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From the Editor

Ordained Servant has never done summer reading suggestions, but unintentionally this issue provides lots of possibilities, even though we're half way through the summer, beginning with John Shaw's excellent article on the OPC and urban missions. His first footnote gives a list of five recent books on urban church planting. I can still remember Ross Graham, years ago at the annual home missions conference, calling for an urban missions initiative. It is certainly a great need in the OPC and I suspect in NAPARC churches as well. This is the work of several generations. Something worthy of our fervent prayers, personal help, and generous financial support. John Shaw's article is programmatic, and thus a good place to begin.

This issue we have two review articles. John Muether reviews two books of sociology, which examine the transmission of faith in families, in "Getting or Not Getting Religion." Several major pieces of conventional wisdom about teenagers are turned on their heads. Meredith M. Kline, bringing rich insight on a biblical book that has occupied his thinking for decades, reviews a new popular commentary on Ecclesiastes.

Three reviews follow. Carl Trueman reviews David Wells's latest book *God in the Whirlwind*. This is another Wells *tour de force*, bringing theology—the doctrine of God—to bear on the situation of the conservative American evangelicalism in modernity. In this book he goes beyond analysis and critique to give direction to the church. David Booth looks at student articles exploring the relationship between Christ and culture from a Neo-Calvinist perspective in *The Kuyper Center Review, Volume Three*. Mark Debowski looks at a new book on preaching with the provocative title *Saving Eutychus*. The two authors bring much experience to their critical examination of each other's sermons, all in the laudable interest of keeping worshippers awake.

Finally, our poem this issue is a hymn written by Isaac Watts, based on Psalm 72. The original had eleven verses, more than twice the number in *The Trinity Hymnal*, as well as most other hymnals. Those were days of the heartiest Calvinist worshippers. Those were also the days when people made their own music, instead of having it made for us. Teaching God's people to sing well will be a great challenge in the decades to come.

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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

Servant Witness

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the City

by John S. Shaw

Christian publishing houses continue to roll out new books on the subject of church ministry in the city.¹ There is a growing desire to learn how to plant churches in large urban centers, and also a desire to effectively communicate the gospel across languages and cultures. These desires grow from a response to the changing dynamics of our nation and world.

A quick review of demographic trends tells the story of a world becoming increasingly urban with nationalities, languages, and races mixing in new ways. Consider the following statistics and trends:

- The percentage of people living in urban centers across the globe has increased steadily over the past one hundred years: 20% in 1910; slightly less than 40% in 1990; more than 50% in 2010; projected at 60% in 2030 and 70% in 2050;
- Globally, the number of urban dwellers grows on average by sixty million per year;²
- The urban population in the United States grew by 12.1% from 2000 to 2010;³
- Urban areas made up 80.7% of the population of the United States in 2010, while rural areas made up more than 80% of the geography of the United States;⁴
- The total urban population of the United States in 2010 accounted for more than 250 million people;⁵
- From 2006 to 2011 the number of children (age 0 to 17) in the United States with at least one immigrant parent grew by 1.5 million, from 15.7 to 17.2 million, which includes nearly one fourth of all the children in the United States;⁶

¹ Some examples: Jon M. Dennis, *Christ + City: Why the Greatest Need of the City Is the Greatest News of All* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013); Darrin Patrick, *For the City: Proclaiming and Living Out the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010); Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); Mark Gornik, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Stephen T. Um and Justin Buzzard, *Why Cities Matter: To God, the Culture, and the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013).

² “Urban Population Growth,” World Health Organization, accessed July 26, 2013, http://www.who.int/gho/urban_health/situation_trends/urban_population_growth_text/en/.

³ “Growth in Urban Population Outpaces Rest of Nation, Census Bureau Reports,” U.S. Census Bureau press release, March 26, 2012, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb12-50.html.

⁴ “America’s Urban Population: Patterns and Characteristics,” ProximityOne, accessed July 26, 2014, <http://www.proximityone.com/urbanpopulation.htm>.

⁵ “U.S. Urban Population Is Up . . . But What Does ‘Urban’ Really Mean?” Nate Berg, Citylab, last modified March 26, 2012, <http://www.citylab.com/housing/2012/03/us-urban-population-what-does-urban-really-mean/1589/>.

⁶ “Children of Immigrants: 2011 State Trends Update,” Devlin Hanson and Margaret Simms, Urban Institute, last modified May 5, 2014, <http://www.urban.org/publications/413113.html>.

- The non-Hispanic white population in the United States shrunk from 76% of total population in 1995 to 65% of total population in 2009;⁷
- A December 2012 study from the United States Census Bureau (based on the 2010 census) predicted that by 2020, no single ethnic or racial group will constitute a majority of children under 18, and that by 2043, no single ethnic or racial group will constitute a majority of the total population;
- Already, based on the 2010 census data, there is no majority race among new births within the United States;
- The Hispanic population in the United States is predicted to increase from 53.3 million in 2012 to 128.8 million in 2060—then making up one in three of the total population;
- The Asian population in the United States is predicted to increase from 15.9 million in 2012 to 34.4 million in 2060—then making up 8.2% of the total population.⁸

The demographic trends tell us something. Obviously, we don't build our theology or our mission on demographics that reflect cultural movements and shifting human priorities. The Bible provides the only foundation for theology and mission, and that standard never changes despite the movement of the culture. We recognize, as well, that statistics can be and often are twisted to support the political and moral inclinations of the powers of the age. But the demographic realities tell us something: that the world in which we live is becoming more urban and more ethnically diverse. Those realities provide both challenges and opportunities for the church that we must recognize.

Two Possible Responses

So how should the church, and in particular, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, respond to a population growing increasingly urban and diverse? The literature and practice of the evangelical and Reformed church generally suggests two typical responses, what I will describe as being either against the city or for the city.⁹

First, the response that I have described as being “against the city” focuses on the problems of the city (e.g., crimes, drugs, homelessness, overcrowding, poor schools, etc.). Proponents of this viewpoint describe cities as “uncomfortable, congested places filled with crime, grime, and temptation.”¹⁰ Christians that begin from such a starting point approach the city in one of two ways. It is either a terrible place from which Christians should flee, or a flawed place that Christians must fix. You see the results of this approach with certain trends in the American church. Congregations leave behind their building in the city to replant their congregation in the suburbs. (Have you noticed all the empty church buildings in the city and wondered where those congregations

⁷ “U.S. Census Bureau Projections Show a Slower Growing, Older, More Diverse Nation a Half Century from Now, U.S. Census Bureau press release, December 12, 2012, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/population/cb12-243.html>.

⁸ “2012 National Population Projections,” U.S. Census Bureau, accessed July 26, 2014, <https://www.census.gov/population/projections/data/national/2012.html>,

⁹ Obviously, this is an oversimplification of the issue. But gathering the typical evangelical responses into two categories seems the best way forward for a short article.

¹⁰ Um and Buzzard, *Why Cities Matter*, 16.

went?) And politically active Christians sometimes talk about poverty, welfare, health care, and immigration in ways that communicate disdain for people made in God's image.

Anyone who has lived in an urban environment has experienced the problems of the city. In my short experience of urban living, I was solicited for drugs in front of the elementary school playground one block from my house; interrupted a drug deal six blocks from my home; lived in a neighborhood with gang shootings, extensive drug raids, and a manhunt that led to the killing of a police officer and the lock down of our neighborhood on an otherwise quiet and leisurely Saturday morning. Of course, you can experience many of these same things living in suburban or rural communities; but the concentration of such events tends to be much higher in urban contexts.

Yet our family also experienced tremendous benefits living in an urban context. Our children played with the neighborhood children quite happily while being some of the only Caucasian children, and that changed their perspective on race and ethnicity. We hosted a Bible club in our backyard with fifteen Hmong children participating in some form and enjoyed hearing five of them recite the Bible verses for that week in our kitchen. Our children learned about maintaining their public testimony as they confronted difficult interactions with the neighbors (for instance, how to respond when a neighbor asks you to play house with their family idols) and invited neighbors for dinner and family devotions. We also celebrated three professions of faith and five baptisms of internationals (Korean, Japanese, and Chinese) in our urban, mid-western congregation.

The biblical answer to the problems of the city certainly can't include fleeing the city or looking at the city as a place that simply needs to be fixed. Cities are filled with people made in the image of God who need the gospel and the compassion of Jesus Christ. Churches in urban contexts within the United States have a unique opening for gospel ministry, and even the opportunity to minister the gospel in circumstances that we have often relegated to foreign missions.

So what about the second approach—what I have labeled being “for the city”? Maybe that provides the right response to a population growing increasingly urban and diverse. You can trace this particular urban movement within Reformed circles to men like Harvie Conn and Manuel Ortiz, who have written extensively about how the church should approach urban centers. But the most prolific twenty-first century voice addressing this issue is Tim Keller, a popular author and speaker, and the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. In one of his articles, “A Biblical Theology of the City,” he wrote: “This city [the New Jerusalem] is the Garden of Eden, remade. The City is the fulfillment of the purposes of the Eden of God. We began in a garden but will end in a city; God's purpose for humanity is urban!”¹¹

To summarize, being “for the city” in this context means to focus on the blessings and opportunities of the city. Stephen Um and Justin Buzzard describe cities as centers of power, culture, and worship; as magnets for people, amplifiers of voice, and engines of culture and ideas; and thus consider cities to be unique gateways for the ministry of the gospel.¹²

¹¹ Resurgence, a ministry of Mars Hill Church, accessed July 26, 2014, http://theresurgence.com/files/pdf/tim_keller_2002_a_biblical_theology_of_the_city.pdf.

¹² See Um and Buzzard, *Why Cities Matter*, chapters 1 and 2.

Once again, this particular viewpoint includes much that is true. Due to the nature of urban populations—with large concentrations of people from various people groups, and with a greater concentration of professionals, universities, and the arts—cities exercise an immense influence on the direction of culture and ideas. In addition, the large concentration of people in a relatively small geographic footprint provides great opportunities to reach many people with the message of the gospel. Churches within these contexts have an opportunity to speak loudly and broadly the message of the gospel, with a much greater reach than is generally available in smaller towns and rural communities.

Yet there is an accompanying danger in the message of those who fall into the camp of being “for the city.” They at least suggest, if not boldly state, that God possesses and the Bible expresses a preference for the urban. “God’s purpose for humanity is urban!”¹³ Keller proclaims. The unstated implication is that God’s purpose for humanity is not suburban or rural (or small town or whatever other category you might want to include). Such an attitude leaves people in small or rural communities to wonder, what happens to us if Christ and his church prefer the urban? Such an attitude could also lead the church to wonder, “Why would we bother planting churches in rural areas or small towns when demographics, and even the Bible itself, tell us to go to the city?”

A Third Response

I would suggest a third response to the city that looks somewhat different from the two already mentioned. Rather than focus on the city as something the church should stand for or against, this third response focuses on the people who populate the city. To explain, let me begin with Bible passages that stand at the center of books that present a “for the city” approach.

Um and Buzzard build their argument for a city-centered ministry on a biblical theological walk through the Old and New Testaments. They suggest that their “for the city” approach finds its greatest support in the earthly ministry of Jesus, focusing on Luke 9:51 and 19:41–48. Building from these passages, Um and Buzzard make a bold statement concerning the ministry of Jesus:

Jesus’s ministry is not only set in an urban context, we must remember that in some sense its goal—that by which it is gravitationally pulled—is a city. This is eminently clear in Luke’s Gospel where the bulk of the story is shaped around Jesus’s journey toward Jerusalem. The major turn of the book occurs in 9:51, where we see Jesus “[setting] his face to go to Jerusalem.” The travelogue continues until Jesus enters the temple in 19:45, effectively taking Jesus to the center of the city immediately outside of which he will soon be put to death. Though it will not be a refuge for him, Jesus is determined to get to Jerusalem. To recognize the centrality of the city of Jerusalem for Jesus’s ministry is not to deny or undervalue his ministry in rural or pre-suburban settings, it is simply to acknowledge the shape of his ministry as it is presented in Scripture. As we will see, in Jesus, God’s commitment to the city is at its peak.¹⁴

¹³ Resurgence, a ministry of Mars Hill Church, accessed July 26, 2014, http://theresurgence.com/files/pdf/tim_keller_2002_a_biblical_theology_of_the_city.pdf.

¹⁴ Um and Buzzard, *Why Cities Matter*, 68–69.

This whole chapter, “The Bible and the City,” provides many opportunities to wrestle with the exegetical implications of the passages they consider, but I will leave that task to a more skilled exegete. It seems to me, though, that Um and Buzzard miss the most basic and clear application of these passages to our practical theology. When you consider the words of Jesus in Luke 19:41–44, he weeps not so much over the city as an institution or structure, but rather over the people who will perish as the Lord judges the city. Consider what he says in verses 43 and 44: “For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side, and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you.” Jesus focuses on the judgment (the visitation mentioned later in verse 44) that the Lord will visit on the people of Jerusalem and their children.¹⁵

Throughout this chapter of Um and Buzzard’s book, and throughout many similar books, the authors read their own definition of the city (a metropolis) into every mention of cities (both particular earthly cities, like Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and also every mention of Zion, the city of God, in places like Hebrews 11 and 12 and Revelation 21). In the process, they often miss the beautiful message of the Lord’s love for the people within the walls of earthly cities. Even more important, they miss the particular love that Jesus reserves for the people of Zion, his bride and the apple of his eye, the church.

When Jesus approaches earthly cities, he looks with compassion on lost and perishing sinners “who were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:35–36). Also, “the Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob,” not because of a particular bias toward the urban, but because he founded that great city as a dwelling place for his beloved and chosen people (Psalm 87:2ff). That city points us, ultimately, to Christ’s church.

We do learn how to approach the city from the example and teaching of Jesus. He calls us not to be against or for the city, but rather to be for people. To approach men and women with the same love that characterized our Savior. To approach lost sinners with compassion because we recognize the terror of God’s wrath, and to approach believers with great love because we recognize the price of Christ’s sacrifice for them. Jesus’s earthly ministry, and in fact the whole scope of biblical theology, calls us to approach men and women with compassion modeled after that of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Such an approach gives us a method to build churches and gather sheep in every context—whether urban, suburban, rural, or small town. Because Christ loves people and possesses a special love for his chosen people, we plant churches anywhere that we find people. Yet this perspective also gives us good reason to focus attention on large cities and urban centers. The Lord sends his church to gather the sheep, and we find the greatest collection of people (and potential sheep) in large cities.

In addition, this particular perspective provides good reason to focus our attention on places where a diverse population of people (across languages, races, and cultures) is gathered. The Bible describes the church as a collection of people from the nations, even nations that previously hated each other and hated God and his people. Psalm 87:4 describes Zion as including citizens from every geographic direction and even from those

¹⁵ This is not to deny that the Lord Jesus weeps over the judgment that will come against the creation, which includes more than simply people. The pattern of Scripture bears out such a concern for all the creation. But the focus of his sorrow rests on the crown of creation, men and women made in the image of God.

nations who sought to destroy Israel (Assyria, Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Egypt). Revelation 7 describes the people of God as including “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (v. 9). The growing diversity of our nation’s cities, rather than a threat, presents an opportunity to bring the gospel message to the nations. How wonderful to see the Revelation 7 vision reflected in churches in our own country.

The increasing urban and diverse population of our nation certainly presents challenges. But the Lord provides, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, a plan to unite all things in him (Eph. 1:10); and he promises to unite all things especially through the message of the cross of Jesus Christ carried by the church (Eph. 2:11–22; 3:10). The church finds in these demographic trends an opportunity to proclaim Christ to a growing and diverse population, and to offer them the only answer to those things that otherwise divide people. The flow of biblical theology calls us to love people, and therefore the flow of biblical theology calls us to places where people, many in number and diverse in population, gather. In conclusion, let’s consider a few ways the Orthodox Presbyterian Church can tangibly love people in the city.

Loving People in the City

First, the church tangibly loves people in the city simply by their kind presence. Most large American cities are littered with empty church buildings or repurposed church buildings. Christians have fled city cores in droves, and the void of gospel influence leaves tangible marks. Urban cores feel the painful results of the fall in a concentrated way, and they need the gospel. When Christians offer their presence, following the instruction of Paul in Romans 12:9–21—blessing those who persecute you, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those weep, living in harmony with one another, associating with the lowly, living peaceably with all, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, overcoming evil with good—the Lord blesses those labors of love. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church should be present in cities expressing genuine Christian love for our neighbors.¹⁶

Second, the church tangibly loves people in the city by proclaiming the truth of the Scriptures, without hesitation or compromise. The only answer to sin that tears down and divides is the gospel of Jesus Christ. He calls his church to disciple nations as we go by baptizing in the name of the triune God and teaching them to observe everything that Jesus commands (Matt. 28:18–20). For people to believe and call upon God, we need to send those who preach the good news (Rom. 10:14–15). People need truth and they want truth, no matter what secular sources might claim. The Lord gives his church everything necessary for life and godliness. Let’s boldly teach the truth.

Third, the church tangibly loves people in the city by establishing congregations committed to the fullness of the Christian ministry laid out in Acts 2:42–47. Congregations devoted to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers (v. 42). Congregations committed to helping any who have need (v. 44–45). Congregations committed to regular fellowship, regular worship, and opening their

¹⁶ I would argue that the relational ministry to which we are committed—including an emphasis on Christian fellowship, pastoral visitation, and family visitation—is well-suited for urban ministry. People want and need that kind of Christian nurture and committed presence. Our pastors have committed to being with and loving people—the house-to-house ministry that Paul describes in Acts 20:20.

homes (v. 46). Congregations characterized by joy and praise (vv. 46–47). Congregations known as good neighbors who have favor with all the people (v. 47). Congregations in the city must plan for an active diaconal ministry and a vibrant prayer ministry. The Lord blesses such churches and makes them a blessing (v. 47b).

Fourth, the church tangibly loves people in the city by emphasizing the teachings of Scripture (the content of the gospel and the commands of God) and de-emphasizing other things we consider important (politics, personal choices for school, etc.). I recognize this point may touch some nerves, but the church should be about the gospel and about the Bible, calling people to faith and obedience to the Word of Christ. In contrast, the church should not be about party politics, homeschooling versus Christian schooling versus public schooling debates, health food, homeopathic medicine, or environmental causes. Christ calls the church to proclaim the whole counsel of God, and we must focus our words on those matters.

Fifth, the church tangibly loves people in the city by being good neighbors and good laborers. There are probably several good articles to be written on this point alone. Without question, clear, biblical preaching and teaching are essential and powerful (Rom. 10:14-15; 1 Cor. 1:18–2:5); yet it is important to recognize that most Christians exercise their Christian witness most directly by how they treat their neighbors and how they serve their employer. Careful attention to these matters has opened many doors for the gospel.

Do the demographic trends so clearly evident in the twenty-first century mean anything for the church? Yes, of course they do. The Lord, in his good providence, has gathered large and diverse populations into urban centers throughout the United States and the world. There are new opportunities to bring the gospel to the nations even in our own backyard. May the Lord give us wisdom to speak clearly and grace to speak kindly the words of life, so that a multitude, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, might worship the one true God.

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ServantReading

Getting or Not Getting Religion A Review Article

by John R. Muether

Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church, by Kenda Creasy Dean. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 254 pages, \$24.95.

Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations, by Vern L. Bengtson with Norella M. Putney and Susan Harris. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 267 pages, \$29.95.

When sociologist Christian Smith published his 2005 study of contemporary teenage American spirituality, his term “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD) entered the vocabulary of Christian educators and youth ministers as the dominant idiom for assessing the crisis of faith among the church’s children.¹ Each of the two studies under review devotes some attention to this term and the phenomenon it describes, as they examine the ways in which today’s youth get (or don’t get) religion.

In *Families and Faith*, Vern Bengtson and his associates at the University of Southern California tackle the heart-breaking scenario of parents watching their children abandon the faith. Since the sixties, the expression “generation gap” has been employed to describe the seemingly unbridgeable chasm between parents and children. However, the research in this book, based on a four-decade survey of 350 families, suggests that generational continuity tends to exceed, and often significantly, the presence of any “gap.”

Why then do we commonly perceive a crisis in both institutions? The authors suggest several factors, including secularization and the rise of the “ethos of individualism and self-fulfillment” that has eroded our sense of belonging to a community. Increases in interfaith marriages and sky-rocketing divorce rates have proven particularly disruptive to religious socialization. But Bengtson adopts the prevailing scholarship and counters that under these conditions, the family is not in crisis; rather, it is changing. We may object to definitional elasticity that describes any amicable social arrangement as a “family.” But we should acknowledge the dangerous extremes to which Christians tend to romanticize and privilege the nuclear families at the expense of the extended family and especially the church (the family of God).

Bengtson argues that the sum of these social disruptions does not render inevitable the failure to transmit religion to our children. Contrary to popular impression, “something about

¹ Very briefly, MTD asserts that a good God created and watches over the world, intervening in our lives when we encounter problems. God wants us to be good, and our goodness depends on being happy and feeling good about ourselves. Such good people go heaven when they die. Christian Smith, with Melinda Lunquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). See the review essay by Gregory E. Reynolds in *Ordained Servant* 16 (2007): 136–39.

religion seems to ‘stick around’ families over generations,” far more so than political loyalties or social views (192). Sixty percent of adult children in this study had the same religious affiliation as their parents, a percentage that has remained fairly steady since Bengtson began his research in 1970. The term that Bengtson employs to describe this faith transmission is “intergenerational religious momentum,” and he outlines conditions under which this momentum is most successful. Most often it takes place in faiths with “high boundaries,” tight-knit communities with coherent “rituals and traditions that help to maintain the continuity of their faith across generations” (181).

Other important findings stick out in a reading of this book, including these:

- Echoing the findings of Christian Smith, Bengtson argues that teenagers’ peers are no match for the effect that parents continue to have on their children: “The single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents.” (7)
- Grandparents are a vastly overlooked influence in spiritual formation. With longer life spans and expanding roles in the duties of child care, grandparents are shaping the faith of their grandchildren more than ever, either in reinforcing the values of the parents or in exerting a religious influence that has skipped a generation. (101)²
- Bengtson stresses persistence and endurance in spiritual nurture. There are grave consequences, his research indicates, when the busyness of life encourages families to “put religious practice on hold for a season.” (40–41)

This is not to suggest, of course, that faith development functions take place automatically. Certainly there are parents who have been faithful in the religious upbringing of their children who still suffered the heartache of children rejecting the faith. But even here there is encouraging news from Bengtson’s study. Among the most stubborn of prodigals, faith can yet prove to be “sticky.” There is a residue of influence even where religious transmission seems to have failed (118). And so many prodigals do return.

The stress on “high boundaries” brings to mind a previous study of the decline of mainline Protestant religious transmission, in a book appropriately entitled *Vanishing Boundaries*. In that study, the authors look at the failure of the mainline to transmit a meaningful and coherent faith: “The children have asked over and over what is distinctive about Presbyterianism—or even about Protestantism—and why they should believe and cherish it. The answers have apparently not been very clear.”³ Bengtson urges that religious nurture in today’s world requires careful discernment: what are appropriate boundaries? Here we should not expect the book to provide much theological direction. Bengtson describes one ex-evangelical’s incredulity at the arbitrariness and inconsistency of a faith community that would prohibit women from teaching in the church and yet permit the eating of shellfish (136).

A recurring frustration of this book is its broadly religious scope that demands the most generic of categories. So, for example, the author speaks of “religious socialization” and not Christian nurture. The findings are expressed in terms of vague inter-faith trajectories. So

² Here is one compelling story about attending church with a grandfather: “We sat in the same seats. It was really predictable. And most of what was going on in my family life just wasn’t really that predictable. . . . He didn’t just go to church or talk about it; he actually lived the tenets of the faith. . . . He was like a rock for me” (103–4).

³ Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 200.

while it is true, as the book's title implies, that families and faith remain very deeply connected in American culture, it comes as small comfort for Orthodox Presbyterians that Bengtson's greatest success stories for intergenerational religious momentum are found among orthodox Judaism and Mormonism.

Here is where the ecclesiastical orientation of Kenda Creasy Dean offers more insight. Dean, who was part of Christian Smith's National Study on Youth and Religion research team, now serves as Associate Professor of Youth, Church and Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary. She keenly observes that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is no sign of the church's failure to pass its faith down from generation to generation. To the contrary, it is the result of successful enculturation by churches that distort the gospel. This is how the church today produced, in the haunting phrase of her title, young people who are "almost Christian."

Though the concept of religious "boundaries" is implied in Dean's analysis, she prefers sociologist Ann Swidler's term "cultural toolkit." By these she means a set of four "cultural tools" that mark one as a member of a faith tradition: creed, community, calling, and hope. She goes on to caution that no religion is more successful in developing these toolboxes than Mormons, who "top the charts" in these sociological categories. Moreover, she insists that these tools are no magic bullets for faith formation (49). These ingredients can "foreclose faith identity" as easily as they can develop it (53). "Consequential faith" requires a measure of detachment ("liminality"), liberating our youth from their self-indulgent comfort zones and nurturing them in a missional faith characterized by outreach, hospitality, and prayer.

Achieving such detachment may entail "experimentation for education and growth" (168), hinting at a liberationist mindset that hardly conduces to the transmission of religious orthodoxy. Indeed, Dean's approach to faith development bears unsurprising resemblance to Protestant liberalism. But to her credit, Dean is careful to observe that "situating ourselves within deeply held traditions" can render Christians "less rigid" (190), and that owning a tradition enables greater articulation of the faith.

This brings us back to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Dean suggests that our young people may not be as fooled by this false religion as we may suspect. They do not "buy it" as a faith so much as "buy into it" as a strategy for worldly success (and to repeat, this may largely owe to parental example). The hopelessness and cynicism of MTD may be best countered by Christian eschatology—churches and parents modeling a theology of hope "marked by patience, determination, and above all, humility" (191).

Both Bengtson and Dean would have us believe that religious transmission—for good or ill—can and does take place even in our age. If what they write is true of generic or mainline Protestant religious transmission in twenty-first-century America, consider how much encouragement this should provide for Presbyterian confessionalists, equipped with a Reformed ecology of Christian nurture that includes infant baptism, catechetical instruction, Sabbath observance, family worship, home visitation, and preeminently the ministry of the preached word—all with the view to bringing up children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Let us have the courage to believe that these are the means God has provided for genuine "intergenerational religious momentum."

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ServantReading

Recovering Eden *by Zack Eswine*

Meredith M. Kline

Recovering Eden: the Gospel According to Ecclesiastes, by Zack Eswine. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014, xiii + 246 pages, \$14.99, paper.

Organization

Recovering Eden is a homiletic rather than an academic presentation of the message of Ecclesiastes. The series is directed to lay readers and pastors, so there are few footnotes and most of the bibliography is of cultural or theological works not focusing on Ecclesiastes. The text is sermonic, written in an engaging style with many illustrations and rich metaphors.

The format of the book is not a linear commentary through each section of Ecclesiastes. It begins with two chapters introducing the reader to unexpected aspects of Ecclesiastes. In the first chapter Qohelet's ideas are portrayed as disconcerting because they present the exceptions encountered in life to the more familiar concept of Proverbs that righteous behavior results in positive experiences and because, unlike most of the Old Testament, Qohelet's message does not deal with distinctive features of the redemptive covenant community but with the common miseries and mercies experienced by all humanity. In the second chapter the method of Ecclesiastes is pictured as unsettling because its negative language—that all is meaningless, life is hated, and the stillborn is better off because not experiencing the evil of this present world—dominates the sporadic recommendations to enjoy life.

Next, Eswine begins to proceed through the text. He perceives Ecclesiastes as a sermonic thesis (“all is vanity,” 1:2, 12:8) which is explained in chapters 1–10, applied in 11–12:7, and supplemented in 12:9–14 with an evangelistic call to fear and obey God. He spends five of his remaining nine chapters focusing on the first three chapters of Ecclesiastes. This organization works, however, because topics recur throughout Ecclesiastes, so much of the last half of Ecclesiastes has been included in the discussion. Nevertheless, some passages do not get covered, including the programmatic questions of 6:8–12, since Eswine's last four chapters concentrate on only selected portions of the remainder of Ecclesiastes. That Eswine in his discussion of 12:13–14 includes references to God as judge in 3:17 and 11:9 and that the command to fear God also occurs in 5:7 along with the term God-fearers in 7:18 and 8:13, however, indicates that the concluding remarks are integral to the book's message and not just a pious addition. Recognition of the alternation of the work and wisdom themes as well as their integration with the thematic questions about what profit or advantage accrues to humans would also warrant changes in how common, recurring topics might have been more organically arranged.

Interpretation

Is Ecclesiastes about exhorting a secularist to become a God-fearing theist or about reminding a devout believer to remain faithful despite an inscrutable divine providence overlaying a world of rampant human wickedness? Is the message of Ecclesiastes to trust God in order to experience the blessings of his presence or to trust God and enjoy life's blessings despite his seeming absence from a world filled with human folly, demonic activity (associated with the **הַבַּלִּים** *hábālîm* idols of 5:7, 6 in Hebrew), and the common curse culminating in death?

For Eswine the warning of ultimate divine justice in 12:13–14 is a final appeal to a deity-repressor to trust God. Unlike the common evangelistic interpretation of Ecclesiastes which perceives the book's negatives as the view of someone who is skeptical about God's goodness, however, Eswine believes Qohelet trusts God but is only cynical, as he supposedly explains in 2:1–11, about the ability of earthly endeavors to satisfy humanity's deepest longings for fellowship with God. The thrust of Ecclesiastes is to warn of the dangers of human folly and to point to the joys associated with trusting God. While Qohelet does promote righteousness and wisdom rather than sinfulness and folly and believes God is just, what disturbs him is not just that humans warp reality but that God is behind life's inexplicable (1:15, 7:13, 8:16–17), “unhappy business” (1:13).

Are the efforts described in 2:1–11 examples of self-centered, foolish worldliness? Supposedly they would not supply the satisfying joy recommended in 2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; and 11:7–10, yet Qohelet says in 2:10 that he did get enjoyment from such labors which, as the text highlights in 2:3, 9, were guided by wisdom. Is not what he laments with his vanity judgment in 2:11 that death cancels any earthly gains or joys he experienced through his projects, even as divine gifts? Is 2:1–11 informing a secularist of the futility of his ways or lamenting the fact that, even for the righteous-wise, exhilarating earthly endeavors cannot recreate Eden or escape the disheartening effects of death on individual and cultural labor?

Eswine's title unveils his interpretational stance: Ecclesiastes tries with the “joy” passages to persuade the reader to recover the shalom of Eden. Such a position seems plausible if the negatives of Ecclesiastes are construed as only folly rather than a combination of folly and the common divine curse evident in providence. But, not only did pre-Fall theocratic Eden not have a common curse falling on its king, but vassal Adam also had physical, visible interaction with the divine suzerain. Qohelet laments the permanent loss of both features in life under the sun. The fact that God accompanies believers even in their present difficulties is not the same as Adam's Edenic fellowship with God. Neither is Ecclesiastes explicitly about experiencing the glory of a visibly integrated heaven and earth but only about how to navigate the current frustrations and fortunes of earthly reality.

Preaching Christ and the Gospel

The stated challenge for books in this series is how to present the gospel from the Old Testament by means of Christ-centered preaching. Eswine relates Christ to Ecclesiastes in two ways. First, he draws parallels between Ecclesiastes and Jesus. Many of the teachings of Qohelet can be replicated by the words of Jesus. Additionally, Jesus had experiences like characters in Ecclesiastes; he knew the joys of common blessings and the opposition of the wicked. Second, Jesus transcends aspects of Ecclesiastes. He speaks of heavenly, not just

earthly, treasures and he is not only a servant leader but also the wise and righteous good shepherd who conquers death.

What about the gospel? How can the message of a divine doomsday in 12:13–14 be a comforting conclusion if all are sinners (7:20–21)? The phrase “fear God” in 12:13 should recall the same phrase in 5:7 in a context about paying a vow, which assumes God has graciously answered a plea for deliverance in dire earthly circumstances. By implication, the hope is that God would save from his own wrath, not only from the dangers of folly, evil, or the common curse but from the ultimate, eschatological curse. Eswine does indicate how Ecclesiastes points to the accomplishment of redemption. The sacrifice at the house of God (5:1) is a type of Christ, the Slain Lamb. In discussing 5:1, though, Eswine does not focus on self-evaluation when entering the presence of a holy God by developing the parallel with the flaming sword guarding the way to Eden, which might support his theme of recovering Eden. Instead he concentrates on separating oneself from unbelievers in the church.

Are the ideas of the application of redemption and the doctrine of saving grace evident in Ecclesiastes? Eswine refers to the transforming work of the Spirit in his discussions about how Jesus transcends Ecclesiastes but not as a message inherent in a pericope of Ecclesiastes. Is the idea of redemptive grace explicit in Ecclesiastes or only elicited by contrast? Qohelet may assume that there are people who are righteous and wise but does Ecclesiastes have anything to say about the change from sinner to saint? By what power can the youth depicted in 11:8–10 obey the command to rejoice in energetic activity yet stand acquitted before the divine judge?

In Ecclesiastes rejoicing may be evidence of special grace, a gift of God (3:13, 5:18), but it is happiness for common grace, not a celebration of redemption. Nevertheless, salvation by grace alone is indicated explicitly in Ecclesiastes by the fact that it joins wisdom with righteousness so that when 2:26 indicates God gives wisdom and knowledge along with joy, the gift of righteousness is hinted at. In addition to passages like 3:12–13 and 5:18 which indicate contented joy is a gift of divine grace, the message of the provision of God’s transforming grace is inherent in 12:11 if the difficult poetic imagery and wording is rendered so that what is given by the supreme shepherd is not inspired words (“collections”) of the wise but rather the “gatherings (of the harvest)” of righteousness and wisdom, the fruit of sage instruction that ripens only by the gracious gift of God.

Thus, though *Recovering Eden* could be sharper on the existence of the theme of spiritual transformation in Ecclesiastes, Eswine repeatedly offers rich pastoral wisdom, with insights not found in commentaries, so its intended audience will profit immensely from this book. Whether one takes an evangelistic tack on Ecclesiastes that concentrates on exhortations to be wise and righteous rather than wicked and foolish or emphasizes a realistic view of how to live amidst the positive and negative features of our wacky world, *Recovering Eden* provides its readers with an abundance of sagacious fruit from the tree of life for strengthening a healthy mind to make wise spiritual decisions amidst the trials and temptations of ordinary living outside Eden.

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ServantReading

God in the Whirlwind by David F. Wells

Carl Trueman

God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy-love of God Reorients Our World, by David F. Wells. Wheaton: Crossway, 2014, 266 pages, \$24.99.

For the last two decades, David Wells has been the stern conscience and prophetic critic of the culture of conservative American Protestantism. In a series of books, he has laid bare the theological and moral bankruptcy of much of evangelicalism. Critics of his work have accused him of simply saying the same things over and over again, and of offering critique without any positive or constructive principles. In his latest book, *God in the Whirlwind*, he attempts to do precisely that: to map out a way forward for the church into the twenty-first century.

I have offered more general thoughts on the book elsewhere ([here](#) and [here](#)).¹ In this brief reflection, I want to offer a short summary of his thesis and then to focus on one or two key points. Essentially, Wells regards evangelicalism as worldly and as having lost sight of a central tenet in Christian orthodoxy: the “holy-love” of God. Tendencies to prioritize either the former or the latter part of that term lead either to legalism or to license. Both are functions of the worldly mindset and both involve a fundamental misunderstanding of God’s grace. The examples in the American world might be old style fundamentalism, with its litany of taboos, and new style evangelicalism, where anything goes (as long as it does not look like old style fundamentalism). Wells has articulated the basic outlines of this thesis before; here he adds the theological dimension by focusing on God’s holy-love.

New subplots emerge in Wells’s narrative, too. The distracting and kaleidoscopic role of information technology and the rise of the politics of sexual identity are both prominent themes in the early chapters and supplement the emphasis on the culture of therapeutic consumerism of earlier books. Over against these, Wells pits the narrative of biblical theology and the sheer Godness of God. A holy God who loves us without compromising that holiness is not a God who has any time for the therapist’s chair. If the world is broken, the answer is not to be found by turning inwards to our own psychological foibles but rather outward to the God who has acted, who acts, and who will act, to bring creation back to himself in the consummation of the Lamb’s wedding feast.

¹ http://www.firstthings.com/index.php?permalink=blogs&blog=firstthoughts&year=2014&month=01&entry_permalink=the-god-of-job; <http://www.placefortruth.org/placefortruth/article/the-evangelical-dilemma>.

What is clear from Wells's analysis is that the tragedy of much modern life is that it has no sense of tragedy. Evangelical Christianity is in general no exception to this. Consumerism is built on the idea that all problems can be solved by purchasing the right product. Therapy is built on the idea that happiness can be achieved by looking inwards and unlocking latent potential or healing inner damage. Secular politics is built on the idea that making the government just the right size (whether bigger or smaller) will cure all social ills. The blithe atheism of a Hitchens or a Dawkins sees life as nothing more than a glorious firework display which fades painlessly into the ether. Nowhere in the liturgies of the secular world does one find acknowledgment of the fundamental tragedy of human existence: we all die; and death is devastating. In short, every human life is doomed to end in failure. One does not have to believe in an afterlife to see that: death reduces those left behind in cruel and painful ways. The mind that produced the Mass in B Minor or the theory of relativity or simply brought joy to another human being by a loving glance or an affectionate word finds its destiny in the grave. Yet such is life—contemporary life, at least—that this basic reality is denied or hidden for as long as possible everywhere one looks.

There is an obvious way in which this touches on the contemporary conservative evangelical scene. One of the hardest lessons now being learned by the so-called New Calvinists is that the power of our consumerist culture is such that anything, even orthodox theology, can be turned into a commodity. The power aesthetic of the Mars Hill rock bands is ultimately as subversive of the ethos of orthodoxy as the prosperity gospel is of its content. That we now see a rapprochement of the two, combined with the confused silence of those who once rode on the coattails of the former, is scarcely a surprise. Wells has warned for two decades of the pernicious ubiquity of consumerism in the church. It has finally come close to the Calvinist home and we can only lament the fact that most powerful voices within the movement seem even now unwilling to take a clear public stand.

Yet here is the problem: the power of consumerism is such that none can be complacent. If pop megachurch Calvinism is a soft target, then high Presbyterianism too can prove vulnerable to consumerism. Any liturgy in any idiom can potentially degenerate into mere formality; and traditional worship can end up merely providing a superficial aesthetic gratification all of its own. This is where the centrality of preaching is important. Biblical preaching mediates the presence of God, reminds the people of who they are by reminding them of whom they stand before, and points them to their life in Christ.

This is surely where the vital importance of the local church comes in to play. There is perhaps an irony that Wells has spent much of his life connected to big tent conservative evangelical movements when it is arguable that the kind of vital Christianity, involving elaborate doctrinal confession and everyday practical expression, can only really be realized in the particularity of the local church context. The Christian as consumer is a much more practical option in large churches, where a full time staff keep the operation running, than in a congregation of two hundred or less, where everyone is required to take turns in the day-to-day chores. And doctrinal breadth or laxity is much more tolerable in such large churches as well, where there is an increasing degree of anonymity in the congregation. This is not to say that large churches

necessarily fall into these sins, any more than smaller churches are necessarily immune to them. But it is to say that the possibility of such a fall is that much greater.

This is perhaps the one place where I would have wished for more practical direction from Wells. The answer to the church's ills cannot be reduced simply to getting the doctrine and the preaching straight. He does not suggest that it is; but he does not provide a larger vision of what faithful churches might practically look like on a weekly basis beyond this. My concern would be that those of us who place a premium on preaching and doctrine might well not see ourselves as indicted by the book. That would represent a failure to understand the deep-seated cultural malaise to which Wells points. We can all turn our particular convictions into consumerism commodities and forms of therapy and our personal tastes into transcendental imperatives.

This is a fine book. It deserves a wide readership. It should not be read by Orthodox Presbyterians with an attitude of "I thank you, Lord, that I am not like other men." Rather, a judicious "Is it I, Lord?" would be more appropriate.

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ServantReading

The Kuyper Center Review *edited by Gordon Graham*

David A. Booth

The Kuyper Center Review, Volume Three, edited by Gordon Graham. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2013, xiv + 184 pages, \$26.00.

Garrison Keillor assured us that in Lake Wobegon “all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average.” In the rest of the country, however, half of every college class is made up of men and women who are academically below average. These are their essays. It is difficult to understand why someone at the venerable Eerdmans Publishing Company didn’t just say “no” to this volume. Those interested in investigating the relationship between Calvinism and culture, or in this case Neo-Calvinism and culture, will be much better served by reading scholars such as Nicholas Wolterstorff and David VanDrunen.

For all the shortcomings of this collection, it did inadvertently raise an interesting question: if Professor Gaffin enjoys Eggs Benedict for breakfast does that transform it into Reformed cuisine or does it simply remain a breakfast option? Surprisingly, several of the articles seem to opt for the breakfast transformation paradigm. For example, in her article “The Calvinian Eucharistic Poetics of Emily Dickinson,” Jennifer Wang acknowledges that Dickinson never made a public profession of faith nor became a communicant member in any church (94). Yet Wang writes:

Rather than rejecting Calvinism wholesale, it is more probable that Dickinson rejected the specific practices of her Puritan Congregational church, which treated partaking of Communion as evidence of moral transformation, a marker of one’s piety, rather than as a reception of grace on behalf of her imperfect faith. (99)

The trouble with this argument is that the four Dickinson poems Wang appeals to in support of her position never mention Christ, God, grace, sin, or forgiveness. Furthermore, the poems could plausibly be read as presenting nature as a better sacrament than the Lord’s Supper. So why should we call such poetry Calvinian? Doesn’t Reformed theology provide us with the framework to enjoy and appreciate the poetry of non-Christians as well as non-Calvinists?

Matthew Kaemingk discusses a very public expression of art in his article “Theology and Architecture: Calvinist Principles for the Faithful Construction of Urban Space.” This is one of the better essays in the volume. Kaemingk is undoubtedly correct to recognize that Reformed Christians should care about architecture and also that our worldviews will shape how we assess the aesthetics, functionality, and social ramifications of different approaches to urban development. He writes:

Augustine, famously commenting on the politics of the earthly city, argues that each city will organize its political affairs around its deepest love. One can easily imagine unique political structures designed to serve the demands of war, market growth, radical equality, or individual pleasure. This essay will be Augustinian in spirit, in that it will seek to explore how a city's physical structure and design reflects its deepest loves, and more specifically, how a deep and primary love for God might develop a robust architectural imagination that can go beyond the contemporary urban aesthetic of growth and speed. (51–52)

This seems like a promising start, but as Kaemingk moves from describing what some Calvinists have done to developing specific principles to inform what Calvinists should do his project unwinds. The four principles that Kaemingk proposes are humility, craftsmanship, justice, and delight. It is difficult to see why any liberally educated Westerner in the twenty-first century would disagree with any of these themes, and therein lies the rub. If my Jewish, Muslim, and secular neighbors all agree with these principles, what makes them distinctively Christian, let alone Calvinistic?

The real challenge comes when we need to choose between these principles as actual architects are forced to do. It is simply a historical fact that most of the landmark architecture that people have enjoyed throughout history resulted from significant concentrations of wealth and power in the hands of individuals, corporations, churches, or civil governments. It would have been interesting if Kaemingk had dealt with the tension between such extreme concentrations of wealth and power (which seem to run counter to his understanding of social justice) and the creation of exceptional architectural beauty. Instead, like the politician who promises both more government services and lower taxes, Kaemingk seems unwilling to choose or even to acknowledge that such choices need to be made. To be fair, other than condemning the extremes of oppressing the poor or denying the value of beauty, it is difficult to see how Scripture provides a working framework for making such choices that is not available to everyone by common grace. In fact, Kaemingk never quotes any passage from Scripture in favor of his position. He merely refers to the architectural judgments of a few men who happen to be Reformed. But doesn't that leave us with Reformed Christians thinking about good and bad architecture rather than thinking about distinctly Reformed architecture? Why then do the modifiers "Reformed" or "Calvinistic" need to be in the discussion at all? Does every opinion that Abraham Kuyper held automatically become Reformed simply because he was?

The temptation to relate all good things in some way to our tribe has been with the church since some church fathers began treating Plato and Aristotle as Christians before Christ. American evangelicals, likewise, occasionally attempt to recast Abraham Lincoln as a model Christian in spite of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Perhaps this temptation is natural, but it is also unbiblical. All the way back in Genesis 4:19–22, we see that the crafting of musical instruments and the practice of metallurgy developed from the line of Cain rather than the line of Seth. The LORD grants aesthetic skill and wisdom to Calvinists and non-Calvinists alike. For this we should rejoice. At the end of the day, and even at the beginning, no matter what Professor Gaffin prefers to eat, Eggs Benedict is not transformed into Reformed cuisine. It's just breakfast.

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ServantReading

Saving Eutychus *by Gary Millar and Phil Campbell*

by Mark Debowski

Saving Eutychus: How to Preach God's Word and Keep People Awake, by Gary Millar and Phil Campbell. Kingsford, Australia: Matthias Media, 2013, 171 pages, \$16.99, paper.

“Preaching is hard work” (7). We who preach know the truth of this sentence all too well. Preaching in a way that is both faithful and fresh, week after week, is an exercise that requires our diligence in applying all of God’s resources. While many of us reading this review are likely faithfully preaching sound doctrine, we can probably all agree that preaching in a way that is fresh or interesting is arduous and sometimes daunting. It is here that the book is most challenging and most helpful.

As the name intimates, Presbyterian co-authors Gary Millar and Phil Campbell want to save Eutychus. That is, they don’t want any more people to fall asleep during sermons, and they certainly don’t want those people to fall out of windows and die. While some of us in the Reformed community may be tempted to tune out the book at this point, we all should listen closely to what the authors have to say. These men have not produced another book in a long line of publications describing pragmatic techniques and methods for entertaining and satisfying itching ears. These men are committed to a biblical and Reformed theology of homiletics but have a belief that “preaching should never bore people to death” (8). Furthermore, instead of blaming the culture or the sinful disposition of our listeners, they are “convinced that when attention wanders and eyes droop, it’s more often our fault than our listeners’ ” (14). This is a challenging word to those of us who are preachers.

At 171 pages, and written in a conversational style, the book is a quick read. The different perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences of two authors blend well and complement one another. Millar and Campbell hit topics that are essential for good preaching and are covered well in many other preaching books: prayer, preaching with purpose, structuring the sermon around a central idea, historical-grammatical and redemptive-historical hermeneutics, good delivery practices, and sermon construction steps. Here, the book is a good summary of sermon basics, and reviewing these principles is a helpful exercise for any preacher. Most notable, and possibly most helpful for those of us in the Reformed community, though, are chapters three and seven. These chapters are a homiletical gold mine. It is here that the book addresses issues that are not as well handled in Christian preaching literature. If each of us committed to implementing the

ideas found in these two chapters, many of our current weaknesses as preachers would be strengthened.

Chapter three addresses the question of how we can be less boring and more interesting. Their answer: be clear. Crystal clear. As the authors point out, we have good biblical precedent for desiring to be clear in our preaching. The remainder of the chapter covers ten practices for enhancing clarity. Understanding and employing them will likely be a lifetime struggle for most of us. Instead of pitching them as ten tips for growing your church or making people like our sermons more, the authors remind us that growing in our skill of being clear is growing in faithfulness and stewardship of the gift and opportunity that God has given to us.

Chapter seven emphasizes the importance of seeking out educated, constructive, and honest critique. Many of us would agree with Gary as he writes, “Getting feedback on my preaching is just about the worst thing there is. It’s about as desirable as having pins stuck in my eyes” (111). He goes on to say, “And yet there is probably nothing more important for anyone who teaches the Bible than loving, godly, perceptive criticism” (111). He insightfully diagnoses the motive behind preachers’ resistance to feedback: sin. The remainder of the chapter lays out ideas for gathering helpful feedback both before and after sermons. Here, ruling and teaching elders need to pay special attention. Ruling elders have the duty of guarding the teaching of Scripture in the visible church as well as the privilege of encouraging and helping the teaching elder become a more effective preacher. If each session carefully and humbly implemented chapter seven in a quarterly or yearly session meeting, much godly fruit could result. Those of us who are preachers need to admit, though, that it is up to us to ask for the feedback on a regular basis from people we trust. We would do well to create a system of loving, honest feedback to spur us on to better preaching.

There are a few weaknesses to the book, including an uncritical use of video clips and slides. Here, the authors would be well advised to consult the wise warnings of others with a background in Christian media ecology. Thankfully, they never promote these practices as means of making a sermon more interesting. Some may disagree with their insistence on shorter sermons (in the twenty five minute range), but we would do well to at least consider their point.

Overall, the book is a humble, informed, biblical, and straightforward preaching tune-up book. I plan to read it at least once a year for the foreseeable future. It’s that good. I highly recommend it to teaching elders, ruling elders, elders’ wives, and any Christian who is interested in being a better listener to sermons and more educated and effective encourager of preachers.

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ServantPoetry

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Jesus Shall Reign

Based on Psalm 72 (#441 *Revised Trinity Hymnal*, stanzas 1, 4-6, 8 only)

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Does his successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

Behold the islands with their kings,
And Europe her best tribute brings;
From north to south the princes meet,
To pay their homage at His feet.

There Persia, glorious to behold,
There India shines in eastern gold;
And barb'rous nations at His word
Submit, and bow, and own their Lord.

To Him shall endless prayer be made,
And praises throng to crown His head;
His Name like sweet perfume shall rise
With every morning sacrifice.

People and realms of every tongue
Dwell on His love with sweetest song;
And infant voices shall proclaim
Their early blessings on His Name.

Blessings abound wherever He reigns;
The prisoner leaps to lose his chains;
The weary find eternal rest,
And all the sons of want are blessed.

Where He displays His healing power,
Death and the curse are known no more:
In Him the tribes of Adam boast
More blessings than their father lost.

Let every creature rise and bring
Peculiar honors to our King;
Angels descend with songs again,
And earth repeat the loud amen!

Great God, whose universal sway
The known and unknown worlds obey,
Now give the kingdom to Thy Son,
Extend His power, exalt His throne.

The scepter well becomes His hands;
All Heav'n submits to His commands;
His justice shall avenge the poor,
And pride and rage prevail no more.

With power He vindicates the just,
And treads th'oppressor in the dust:
His worship and His fear shall last
Till hours, and years, and time be past.

As rain on meadows newly mown,
So shall He send his influence down:
His grace on fainting souls distills,
Like heav'nly dew on thirsty hills.

The heathen lands, that lie beneath
The shades of overspreading death,
Revive at His first dawning light;
And deserts blossom at the sight.

The saints shall flourish in His days,
Dressed in the robes of joy and praise;
Peace, like a river, from His throne
Shall flow to nations yet unknown.