuch as he labored deliberately in the role of codifier of Reformed orthodoxy and wrote as a defender of the

Reformed consensus. In doing so he aimed to bring Reformed thinkers into agreement with one another where possible. Although his theology is not marked by innovation, neither is it merely rote. He writes with clarity and acumen on each topic under his purview, treating subjects with erudition and insight. James T. Dennison Jr., the editor of the English translation of Turretin’s *Institutes*, “extracted more than 3,200 quotations from classic, patristic, medieval, Jewish, Socinian, Lutheran, Arminian, Anabaptist and Reformed authors,” which further commends its abiding value even as it alerts readers to many important sources. Given the elenctic form of Turretin’s theological exposition, his *Institutes* was and remains a pinnacle achievement in the development of Reformed scholasticism in Geneva and throughout Europe; and it remains an outstanding specimen of Reformed dogmatical works. Following the *quaestiones* format of instruction, Turretin’s *Institutes* still exhibits its well-designed function as a textbook of theology, and its readers, upon mastering its scholastic vocabulary and method, at once discern that it is an effective pedagogical tool. Moreover, since Turretin was not given to embracing extreme views, refusing to color outside the lines of Reformed confessional orthodoxy, he set the benchmark of that orthodoxy, even as he persists as its standard-bearer. As such, his *Institutes* will endure as a work of interest to scholars of the early modern era and the history of doctrine. In its English translation, Turretin’s *Institutes* will continue to occupy a highly influential place among the dogmatical works of Reformed theology. ©

J. Mark Beach is a minister in the United Reformed Churches and serves as Professor of Doctrinal and Ministerial Studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana. He is associate pastor of Redeemer United Reformed Church in St. John, Indiana.

16 See J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin’s Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace*, Reformed Historical Theology, vol. 1, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis, et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007). For an analysis of diverse interpretations of federal theology, see 22–73.

17 See Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 316–39.

Theological Daylighting: Retrieving J. Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
December 2023¹

by Justin McLendon

In 2025, New York residents will benefit from a long-planned environmental project of Tibbetts Brook, a small stream that flows through Yonkers and the Bronx, eventually merging into the Harlem River. This project promises to address annual flooding and the stressed stormwater infrastructure of New York's aged sewer system. Like other waterways in the United States, Tibbetts Brook was once a thriving water source that developers chose to contain by burying the waterway underground, forcing water through culverts and other coverings. Over time this process contributed to neighborhood flooding as underground culverts proved to be incapable of handling excess water and drainage.

Daylighting is the environmental act of restoring a covered waterway, and this tedious process can be pursued for a variety of reasons, such as to improve water quality, provide wildlife habitat, or create a more pedestrian-friendly environment.² However, it can be a complex and challenging process, for it often requires the removal of buildings, roads, and other infrastructure that has been built over the waterway. Complicating matters further, daylighting requires strategic thinking to ensure that the banks of the waterway are stabilized to prevent future erosion and flooding. While daylight-

ing is fraught with complexities, its benefits can be significant.

In one sense, daylighting a buried waterway is the exhuming of a buried life-source, with the belief that its resources are critical to future flourishing. From my perspective, daylighting can be theologically applied to old books that often sit untouched on our bookshelves, forgotten by the distance of time and change. Theological daylighting offers a compelling picture of how we can rejuvenate and reinvigorate theological discourse by retrieving the theological riches of the past to bring them into dialogue with contemporary challenges. As such, in what follows we will consider an old life-source from which we can theologically daylight three applications.

Confronting Liberalism

Biographical treatments of J. Gresham Machen are easily accessible, and a full treatment is beyond the purview of our reflection.³ We should recall, however, that Machen was a prominent American theologian and a key figure in the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy of the early twentieth century.⁴ Born in 1881 in Baltimore, Maryland, Machen displayed exceptional intellectual abilities from a young age. He pursued his education at Johns Hopkins University, Princeton Theological Seminary, and the Universities of Marburg and Göttingen in Germany. For our purposes, we recall his lengthy service as New Testament professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he taught from 1906 until Princeton's reorganization in 1929.

Recognizing the urgent need for a new institution committed to the preservation of orthodox

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1090.

2 Jim Morrison, "How 'Daylighting' Buried Waterways Is Revitalizing Cities Across America," *Smithsonian Magazine* (March 15, 2023), https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/how-daylighting-buried-waterways-is-revitalizing-cities-across-america-180981793/?utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=editorial&utm_term=3/15/2023&utm_content=new.

3 Biographical information gleaned from Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2020). See also D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

4 Though Machen appreciated the Fundamentalist movement and was sympathetic to its concerns, he disliked the term "Fundamentalist," believing it was reductionistic to refer to Christianity as an "ism." See David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary: The Majestic Testimony, 1869–1929* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 343.

Christian doctrine, Machen (and others) founded Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929. The seminary aimed to provide rigorous theological education firmly rooted in the authority of Scripture and the Reformed tradition. Machen's establishment of Westminster showcased his unwavering commitment to doctrinal integrity and his determination to equip future generations of Christian leaders with a solid theological foundation. John Murray, who arrived at Westminster in 1930, claimed that "Westminster raised a banner for the whole counsel of God when concrete events had made it more than apparent that Reformed churches throughout the world had laid in the dust that same banner, defaced, soiled, and tattered. When the enemy came in like a flood, God in his abundant mercy and sovereign providence raised up a standard against him."⁵ We cannot overlook Murray's insistence upon the seminary's role in confronting enemy forces, stationed as it were as a bulwark against the intellectual assaults of Modernist proponents and institutions.

Machen's opposition to the theological liberalism within the PCUSA led to his involvement in various controversies, including the Auburn Affirmation and the subsequent trials that resulted in his suspension from the ministry. Despite facing opposition and criticism, Machen remained steadfast in his defense of orthodox Christianity and his commitment to the authority of Scripture. His theological convictions and willingness to stand against the prevailing cultural and theological trends earned him both admirers and detractors.

Due to his untimely death in 1937, Machen's primary theological challenges and his enduring influence are often bookended within the confines of the Fundamentalist/Modernist controversy. Overall, Machen's academic career was characterized by significant contributions to New Testament studies and his frequent engagement with theological issues: his publications addressed New Testament criticism, Pauline studies (e.g., *The Origin of Paul's Religion*; 1921), Bible surveys, doctrinal

⁵ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 1, *The Claims of Truth* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 101.

treatments of the virgin birth (e.g., *The Virgin Birth of Christ*; 1930), theological anthropology, the Christian understanding of faith, and most notably, the intersection of Christianity and cultural engagement. He played a leading role in the formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936 (serving as its first moderator), after his departure from the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA).

Machen's classic, *Christianity and Liberalism*, has now reached its one-hundredth anniversary and remains a standard academic text to engage early twentieth-century theological developments in American seminaries and churches. The book, however, has a grassroots origin: its first iteration occurred in 1921, when Machen addressed the Ruling Elders' Association of Chester Presbytery with concerns over theological trends infecting academic and ecclesiastical audiences. Machen knew, and we must never forget, that theological wandering in the seminaries eventually infects the people in the pews. The following year, *The Princeton Theological Review* published Machen's remarks, which ultimately created widespread interest and the need for a more substantive presentation. Thus, in 1923, Machen's mature presentation appeared and challenged American Protestants to reject the appeals of theological liberalism. As D. G. Hart acknowledged, Machen's book "met a chilly reception" among his peers, and Machen's formidable opposition dismissed his concerns as extremist and alarmist, only fostering a theological isolationism.⁶

Though not a lengthy work, throughout *Christianity and Liberalism* Machen offered a robust defense of orthodox Christianity against the encroachment of modernist ideas. He argued that theological liberalism diluted the essential doctrines of the faith, including the authority of Scripture, the deity of Christ, the significance

⁶ D. G. Hart, "The Rise and Fall of J. Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*," in *Christianity and Liberalism Revisited: A 100 Year Appreciation*, Christ Over All podcast (June 5, 2023), paragraph 4. <https://christoverall.com/article/longform/the-rise-and-fall-of-j-gresham-machens-christianity-and-liberalism/>.

of the atonement, and the role of the church in society. Machen contended that Christianity and liberalism were fundamentally incompatible, as liberalism sought to reinterpret and revise Christian doctrine to accommodate modern sensibilities and scientific advancement.

Machen lived in an era where Christian orthodoxy was contested from internal and external forces. As he argued:

The great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology. This modern non-redemptive religion is called “modernism” or “liberalism.”⁷

According to Machen, theological liberalism transcended mere variations in ecclesiastical practice or divergent Christian theological perspectives (more on this later). Rather, he contended that liberalism constituted an entirely distinct and humanized religious system, characterized by a sentimental, superficial, and man-made understanding of God. Machen believed liberalism departed wholesale from the historical and doctrinal tenets of orthodox Christianity.

Thus, Machen meticulously dismantled the theological presuppositions of liberalism and exposed its inconsistencies. His rigorous analysis not only challenged the intellectual foundations of theological liberalism but offered a warning of perilous consequences if churches and institutions failed to reject what amounted to an imposter religion clothed in Christian garb.

Three Applications of Machen’s Work for Today

There is, of course, a great distance between 1923 and today, and over the course of one hundred years, the Church has encountered significant challenges on every front. Machen

7 J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 2.

could not have imagined Vatican II, the outbreak of liberation theology, or the recent theological compromises related to marriage and sexuality. Even though much has transpired since Machen’s publication, we should carefully daylight key features of his work to assist our efforts in maintaining doctrinal fidelity. Of course, it goes without saying, every generation of Christians must articulate a robust defense of the verbal plenary inspiration of the Bible, and Machen provides a timeless and informed example.

We can further assume that Christians will continue to encounter challenges from secular worldviews whose epistemological framework rests upon scientific findings and secular humanism. As Mark Noll observes, “*Modernists* were Protestants who felt it was important to adjust Christianity to new science, new economic expansion, and new ideals of human progress.”⁸ We are careful to remember that Christian orthodoxy will always be challenged on two fronts: from a secular, godless culture whose rejection of Christianity persists, and from those within the church, like the *Modernists* of old, who seek to soften the perceived rough edges of doctrine, often with the aim of bridging the gap between traditional faith and a younger generation. This phenomenon occurs across generations and cultures, as the allure to adapt and accommodate doctrinal principles remains a recurring challenge for the Christian community.

In addition to these obvious areas of continued relevance, we can discern three additional applications as we address present crises and forecast future challenges. The following applications do not exhaust the usefulness of Machen’s work, but these broadly apply, even if portions of his work are deemed outdated.

1. Making an Apologetic Approach

In every era, the presence of Christian apologists is indispensable, and Machen serves as an example of a comprehensive apologetic approach

8 Mark Noll, *The Work We Have to Do: A History of Protestants in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 57. Emphasis in original.

encompassing biblical fidelity, historical acumen, a deep devotion to the gospel, and a commitment to safeguarding the church from error. Christians are called to be apologists, which means we are tasked with providing a rational defense of the Christian faith. This responsibility does not mean every Christian must possess expertise in all areas of knowledge, but rather, we are expected to provide answers for the hope that resides within us (1 Pet. 3:15). In essence, this means, as part of our faith, Christians work as ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20), whose task centers upon articulating and explaining the basis for their beliefs when engaging with others, demonstrating the historical, biblical, and theological reasons for our hope in Christ. When we consider our duty to defend Christian orthodoxy, we can retrieve a critical aspect of Machen’s approach.

Though he did not use our modern term when assessing the modernist challenges, Machen viewed the severity of modernist claims through the lens of theological triage.⁹ In short, theological triage refers to the process of prioritizing theological issues based on their significance and impact on Christian doctrine. As such, this evaluation involves categorizing theological disagreements into different levels of importance, distinguishing between essential doctrines, secondary doctrines, and issues of lesser consequence. This approach helps Christians navigate theological tensions, ensuring that we focus on preserving core, essential beliefs while allowing room for secondary disagreements.

In Machen’s case, he argued, “We do not mean, in insisting upon the doctrinal basis of Christianity, that all points of doctrine are equally important. It is perfectly possible for Christian fellowship to be maintained despite differences of opinion.”¹⁰ As an example, Machen noted the rising interest of eschatology, especially the growing popularity of dispensational premillennialism

(Machen also uses the older term, chiliasm). Though Machen admitted that the rise of premillennialism “causes us serious concern,” for he disagreed with its hermeneutical conclusions, he nonetheless praised premillennial advocates for their adherence to orthodoxy: “how great is our agreement with those who hold the premillennial view!” Despite his rejection of premillennialism, he recognized that its adherents

share to the full our reverence of the authority of the Bible, and differ from us only in the interpretation of the Bible; they share our ascription of deity to the Lord Jesus, and our supernaturalistic conception both of the entrance of Jesus into the world and of the consummation when He shall come again.¹¹

With the challenges the church now faces, we must resist every effort to delegate apologetics to specialists. Instead, from the perspective of Christian discipleship, the employment of theological triage can assist our apologetic witness to clarify the gravity of theological novelty, all with the hopes of providing a grid with which we can discern the legitimacy and seriousness of new proposals.

2. Maintaining Theological Vocabulary

Christians must preserve and promote theological terminology as a means of Christian discipleship. Machen recognized the downstream dangers of abandoning theological vocabulary to accommodate modern sensitivities. He claimed that “among students [at theological seminaries] the reassuring employment of traditional phrases is often abandoned, and the advocates of a new religion are not at pains, as they are in the Church at large, to maintain an appearance of conformity with the past.”¹² In other words, to avoid offending others, modernist sympathizers jettisoned specific theological terminology to situate Christianity around experientialism and morality. This practice

⁹ For a helpful summary, see Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

¹⁰ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 40–41.

¹¹ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 41.

¹² Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 15.

was justified as a way to convey Christianity in relational rather than doctrinal terms. Machen, on the other hand, understood that Christianity is much more than doctrine, but it is not less than doctrine.

In his advocacy of retaining theological terminology, Machen argued that

From the beginning, the Christian gospel, as indeed the name “gospel” or “good news” implies, consisted in an account of something that had happened. And from the beginning, the meaning of the happening was set forth; and when the meaning of the happening was set forth then there was Christian doctrine. “Christ died”—that is history; “Christ died for our sins”—that is doctrine. Without these two elements, joined in an absolutely indissoluble union, there is no Christianity.¹³

From its inception, Christianity was more than a mere lifestyle; it was a way of life rooted in a profound message. Foundational to this way of life was the significance of doctrine. Machen appealed to the Apostle Paul, demonstrating that doctrine served as the very bedrock of his ministry, fueling his intense concern for the substance and content of the Christian message. Machen is not rejecting the reality of theological contextualization (explaining doctrine in an understandable way to any specific audience); he is, however, rejecting revisionist definitions of theological terminology and the diminishing efforts modernists applied to its importance.

3. Involving the Whole Church

Our current theological and cultural challenges must be confronted in a joint effort between Christian academics and Christian laypersons. Noll argues that Modernists won their most important victories and gained their most ardent advocates in academic institutions, while the Fundamentalists were primarily led by laypersons.¹⁴ To be sure, Fundamentalists had academic advocates,

even if they were outnumbered. George Marsden notes that Machen “eventually assumed Warfield’s mantle as chief intellectual spokesman for conservative Presbyterians.”¹⁵ But Machen knew that the challenges before the church necessitated a diverse alliance to sustain an effective witness.

Similarly, a broad coalition encompassing both academics and laypersons offers several compelling advantages. First, academics’ inclusion provides rigorous intellectual engagement, drawing upon scholarly expertise and research. When in service to the church, academic specialization provides theological frameworks and nuanced responses to complex issues. Second, the engagement of laypersons plays a vital role in anchoring theological discourse to the practicalities of daily Christian life. Christians bring a wealth of diverse perspectives, experiences, and insights forged by their distinct contexts and vocations. Their active involvement serves as a safeguard against detachment from real-world realities, ensuring that theological discussions retain relevance and applicability to believers across diverse cultural and societal contexts. Third, a coalition of academics and laypersons invites collaboration, where scholars benefit from the wisdom and contextual knowledge of laypersons, gaining insights into the practical implications of their research. Conversely, laypersons can draw upon the theological expertise of academics to deepen their faith and to navigate complex theological challenges. Together, this means seminaries and churches cannot minimize their shared governance of confronting theological compromise while training the next generation of ministers.

Conclusion

Machen’s *Christianity and Liberalism* is a significant work of Christian theological discourse that remains relevant in our tenuous theological and ecclesial landscape.¹⁶ Machen’s insights pro-

13 Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 23.

14 Noll, *The Work We Have to Do*, 57–58.

15 George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 137.

16 There is a website dedicated to the celebration of Machen’s work: <https://www.christianityandliberalism.com/>.

vide continued guidance for Christians to navigate the challenges brought by modern versions of theological liberalism and its accommodationist alternatives. Machen's vigorous and unwavering defense of orthodoxy highlights Christianity's historical verifiability and foundational doctrines, emphasizing the inseparable connection between several fundamental truths. His work serves as a reminder that God's self-revelation finds its primary expression in concrete historical events, most notably in the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. These pivotal moments in history, accessible to humanity through the sacred Scriptures, form the solid foundation upon which the Christian faith firmly stands. Machen's emphasis on the historical basis of Christianity underscores the significance of these events as essential components of the faith, reinforcing their central role in shaping the belief system and providing a solid foundation for believers to cultivate lives of sanctified devotion. As believers strive to uphold the timeless truths of the Christian faith, Machen's overall emphases remain a relevant and indispensable resource that we can daylight, applying his classic work in our efforts to discern an apologetic that confronts the theological challenges threatening the vitals of orthodoxy, to reinforce our commitment to promote and protect the doctrinal bases and terminology underlying our faith, and to emboldened us to foster mutual partnerships between academic learning and ecclesial ministry. ©

Justin McLendon *is a teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and serves as professor of theology at Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, Arizona.*

✦ Servant Living

Creativity

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
March 2023¹

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.²

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.

* * *

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 chose different colors from the palette, and make sure the

² 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).

¹ https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1025.

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.

* * *

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 verité en peinture” (“I owe 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*.³

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. ©

William Edgar is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and emeritus professor of *apologetics and ethics* Westminster Theological Seminary, Glenside, Pennsylvania.

³ 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>.

Christians, Churches, and Public Aid

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
April and May 2023¹

by **David VanDrunen**

I write this article at the request of the OPC's Committee on Ministerial Care (CMC). I note this for a couple of reasons. For one thing, this article is meant to address practical issues in the church pertinent to the work of the CMC and the OPC Committee on Diaconal Ministries, as well as to diaconal work at the local and presbyterial levels. For another thing, readers should know that I do not write this out of any interest in advancing a personal agenda or to persuade others of my personal convictions. My goal, instead, per the CMC request, is to help church officers and other Christians think through the multiple and often complicated questions raised by the matters before us. I hope that readers who disagree with some of the conclusions below will still benefit from my attempt to clarify the issues at stake. The CMC did not ask me to take particular positions, nor has it officially endorsed my conclusions.

The main issue is the propriety of Christians accepting public aid and of the church encouraging or discouraging its members (including ministers) from accepting public aid. I use "public aid" generally to refer to government assistance to the needy. Reformed Christians clearly do not share a unanimous view on this issue. There are many relevant exegetical, ecclesiological, ethical, and political factors that might shape a person's view, so it is wise for us not to be prematurely dogmatic, especially since the ramifications of our answers for individuals, families, and churches can be quite serious.

Among the factors relevant to resolving the issue are the obligation of individuals and families

to provide for themselves, the responsibility of the church to care for its needy members and especially for its ministers, the concern that the church not be unnecessarily burdened, the proper authority of civil government, and Christians' participation in civil government when they believe it has overstepped its proper authority. Some examples of concrete cases are the following: Is enrolling in Medicaid permissible or advisable for, say, a retired minister and his wife with little savings, for a family of limited means with a child having disabilities requiring speech or physical therapy, or for a family of limited means with a parent/grandparent having serious memory care issues and in need of constant supervision? Or is the church obligated to provide all the necessary financial and personal support in such cases? Is utilizing public school resources permissible or advisable for a family having a child with disabilities, when that family is committed to Christian or home schooling, but the latter have no resources to help the child? Or, is it permissible for a church of modest means to call a pastor with a promise to keep him free of worldly care when that promise depends upon access to a state program that will provide free healthcare to the pastor's children?

Rather than focusing on concrete examples, this article works through a number of foundational issues and offers some general conclusions, with the hope that this will equip Christians and churches to work through specific cases on their own. To approach our topic in an orderly way, I first address whether there is a Christian view of the proper scope of government responsibilities. Then, I address whether Christians may or should accept public aid, considering this first from the perspective of individuals and families and then from the perspective of churches. Finally, I address the distinctive issues that arise for ministers accepting public aid, in light of the church's special obligations toward them. I generally assume political conditions in the United States and trust that readers elsewhere can make appropriate application to their own contexts.

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1033,1042.

The Proper Scope of Government Responsibility

The question of what civil government properly does is obviously controversial, but it is an unavoidable aspect of our broader topic. Readers who support a more activist government may find it puzzling that anyone would question the propriety of needy Christians accepting public aid. In contrast, readers who are deeply skeptical of government assistance programs may be instinctively troubled at the idea of Christians doing so. Hence, it would be helpful at the outset to clear the air on the scope of government authority as much as possible. Is there a distinctively Christian view of this subject? Or is this a matter of judgment, about which Christians may hold well-informed opinions, but which they should not impose upon fellow believers?

It may be helpful to distinguish between different types of possible government functions. One way to do so is the distinction among so-called *protectionist*, *perfectionist*, and *service-providing* activities.² *Protectionist* functions aim to protect people from being harmed by others and to provide remedies and punishments when such harm occurs. These include administering a judicial system, a police force, and a military. *Perfectionist* functions aim to make citizens better people or at least stave off the worst vices. Examples include prohibiting gambling, prostitution, or narcotics (negatively), and establishing public libraries (positively). *Service-providing* functions, as the name suggests, aim to provide a variety of goods and services to the public. Among many examples are building roads, running municipal sports facilities, and funding or administering health care. It is not always obvious how to categorize a given government program, but this basic distinction at least

2 I have used this threefold distinction to examine similar issues in a recent book, which readers may consult for a more detailed discussion: David VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 329–48. Other writers have distinguished government functions differently. For example, George Klosko makes a sevenfold distinction in *Political Obligations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 24–40.

provides some initial conceptual clarity.

Only a few New Testament texts address what responsibilities civil government has. Romans 13 says that God has “instituted” and “appointed” magistrates (13:1–2) such that they are his “servant[s]” and “ministers” (13:4, 6).³ The purpose of this appointment is to “bear the sword” and to carry out “God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” 1 Peter 2:14 puts it more briefly but similarly. God has “sent” civil magistrates “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.” 1 Timothy 2:1–2 does not say directly what magistrates should do, but it tells Christians to pray for them, “that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life.” This arguably implies that civil government ought to keep the peace.

The first two texts and likely the third speak of government responsibilities in *protectionist* terms: government should do what is just by punishing wrongdoers and maintaining social order. It is debatable whether the commission to punish those who do wrong includes perfectionist functions, but I say nothing more about this, since it is beyond the scope of this article. Any mention of service-providing functions, however, is clearly absent from these texts.

Does the Old Testament add anything to these observations? The Noahic covenant commissions human society in general to enforce justice in response to intra-human violence (Gen. 9:6). This does not establish civil government directly, although it does describe protectionist responsibilities that, according to texts such as Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2, civil government rightly administers. In the rest of the Old Testament, we observe many Gentile governments conducting protectionist responsibilities, which reflect God’s common-grace governance of the world under the Noahic covenant. The Old Testament occasionally condemns Gentile rulers or societies for their sins. These texts usually focus on hubris, excessive

3 Scripture quotations are from The ESV Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright © 2001 by Crossway. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

brutality (such as slave-trading or ripping open pregnant women in Amos 1), and mistreatment of Israel.⁴ Some of these sins, especially those involving misconduct in war, could be interpreted as perversions of legitimate protectionist activities. But no text I am aware of condemns these nations or their rulers for failure to provide government services. (Of course, the Mosaic law and much else in the Old Testament speak about the responsibilities of theocratic Israel's kings and judges, but this provides no direct evidence of the rightful competence of contemporary civil governments, which are not in covenant with God through Sinai. But for those who might think it relevant, I note that the Mosaic law did not give service-providing responsibilities to Israel's kings and judges.)

What can we conclude from this biblical evidence? One sound theological conclusion is that civil government is divinely authorized to exercise protectionist functions in pursuit of intra-human justice. This is the prime rightful function of government. Another conclusion is that Scripture says nothing directly about government service-provision. This latter point suggests some further conclusions, but we need to step carefully. Reformed Christians recognize the regulative principle of *worship* but not a regulative principle of *government functions*. That is, while we insist that the church should worship only in ways Scripture commands, we do not insist that civil government may only do things Scripture commands government to do. Thus, it would be hasty to conclude that governments should not provide services because Scripture never says that they should. At this point, we can merely say that providing services is, at best, a secondary function of government.

Are there other general moral or theological considerations that shed light on the legitimacy of government service-provision? One argument in favor of supporting some service-providing functions is that if human societies are going to accom-

plish certain good and important things, certain other goods are necessary that private parties cannot provide, or at least not without great difficulty. A classic example is roads, which are required for many worthwhile activities that almost everyone wishes to pursue. While private parties can build and maintain roads on a small scale, developing an extensive system of roads is virtually impossible to imagine without government oversight and funding. So it seems reasonable to say that there is a stronger case for government services regarding goods that are less easily provided privately than regarding goods more easily provided privately. But the lines between these things are blurry, and thus we again fall short of being able to affirm or condemn government service-provision absolutely.

What about government assistance for the needy, the service-provision function of special concern to this article? In terms of the previous paragraph, assistance for the needy is something that private parties can and often do provide. Thus (at least in most cases), it cannot be justified on grounds that government must provide it or it cannot happen. There are also many weighty reasons to prefer private to public assistance (again, at least in general): In comparison to public aid, private assistance is better able to personalize help to match distinctive circumstances, to hold recipients accountable, to avoid creating unnecessary dependence, and to use resources efficiently. It also permits people to be genuinely charitable to the needy rather than simply enforcing contributions through taxation. Related to these factors, public aid programs display a tendency to swell over time.⁵ Yet Christian proponents of public aid (even if only a modest safety net) raise other moral and theological considerations in response. Reformed Christians profess that people are deeply sinful and thus often are not very generous with their resources toward the needy. Hence, keeping assistance purely in private hands is likely to leave many genuine needs unaddressed. Some contend

4 For extensive discussion of this, see David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), Ch. 4.

5 See e.g. John F. Cogan, *The High Cost of Good Intentions: A History of U.S. Federal Entitlement Programs* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

that societies do not show adequate concern for the needy if they merely protect them from violence, since their needs run much deeper. Others argue that government is in some sense an extension of the family and thus serves as an important backstop for needy people who lack ordinary family support or that earthly kings rightly imitate God the heavenly king who provides for the poor.⁶

Where does this leave us? I suggest that it is impossible to insist upon a clear *Christian* view of exactly what kinds of services and how much of them civil governments should provide. To be sure, Christians may make strong and well-informed judgments about the propriety and effectiveness of particular sorts of public aid. But since Scripture never commands or prohibits governments to provide services, including aid to the needy, believers should refrain from characterizing their own views as binding Christian doctrine. I myself am quite skeptical about the wisdom and effectiveness of most public aid programs, and I have made a political-theological argument elsewhere that public aid “stands on the outskirts of legitimate state authority.”⁷ But I could not draw that conclusion (even vague as it is) as a matter of dogmatic Christian conviction.

Christian Acceptance of Public Aid

If the conclusion of the previous section is sound, the church itself should not label public aid either as an evil or a good, as a cause either to support or oppose. The church can merely regard public aid as arguably within the bounds of legitimate government authority. And to the extent public aid is legitimate, it seems to follow that needy Christians may accept it. As a general principle, Christians rightly participate in divinely-instituted political structures (as evident in Rom. 13:1–7) and rightly claim legal benefits of their own political

system (as evident in Paul’s appeals to his Roman citizenship in Acts 16 and 22).

But there are potentially complicating factors with respect to public aid. One is that Scripture requires Christians, on an individual and family level, to strive to support themselves through hard work (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:11–12; 2 Thess. 3:6–12). Another is on the ecclesiastical level: the church has a solemn responsibility to care for its own needy members (e.g., Acts 6:1–6; 2 Cor. 8–9). Let us now consider the morality of Christians’ acceptance of public aid with respect to these two potential complications.

Public Aid and Individual/Familial Responsibilities

Christians ought to work hard (e.g., Col. 3:23; 1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:6–12). The wise person takes care of his property, lives within his means, and saves for the future (e.g., Prov. 10:5; 13:22; 24:27; 27:23–27). One of the goals of such industriousness is to avoid financial dependency (1 Thess. 4:12). These principles apply to individuals but also extend to families: family members should care for each other (1 Tim. 5:4, 8, 16). Paul took such concerns so seriously that he issued the stern judgment that the person unwilling to work should not eat (2 Thess. 3:10). Paul also suggests that unnecessary dependence tends to be morally degrading (1 Tim. 5:13).

Such texts make clear that Christians should aspire not to rely on public aid. They should not only avoid idleness and financial profligacy but also beware of life choices that make such dependence likely. Even to the extent public aid falls within legitimate government jurisdiction, Christians must never view it as a backstop for their own laziness or irresponsibility.

But laziness and irresponsibility are not the only source of financial need. Many people who work hard and make reasonable financial decisions fall into want. “Time and chance happen” to us all (Eccl. 9:11). Accident, injury, famine, pandemic, war, economic crash, and other events beyond our control or foresight bring hard times for Christians. The mere fact that Scripture so often praises care

6 Among recent Reformed writers who utilize some of these arguments in defense of modest government assistance to the needy, see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 824–25; and Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal World-view* (Overland Park, KS: Two Age, 2000), 174–79.

7 VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom*, 341–48.

for the poor demonstrates that while those *unwilling* to work should not eat (2 Thess. 3:10), others who lack life's necessities properly accept help from those better off. God has made us part of communities, and communities exist in part so we can care for each other in our inevitable times of need.

Such considerations alert us to *two* potential temptations. One is that Christians become idle and irresponsible. The other is that Christians become proud and deny their inherent neediness. Christians should not want to be financially dependent on others and rightly make effort to avoid it. But one of the ways God disciplines his children through suffering is by allowing them to fall into want. There is no shame in poverty per se or in accepting help from others. (Here I speak in general, without thinking specifically about private or public aid.) God provides for his people, but ordinarily does so through fellow humans. To refuse help in time of genuine need may be a symptom of pride, for only God is truly independent. Such pride is bad enough if only the proud person himself suffers because of it. But it is considerably worse if it enhances the suffering of others too. I think, for example, of cases in which proud parents turn down help that would offer relief to their needy children.

These initial considerations indicate that Christians' responsibility to work hard and care for themselves, in and of itself, does not constitute a moral barrier to accepting public aid. Insofar as public aid falls within the possible legitimate authority of civil government, the obligation of industriousness and self-care is not itself a sufficient reason for Christians to refuse assistance from state sources. In fact, refusing it could be the result of pride that scorns help God has seen fit to provide.

But an objection may arise at this point. Christians do not have biblical grounds for condemning public aid altogether, but they may have grave moral reservations about their particular society's public-aid system, perhaps because of how bloated it has become, how wasteful it is with tax revenue, or how it promotes or condones anti-Christian values. Christians who may not oppose accepting

public aid might theoretically still feel conscientious unease about benefiting from a corrupt system. How should we think about this?

There certainly may come times when a political system becomes so evil that Christians should refuse to participate in it. But no Christian should be hasty in concluding that his own government has sunk to this level. The infamous Nero was likely emperor when Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 were written, yet the apostles still regarded Roman magistrates as legitimate and commanded Christians to honor, obey, and pay taxes to them. Apparently, governments can fall into many terrible wrongs without triggering Christian obligation to disengage from them.

The New Testament provides an interesting concrete example of Christian participation in a sinful government structure: Paul's experience with the Roman judicial system in Acts. On many occasions, judges or other officials acted rather reasonably (16:38–39; 18:14–16; 19:35–41; 22:25–29; 23:16–35; 27:42–43), although at other times Acts describes them allowing or perpetrating injustices (e.g., 12:1–5; 16:19–24; 18:17; 24:26). Despite their shortcomings, Paul treated Roman civil officials with respect and participated in the system by defending himself in court and appealing to his legal rights (e.g., 16:37; 22:25–28; 24–26). His appeals to his rights are especially noteworthy. It is difficult to condone Roman policy toward non-citizens. They *could* be “beaten publicly” when “uncondemned” (16:37) and be “examined by flogging” (22:24).⁸ But that systemic injustice (as people might call it today) did not prevent Paul from taking advantage of the benefits the system gave him. To put it differently, Paul did not turn down benefits on account of objection to evils in the system.

I imagine that most Christians tempted to refuse public aid on account of problems in the public-aid system do not apply the same principle

8 See e.g. Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 3246–48; and C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 1047.

to their participation in protectionist government functions. Many Christians have concerns about the conduct of their local police departments. Some Christians regard their police as too aggressive in trying to combat crime, while others regard them as not aggressive enough. Many believers object to police-officer biases that compromise equal justice. Yet, most Christians do not feel obliged to refuse all benefits they might derive from their police. They are willing to call the police when threatened by imminent danger and to report crimes they witness. They act similarly toward their judicial system. Thoughtful Christians can recognize many injustices in their courts, but that does not prevent them from serving on juries or participating in lawsuits. One way to put it is that most Christians, when dealing with protectionist government functions, act as Paul did.

It is difficult to see why the same principle should not apply with respect to service-providing government functions. If participating in and receiving benefits from the police or civil courts is legitimate for Christians, despite corruptions within them, the reality of corruptions in a public-aid system is not a sufficient reason to prohibit Christians from participating in and receiving benefits from it.

This analogy might raise an objection from some readers. What if someone contemplating a certain public-aid benefit objects to the very idea of the government providing such a benefit? That is, it is one thing to continue utilizing the local police, despite objection to some of its practices, when a person believes that the government should provide police protection. But it is another thing for a person to accept a public-aid benefit if he believes the government should not provide that benefit at all.

This scenario does require further thought. A person finding himself in such a situation presumably has the freedom to choose to forgo the benefit and endure the consequences, at least if this decision does not hinder his ability to fulfill his God-given vocations or impose serious deprivation on others, such as his dependents. But I believe there are good reasons to conclude that this person is not

morally obligated to forgo the benefit.

The reasons I have in mind pertain to our place and responsibilities within corporate bodies. Participation in corporate bodies is part of ordinary human experience. Christianity highly values each person as an individual yet also affirms that we are meant to live and work in communities. God made each individual in his image (Gen. 1:26; 9:6) yet also made and redeems us as communities of image-bearers (Gen. 1:27; Rom. 8:29). While we might envision a pre-fallen or eschatological community in which all its members are in perfect agreement about everything, that is decidedly not our experience in any community of this fallen world. Corporate bodies need to make corporate decisions, and their individual members often oppose and regret those decisions. But it is simply not the case that individuals are obligated to refuse participation in the consequences of decisions they oppose and regret. In fact, humility and charity ordinarily require us to acquiesce in corporate decisions and to share in their burdens and benefits, even when we have lost the vote.

To use a personal example, I have been a member of a presbytery and of a seminary faculty for more than two decades. I concur with most of their corporate decisions, but on occasion I do not, and on some of these occasions I disagree strongly. What is the right course in the latter situations? I regard it as my responsibility to submit to these decisions and to live with their consequences. I am free to regret the decisions and to propose future measures to reverse or mitigate them, but I am not free to pick and choose which I participate in. In most cases, I will not have a choice anyway about whether to share in their burdens, since that will be required of me. And it is not hypocritical of me to share also in their benefits, even if I could turn them down. I remember a particular decision of my faculty many years ago from which I strongly dissented. It entailed a burden (extra work) but also provided a benefit (extra compensation). I had to accept the former, and I did not refuse the latter. As I shared the burden as a member of the body, I also rightfully shared in the benefit.

God has called each one of us to live within

another corporate body: political community. As considered above, political communities are divinely ordained and have legitimate authority structures. Few if any of us participate in the corporate decision-making of our political communities as intimately as I do in my presbytery and faculty meetings, although most readers live in political systems that grant rights to vote and to free expression. But in any case, we all must live within political communities that inevitably make many corporate decisions of which we disapprove, in some cases strongly. We cannot simply pick and choose which legislative, executive, and judicial decisions we will participate in. With respect to disagreeable policies about public aid, we seldom have a choice about whether to share in the burdens: our income will be taxed to fund them. And if so, we rightfully also share in their benefits. It is not hypocritical to accept the benefits as a just exchange for the exacted burdens, even if one objected to the exchange in the first place.

Of course, this conclusion requires nuances and exceptions. Christians should never acquiesce in a corporate body's decision that requires doing something inherently sinful. And corporate bodies sometimes make decisions that compromise or nullify that body's entire justification for existence (in the case of my personal examples, a presbytery or faculty decision to embrace a heretical doctrine would qualify). In such cases, active resistance to the decision or even withdrawing from the body may be required. But it seems unlikely that accepting basic public-aid benefits would entail doing something inherently sinful or that any of the policies behind these benefits compromise or nullify the government's entire justification for existence.

I conclude, therefore, that although a Christian is generally free to refuse public-aid benefits he believes should not be available, he is not obligated to refuse them because of such belief. In fact, accepting the benefits is a rightful exchange for the burdens imposed. And if refusing the benefit hinders a person's pursuit of his lawful vocations or deprives one's dependents of genuine goods, that person should seriously reconsider his refusal. He should at least ask whether this is a stubborn insis-

tence on getting his own way that detracts from his responsibilities toward God and neighbor.

Public Aid and Ecclesiastical Responsibilities

The previous subsection argued that the responsibility of individuals and families to care for themselves does not, in and of itself, prohibit Christians from accepting public aid. This new subsection considers a related question: does the *church's* responsibility to care for its needy members imply that it should provide all the assistance they require and should thus advise needy members to refuse public assistance?

The following discussion takes a couple of things for granted without argument. First, the church has a weighty yet wonderful responsibility to care for its needy members. Its generosity in doing so is profoundly Christlike (e.g., 2 Cor. 8:9). Second, the church's ministry is fundamentally independent of the legitimate work of civil government. Presbyterian and most other Reformed churches have quite rightly rejected Erastianism.⁹

These two important truths do not provide a neat and simple solution to the question, however. For one thing, corporate bodies other than the church have obligations toward their own needy members. This is obviously true with respect to families. It is also true for the political community. Even a government merely seeking to perform its bare-minimum function of providing justice for victims of violence must be specially attentive to the needy, who are generally the most vulnerable and easily overlooked members of society. And since many needy people are members of multiple corporate bodies, it is far from obvious that the responsibilities of one body (such as the church) eliminate the responsibilities of another (such as the government). For another thing, while church

⁹ People often use the term "Erastianism" loosely. I use it here to designate the denial of the church's spiritual authority, independent of the civil magistrate, to govern her own affairs and carry out her ministry. For an example of Reformed engagement with and rejection of Erastianism, see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 3, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), 274–81.

and state are properly independent, they still interact and have mutual interests in this world. If someone vandalizes a church building or threatens people with a gun in the church parking lot, both the church and the civil government have an interest in redressing the situation. The church calls the police and requests assistance. Of course, there are more difficult cases. The Covid-19 pandemic created situations of conflict between the government's jurisdiction over public health and safety and the church's jurisdiction over its worship. In a complicated world, cases of conflict or at least potential conflict arise. Jurisdictions potentially overlap.

What, then, about care for the needy? We might begin by considering whether the church's independence from the state requires the church to refuse all benefits from service-provision government functions. The answer is clearly negative. The church takes advantage of government-provided roads as its members drive to worship on Sundays, and it calls on government-funded firefighters if a blaze breaks out in its building. Such cases are relatively uncomplicated, since Christ does not call his church to build roads or fight fires. But Christ does call his church to provide diaconal aid for its needy, so we need to inquire further about issues regarding public aid.

Most Reformed churches (in the United States) already accept some government benefits that support its diaconal work, indirectly but substantially. They do so by embracing the legal status of being a charitable organization. Churches are exempt from property taxes, and its members can write off their donations from their income taxes. Churches also typically designate part of their pastors' remuneration as housing allowance, which is tax exempt. Such benefits stretch the resources of the church beyond what they would otherwise be. At the very least, churches that accept such favorable tax status should be mindful of potential inconsistency if they insist on the impropriety of their needy members accepting public aid.

But to focus the question before us: Does the church neglect its obligation to care for its needy members if it permits or even encourages them

to accept public aid? 1 Timothy 5:3–16 indicates that this is not the case. This text provides the most detailed New Testament instructions about the church's care for its needy.

1 Timothy 5 focuses on care for widows. It is not surprising that the early church's greatest diaconal needs arose among this group (cf. Acts 6:1), given widows' special vulnerability in the socio-economic setting of that day, as in many other times. But widows then and now are not the only vulnerable group. We might think, for example, of how often the Old Testament classed widows alongside orphans and sojourners. The principles of 1 Timothy 5 are surely applicable for other needy members too.

One of the prime principles of 1 Timothy 5 is that the church is *not* to be provider of first resort for its members' needs.¹⁰ Paul refers three times to those who are *truly* (*ontōs*, ὄντως) widows (5:3, 5, 16), those who are “left all alone” (5:5). These are the widows the church should support. Young widows should generally secure their own care by remarrying (5:14), and Christians who have widows in their family should provide their care (5:4, 8, 16). Paul's final statement in this discussion seems to capture the main point: “Let the church not be burdened (*bareisthō*, βαρείσθω), so that it may care for those who are truly widows” (5:16).¹¹ Paul's concern about not burdening the church also emerges in 2 Thessalonians 3. He says he worked hard and refused remuneration for his ministry so that “we might not be a burden (*epibarēsai*, ἐπιβαρῆσαι) to any of you.” He did this as “an example to imitate” (3:8–9). These texts clearly obligate individuals and families to strive not to strain the church's finances. But 1 Timothy 5 also obligates the church to enforce this, as it were, by withholding support from those who are not actually in desperate straights (5:9–16).

10 As Robert W. Yarbrough puts it, “Church relief . . . should be the last and not the first resort.” See *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 284.

11 As noted, e.g., in George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 231; and Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 358.

This is a weighty moral-ecclesiastical concern with bearing on our question. Some Christians may be inclined to refuse public aid because of objection to government overreach and to expect diaconal help from the church instead. They should be sure they are taking seriously the biblical command not to burden the church unnecessarily. Objection to government overreach is a debatable personal judgment, but not burdening the church is a divinely mandated obligation. Is one's personal political opinion of such moment that it justifies taking resources from the church that the church could use to meet the needs of fellow believers who have no other source of help? Likewise, a church inclined to provide for a member who refuses lawful public aid ought to weigh whether it is being faithful to 1 Timothy 5, insofar as such help depletes funds available for more desperate members.

Of course, 1 Timothy 5 speaks of *families'* obligation to help their own, not civil government's. The Christian community should not lose this emphasis upon familial responsibility. Yet the fact that Paul so stresses families' obligation to help their own demonstrates that the church's diaconal calling does not nullify the legitimacy of Christians receiving aid from outside the church. To be put it more sharply, this obligation of families demonstrates that the church's diaconal calling does not nullify the legitimacy of Christians receiving aid *from creation-order, common-grace institutions*. This is the sort of institution the family is (Gen. 1:28; 2:22–24; 9:1, 7). It is worth noting that in 1 Timothy 5 Paul speaks of family obligations not as some uniquely Christian duty but as a *natural* duty binding upon and understandable to all people. The duty involves making “some return to their parents,” or *paying back recompense* (*amoibas apodidonai*, ἀμοιβὰς ἀποδιδόναι) to them (5:4). Parents raise their children, and as a matter of simple justice children should care for their parents in their own time of need. A Christian who fails to do this is “worse than an unbeliever” (5:8), which is to say, even unbelievers understand this principle of

natural justice and typically follow it.¹²

In short, 1 Timothy 5 contradicts the idea that the church's obligation to help its needy members prohibits Christians from accepting aid from other sources. Paul appealed to the family's obligations to help its own needy members, but not because the family is a special redemptive institution. Paul's point was that the church's obligation toward its needy members does not cancel out *natural* obligations rooted in the orders of creation and/or common grace. Civil government is grounded in this natural order. This means, at least, that the church's obligation toward needy members is not sufficient reason for Christians to reject public aid.

Pastors and Public Aid

One question remains: May *pastors* accept public aid? Another way to ask it is whether churches, as they fulfill the responsibility to support their pastors, should encourage or discourage them from accepting government assistance.

On the one hand, we should not think of ministers as a different kind of Christian who stand in fundamentally different relationship to civil society from other Christians. Reformed churches have rejected traditional Roman Catholic claims that their clergy are exempt from civil jurisdiction.¹³ Pastors have all the legal liabilities of other citizens and have a right to vote and hold political opinions, although they must avoid getting engrossed in public affairs (see 2 Tim. 2:4). So, at the most general level, there is no reason to conclude that pastors should not receive public aid that other Christians may receive.

On the other hand, a church's obligation to support its pastor is not identical to the church's obligation to support its needy members. While the church should only provide for genuinely needy members without other recourse, as considered above, the church should be the *primary* provider for its pastor. The church does not help its pastor when he becomes needy but remuner-

12 See similar comments in Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 221; and Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 345.

13 E.g., see the argument in Turretin, *Institutes*, 3.258–68.

ates him so he does not become needy in the first place. This is a very important ecclesiastical responsibility. It is wonderful that the OPC is committed to remunerating the ministers it calls so that they might be free from worldly care, in distinction from many churches that call ministers but require them to raise their own support. Hence, it is worth considering what implications this responsibility might have with respect to public aid.

1 Corinthians 9 provides the most detailed explanation of the obligation to remunerate pastors. Paul's main concern here is his *apostolic* ministry. But it becomes clear that what he says applies to all ministers of the Word, as captured in 9:14: "the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel." The presenting issue in 1 Corinthians 9 is the fact that Paul had not accepted remuneration from the Corinthian church. He defends both his right to receive remuneration and his right to decline it for the sake of the gospel. But his entire argument hinges on the general right of ministers to be compensated for their labors. Moreover, this general right does not depend on some special status of the church as the kingdom of Christ but instead rests on an ordinary natural-law reality. Let us consider a few of the details.

The principle that launches Paul's discussion about ministerial remuneration is implicit in 9:6: Paul and Barnabas, *as all other preachers*, have a right (*exousian*, ἐξουσίαν)¹⁴ not to work (*mē ergazesthai*, μὴ ἐργάζεσθαι), that is, not to work beyond their gospel labors (though Paul had done so: 2 Thess. 3:8). The rationale follows: "Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk" (1 Cor. 9:7)? This is not complicated or profound but a reality of the natural order. Workers cannot devote themselves to service if they do not get compensated for it, and those who labor at something rightly claim a share of the profit. These

are not theological claims but a moral argument *kata anthrōpon* (9:8, κατὰ ἄνθρωπον)—literally, according to man. Paul confirms his conclusion by appealing to the general equity of the Mosaic law (9:8–10; cf. 9:13) and then returns to natural principles of justice: ministers sow spiritual things, so they rightly reap material things (9:11). Other ministers have this right and so also do Paul and Barnabas (9:12). Elsewhere Paul also cited a natural principle of justice when commanding ministerial remuneration: "The laborer deserves his wages" (1 Tim. 5:18; cf. Luke 10:7).

For present purposes, it is important to note that Paul does *not* claim that ministers' support must come from the church and from no other source. That cannot be the case, since Paul is so adamant to defend his decision not to receive support from the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 9:15–18). What, then, is Paul's claim? It is that *ministers who devote themselves to gospel proclamation have no obligation to engage in other remunerative employment*. They have a *right not to work* (9:6). If ministers accept public aid, there is no violation of this right or transgression of Paul's moral concern in 1 Corinthians 9. This suggests that if a minister falls into need in the exigencies of life, it is just as valid for him to accept public aid as for any other Christian.

But what if a ministerial need arises not from the exigencies of life but as part of the church's own plan? For example, a church calls a minister and promises to support him so that he will be free from worldly care. But the terms of the call leave the minister below a certain income line, which makes his family eligible for public aid benefits, and he will be free from worldly care only if he accepts this. Is such a call consistent with the moral and ecclesiological considerations addressed thus far?

If the church can afford to provide its pastor with whatever benefit the public aid might otherwise provide, such a call is difficult to justify. As considered above, Christians have an obligation to work hard and support themselves if possible. No Christian should desire to be dependent financially on others. Why then would the church *want*

¹⁴ On the translation of *exousia* here as "right" or "authority," cf. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 444.

to make its pastor dependent on the civil government?

But the situation is different if the church cannot in fact provide full support to a pastor. The alternative to asking the pastor to accept public aid may be to have no pastor at all. This is hardly an enviable situation, but it happens. 1 Corinthians 9 again provides insight. Paul's overarching zeal in this text is not about finances but about "winning" people (9:19) and "saving some" (9:22): "I do it all for the sake of the gospel" (9:23). Financial decisions should serve this end. It seems odd that a church would refuse to call a gospel-preaching minister in order to avoid having a minister who receives public aid. That would abandon the most important concern for the sake of upholding a subordinate concern.

As a final thought, I simply note that the government does not give such public aid to ministers *as ministers*, but simply as citizens. Support for indigent ministers is not a line-item on any American state's budget. Most American Reformed pastors are happy to receive the benefit of a tax-exempt housing allowance, and most Reformed churches are happy to incorporate this into their calculations about ministerial remuneration, yet this *is* tied to pastors' status as ministers. If it is permissible to accept this benefit from the government, which is direct assistance to the church, it is difficult to see why a poor church is prohibited from taking advantage of lawful indirect assistance when the alternative is an empty pulpit.

Conclusion

Scripture does not directly address whether governments should give public aid or whether Christians may accept it. This should make believers cautious about offering dogmatic conclusions about these issues. This article has argued that even Christians who are generally skeptical about the propriety of public aid have morally legitimate reasons, on at least some occasions, to accept public aid and to approve of other Christians doing so. Individuals and families must be industrious and financially responsible, and the church should generously support needy members and their pas-

tors. But the exegetical rationales for these important moral principles, in and of themselves, do not provide sufficient reason for Christians to reject public aid in times of genuine need. They may, in fact, provide weighty considerations for accepting it. ©

David VanDrunen is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as the Robert B. Strimple professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics at Westminster Seminary California, Escondido, California.

Two Paths to Happiness, and Why Only One Can Lead to a Happy End

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* June-July 2023¹

by **Andrew S. Wilson**

In our relativistic age, happiness is seen as a matter of personal taste. If you come across someone whose happiness aesthetic differs from yours, you are expected to shrug and politely say, "Whatever makes you happy." This makes sense to those who see human beings as more authentic when they act in accordance with their feelings. On the other hand, those who see all people as sharing the same human nature will conclude that some things are universally conducive, and others universally detrimental, to personal fulfillment. These differing perspectives correspond to two different paths to happiness, only one of which can lead to a happy end.

¹ https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1050.

The Path of Deified Desire

It is widely assumed in our time that happiness consists in having positive feelings (or at least not having negative ones). Closely related to this is the notion that subjective preferences should be the determining factor for how objective reality is ordered. As C. S. Lewis once put it, modern man has rejected the approach to life that focuses on how to conform the soul to the natural moral order, replacing it with an approach that seeks to subdue everything to his desires.² This outlook is now in full bloom, and it is being implemented politically on the basis of various supposed “existential threats.” In the words of professor Russell Berman, the formidable “nexus of government, media, major corporations, and the education establishment . . . aspires to a permanent state of emergency to impose a new mode of governance by intimidation, censorship, and unilateral action.”³ The powerful in our society claim to have the knowledge and expertise needed to fashion a new world that corresponds to their imaginations, all the while ignoring the constraints of the actual world. Psychologist Mattias Desmet explains this rise in coercive control as “the logical consequence of mechanistic thinking and the delusional belief in the omnipotence of human rationality.”⁴ Theologically, it is a manifestation of what Martin Luther was talking about when he said that “man cannot of his nature desire that God should be God; on the contrary, he desires that he himself might be God and that God might not be God.”⁵

The same dynamic is evident at a personal level in the embrace of expressive individualism, which Carl Trueman defines as “a prioritization of the individual’s inner psychology—we might even say ‘feelings’ or ‘intuitions’—for our sense of

who we are and what the purpose of our lives is.”⁶ Note how expressive individualism undergirds the response of William “Lia” Thomas (winner of the 500 meter freestyle at the 2022 NCAA Women’s Swimming Championships) when he was asked about his biological advantage when competing against women:

There’s a lot of factors that go into a race and how well you do, and the biggest change for me is that I’m happy, and sophomore year, when I had my best times competing with the men, I was miserable. . . . Trans people don’t transition for athletics. We transition to be happy and authentic and our true selves.⁷

As anyone who followed Thomas’s story knows, the thing that made him happy brought unhappiness to female swimmers who were forced to share a locker room with and compete against a biological male. When one person’s pursuit of happiness gets in the way of someone else’s pursuit of happiness, the conflict has to be adjudicated by something beyond individual feelings. But in a relativistic and therapeutic society that makes feelings ultimate, it simply boils down to which side has more power. This is exactly what happened in Thomas’s case, as the cultural ascendancy of transgender ideology resulted in his teammates and competitors being bullied into silence.

Such things are to be expected when a society unmoors itself from any sense of objective moral order. Trueman shows how the modern West has done this by employing Philip Rieff’s taxonomy of “worlds” to describe the various types of culture that societies embody. In this taxonomy, first worlds are pagan, second worlds are epitomized by the Christian West, and third worlds describe modernity. Trueman explains,

2 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 83.

3 Russell A. Berman, “State of Emergency,” *First Things* (June 2022), <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2022/06/state-of-emergency>.

4 Mattias Desmet, *The Psychology of Totalitarianism* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2022), 7.

5 Cited in Gene E. Veith, *Reformation Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 44.

6 Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 23.

7 “Swimmer Lia Thomas Breaks Silence about Backlash, Future Plans,” *Good Morning America*, May 31, 2022, <https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/news/video/swimmer-lia-thomas-breaks-silence-backlash-future-plans-85081325>.

First and second worlds thus have a moral, and therefore cultural, stability because their foundations lie in something beyond themselves. To put it another way, they do not have to justify themselves on the basis of themselves. Third worlds, by way of stark contrast to the first and second worlds, do not root their cultures, their social orders, their moral imperatives in anything sacred. They do have to justify themselves, but they cannot do so on the basis of something sacred or transcendent. Instead, they have to do so on the basis of themselves. The inherent instability of this approach should be obvious. . . . Morality will thus tend toward a matter of simple consequentialist pragmatism, with the notion of what are and are not desirable outcomes being shaped by the distinct cultural pathologies of the day.⁸

Lewis foresaw this when he wrote, “When all that says ‘it is good’ has been debunked, what says ‘I want’ remains.”⁹ And as Desmet notes, this produces a level of destabilization and anxiety that causes people to long “for an authoritarian institution that provides direction to take the burden of freedom and the associated insecurity off their shoulders.”¹⁰ This is why today’s West is simultaneously marked by libertinism and legalism. The rise of authoritarianism (or what Rod Dreher describes as “soft totalitarianism”)¹¹ is yet another manifestation of how fallen man slavishly looks to law for his deliverance. This is what the apostle Paul is talking about in Galatians 4 when he speaks of being enslaved to the “elementary principles of the world,” a phrase that describes the legalistic religious principle that was active for Jews under the law of Moses and for Gentiles under the law of nature. In the words of John Fesko, the phrase “elementary principles of the world” in Galatians

4 refers to “the creation law that appears in both the Adamic and Mosaic covenants.”¹² Because of fallen man’s enslavement under the law, when a society makes feelings and desires preeminent, the inevitable result is not happiness, but tyranny. This further demonstrates that the good order for which human nature was designed cannot be restored by human effort but only by receiving salvation as a free gift through faith in Jesus Christ, in whom we are accepted as righteous in God’s sight and renewed in the whole man after the image of God.¹³

The Path of Rightly Ordered Desire

Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430) expounds on the other path to happiness in his dialogue *On the Happy Life*, written soon after his conversion to Christianity.¹⁴ In this dialogue, Augustine discusses the connection between desire and happiness by saying, “If [a man] wants good things and has them, he is happy; but if he wants bad things, he is unhappy, even if he has them.”¹⁵ In other words, happiness cannot be separated from goodness, which is defined not by individual desires but by the objective moral order that God has inscribed in his world. What matters is not desire itself, but whether what we desire is good or bad. A similar point is made in one of Plato’s dialogues when an interlocutor contends that happiness consists in having the strongest possible appetites and being able to satisfy them. Socrates exposes the silliness of this notion by asking its proponent if it would be good to have a desire to itch as much as possible and to be able to follow through on that desire.¹⁶ A contemporary postliberal feminist makes the same point, saying,

12 J. V. Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2021), 271.

13 See Westminster Shorter Catechism Question #33.

14 Augustine, *On the Happy Life: St. Augustine’s Cassiciacum Dialogues*, vol. 2, trans. Michael P. Foley (New Haven: Yale, 2019).

15 Augustine, *On the Happy Life*, 27.

16 Cited in J. Budziszewski, *How and How Not to Be Happy* (Washington D.C: Regnery, 2022), 17.

8 Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 76–77.

9 Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 74.

10 Desmet, *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*, 84.

11 Rod Dreher, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (New York: Sentinel, 2020).

Liberal ideology flatters us by telling us that our desires are good and that we can find meaning in satisfying them, whatever the cost. But the lie of this flattery should be obvious to anyone who has ever realized after the fact that they were wrong to desire something, and hurt themselves, or hurt other people, in pursuing it.¹⁷

For the above writers, desire itself cannot be the measure of happiness, because some desires are good, and some are bad. If we want to find true happiness, we need to cultivate good desires and suppress bad ones. True happiness, like true freedom, must be ordered toward the good.

Augustine also points out that approaches to happiness that are focused only on the things of this life will inevitably fail, because they are based upon that which is ephemeral and thus bound to disappoint us. As Michael Foley summarizes in his commentary on Augustine’s dialogue,

Wealth, bodily health, honor, or success, the affairs of the heart—all these are to some extent products of good fortune and therefore vulnerable to misfortune. Therefore, building one’s happiness on these vulnerable goods is building one’s house on sand.¹⁸

When Augustine speaks of “fortune” and “misfortune,” he means that, try as we might, there are always going to be things in this life that are beyond our control. No matter how carefully we try to promote and protect our interests, we will not always succeed. Even when misfortune does not befall us, its possibility makes us anxious, and this keeps us from being perfectly happy. This is why the Scriptures tell us that it is only when our hearts are fixed upon that which cannot be shaken that we can face the prospect of bad news without fear (cf. Ps. 112:7; Heb. 12:26–29). In short, the transitory nature of this life makes it incapable of fulfilling our longing for happiness.

17 Louise Perry, *The Case against the Sexual Revolution* (Cambridge: Polity, 2022), 20.

18 Augustine, *On the Happy Life*, 53.

In his dialogue, Augustine’s concern is with *supreme* happiness, which does not exist on a spectrum but is something we either possess or do not possess, like life itself.¹⁹ Foley explains,

Augustine is not interested in lessening the pain and despair of our frail and mortal existence. . . . Augustine wants to identify and *reach* supreme happiness and bliss, and as such he is seeking the source of total human fulfillment. The value in Augustine’s approach. . . . is that in forcing us to consider what ultimate happiness would consist of, it forces us to discover our human nature—that which is to be perfected.²⁰

Of course, the suggestion that there is such a thing as a human nature that exists outside the individual will is abhorrent to those who are intent on bringing reality into alignment with their desires. This is tragic, but understandable. As professor Joshua Mitchell notes, “A lost civilization, like a lost soul, is seldom drawn to what will heal it; it is repulsed by the medicine it most needs.”²¹ While there is significant enthusiasm these days about technologies that promise humans greater control over the world, the counterfeit realities produced by such things will never be able to bring real happiness.²² In Mitchell’s words, “Our Tech Wizards seek now to give us the ultimate drug to lift us from the stupor of loneliness that they themselves have manufactured: the metaverse, the high that never crashes. This will not end well.”²³

When people see happiness only as a matter of feeling good, they are actually conceiving of themselves as the highest good. The reason why this

19 Augustine, *On the Happy Life*, 40.

20 Augustine, *On the Happy Life*, 77.

21 Joshua Mitchell, “By the Sweat of Our Brow,” *First Things* (August/September 2022), <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2022/08/by-the-sweat-of-our-brow>.

22 See Ronald W. Dworkin, “The Politics of Unhappiness,” *First Things* (May 2022), <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2022/05/the-politics-of-unhappiness>, and Mary Harrington, “Love Drugs’ Are More Dangerous than You Think,” *UnHerd* (June 10, 2022), <https://unherd.com/the-post/love-drugs-are-more-dangerous-than-you-think/>.

23 Mitchell, “By the Sweat of Our Brow.”

does not work is because happiness is the result of the satisfaction of longing, which is by nature directed toward something outside ourselves. Happiness is a by-product, not an end in itself. None of the things of this world can fully satisfy man's deepest longing, because they all stubbornly point beyond themselves to something greater.²⁴ Consider philosopher J. Budiziszewski's thoughts on earthly beauty:

I can spend all day looking at the beautiful earth and sea, until I no longer want to. I can tire myself out feeling the breath of the beautiful air, diffused and spread abroad. I can take in so much of the arrangement of the constellations that I need to go indoors and catch my breath. Yet the longing for that *something more* will follow me inside.²⁵

The only way we can find supreme happiness is by obtaining that which is perfectly good and endures forever. This is why knowing the living and true God is the only thing that can truly satisfy us. As Augustine prays in his *Confessions*, "The happy life, in fact, is joy in truth: and that means joy in you, who are Truth, O God my light, the health of my countenance, my God."²⁶ This leads Budiziszewski to say that

not yet being fulfilled is a sign not of something wrong but of accurate perception, for we are not fulfilled here. . . . St. Paul spoke searchingly of how we "groan" in the longing that what is mortal in us may be "swallowed up by life." These very tears and groanings are promissory notes of joy, for if we were perfectly adapted to the way of the world, we would not have such tears and groanings; the ordinary satisfactions would satisfy us. . . . Blessed are those who refuse to drug their discontent with

futile satisfactions.²⁷

Dissatisfaction and sadness are to be expected in this world. Attempts to find fulfillment here will always end in frustration. In the words of Bosnian war survivor Emina Melonic, "Western society demands to free itself from pain but such freedom is always just an illusion. Our lives demand attention, and sometimes painful reflection. This is something no pill or an app can provide."²⁸

Of course, Christians should not be gloomy and see this life merely as something to endure until we can enter into the permanent joys of heaven. Even though supreme happiness cannot be found in any of the things of this world, those of us who have been reconciled to God through faith in Christ already participate in his victory over this sin-cursed world (cf. Jn. 16:33). This is why the Latin term Augustine used for "happy" in *On the Happy Life* was not *felix*, which was associated with good fortune, but *beatus*, which can also be translated as "blessed." Consider this definition of "blessedness" by Old Testament scholar Willem VanGemeren: "Even when the righteous do not feel happy, they are still considered 'blessed' from God's perspective. He bestows this gift on them. Neither negative feelings nor adverse conditions can take away this blessing."²⁹ As recipients of God's redemptive blessing in Christ, Christians can receive the good things of this life as foretastes of the eternal bliss that lies in store for us in the life to come. We can even maintain a hopeful and positive attitude in the face of the evils, frustrations, uncertainties, and sorrows of this life. This does not mean being a Pollyanna, but cultivating what Melonic describes as "Slavic joy," or honest optimism.³⁰ We do this by always keeping in mind

27 Budiziszewski, *How and How Not to Be Happy*, 205.

28 Emina Melonic, "There's a Pill for That," *American Greatness* (July 26, 2022), <https://amgreatness.com/2022/07/26/theres-a-pill-for-that/>.

29 Willem A. VanGemeren, *Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 5: *Psalms*, eds., Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 78.

30 Emina Melonic, "Why America Needs Slavic Joy, or How to Be an Honest Optimist," *American Greatness* (September 28, 2021), <https://amgreatness.com/2021/09/28/why-america-needs>

24 This point is beautifully described in George Herbert's poem "The Pulley." See Gregory E. Reynolds, "The Pulley: A Theological Reflection," *Ordained Servant* 26 (2017): 16–18, *Ordained Servant Online*, https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=653.

25 Budiziszewski, *How and How Not to Be Happy*, 133.

26 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2019), 10.23.22.

the big picture set forth in Scripture, which assures us that the Lord is superintending over all things in order to establish an eternal kingdom in which evil and sorrow will be fully and finally vanquished.

This is not to be confused with being optimistic about the prospects of a particular society. After all, while we are called to seek the well-being of the earthly cities in which we sojourn (see Jer. 29:7), the fate of nations and civilizations ultimately lies in the hands of the Lord. Furthermore, honest optimism does not require that we embrace the postmillennial notion that history will culminate in a golden age in which Christ will rule over the world through his church prior to his return.³¹ Christian hope transcends this present age, regardless of one's eschatology. This is why believers can laugh at the inevitable manifestations of corruption, absurdity, and futility in our fallen world without falling into cynicism or despair.³² The evils of this world throw the glories of the gospel into sharp relief.

One of the most important ways we can cultivate honest optimism is by paying careful attention to our thought patterns, so that our feelings are kept in their proper place. As pastor David Murray points out, "Feelings have big muscles. They are often the most powerful force in our lives. They can bully our minds, our consciences, and our wills. They can even knock out the facts and bring the truth to its knees."³³ Instead of letting our feelings dominate our thoughts and color the way we view reality, we should train them under the yoke of truth, remembering that "he that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls" (Prov. 25:28 KJV). It is no surprise that the apostle Paul, while

slavic-joy-or-how-to-be-an-honest-optimist/.

31 See R. Scott Clark, "Stop Saying that Amillennialism Is 'Pessimistic' but Postmillennialism Is 'Optimistic,'" *Heidelblog* (September 5, 2022), <https://heidelblog.net/2022/09/stop-saying-that-amillennialism-is-pessimistic-but-postmillennialism-is-optimistic/>.

32 See Carl Trueman's reflections on Martin Luther's sense of humor in *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 198–200.

33 David Murray, *The Happy Christian: Ten Ways to Be a Joyful Believer in a Gloomy World* (Nashville: Nelson, 2015), 1.

writing from prison, accompanied his famous imperative "Rejoice in the Lord always" with this charge: "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. 4:4, 8). This is not a habit that comes naturally to many of us, especially not in our present cultural context. But it can be cultivated through the use of readily available practices and resources, most notably memorizing and meditating on Scripture and reflecting upon great hymnody and poetry.³⁴ Professor Leland Ryken promotes this function of poetry in the introduction to his recent anthology of devotional poems, contending that such poems can be read as "setting our thoughts and feelings in right tune, and also some of the time correcting them," adding that "the same is true when we read the Psalms."³⁵ Let us endeavor to turn our focus away from our feelings and circumstances and toward the Lord, remembering that his praise is both pleasant to us and fitting for us (cf. Ps. 147:1).

Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!
Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!
(Ps. 34:8) ©

Andrew S. Wilson is the pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Laconia, New Hampshire.

34 Two excellent, accessible books on Christian poetry are Jim Scott Orrick, *A Year with George Herbert: A Guide to Fifty-Two of His Best Loved Poems* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011) and Leland Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase: A Treasury of Classic Devotional Poems* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018).

35 Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 15.

Servant Work

Letters to a Younger Ruling Elder

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* January–December 2023¹

by an Older Elder

The Danger of Pride

Letters to a Younger Ruling Elder, No. 1

Dear James,

Thank you. Your words warmed the heart of an old man. I heard about your ordination and was just speaking with the Lord about you this morning. I wondered how you were doing in this new calling to serve him as a ruling elder. You can imagine my surprise when your letter came today requesting some advice. God’s timing is always just right, isn’t it? Of course, I am delighted to share anything the Lord has taught me over the years. I wish I had learned more by advice and less by mistake! It is a good thing to ask for some help (Prov. 24:6). Just bear in mind that giving good counsel can be hard. Even older men like me must be cautious here, lest we become like one who “darkens counsel by words without knowledge” (Job 38:2). Weigh my words by Holy Scripture. One thing we know for sure—that is, “the counsel of the Lord stands forever” (Ps. 33:11).

No doubt you grasp the weight of this calling to serve as a ruling elder in Christ’s church. You are a soul-watcher now. And you will, one day, give an account of your watching (Heb. 13:17).

Soon enough, if not already, you will come to

feel what Paul expressed when he wrote “we were burdened above measure, above strength” (2 Cor. 1:8). And this is uniquely so for those called to serve as ruling elders. You have already, as I understand from your letter, an earthly calling of significant responsibility. You also have a family. Now you are an elder. But I trust you will learn by experience just how strong our Lord is. He gives power to the weak (Isa. 40:29), which you will surely see.

On to some advice. I think I will begin, if you do not mind, with an important caution. I do not know that you need it personally. But sooner or later it becomes a snare to many. I am talking about your heart. *The greatest danger of the eldership is an elevated heart.* Remember that. Nothing will ruin a man’s work so much as a proud spirit. It is vital you know this. Whole churches have been destroyed by nothing more than the haughty heart of a ruling elder. Pride is a potent poison. The fiery dart of pride is Satan’s favorite weapon. “Pride goes before destruction” (Prov. 16:18) is a rule that has sadly been proven time and again. A false teacher is bad. A proud elder is worse. Heresy has slain her thousands. Pride her ten thousands. There is no damage like the damage done by an arrogant elder.

In Romans, Paul’s warning against pride is nearly the first thing he mentions when he goes from doctrine to practice. He explains the gospel. He shows our helplessness and need. He points to God’s righteousness in Christ. He teaches us the meaning of sovereign grace. Oh, the wonders of His love! So how should we now live? What must this Christian now do? Here is where he starts, that man is “not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think” (Rom. 12:3). If this is true of every Christian, it is more so for us elders. Beware of pride.

I would also have you carefully weigh the warning of Proverbs 26:12: “Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” The fool is a bad man. He is a godless man. “The fool says in his heart, “There is no God”” (Ps. 14:1). But the proud man is a worse man. Pride makes us worse than atheists. An atheist thinks there is no God, but the proud man thinks

¹ https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1013,1022,1031,1036,1045,1053,1064,1075,1082,1092.

he is God. That is worse. Mark this: a proud elder is worse than a godless one. A proud elder will share in Satan's fate—"he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil" (1 Tim. 3:6). Remember, my dear brother, a proud elder is an ordained demon.

Having said all of that, our greatest need in this office of ruling elder is, by God's grace and means, to cultivate a humble heart. Let that, my dear, precious brother, be your great aim. Keep your heart with diligence (Prov. 4:23). Jonathan Edwards called pride "the worst viper in the human heart." Well, I have given you enough to think about for now. Feel free to write again should you want to discuss this topic, or maybe another, at greater length.

Your soul's well-wisher,
An older ruling elder

* * *

The Importance of a Lowly Heart **Letters to a Younger Ruling Elder, No. 2**

Dear James,

What a delight to get your response to my last letter. I am glad you found it helpful. To God be the glory. The Lord is the ultimate source of all that is truly helpful to our souls. He is the giver of every good gift (James 1:7). He pours out the most refreshing water and serves it to us in various vessels, but he himself is the "fountain of life" (Ps. 36:9). It is a joy to be his cup. As we travel along serving within the sphere the Lord has given to us, nothing is more pleasing than to be his glass of goodness to another soul.

Now, you asked if I would comment on further on a topic which I introduced briefly in my last letter, namely, the nurturing of a lowly heart. I will do my best in a few words to handle a large subject. I think it would be best to begin by explaining what I mean by a lowly heart, then to share some thoughts on how to pursue it.

A lowly heart is a heart brought low by what sin has done. I think you will find this a helpful definition and a lens by which to see your own soul. Sin has ruined this world and mankind to a degree that words struggle to express. In a moment, one sin

plunged all creation from perfection into misery. Where there was only life, there came universal death (Rom. 5:12). Sin brought corruption into everything. Sin traded away peace and gave war. Sin exchanged cleanness for filthiness. Sin stole heaven and gave hell.

A lowly heart carries about this deep sense of sorrow for what sin has done. This begins, first and foremost, with a sense of *our own sin*. You asked for practical advice on developing a lowly heart. So here is the first thing—*cultivate a sense of your own sin*. Be specific. Call it out by name. Is it greed? Is it laziness? Is it selfishness? Is it lust? Is it ambition? No one can go to war with an invisible enemy. You cannot repent over nameless sins.

Your capacity to minister to others effectively will depend upon this. God's greatest servants in Scripture saw their own sin and were deeply moved by it. Abraham did. David did. Isaiah did. Paul knew himself to be the "chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). This is a secret to fruitful ministry. Spurgeon once put it this way, "A sense of our own poverty drives us to Christ, and that is where we need to be, for in Him our fruit is found."²

Listen. There are some who have served in this office of elder who, sadly, do not seem to have much of this sense of their own sin. Maybe the Lord has spared them from some of the greater vices, and they mistake this for holiness. Maybe they are too busy focusing on the sins of others to see the evil in their own heart. It is a most painful thing for the church to endure an elder that does not seem to know himself a sinner. Ask the Lord, dear brother, to search your heart often.

And that leads me to the second piece of practical advice. Use this sense of your own sin to foster a deep sorrow for what sin has done to others. Every lamb in your flock is suffering, in some way, the horrible effects of sin. Have they lost loved ones? Sin did that. Are they sick? Sin, ultimately, is the cause of every sickness in this world. They may also be suffering from the miserable consequences of personal sin in their lives. Stir up a sympathy

2 C. H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, Evening, August 28.

for these precious sheep of the Lord Jesus who are being hunted and wounded by the wolf of sin.

This was most eminently true of our precious Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore he, above anyone who ever walked on this earth, was most “lowly of heart” (Matt. 11:29). None were moved as much as he was by what sin had done to mankind. None wept as he wept over our sin. None cared like he cared about the consequences of our sin. And no one suffered as he suffered to undo the terrible effects of sin for his people.

If you want some practical advice on cultivating a lowly heart, I can do no better than to point you to Christ, dear brother. As you move among his people, do so with a sense of what a mess sin has made of this world and our lives. Bear that burden. Plead for God’s mercy. May the Holy Spirit put the heart of that publican in your soul, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13). And then go to the flock with love and compassion, bringing them to Jesus. That is what is meant by a lowly heart.

Your soul’s well-wisher,
An older elder

* * *

The Importance of the Devotional Life Letters to a Younger Ruling Elder, No. 3

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.”³

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.”⁴ 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 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 overzealous pastor that wanted to see their own work bear fruit. This rarely goes well. There are women

3.10.6, ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 724.

4 C. H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, August 28 AM (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980).

3 John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1,

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 much 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

* * *

Prayer Work

Letters to a Younger Ruling Elder, No. 4

Dear James,

It warmed the heart of an old man, especially on a frigid February morning, to see your letter in the mail. I was wondering how you were doing. What wonderful news that Jean is expecting again! Your family is growing. With that, so will your

responsibilities. But I would remind you to meditate much upon the promise of James 4:6, that “he gives more grace.” Some translate it “greater grace.” Either way, you will find that grace grows in proportion to your need. Another very busy servant of the Lord found his grace to be more than sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9), and you will too.

You asked if I could write a little more about the prayer life of the ruling elder. My answer is: *not easily.* It is a painful subject because I sense a very deep and personal deficiency here. I wish I had the perspective on the prayer life of a ruling elder back when I began that I have now. If our regrets were permitted in heaven, no doubt prayer-regrets would haunt me there. But O the depth of the sufficiency of Christ’s death that has paid to the last farthing for every failure and every sin. Hell will be filled with regrets; but not one shall make it past the pearly gates of glory.

I say without hesitation that effective, fervent prayer is the most important and chief work of the ruling elder. Prayer is the duty of every Christian. It is doubly the duty of the elder. Your closet, *wherever that place of quiet solitude is that you have carved out for prayer,* is where the battle is lost or won. It is said of Jacob, “in his manhood, he strove with God” (Hos. 12:4). The ruling elder must be a prayer-man. Do you need wisdom? You will get it only by prayer. Do you need strength? Prayer is the pipeline to heavenly power. Whatever it is you stand in need of, may you say with Hannah, “for this child I prayed” (1 Sam. 1:27).

Prayer, you will find, ties all the duties of your work as an elder together. Do you need to get to know your sheep? One great way is to be praying for them and asking them how best you can pray for them. Do you see some of the wrinkles, spots, and blemishes of the flock that mark all God’s sheep in his pastures below? Prayer is the first weapon to begin to deal with them. Do they need to be nourished by the word of God, especially the preached word? Pray for your pastor and put his preaching ministry regularly before the throne of grace. And prayer blesses your soul, too. Prayer makes the heart larger, and a ruling elder desperately needs a great heart.

I mentioned already the need for wisdom, but let me emphasize that. Individually, and as a session, you will need an abundant supply of godly thinking. We must ask for this in prayer (James 1:5). Solomon was at his best when he asked for an understanding heart (1 Kings 3:9). Beware of making plans and decisions without consulting the Lord.

Let me bring these thoughts to a close with some practical advice. You need a plan. There is enough to be praying about, even in a small church, that you need a strategy and a system to do this work well. A disorganized prayer-life is as bad as a disorganized army. When it comes to prayer, elders often have great thoughts, but bad habits. How will you adequately and effectively pray for all the needs of every saint, let alone your own needs and those of others you know? I would not prescribe where God has not. You will need to find a plan that works for you. However, the Scriptures do teach that “without counsel, plans fail (Prov. 15:22).” So my counsel, for your consideration, is to divide up the members of your church like a calendar, with some allotted to each day. By this method you will pray particularly for each member at least monthly.

James, let me remind you as I close, that our Savior Jesus Christ was and is a praying man. Jesus prayed for his sheep, and he still intercedes for them today (Heb. 7:25). There is nothing in which your likeness to Christ is more needed than in prayer-likeness. Well said that godly evangelist George Whitefield, “O prayer! Prayer! It brings and keeps God and man together. It raises man up to God and brings God down to man. If you would therefore, O believer, keep up your walk with God, pray. Pray without ceasing.”⁵

Your soul’s well-wisher,
An older elder

* * *

The Elder’s Wife

Letters to a Younger Ruling Elder, No. 5

⁵ Randall J. Pederson, ed., *Daily Readings: George Whitefield*, February 11 (Ross-shire, Scotland, UK: Christian Focus, 2010).

Dear James,

Your letter came this morning with the cookies from your dear wife. Blessings to her for thinking of me and give her my love. You have, as the Scriptures say, found “a good thing” (Prov. 18:22). No need for apologies about the delayed reply. You have a busy schedule and a bustling home; cherish this time. We are told of King Asa that “in his days the land had rest for ten years” (2 Chron. 14:1). These are not your restful years! But the Lord is pleased with noisy homes and busy children. Love those dear little ones now and tell them often of God’s love for them too. Of such, as our Lord said, is the kingdom of heaven.

You asked specifically in your letter about whether I had any advice for you *as a husband* who is also an elder. You are concerned about balancing the responsibilities of your office and your domestic life. *It is good you are thinking about that!* Some men do not. And, sadly, far too little has been written about the importance of the husband-wife relationship of ruling elders. The pressures upon a pastor’s wife are real and well known. But the added stress upon the marriages of ruling elders can, sometimes, be even greater. Allow me to share a couple thoughts.

The first thing I would say, James, is this: next to the care of his own soul, the most important duty of a married elder *is to love his wife*. I cannot emphasize that enough. You must not think of the care that you give to your “rib” (as Luther called his precious Katie) as something separate from your elder-work. No. *It is your elder-work*. And far too many elders forget that. “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the church” (Eph. 5:25) is a word to all married men, but it is doubly important for the elder who, like Timothy, is commanded to be an example (1 Tim. 4:12).

It has been my sad experience to observe that when the devil wants to disable the work of a ruling elder, he will often attack him in his marriage. He did this in Eden and has been striving to do it ever since. I suspect this wicked scheme is driven by his desire to cripple the effectiveness of your prayers (1 Pet. 3:7). You must therefore guard that precious relationship with your dear wife with a

great jealousy. Our God is a jealous God. And if you are to be effective in your eldership as a married man, you must be a jealous husband. Guard your relationship with your wife.

Not that you need this warning, but when a ruling elder treats his wife carelessly, he ruins his own ministry and does great dishonor to the Lord Jesus Christ and to the church. When a ruling elder is, as Bunyan said of Talkative, “a saint abroad and a devil at home,”⁶ he does greater harm as an officer in the church than he would do if he were not ordained. Domineering husbands make poor elders. They “lord it over their wives,” so no wonder they “lord it over the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3).

Another thing to think about with respect to your marriage and your work as an elder is this: You might err in sharing too much with your wife, *but you will never err in listening too much*. I know a good many ruling elders, and not a few pastors, who should have shared less and listened more to their wives. Your dear Jean will neither want nor ask the details of some of the things you discuss on the session. But she will often have wonderfully wise insights which, if heeded and prayed over, will serve you quite well. We men need our wives. When the Lord God saw man alone in the garden, it was not good. To meet that need our all-wise God brought to Adam a wife, not a session! Consider this.

Let me wrap up my little letter this way: Some of the best sermons ever preached in church *happen on the other side of the pulpit*. I am referring to the *living sermon* which your love for your wife proclaims. Do you want your people to know Christ’s love for them? Love your wife. Do you want them to know Christ cares for them? Care for your wife. Develop good habits of communication, support, trust, fidelity, and tenderness for her. When you love your wife, you love the church.

James, I trust the Lord will help you pick some sense out of my rambling advice.

⁶ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, (a Project Gutenberg eBook.) (n.d.). <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/39452/39452-h/39452-h.htm>, location 150.

Your soul’s well-wisher,
An older elder.

* * *

Getting to Know Your Pastor Letters to a Younger Ruling Elder, No. 6

Dear James,

I received your letter last week Thursday. I would have written back sooner, but it seems the good Lord preferred that I spend the last few days in our local hospital. It all started with some stomach pains and nausea on Friday, not long after my breakfast with Pastor Sam. When it did not subside by noon, I drove myself to urgent care and was subsequently taken by ambulance to Mercy Hospital, where I remained for four days. Pastor Sam visited me; God bless his soul. He was quite concerned it was the breakfast that got me. I told him they ruled out food poisoning, so it must have been the company! We had a good laugh, which seemed to help (Prov. 17:22). Anyway, after four days at Mercy it is nice to be home. I have a follow-up next week with my regular doctor.

I am glad you found some help in my last letter on the importance of the relationship of a ruling elder and his wife. When the Lord gives an elder a wife, He gives him much needed help (Gen. 2:18). You asked me if there are *other relationships* which are crucial to the effective ministry of a ruling elder. That is a very good question. If you do not mind, I would like to start with that relationship which is *so obvious that it is often ignored*. What I am speaking of is the immensely important relationship of a ruling elder with the pastor.

Our Lord Jesus Christ took great pains to promote a spirit of unity and love among his apostles. Whenever he found them disputing, he immediately set them aright: once by means of a little child (Luke 9:47) and once by means of a lesson about service (Luke 22:25). Maybe his most memorable lesson was when he took a towel and washed their feet, telling them, “You also should do just as I have done to you (John 13:15). Your relationship with the pastor must be marked by and maintained by this servant attitude of the

heart. This is very important.

James, allow me to speak very plainly to you here. I do not believe I am exaggerating when I say that within the congregation no relationship will predict the overall health, growth, and maturity of the flock as this relationship between the pastor and his ruling elder(s). It is foundational. This relationship has often been the special target of Satan's most forceful attacks upon the church. He knows that a house divided cannot stand (Matt. 12:25). Therefore, in the language which Paul used in Romans 12:18, "so far as it depends on you," ensure the protection and nourishment of this relationship with your pastor.

To drive this point home a bit more clearly, allow me to give you three reasons why this relationship with your pastor must maintain a very high priority for you as a ruling elder. First, the pastoral ministry, conscientiously and earnestly practiced, is subject to more discouragements, disappointments, and depression than almost any other work. Your pastor will know spiritually dark days and often cry with Paul, "who is sufficient for these things? (2 Cor. 2:16)." He will often, like his master, be a man of sorrows. It was Spurgeon's experience that "those who are honored of their Lord in public have usually to endure a secret chastening, or to carry a peculiar cross, lest by any means they exalt themselves, and fall into the snare of the devil."⁷ A good ruling elder will have his finger on the pulse of his pastor's state of mind, and this can only be done by fostering a friendship with him.

Second, allow me to remind you of the obvious fact that your pastor is just a man, with the same nature as you and me (James 5:17). Charles Bridges (1794–1869) helpfully reminds pastors (and elders!), "Were we angels by nature as well as by office, the difficulty would be of little account."⁸ But pastors are not angels. And like all men they

need friendship, encouragement, recreation, refreshment, and rest. I knew an elder once who told me he never complimented his pastor's preaching, fearful that it would go to his head. I felt bad for that elder, but worse for his pastor. Pastors are people too. They bleed. They bruise. Encourage your pastor regularly and foster a relationship with him that provides frequent opportunity for healing words (Prov. 16:24).

Third, and finally, you will need a strong bond of affection and trust to provide, from time to time, some needed mutual correction. Remember what the preacher said, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Prov. 27:6). A friend! Note that carefully. A loving and faithful elder is in the best position to share with the pastor observations about his ministry or preaching that may promote its effectiveness. The art of doing so in a way that builds up, rather than breaks down, can only be cultivated in the context of a sincere friendship.

Allow me to close with some practical advice. First, make the matter of your relationship with the pastor a subject of frequent prayer. Ask God for this, and for his help in protecting and fostering it. Second, spend some time with your pastor in which the subjects of conversation are mostly *not* about church, ministry, or the flock. Find out what interests him and learn enough about it to connect over it. Finally, the best way to encourage your pastor is to keep becoming more Christ-like every day.

Your soul's well-wisher,
An Older Elder

* * *

Discouragement and the Ruling Elder Letters to a Younger Ruling Elder, No. 7

Dear James,

Thank you for sending that very thoughtful get-well card a couple weeks ago and for the letter that I just received this morning. To answer your question, I feel a bit better. My doctor saw something when examining me and wants to run a few more tests. Doctors love their tests. But then, I suppose, so does our Lord. The difference is that we already know the outcome of God's testing (James 1:3).

7 C. H. Spurgeon, "The Minister's Fainting Fits," in *Lectures to My Students* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 169.

8 Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry: With an Inquiry into the Causes of Its Inefficiency* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 14.

If I am not mistaken (forgive me if I am wrong), I picked up just a small note of discouragement in your comments about a certain irregularly attending member. You asked me how to handle that situation, and I can tell it is weighing on your mind. I will give some advice. But first, if you do not mind, I would like to say a few words in general about a very important subject; namely, *discouragement and the calling of a ruling elder*. While much has been written, and rightly so, on the discouragements of pastoral ministry, not as much has been said on dealing with the heavy heart of a ruling elder.

If you are a sufficiently sensitive ruling elder, and I know that you are, you will likely encounter episodes of a *heavy, discouraged heart*. Hard, dry sponges are not heavy, and neither are hard, dry hearts. But a soft and tender heart, the type of heart you need for this work, will absorb many sorrows and disappointments. Do not be surprised by this. I will share with you, from my own experience, some of the common causes and some helps.

One of the most common causes for discouragement I have found among ruling elders is simply the labor involved. Shepherding can be mentally and spiritually exhausting. You need to pay attention to this for yourself and for others. We often document the vacation time of our pastors. We almost never do for our elders. I believe that is a mistake. Ask about this at your session meetings! I have known hard-working elders who easily put in forty to sixty hours a week at their job, and then add to this the church meetings, visiting, teaching, and checking in that many elders do. In Nehemiah we read that “the strength of those who bear the burdens is failing” (Neh. 4:10). Your strength may fail too. If you do not build in breaks, you will quickly get exhausted and discouraged. Remember that our gracious and wise Father put into the very fabric of creation an obligation to rest (Gen. 2:2).

Another cause of discouragement in the work of the ruling elder, one which is rarely ever discussed I am sorry to say, is the problem of loneliness. This may not seem like a real danger right now, but trust me, James, *elder work can be lonely work*. A ruling elder may have a busy job, a bus-

tying home, a growing church, and a full session, but still find himself feeling like a lonely man. I have been there. And loneliness is often the door through which discouragement comes. But our Lord does not want us to be lonely. His words in Genesis 2:18 are still true, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” As such, he will hear the cries of a lonely heart, “turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely . . .” (Ps. 25:16). Remember we serve the one who said himself, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5).

Finally, I will share just one last cause of discouragement in the life of the ruling elder, and I suppose this one is the most common of all, though we have the least reason for it. Our discouragement sometimes arises from the fact that we have *lost sight of God’s love for us in Christ*. We lose sight of his love. Nothing will drain the life out of your work faster than forgetting the love of God. Whenever I found discouragement rising in my heart, I knew I needed a fresh reminder of him “who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). Remember, as Cowper put it so well, that “behind a frowning Providence, he hides a smiling face.” Jonathan Edwards had a great resolution regarding the love of God which every discouraged ruling elder should consider: “Resolved, to examine carefully, and constantly, what that one thing in me is, which causes me in the least to doubt the love of God; and to direct all my forces against it.”⁹

So much, for now, about my thoughts on discouragement. Now about this inconsistent member. I think your best approach, after prayer, is to get to know him a bit better. Ask him to meet you for a cup of coffee, or to watch a ballgame on Saturday. I have even found a cold beer at a local brewery to be blessed by God as a means of getting to know his sheep. Do let me know how it goes.

Your soul’s well-wisher,
An Older Elder

9 Jonathan Edwards, “Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Edward Hickman, ed. vol. 1, (1834 repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), xxi.

The Ruling Elder among the Flock

Letters to a Younger Ruling Elder, No. 8

My dear James,

As I pulled into the driveway this afternoon, I met Don, our mailman, delivering your letter. I thanked him for his services. Don does not know the Lord. I sometimes ask him with a smile, “have you read God’s letter yet?” He keeps saying, “maybe someday.” Our sad world forgets that our days are numbered, and “someday” may be too late. I keep praying for Don, nonetheless. Speaking of numbered days, I do want to let you know something, James. My good doctor gave me the news that the tests came back, and it looks like cancer. I did not want to hide this from you, nor do I want you to worry about it. I am going to see a specialist, and in the meantime I am perfectly content to know that our times are in God’s hands (Ps. 31:15).

Thank you for the update on your meeting with that church member. I am glad you found that a casual, friendly conversation over a bite to eat after work between two Christian brothers can be profitable. You mentioned that you sometimes find it difficult during these talks to turn the focus to spiritual matters. That is a good topic for discussion. And this brings up a whole subject which we have not explicitly talked about yet, namely, *the ruling elder among the flock*. Allow me, therefore, to share a few thoughts on this subject, and hopefully I can try to answer your question in the process.

It is one of your responsibilities as a ruling elder to get to know the state of your flock (Prov. 27:23). You, along with the session, are to “take heed” to them (Acts 20:28, NKJV). That word, “take heed,” was sometimes used of *bringing a ship to land*. The idea is to *draw close* and to *bring near*. That is what we are to do with our dear people as elders: bring them near; draw them in. I did not appreciate this sufficiently in my early years as an elder. I think the most important chapter in the Bible on this is John 10. Allow me to share a few observations about our work drawn from this chapter.

First, and most basically, our people need to hear our voice. Jesus said of the true shepherd, “The sheep hear his voice (John 10:3).” This may be as simple as an email, a card, or a greeting after church. Even better is a phone call to check in, particularly if there are any matters of concern that your people have shared. Use your words to build your people up. Be a Barnabas, a son of encouragement. Encourage them with many words (Acts 20:2).

Let me only add a brief caution here, which I do not think you will need. Be careful in conversation of *talking too much*. I knew a dear elder once who was a great talker. But he would go on and on such that his unsuspecting victims, caught in his web of words, soon wished he would just eat them and be done with it.

Second, it is important to see and visit your people outside of the context of Sunday worship services, both formally and informally. I love the words of John 10:14: “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.” It is hard to get to know the sheep, and for them to know you, in a few minutes after worship. I wouldn’t be too prescriptive here about how this is done. Consistency is the key. Sessions and individual ruling elders must work this out.

Third, and this is really implied in *knowing* the sheep: practice asking questions. And this circles us back to the thing you asked me about in your letter. How do you turn the conversation to spiritual matters? Do what Jesus did. He asked questions. One I like is to ask something like, “So that I can be praying best for you, what would you say is the hardest thing in your Christian life right now?”

Another question I like is, “Tell me, do you find yourself to be growing spiritually at this point in your Christian life, and to what do you attribute this to?” Healthy Christians are growing Christians (2 Pet. 3:18). Gardiner Spring put it this way, “It is a distinguishing trait in the character of every good man that he grows in grace.”¹⁰ So, ask about their

10 Gardiner Spring, *The Distinguishing Traits of Christian Character* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 64.

growth. Ask what is most helping their growth right now. Is it a sermon series, a Bible study, their own time in the Word? Is it a spiritual book, or maybe a godly friend? Ask. Then listen.

James, if you prayerfully and humbly focus on doing these things, you will be both a blessing to your pastor and a blessing to the flock.

Your soul's well-wisher,
An Older Elder

* * *

The Elder, the Session, and Leadership Letters to a Younger Ruling Elder, No. 9

Dear James,

Job said, “My days are swifter than a runner” (Job 9:25). I feel much the same. My good doctor tells me that my race is almost over. I thanked him for the good news. If a pauper knew he would awake a prince, why should he fear falling asleep? Teach me, Lord, to number my days! Your letters have been a singular blessing and encouragement to my soul. What little I have learned about serving faithfully as a ruling elder in Christ’s church I am humbly willing to pass on.

You asked about any advice I might have for working *as part of a session*. This is a vitally important topic. When it comes to the effectiveness of working as part of the session, nothing is so important as to take up God’s call to collectively *lead the people of God*. Leadership is now, and always has been, the great need of the hour. Far too little has been written about this. Shepherds must lead! “He leads my beside still waters. . . . He leads me in paths of righteousness” (Ps. 23:2–3). The call to serve the Lord as a ruling elder is a call to serve God’s people by leadership. I am convinced now more than ever before that what the church needs is a generation of humble, holy, God-fearing, Christ-exalting, Spirit-filled elders to rise up and lead the flock.

What is a leader? Office, title, position, rank, authority—none of these make you a leader. One thing, and one thing only, makes you a leader, James, and that is *willing followers*. When people are willing to follow you through good times and bad times by the very force of your godly example,

commitment to Christ and Scripture, courage, faith, and love, then, and only then, is a leader is born. The church needs sessions who are willing to lead. God will surely raise them up. But you, and the session, must be ready to answer that call. As a session, humbly and sincerely ask yourselves this question: Are we leading, or are we simply showing up? Scripture and church history are replete with examples of great leadership. Such were the likes of Moses, David, Nehemiah, and Paul. Such were the likes of Luther, Calvin, Whitefield, Spurgeon, Machen, and Sproul. Such was preeminently our Lord and savior Jesus Christ himself. You and your session may never be called to leadership of that scope or scale, but the effectiveness of your service still hangs on your commitment to lead. I believe J. Oswald Sanders was right when he said that “churches grow in every way when they are guided by strong, spiritual leaders with the touch of the supernatural radiating in their service.”¹¹

Sessions, in my experience, fall short in leadership by one of two extremes. They may abuse their authority by an unholy tyranny on the one hand, or by simply abdicating all efforts at leadership on the other. Of the two, I fear effortless, lazy leadership is far more common today. Leadership takes work. And it is only when leaders lead that you will find a people who are willing to rise up and serve as well (Judges 5:2). No wonder Paul prodded “the one who leads” in Romans 12:8 to do so “with zeal.”

Zeal can be exhausting; and for that reason, many elders and sessions take the softer road of leading to nowhere but the status quo. “Pace yourself,” is their motto. While some wisdom may be found in that advice, I fear that sessions today are too often pacing themselves to death. Leadership has always been hard work, and spiritual leadership the hardest of all. Mark my words—the church has rarely grown except by the godly leadership of tired men.

God’s leaders have also been men of vision, courage, and action. Prophets in the Old Testa-

11 J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 18.

ment were called “seers.” The elder in leadership needs to be a seer too. He must not look upon the church merely as she is, but as the glorious bride of Jesus being prepared for that majestic return of her groom. The ruling elder who sees the church this way, and is doing something about it, is truly leading the people of God. “Vision leads to venture, and history is on the side of venturesome faith.”¹²

James, maybe one of the most common causes of failed leadership is when ruling elders simply expect that the pastor do all the leading himself. Yes, there are times when the Lord grants the pastor remarkable gifts of leadership. He, working hard to develop these gifts, becomes a great source of encouragement, growth, and service to the church. But sometimes this has not been the case. The leadership skills of the pastor may be undeveloped. Therefore, every member of the session must work at leadership, stirring one another up to the task.

Allow me to close this letter with a plea to *lead the flock of our Lord as an example of sacrificial, service-focused, Christian living*. That is the type of leadership our churches need most of all (1 Pet. 5:3). And the more that your life reflects the humility, beauty, and holiness of Christ, the better your leadership will be (1 Cor. 11:1). He leads the best, who follows Jesus the best.

Your soul’s well-wisher,
An Older Elder

* * *

Be a Presbyter

Letters to a Younger Ruling Elder, No. 10

Dear James,

It is time for me to go. As David said to Jonathan, so I say to you, “There is but a step between me and death” (1 Sam. 20:3). I must shortly give an account of my own stewardship (Heb. 13:7), just as you, dear James, must one day give account of your own. I feel coming near what Asahel Nettleton described as that “solemn hour of exchanging

of worlds.”¹³ As such, this may be my last letter. The tender words and kind expressions in the note I just received from you mean a great deal to me. I see now, more clearly than ever before, the weightiness of words. Be no miser of good words, dear James. “A word in season, how good it is!” (Prov. 15:23).

Knowing my time is at hand, I have just a couple final thoughts to share with you on the work and calling of a ruling elder. The first one is this: to the degree our Lord allows and enables you, *be a presbyter*. Involve yourself, in some capacity, in the work of the presbytery. I had a mentor, when I began my first significant leadership position at the hospital, say to me, “Look up and out!” I was a bit too focused on the department and was missing opportunities in the organization. Ruling elders also need to look up and out.

Far too often the responsibilities of the presbytery, not to mention the work of the denomination, have fallen mostly on the shoulders of our ministers. Some of this cannot be avoided. But the Word calls us to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2), and this includes presbytery burdens. Those who do will generally find by experience that the Lord helps them and that Christ’s words are true: “my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:30).

When attending a presbytery meeting, make it a point to get to know some of the other ministers and elders. Listen for prayer requests and needs, add them to your prayer list, and then check in with these men from time to time. Join a committee if you can. I always enjoyed talking to some of the retired ministers at these meetings. Ask them questions. Listen. Those who approach presbytery with brotherly kindness and love in their hearts will keep themselves “from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord” (2 Pet. 1:8).

James, the great calling of the eldership is to love the church, protect the church, serve the church. That begins in your own flock, but our care must grow according to the measure of

12 Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, 57.

13 https://www.gracegems.org/33/asahel_nettleton.htm.

Christ's own love. Jesus said, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold" (John 10:16). He loved them too, and so must you. Love the church. Love the presbytery. Love the denomination. Love Christ's sheep wherever they are found. As Paul said to the Ephesian elders, so I say to you, "care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). He serves Christ best, who loves him most.

Isn't the church lovely, James? Can you not see beyond her spots and wrinkles (Eph. 5:27)? She becomes more glorious every day (2 Cor. 4:16). The bridegroom is coming. Oh, let us love what he loves (Eph 5:25)! There is so much to love about the church! Her gospel is beautiful, isn't it? There is no message like it on earth; it beautifies the preacher and the hearer (Rom. 10:15). I love to hear of that grace that saved a wretch like me! Tell me the old, old story, of Jesus and his love.¹⁴

And the church's worship is lovely too, isn't it? Consider whom we worship: our God is an awesome God. Look, look at the beauty of the Lord (Ps. 27:4)! Oh, how our Triune God is worthy of our praises! "Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness" (Ps. 96:9). And the singing of the church is beautiful . . . glorious! Listen to her hymns, her Psalms! Hear the music. Breathe out the lyrics from your soul.

*Chosen not for good in me,
Waked from coming wrath to flee,
Hidden in the Savior's side,
By the Spirit sanctified—
Teach me, Lord, on earth to show.
By my love how much I owe.*¹⁵

I can hear singing now—somewhere, softly in the distance . . . a triumphant song. Are those angel voices? I cannot quite make out the tune; I think it is new! It is! It's a new song! Heaven sings James, heaven sings!

Dear James, this is Aunt Bonnie. When I came in to check on your uncle this afternoon, he had, according to the perfect timing of our Lord, passed into the presence of that Jesus whom he loved. He is there now. I can almost hear him singing, I think. This letter was the last thing he appears to have been working on before our Lord called him home. I know he would have wanted you to have it. ☺

14 "Tell Me, the Old, Old Story," *Trinity Hymnal* (revised ed.) (Atlanta: Great Commission Publications, 1990), #625.

15 "When This Passing World Is Done," *Trinity Hymnal* (revised ed.) (Atlanta: Great Commission Publications, 1990), #545.

Servant Mission

The Epistle to the Romans: Profound Theology and Ethics for the Sake of Missions¹

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* May 2023¹

by **Marcus A. Mininger**

My sermon text tonight is in some ways the entire book of Romans, because what we will be reflecting on is the relation between the content of Romans and its stated purpose. The former of these is in many ways quite familiar to us in our tradition. Yet the latter is significantly less so, I believe, and this is why we have read Romans 1:1–17 and 15:14–33, since those passages frame the entire body of the letter and also comment directly on Paul’s reason for writing it.

The book of Romans is such a heavily used book of the Bible in our Protestant tradition. I wonder what mainly comes to your mind when you think of it.

I am sure most of us here tonight can mentally scan through much of the theological content of Romans without effort, from its opening announcement of the gospel as the power of God unto salvation for all who believe in 1:16–17; to its memorable description of natural revelation and God’s wrath in 1:18–32; to key prooftexts regarding total depravity (3:10–18), universal sinfulness (3:23), propitiation (3:25–26), and justification by

faith alone (4:4–5); to its magisterial federal theology in 5:12–21; to its clear insistence that justification should not lead to antinomianism (ch. 6) yet that the Law itself is also unable to sanctify us (ch. 7); to the great conflict between flesh and Spirit as well as rich reflections on Christian assurance and future hope (ch. 8); to its stalwart depiction of God’s sovereignty in election and reprobation (ch. 9); to its insistence on one way of salvation for Jews and Gentiles throughout chapters 9–11 and elsewhere; to its clear description of the legitimacy of civil government and of Christian submission to it (ch. 13); and to perhaps the clearest description we have of adiaphora in ethics (chs. 14–15). These are the kinds of things we go to Romans for and the things that most readily come to mind when we think of this letter, all of which are a wonderful provision to the church.

Yet tonight I want to ask if when you think of Romans you also typically think of another topic that I did not mention so far, which is the topic of missions. There is a good chance that you do not.

We are here tonight to install a new Regional Home Missionary, the Reverend Bruce Hollister, for the Presbytery of the Midwest. And as we do this, I want us to reflect together on how Romans, one of the most theologically robust books in all of Scripture, is itself indelibly and throughout its pages a missionary document as well, that is, a document written in order to prepare for, make possible, and guide a new missionary endeavor to an unreached part of the ancient world, namely Spain. As we think about this, I hope we will be impressed by the biblical phenomenon of the letter to the Romans and appreciate how this rich, nuanced, profound, lengthy theological document is all of those things precisely for the express purpose of facilitating missions within the church of Jesus Christ. In this way, Romans joins two things that the church has typically had a difficult time holding together and has sometimes even regarded as in conflict with each other, namely, deep, nuanced theology and missionary outreach.

The passages we read this evening are, for the most part, not among the most well-known or well-used texts of Romans (apart from 1:16–17,

¹ https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1041.

which we included with the rest of the letter's introduction). Yet at the same time, these passages are also among the most important for interpreting Romans. We would all generally agree that knowing who wrote something, when, to whom, and why is crucial to rightly understanding what a person wrote and its significance. And yet perhaps nowhere in Scripture are such details more frequently and systemically eclipsed than with Romans, which people routinely take as something of an abstract, situationless, theological treatise. But as the last five decades of scholarship on Romans have emphasized, viewing Romans as a generalized, situation-unspecific treatise is inadequate. While Romans is theologically very deep, it is also not generalized, abstract, or context-free. It is, instead, very pastorally guided all throughout, and as we want to reflect on tonight, specifically with an eye to missions.

The fact that Romans is a missionary document is indicated by many things in the letter, but especially by our passages in Romans 1 and 15. When we look closely at these sections, we should notice an extended set of verbal and thematic parallels between the passages. This includes references to:

- (1) The "gospel of God" (an unusual phrase for Paul, found in 1:1 and 15:16)
- (2) The distinct grace given to Paul to serve the Gentiles (1:5 and 15:15–16)
- (3) The specific purpose of this ministry to the Gentiles, to bring about their obedience (1:5; 15:18)
- (4) Paul's awareness of the strength of the Roman churches (1:8; 15:14)
- (5) Paul's desire to visit the Romans (1:11; 15:23)
- (6) Explanation of Paul's absence from Rome previously (1:13; 15:22)
- (7) Paul's desire to impart something to the Romans, but also clearly to receive something in return (notice a progressive

heightening of terms in 1:11–12; 15:15, 23, 28, 32, which eventually come to clearly include a desire to receive financial help from Rome)

- (8) Concern for the hope of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles and for the defense of God's uprightness in giving salvation to both (1:16–17; 15:8–12)
- (9) Paul's commitment to minister to all kinds of peoples, including barbarians (1:14) and the Spanish (15:24, 28), whom people in Rome would have viewed as a chief example of barbarians

Taken together, all these parallels between Romans 1 and 15 comprise an elaborate, multi-faceted *inclusio* around the body of the entire letter, and in the ancient world such an *inclusio* functions as a kind of heading, saying, "Everything in between these references should be read in connection with what is mentioned in them." In other words, Paul's composition of Romans, which features both the longest introductory section in all his letters and the longest concluding section in all of his letters (including ch. 16), frames the entirety of the letter around numerous key themes, in relation to which we should read the letter's central content.

And when we notice these cues that Paul provides for reading the letter, what do we see? Not only that the content of Romans must be read in light of the situation described in this *inclusio*, but also more particularly that there is really one main purpose why Paul writes to Rome, along with three subordinate goals that help support this main purpose.

On the one hand, then, the main reason that Paul writes to the Romans is his desire to have them help him travel to Spain to extend the gospel to an unreached people group there. While many statements in Romans 1 and 15 (and elsewhere) communicate this purpose indirectly, Paul also states the matter directly in 15:23–24:

But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have

longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.

Then, not to be unclear, he reiterates the same idea again in 15:28—“When therefore I have completed this [impending trip to Jerusalem] and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.”

On the other hand, though, as we read Romans, we also need to see that, in addition to this main purpose of beginning to gain support for a Spanish mission, there are at least three other significant obstacles to this, which Paul must surmount if he is truly to win the Romans’ support for this cause and if that support is truly to prove helpful in the ways needed. These three obstacles, evident within the letter, create three additional, subordinate purposes that Paul also seeks to accomplish in Romans, which could be stated as follows.

First, the Romans lack clear, accurate knowledge about Paul’s message. This is partly due to his never having visited them before (1:10–15; 15:22), but it is compounded by the existence of strong criticisms of Paul’s preaching, which 3:7–8 show the Romans knew about. In response, Paul sets out to introduce crucial aspects of his teaching in a way that will also overcome misperceptions spread by others and so enable the Romans to want to support him. Among other things, Paul’s effort to introduce his teaching to the Romans helps explain the broad number of topics Romans addresses, while his effort to defend himself helps explain the surprisingly negative, apologetic beginning of his theme statement for the letter in 1:16—“For I am not ashamed of the gospel . . .”

Second, the Romans lack internal unity. Chapters 14–15 especially show how the church in Rome was experiencing significant internal division, with so called “weak” Christians judging the “strong” and the “strong” despising the “weak.” Regardless of the specific source of the division in Rome, a significantly divided church is certainly not a very stable one for sending and supporting

a missionary. In addition, the specific topic that divides the Romans concerns what foods to eat and days to observe or not. Most scholars conclude (rightly, in my view) that this division revolves around whether Christians should continue to follow certain distinctively Jewish practices, or not, and so connects closely to the question of Jew-Gentile relations—precisely the kind of controversy that could undermine a future mission to Gentiles in Spain. In addition to introducing and defending his maligned gospel to the Romans in general, then, Paul also needs to help the Roman churches have greater internal unity by explaining a gospel that is for Jews first as well as Greeks, the nature of Israel’s place within redemptive history, and the nature and limits of the continuing applicability of the Law.

Third, the Roman church was steeped in the externalism and competitive hierarchicalism of their culture. Here we must think not only about the Romans’ relation to Paul or to each other but of their prospective relation to any future converts in Spain too. We can remember that Paul is not only concerned for the topic of Jew-Gentile relations in Romans but also with Gentile-Gentile relations, or particularly as he notes in 1:14 that he is under obligation to go not only to wise Gentiles, like the Greeks, but also to the comparatively foolish ones, which he calls barbarians. We can remember here that wisdom in the ancient world is always correlated with ability or power, and so the Romans, who were at the center of the ancient world in the first century, would naturally see themselves occupying a position of superiority compared to others, and especially to ignorant, unsophisticated peoples in the provinces Rome had conquered. If the Roman Christians cannot even accept each other without major divisions, how could they be in a position to reach out to, accept, and have fellowship in one body with converts from the unwashed masses to be found in an uneducated and uncouth backwater like Spain? For this to be done, they must give up external comparisons and hierarchically competitive ways of viewing other people, which would prevent them either from wanting to reach the Spanish or

from being anything other than condescending and divisive with those Paul reached.

On close reflection, then, we ought to read Romans in relation to both the one overarching purpose of missions and these three subordinate purposes that connect to it. Moreover, as we read the letter, we can see again and again how each of these subordinate purposes is repeatedly being addressed.

For example, regarding introduction and self-defense, we not only see that Paul begins his letter on a remarkably defensive note in 1:16, but he also subsequently goes to great lengths to show how his theology does not implicate God in unfairness in 2:11; 3:6; and 21–26, how justification by faith alone does not in fact undermine the importance of Abraham (ch. 4) or of Christian obedience (ch. 6), and how Paul has not forsaken but continues to try to reach his kindred according to the flesh (ch. 9). Clearly, Romans is designed to defend Paul's gospel in a variety of ways.

Similarly, regarding internal unity, Paul not only claims that the gospel is God's power for the Jew first and also the Greek (1:16), but he also goes on to address the objections of a Jewish teacher proclaiming circumcision in 2:17–29, shows God's equal treatment of Jews and Gentiles in both sin and salvation in Romans 3, addresses the peculiar place of the Jewish people within redemptive history throughout Romans 9–11, enjoins unity of diverse parts within the one body of Christ in Romans 12, and directly addresses weak and strong in Romans 14–15.

Or again regarding externalism and hierarchicalism, Paul not only describes a mission to all kinds of Gentiles (1:14–15) but also addresses a variety of ways in which visible distinctions between different groups of people are not a basis for confidence. He shows how God's observable patience with some people's sins is only temporary in 2:1–11, how the Jew is properly defined by something hidden not something visible in 2:17–29, how Abraham was justified before not after he was circumcised in Romans 4, how the hope of God's people is not presently visible and will only be revealed at the resurrection in Romans 8, how not

all Israel according to the flesh was truly of Israel spiritually in Romans 9, and how it is neither the outward distinction of abstaining from foods nor the outward distinction of eating those same foods that accomplishes God's purposes in Romans 14. After all, the kingdom of God is not in fact of eating or drinking but of the invisible, spiritual realities of righteousness, joy, and peace in the Holy Spirit (14:17). Throughout the letter, Paul, therefore, instills a theology of the cross that undermines externalism and all forms of this-worldly hierarchicalism.

In these and other ways, then, detail after detail of Romans makes clear that we understand Romans best when we read it as an effort to transform the Roman church's relations to Paul, to each other, and to the assumptions of the culture around them—all for the sake of missions.² Clearly, in order to become an effective part of supporting a mission to Spain, the Roman church would need to think rightly. In fact, it would need to be transformed by the renewing of its mind (12:2). In other words, it needed sound theology and ethics, or else the mission that Paul planned would either never start or would eventually be imperiled. Put differently, Romans demonstrates how the missionary endeavors of the church must be funded and supported by deep theological interest, nuance, and precision, of just the sort that the letter provides.

Why? Well, among other reasons, because missionary efforts are something we engage in actively, and everything we do and how we do it is always predicated on our view of ourselves, the Lord, and others. In other words, missions, as with the rest of life, is inescapably and deeply theological, whether we know it or not.

Our options, then, are to be acting out a theology that is insufficient, reductionistic, unnuanced, or just plain wrong and so not be able to have proper unity internally or proper engagement with unbelievers externally, or else to be more

² This general approach to reading the entirety of Romans as an integrated whole is helpfully articulated by Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

thoroughly and deeply biblical in our beliefs, seeking to have and make use of all the resources that Romans and the rest of Scripture provide us in order to know how to be the church and seek to reach a lost world. In other words, to serve the gospel of God properly, our theologizing should have clarity, precision, and depth for the sake of cordial unity in the inward functioning of the church and in proper outward expansion.

It is not mere coincidence, then, that the single greatest missionary of the apostolic church was clearly also one of its greatest—probably its very most influential—theologian.

Similarly, we can also be thankful, as we reflect on our own context, for the great theological resources and heritage we possess as Reformed believers and as members of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Ours is certainly a heritage steeped in theological care. And it is not despite this but because of it that we should be enabled in a particular way to do missions.

We can therefore be encouraged tonight to remember afresh the synergy—the necessary and inescapable synergy—between theology and missions. The missionary endeavor, whether overseas or here, is always among other things a conflict of worldviews, between the Christian faith in all its detail and unbelief in its varied forms. How will we navigate that conflict and address exactly what each alternative, non-believing worldview offers if we do not have deep and carefully crafted theology ourselves? In fact, Reformed theology, more consistently than any other Christian tradition, has a detailed and all-embracing biblical worldview to offer, not least because of the long-standing impact that books like Romans, Hebrews, and many others have had on it.

In fact, this is part of what J. Gresham Machen and others understood when they first formed the Independent Board of Presbyterian Foreign Missions and then later founded the OPC itself and its missions committees. Contrary to the pragmatism of the mainline church of that time, the missionary endeavor is not a place for compromise or for watering down the distinctives of Scripture so that unbelief is left partly intact or less than fully chal-

lenged, uprooted, and replaced by the all-embracing claims of Jesus Christ.

In addition, we must remember that missions always require great sacrifice from the church and a willingness to love others who are outsiders or foreigners to our own experience. How will we want to do that? How will we know how and how not to do that? How will we know what is essential and what is optional? Romans shows that this is no easy, shallow task; it is one that can easily be misunderstood. We need the depths of Romans's own theology, then, in order to be properly informed and equipped as a church for this task.

We, therefore, must see clearly that what the broader church often sees in competition, namely theology and missions, we should see as closely, cordially intertwined and interdependent. And we should be encouraged by the richness of the theological heritage that we have, drawn in no small measure from Romans. Yet we should also be challenged to ask ourselves afresh in every generation of the OPC whether we have indeed embraced the cordial relation between theology and missions as we should. Does a tension between theology and missions continue to exist in our midst in any measure? Is our cordial commitment to deep and nuanced theology at a high or a low ebb as individuals and as a presbytery? And what about regarding missions? It is fair to say, I think, that the Presbytery of the Midwest is known for effective outreach and expansion. Is it also equally known for its interest in theological depth? And similar questions can and should be asked by every other OPC presbytery about itself as well. Does beautifully detailed and deep theology fuel missions? And does a desire for missions sponsor extended effort to articulate and defend beautifully detailed and deep theology, just as in Romans?

No doubt there are many forces at work in the world around us that would seek to chip away at and undermine our commitment to theological depth and precision as well as to missions. We live in a day of unparalleled distraction, technologically and otherwise. It is easy to feel we do not have time for deep theological study or for engaging theological controversy. We live in a day

where people outside the church are increasingly unfamiliar with even the basics of the Christian message, making outreach and discipleship even more energy intensive than it has been in recent memory. It is easy to feel weary or overwhelmed, is it not? We also live in a day of increasingly aggressive and high-profile opposition to Christian truths. Particularly in our Midwestern context, where disagreement and conflict are generally avoided, these features of life today could challenge our theological resolve. Or, looking in the opposite direction, they could challenge our resolve to engage in missions instead.

Yet in the face of these great challenges, may the magisterial letter of the apostle Paul to the Romans both encourage and challenge us afresh to remain committed to and even to relish in the synergy between profound, nuanced theology and God's mission to a lost and dying world. May we continue to value our rich theological heritage as we should and to pursue missions zealously, precisely on that theological basis and nothing less, as we should. And may we particularly be strengthened in the gospel itself, with all the detail that Romans and other parts of Scripture use to describe and defend it. For that gospel, regarding a Savior crucified and resurrected for us, who is received by faith alone, and who transforms lives with a heavenly hope, is indeed the sole power of God unto salvation, a power that can even bring hedonistic, profligate, willful Gentiles like ourselves to the submission of faith, the assurance of sonship, the transformation of ethics, and the ultimate glory that awaits in the future. May we be strengthened, unified, and directed by this letter then, brothers and sisters, as we engage the great missionary task both within the boundaries of our own presbytery and beyond, unto God's glory alone. Amen. ©

Marcus A. Mininger serves professor of New Testament Studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana, and is associate pastor at New Covenant Community Church (OPC) in Joliet, Illinois.

✦ Servant Reading

Book Reviews

The Unfolding Word: The Story of the Bible from Creation to New Creation

by Zach Keele

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
January 2023¹

by Christopher J. Chelпка

The Unfolding Word: The Story of the Bible from Creation to New Creation, by Zach Keele. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020, 350 pages, \$28.99, paper.

Every Christian should strive to have a good overall understanding of the Bible and its theology. But those who are responsible for frequent exposition of the Scriptures must aim for something more than a general understanding.

Look at Psalm 118, for example, and imagine you are going to teach it in a Sunday school class. You see clear themes of deliverance, the hope of God's grace, and the joy of salvation. You also see the character and works of God. Let us say you have also got enough biblical theology under your belt that you know how to interpret and apply the

¹ https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1017.

vanquishing of the nations, the discipline of the Lord, and the rock that the builders rejected.

But just as you start writing an outline, you notice details like the “gates of righteousness.” What does the metaphor of the gates represent? Does it point to the gates used in sheep pens or the ones for castles? Do they refer to something like judgment or entering or protection or something else?

Or maybe you are wondering about “bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar!” Why is binding it necessary? Why is the psalm specific about the horns of the altar, and what are they? Is a festal sacrifice a special kind of sacrifice? Which festival? We could stop there. But should we? How can we know which details are minor and which are a significant key to the meaning of the psalm?

Theology is key for good interpretation and application of God's Word, but it is no shortcut for understanding the details of a passage. And when you can only see the big picture, you run the risk of “inaccuracies and bland generalizations.”

That is the warning Zach Keele gives in his introduction to *The Unfolding Word*, a book that guides readers through the important details of the Bible without losing sight of the whole. Keele compares reading the Bible to looking at a “large mosaic, where each tile is its own image. Put together, they form another image. We need to zoom in and out regularly; slowing down and speeding up have to work together” (3).

This is not an easy skill, especially when you are a beginner. So, like someone visiting an unfamiliar city, it can be helpful to find a good guide—someone who knows what is important to point out first, what can be left for another time, and what newcomers tend to miss when they are on their own.

Zach Keele is a worthy guide. First, he knows the Bible well. As my pastor during my seminary training, I saw firsthand that Pastor Keele is an exceptionally devoted student of God's Word. Others will attest to this as well. He pays no lip service to things like working in the original languages and the study of background material. He is

a careful thinker and exacting in exegesis. Second, he knows his audience well. As a lecturer for English Bible Survey at Westminster Seminary and a longtime member of the candidates and credentials committee of the OPC Presbytery of Southern California, he has the advantage of knowing what many students of the Bible tend to miss but need to pay attention to. Happily, for those beyond his classroom, Keele has brought that knowledge and experience to bear in *The Unfolding Word*. It is an introduction to the Bible for those who are familiar with its contents but are ready to go beyond the general and learn to see more detail.

Keele starts in Genesis. He explains the covenantal foundations of the Bible in their ancient Near Eastern context, then traces the history of God's people from "Eden to Egypt" (chapter 2). Next comes "Exodus and Settlement" (chapter 3) along with "The Mosaic Economy" (chapter 4). The united and divided kingdom are dealt with in chapters 5–6, followed by "The Prophets" (chapter 7) and the "Exile and Return" (chapter 8), before concluding the Old Testament portion of the book with "Psalms and Wisdom." The New Testament books are covered in the four concluding chapters.

In each of these chapters Keele moves back and forth from the big picture to the tiny details. Sometimes he provides keys that help unlock vast amounts of understanding, sometimes he zooms in and provides compelling answers to specific questions. Examples of the former include observations about the physical landscape of Israel and the spiritual functions of that land; how God used the tabernacle, sacrifices, purity laws, and priesthood in the Mosaic economy; and the definition of wisdom and how the Wisdom Literature makes us wise. Examples of the latter include why lists of the twelve tribes often do not match with the twelve sons of Jacob, what the Jerusalem Council was requiring in their prohibition that went out to the churches, and the identification of Lady Babylon in John's apocalypse.

But in all the zooming in and zooming out, Keele always keeps in mind the unity of the picture in Christ and shows how the parts fit into the whole of God's unfolding Word. ☉

Christopher J. Chelpka is pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Tucson, Arizona.

Illustrating Well: Preaching Sermons that Connect

by *Jim L. Wilson*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
April 2023¹

by **Christopher J. Chelpka**

Illustrating Well: Preaching Sermons that Connect, by Jim L. Wilson. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2022, xv +184 pages, \$19.99, paper.

Sermon illustrations are important because they help explain and apply the truth, assuming they are done well. But how can a preacher improve this aspect of his preaching? One tool that has recently helped me is Jim L. Wilson's book *Illustrating Well: Preaching Sermons that Connect*. I would like to recommend it for several reasons.

First, Wilson shares the homiletical consensus on how to illustrate well. Having studied most of the books he cites, and a few he does not, I can attest that he reliably synthesizes what has been learned over the years. By pulling together the best advice from the majority, he saves the reader time. Moreover, Wilson shares thoughtful dissenting opinions, which provide nuance and guardrails for the good advice of the majority.

Second, Wilson categorizes sermon illustrations into eight types. He shares examples, necessary qualities, and best practices for each. For

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1038.

instance, one type is personal illustrations. Good personal illustrations should be authentic, ethical, proportionate, and suitable. Illustrations drawn from contemporary culture should be familiar to the listeners. Fictional illustrations are another type. These should rarely be used and never represented as true; turning them into a hypothetical illustration, a third type, is a good practice. One has to dig into the text to really benefit from the advice in this section; it is worth doing so. This section also helped me recognize which types I am over- or under-using.

Third, Wilson provides a tool for evaluating sermon illustrations no matter which type they are. Wilson argues that all worthy illustrations have four qualities. They must be familiar, clear, interesting, and appropriate. He explains each of these and provides a rubric for quick evaluation where each quality is given a green, yellow, or red light. These four qualities of a good illustration may seem obvious, but it is worth reading the section because the grading for each may not be what is expected. For example, one might assume that a green light on “interesting” means the illustration is very interesting. But it does not, because “it’s not enough for an illustration to be interesting; it must create interest in the text.” Also, if something is so interesting that it upstages the main point, it actually gets a red light, which means one must avoid or modify the illustration. In evaluating each quality, Wilson’s rubric is insightful without being complicated and hard to use. In fact, with just a little bit of practice, I improved my evaluation skills quite a bit.

There are several other helpful tips in this book, like how illustrations function differently in deductive and inductive sermons, or how one should “secure permission to use illustrations that involve other people.” In one particularly insightful section, he uses the metaphors of bridges, windows, lights, and pictures to show the different things sermon illustrations are capable of doing in a sermon. In another place, he discusses secondary functions of illustrations. I think most preachers will find, as I did, that they have an overly narrow conception of what sermon illustrations are for.

Illustrating Well convinced me to use a wider range of sermon illustrations, showed me why, and told me how. Other preachers wanting to improve in this area of their preaching would benefit in similar ways. ☺

Christopher J. Chelpka is pastor of Covenant Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona.

Poetry of Redemption: An Illustrated Treasury of Good Friday and Easter Poems

by *Leland Ryken*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
April 2023¹

by **Mark A. Green**

Poetry of Redemption: An Illustrated Treasury of Good Friday and Easter Poems, by Leland Ryken. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2023. \$17.99, paper.

Ryken’s latest work, *Poetry of Redemption*, selects psalms, hymns, and spiritual poems (Eph. 5.19) that invite the reader on a devotional journey. Beginning on Palm Sunday, the seven sections walk through the days of this extraordinary week, culminating in the resurrection of our Lord. Although the book’s title mentions Easter, the selections can be used for any timeframe. Meditating on the indicative works of Christ in this devotional collection of verse encourages us to apply the imperatives of Christ’s glorious gospel

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1039.

every day of the year.

Sound theology is conveyed through the hymns Ryken has chosen. Early in my Christian life, gatherings with fellow undergraduates in meetings organized by the Navigators at Michigan State University always began with the exuberant singing of classic hymns, many of which are in this collection. Besides learning to sing together, we also learned theology, though none of us realized it at the time. All of us profited from singing the truth about Christ's work, as in this selection by Bernard of Clairvaux's *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded*:

*What language shall I borrow
To thank thee, dearest Friend,
For this thy dying sorrow,
Thy pity without end?
O make me thine forever;
And should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never
Outlive my love to thee.*

Readers benefit from Dr. Ryken's almost fifty years of studying and teaching literature at Wheaton College. With skill and craft, he orders the selections clearly and elegantly, providing his own insights. The helpful index at the beginning of the book offers a roadmap to help get the lay of the land before beginning the journey. Ryken provides some of the very best devotional poetry written. He includes two of the most famous of John Donne's works and four of George Herbert's finest, including "Love":

*Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lacked anything.*

*A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?*

Truth Lord, but I have marred them:

let my shame

Go where it doth deserve.

*And know you not, says Love, who bore the
blame?*

My dear, then I will serve.

*You must sit down, says Love, and taste my
meat:*

So I did sit and eat.

Many readers will find Ryken's Holy Week architecture helpful as they prepare for Easter or anytime a reader longs to engage in a time of contemplation of the work of our Lord. This devotional approach is a strength of the volume.

While recognizing the usefulness of this volume, including the brilliant pieces of art selected to accompany the devotional verse, I have one caution.

The selection "Shall Grace Not Find Means?" from Milton's *Paradise Lost* seems a curious choice for this volume. Milton wrote poetry as well as theology (e.g., *De Doctrina Christiana*), and it is well accepted that his most famous work, *Paradise Lost*, reflects his Arianism and supralapsarianism throughout. Although Dr. Ryken comments on this selection, referring to "intra-trinitarian dialogue," my interpretation of this Miltonian passage reflects a subordinated, unequal role for Jesus as the Son. *Paradise Lost* is deservedly one of the most revered poems in the English poetry canon, and I can understand wanting to include a passage by Milton. However, it seems theologically confusing in a book dedicated to the Easter-week work of the second person of our Trinitarian God.

Dr. Ryken has, once again, used his many talents and skills to give us another volume focused on helping us appreciate the beauty of poetic writing. Readers will find this both fruitful and delightful in a devotional format focused on the Holy Week in the Christian calendar. ☺

Mark A. Green is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as the President and CEO of *Sola Media* in San Diego, California.

Faith in the Wilderness: Words of Exhortation from the Chinese Church

*edited by Hannah Nation
& Simon Lee*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
May 2023¹

by Anonymous

Faith in the Wilderness: Words of Exhortation from the Chinese Church, edited by Hannah Nation & Simon Lee. Bellingham, WA: Kirkdale, 2022, xxiv + 161, \$16.99, paper.

For me to read this marvelous little book of sermons was a welcome experience during a time of transition. Not only was it fun to read a collection that included works written by people I have actually met, but the preaching of these heroic Chinese ministers also helped me regain perspective, as I was suddenly facing extraordinary additional challenges during a difficult, extended time of re-tooling for a new phase of ministry. God used this book to help me see that if I faced these difficulties with faithfulness, they could actually be something positive in my life, deepening my joy and love. Indeed, that was the common thread running through this sermon collection of well-educated, Reformation-theology-influenced, underground church pastors: The Lord is sovereign over all of life and is even working so that he can bring his people through the fires of opposition more pure, humble, joyful, obedient, Christ-like, and mature than before. And you know what? God was true to his Word! I am not sure how well

I did, but the Holy Spirit was not only faithful to sustain me but also to walk more closely with me as my Comforter, Savior, and Guide, welcoming others to come along for the ride. Hallelujah!

Living in North America for about half of my life and East Asia for the other half has encouraged and given me the opportunity to think deeply about things, and this book called for some critical thinking. First, there is a danger of oversimplification by the reader when reading such books and, second, a danger for our minds as we live out the Christian life in the real world, where the principle of Antichrist will always be at work opposing the things of the Lord until the last day. As much as it is true that just because someone is suffering (or has suffered) does not automatically mean that God is punishing him or her for unfaithfulness, so too it does not mean they are automatically wiser or more spiritually advanced than someone else. So, we should read with discretion. Just as there are temptations living in countries where persecution is not so obvious—perhaps to be lazy in spiritual disciplines or to fall into sins of the flesh—so too there are temptations that more likely fall upon a person when they are threatened with persecution—perhaps to compromise so as to avoid the persecution, to be unnecessarily legalistic, or to be prideful after having been faithful and suffering for it (“*Sin and Hell*,” by Yang X., 47). And there are quite a variety of forms anti-Christian opposition can take, not only the dramatic forms they may tend to take in a Communist or Muslim country. Persecution is not always from the government. It could be ridicule for saying or doing something culturally unacceptable; it could be a boss who makes you work on the Lord’s Day (or requires your child to compete on Sunday if they want to be on the school debate club). It might not be intolerant of Christianity itself; it could be pressure to be tolerant of (not speaking out against) points of view, lifestyles, or behaviors that God forbids or clearly calls evil and requires us to oppose. So, stay alert and obedient!

But with such things in mind, *Faith in the Wilderness* is a good read. We have much to learn from our Chinese brothers. Yes, silence—when

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1049.

called by God to speak out—can be sinful (“Let Us Fall into *the Hand of the Lord*,” by Guo M., 20). While we are not called to jump into the lions’ den (33), we *are* called to worship God without (idolatrous) regard for our own lives, because for us there is no real death, just a change of address (“A Deadly World,” by Simon L., 31, 34). No, a minister cannot lecture with integrity on spiritual warfare and then fight over some petty thing with his wife without confessing his sin (“Why We Must Pursue Christ,” by Brian L., 73–75). Sometimes it is easier to know what is right than it is to know what is best and choose it instead of choosing the second-best (“True Love,” by Victor G., 81). Though you may be afraid of those who oppose the Lord, do not give up your integrity as a Christian for the sake of lentil stew (“Our Hope,” by San S., 32). “All those who stand on the edge of the sea of glass have been carried through the chaos of the sea of darkness and been made to prevail through it.” It is Christ who makes them victorious (i.e., we are saved by God’s grace alone) (“On *the Other Side of the Sea*,” by Paul P., 151).

Brothers and sisters (wherever you are), persevere in your faith in good times and in the bad; and as you strive so hard to do so, remember the key hope that we have as the children of God: it is God in Christ by the Spirit who will preserve us!

©

Teaching Your Children to Delight in the Lord’s Day

by William Boekestein

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* May 2023¹

by Cynthia Rowland

The Best Day of the Week: Why We Love the Lord’s Day, by William Boekestein, with illustrations by Brian Hartwell. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2022, 34 pages, \$15.00.

In this picture book for young audiences (ages 2–7), William Boekestein and Brian Hartwell present a dramatization of what a family serious about worshiping God rightly does on the Lord’s Day. The language is fairly simple, and the typeface is fairly large, allowing seven-plus-year-olds to read alone, but the book seems primarily geared as a read-aloud book. While reading aloud, a parent could discuss how the worship depicted in the story mirrors the worship patterns of their own family, providing a springboard for training about the deeper meaning of their family’s habits.

The theme of Christ’s calling the little children to himself (Mark 10:14) is woven throughout the book, emphasizing that Sunday worship is for children as well as adults. So much of our corporate worship is geared toward an older audience: creeds and confessions contain words that are hard to understand, hymns contain poetic allusions unfamiliar to young children, and sermons often set forth concepts and principles at a level above the grasp of young minds. This book encourages parents to make worship applicable and accessible for even the very youngest and encourages children to participate in it rather than treat it as

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1046.

a bystander would treat it.

The narrative of each page describes a different aspect of the family habits of worship, beginning with family devotions Saturday evening and progressing through each element of the Sunday worship service. While reading aloud, a parent could elaborate on why we “sometimes use very old words to speak our faith aloud” by describing, at a level appropriate for the child, the rich history of the creeds and confessions. A parent could elaborate more on the obscure poetic allusions from a recently sung hymn. A parent could take the time to describe in easy-to-understand words the meaning of a recent sermon. A parent could explain more fully the symbols of bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper and why only adults are being served, fanning the flame of the child’s desire to one day participate with everyone. Has the child earned money for the offering? Explain the meaning behind the collection: God’s love for a cheerful giver, God’s building of the kingdom, God’s providing for his ministers. The final words of the book are that Sunday is the “emblem of eternal rest.” This is an opportunity for the explanation of God’s heavenly promise of the joy that awaits his children.

The emphasis on *preparation* for worship by going to bed early on Saturday night, thinking ahead to be sure Sunday morning routines run smoothly, and ridding your mind of unnecessary distractions during worship offers opportunities to discuss the principle that worshipping God is serious business and should be entered into thoughtfully.

William Boekestein’s book provides a framework for parents to train their children in the delights of the Lord’s Day. Reading the book by itself, without filling in the gaps with familial anecdotes and parental devotion for the Lord, may leave a flavor of duty without love, but joined with these two aspects of personalization and passion, the book could serve as an excellent guidebook for parents to instill a proper regard for God’s worship and a delight for it.

Brian Hartwell’s illustrations depict in simple ways a family with eager children and purposeful parents. The artwork style is reminiscent of the

child’s book *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* and has a patchwork teddy bear on most pages. ©

Cynthia Rowland is member of Redeemer Presbyterian Church (PCA), Concord, Massachusetts.

The Holy Spirit

by Robert Letham

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* June-July 2023¹

by John V. Fesko

The Holy Spirit, by Robert Letham. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2023, xxii + 343 pages, \$29.99, paper.

Robert Letham has established himself as an expert on the doctrine of the Trinity with his 2004 work *The Holy Trinity*, which makes him an ideal person to write a book on the Holy Spirit.² This book culls from his earlier book on the Trinity and his systematic theology.³ The book has two sections. Part 1 gives a historical-theological overview of the doctrine and sets forth basic theological axioms. Part 2 surveys the doctrine in Scripture from the Old Testament (ch. 5); to the ministry of Jesus (ch. 6); Christ’s resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost (ch. 7); the ministry of the apostles (ch. 8); New Testament gifts (ch. 9); eschatology (ch. 10); and the nature of the Spirit’s redemptive work (ch. 11). The book concludes with a critical

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1056.

2 Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship*, rev. ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2019).

3 Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 131–352; idem., *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 212–13, 296–97, 860–65. For this information see publication information page of *The Holy Spirit*.

appendix on “Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Renewal.”

The book has a number of strengths that commend it to readers. First, Letham provides a historical overview of the doctrine that spans the patristic to the contemporary period. For those unfamiliar with the history of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the survey covers many key persons and events. Second, the book gives a redemptive historical overview of the Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments. In the day of hyper-specialization and books that focus on either biblical theology or conversely systematic theology, this book covers both. In short, one need not choose between ontology or history but rather may study and appreciate the intra-trinitarian processions as they become manifest in their historical missions as they relate to the Holy Spirit. A third strength of the book is that it explores and critiques Pentecostal theology. These days much of our culture, and thus sadly the church, is given to experience-driven ideologies and theologies. Thus, Letham’s final analysis of Pentecostalism gives readers important food for thought: “A movement that has no discernible distinctive theology and is based not on the textuality of the Bible but rather in experience cannot, *as such*, be judged to be in harmony with the biblical gospel and the Christian tradition” (297). A fourth strength is that Letham provides a glossary of key theological terms to assist the uninitiated and students in navigating the book’s contents and concepts.

Letham’s book is a very good contribution to the field, though there are several desiderata that would enhance it. Letham covers the history of the doctrine but skips over nineteenth-century developments. The influence of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) upon nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology is considerable. Hegel’s “trinitarianism” and his own understanding of the “Spirit” caused orthodox theologians to respond and write works on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit to demonstrate and contrast the Bible’s teaching from Hegel’s. Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), George Smeaton (1814–89), and James Buchanan (1804–

70) wrote in response to Hegel.⁴ Letham cites Kuyper periodically, but Smeaton and Buchanan do not appear in the book at all. The fact that so many contemporary theologians have written on the Holy Spirit is arguably due to Hegel’s influence, which explains the explosion of works on the Spirit in the twentieth century, yet the book says very little about this significant development.⁵

A second desideratum is greater attention to the Westminster Standards—they only appear as supporting cast, yet for all the complaints of an absence of the Holy Spirit in the documents, the Spirit features quite prominently in chapter 8 on Christology, among many other places. In this vein, one of the missing works in Letham’s book is Thomas Goodwin’s (1600–80) *The Work of the Holy Ghost in Our Salvation*.⁶ Goodwin was a Westminster divine, and his work gives insights into the nature of the Spirit’s work as it relates to Christology. When Letham rightly states that Christ offered himself on the cross through the power of the Spirit (Heb. 9:14), he neither mentions nor cites Westminster Confession 8.5. By not integrating analysis and citation to the Standards, Letham misses an opportunity to showcase the theological riches that some might otherwise not realize are in these documents.

A third desideratum is that, at times, certain sections cry out for greater exposition but get the briefest treatment. For example, when he treats the Holy Spirit and justification, Letham rightly highlights the forensic nature of justification and says that because of Christ’s justification believers share in his legal status (178). But Letham mentions nothing of 1 Timothy 3:16, that Christ was “justified in the Spirit” (translation mine). What

4 Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri DeVries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1900); George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1882), 95–109; James Buchanan, *Office and Work of the Holy Spirit* (New York, NY: Robert Carter, 1847).

5 E.g., Nicholas Bye, Liz Disley, and Nicholas Adams, eds., *The Impact of Idealism*, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2013), IV: 48–112.

6 Thomas Goodwin, *The Work of the Holy Ghost in Our Salvation*, in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol. 6 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1862).

role does the Spirit play in Christ's justification? Or, Letham rightly notes the Spirit's work in equipping Bezalel and Oholiab to construct the desert tabernacle (115) and correlatively treats the gifts of the Spirit (197–231), but he does not fully close the circle to connect these two giftings. Just as the Spirit gave the Old Testament gifts for the construction of the tabernacle, so the Spirit gives New Testament gifts for the construction of the church, God's final dwelling place. Closing the loop between the Spirit's work in the Old and New Testaments would further strengthen Letham's overall arguments.

These three desiderata notwithstanding, Letham's book is a fine treatment of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit that lays out the issues and points to avenues for further research. Students and laymen should carefully study this book if they want to learn more about the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The book also bodes well for the two prospective follow-on volumes on the Father and the Son. Letham's contributions to the study of the doctrine of the Trinity will undoubtedly contribute to the church's understanding about the God we love and serve. ©

John V. Fesko is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as Harriett Barbour Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi.

Big Answers to Big Questions

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* August–September 2023¹

by William Edgar

The Great Quest, by Os Guinness. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2022, 132 pages, \$11.90, paper; and *Signals of Transcendence*, by Os Guinness. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2023, 128 pages, \$15.36, paper.

By now Os Guinness is a household name to many Christians. He is a popular speaker, has written scores of books, and is a sought-after public intellectual. While best known for his works of popular theology, such as *The Call* (Nelson, 2003) and *Last Call for Liberty* (IVP, 2018),² it must not be forgotten that one of his greatest concerns is to reach outsiders for the Christian faith.

Guinness is co-founder of the Trinity Forum, whose stated mission is “to provide leaders a space and resources to engage life's greatest questions, in the context of faith.” If this sounds a bit vague, a deeper look shows the concern to bring cultural influencers to the Christian faith. It does this through book launches, quarterly readings, and forums to explore the great ideas, leading to Christian commitment.

No doubt the center of Guinness's interests is apologetics, the defense and commendation of the Christian faith. Many of his lectures and writings are about persuasion, encouraging people to think through issues and become convinced that the Christian faith is valid. From a family of missionaries to China, he came to robust ways of explicating the truth at L'Abri, the remarkable community in the Swiss Alps, led by Francis Schaeffer, one of

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1069.

2 Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling God's Purpose for Your Life* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998); and *Last Call for Liberty: How America's Genius for Freedom Has Become Its Greatest Threat* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018)

the twentieth century's very effective evangelists. A turning point came when he went to earn a doctorate at Oxford University, under the guidance of David Martin, the preeminent architect of secularization theory. Guinness's dissertation examined the implications of sociologist Peter L. Berger's views for Christian apologetics. We might call this the sociological turn in the art of commending the gospel.

Berger, not exactly an evangelical, stressed the social and psychological dimensions of worldview thinking. While truth and ideas matter, so do what Berger calls "structures of plausibility," the social conditions for knowledge (known as the sociology of knowledge). Guinness argued for recognizing the wider context for belief and unbelief. Apologetics hitherto had been too limited to logical proofs and attestations. While these may be helpful, most people do not develop convictions solely in abstract fashion.

Signals of Transcendence recognizes this wider view of belief. It is an extraordinary book, based on Berger's approach to intrusions into a closed world. The book simply lists cases of people who have built worldviews that are secular and then had a divine intervention that has jarred their assurance.

A couple of examples. First, the great poet W. H. Auden had become a typical liberal who believed man was basically good, and that if only we could change people's circumstances, we could climb out of our problems. Until—he went to a cinema in New York and saw a news report of Hitler invading Warsaw. To his utter astonishment, he heard people in the largely German audience shouting, "kill them; kill the Poles!" This profoundly shook his liberalism and forced him to ask how he could be so upset. It drove him to a sovereign God who could define good and evil above human convention.

A second example is G. K. Chesterton in art school. Surrounded by practiced pessimists, he began to feel that these fellow artists, who were close to the most beautiful objects, were ungrateful, lacking humility. It was (oddly) the contemplation of the dandelion that changed him from a typical secularist to a theist.

No one except possibly Francis Schaeffer has exploited this kind of tension as well as Berger. In my own conversations with unbelievers, this kind of conflict between a held position and the impossibility of living with it has most often led to an awareness of sin (the law) leading to salvation (grace). These signals are not natural theology, but "revelations," as J. H. Bavinck would suggest in *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*.³

Very different is Guinness's second book, *The Great Quest*. It is almost hard to believe it is by the same author as *Signals*. The concern to reach unbelievers is still very much there. But instead of (often somewhat diffident) presentations of various signals, it is a step-by-step argument for faith in Christ. There are four "phases," beginning with questions asked by seekers and ending with the Gospel. I feel conflicted about this. The Calvinist in me says there are no honest seekers. Guinness partly anticipates this by attempting to describe reasons why some people do not seem to care or want to go on the quest. They include being distracted (Pascal's "diversion"), bargaining ("I'll get to these things later"), or just noise (obstacles from our problems crowding in).

Still, these do not fully account for the apparent irrelevance of the big question for many people. My father was a decent man, even a good man. He had fought in World War II, survived the Great Depression, and married a lovely woman from Wilmington, North Carolina, where I was born. He worked for a multinational corporation and retired comfortably. As I would discover, he was impervious to the big questions. He and my mother developed the fine art of diverting dangerous conversations that might have raised the larger questions to safer ones: they could turn any exchange to innocuous issues, such as the children, travels, issues with neighbors, and so forth. As I read these two extraordinary books by Guinness, I kept asking myself how they would respond. The answer: with studied indifference.

To be generous, I must acknowledge *The*

3 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque* (Chestnut Hill, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2023).

Great Quest is full of rich illustrations and persuasive arguments meant to unsettle anyone from indifference. Many of them can be found in the readings and discussion questions from The Trinity Forum.⁴ They are arresting and challenging. But it is hard to get over the fact that so many people simply do not care, and no amount of logical persuasion is likely to get through.

May God use these two books to awaken people to the big questions and then to the big answers. ☺

William Edgar is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and emeritus professor of apologetics and ethics at Westminster Theological Seminary, Glenside, Pennsylvania.

⁴ <https://www.ttf.org>.

Timothy Keller: His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation

by *Collin Hansen*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
October 2023¹

by **William Edgar**

Timothy Keller: His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation, by Collin Hansen. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2023, xii + 306 pages, \$22.99.

My good friend,
You (foolishly) asked me what stood out for me in your splendid biography of Tim. That is a

¹ https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1076.

bit like asking an aging Swiss what he liked most about his country. In no particular order here are a few of my thoughts.

1) At the level of style, your prose is utterly readable. And your choices of stories and facts—you manage to pack so much in, within the limits of 272 pages, a feat few biographers have accomplished. They either err on the side of information overload or just hagiography. I thought I knew the man pretty well, but you showed me aspects of his life I had little or no knowledge about. I think Tim has meant more to me than most friends; and he was a very good friend, though he may have thought it was a one-way street.

2) I share many of the personal and geographical influences that affected him and Kathy. But because I am from France and went to Westminster, these do not exactly match up. I have only encountered the full British influence recently. But several influences do match. I cannot enumerate all of them here. But certainly at the top of the list are John Stott, Ed Clowney, Harvie Conn, Kennedy Smartt, Jack Miller; the cities of Boston and New York (my family includes the founders); also ministries like L’Abri, where I became a Christian, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, which nurtured me and published my books, and the Gospel Coalition, which embodies many of the principles of outreach I believe in. Of course, all the aspects of the influence of Westminster Seminary converge with my own formation (a sixty-year involvement). I could say a lot more concerning the seminary (I thought you did an excellent job of describing the place and its personnel, its strengths and its weaknesses). I was greatly interested in your descriptions of Gordon-Conwell. What a hard time they are going through!

3) Human stories. (a) Your depiction of Kathy and their “romance” is deeply moving. (b) I loved some of the inside line on Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Among the many accounts I enjoyed was that of Elizabeth Elliott. For years I struggled with (what I perceived to be) her fatalism. We had some unfortunate personal encounters. What changed my mind is Ellen Vaughn’s *Becoming E. E.*—she helped me understand what

I had not liked about her and gain great respect for her. (c) Your wonderful descriptions of Tim’s soul: his struggles, his passions, his vision. (d) How he got to New York by process of elimination! (e) His disarming humility.

4) From cover to cover the book describes my own vision for the Christian faith. While it is all a bit intimidating (honestly confronting my very limited contributions compared to—ahem—brother Keller) it shows the glories of the gospel in its every aspect. It is for this I am most deeply grateful to you. ☺

William Edgar is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and emeritus professor of apologetics and ethics at Westminster Theological Seminary, Glenside, Pennsylvania.

Recovering Our Sanity: How the Fear of God Conquers the Fears that Divide Us

by Michael Horton

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
October 2023¹

by Andrew S. Wilson

Recovering Our Sanity: How the Fear of God Conquers the Fears that Divide Us, by Michael Horton. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022, xiv + 306 pages, \$24.99.

“I’m telling you, *this is the way modern society works*—by the constant creation of fear.”²

While those words are spoken by a character in a work of fiction, Michael Horton agrees that fear is a dominant force in modern life. The fact that this is true should not sit well with us, because fear-mongering is dehumanizing. In Horton’s words, God “did not design us to live in a perpetual state of emergency” (2).

After an introductory chapter that shows how life in today’s world can be described as “A Pandemic of Fear,” the main chapters of this book are divided into two parts under the headings “The Fear to End All Fears” and “Facing Our Fears with Eyes Raised to God.” The theme of part I is that cultivating and maintaining the fear of God keeps other sources of fear in proper perspective. Horton describes fearing God as “living with the grain of reality” (28), noting that “living against the grain of reality is the epitome of insanity” (50). Nebuchadnezzar’s experience of madness in Daniel 4 is

¹ https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1077.

² Michael Crichton, *State of Fear* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 456.

used to illustrate this point. Horton reflects upon that episode by noting that “the illusion is that we are in charge. It’s autonomy that is the myth—and the sooner we raise our eyes to heaven, the sooner our sanity will be restored” (57). This is probably the book’s most important insight. Soundness of mind depends on our ability to be grateful for the world as it has been given to us, even with all the constraints of reality and in spite of all the havoc wrought by human fallenness.³ And Horton reminds us that the deepest gratitude is cultivated in our hearts when we abandon our reality-denying attempts at self-justification and lay hold of the righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus Christ.

In part 2, Horton applies the principles outlined in part 1 to the sources of fear that confront us in the world today. There are chapters dealing with death, suffering, work, the environment, politics, religious liberty, the LGBTQ+ movement, and racial matters. One of the best insights in this section comes in response to the way technology and social media incline us to live in echo chambers and view anyone who disagrees with us as the intolerable “other.” Horton is right to remind us that we are to see all people, even those with whom we have sharp disagreements, as neighbors whom we are called to love.

In his chapter on politics, Horton takes on the hot topic of Christian nationalism, contending that it is inconsistent with our era of redemptive history and with our nation’s founding principles. While this line of argumentation deals a significant blow to things like theonomy and an established church, there is still a measure of complexity to this matter. Many Christians, whether or not they identify as Christian nationalists,⁴ think that they

should seek the welfare of their political communities by striving to order them according to the principles of right and wrong set forth in God’s moral law. This is made especially challenging when the dominant social imaginary⁵ leads to grave misreadings of the light of nature. Confronted with such a situation, the notion of recovering the America that once embraced a generic Christian identity seems pretty desirable. That being said, it also seems that the only realistic way this might happen is if the church, as an institution, keeps its focus on its task of making disciples.

Horton begins this book by saying that his goal is “not to take sides in cultural and political debates” (17). In spite of this, the things that he says and the sources that he references concerning certain topics will likely alienate a number of readers who might otherwise have been open to considering his theological insights. I wish that Horton had been able to express more sympathy toward the concerns of Christians who take a different view than he does on matters like climate science, immigration, systemic racism, and Donald Trump. The book will appeal to Christians who prefer the kind of cultural and political engagement modeled by evangelicals like Russell Moore (who writes the forward in the book) and David French (whose writings are cited at several points). But many believers see serious deficiencies with that type of strategy.⁶ Horton could have had a

reformer.org/2023/04/cultural-christianity-is-about-culture/, accessed May 1, 2023. For a nuanced critique of one popular expression of Christian nationalism, see Kevin DeYoung, “The Rise of Right-Wing Wokeism,” *The Gospel Coalition* (Nov. 28, 2022): <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/christian-nationalism-wolfe/>, accessed Dec. 7, 2022.

5 “Social imaginary” is a phrase coined by philosopher Charles Taylor to describe “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings.” Cited in Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 27.

6 See the following articles: Carl R. Trueman, “David French and the Future of Orthodox Protestantism,” *First Things* (Nov. 25, 2022): <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2022/11/david-french-and-the-future-of-orthodox-protestantism>, accessed Nov. 25, 2022; John Ehrett, “The Embarrassment Reflex: Evangelicals and Culture,” *American Reformer* (Oct. 5, 2021): <https://americanreformer.org/2021/10/the-embarrassment-reflex-evangelicals-and-culture/>, accessed May 8, 2023.

3 In connection with this, it is interesting to note that recent studies have shown that those who embrace progressive ideology, with its utopian vision that is uncongenial to gratitude, are especially prone to poor mental health. See Shaun Rieley, “Progressively Mental,” *The American Conservative* (Apr. 14, 2023): <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/progressively-mental/>, accessed Apr. 15, 2023.

4 A number of astute reflections are being written about various aspects of this subject. On the benefits of some form of cultural Christianity, see Ben C. Dunson, “Cultural Christianity Is About Culture,” *American Reformer* (Apr. 27, 2023): [https://american-](https://american-reformer.org/2023/04/cultural-christianity-is-about-culture/)

broader readership if he had been more solicitous toward those who think that a different approach is needed. ©

Andy Wilson is an OPC minister and serves as the pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Laconia, New Hampshire.

Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction

by Cory C. Brock and
N. Gray Sutanto

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
December 2023¹

by David VanDrunen

Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction, by Cory C. Brock and N. Gray Sutanto. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022, 322 pages, \$36.99, paper.

N*eo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction* is a straightforward title that indicates what this book's authors, Cory Brock and Gray Sutanto, wished to accomplish in writing it. But both title and subtitle need clarification. By "neo-Calvinism," the authors refer to "a nineteenth- and early twentieth-century movement in the Netherlands" (3). This means an almost exclusive focus on the work of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. In writing "a *theological* introduction," the authors unfold "the unique dogmatic contributions" (2) of these two figures. Brock and Sutanto observe that

most treatments of neo-Calvinism explore topics such as "public theology, politics, and philosophy" (1). In contrast, Brock and Sutanto aspire to explain the "key dogmatic developments" in Kuyper's and Bavinck's thought, and to do so in a "*descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*" (7) way.

After a brief introduction, chapter 2 ("Calvinism and Neo-Calvinism") argues that Kuyper and Bavinck identified Calvinism with the development of a Christian worldview, an emphasis on divine sovereignty, and a robust doctrine of common grace. Their neo-Calvinism, then, developed John Calvin's theology into a holistic worldview within the context of the modern world. The third chapter ("Catholic and Modern") claims that Kuyper and Bavinck distinguished between the essence and the external forms of historical orthodoxy. They were devoted to preserving the essence but believed that the external forms rightly change from time to time and place to place. Thus, they defended the "multiformity" of the church over against stale conservatism.

Chapter 4 ("Revelation and Reason") explains Kuyper's and Bavinck's views of general revelation. It argues that they affirmed the classical Reformed position but that they combined it with "a romantic emphasis on the *affective* dimensions of revelation's reception" (72). The basic idea is that God has implanted his revelation deep in the heart, such that human beings *feel* God's existence even before they reason about it. Chapter 5 ("Scripture and Organism") explores Kuyper and Bavinck on the Bible. They affirmed Scripture's divine inspiration but also emphasized its human character and authorship. According to the authors, they held an *organic* rather than *mechanical* view of Scripture, and they believed Scripture was authoritative for all scientific disciplines although not a manual for non-theological disciplines.

Chapter 6 ("Creation and Re-creation") revisits perennial questions about nature and grace. The authors suggest that affirming the continuity of God's work in creation and re-creation was Kuyper's and Bavinck's central contribution to the topic. This chapter also contains a lengthy refutation of recent claims about Bavinck's view of the

¹ https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1093.

beatific vision.

Chapter 7 (“Image and Fall”) focuses on anthropology, particularly on humans as image of the divine Trinity and its vocational implications.

Chapter 8 (“Common Grace and the Gospel”) explores a topic especially associated with Kuyper. Brock and Sutanto contend that Kuyper and Bavinck found the idea of common grace in earlier Reformed theologians but were the first to give this doctrine “magisterial treatment” as “a distinct loci [sic] of dogmatic logic” (216). This chapter includes extended discussion of natural law. The ninth and final full chapter (“The Church and the World”) unpacks the famous Kuyperian (and less famous Bavinckian) distinction between the church as *organism* and *institute*, and particularly its implications for the church’s relationship to the world. The volume concludes with sixteen theses summarizing neo-Calvinist theology.

It may be tempting to judge this book by the degree to which one appreciates the theology of Kuyper and Bavinck. But the important question to consider is whether the authors accomplished their purposes in writing. In important respects, I believe they did. They generally maintained the descriptive tone they desired and set forth these Dutch theologians’ work in ways that allow readers to agree, disagree, or argue with them. Brock and Sutanto effectively draw readers into Kuyper’s and Bavinck’s thought. In the big picture, this is precisely what the book aims to do.

In some other respects, I judge the book to be less successful. I first mention three concerns briefly and then reflect a bit further on the book’s title and subtitle.

First, this volume could have been considerably more concise. Some individual chapters circle around similar issues repeatedly. This was especially the case in chapter 9. Moreover, many of the same topics appeared in multiple chapters. In part, I believe, this is because so much of the book comes back eventually to a handful of core issues related to Christianity-and-culture questions. I will return to this last point shortly.

Second, while the book usually explains its claims clearly, there are occasional exceptions.

In my judgment, chapter 4 fails to clarify some of its key assertions. The basic human-psychological distinction between the *affective* and *rational* is clear enough, and the idea that Kuyper and Bavinck believed that general revelation provokes both affective and rational responses is persuasive. But the authors portray the affective as a “preconceptual” (96) knowledge, a knowledge “without thinking” (80). What exactly “knowledge” is that exists entirely without concepts or thinking is not obvious, and the authors never adequately explain. The chapter also suffers from lingering confusion on whether, for Kuyper and Bavinck, general revelation itself is distinct from the human responses it provokes. For example, the authors say that general revelation both “has” affective dimensions and “produces” an affective knowledge of God (96).

Third, the authors’ discussion of Kuyper and Bavinck on natural law in chapter 8 was not entirely satisfying. Brock and Sutanto state that Kuyper and Bavinck affirmed much of the older Christian (including Reformed) tradition of natural law. This is clearly true. But the authors portray older and contemporary Reformed thought on natural law in a somewhat flattened and unnuanced way, which allows them to present the Dutchmen’s views as distinctive and richer. While I have no quarrel with their description of Kuyper and Bavinck themselves on the topic, I believe there is more to the Reformed natural-law tradition than the authors give it credit for. Kuyper’s and Bavinck’s views were probably not as substantively distinct from the larger tradition as the authors suggest.

I conclude with a few reflections on this book’s title and subtitle. The authors entitle their book *Neo-Calvinism*, yet their focus is almost entirely on the work of Kuyper and Bavinck, whom they frequently refer to as “the neo-Calvinists.” To their credit, Brock and Sutanto are very clear what they mean by “neo-Calvinism,” but neo-Calvinism ordinarily means something rather different from the thought of Kuyper and Bavinck. Neo-Calvinism represents a tradition of thought that has been developing for nearly a century and a half. It has spread to many places around the world, and its

practitioners have advocated a variety of ideas, many of which Kuyper and Bavinck themselves did not advocate and some of which, arguably, they would have rejected. Kuyper and Bavinck may have been its progenitors, but neo-Calvinism involves a good deal more than their work. There is something off-kilter about defining neo-Calvinism so narrowly when the neo-Calvinism almost everyone knows has been filtered, modified, and developed through many subsequent writers and institutions. Treating neo-Calvinism as “a nineteenth-and early twentieth-century movement in the Netherlands” (3) is analogous to defining Christianity as a mid-first-century movement in the Mediterranean or Reformed theology as a mid-sixteenth-century movement in Switzerland. This is not really a book about neo-Calvinism. It is a book about Kuyper and Bavinck, the progenitors of neo-Calvinism.

The book is subtitled *A Theological Introduction* because this is a study of Kuyper’s and Bavinck’s *theology*, in distinction from most works on neo-Calvinism, which focus on the movement’s views of politics, art, or other broader cultural issues. I found this an intriguing and promising goal. Yet it is remarkable how almost every topic addressed in the book turns into a discussion of something related to “Christianity-and-culture” debates. As two examples, chapters 3 and 9 address ecclesiology, yet a major theme of the former is the “leavening” power of Christianity’s catholicity, and a major theme of the latter is the relationship of the church and the world. One might also note how the authors define neo-Calvinism in terms of developing a “holistic worldview” (20) and their suggestion that “the continuity of God’s work in the nature-grace relationship is the key insight of neo-Calvinism” (134). This book is indeed a work of *theology*, but more precisely it is a book on the theological roots of Kuyper’s and Bavinck’s views on Christians’ place and work in the broader world. If one of the book’s purposes was to show that neo-Calvinism is more than a Christianity-and-culture movement, its success is limited. In fact, it may reinforce the opposite conclusion. The authors say that the term “neo-Calvinism”

has “become associated, even as a synonym, with transformationalism” and that “this ought not to be so” (4). Although I agree with them that such an association is simplistic, their book has not done as much to dispel this impression as they probably hoped. ☺

David VanDrunen is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as the Robert B. Strimple professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics at Westminster Seminary California, Escondido, California.

✦ Servant Reading

Review Articles

An Attempt at Reconciling Paleanthropology and Scripture

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* January 2023¹

by Jan Frederic Dudt

In Quest of the Historic Adam, by William Lane Craig. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021, 439 pages, \$38.00.

Over the last decade and a half there has been a proliferation of articles and books from Christian authors of various stripes over the matter of reconciling the message of human origins as described by the current science of paleoanthropology with the biblical account of human origins. The discussion has typically centered around how to weigh the claims of modern science with those of Scripture.

The continual discoveries of fossils and artifacts has pushed back the date of the earliest *Homo sapiens* to about 350,000 BP (years before present), as suggested by recent finds from Morocco. The picture is complicated by the modern genetics of human diversity. The raw number of genes and allelic variants of characteristics like the human leucocyte antigens (HLA) make it hard to imagine

that there was an original single couple any time in human history. HLA antigens are those protein flags on our cells that define us as self, requiring very close matches if an organ or tissue donation is needed. The total number of variants for HLA genes is staggering. A single first couple could only contain a minute fraction of the variants currently seen across the human population.

Complicating the picture are new discoveries that suggest that there were various forms of the genus *Homo* prior to the existence of *Homo sapiens* by hundreds of thousands of years. Names like *Homo erectus* and *Homo heidelbergensis* come to mind. In addition, there are discoveries of *Homo* species that were contemporary with modern *Homo sapiens* as recently as the last ice age, nearly 40,000 years ago, or less. Names like *Homo neanderthalensis*, *Homo denisova* (Denisovans), and the enigmatic hobbit man (*Homo floresiensis*) come to mind. In the last ten years or so the complete genomes of Neanderthals and Denisovans have been sequenced from DNA extracted from fossil bones or teeth. Rigorous comparisons of those genomes to modern human genomes across the continents has led to the conclusion that all non-African descended people and some African-descended people show genetic markers consistent with cross breeding of *Homo sapiens* with Neanderthals and Denisovans. The genetic contribution from these ancient species is about 2 percent. The indication is that this occurred about forty or fifty thousand years ago, before Neanderthals and Denisovans disappeared from the fossil record.

Evidence from skeletal similarities of these *Homo* species and neurological and vascular markers in the bones of the *Homo* species compared to that of anatomically modern humans has led many to conclude that they were capable of speech and abstract human-like reasoning. Supporting this conclusion are discoveries of sophisticated throwing spears associated with *Homo heidelbergensis* dating to about 350,000 years BP and art associated with Neanderthal cave sites in Spain from 65,000 years ago, about 20,000 years before modern humans are thought to have arrived there.

The matter of reconciling these dates and the

¹ https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1015.

paleoanthropological complexities with the biblical account of human origins has generated much literature dedicated to the analysis. The literature spans the spectrum of perspectives of those who are committed to a historic understanding of biblical authority and inerrancy to those who have taken a more critical approach. Theologians and scientists alike have contributed. Such theologians as C. John Collins, John Walton, and Peter Enns populate the theological spectrum. Scientists such as Dennis Venema, Denis Lamoureux, and Francis Collins have contributed. Those who allow the science to arbitrate over biblical authority typically retreat from a historic Adam. In so doing, classic doctrines associated with a historic fall and original sin are significantly reworked or abandoned altogether, often for something that looks strikingly Pelagian. Those who are committed to the historicity of the biblical narrative and characters are perplexed by the science and its implications for crucial doctrines such as the *imago Dei* and original sin.

Into this mix William Lane Craig has written *The Quest for the Historic Adam*. He makes his case for the great antiquity of humanity as informed by modern science while desiring to secure the biblically nonnegotiable historic Adam. His attempt to reconcile science with Scripture is part of a noble Christian project that echoes the sentiment of Christians down through the ages. Even Galileo believed that “nor is God any less excellently revealed in Nature’s actions than in the sacred statements of the Bible.”²

Craig’s theological commitments are not Reformed, nor are they classically evangelical. For him, the doctrine of original sin has scant biblical support and is not crucial to the Christian faith, though he does recognize that a historic Adam is crucial to the doctrine (4–6). He also has an apparent misunderstanding of limited atonement, calling it a “strange teaching” that would not encompass the sins of archaic humans (365). In addition,

as one reads his book, it is unclear how he sees the inspiration of Scripture. He never clearly says. However, his commitment to the concept of historic Adam is commendable. His appreciation for Peter Enns’s position that “Paul’s Adam in Romans is not a plain reading of the Adam story but an interpretation of the story for theological purposes that are not rooted in Genesis” (6) is revealing. Craig does not clearly distance himself from Enns’s position that the Old Testament is a post-exilic, second-temple polemic on Hebrew identity. Hence, it is left to serious doubt whether Craig sees the Scriptures as a clearly inspired set of books with linked continuity. Perhaps it is for this reason that Craig spends the first half of the book contextualizing Genesis within its ancient Near Eastern cultural setting. For Craig this seems to be the greater influence on the narrative of Genesis 1–11 than the Holy Spirit himself, who is never mentioned in the book.

Craig makes it clear in the first chapter that “we need to consider the option that Genesis 1–11 need not be considered literally” (14). Here he sides clearly with non-concordists, leaving one to wonder what useful information can be gleaned from the Genesis narrative. He is desirous of taking “a canonical approach to Adam” that prevents him from reducing Adam to complete figurative myth. However, he appeals to ancient Near Eastern mythology to do this.

Chapters 2 and 3 are dedicated to convincing the reader that myth need not reflect real events or linear time while it maintains a sacredness in the mind of the adherent. It looks to him like the Genesis narrative has ample parallels to classic Near Eastern myths. Those parallels are used as a commentary against “crass polytheism” punctuated by genealogies that were “regarded as authoritative” by the “undisputed post-exilic Chronicler.” It is curious that he never mentions Moses and how the Holy Spirit would guide the narrative to accomplish its purpose. Craig’s take on Genesis is not that it is a description of real events worked out in historic time but rather a commentary against the contemporary polytheistic myths. It makes one wonder why to even bother with a historic

2 Galileo, “Letter to Madame Christina of Lorraine, Grand Duchess of Tuscany,” 1615. <https://inters.org/Galilei-Madame-Christina-Lorraine>.

Adam and not just default to the classic position of many higher critics that reject the historicity and the heart of the gospel. The reader is required to assume that Craig is unwilling to go that far due to a conviction that the rest of Scripture accepts Adam as historic. Why the authors of Scripture would be seen as authoritative without Craig's clear articulation of his view of biblical authority is an unanswered question.

In chapters 4 and 5 Craig makes the case that although Genesis 1–11 is mythic, it is not the same type of myth as was found among the Hebrews' contemporary neighbors. While trying to retain some historic flavor in the narrative, he points out that in Genesis, cultural practices like livestock herding and vine dressing are attributed to humans, not the gods. But this point could be made using myth to attribute these skills to human invention rather than to the deities. This is also the case with anthropomorphisms such as God breathing life into nostrils, walking in the garden, or smelling Noah's sacrifice. His take is that the author of these descriptive events would have assumed his readers would see these anthropomorphisms to be part of the storyteller's art and not serious theology (102). Strangely, Craig fails to make the case that Jewish and Christian people have not seen these descriptions as serious theology. He goes on to make the case that fantastic things like six creation days, a crafty snake, cherubim with flaming sword, unions of angels and humans, and trees with special qualities would likely have been considered less than factually true by the biblical author. Yet, despite the fantastic elements and inconsistencies, these stories would have been objects of belief for the ancient Israelites. Chapter 5 is Craig's attempt to anchor Adam in history despite the mythic qualities of the Genesis 1–11 narrative. Genealogies from the Old and New Testaments make historicity an insurmountable matter. His belief is that the purpose of the genealogies in ancient Near Eastern tradition, including Genesis, is domestic, political, and religious. The history is an incidental preservation (141). However, the characters in the genealogies would have been considered by ancient readers as

real, even if the life spans were believed to be fantastic (146). He does not make a good case at this point why ancient supernaturalists would reject the long-life spans while holding to the historicity of the individual, whether considering a Sumerian king or a biblical patriarch. Craig jumps to favor the term "mytho-history"—real people from the primeval past whose actions are significant for mankind in a highly symbolic story. I suppose he would see this historical account to be on par with the account of Davey Crockett riding on a lightning bolt. You might believe in Davey but not the ride on the bolt.

Building on this perspective, Craig goes on in chapter 7 to see Paul's treatment of Adam in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 as truly historic. He does not go as far as some to suggest that Paul assumes the history of Adam because he misses the point of mythic Genesis. However, he also does not go so far as to say Paul got it right because he was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, for many of us, Craig's choosing of the historic Adam is not a much better opinion than those who reject the historic Adam for the figurative myth of Genesis. However, Craig needs his Adam to be historic in order for him to make his case from the science outlined in the last part of his book.

Craig claims Adam to be historic. However, when was he and what was he like? In the last third of the book Craig explains why he thinks Adam is very old, perhaps 750,000 years BP. He relies heavily on mainstream paleoanthropology and modern human genetics to make his point. He does a masterful job of surveying the current science to make his case. This might be a tough read for those who have not followed the field over the last few decades. The terms, dates, and anthropological theory could be a slog for the unfamiliar. However, I believe he represents the science accurately. It is good to remember that the modern science of paleoanthropology has no Christian voice and spends a lot of time in rancorous debate of the evidence, with no sympathy for Christian concerns. Classically, the idea of humans being defined biblically as image bearers is rejected if not scoffed

at. For Christians, the matter of being in the image of God is of far greater importance than knowing when Adam walked the earth.

Based on the modern state of the scientific data, Craig chooses *Homo heidelbergensis* as the species that most likely represents the first couple. Recent finds that show this archaic species to be capable of sophisticated tool making in a temperate climate suggests that *Homo heidelbergensis* was as capable as modern humans. Cranial capacity in the lower range of modern humans would not preclude their human identity. Skeletal evidence of neural and vascular pathways like those in modern humans supports the claim. Craig is correct to claim that the modern science chooses *Homo heidelbergensis* to be the forebearers of *Homo Neanderthalensis*, *Homo denisova*, and *Homo sapiens*. All of these appear to be fully possessing of human capabilities when the latest evidence is considered. There is evidence for tool making, speech, and art among all of them. Neanderthals and modern humans were burying their dead as early as over 100,000 years ago. Based on the evidence, Craig finds it hard to exclude any of them from *imago Dei*, even though they are classified as different species. The implication is that heaven could likely look more like Tolkien's Middle Earth than we typically think.

However, Craig puts a lot of weight on a functional definition of what it means to be in the image of God. He is less sympathetic to an ontological approach to being *imago Dei*. This could be unsettling to some traditional Christians who realize that human possession of the *imago Dei* is not a function of capabilities that can be gained or lost. Function can certainly define the group, but it is insufficient to define the individual's status. Function can be lost or gained; identity cannot. Fortunately, Craig does not reject an ontological approach entirely (366–67). Significantly, he rejects monism and retains the dualistic Christian doctrine of humans as physical body and immaterial soul. He sees human consciousness as seated in the immaterial soul. There is mystery here for sure. To his credit, he is clearly stating that God imputed the soul in a direct act to create Adam,

the first human, as *imago Dei*.

Craig's final effort in the book is to make the case for an original first couple as the progenitors of all humans. This position has regained some traction among Christians who have reconsidered the long history of humanity and the genetic complexity that drove many over the last couple decades to reject the idea of a historic first couple. He makes the point that the great antiquity of *Homo heidelbergensis* (+700,000 BP), as outlined in the work of Joshua Swamidass, has demonstrated that a genealogical ancestor is not necessarily a genetic ancestor, as one's genealogical ancestor may not have a genetic contribution to the offspring after many generations. Here a lot of speculation is done to show that the original image-bearing couple, Adam and Eve, could conceivably be the ancestors to all living.

A lot more could be said about William Lane Craig's *In Quest of the Historic Adam*. He has obviously done a masterful job on the research and thought needed to write this book. The book is useful for understanding how an old-earth creationist can make sense of a thorny scientific problem associated with the origin of humans. However, it is also clear that Craig does not adequately treat what it means to have authors writing Scripture who are inspired by the Holy Spirit. Could biblical authors who knew less about ancient Mid-Eastern manuscripts than some scholars today write books under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that are consistently coherent with linked continuity? I am not convinced that Craig believes that they could. Hence, there is a major weakness in his argument. ©

Jan Frederic Dudt is a professor of biology at Grove City College in Grove City, Pennsylvania.

What Is the Primary Mission of the Church?

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* January 2023¹

by Alan D. Strange

The Primary Mission of the Church: Engaging or Transforming the World? by Bryan D. Estelle. Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2022, 448 pages, \$19.99, paper.

Letter to the American Church, by Eric Metaxas. Washington, DC: Salem, 2022, xiv +176 pages, \$22.99.

The cry of the hour in some quarters of the institutional church—by liberals, typically—is “relevance!” The challenge leveled at the church by such liberals is that the message and service of the church must properly serve a culture that insists on wage equity, gender sensitivity, “wokeness,” and the like. In other quarters—as witnessed in Eric Metaxas’s book—the call for the church is to “speak up” about matters that are of concern to many on the other end of the political spectrum. So, whether the church is being told that it must be relevant to progressive culture or that it must not be silent politically in the face of liberalism, the calling, task, and mission of the church appears by such imperatives to have as much to do with cultural currents as it has to do with anything that Jesus Christ has commanded his church to do. Not, however, for Bryan Estelle, Professor of Old Testament at Westminster Seminary California. Dr. Estelle is clear that the primary mission of the church is not to testify directly to political, social, economic, or cultural verities as some perceive them but for it to be faithful to the call and commission of the Lord to evangelize and disciple the nations (Matt. 28:18–20).

Estelle’s subtitle also suggests his view of the church’s primary mission, though put in a

question form: is the church to engage or transform the world? It becomes quickly evident that Estelle thinks the answer to the question is different than the one H. Richard Niebuhr furnished, who thought that the Reformed understanding of “Christ and Culture” was to see “Christ as the Transformer of Culture.” Dr. Estelle does not see the church as the transformer of culture; rather, he sees the church as an institution given a specific task from Christ, in which she is to “engage” the world and to call her to faith alone in Christ alone. Estelle in this book treats that conviction in four sections: beginning with a biblical survey, exploring various competing approaches to the question of the primary calling of the church (theologically, confessionally, and historically), and ending with a treatment of church power and a treatment of the relationship of church and state. This tract for our times provides an apt remedy for the pervasive politicization that afflicts us even in the church.

Estelle begins his treatment in Genesis, finding the foundations laid there “for the biblical teaching on the primary mission of the church” (72). He sees it as rooted in covenant, both in the covenant of redemption and historical covenants, namely, the redemptive covenant of grace and the non-redemptive Noahic covenant. This forms the basis for a two-fold citizenship for God’s people, a sacred and secular citizenship, along the lines of Calvin’s two-kingdom view, according to Estelle. The question then becomes one of how the Christian and the church should comport themselves in the world in this present age. Estelle makes it clear here that he is not suggesting that it is possible for a Christian to “keep his faith out of certain spheres of life” (72); rather, the question is how the Christian and the church ought to engage what Estelle calls the “secular sphere.”

Estelle suggests Old Testament answers to “secular” engagement in chapters 2 and 3 of the book, in which he treats in turn both Joseph and Daniel. These two are case studies for strangers in a strange land, as Joseph was forcibly taken to Egypt and Daniel to Babylon, with each in turn coming to have exemplary lives, albeit with both in captivity. Estelle sees Israel’s life in its own land

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1016.

as emblematic of saints in the new heavens and earth, while the saints in exile, as were Joseph and Daniel, typified life in the New Covenant era, in which the church labors under a pilgrim identity, as did Israel in its wilderness wanderings; the church reaches its eschatological fullness in the coming age, as anticipated by Israel entering and living in the promised land.

In chapter 5, Estelle examines the New Testament witness to the primary mission of the church, looking at classic passages in the gospels and the epistles that testify to the spiritual character of the church's divine task, particularly as that task is conceived over against the task of other institutions of God, like the state or the family. Estelle concludes that the New Testament clearly teaches that "Christ is ruler of the Universe; however, how He rules in creation and civil society as moral governor of the world is different from how He rules His church as mediator of the covenant of grace" (145). Here Estelle self-consciously relies on his colleague David VanDrunen in affirming that "the church is 'the only institution and community in this world that can be identified with the redemptive kingdom and the covenant of grace'" (145).

In part 2 of his book, Estelle looks at various approaches to the question of Christ and culture and definitions of the primary mission of the church that he takes to differ from the approach that he is setting forth, which is that the institutional church has a more precise, and narrow, call than many may conceive it to have. He begins in chapter 6 by looking at Kuyper, Dooyeweerd, and North American Calvinism and is critical of their propensity to modify secular matters, even one's job, with the qualifier "Christian" (as in "Christian architecture" or "Christian cooking"). While he is critical of such approaches, he is even more critical in what follows, as he engages a Marxist approach in his examination of Liberation Theology (chapter 7) and, on the other end of the spectrum, reconstructionist and theonomic viewpoints (chapter 8).

Finally, he finishes part 2 with looking at what he calls "missional creep," as seen in the ways that Leslie Newbigin, Martin Luther King, Jr., and

the social justice movement more broadly have sought to redefine the church so that it ends up not primarily shaped by and responsive to the command to preach the gospel narrowly focused (the person and work of Christ and the call for faith and repentance) but broadly conceived as securing social justice in this world, especially for the poor and oppressed. The church should indeed preach that our goal as Christians should be not only to work to provide for us and ours but also to help those who have need (Eph. 4:28). The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) and the judgment of the sheep and goats (Matt. 25) make clear that the needy—especially needy Christians—merit our aid as we are able to render it.

Certainly, our business ethics must have the glory of God and the welfare of our neighbor at heart and never simply focus on the "bottom line" of the world, the mere accumulation of wealth. We address for the Christian life much of what concerned Newbigin, King, and others, but not in explicit political ways: we do not preach that justice means that the church (or even individual Christians) must support a certain minimum wage, tax bill, or the like. The pulpit can properly call neither for conservative nor liberal political measures to be adopted by the civil magistrate, though we always preach the obligation of all men to love God and neighbor in practical ways.

In part 3 of his book, Estelle examines the primary mission of the church as it relates to the Kingdom of God (KOG), as it is developed confessionally, and the outplaying of the church's mission historically. With respect to the relationship of the church to the KOG, Estelle acknowledges that while most have seen the kingdom as more extensive than the church, "nevertheless, the church is the sole institution on earth for carrying out the goals of the KOG" (283). He examines Calvin, Vos, and current writers on this question, critiquing social gospelers and others who fail to see that because the KOG realizes its fulfillment eschatologically, the true mission of the church is to prepare its members for that future realization.

In the confessional and historical chapters, Estelle deals with the teachings of Westminster,

both in its original and disestablishment (American) forms, highlighting the church's mission and spiritual character. In both forms, the Westminster Confession of Faith notes that the church is "not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth" (WCF 31.4, amended; 31.5, unamended). The doctrine of that spiritual character is often termed "the spirituality of the church," which Estelle shows in all its sides, good and bad (the latter being used in the defense of chattel slavery in America). He thus looks at the relevant nineteenth-century Presbyterian Church (in the USA) Old School theologians (Thornwell, Robinson, Hodge, Peck, et al.) as they dealt with the question of the spirituality of the church.

Finally, in part 4, Estelle looks at what is fundamental to all of this—the nature of church power. Over against the Roman Catholic claim that church power is magisterial and legislative, Presbyterians believe it to be ministerial and declarative. The power of the church is exercised in lowliness, in servant form (ministerial: seen in the servanthood of our Lord, the foot-washer). Presbyterians also view church power as moral and suasive, contrasted with civil power, which is legal and coercive. Church power is never coercive, with officers lording it over the flock; rather, it is declarative of the Word of God.

All this is to say that the nature, and limits, of the power of the church define it as the institution that it is, a spiritual one, seen in its exercise of the keys, over against a civil institution (the state), whose power is that of the sword, or a biological institution (the family), whose power is symbolized by the rod. Estelle explores all of this by looking at the nature of Christ's kingship as that which is exercised particularly in and over the church and how that has played out, from matters as diverse as the nineteenth-century debate about church boards in the PCUSA and the twentieth-century dispute about women in combat in the OPC. All in all, Estelle addresses the need for the church to mind its own (spiritual) business, chronicling when he thinks it was and was not successful in pursuing its true mission.

As noted, this is an apt book for the times.

Rather than simply decrying these dark days with the "*O tempora! O mores!*" of a Cicero contra Cati-line, Estelle calls upon the church to recapture her mission, to mind her spiritual business, and to give herself unstintingly to that for which her Lord has called her. The differences that I would have with this fine book would be those that I have already expressed elsewhere relating to contemporary two-kingdom approaches. I think that such approaches tend to draw the distinctions well between the institutional church and other institutions (like the state) but come up short in showing us how faith is integrated with life (accounting for diversity but not unity; both must be accounted for).

Also, while I think that Joseph and Daniel do furnish us with many good patterns to follow in an often hostile culture, surely the church that now operates, considering the finished work of Christ and the globalization of the gospel message, must impact the world in a way that ethnic Israel before entering and then in her land never could. Another way of putting it—while wilderness wanderings may be evocative, and certainly descriptive of our Christian experience now in a measure, they do not exhaust our present reality of taking all captive to the obedience of Christ. It seems that a fair reading of Western history shows that the gospel has transformed many lives that have impacted the world about it. Again, though, these are minor criticisms of a very good book.

I think that while the contemporary two-kingdom model offers much that is helpful, it is not the best strategy in encouraging others to recapture a right view of the church's mission. I am elsewhere currently arguing for something like what Dr. Estelle calls for—a revival of a balanced spirituality of the church doctrine—that I call "mere spirituality" (with apologies to C. S. Lewis). This "mere spirituality" approach calls for all the Reformed—whether two-kingdom advocates, transformational partisans of the right or left, establishmentarians, etc.—to recognize what the calling of the institutional church truly is, however they may differ as to questions of Christ and culture, public or political theology, and the like. I want all parties at the Reformed table, even if they disagree with

each other politically and on the relationship of faith and the world, to agree that the church is the church, along the lines that Estelle and I seek to define it, in terms of its primary mission and true spirituality.

The book by Metaxas stands in sharp contrast to Estelle's. While there is much in Metaxas with which many confessional Christians would agree—he calls for pulpit opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage, for instance—there is much else that he calls for respecting the “need” of the institutional church to be explicitly political that is, at best, uncertain, on a charitable reading. For instance, take Metaxas's curious call that we must not only fight “for justice,” which could mean many things, but that the church must also attempt to see “that our government enacts the will of the people” (77). The best reading of that is problematic for the institutional church—how does the church know “the will of the people” and, in any case, if such could be ascertained, why would it be the church's business to seek to have the government enact it? What is really going on here? Throughout the book one has the sense that something that is not being made explicit lies beneath the surface and is Metaxas's “real reason” for writing this volume.

How would seeing to it “that our government enacts the will of the people” work in a monarchy or an oligarchy, which are biblically legitimate forms of civil governments, and, in any case, under which God's people have lived or currently live? I guess Metaxas would reply that his letter is to the American church, and since we have a republic here, it is the church's responsibility to see that the government of the republic enacts the will of the people, even though it is arguable that simply “enacting the will of the people” is how a republic is properly to work. Many would say that historically, electing the best persons and letting them vote accordingly is how a republic is to be governed; admittedly, a republic does not classically mesh with the democratic populism that has come, not only in the days of William Jennings Bryan but also more lately, to characterize the United States.

One suspects, given Metaxas's known public commitments and actions regarding former President Trump, that enacting the will of the people may have something to do with the church speaking up in the case of a defective election result so that the “real decision” of the people may be followed. How the church is supposed to ascertain such and why it is the church's calling even to attempt to do so and to proclaim the “real winner” of an election is never disclosed. It is hard to think that Trumpism does not lurk in the back of his insistence that the church needs to step up and stop dodging its political obligations. Not only did an overwhelming number of evangelicals vote for Trump in two elections, but also many evangelicals have spoken of Trump in near-messianic terms, with Pentecostal and charismatic leaders especially referring to him as “anointed” or using like religious metaphors. In some quarters, it is hard to imagine how the American evangelical church could be any more open and supportive of Trump than it has been.

Metaxas's point of departure throughout his call for the American church not to be politically silent is his analogy of the present church in this country with the German state church of the 1930s. Metaxas believes that the failure of the German church to confront National Socialism and Hitler parallels the modern church in its failure to confront abortion, same-sex marriage, and fluid genderism, as well as more directly political matters like COVID-governmental overreach, the thwarted will of the people (in elections and the like, presumably), etc. In fact, it seems to me that many evangelical churches have spoken out about matters garnering wide Christian agreement like same-sex marriage and also in the areas in which many of us who take an Old School Presbyterian view of the spirituality of the church would find transgressive on the part of the institutional church: one need only think here of the widespread open support/advocacy of Trump in the pulpits and narthexes of many confessional churches. To be sure, this sort of thing has characterized certain charismatic or Pentecostal churches even more than any Reformed ones, thankfully,

but Metaxas writes as if what he laments the lack of afflicts the whole American church.

Much could be said here about the church in Germany in the 1930s and particularly about the hetero-orthodox theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who Metaxas takes as paradigmatic—interestingly so given Bonhoeffer’s involvement with the attempt to assassinate Hitler. Metaxas has elsewhere, in his biography on Bonhoeffer, wrongly constructed him as some sort of evangelical, which he decidedly was not, and wants to read our current history as replaying the history of Germany in the time leading up to and during the “thousand-year reign” of Hitler, which was mercifully cut short after twelve years. No historian worthy of the name ever thinks that history simply “repeats itself,” though patterns might recur. Even if one wishes to paint the present presidential administration (and perhaps the Democratic congress along with it) as Hitlerian in some fashion, it is hardly the case that the evangelical church is silent today as was the Lutheran church in Germany. Many evangelical Christians and churches make their views known: 81 percent voted for Trump in 2016 (and more in 2020), and many regularly, in fact, speak out against matters to which they object in the public square.

Strangely, though Metaxas addresses abortion often, he fails to note that Dobbs recently overturned Roe, returning the question of abortion legislation to the states. Was this an expression of the “will of the people” or not? That is hard to gauge, as many people, certainly those on the left, are stirred up to defend abortion more vigorously than ever. Frankly, the church should not care what public opinion is on matters like murder or same-sex marriage but proclaim “thus saith the Lord” with possible political consequences secondary to the moral truths of the Scriptures. The church should never be silent about preaching “the whole counsel of God.” At the same time, it should be silent about directly political matters like “who really won the 2020 election,” best COVID protocols, term limits, etc. Christians of the same confession may differ about a variety of political matters, while all would agree that same-sex mar-

riage violates God’s pattern for marriage.

Metaxas is not wrong that the church should speak prophetically to the nation. We ought to proclaim to all around us not only the gospel but also the law in all three of its uses. The second use of the law furnishes civil society with a legal pattern. Thus, the church can call upon the magistrate to rule righteously, even in accordance with natural law, if he refuses to hear biblical law, since the latter is fundamental to the former. The church has a proper place in calling all men everywhere to repent and believe. The church as church, however, is to distinguish itself from the world; at the same time, it is to give itself to the world. Only in this way can the “mere spirituality” that ought to characterize the church, regardless of where it is in the world, shine forth and draw all men to Christ, the only light and hope of the world.

Estelle is right about the primary mission of the church, and Metaxas is wrong in promoting its further politicization. The last thing that we need more of in a society and culture in which pervasive politicization threatens to swamp us and sink us beneath its secularistic waves is more of the same. Instead, we need the church to carry out its primary mission of proclaiming the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the good news that the world truly needs. ©

Alan D. Strange is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as professor of church history and theological librarian at Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana, and is associate pastor of First Orthodox Presbyterian Church of South Holland, Illinois.

Justification: A Lutheran Perspective

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
February 2023¹

by John V. Fesko

Justification by the Word: Restoring Sola Fide, by Jack D. Kilcrease. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022, xi + 442 pages, \$39.99.

A steady stream of books and articles on the doctrine of justification continues to flow from presses, and this latest contribution comes from Jack D. Kilcrease, professor of historical and systematic theology at the Institute of Lutheran Theology in Brookings, South Dakota. This book is about the doctrine of justification within the framework of Lutheran soteriology. The book consists of seventeen chapters. The first four discuss the doctrine from Genesis through the Pauline corpus. The next seven chapters provide a historical-theological survey that begins with the early church, has two chapters on Martin Luther's (1483–1546) view, and then covers post-Lutheran developments. The following six chapters treat justification and election, the sacraments, and the Christian life. The final chapter presents six theses on justification as a summary of the book.

There are three strengths in this book that commend it to readers. First, Kilcrease writes from a Lutheran perspective. For readers that come from a Reformed perspective, studying the doctrine of justification from a Lutheran vantage point offers a good opportunity to see things differently. Rather than rehearsing important but common arguments, the reader can see how Lutherans employ the doctrine. There is confessional agreement between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions on the doctrine of justification, a point attested by John Calvin's (1509–64) subscription to

the modified Augsburg Confession and Theodore Beza's (1519–1605) supervision of the creation of the *Harmony of Confessions of Faith* (1581), a collection of Reformed and Lutheran confessions that Reformed theologians used to demonstrate agreement among the Reformed and Lutheran churches. At the same time, the respective doctrines function differently within the context of each tradition's theology. Kilcrease's book showcases this difference.

Second, the book delves into exegetical arguments for the doctrine of justification, and in light of recent debates over the New Perspective on Paul, the book critiques this contemporary movement in a nuanced way. Kilcrease persuasively argues, for example, that the New Perspective "has projected the modern, post-secular problem of how to create unity in the midst of radical pluralism onto the first-century situation" (79). He also insightfully captures the eschatological nature of justification and presses this point against N. T. Wright's claims of a twofold justification, one based on faith in the present and a second based on faith-wrought works (94).

A third strength lies in the book's two chapters on Luther's doctrine of justification. Luther was a chief figure in the articulation of this biblical doctrine. In popular Reformation mythology, Luther was fully persuaded of the doctrine of justification when he nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the castle door at Wittenberg, but students of church history often read his Theses searching in vain for the doctrine. The author traces the development of the young Luther and the various biblical and theological influences upon him until he had his Reformation breakthrough. This is not to say that everyone will agree with every historical claim the author makes, but tracing Luther's maturation process helps readers obtain a more nuanced understanding of Luther's doctrine of justification.

There are at least three areas that warrant further consideration. First, the book lacks a strong introduction and thesis. The book's introduction is a mere four pages. Introductions need not be long, but they should present the book's chief thesis and briefly explain how each chapter supports the

¹ https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1023.

thesis. The author, for example, writes: “Instead of ‘justification through faith’ it might be appropriate to characterize Luther’s position as ‘justification by the word.’ In this book, we will endeavor to show that, although it has been neglected and misunderstood by Protestants and Catholics alike, Luther’s ‘justification by the word’ is a better model for understanding salvation in Christ” (4). This is the book’s thesis, but the author does not clearly explain what he means by “justification by the word” in the introduction. There are hints that point to the “sacramentality of the word, and not justification by faith” as an important difference, but what the author means is unclear. Readers must wade into the book to determine what the author specifically seeks to substantiate.

Related to this is the fact that the author does not explain the plan of his argument. How do each of the following chapters support the thesis? How will each chapter prove that justification by the word is preferable to justification by faith? Once again, the reader must wade into the book to ascertain how each chapter supports the book’s thesis. There is a clear statement of the book’s main point at the end of chapter 11 that crystalizes the author’s thesis: he argues that justification by faith alone must function with an anchor in sacramental realism and the sacramentality of the word (258). In other words, the chief claim of the book is that justification by faith alone is incomplete apart from the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation (though Lutherans object to this term)—that Christ is truly present in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Apart from this sacramental objectivism, *sola fide* degenerates into a form of subjectivism and legalism.

Second, the author writes for a Lutheran audience who will probably nod in agreement with his claims. Those from a Reformed perspective, however, will likely be unpersuaded because he relies more on assertion rather than careful exegetically and theologically persuasive arguments. For example, the author claims that sacramental realism is a bulwark against subjective doubts of faith. Christ is truly present in the supper and therefore assures believers of their saved state (304). This

view is supposedly superior to Reformed views of assurance because they must rely upon the *practical syllogism*. Yet, something the author never addresses is how does a believer truly know whether he is saved? For the sake of argument, assume consubstantiation is true and Christ is physically present in the supper; in contrast to the Reformed, Lutherans teach because Christ is truly present apart from faith in the participant, even the unregenerate consume Christ. The *manducatio impii* seems to be a looming fear for the true believer, does it not? Just because Christ is present in the supper does not guarantee that the person who partakes is saved. He could be unregenerate and nevertheless consuming the physically present Christ to his condemnation. Moreover, what of Scripture’s call for self-examination (1 Cor. 11:28; 2 Cor. 13:5; 2 Pet. 1:10; Luke 6:43–44)? The book dismisses calls for self-examination as subjective and legalistic quests for assurance. Such self-examination may very well be, but apart from exegetical and theological treatment of these passages, claims of the superiority of sacramental realism border on assertion rather than proven points.

Another example appears in the book’s scant engagement with Reformed views. Calvin and Zwingli are the representatives for the Reformed tradition. The problem is that both of these theologians are not fountainheads of the tradition the way that Luther is for Lutheranism. The Reformed churches employ their confessional and catechetical corpus to define Reformed theology, and yet the book never interacts with these documents; the Westminster Standards, Three Forms of Unity, and Second Helvetic Confession never appear. When the book engages Zwingli (e.g., 304, 329), it only mentions the early memorialist views of the reformer and not his later views that commend a spiritual presence of Christ. Related to this limited exploration of the Reformed tradition is the book’s rejection of the Reformed view of the Lord’s Supper. The book only cites a secondary source as the “Reformed tradition” and never shows by exegesis, theology, or engagement with primary sources why the Lutheran view of sacramental realism is the correct position (313–14). The book also does

not wrestle with more recent historical-theological claims by Donald Fairbairn and Ryan Reeves that Calvin's *extra-Calvinisticum* is not unique to Calvin or the wider Reformed tradition but also appears among the patristic theologians and should be called the *extra Catholicum*.²

Third, at key points I wonder how much the author reads Luther through modern ideas that end up distorting the reformer's doctrine. The book begins with the claim that justification is central to Christian theology. He rejects the notion of a *central dogma*, a single doctrine from which one deduces an entire system of thought (1). On the other hand, he nevertheless argues that justification is central to Christianity but never explains in what way and how his idea of centrality differs from central dogmas. This becomes relevant to questions of interpreting Luther when the author periodically invokes the interpretations of Oswald Bayer, a contemporary Lutheran scholar (178). The author cites Bayer's explanation of Luther's doctrine through speech-act theory, which is a contemporary linguistic school of thought associated with J. L. Austin. The book simply assumes the legitimacy of this interpretation. Moreover, Bayer constructs justification along the lines of a central dogma and has argued that sanctification is not something that follows justification but is nothing other than justification. Similar types of modern interpretations of Calvin abounded in nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography that necessitated works like Richard Muller's *The Unaccommodated Calvin*,³ i.e., a reading of Calvin situated within his early-modern context defined by primary sources, not accommodated by modern misreadings. The book's use of modern interpretations of Luther apart from argumentation warrants the question, does the author present the unaccommodated Luther?

Lutheran readers of this book will likely find

2 Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019).

3 Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

its claims and arguments familiar and agreeable, but Reformed readers will find key arguments unpersuasive. This does not mean that people should not read the book. It can be read for profit, and it is especially important for readers with Reformed convictions to engage Lutheran sources so they have a firsthand knowledge of what Lutherans believe. However, Reformed readers should also be aware and will detect the shortcomings of this book. The book succeeds as a treatment of the function of justification by faith alone within a Lutheran view of salvation but fails to persuade this reviewer of its superiority over Reformed confessional views. ©

John V. Fesko is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as Harriett Barbour Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi.

Jazz and the Gospel

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* March 2023¹

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 that seek to bridge the connections between jazz and the gospel. Enter now this fascinating new book on

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1028.

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 as 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 and 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 that 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, that found expression in such "Psalm-like" laments as the well-known, moving spiritual "Nobody Knows," a fitting example of the pained beauty that 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 traveled 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).² 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 Malcolm 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 that was most responsible for drawing the black slaves to the gospel—a gospel that 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!) 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 that 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).³ 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

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

3 Pierre Courthial, emeritus dean of the Reformed Seminary in Aix-en-Provence, France, in personal conversation with William Edgar.

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).⁴

The third and final section moves on from the background genres that shaped jazz to jazz itself. The author begins his evaluation of jazz history proper with ragtime, traces its development in New Orleans, and 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 work of Miles Davis with his cool jazz / hard bop innovations, taking his leave from the diatonic (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).⁵ 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! ©

Stephen M. Michaud is an Orthodox Presbyterian minister and serves as the pastor of Pleasant Moun-

4 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.

5 Salim Washington, "Meditations on Coltrane's Legacies," *Institute for Studies in American Music Newsletter*. Vol. 31, no. 2, (Spring 2002).

tain Presbyterian Church in Bridgeton, Maine. He has also performed professionally for many years as a jazz fusion drummer.

What Do We Do with Modern Art?

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* March 2023¹

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.’²

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.³

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 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

2 Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 157.

3 Scruton, *Beauty*, 160–61.

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1032.

of culture and to 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*.⁴ 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."⁵ 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*⁶ 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, every-

thing that the great humanist painters had celebrated for centuries as they drew off their Christian and classical tradition."⁷

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. ⁸

I left that lunch deeply saddened.

Again, Scruton:

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 post-modernist desecration. We seem to be caught between two forms of sacrilege, the one dealing with sugary dreams, the other in savage fantasies.⁹

4 Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible: Two Essays* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973).

5 Scruton, *Beauty*, 156.

6 Hans Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 173.

7 Rookmaaker, *Modern Art*, 174.

8 Rookmaaker, *Modern Art*, 174.

9 Scruton, *Beauty*, 160.

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, 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 to 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 (1904–89) 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 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 was not familiar: Phillip Guston (1913–80) and Richard Diebenkorn (1922–93).

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.¹⁰ 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).¹¹ 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” (108–9). “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

10 Gregory E. Reynolds, review of *River Grace and Refractions*, by Makoto Fujimura. 20 (2011): 165–67.

11 C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 18–19.

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*.¹²

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)

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

12 Thomas Crow, *No Idols: The Missing Theology of Art* (Sydney: Power, 2017)

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 (127–28). 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" (130–31). He seems to be commenting on the commercialization of faith. This represents a challenge to what or whom 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 artistic 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).¹³ 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

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

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). ©

Gregory E. Reynolds is pastor emeritus of Amoskeag Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Manchester, New Hampshire, and is the editor of *Ordained Servant*.

Can Biblical Exposition Be Beautiful and Powerful?

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* April 2023¹

by **T. David Gordon**

The Beauty & Power of Biblical Exposition: Preaching the Literary Artistry & Genres of the Bible, by Douglas Sean O'Donnell and Leland Ryken. Grand Rapids: Crossway, 2022, 304 pages, \$23.99, paper.

Drs. O'Donnell and Ryken are particularly qualified to write a book such as this. Ryken not only taught English literature at Wheaton for many years but has also written a number of books about the Bible that focus on its literary qualities and has served as an advisor to the ESV translation committee. O'Donnell has two decades of pastoral experience and has written an interesting volume entitled *God's Lyrics: Rediscovering Worship through Old Testament Songs* (for which—full disclosure—I wrote the Foreword) about Old Testament songs outside of the Psalter, indicating his interest in matters of composition and style. O'Donnell primarily writes about the Bible, having written books on Ecclesiastes, the Psalms, Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, Matthew, and the Johannine letters. Each of the co-authors has demonstrated both competence and interest in “the literary artistry and genres of the Bible.” O'Donnell has assumed the primary duty of writing the book, with frequent citations of Ryken's words as well. And those citations are, indeed, frequent: By my count (and I may have overlooked one or two), Ryken has written at least eleven books that pertain to the literary artistry and genres in the Bible.² To my knowledge, no author has devoted

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1037.

2 Leland Ryken has written at least two books about Bible

as much to the topic of the literary traits of Holy Scripture as Ryken. The shared commitment of the two authors to expository preaching is well-evidenced by the fact that they dedicated the book to R. Kent Hughes, widely recognized as one of the ablest expositors of our day.

The title of the book may suggest to the casual reader that this is another homiletics textbook, to compete with others in the field; and, indeed, the book demonstrates a thorough acquaintance with the literature on homiletics written by authors both living and deceased. The subtitle, however, discloses what sets this volume apart from the more-typical homiletical textbooks, because the special concern of the volume is to include self-conscious reflection on the Bible's literary artistry and genres as an aspect of expository preaching. The subtitles of the six chapters disclose this interest: *Preaching Narrative*, *Preaching Parables*, *Preaching Epistles*, *Preaching Poetry*, *Preaching Proverbs*, and *Preaching Visionary Writings*. Each of the six chapters has two parts: how to *read* each specific genre in the Bible and how to *preach* that genre. Their stated goals for the book are two: that "attentiveness to the literary dimensions of the Bible should be foregrounded in expository sermons" (23) and that readers would produce "sermons that are fresh, relevant, interesting, and accurate-to-the-authorial-intention," (23) including, of course, the biblical authors' intention to employ particular literary genres.

The interesting (and, to my knowledge, novel) thesis throughout the book is that the preacher

translations: *Choosing a Bible: Understanding Bible Translation Differences* and *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation*. He has written four books that pertain to literary dimensions of the Bible: *A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible*; *How to Read the Bible as Literature*; *Literary Introductions to the Books of the Bible*; and *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*. He has also written five books in the Reading the Bible as Literature Series: *Symbols and Reality: A Guided Study of Prophecy, Apocalypse, and Visionary Literature*; *Short Sentences Long Remembered: A Guided Study of Proverbs and Other Wisdom Literature*; *Sweeter Than Honey, Richer Than Gold: A Guided Study of Biblical Poetry*; *Jesus the Hero: A Guided Literary Study of the Gospels*; and *Letters of Grace and Beauty: A Guided Literary Study of New Testament Epistles*.

should, when and where possible, reflect the biblical genre by the manner and structure of the sermon itself. Such a thesis needs to be discussed for a considerable time before the churches and/or their individual ministers embrace it; but, at a minimum, the thesis demonstrates a very high regard for the Bible's own artistry and genres. At a minimum, it could not be wrong *per se* to employ in sermons, genres that exist in the Bible itself; however, for the thesis to be widely accepted, it might be proper to acknowledge that orality, as a medium, differs from writing, as a medium—a distinction that was very important in the twentieth century to those who proposed what became known as the Oral Formulaic Hypothesis, proposed by Milman Parry (1902–35)³ and developed by Parry's student and protégé Albert Lord (1912–91),⁴ Eric A. Havelock (1903–88),⁵ and Walter Ong (1912–2003), who interacted substantively with Parry, Lord, and Havelock in his own *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*.⁶ Those persuaded by the theory might suggest that literary genres have their own distinctive properties and that, therefore, they may not always "translate" well into an oral production such as a sermon; a literary genre, such as epistle, may not be a good model for an oral performance, such as a sermon. Repetition, for example, a common virtue in an oral performance (whether Parry's Croat traditional performers or preachers today), is tedious, if not objectionable, in a written product. And, unfortunately, even the records of oral performances in the Bible (such as prophetic judgment oracles or the public speaking of Jesus or his apostles) are

3 Because Parry died of a gunshot wound at such a young age, his influence was primarily through the lectures he gave at Harvard as an adjunct and through his protégé, Albert Lord, who travelled with Parry in his travels to observe the oral bards in Croatia.

4 Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

5 Especially Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963) and *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

6 Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982).

themselves *written* records of *oral* performances; they are not recordings of those performances themselves. Proof of this is that the records of apostolic preaching in Acts are very brief and can ordinarily be read aloud in less than a minute (Peter, at Pentecost, might need two minutes). Yet we know Paul preached longer than this, so much so that the hapless Eutychus, wearied by Paul's sermon going until midnight, "fell down from the third story and was taken up dead" (Acts 20:9). The thesis, therefore, of O'Donnell and Ryken might need some fine tuning, but it need not be abandoned entirely, especially without some effort being made to attempt the thesis in practice.

Indeed, O'Donnell has done this very experiment in his own preaching, and he provides many examples from his own pulpit ministry of efforts to model the manner of his sermons by the genre of the biblical texts themselves; readers who are willing to entertain the thesis will find such examples to be very helpful, as examples of what the theory looks like in practice. I would even predict that many who might initially be skeptical that the genres of the Bible should shape, in some ways, the production of the sermon will find some of their skepticism waning as they reflect on the examples provided.

While some readers may have reservations about *preaching* each genre in a manner that reflects that genre, no readers of *Ordained Servant* will question how this volume contributes to its other stated thesis about how to *read* each specific genre in the Bible. This part of each chapter is rich with references to other books on biblical interpretation and rich in examples from O'Donnell's preaching and from the preaching of others. Many readers will feel as I did, as though they have returned to seminary for a refresher course in biblical interpretation and Bible survey, with a special emphasis on preaching. This aspect of the book succeeds extremely well. I expect many homiletics will require this as a textbook in their courses on preaching, either as the principal text or as an augment to the principal text.

There are two ways readers might elect to read this book. First, and most obviously, one might

read it in its entirety, as a general introduction (or refresher) to the importance of recognizing the Bible's art and genres as an aspect of biblical exposition. Second, one might elect to read the introduction and then reserve reading the subsequent chapters before preaching sermon series from each of the six major literary genres, so that the particular insights of each of those six chapters might be fresh before planning out the sermon series. Still others will do both, reading the book in its entirety, then referring back to it as they prepare sermon series from each of the six major genres in Scripture.

One of the most refreshing dimensions of this volume is that it is entirely free of fad-chasing. Its ideas and recommendations flow out of careful study of, and respect for, the Bible itself and could have been recommended to any generation in the post-apostolic church, something that cannot be said about every book on preaching, many of which are outdated within a decade or so of their appearance. Ironically, the acute attentiveness to the literary qualities and genres within the Bible, which might be regarded as a timeless reality, may make this volume especially timely for a generation that is increasingly illiterate. Indeed, non-preachers would read the book with considerable benefit, because they would become much better Bible readers (one of the two stated goals of the book), even if they never preach a single sermon.

We, as readers, are always grateful when we have read a book that rewards our effort. But a special category of book also exists, the kind that, when we finish reading it, we look forward to rereading it in the not-too-distant future, out of our sense that we could not glean all of its benefits from a single reading. I regard *The Beauty and Power of Biblical Exposition* as such a book, and I believe I will discover even more beauty and more power the next time I read it. ©

T. David Gordon is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and is a retired professor of religion and Greek at Grove City College in Grove City, Pennsylvania.

Secular Insight on Happiness

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* June-July 2023¹

by Andrew S. Wilson

The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness, by Robert Waldinger and Marc Schultz. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023, 341 pages, \$29.99.

For the past three decades, psychiatrist Robert Waldinger and clinical psychologist Mark Schultz have served as the director and associate director, respectively, of the Harvard Study of Adult Development (HSAD), which “has followed two generations of individuals from the same families for more than eighty years” (ix). This longitudinal study began by focusing on two groups of young males from the Boston area: 268 sophomores from Harvard College and 456 fourteen-year-old boys from disadvantaged neighborhoods. One might expect that the Harvard students’ privileges and prospects would have made their pursuit of happiness more successful compared to the boys in the other group, but this was not invariably the case. The HSAD reveals that there are other, more significant predictors of a person’s long-term health and happiness.

In their book *The Good Life*, Waldinger and Schultz draw upon the many interviews conducted over the course of the HSAD to explore the question of what makes for a good life. The basic insight that they derive is that good relationships are the key to happiness. Throughout the book, they consider different facets of our relationships and use examples drawn from the lives of the study participants to illustrate the points they make.

The reason why healthy relationships are linked to happiness is because human beings are

social creatures. While Waldinger and Schultz explain this as the result of evolutionary history, Christians know that it is rooted in God’s declaration at creation that “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen. 2:18). *The Good Life* shows that through the various stages of life there are many ways in which we are helped by the connections we have with others. Stable and supportive relationships provide us with security, equip us to become responsible adults, help us turn our focus outside ourselves, embolden us to take chances in the pursuit of new goals, and support us in times of adversity.

One contemporary challenge to relationships that Waldinger and Schultz address is the widespread use of social media and digital technology. With the advent of these tools, even our closest interactions are often “filtered through devices and software whose design subtly—and sometimes not-so-subtly—shapes each interaction” (127), and it is not clear whether the net effect is to deepen or inhibit our ability to connect to each other. While such technologies do bring benefits, the authors warn of the detrimental developmental effects that they have on children and stress the inability of virtual tools to duplicate the experience of being physically present with others. Common sense advice is given on how to use digital tech in a wise manner.

The chapter “Social Fitness” provides guidance for evaluating the health of our relationships and makes three practical suggestions for how to improve and deepen them. First, we should be generous in our dealings with others, thinking first and foremost not about what we hope to receive from our relationships but about the time and attention that we can give to others. Second, we need to resist the tendency to let past negative experiences in relationships dominate our lives and prevent us from taking the risks needed to make new and better connections with others. And third, we should cultivate curiosity and ask questions of others, as this “opens up avenues of conversation and knowledge that we never knew were there” and “helps others feel understood and

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1054.

appreciated” (113).

The authors offer advice on how to deal with challenging situations in our relationships, providing a model that we can use to process our emotional reactions when difficulties arise. Using the acronym W.I.S.E.R. (watch, interpret, select, engage, reflect), they walk through five steps we can take to think through what is happening, why we are responding in the way we are, what we should do, how to address the challenge, and how to assess how our effort went. While we may be inclined to avoid confronting the difficulties that arise in our relationships, the authors note that this can lead to other problems and leave us in relational ruts. They also remind us that the differences and disagreements that we experience in our closest relationships can be opportunities to grow.

Several chapters focus on relationships with spouses, family, and friends, explaining and illustrating the challenges and benefits of these intimate connections. Consideration is also given to everyday encounters with people whom we do not know very well. An entire chapter is devoted to relationships in the workplace. This bears consideration given that many people spend significantly more time at work than they do in activities with friends and family. On the one hand, our work can contribute to our happiness by giving us a sense that our lives matter and that others value our contributions. On the other hand, when a person’s workplace relationships are strained, the unhappiness he experiences at work will likely spill over into his life outside of work. While there are things in our workplaces that are beyond our control, the authors’ advice on how to make the most of work relationships is well worth considering.

In addition to the workplace, Waldinger and Schultz note the positive impact that interactions with casual acquaintances and strangers can have on our state of mind. Chatting with someone on the subway, taking an extra moment to have a meaningful interchange with a store clerk, or greeting the mailman may not seem like much, but research indicates that such seemingly insignificant human connections do contribute to a person’s happiness. A kind word and a smiling

face make more of a difference than we realize.

Given the importance of relationships for happiness, it is no surprise that isolation is often connected with unhappiness. The authors discuss this at various points in the book, and they repeatedly call attention to the negative impact of the suppression of in-person interactions during the COVID crisis. Unfortunately, they imply that the damage was done by the pandemic itself, apparently accepting the oft-touted notion that we had no choice but to respond to COVID in the way we did. This is not true. The unprecedented mitigation strategy employed during COVID had been rejected by eminent public health scientists long before this pandemic struck,² and many scientists and medical practitioners opposed the strategy while it was being implemented.³ Now that the pandemic is over, numerous studies⁴ have shown that the novel mitigation measures did no good while bringing about a massive amount of personal, relational, social, economic, and political harm.⁵ This dovetails with Waldinger and Schultz’s assertion that people who have a sense of disconnection from others are less healthy and

2 See Thomas V. Inglesby, Jennifer B. Nuzzo, Tara O’Toole, and D. A. Henderson, “Disease Mitigation Measures in the Control of Pandemic Influenza,” in *Biosecurity and Bioterrorism: Biodefense Strategy, Practice, and Science*, vol. 4, no. 4, (New Rochelle, NY: Mary Ann Liebert, Inc., 2006), 373, <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.552.1109&rep=rep1&type=pdf>. Dr. Henderson was the epidemiologist who led the successful campaign to eradicate smallpox.

3 See “The Great Barrington Declaration,” <https://gbdeclaration.org>. This document was authored by epidemiologists from Harvard, Oxford, and Stanford universities. It has been signed by over 60,000 public health and medical scientists and medical practitioners. Accessed Mar. 11, 2023.

4 The findings of two especially notable meta-analyses are summarized in these articles: Joel Zinberg, “No Benefit, Many Costs,” *City Journal* (February 4, 2022), <https://www.city-journal.org/new-study-finds-covid-lockdowns-had-no-benefit>; John Tiemey, “Approximately Zero,” *City Journal* (Feb. 17, 2023), <https://www.city-journal.org/new-cochrane-study-on-masks-and-covid>.

5 The problems with the pandemic response are adeptly explained in Aaron Kheriaty, *The New Abnormal: The Rise of the Biomedical Security State* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2022). Dr. Kheriaty taught psychiatry at the University of California-Irvine (UCI) School of Medicine, was the director of the Medical Ethics Program at UCI Health, and was the chairman of the ethics committee at the California Department of State Hospitals.

have shorter lifespans than those who are more connected to family, friends, and community (21). Considering this, it is disappointing that the authors do not at least raise the question of whether mandated health protocols that radically suppress human interactions and train people to view others primarily as potential vectors of disease are respectful of human dignity and compatible with the fundamental principles of medical ethics. Waldinger and Schultz are willing to apply their research to other matters of public policy (279). Why would they not do so with respect to the COVID policies?

There are points where *The Good Life* is in clear conflict with Christian beliefs. One reason for this is because the authors define the good life as “a state of deep well-being in which a person feels that their life has *meaning* and *purpose*” (18, italics original). While this is better than a hedonistic conception of happiness, it still falls short of the biblical perspective, because it makes a person’s feelings the standard for what is good. Feelings can be misleading. The authors’ failure to reckon with this sometimes leads them to deem things that are immoral to be good. For example, one of the study participants is presented as finding the good life by ending her marriage to someone she described as “one of the nicest men on the planet,” so that she could embrace a gay identity (140). The authors also call a drag-queen-ballroom-dancing community “a rich example of nontraditional family” because of how it “offers an enduring social sanctuary for those who have been rejected by and marginalized within their families of origin, religious institutions, and society at large” (202). Of course, people should always be treated with dignity, but this does not mean that they should always be affirmed for acting on their feelings and desires. God’s law is the objective standard of what is good, and we are not free to call things good when God calls them evil (cf. Deut. 22:5; Matt. 19:9; Rom. 1:26–27). The fact that the prevailing cultural winds of LGBTQ+ ideology are reflected in a book like *The Good Life* demonstrates fallen man’s proclivity to value social acceptance over truth. Christians should remember that we are by

no means immune to this temptation.

In his common grace, God bestows ingenuity and insight upon both believers and unbelievers, so that secular enterprises can be a source of knowledge and temporal blessing for all people (see Gen. 4:20–22; Acts 17:28). This means Christians can benefit from the lessons that Waldinger and Schultz derive from the HSAD. Having said that, we need to be aware of the ways in which worldly notions affect some of their judgments and advice. We also need to remember that while the good relationships that we have with other people certainly do strengthen and enrich our lives in this world, the things of this world will not endure forever. The key insight that is missing from *The Good Life* is that our longing for human connection points to the fact that we were made for relationship with God, and that being reconciled to him through Christ is the only way to find lasting happiness (see Ps. 16:11). ©

Andrew S. Wilson is an OPC minister and serves as the pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Laconia, New Hampshire.

Muddying the Baptismal Waters?

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* June-July 2023¹

by **Ryan M. McGraw**

Washed by God: The Story of Baptism, by Karl Deenick. Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2022, 204 pages, \$12.99, paper.

Baptism is a vital practice in virtually all Christian churches. Being part of Christ's Great Commission to his church, it is hard to ignore. Though the meaning and purpose of baptism have often divided Christians, especially after the Protestant Reformation, God designed it to unite us in one body in Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). One reason why confusion exists over baptism is that many people fail to realize that the story of baptism begins in the Old Testament (OT). Ceremonial cleansing rituals passed neatly into the baptism of John, Christian baptism, and Christian explanations of OT worship (Heb. 9:10). This book helpfully roots the story of baptism deeply in the OT, shedding great light on New Testament (NT) teaching on baptism.

However, while the first six chapters of the book are highly valuable, some substantial problems arise in the later material. Particularly, this review focuses on some problematic issues related to the sacraments as seals, the relationship between the covenant and the church, and the vital need for historical theology when evaluating the sacraments. The bottom line is that discerning readers have much to learn from this book, but its eccentricities run the risk of increasing, rather than lessening, potential divisions related to Christian baptism.

Unfolding the story of baptism in nine chapters, the author traces ideas related to washing and baptism from the OT into the New. Presenting

three aims for his book, he targets the gospel itself, ideas running through the OT and NT, and fulfillment of the OT in Jesus Christ (14). Ultimately, in the second chapter, he argues that we cannot understand baptism in the life of John and Jesus without starting with the background of uncleanness and washing rituals in the OT (39). Chapter 3 then makes vital links between OT language about washing and the Spirit and key NT texts like John 3 and 7, Titus 3, and Hebrews 8–10. Throughout, the author masterfully leads readers through the thought process of such biblical texts, creating a natural and gradually unfolding narrative of biblical links between washing, Christ's blood, and the Holy Spirit. It is only towards the close of this material that he begins to connect OT cleansing rituals to the meaning of baptism via Hebrews 9:10 (70–71). Doing so has the advantage of alerting readers to the fact that the idea of baptism as washing did not drop from the sky into the pages of the NT.

The chapter (ch. 4) on circumcision is perhaps the most illuminating, since the author illustrates well how Christ is the fulfillment of the blamelessness God required and symbolized in circumcision. Having done his doctoral studies on circumcision, the author has a lot of useful things to say that go beyond standard treatments of baptism. Only in chapters 5–6 does he treat Christian baptism. By this stage, it should be clear to readers that baptism is not a novelty in the NT but grew out of a long-standing OT context. This OT background is very needed and often neglected in treatments of the sacraments. Chapter 8 concisely and clearly demonstrates that the mode of baptism is not essential to its administration, and the final chapter offers a conclusion of the whole.

Despite the strengths of this book, several weaknesses stand out. Among these are the paucity of material on the Trinity (179 in passing only), which is surprising in light of the author's stress on how baptism illustrates the gospel. Additionally, he includes very little material on the life-long efficacy of baptism, God's covenant promises to children, the spiritual relation between the sign and the thing signified, and sacraments as instru-

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1055.

ments of grace to believers. Taking a closer look at his material, it appears that all these issues stem from a defective view of the sacraments in relation to the covenant of grace. Most serious among these problematic issues are his virtual rejection of the sacraments as seals and his implicit denial of two senses in which people can belong to the covenant of grace, which appear in points two and four of his critiques of infant baptism. Since these problems largely arise from chapter 7, the material below gives careful attention to issues related to the sacraments as seals, the use of historical theology in relation to such questions, and the relationship between the church and the covenant of grace.

First, Deenick virtually excludes the idea of sealing from sacraments (160, fn. 27; 178), at least insofar as sealing entails any personal or applicatory aspect of baptism. He assumes that sealing does not depend on a response in baptized people in any sense “but is a confirmation of a truth that cannot be broken” (160). He adds that appeals to Romans 4:11² about Abraham’s circumcision are off base, because circumcision was only a seal to Abraham, stating that “no other act of circumcision performed that same binding confirmation.” Given that sealing has traditionally been a distinctive feature of Reformed treatments of the sacraments, this shift moves Deenick outside of Reformed treatments of the subject.³ Maintain-

ing that baptism does not seal our participation in redemption, he concludes, “If baptism and circumcision can be called seals at all, it is only in sealing and confirming God’s promise in general, rather than sealing and confirming God’s promise to that individual” (160, fn. 27). Yet engaging in some measure of equivocation, the author then adds that the Spirit’s work in individuals “seals and guarantees their participation in salvation” (160). If sealing relates to the promises of God only, then how does room remain for sealing in relation to the subject’s application and appropriation of redemption, whether by the Spirit in reality or through baptism as an instrumental sign? While objecting that sealing can apply only to God’s promises to Abraham in his unique circumcision, removing the seal from individuals, Deenick shifts toward sealing people with the Spirit (Eph. 1:13; 4:30; 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5), which he detaches from the sacraments. While this point risks opening an ideological can of worms, the Spirit as seal, applying the benefits of redemption to God’s people, is precisely the point at which the Christian church has always seen the sacraments as a means of applying Christ’s work of redemption to believers by the Spirit.⁴ Though the Spirit is the seal applying redemption to believers, he uses means to apply Christ to them, preeminently through preaching (Rom. 10:14–17) and the sacraments (1 Cor. 12:13). Why can we not, with Heidelberg

2 “And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also,” NKJV.

3 As a clear representative sample of Reformed sacramental language, see Johannes Wollebius (1589–1629), *Compendium Theologicæ Christianæ, Editio Ultima Prioribus Multo Correctior*, 9th ed. (Cantabrigiæ, 1655), 126–27:

These four species of signs should be observed well, against those who cry out against us to have nothing but signs in the sacraments. Signs, therefore, either signify only, as a painted image signifies a man, or they exhibit also, as a scepter, keys, or similar things, which being exhibited, regal power and the right to enter the house is conferred. Or, in addition to these things, there are applying signs, as it is with regard to God’s promise concerning the protection of the 144,000, who also have a sign applied and impressed on their foreheads by the Angel. Rev. 7:3. Or, finally, sealing signs, which are of the same nature as down-payments, seals, and similar things. Now these four degrees of signs

certainly agree with the Sacraments. For, first, the external symbols signify and represent Christ’s body and his blood also. Second, the sign simultaneously exhibits the thing signified, not in the sign only, but in the sacramental action by which the minister exhibits the sign while Christ the Lord is giving the thing signified. Third, the thing signified which is promised to the faithful generally by the word of the Gospel, is applied to each one of the faithful through exhibition by a sign. Fourth, the same promise is sealed by the Sacrament. For this reason [Sacraments] are not only called signs, but seals. Rom. 4:11. (My translation)

4 Though differing in their conclusions, both medieval and Reformed authors have agreed over the need for the Spirit, who seals redemption to the elect, to apply Christ’s grace to believers in the sacraments through faith. See, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, trans. Lawrence Shapcote, Latin/English Edition of the *Works of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2012), 3.75.2. Walaeus et al., *Synopsis Purioris Theologiæ = Synopsis of a Purer Theology*, ed. Harm Gorris, trans. Riemer A. Faber, vol. 3, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 3:283.

Catechism (HC) 66, apply sealing in both objective and subjective senses to baptism, including assurances of God's promises and their application to believing individuals?⁵ In the end, the author appears to make sacraments bare signs without any room left for them being instruments of the Spirit to apply redemption to believers or instruments in which Christ is present.

Second, Deenick virtually bypasses all historical reflection of the sacraments in the church, including debates that existed among Reformed authors over the nature of sacraments as seals. Assuming that all proponents of infant baptism believe that sealing applies to individual persons rather than to assurances of God's promises (160), he fails to recognize the diversity of views over this point.⁶ Often one's understanding of the sacraments as seals depended on one's views of Christ's presence in the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper. For instance, authors like Heinrich Bullinger, who favored sacraments primarily as military oaths or professions of faith, tended to attach the seal to the promise, removing the personal element of application from the sign itself. If God worked in the recipient, then it was only in parallel with the sacraments rather than through them. On the other side, authors like John Calvin tended to appeal to sealing language to highlight elements of personal application to believing individuals in the sacraments. As shown above, documents like the HC merged both ideas to an extent, noting that in the Lord's Supper, for example, God sealed his promises "to us," pressing home both objective and subjective aspects of sealing. Deenick refers in a footnote on page 178 to the HC but wrongly pits its teaching against the Westminster Confes-

sion of Faith (WCF) 28.1. However, like the HC, this statement in the WCF notes that baptism becomes "unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace." Both documents include a personalized applicatory aspect in treating the sacraments as seals, which classic Reformed authors regarded as a transitional term between signifying and applicatory aspects of the sacraments.⁷ Generally, he appears to be unaware of post-Reformation, let alone historic Christian, thought on the sacraments as seals and instruments by which the Spirit applies Christ's finished work to believers. This paucity of historical awareness becomes an even more glaring problem in the material below.

Third, Deenick's book is marked by faulty views both of church and covenant in ways that place him outside of the bounds both of Baptist and paedobaptist ecclesiology and covenant theology. Though in the end he argues for a form of infant baptism that is not grounded in the participation of the children of believers in the covenant of grace, Deenick actually rejects both Baptist and paedobaptist viewpoints, replacing both with his own peculiar position. In his fourth response to paedobaptist arguments, he notes that this view fails to meaningfully distinguish those who are baptized from those who are not (161). His reasoning is that baptism is only an outward testimony of the gospel with no personal element, making it indistinguishable from offering the gospel in preaching. Since baptism only offers the gospel, then how is the offer of salvation to the baptized different from that of any other human being? From a paedobaptist standpoint, however, Deenick denies the category of covenant breaking, both in the old and the new covenant. Baptists would agree that the old covenant could be broken, while the new covenant cannot be, but Deenick actually denies the idea that the covenant of grace, whether in the

5 "The sacraments are holy visible signs and seals, appointed by God for this end, that by the due use thereof, he may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel, viz., that he grants us freely the remission of sin, and life eternal, for the same of that one sacrifice of Christ, accomplished on the cross."

6 For some historical details on this point, see Lyle D. Bierma, *Font of Pardon and New Life: John Calvin and the Efficacy of Baptism*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

7 E.g., Wollebius, *Compendium*, 126–27; Peter van Mastricht, *Theoretico-Practica Theologia. Qua, Per Singula Capita Theologica, Pars Exegetica, Dogmatica, Elenctica & Practica, Perpetua Successione Conjugantur* (Trajecti ad Rhenum, & Amstelodami: Sumptibus Societatis, 1724), 914. Book 7, Chapter 3, Paragraph XXII (*pars practica*).

OT or the NT, was ever breakable, virtually ruling out the idea of apostasy as covenant breaking.

In answer, from a NT standpoint, the book of Hebrews refers to members of the church trampling the blood of the everlasting covenant and insulting the Spirit of grace (Heb. 10:29). Apostasy is a form of covenant breaking, though, as John put it, “those who went out from us were not at all of us” (1 John 2:19). Just as some people are in the church but not of the church, so some people are externally in covenant with God without partaking of the internal saving realities of the covenant. This is why it is better for those who have never come to know the truth and perish than it is for those turning aside from that which they once professed (2 Pet. 2:21). Ironically, the same things apply to circumcision, which brought Israel both greater privileges (Rom. 3:1; 9:1–5) and greater condemnation (Rom. 2:9). Precisely because the Jews were related to God by covenant, circumcision being its sign and seal (Gen. 17:10–11; Rom. 4:11), they possessed both greater privileges and responsibilities than people who were not in covenant with God. Arguing from the lesser to the greater, Hebrews 10:28–29 argues similarly,

Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?

Just as the church has visible and outward aspects and inward and invisible ones, so the covenant of grace, in the NT as well as the OT, has an external administration and an internal saving essence. By making both circumcision and baptism proclamations of grace with no applicatory sealing significance, he denies the realities of apostasy from the covenant and the church in both testaments. Baptists generally only exclude the idea of covenant breaking from the new covenant, while retaining the essence/administration distinction in the old covenant. Deenick thus radically

places himself outside of both Baptist and paedobaptist covenant theology at this point.

The same problems apply to his ecclesiology. In a borderline arrogant statement, alerting readers to deeper problems, he notes that “both sides have an incorrect view of the Old Testament” (164), effectively sweeping aside the entire scope of the history of theology in the Christian church. After consistently rejecting both Baptist and paedobaptist viewpoints, he adds that we cannot baptize children on the ground that “they are members of the covenant on account of their birth” (167). Yet again, this is true only if “covenant” and “church” flatten out any distinction between an outward visible body and internal saving realities known to God only. While Baptists and paedobaptists disagree over whether distinguishing an external administration of the covenant and its internal saving essence continue under the new covenant, both acknowledge this distinction on some level in the old covenant, and both uphold some form of distinction between the visible and invisible aspects of the church.⁸

Taking a third position, Deenick asserts that “both sides make their claims with a false sense of either continuity or discontinuity with the Old Testament” (172). He thus sweeps away both Baptist and paedobaptist ecclesiology and covenant theology at once. While proponents of both views could be more or less right or wrong, arguing that both are fundamentally wrong places the author out on a weak theological branch. Ultimately, he claims to adopt the Baptist view of the nature of the covenant and the paedobaptist view on the nature of the church (172, fn. 50). In other words, the new covenant consists only of regenerate

⁸ Westminster Confession of Faith 25.1–2. The London Baptist Confession (1689), while defining the catholic church exclusively in terms of its invisible aspects, nevertheless maintains that all professing faith in and obedience to Christ “may be called visible saints” (LBC 26.2). Also, “the purest churches under heaven are subject to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan” (LBC 26.3). The Congregationalist Savoy Declaration (1658), which drew from the WCF, and on which the LBC was largely based, simply asserts the catholic church with its visible and invisible aspects (SD 26.1–2).

people, yet we should baptize anyone being disciplined in the church, including children. Without citing every example, the way in which Deenick continually dismisses almost all theologians from Christian history is breathtaking. As one final example, he writes, “both sides have a wrong view of circumcision, and hence presumably, a wrong view of baptism” (175). Perhaps it is truer to say that both sides have more or less truer views of baptism, the covenant, and the church than Deenick’s apparently self-consciously eccentric position. Additionally, the ground on which he accepts the baptism of infants because they are simply born under the hearing of the gospel raises the question as to why we cannot simply baptize everyone coming under the hearing of the gospel, irrespective of their confession of faith or connection to believing households. While Baptists restrict administering baptism to those who profess faith in Christ, and paedobaptists include households on the grounds of covenant administration, Deenick advocates baptizing whoever happens to be in the church regularly, without any grounds in covenant theology or profession of faith (184–88). For him, baptism is neither a means of grace nor a seal applying Christ to believers by the Spirit, nor is it a badge of our profession of faith in Christ (as in Zwingli/Bullinger and Baptist accounts). Instead, baptism is merely one more way of saying, “Believe in Jesus,” being applied to anyone whom the church is teaching this message.

This book raises a pressing question: With all the divisions the church has suffered over the sacraments, especially from the Reformation onward, do we really need another view thrown into the mix? Though much of his material on the OT background of baptism and the meaning of circumcision is highly valuable and clarifying, asserting boldly and repeatedly that both major Protestant sides are fundamentally wrong on issues like church, covenant, and sacraments seems to be misguided. Positively, however, perhaps Protestants otherwise divided over who should be baptized will reflect in light of this book how many things they hold in common in relation to ecclesiology and covenant theology in other respects. Baptism does

proclaim the gospel. It tells people that God must be their Father, that Jesus must be their Savior, and that the Spirit must dwell in their hearts. Adding people to the visible church, the Spirit also applies Christ to believers within its bounds through baptism, which is why baptism has life-long significance to believers (Rom. 6:3; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 4:5; etc.).⁹ ©

Ryan M. McGraw is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church serving as a professor of systematic theology at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Greenville, South Carolina.

⁹ See Westminster Larger Catechism 167:

The needful but much neglected duty of improving our baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the administration of it to others; by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements; by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace; and by endeavoring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body.

Real Differences: The Danger of Radical Individualism

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
August–September 2023¹

by T. David Gordon

Generations: The Real Differences between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents—and What They Mean for America’s Future, by Jean M. Twenge. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2023, 560 pages, \$32.50.

The 1960–61 Broadway production of the Adams-Strouse play *Bye Bye Birdie* was an enormous success both in the United States and London and spawned off-Broadway versions for many years, including amateur versions by high school and college students. Among its more-memorable musical numbers was “Kids,” memorable for the question: “What’s the matter with kids today?” Generations attempting to understand (and, hopefully, endure) each other is therefore not a new human phenomenon. As the pace of cultural change has accelerated in the third millennium, however, the endeavor may be more pressing than usual.

Into this pressing endeavor strides Dr. Jean M. Twenge (San Diego State University), whose professional life has been devoted to generational questions and has resulted in two previous books on the topic: *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before*; and *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—And What That Means for the Rest of Us*. She also co-authored (with W. Keith Campbell)

The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement.² The present volume reflects a mature analysis of generations informed by decades of labor; Twenge’s knowledge of the subject is only equaled by her nuanced analysis thereof. The passage of time from her first book to this one has equipped her with growing understanding and nuance and has provided ever-increasing knowledge of the subject from many sources. As she herself says, “In these pages, you’ll find the results of generational analyses spanning twenty-four data-sets including thirty-nine million people” (2).

Publishers and reviewers of her earlier books perhaps suggested a toned-down title to this volume; and “Real Differences” is indeed milder than “Miserable,” “Unprepared,” “Entitlement,” or “Narcissism Epidemic,” but Twenge’s evaluation of generational differences still does not shrink from at least raising evaluative/normative questions. Early on, she rightly distinguishes individualist culture from collectivist cultures:

Individualist cultures such as the U.S. value freedom, independence, and equality, while more collectivistic cultures such as South Korea instead value group harmony and rule-following. Levels of individualism also vary over time. . . . By the 1960s and 1970s the highly individualistic world we know today had begun to emerge. . . . Sacrificing for the greater good was less prized. . . . With so much reliance on the self, it was important that people feel good about themselves, so viewing the self positively received more emphasis. (9)

This distinction is critical to grasping Twenge’s evaluations. A recurring theme in each of her books is that unchecked individualism can easily become narcissism, which is a poor foundation

2 Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Atria, 2006); and *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—And What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Books, 2018). She also co-authored (with W. Keith Campbell) *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Atria, 2009).

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1068.

for a richly humane society. One constant across the six generations is the increasingly unchecked individualism in each subsequent generation. Twenge's point of view is neither original nor idiosyncratic; within her particular sphere of expertise she joins concerns expressed by culture observers such as Robert N. Bellah, Robert D. Putnam, Christian Smith, Sherry Turkle, and Charles Murray.³

The book consists of eight chapters, the first of which, "The How and Why of Generations," introduces both the topic and the proposed method; the last of which, "The Future," discusses trends and tendencies we may expect; and a chapter each is devoted to the six generations in their chronological order:

- Silents (born 1925–1945)
- Boomers (born 1946–1964)
- Generation X (born 1965–1979)
- Millennials (born 1980–1994)
- Generation Z (born 1995–2012)
- Polars (born 2013–2029)

In the introductory chapter Twenge explains that generations potentially differ from one another for three reasons: cultural changes (e.g., stay-at-home mothers vs. working mothers), major events, and technological changes. Among the major events that have shaped these generations, she discusses World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the Vietnam War, fears of nuclear war with the Soviet Union, the September 11 attacks, the 2008 Financial Collapse, the internet, smartphones, George Floyd (and the following riots), Donald Trump, and the January 6, 2021,

³ Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (University of California Press, 1985); Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Touchstone, 2001); Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: University Press, 2005); Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011) and *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015); Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (New York: Crown, 2012). Twenge is familiar with some of these, citing Smith on pages 296–97 and Turkle on page 413.

capitol insurrection. However, Twenge believes an exclusive attention to such events is inadequate in studying generations:

The classic theories of generational change focus almost exclusively on just one aspect of cultural change: major events. . . . Major events can certainly shape a generation's worldview. Those who lived through the Great Depression, for example, were often frugal for the rest of their lives. However, this view of generations as shaped by cycles of events misses the rest of cultural change—all the ways in which life today is so different from life twenty years ago, fifty years ago, or one hundred years ago. . . . The average woman born in 1930 ended her education with high school, married at 20, and had two kids by 25, while the average woman born in 1990 went to college and was unmarried with no children at 25. (4, 5)

Having two children at age 25, compared to being unmarried and without children at the same age, is not a "major event" in the ordinary sense of the expression; but being married vs. single, and having children vs. not having children, are profoundly different experiences of life. Twenge's goal is to describe "real differences" between generations, and marital and child-rearing differences are "real differences" indeed.

Traditional analyses of generations either focused on the regular family dynamics of infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood/parenting, or on the influence of significant cultural events (such as wars or economic collapse). Twenge acknowledges the value of such but proposes an approach that augments such analyses. She employs a three-pronged approach to generational analysis, but the prongs are not of equal length:

"So what is the root cause of these cultural changes—and thus the root cause of generational changes? . . . The strongest candidate is technology . . . This model—let's call it the Technology Model of Generations—is a new theory of generations for the modern

world. . . . there are intervening causes as well. . . . Two of these intervening causes are individualism and a slower life trajectory. (6)

Note, then, that the remainder of her book benefits from the two more-traditional analyses but adds her additional three (individualism, slower life trajectory, technology), with a strong emphasis on technology. I am especially alert to, and appreciative of, her approach to technology as a significant factor in cultural change. She even believes technology profoundly influences those very “major events” that some propose to be the primary influence on generational experience:

Technology also contributes to many of the major events prized in classic generational theories. Consider airplanes, a key technological development of the 20th century. Airplanes played a role in at least four major events of the last one hundred years: World War II (where planes were used in combat, including dropping the first nuclear bomb), 9/11 (where planes were used as weapons), and the AIDS and COVID-19 pandemics (where both viruses spread via airplane travel). (8)

Twenge joins such earlier culture analysts as Lewis Mumford and Elisabeth L. Eisenstein⁴ in recognizing the culture-shaping influence of technological change. In my final eighteen years of teaching, I taught an introduction to media ecology each year and even required Twenge’s 2018 book as one of the texts for the class.⁵ I was therefore especially eager to read her current book, and my eagerness was generously rewarded. Cultural change occurs more rapidly now than at any other historical moment, and technological change is one of the most influential dimensions of cultural change.

4 Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (Harcourt Brace, 1990; original 1934); Elisabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

5 Twenge, *iGen*.

The breakneck speed of cultural change means that growing up today is a completely different experience from growing up in the 1950s or 1980s—or even the 2000s. . . . In fact, when you were born has a larger effect on your personality and attitudes than the family who raised you does. (2)

Twenge makes thorough use of the concept of “slow life strategy,” especially observing at each generational moment that this life strategy gets increasingly slower. She acknowledges that the pace of life is increasingly rapid, but the life strategy gets slower. It takes longer and longer to move from infancy, through childhood, through adolescence to adulthood, to retirement. Indirectly, technology contributes to this slower life strategy, because technology has decreased the role of manual labor in the American economy, causing many young people to pursue college degrees (and often beyond) in order to be competitive in a market that rewards brains more than brawn. The slowing of the life strategy is one of the consistent traits that distinguish each successive generation from the previous.

People who involve themselves in what I call the “generation wars” will find little fodder in Twenge’s work. She candidly concedes that there is some arbitrariness in ascribing dates and/or labels for the various generations,⁶ and she ordinarily works with the consensus, saying of the last generation, e.g., “I call them Polars; some marketers have called them Alphas” (2). Her subtitle explains her motivation, which is to explain “the real differences” that exist between the several generations, not the (often unreal) perceptions they sometimes have of each other. Using such tools as the General Social Survey and the U. S. Census Bureau’s

6 Regarding the Polars, she says, “Two aspects of the period form their name: the political polarization that gripped the country beginning in the 2010s that rose to new heights during the pandemic, and the melting polar ice caps that serve as a symbol of global warming. Polars will grapple with these two issues for most of their lives. This generation has also been called Alphas, after the Greek letter A; after Generation Z, this gambit argues, the only way to use letters is to go back to the beginning of the alphabet.” (451)

findings,⁷ Twenge resists the huffing, flame-throwing, and blaming to demonstrate that particular generations are often quite different than common conceptions suggest; Millennials, for instance, are actually doing much better financially than the doom-predictors had said. Adjusted for their somewhat slower life strategy, once they have been in the job market for the same amount of time, they do as well as (or better than) their predecessors. Indeed, throughout the book, Twenge displays a “light touch,” as it were, permitting frequent charts and graphs to speak for themselves with no need for exclamation marks. She exhibits the soft-spoken manner of a family physician who calmly presents diagnosis, prognosis, and options of proposed treatment. She consistently avoids either canonizing or demonizing each generation and is content to note paradox when it is called for, as when she says, “Polar children are less likely than ever to be injured, but more likely than ever to get little exercise and to be overweight” (459).

Aided by the many surveys available to her, Twenge explains similarities and differences in attitudes and beliefs in many areas: family, human sexuality, the American Republic, patriotism, racism (white females today are more concerned about systemic racism than black Americans are, male or female!), labor, marriage, child-rearing, self-esteem (getting higher), self-harm (also getting higher!), materialism, politics, “cancelling,” the First Amendment, and more. Sometimes the generational differences are small, and sometimes they are very large.

A pleasant surprise amid all the statistics and graphs is the presence of two impressionistic parts of each chapter. Early in the description of each generation, Twenge includes a list of the ten “Most Popular First Names” for males and females in each generation (with asterisks for any first-time appearances on the list); I was surprised to find my half-year-old grandson’s name (“Liam”) was

ranked second on the list for the Polars. This list of names is followed, in each chapter, by the names of well-known actors, comedians, and filmmakers in each generation. While neither of these lists has any particular explanatory consequences, the lists personalize the perception of each generation in a whimsical-but-interesting manner.

Readers of this review may be disappointed that it contains no brief, pithy description of each of the six generations; but no perceptive review of Twenge’s book could do so; her analysis of each generation contains many specific traits but no defining trait. This makes for rewarding and interesting reading, but unsatisfying reviewing.

The concluding chapter on “The Future” describes seven trends that are likely to characterize the next decades barring some unusual event:

1. Remote work will be the new norm in the workplace.
2. Safe spaces and speech will likely move from the universities into workplaces.
3. Workplaces will need to adjust to emotionally fragile Gen Z: “That means a transition from optimism to pessimism, entitlement to insecurity, and self-confidence to doubt. Millennials were challenging because they expected praise as a given; Gen Z’ers are challenging because they need praise for reassurance.” (467)
4. Everything will be political. “Gen Z’ers can barely remember a time before the country was so sharply divided politically. Everything is political, and politics has become about morals and values, not just candidates and debates. There is a new feeling that it’s us versus them, and you must take a stand one way or another. . . . Companies will increasingly feel pressure from employees to speak out about political issues, no matter what their business.” (471)
5. Mental health will be recognized as real illness. What was once stigmatized is now expected to be acknowledged openly: “Gen

7 I noticed more than sixty references to the U.S. Census and nearly fifty references to the General Social Survey. Twenge also makes good use of the Google Books database, citing it well over a dozen times.

Z knows how to advocate for their mental health needs and is determined to eliminate any stigma around discussing mental health issues.” (472)

6. Flattening of social roles and relations will continue, and the corporate culture will be more collegial than hierarchical: “Individualism has flattened the authority structure everywhere, with distinctions between managers and employees fading. Relationships are less formal and more casual. . . . The days when managers could tell employees to do something and they would just do it are long gone. Gen Z is, at times, skeptical of the need for leaders at all.” (473)
7. The future will be nonbinary. Gender-neutral bathrooms will become the norm in most public places. “Stating pronouns will become standard practice in businesses. As Gen Z becomes the bulk of new hires, they will request (and possibly demand) it.” (475)

In the concluding chapter, Twenge notes that the birth rate had dropped to barely replacement levels in 2008 (at 2.1), but by 2020, it had dropped to 1.64, the lowest ever in the United States, and it will likely stay that way or decline further, due to the three causes of generational change:

All three of the major causes of generational change point toward birth rates either continuing to decline or stabilizing at low rates. Technology makes birth control possible, so having children becomes a choice. Individualism deemphasizes family and tradition, which leads to fewer people choosing to have children. The slow-life strategy means people wait to have children and have fewer of them. (480)

Policymakers will need to address this population decline. Too recent for Twenge to include is President Macron of France addressing the matter by raising the retirement age to keep people in the workforce longer to provide for state-funded retire-

ment benefits. Other western democracies will need to follow suit or discover another solution.

Readers of *Ordained Servant* will appreciate one aspect of Twenge’s analysis that some readers will not: from 2006 to the present, her writings have consistently, if with increasing sophistication, called attention to untempered individualism, or what we might call “self-centeredness.” Even the word “individualism” occurs nearly two hundred times in the volume, as Twenge adds her voice to the now-chorus of culture observers over the past four decades who express concern that even a culture that promotes individual freedom must not do so at the expense of the well-being of the society as a whole. Self-fulfilment has never been consistent with biblical teaching about self-denial; Twenge’s portrait of the recent six generations describes a slow but inexorable march in the wrong direction. In the midst of that narrative, however, she provides remarkable insights into the distinctive traits of each generation, and I would be pleased if her book were the most-read book this summer. Preachers and teachers will especially find her analysis to be helpful in understanding and serving our generations. ☺

T. David Gordon is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and is a retired professor of religion and Greek at Grove City College in Grove City, Pennsylvania.

A Tale of Two Exegetes

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
November 2023¹

by Meredith M. Kline

The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible, by Michael S. Heiser. Bellingham, Washington: Lexham, 2015, 413 pages, \$14.99.

Heiser's *The Unseen Realm* is not aimed at deniers of the supernatural; it seeks to correct the ideas of primarily non-Pentecostal evangelicals, like himself, concerning the traditional understanding of the invisible heavenly realm and its inhabitants, which all branches of the church have confessed for two millennia (chapters 1 and 2).

Seeing the Bible through the eyes of an ancient reader requires shedding the filters of our traditions and presumptions . . . a mixture of creedal statements and modern rationalism. I want to help you recover the supernatural worldview of the biblical writers.” (13)

“The Bible tells us of the existence of a realm our mortal eyes cannot see.” This quote is not Heiser's opening sentence but that of Meredith G. Kline's *God, Heaven, and Har Magedon*.² The two authors deal with the same debated biblical texts; however, they come to contrasting exegetical conclusions.

Heiser's underlying theme is a limited conception of a peripheral second-temple Jewish group: the geographical domain authority of rebellious angels.³ This concept is developed by unfolding the results of years of research expanding his doctoral dissertation; though conversational in style to

persuade educated parishioners to accept his perspective, the book is academic, containing forty-two chapters in eight parts, building an exegetical web of many controversial biblical passages, with lengthy footnotes and discussions of ancient Near Eastern materials; it is accompanied by an online supplement covering each chapter. Heiser elaborated his ideas in several subsequent books and online videos until his death earlier this year.

Exegesis

The direction of Heiser's interpretational trajectory was set when he felt evangelicals who interpreted Psalm 82, who were criticizing human kings, dishonestly filtered the text, so he “looked beyond the world of evangelical scholarship” to resources that integrated biblical and non-canonical texts (12). The foundation of *The Unseen Realm* is the non-canonical Book of the Watchers,⁴ the first thirty-six chapters of 1 Enoch,⁵ a Hellenistic period Jewish text popular at Qumran, which is the source for interpreting the phrase “sons of God” in Genesis 6:2 as rebellious angels, a view subsequently adopted by multiple non-canonical, second-temple period writings, and currently a common academic position.

After arguing against previous evangelical interpretations of Genesis 6:1–4, Heiser promotes the 1 Enoch 6–8 view of Genesis 6:2 in which angelic beings (the “sons of God”) cohabited with “the daughters of man” and produced giants, whose spirits at death became the demons of the New Testament (chapters 12 and 13). In addition to their own sin of transgressing the boundary between angels and humans, the sinful angels corrupted humans by transmitting knowledge about making iron weapons of war and seductive jewelry, about practicing sorcery and casting magic spells, and about astronomy (108).

1 https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1083.

2 Meredith G. Kline, *God, Heaven, and Har Magedon* (GHHM) (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 3.

3 Heiser introduces the concept of “geographical domain rulership” on page 121 in the context of a discussion of angelic powers mentioned in passages like Ephesians 6:12; the concept is based on his exegesis of Deuteronomy 32:8–9 in chapter 15.

4 Translation of an Aramaic term of Nebuchadnezzar referring to supernatural beings in recounting his dream as reported in Daniel 4.

5 For translation and commentary of the Book of Watchers see George W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch, Chapters 1–36; 81–108* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

Heiser also argues for the common position that 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6 rely on the 1 Enoch interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4. But these New Testament passages are vague in describing the transgression of angels: “For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment” (2 Pet. 2:4); “And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day” (Jude 6). These texts could refer to demon-possession (GHHM 84–85), thus not being dependent on 1 Enoch. Even if these human rebels are demon-possessed, the focus in Genesis 6:1–8 is on the depth of human depravity that necessitated the flood. If the text is interpreted as portraying a purported angelic rebellion, why are the angels not depicted as objects of God’s wrath in the flood account? Heiser prefers an interpretational position that seems textually inconsistent with its context.

Heiser supports his interpretation of Genesis 6:2 by correlating the supposed cohabiting angels with the gods of Psalm 82:1, arguing that the psalm depicts God as judging the angels אֱלֹהִים (*’elohîm*) for mismanaging the earth’s nations they were assigned to govern. In both Genesis 6:1–4 and Psalm 82 his interpretation contrasts with that of Kline, who understands both the “sons of God” in Genesis 6:2 and the *’elohîm* of Psalm 82:6 as human kings, in Genesis 6:2 as self-deifying tyrants⁶ and in Psalm 82:6 as God-ordained authorities of common-grace kingdoms (GHHM 37). For Kline, the term *’elohîm* in Psalm 82 can refer to living human kings, based on Jesus referring in John 10:33–36 to Psalm 82:6 to show the Jews that humans could be called “gods.” Thus, Jesus thwarted their charge of blasphemy. Heiser, however, tries to support his position (page 268 fn.

6 As argued in Kline’s 1962 article “Divine Kingship and Genesis 6:1–4”; see *Essential Writings of Meredith G. Kline* [EWMGK] (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2017), 63–78.

3, plus an extended defense in the book’s online supplement) that Jesus quoted Psalm 82:6 to indicate he was “superior to all divine sons of God.”⁷ But the Jews surely understood Jesus to be claiming oneness with the Father, not with angels.

Heiser postulates three angelic rebellions: the first by the snake figure in Eden who tempted Adam and Eve; the second by the pre-flood action of the purported 200 watchers (1 Enoch 6:6) of Genesis 6:2; and the third by a post-flood group of angels from the Tower of Babel account (Gen. 11:1–9), also tied to Psalm 82. Based on God saying in Genesis 11:7 “let us go down,” good angels who accompanied Yahweh were assigned to control the scattered nations. That concept is based on Heiser’s understanding of Deuteronomy 32:8–9: “When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. But the LORD’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage.” Verse 8 supposedly indicates God disinherited the nations and delegated their control to the angels, the “sons of God”⁸ (113). According to Heiser, his “seventy gods” of Deuteronomy 32:8–9 were later judged by God for corrupting the nations (Ps. 82), but he admits there is nothing in the Bible that would indicate how these angels changed from good to bad (116). He seeks support from the translation of Psalm 82:8: “Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations!” The last line is better translated as: “For it is you who possess all the nations.” Note, also, that the first line indicates it is the earth’s inhabitants, not heaven-dwellers, who should be judged.

Nevertheless, for Heiser “the concept of realm

7 The use of “divine” in this quote is disconcerting when combined with unguarded statements based on Psalm 82 like “the God of the Old Testament was part of an assembly—a pantheon—of other gods” (11).

8 The Masoretic text has “sons of Israel.” The Septuagint has “angels of God.” The ESV is a hybrid version. Since the Genesis 10 Table of Nations numbers around seventy and the number of Jacob/Israel’s family descending to Egypt numbered seventy, which would support the “sons of Israel” reading, Heiser justifies his exegesis by appealing to Ugaritic El’s divine council, which numbered seventy (114 note 7).

distinction was fundamental to the supernatural worldview of ancient Israel” (171). Heiser links realm distinction to Daniel 10, which describes conflicts of angels associated with the nations of Israel, Persia, and Greece (119). Palestine was a holy territory, in contrast with the rest of the world, during the Old Testament theocracy. Yet, Daniel 4:14 says the Most High is sovereign over the kingdom of man; rebellious angels did not have autonomous control over nations in the way Heiser envisions. The Holy One is he “who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness” (Isa. 40:23). “The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules overall. Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word!” (Ps. 103:19–20).

According to Heiser, the concept of “geographical domain rulership” “applies to all nations of earth at any time period. All nations whose God is not Yahweh are under the dominion of lesser gods” (329, fn. 22), so the concept continues through the New Testament period (322–23) and culminates in a physical military attack against Christians at earthly Jerusalem (370, 373). For Heiser, the angelic powers were not disarmed at Jesus’s resurrection and ascension into heaven but remain in control of the world’s nations until the battle of Armageddon (376). However, even if Heiser’s theory applied when the covenant community existed in the form of a national theocracy, after Pentecost the covenant community as church is no longer a nation but a global, non-political institution, so the nation-versus-nation-conflict paradigm no longer is an appropriate model.

In addition, outside the theocratic territory of Israel, Heiser sees the world as a demonic realm with hostile “gods” exercising dominion (343), not as a common realm where God sovereignly directs common blessing and curse. God, however, controlled the rulers of Egypt, Babylonia, and Persia while the descendants of Abraham were under their authority outside the holy land. Even in the patriarchal period, when rebellious angels purportedly also dominated the nations, God was the ultimate authority over Job and his friends in the

land of Uz as well as over Melchizedek in Canaan. Likewise, the resurrected Christ directs historical events during the church age. Indeed, after the flood all inhabitants of the planet are subjects of the Noahic covenant, with God as their Suzerain.

Heiser adds speculative exegesis to prop up his theory. For example, since 1 Enoch 6:6 says the two hundred transgressing angels descended on Mount Hermon, he claims it is a counter mountain-headquarters of the heavenly rebels who oppose the God whose throne is on Mount Zion (chapters 25, 32, 33, and 40); Mount Hermon is depicted as sinister, even though, other than being mentioned as a geographical location, in the Old Testament it is only referred to positively: brotherly unity “is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore” (Ps. 133:3).

A revealing example of Heiser using scholarly insight but skewing it is his approval (371, note 3) of Kline’s translation of “Armageddon” in Revelation 16:16 as “the mountain of gathering.”⁹ Kline takes Har Magedon as the name for heavenly Mount Zion/Jerusalem, location of the throne of the universe’s Suzerain. In contrast, because the term “Jerusalem” is associated with the heavenly mountain, Heiser claims the eschatological battle of Armageddon does not occur at the city of Megiddo, a popular view, but instead as a physical conflict at earthly Jerusalem (371–73). Kline views the battle as spiritual and located at the heavenly temple from Adam to the eschatological crisis, with an emphasis in the church age on the worship of God at Mount Zion (Heb. 12:18–29). Heiser claims to be agnostic on eschatology, though he does note disagreement with Kline’s amillennialism, but the detail about the battle occurring at

9 Meredith G. Kline, “Har Magedon: The End of the Millennium.” *JETS* 39 (1996): 207–22; included in *EWMGK*, 259–77. Despite undermining his position, Heiser does list GHM in the additional bibliography for chapter 41 in the online supplement to the book. While Heiser reports a voluminous academic bibliography, he does not mention any other of Kline’s publications besides the Armageddon material, even though many deal with Heiser’s topics.

earthly Jerusalem reveals what drives his whole book, since for him the “battle of gods and men” is where the rebellious angels who supposedly control the nations are finally defeated (373–75).

Method

While the core of Heiser’s geographical-domain-authority-of-rebellious-angels thesis is founded, and founders, on The Book of the Watchers portion of 1 Enoch in a way that distorts the interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4 and Psalm 82, his interpretations also raise many problems.

A major methodological issue of *The Unseen Realm* is Heiser’s handling of worldviews. Knowledge of ancient social and cultural practices that differ from modern life is helpful in appreciating details of biblical historical records or literary accounts like parables.¹⁰ But care needs to be exercised in relation to intellectual concepts. Heiser thinks all biblical writers believed the earth was physically flat “because they lived at a time before scientific discovery proved otherwise. It’s that simple.” (online supplement to chapter 2). Not necessarily.¹¹

More importantly, neither ancient nor modern worldviews are culturally monolithic, as indicated by current culture wars or different factions within ancient Roman or Jewish culture. Heiser claims that all biblical authors shared the same understanding of the supernatural realm, but his definition of “supernatural worldview” is restricted. It is not about the invisible heavens where God is enthroned among myriad angels or the visible manifestation of heaven in the shekinah Glory Cloud, nor about cosmological concepts that varied from the times of Moses to the Apostle John, nor about the locations of imprisoned angels or deceased humans. Biblical authors had different views of the supernatural to choose from. Saddu-

cees did not even believe in angels or spirits (Acts 23:8)! Heiser restricts the supernatural worldview to the perspective of the Book of Watchers, that wicked, unseen angels corruptly direct earthly nations. That thesis is not established by his seemingly plausible, but imbalanced, biblical exegesis.

The book has other methodological problems. First, Heiser exhibits a strange literalism with respect to Satan. Despite Revelation 12:9 and 20:2 indicating that the great dragon is “that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world,” he holds that associating the name Satan with the serpent is a second-temple Judaism and New Testament development (242 note 6). Thus, the Genesis 3 snake is not the Job 1–2 and Zechariah 3 “accuser,” or the tempter of Jesus, since the snake lost his position in the divine council and was cast to the underworld, according to Heiser’s interpretation of Isaiah 14:12–15 and Ezekiel 28:14–17 (91 note 6).¹²

Second, Heiser has strange uses of typology. Another example of his literalism undermines typology involving the gospel: Heiser argues that the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 is never treated in the New Testament as a picture of crucifixion or resurrection, since Isaac did not die; we should not make connections New Testament authors do not claim (242).

In contrast to not seeing typology in a canonical text, he fabricates a type from a non-canonical text. 1 Peter 3:18–19 is a difficult passage about Jesus going in the Spirit to preach, through Noah, to (now) imprisoned spirits.¹³ In Heiser’s interpreta-

12 Heiser takes the Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 passages as indicating the serpent-cherub was cast out of heaven at the Fall rather than as a result of Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection. If Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 do include references to Satan rather than Adam, it could indicate devil possession of the kings of Babylon and Tyre and support application of that concept to pre-Flood kings as well as kings of the eschatological crisis. See GHHM 65–69.

13 “Noah’s prophetic activity is described in 2 Peter 2:5 as a heralding of righteousness in the face of the world of the ungodly. According to the probable meaning of 1 Peter 3:19, 20, Noah performed his prophetic preaching as the mouth of the Spirit of Christ, that Spirit-Presence from whom all the true prophets were sent forth in the judicial administration of God’s covenant.” Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 209.

10 For example, see Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Dutton, 2008).

11 A flat earth as part of the standard cosmography of the Bible as presented by scholars “would have been unrecognizable to ancient Israelites.” William Lane Craig, *In Quest of the Historical Adam: A Biblical and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2021), 191.

tion, Jesus is a second Enoch who goes to declare to imprisoned angels that God will not change his mind about punishing them in hell, as taught in 1 Enoch 12–16 (335–38). This is another example of how the Book of Watchers is the driving force of *The Unseen Realm*.

Third, Heiser reshapes the traditional doctrine of sin by putting significant responsibility for human sin on rebellious angels as well as on Adam: “Contrary to the dominant Christian tradition the Fall of Adam is not the exclusive touchpoint for the depravity of humankind . . . the proliferation of evil throughout humanity should not be placed at the feet of Adam but of the Watchers.”¹⁴ Heiser thus understands Colossians 1:20 (“and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross”) to indicate that Jesus came not only to rectify sin introduced by Adam but also the sin of the Watchers responsible for the human problem.¹⁵

Fourth, Heiser argues against a Reformed understanding of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. For him, both angelic and human creatures need to have libertarian freedom from any necessary causation: “Free will in the hearts and hands of imperfect beings, whether human or divine, means imagers can opt for their own authority in the place of God’s” (68). God did not predestine sinful acts of his creatures. “The risk of creating image bearers who might freely choose rebellion was something God foresaw but did not decree” (55).

Fifth, Heiser has confusing comments about angels existing before creation: “the heavenly host was with God before creation” (23); “heavenly beings, those sons of God who were already in existence at the time of creation” (41). He also misinterprets Psalm 74:12–17 as describing creation

as “Yahweh’s victory over the forces of primeval chaos” (154) rather than as defeating the Egyptians at the exodus from Egypt; the psalm’s terminology such as day/night, summer/winter reflects Genesis 8:21–22, not Genesis 1.

Sixth, Heiser misunderstands the goal of human history. God created humans to guard God’s earthly temple from evil and build a holy race of ever-living humans which would be transformed into a glorified people entering God’s sabbath realm, a goal that is achieved after the Fall by the salvation provided by God’s beloved Son. For Heiser, the goal of post-Fall humanity is returning to Eden. The Old Testament is the record of a long war between Yahweh and the gods and between Yahweh’s people and the nations in order to re-establish Eden. That is achieved in the battle of Armageddon at earthly Jerusalem by defeating the beast of the Apocalypse, who directs the nations against Yahweh’s holy city, a victory that topples the rebellious אֱלֹהִים (*elohîm*) from their thrones (376), thus enabling the transformation of the earth into the new Eden—the kingdom-abode of God on earth with believers as glorified members of the divine council along with angels (online chapter 42). This is not the new-earth-Jerusalem descending out of heaven.

Seventh, Heiser sometimes makes bombastic statements: “Any work on Gen. 6:1–4 that seeks to defend a non-supernaturalist view and does not seriously interact with the treatment of the original context for the passage discussed by Annus and Kvanvig via primary sources can be safely ignored” (online supplement, chapter 13). The cited authors discuss Mesopotamian texts about seven divine figures who bring cultural knowledge to the inhabitants of the Tigris and Euphrates area before the flood and have partially human descendants after the flood, so must have cohabited with humans, and whose evil members were driven to the abyssal regions. While such figures may be the background for the Watchers of 1 Enoch, this material does not invalidate previous non-Watcher interpretations of Genesis 6:1–4.

Eighth, what Heiser leaves out is surprising and revealing. Probably because his focus is on

14 Michael Heiser, *Reversing Hermon: Enoch, the Watchers & the Forgotten Mission of Jesus Christ* (Crane, MO: Defender Publishing, 2017), 103, 105.

15 Heiser, *Reversing Hermon*, 103, 119. However, according to 1 Enoch, the watchers asked Enoch to mediate for them with God that he not punish them, but God did not relent, and Enoch conveyed to the watchers that their doom was certain.

human physical conflict with angels at Jerusalem, he refers to Ephesians 6:10–20 only for the terms relating to angels in verse 12, but he does not discuss spiritual warfare, probably because the armor of soldiers is metaphorical for spiritual realities.

Conclusion

Heiser confesses that *The Unseen Realm* reflects “the struggle of being a modern person with a believing heart trying to think like a pre-modern biblical writer” (20). While many of the passages he deals with are controversial and his arguments thought-provoking and plausible-seeming, he ends up thinking like a 1 Enoch writer rather than a biblical author, and not enough like a modern tradition-appreciating, yet creative, researcher.

For the scholar familiar with ancient Near Eastern languages, literature, and culture, *The Unseen Realm* provides an abundance of detailed material and issues to wrestle with, grappling with whether Heiser’s avowedly incompletable mosaic of interpretational results is congruent with a redemptive-historical biblical theology. While the exercise might stimulate some refining of interpretational details, the endeavor is a constant struggle to identify and counter exegetical imprecision and distortion. Pastors, elders, and educated parishioners would find Heiser’s wide-ranging arguments challenging and time-consuming to carefully and critically assess. ©

Meredith M. Kline is the former director of the Goddard Library, and was Ranked Adjunct Assistant Professor of Oriental Languages, at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts. His ThD thesis was on *Ecclesiastes*, and he is a member of First Presbyterian Church, North Shore (PCA) in Ipswich, Massachusetts.

The Trinitarian Theology of Cornelius Van Til

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* November 2023¹

by Nathan P. Strom

The Trinitarian Theology of Cornelius Van Til, by Lane G. Tipton. Libertyville, IL: Reformed Forum, 2022, 218 pages, \$34.99.

A book’s significance is found at the intersection of its content and its context. Lane Tipton’s latest book is no exception. Regarding content, consider the subject. The most foundational theological beliefs of, arguably, the second most influential figure in our denomination. Love him or not—Cornelius Van Til shaped the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in undeniable ways. He is, therefore, unavoidable for those entrusted with carrying on our church’s spiritual heritage and theological identity.

Dr. Tipton’s goals are ambitious for a 150-page book. Some may find the densely packed prose *chewy*—difficult to digest but filled with nutrients. Pastors will have the easiest time grasping the content, but the book is accessible to engaged elders and lay people. So, why yet one more book on Cornelius Van Til? First, Dr. Tipton sets out to reassess Van Til’s image as a dangerous innovator. Tipton desires to illustrate that Van Til was a faithful synthesizer of figures like Athanasius, Augustine, Calvin, the Hodges, and Bavinck (xii). Second, Tipton offers Van Til’s theology as the best hope for an intellectually honest confession that God does not change, “For I the LORD do not change” (Mal. 3:6); nor is he “served by human hands, as though he needed anything” (Acts 17:25, xi). It is one thing to nod at those statements, but how do we hold them alongside claims like “God created the world” and “He entered a ‘new

¹ https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1084.

relation' with Adam"? Tipton offers Van Til as our quartermaster in the struggle for intellectual integrity. Third, Tipton aims to lay bare the true foundations of Cornelius Van Til's apologetic project. If that is the job, what tool has he wielded?

The tool is both simple and infinitely mysterious. Simply put, it is an idea or a proposition. Now the mysterious part: God exists as three persons (who are themselves self-conscious, inhabit one another, and yet remain distinct, totally coincident with the divine essence) *and* as one divine substance or essence (who is eternal, dynamic, and absolute *personality*; fully possessed by each trinitarian person). The words outside the parenthesis represent a simple statement of the oldest and simplest Trinitarian beliefs in Christ's church: one God, three persons. The words inside the parenthesis are Van Til's distinctive development of the Nicaean tradition, building on Vos before him. We now turn to those distinctive contributions.

First, Van Til teaches that the persons are in some sense conscious in a unique way (72–73). That is, the Son is conscious that he is not the Father. So too, the Father is conscious that he is not the Son (73, fn. 32). Second, Van Til, as Tipton summarizes him, claims that God is absolute personality (75–86). To fully grasp what is meant by "absolute personality" one needs to read the full section. However, key to Van Til's idea is that the one is also self-conscious. It is being "conscious" that seems central to the idea of the one as "absolute personality." Here then is the tool that Van Til, and Tipton, offer to account for God's relating to his creation without changing. There is no *change* in the being of God to enter into dynamic (i.e., interpersonal) religious fellowship with his creature *because* his eternal being is inter-personal religious fellowship. Additionally, the heart of Van Til's apologetic is his construal of the Triune God as one absolutely personal (self-conscious) essence and three (also self-conscious) persons. With this construct in view, Van Til can assert "the impossibility of the contrary," since, for Van Til, this construct has resolved the main problem of philosophy. According to Van Til, the one and the many are equally ultimate in classical Nicaean and

Reformed theology.

How might we evaluate this volume? Tipton has served us well, providing the clearest summary of Van Til's distinctiveness as a theologian and, therefore, as a defender of the faith. This small volume may join Bahnsen's and Frame's volumes to form a triumvirate of authorities on Van Til's theology and apologetic. The book fills an important gap in the secondary literature on Van Til.

Van Til's legacy has looked tenuous in recent years. Rising interest in older theologies has given the sense that scholastic sources are better suited for defending the faith. Controversial statements from Van Til's most well-known publicists have also caused many to wonder, "Has the well been poisoned?" Tipton's book offers promise as a timely elixir, stabilizing a movement nearing life support. As officers charged with maintaining the purity of Christ's church, we must not ignore these matters. Tipton's book is significant for understanding our past and for building a healthy future.

As content greets context, this volume's significance is seen in three ways. First, the long-term stability of Van Til's, and therefore Tipton's, proposal is questionable. Professor Tipton is highly capable, wielding the technical vocabulary and avoiding pitfalls as he writes. For example, Tipton eschews the word "person(s)" when speaking of the one, opting instead for words like "personality," "personhood," etc. (one exception is p. 66). His awareness of technical pitfalls is clearly seen in the section titled "Divine Simplicity and Trinitarian Personality" (72–74).

Tipton understands the shifts in the cluster of terms historically used in the history of doctrine—*ἄνθρωπος* (*panim*), *προσωπον* (*prosōpon*), *ὑποστάσις* (*hupostasis*), *persona*. These terms were debated, and their specific meaning shifted throughout the Trinitarian and Christological debates of the ancient church. The concept of "person" undergoes additional redefinition in nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology. The English word "person" and its inflected forms cannot fully communicate the nuances inherent

in the genealogy of this term.² If very capable hands strain to wield these terms appropriately, what will happen when wielded by less capable ones?

Van Til's ideas seem to swim against the tide of the ancient fathers who gave us our creedal form—one essence and three persons. For Van Til's apologetic to work, the oneness and threeness of God must be said of the same "thing." Hence, it becomes vital that "consciousness" and "personality" can be predicated of both the one and the three. The fathers worked to make a sharp, clear boundary, eager to say the one was a different kind of "thing" than the three. They bled to preserve this distinction. I fear Van Til's construction will diminish the essence-person distinction if taken up at a popular level.³ The development of further technical terms could help. New vocabulary is unlikely to command adherence, however, given the differences between fourth- and twenty-first-century Christianity.

Secondly, and decisively more positive, Van Til's trinitarian theology is the healthiest version of the social-turn characteristic of much modern reflection on the Trinity. In line with one of Tipton's stated goals, Van Til has given us an ontology that more safely and securely undergirds the language of modern practical theology, e.g., ". . . he is a social God."⁴ Speaking of the self-consciousness of the persons while avoiding speaking

2 See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 298–304. "Now even in the case of humans this concept of personality fails to cut ice. . . . But it is even much less applicable in the doctrine of the Trinity. Here the term "person" has a meaning of its own" (302). See Stephen Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012) for trends in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Trinitarian theology.

3 This loss in transmission can be seen even in Van Til's dependence on Vos and Bavinck. Tipton quotes both as foundational for Van Til's construction, and yet both of them seem to ground the personality of the One in its unfolding in the three. See Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics* (single volume edition), 60, where he says ascribing personality to the essence of God is inappropriate. Similarly, Bavinck says our use of the word person falls short of predicating "personality" to God. "The emphasis here in no way lies on the elements of rationality and self-consciousness . . ." (Bavinck, *RD*, 2: 302).

4 Paul Tripp and Tim Lane, *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2006), 9.

of centers of consciousness puts "social God" talk on a safer, more secure footing (72–73). Van Til's connection to historic, Nicaean theology makes his thinking safer than the social Trinitarian theology of the last hundred years.

There is yet a third reason this volume is significant for officers in the OPC. It is the product of a developing debate between former colleagues. In a footnote, Tipton estimates that Westminster Theological Seminary professor and fellow OPC minister Scott Oliphint "effectively redefines the notion of voluntary condescension in mutualist terms⁵ that are out of accord with the Reformed doctrine of the covenant enshrined in WCF 7.1" (Tipton, 34, fn. 28). In other words, Tipton believes Oliphint has departed, perhaps unintentionally, from the theological standards he has vowed to uphold. One can only pray that professors Tipton and Oliphint are continuing to pursue peace and purity at a personal level, even as words like those are printed for all to read.

This short book's significance may be compared to the brilliance of a light. Tipton's work certainly is brilliant. However, only time will tell if that brilliance is the life-giving, healing light of a therapy lamp or a foreboding signal of some foreign conflict destructively intruding into more peaceful quarters. Much like eastern European conflicts, Westminster Theological Seminary rivalries have a history of disrupting the peace of others. As undershepherds of Christ, we are obliged to guard the Church's peace as zealously as we protect her purity. OPC officers will need to read this book to faithfully protect both. *Tolle lege!* ©

Nathan P. Strom is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as the church planter at Breakwater Church in Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

5 "Mutualist" is taken to mean that it posits *mutually* shared categories of being between God and man. Put in more popular terms, mutualists undermine the distinction between Creator and creature.

EDITORIAL POLICIES

1. *Ordained Servant* exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.
2. *Ordained Servant* publishes articles inculcating biblical Presbyterianism in accord with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and helpful articles occasionally from collateral Reformed traditions; however, views expressed by the writers do not necessarily represent the position of *Ordained Servant* or of the Church.
3. *Ordained Servant* occasionally publishes articles on issues on which differing positions are taken by officers in good standing in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. *Ordained Servant* does not intend to take a partisan stance, but welcomes articles from various viewpoints in harmony with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

ORDAINED SERVANT

Cover and layout designed by Christopher Tobias, Tobias' Outerwear for Books, Inc.
Printed and bound by D. S. Graphics, Lowell, Massachusetts.

Composed in Requiem, Helvetica Neue, Electra, and Libertinus.
Printed on 70# Husky Offset Text.
Bound in 80# Velvet Unisource.