

# Ordained Servant

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A Journal  
for  
Church  
Officers

First Congregational Church, Merrimack, New Hampshire / photo: Gregory E. Reynolds

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## ***Ordained Servant***

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# Ordained Servant

A JOURNAL FOR CHURCH OFFICERS

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# ✦ From the Editor

The third annual printed edition of *Ordained Servant* is in your hands. It is a continual source of great joy and satisfaction to me to help provide this resource for the officers of our church.

The 2006 edition was an experiment in size and publishing cost. Last year, we settled on the 150 page format. This will always require making some difficult choices. Articles that were reprinted from previous editions of *Ordained Servant* will not be reprinted. Articles and reviews that are ephemeral, and may lose their importance in the coming years, will not be printed.

Once again I would like to thank general secretary Danny Olinger, and the subcommittee of Darryl Hart, Sid Dyer, and Paul MacDonald, for their continued support, encouragement, and counsel. I would also like to thank the many people who make the regular online edition possible: Diane Olinger, Linda Foh, Stephen Pribble, and Andrew Moody; the many fine writers without whom there would be no journal. Finally, I want to thank Ann Hart for her meticulous editorial work, and Jim Scott for his formatting of the printed volume.

I hope you will continue to benefit from the articles and reviews that we are publishing on the web and in print. Your comments are always welcome.



—Gregory Edward Reynolds  
Amoskeag Presbyterian Church  
Manchester, New Hampshire

# Servant Thoughts

## Paul in Mecca

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* January 2008<sup>1</sup>

by Gregory Edward Reynolds

No, Paul never went to Mecca as far as we know from the inspired history. Had he journeyed there, it would have been a relatively unknown oasis on a trade route near the western shore of the central Arabian Peninsula. He certainly would not have encountered Islam since it was not conceived until over six centuries later. But Paul's encounter at Athens is instructive for our own encounter with Islam. It demonstrates Paul's approach to people whose beliefs were almost entirely unknown to most of the Jewish and Christian communities, although Islam has superficial historical ties to Judaism and Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

### Paul's Agenda

The first thing that stands out in Paul's Athenian mission is that he had no intention of "taking back the culture," or (less anachronistically) taking the culture in the first place, or capturing the culture for Christ. There is no interest in such an agenda in the New Testament. The comprehensive cultural application of the death and resurrection of Christ, according to Paul, is to be realized in the glorious coming consummation. The com-

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=83](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=83).

2 Anees Zaka and Diane Coleman, *The Truth about Islam: The Noble Qur'an's Teachings in Light of the Holy Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 33. Muhammad's contact with Christianity was with a heretical version, namely Nestorian and Monophysite. The former separates the two natures of Christ, denying union in the person; the latter unites the two natures into one, denying the distinction. Noble Qur'an's extensive treatment of Jesus, as a great prophet, bears little resemblance to the Christ of Scripture.

ing of the Lord always dominates the horizon of apostolic thought "You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand" (James 5:8). Paul's own suffering becomes a paradigm for life in this present evil age: "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:16–18).

Until the "not yet" arrives, the church is an embassy submitting to the providentially given authority of civil government in order that the church might be freed to spread the liberating message of "the good news of Jesus and the resurrection" (Acts 17:18 Goodspeed translation<sup>3</sup>). The church is an embassy of the heavenly kingdom rather than a civilization or nation on earth. For Paul the primary calling of the church is to proclaim the amnesty offered from heaven: "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:20–21).

Paul was willing to be labeled a "seed picker" by his opponents. He did not hanker after cultural acceptance, affirmation, or transformation. This was Paul's agenda and program as he approached the Athenians. It must be ours as we approach Muslims.

### Paul's Method of Engagement

The idolatry of the Athenians deeply troubled (distressed *παρωξύνετο parōxyneto*) Paul. But instead of trying to change the culture, he sought to change peoples' loyalty through preaching Jesus as the Christ, the Savior of the world. Worship of "what God had created" rather than the Creator has eternal consequences. This is what troubled Paul. This is what he honestly and respectfully ad-

3 Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The New Testament: An American Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923), 264.

dressed on Mars Hill.

Does the worship of a god with whom there is no loving relationship, no grace and kindness, bother you? Muslims are a people seeking to earn their way to heaven by good works. They know nothing of being sinners or of being reconciled to the God under whose wrath they live. Or does the presence of a mosque in your community—a threat to Christian cultural hegemony—bother you most? Or is it even the legitimate concern for safety due to the clandestine methods of Muslim terrorists that troubles? These secondary concerns tempt us all to forget our calling as Christians.

Paul encountered people formally and informally in the synagogue and in the marketplace in Athens. The two different verbs used to describe Paul's activity show us that he engaged in substantive conversation which involved debating, or reasoning—what we might call dialoguing (v. 17 *διελέγετο dielegeto*), which Goodspeed translated “discussions.” Two sets of philosophers “conversed” (v. 18 *συνέβαλλον syneballon*) with Paul in the marketplace, which for the Athenians was a marketplace of ideas as well as goods.

The American marketplace seems almost void of ideas. People generally are not talking about philosophies of life, especially consideration of the meta-narratives, as we did in the 1960s. This generation, we are told, is concerned with how to make a living, and how to enjoy life in the present. But this, too, is a philosophy of sorts. While it may not deal formally with epistemology, ontology, and axiology, informally it addresses the essential questions of ultimate loyalty and what counts most in living. People made in God's image cannot, after all, escape questions of meaning, even if they invent personal narratives as answers.

But now Muslim immigrants are entering our culture—people who *do* believe in ultimate and absolute truth—and are changing the landscape of evangelism. We must, therefore, not assume that everyone around us is postmodern. To be sure, our consumer capitalism, democratizing electronic media, and moralistic individualism tend to assimilate new comers into the American pattern of moralistic, therapeutic deism. But we should

never forget that first generation immigrants bring the baggage of their world with them—tending to cling to it for survival. Muslims are this way, but with a more self-conscious agenda of winning over the citizens of their new home to Islam. There is a competing truth—a competing loyalty—seeking to dominate world history, which we may challenge on very different grounds than the postmodernist. Loyalties—read presuppositions—are always the ultimate challenge. They are the modes in which ultimate loyalties are expressed, and vary widely in the global landscape. Complicating our evangelism is the fact that the relativistic climate of our culture leaves most Americans ill-equipped to understand Islam, its doctrines, or intentions. Muslims are all too happy to be included in the murky idea that all religious roads lead to the same destination. So we must work extra hard to chart the many roads, and lovingly demonstrate the true nature of their destiny with disaster.

Paul knew the culture, the philosophies of the Hellenistic world in which he lived and evangelized. Epicureans and Stoics covered the spectrum of Hellenistic philosophies in Paul's world. Epicureans worshipped the idol of pleasure—guided by prudence and restrained by self-preservation—but man-centered enjoyment of life no less. Stoics worshipped the idol of control through reason, seeking to shield themselves by force of both intellect and will from the precariousness of living in a fallen world with all of its challenges—another man-centered enterprise.

Paul's profound grasp of Hellenistic thought and culture is demonstrated by his engagement of the audience on Mars Hill. He quotes the Cretan philosopher-poet Epimenides “in Him we live and move and have our being;” and the didactic Greek poet Aratus “For we are also His [Zeus's] offspring.” Not only did he speak the language of Athens, but he also truly understood their ideas and motivations. He could see the general revelation of God expressed in their literature, and challenged them with the true knowledge of God through Jesus Christ. “To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” (1



Cor. 9:22).

How many of us have read the Noble Qur'an? To a large degree our knowledge of Islam comes from the evening news or popular critiques of Qur'anic religion, all filtered through images of the crumbling towers in Manhattan. As important as the events of 9/11 are to our national safety—which should always be a deep concern of ours as citizens—our perspective on Islam as Christians must be more accurate and extensive. A clear understanding of Islam will help point up the genuine differences we have with our Muslim neighbors.

Often the charge of intolerance is thoughtlessly applied to all who profess absolute truth. However, the honest, respectful discussion of differences will at least win a hearing with the thoughtful, especially among Muslims. While the “Noble Qur'an is not subtle about its disregard for people of other faiths”;<sup>4</sup> we must demonstrate the genuine regard for people of other faiths that the Bible demands of us as we seek unashamedly to demonstrate the superiority of biblical faith.

As busy pastors, elders, and deacons we have only so much reading time, so it must be well spent. Anees Zaka and Diane Coleman's *The Truth about Islam* is designed to guide us into a more accurate knowledge of the Islamic scripture, and perhaps spur us on to own a copy. Zaka recommends the Noble Qur'an translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (2001), and the Islamic commentator Al-Ghazali.<sup>5</sup> If we do not accurately represent Islam, we will not—and do not deserve to—gain a hearing among Muslims. Such understanding lends credibility to our message and sharpens the content of our loving challenge to Muslims to repent and believe the gospel.

### Paul's Message

Paul's method of engagement and his message were entirely compatible. Hostility toward those of other religions—especially those who have harmed us in some way—is contrary to the mes-

4 Ibid., 154.

5 Ibid., 5.

sage of reconciliation. Look at what Paul suffered at the hands of persecutors. Such treatment never diminished his love for sinners. Strong convictions and a confident presentation of the truth are in no way contrary to the compassion needed in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul exercised a holy boldness as an apostle to Jew and Gentile, announcing the amnesty offered from heaven to ungrateful rebels. Paul never forgot that his own self-righteous hatred had been forgiven by the crucified Christ. His subsequent suffering only deepened his appreciation for God's remarkable grace.

It was in this spirit that Paul approached even the most tough-minded and virulent opposition. On Mars Hill, having demonstrated his profound understanding of the culture and philosophy of his Athenian audience, Paul was bold and clear in calling them to repentance. “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:30–31). Some were remarkably saved in the midst of this spiritually hostile environment.

Today, as Muslims move into our communities, and mosques are built around us, our stance as the church must be fully Pauline—not seeking to “take back the culture,” but rather seeking the reconciliation of sinners to our great and gracious God through Jesus and his resurrection. Should churches outnumber mosques in the future we will be grateful, especially here in New England, where there is such a paucity of churches to begin with. That having more churches would bring many cultural benefits and blessings cannot be denied. But the mission of the church to lost sinners is the calling of the church, as the church. Nor should we be naïve about the difference in cultural intentions revealed in the Bible and in the Noble Qur'an. Anees Zaka is bold to point out:

Though we are reluctant to characterize Islamic fanaticism as anything but an

extreme or aberrant form of Islam, the truth is that it follows from an honest and forthright interpretation of fundamental Qur'anic texts. To escape the obvious conclusion that Islamic law sanctions violence, one would have to blatantly overlook or completely eliminate essential sections of the Noble Qur'an.<sup>6</sup>

It is just at this point of extreme difference in spreading our faiths that we distinguish ourselves as those who believe that our religion is spread by the power of God's love through the cross and the resurrection, by the presence of his Spirit, and by the demonstration of visible love by the Christian community. The sword of our warfare is the truth of the gospel—the Word of God. Muslims have no acknowledgment of their deep need as sinners. They have only a call to submission to a distant god, Allah, and political, cultural, and military dominion over the nations in his name. Worst of all, they have no Savior, no Mediator, no forgiveness of sins or renewal by the power of the Spirit of the ascended Lord. Their longing for an illusive Paradise must be replaced by the true Paradise of God, realized through the Christ of Scripture. With loving boldness, this is what we must bring to our Muslim neighbors. If Paul had gone to Mecca I think that this would have been his approach.

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Pet. 3:13–16) ■

6 Ibid., 132.

## La-Z-Boy Religion: Assessing the Emerging Church

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* February 2008<sup>1</sup>

by Gregory Edward Reynolds

This article's title is not meant to suggest that anyone in the emerging church is unwilling to work. Rather, I use the furniture metaphor to denote the posture of the new movement: comfort is king. It may also refer to the lack of effort given to "homework," which tends to characterize the reclining position.

Emergent or emerging,<sup>2</sup> the flavor of this movement is familiar to all of us who drank deeply of the 1960s counter culture. When I think of the emerging church, I picture a photograph from *Christianity Today*, of an emerging church meeting in which people are lounging in easy chairs, dressed in blue jeans, undoubtedly sipping lattes and spring water—informality with a vengeance—listening to someone sharing from the Bible.

A recent PBS special on the new media's influence on young people described a traditional classroom as a wasteland in the eyes of young people. This reminded me of the tremendous power of propaganda in a world saturated by mass media. In this editorial my goal is not an exhaustive assess-

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=88](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=88).

2 "To prevent confusion a distinction needs to be made between 'emerging' and 'Emergent.' Emerging is the wider, informal, global, ecclesial (church-centered) focus of the movement, while Emergent is an official organization in the U.S. and the U.K. Emergent Village, the organization, is directed by Tony Jones, a Ph.D. student at Princeton Theological Seminary and a world traveler on behalf of all things Emergent and emerging. Other names connected with Emergent Village include Doug Pagitt, Chris Seay, Tim Keel, Karen Ward, Ivy Beckwith, Brian McLaren, and Mark Oestreicher. Emergent U.K is directed by Jason Clark. While Emergent is the intellectual and philosophical network of the emerging movement, it is a mistake to narrow all of the emerging to the Emergent Village." Scot McKnight, "Five Streams of the Emerging Church," *Christianity Today*, February 2007, 35–39.

ment of the emergent church, but rather a broad presuppositional evaluation in terms of mass media and propaganda. I will then suggest how these assumptions play out in history and truth. Finally, I will suggest how we ought to consider approaching Christians in the emerging church.

### Cultural Engagement or Cultural Absorption?

To understand what is going on in this movement we must consider what Peter Berger calls the “sociology of knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> Technological culture, and especially electronic mass media, create and cultivate an epistemology hostile to the very idea of truth.

The sociologist Peter Berger has made some helpful distinctions in seeking to defend the place of religion in sociology. In *A Rumor of Angels* he describes the church in the context of secularization as a “cognitive minority”. Such a minority experiences “cognitive dissonance” as it encounters a general culture which does not share its assumptions about reality. The church either adjusts to the cognitive majority by revising its ideas or it defends itself against the general assumptions. The sociology of knowledge, which became familiar to the English speaking world as a discipline through the writing of Karl Mannheim in Germany in the 1920s, seeks to identify “plausibility structures” in terms of the “social networks and conversational fabrics” which reinforce ideas of what is credible and thereby legitimize them.<sup>4</sup>

I believe that, despite some awareness among emerging church leaders of mass media and the liabilities of the culture it is creating,<sup>5</sup> these leaders

3 Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday-Anchor, 1969).

4 Gregory Edward Reynolds, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Preaching in the Electronic Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 52.

5 Some emerging thinkers like Shane Hipps and Brian McLaren

have underestimated how much their own theology and practice is being formed not by Scripture but by the plausibility structures of modernity. In rejecting the rationalism of Enlightenment modernity, they have mistakenly assumed that postmodern assumptions are immune to the overwhelming power of technological society. The influence of the electronic culture on the emerging church cannot be overestimated. I refer to “culture” rather than just “media” because those media have altered the cultural terrain so dramatically.

[French sociologist] Jacques Ellul “believes that throughout the West the secular religions are insinuating themselves into the Christian churches, or else they are absorbing Christianity into themselves.”<sup>6</sup> In his treatise on propaganda Ellul asserts: “The psychological structures built by propaganda are not propitious to Christian beliefs.” This faces the church with a dilemma: to ignore or make propaganda. If the church chooses not to use it, the mass media label the church as irrelevant. If the church uses propaganda it discovers that “people manipulated by propaganda become increasingly impervious to spiritual realities.” Christianity becomes one among many myths, fitting into one of the categories created by propaganda, and “reduced to nothing more than an ideology. ...from the moment the church uses propaganda and uses it successfully, it becomes, unremittingly, a purely sociological organization,” submitting “to the laws of efficiency in order to become a power in the world. ...At that moment it has

en show an articulate awareness of the culture-forming power of the electronic media. See Brian McLaren, “Virtual Virtue and Real Presence,” *Leadership* Vol. 28, No.3 (Summer 2007), 110. Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

6 Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons*, translated by C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury Press, 1975) 209, noted in Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction: Christian Faith and Its Confrontation with American Society* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 258.

chosen power above truth.” Propaganda “is one of the most powerful factors of de-Christianization in the world through the psychological modifications that it effects, through the ideological morass with which it has flooded the consciousness of the masses, through the reduction of Christianity to the level of an ideology, through the never-ending temptation held out to the church—all this is the creation of a mental universe foreign to Christianity. And this de-Christianization through the effects of one instrument—propaganda—is much greater than through all the anti-Christian doctrines.”<sup>7</sup> The church which fails to understand that the electronic media are doctrines with their own inherent messages and presuppositions, may be very successful in gathering large numbers, but will no longer be what it set out to be.<sup>8</sup>

This epistemic weakness shows up in the emerging philosophy of history, its use of history, and its understanding of truth in formulating its own views of theology, the church, worship, and the Christian life. I want, therefore, to look at two foundational problems with the emerging church.

### The Problem of History

A major methodological problem for the emerging church is that its leaders are “post” everything, wishing studiously to take no cue from the past, or at least from an accurate understanding of the past. Everyone is behind them. They are cutting a path unencumbered by the thinking of the elders. Perhaps in the baby boom generation there are few elders worth following. But the hubris of this project of reframing everything and asserting the historical novelty of one’s position is breathtaking. In his recent book *Everything Must Change*:

7 Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 228–232.

8 Reynolds, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures*, 297–298.

*Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope*,<sup>9</sup> after appearing to be arguing for pacifism, Brian McLaren asserts:

The last sentences of the previous chapter were not setting you up for a call to ideological pacifism. I agree with the New Vision group: we need to move to a new dialogue beyond the old just-war and pacifist positions. So I would rather sidestep these polarizations entirely and instead call the adherents of both positions to a joint consideration of the addictive nature of war, an addiction we may already have but may be in denial about.<sup>10</sup>

American Christians are not addicted to war so much as we are addicted to novelty—novelty that never seems to settle on a position, wanting always to mute historical distinctions. This is after all the nature of novelty—ever on the cutting edge of history. The “emergent conversation” majors on questions and conversation. “They like to say it’s not about finding answers, it’s about asking questions.”<sup>11</sup>

However, what is emerging is not something new at all. The impulse to get back to the purer form of things is ancient. While often giving the appearance of humility, its fragrance is of the kind of historical conceit noted by C. S. Lewis when he referred to “chronological snobbery.” Only this emerging sort has an added seasoning: using the perceived primitive forms as a rationale for discarding more recent wisdom.

As I have noted elsewhere, the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is not

9 Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007).

10 John Wilson, “Everything Hasn’t Changed,” a review of Brian McLaren’s *Everything Must Change* in *Christianity Today*, January 2008, 59–60.

11 Interview with Scot McKnight, religious studies professor at North Park University in Chicago. Religion and Ethics (July 15, 2005), <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week845/interview.html>. © 2006 Educational Broadcasting Corporation.

unclear; but even if they are distinguished they have one fundamental premise in common: human autonomy.

If the essence of modernity is the quest for human autonomy then postmodernism is that in spades. Emerging church leaders act as if all definition and boundaries are the essence of modernity and its scientific rationalism. This conveniently avoids the fact that confessional orthodoxy has its roots in pre-modernity and not the Enlightenment. To confuse confessional orthodoxy's intellectual rigor (and its resultant impulse to systematize in rational categories based on revelation) with the rationalist assumption that reason is sufficient and rules as a final arbiter, is a dangerous gambit, sacrificing not a pawn, but a bishop.

Unlike the Enlightenment, Protestant orthodoxy never assigned reason a magisterial position in the theological enterprise. This mistaken identity between orthodoxy and the Enlightenment misses the essence of the Enlightenment project: human autonomy. As Cornelius Van Til has shown, rationalism and irrationalism are each manifestations of this fallen human tendency. Despite professing an interest in church history, the emerging church manifests a serious lack of engagement with the primary sources of Reformation and post-Reformation theology. The newer historical approach of scholars like Heiko Oberman, David Steinmetz, and Richard Muller provide a healthy correction to the pejorative take on Protestant orthodoxy so common in much of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Emerging church theologians and historians are thus guilty of an ironic anachronism. While seeking to be on the cutting edge spiritually, they are behind the times historically. However, it is clear that the negative assessment of Protestant orthodoxy suits the purposes of their purportedly more authentic agenda. Sadly, such a posture undermines the authenticity of the

.....  
12 "What McLaren and other Emergent leaders and scholars have failed to do is carefully examine the historical sources as well as the writings of other historians who have contested the neo-orthodox historiography." Jeffrey Jue, "What's Emerging in the Church?" *Reformation 21* (2006), [http://www.reformation21.org/Past\\_Issues/2006\\_Issues\\_1\\_16\\_/2006\\_Issues\\_1\\_16\\_Articles/What\\_s\\_Emerging\\_in\\_the\\_Church/82/](http://www.reformation21.org/Past_Issues/2006_Issues_1_16_/2006_Issues_1_16_Articles/What_s_Emerging_in_the_Church/82/).

emerging enterprise itself and at a most foundational level.

If a conversation is to be fruitful, then all major relevant conversation partners of the past and present should be summoned. By not inviting Protestant orthodoxy to the table, the emerging church is in essence talking about its future without including its parents in the discussion. Perhaps in the case of evangelicalism it is the grandparents whom the children never met who are not being consulted, having died before the children were born. The legacy of the Reformation has been forgotten.

### The Problem of Truth

We should love a generous orthodoxy. Sadly, however, what Bruce McLaren offers under that title—as generous as it may be—does not deliver orthodoxy. Generosity smothers orthodoxy like too much seasoning in a gourmet recipe.

While the trendy lingo is sometimes very annoying, more importantly it indicates an addiction to novelty. Cooler than thou, and too hip by half, the approach to truth reminds me of the Greek god Proteus, defined by the dictionary as "a minor sea god who had the power of prophecy but who would assume different shapes to avoid answering questions."<sup>13</sup>

One of the cool catchwords used repeatedly by the emerging savants is "conversation." This is an ordinarily healthy concept, especially when talking about intellectual and spiritual discovery. But the emerging concept of conversation suggests a hesitation to come to any certainties—perhaps the polar opposite of the fundamentalist mentality that eschews conversation. While Fundamentalism seems intimidated by conversation and discovery, the emerging church seems intimidated by coming to conclusions. I suppose that the understandable reaction to being too certain is being uncomfortable with all certainty. As G. K. Chesterton once quipped (something like), "It's nice to have an open mind as long as one eventually finds something to close it on." But on important ethical

.....  
13 Apple Dictionary 1.0.2 Copyright © 2005 Apple Computer, Inc.

and theological issues, the emerging leaders seem incapable of decisive assertions. Brian McLaren exemplifies this when he says,

Frankly, many of us don't know what we should think about homosexuality. We've heard all sides, but no position has yet won our confidence so that we can say "it seems good to the Holy Spirit and us." That alienates us from both the liberals and conservatives who seem to know *exactly* what we should think. Even if we are convinced that all homosexual behavior is always sinful, we still want to treat gay and lesbian people with more dignity, gentleness, and respect than our colleagues do. If we think that there may actually be a legitimate context for some homosexual relationships, we know that the biblical arguments are nuanced and multilayered, and the pastoral ramifications are staggeringly complex. We aren't sure if or where lines are to be drawn, nor do we know how to enforce with fairness whatever lines are drawn. ... Being "right" isn't enough. We also need to be wise. And loving. And patient.<sup>14</sup>

Theologically "McLaren is saying the focus of Jesus, the focus of the Bible is on life in the world as we live it here and now rather than heaven, whereas the evangelical gospel has often been, 'Jesus came to earth to die for my sins so I can go to heaven.'"<sup>15</sup>

Sounding painfully like the liberals against which J. Gresham Machen fought, the emergents have in principle jettisoned the very cautionary tales they need to hear. "They are worried about how many lines of creeds we have to affirm because they believe that genuine Christian spirituality is action and life and community and performance and embodiment rather than simply

14 Brian McClaren, "More Important than Being Right?" *Leadership* Vol. 27, No. 1 (Winter 2006), 128.

15 McLaren interview with Scot McKnight.

the affirmation of certain doctrines." <sup>16</sup> McLaren's recent book *Everything Must Change* signals a this-worldly agenda that is not at all new. Trying to clean up the world is as old as Adam's fig leaves. "Christianity is a life not a doctrine" a shibboleth of the Protestant liberalism of the early twentieth century. Emerging theologians "frequently express nervousness about propositional truth."<sup>17</sup> Scot McKnight quotes Bethel Theological Seminary professor LeRon Shults: "the struggle to capture God in our finite propositional structures is nothing short of linguistic idolatry."<sup>18</sup> Suspicion of systematic theology does not come as a surprise in this epistemological milieu.<sup>19</sup> McLaren's appreciation of Walter Rauschenbusch and his social gospel is also telling in this regard. Rauschenbusch is supposedly the hero who united personal faith with social concern.<sup>20</sup> While not seeking the relevance in the same way as the megachurch, this emerging mentality makes the same fundamental mistake by choosing to emphasize God's immanence working in his church at the expense of the vertical heavenly reality which is the focus of biblical faith.

Instead of mining the whole Bible "the emergent conversation says we begin with Jesus, and everything else is secondary to what Jesus says in his vision for the kingdom."<sup>21</sup> Is this red letter naïveté or a redemptive-historical hermeneutic rooted in the Emmaus road?

By diminishing its own doctrine of scriptural authority, the emerging movement would seem to be falling into the same tendency as that of Enlightenment autonomy. For example, in their *Christianity Today* interview, Rob and Kristen Bell reflect a change in their view of the Bible:

16 McLaren interview with Scot McKnight.

17 McKnight, "Five Streams of the Emerging Church," 37.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 38.

20 David Evans, "Conversation about Walter Rauschenbusch," posted by Brian McLaren.

21 McLaren interview with Scot McKnight.

The Bells started questioning their assumptions about the Bible itself—“discovering the Bible as a human product,” as Rob puts it, rather than the product of divine fiat. “The Bible is still in the center for us,” Rob says, “but it’s a different kind of center. We want to embrace mystery, rather than conquer it.”

“I grew up thinking that we’ve figured out the Bible,” Kristen says, “that we knew what it means. Now I have no idea what most of it means. And yet I feel like life is big again—like life used to be black and white, and now it’s in color.”<sup>22</sup>

Truth is muffled by the electronic environment. It appears to be a casualty in the emerging church’s quest for authenticity. How are we to respond?

### **We Had Better Understand What Is Emerging**

#### **Appreciate Legitimate Concerns**

Westminster church historian Jeffrey Jue points out three major areas in which the emerging church has legitimate concerns to which the Reformed tradition has substantial biblical responses. Drawing from emerging thinker Spencer Burke, Jue identifies three such concerns under the heading “The Reformation Meets Postmodernity”: 1) “Spiritual McCarthyism.” This is the anti-intellectual authoritarianism characterized by Fundamentalism. 2) “Spiritual isolationism.” This is the cultural separatism that emphasizes individual salvation as the sum of the Christian life. 3) “Spiritual Darwinism.” Here he has in mind the marketing approach of the Church Growth movement.<sup>23</sup> In each of these areas the Reformed tradition shares the concerns and has substantial biblical responses.

This reminds us that the emerging church is

22 Andy Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique,” [www.christianity-today.com/ct/2004/november/12.36.html?start=2](http://www.christianity-today.com/ct/2004/november/12.36.html?start=2).

23 Jue, “What’s Emerging in the Church?”

really assessing the broad evangelicalism—their parents—more than the Reformed church at its best—the grandparents they never knew. The Wheaton-Fuller educated Bells are a case in point. I was converted during the era—not ancient history mind you—of the Jesus People. For all the weakness—and in many cases waywardness—of our alternatives, at least some of our critique was trenchant. The kind of liberation the emergent church seems to be seeking is similar to what the Jesus People of my generation found uncomfortable in Christianity. But the answers to some of these concerns—and I do not mean just simple answers to simple questions—may be found in the fullness of a truly catholic (with a lowercase “c”) orthodoxy, to which I suspect few emerging church people have been seriously exposed.

In reading several editorials by Brian McLaren in *Leadership*<sup>24</sup> it is clear that many of his concerns for things like nuanced thinking instead of pat answers, pastoral gentleness instead of wanting to be right, and an appreciation of the world God created as well as the culture in which we live—all of these concerns are familiar to the Reformed tradition. Thinking outside the box may be important, but those who have already done that thinking should at least be consulted. For example, the Reformed doctrine of common grace encourages enthusiastic appreciation of, and wise engagement in, God’s world, including the culture over which he is sovereign. I would think that McLaren would find this doctrine liberating.

#### **Point Them Humbly to a Better Way**

Inasmuch as those who are part of the emerging church are our brothers and sisters in Christ, we should not condescendingly condemn, but rather compassionately call them to a better way. We should appreciate the emerging sense that community is needed; a sense of mystery is healthy; facile answers and evangelical jargon should be avoided; and open conversation about the Lord, his church, and his Word should be encouraged. Emerging Christians are genuinely troubled about some of the enslav-

24 E.g. “Practicing Faith, or Faithing Our Practices?” *Leadership* Vol. 27, No.3 (Summer 2006), 118.

ing tendencies of modernity. We share this unease with them, and should ourselves be exploring ways in which we can counter the worst aspects of our culture.

Look for yourself. Resist the tendency to be a second hand critic. The website The Ooze (“conversation for the journey”) is a great place to sample the emerging sensibility.<sup>25</sup>

## Two Antidotes

### Confessionalism

Sadly, the very institution which offers the most powerful means of withstanding modernity has often capitulated both wittingly and unwittingly to some of the worst excesses of the whelming tide of modernity. The need for confessionalism is a way of asserting the need for an ecclesiastical counter-environment. This functions as a kind of spiritual antidote to the toxins of modernity.

The emerging church, with its Anabaptist affinities, is in many ways the polar opposite of the confessional churches of the Reformed tradition. Perhaps the Protean nature of the movement will cultivate a hunger for definition. However, Scot McKnight notes that “a trademark feature of the emerging movement is that we believe all theology will remain a conversation about the Truth who is God in Christ through the Spirit, and about God’s story of redemption at work in the church.”<sup>26</sup> The emerging church does not seem to have much tolerance for “cognitive dissonance,” or being the “cognitive minority.” Consequently, confessional orthodoxy, which accentuates this dissonance, will be a hard sell. In any case, we must cultivate confessional consciousness as a central ingredient in our own biblical antidote to modernity.

### Reverential Worship

In our tradition this means regulative principle worship. Recently a visitor to our church revealed that she had come from her contemporary worshipping church to deal with the grief of recently losing

25 <[www.theooze.com](http://www.theooze.com)> Spencer Burke is the luminary behind this site.

26 McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church,” 38.

a loved one. She said “I need stained glass and structure.” Pop culture is indisposed to even face, much less bring comfort in, grief. Although she probably never heard of the regulative principle of worship, she found comfort in the reverential structure and commensurate content of God-centered worship.<sup>27</sup>

### Conclusion

Like the Jesus Movement, the emerging church as a phenomenon will pass. Writer Andy Crouch observes that “the Jesus Movement, largely composed of converts, was generally unconcerned with theology. Emergent, whose leaders are evangelicalism’s own sons and daughters, may yet contribute something more profound than one more fleeting form of cultural relevance.”<sup>28</sup> This remains to be seen. From my view, the culture that the emergent church is imitating (consciously and subconsciously) will swallow it up unless its leaders are willing to recognize the toxic ingredients in some of their fundamental assumptions about Christianity; and challenge some fundamental assumptions — plausibility structures — of modern culture. ■

27 Cf. Reynolds, “The Compromise of the Church,” in *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures*, 300–305.

28 Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique.”

## Living in a Lowercase World

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by Gregory Edward Reynolds

Lowercase letters are emblematic of the rise of informality. However, in the history of printing, lowercase letters were somewhere between the formal Roman capitals and the informal hand script

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=91](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=91).



italic letters. This refinement of the metaphor suits my purposes in this essay perfectly. My contention is that because we are human, formed after God's image in body and soul, we can never entirely give up form. We can never become completely informal. But the damage we can do in trying diminishes our humanity. The evidence is everywhere we turn in our post-everything world.

When we ask why vows and promises are taken so lightly in our culture, we should consider the culture of informality. It is both a cause and an effect of such infidelity. I prefer to call it the *cult* of informality because if one—even graciously—refuses to participate, one is likely to be shunned. Comfort is king—which is to say individual feelings are paramount. Thinking about human dignity and the feelings of others is almost entirely ignored. Attention to good form in attire, manners, speech, and formalities of all kinds is abandoned. Vows are a central feature of a healthy—more formal—culture. So it should not be a surprise that most people, even church officers, do not take vows very seriously any more. We should be loving exceptions to that trend.

### Identifying the Cult of Informality

Blind loyalty characterizes the cult of informality. This attitude—in its quest for the familiar, the relaxed, the casual—has nearly abandoned forms of all kinds, assuming that they reflect a healthy, authentic instinct. No one asks if the very abandonment of the forms is itself deleterious to human health. The instinct of the cult mentality is to resist careful thinking about the reasons for various institutions and forms. The dangers of this failure can be seen in the example of basic manners.

Receiving Christmas cards this year has been an eye-opener. Fewer and fewer people are addressing their cards properly. Almost no one gets it right. Only those over fifty-five are even aware of the proper forms of address. I am thankful to even receive hand addressed cards of any kind—the number of those, too, is diminishing. The very act of hand addressing a card is a form of love. Note how I put that “*form* of love.” The disappearance

of the proper ways in which to express that love signals the diminishment of human relations. Informality, rather than enhancing intimacy, distances people from meaningful relationships. In every area, from basic social awkwardness—when people do not know the proper or agreed upon forms for social interaction—to the breaking of various commitments and covenants, the rejection and consequent ignorance of forms damages our humanity and our society. The problem is compounded since most of those who do not practice the old ways of relating to others do so, not out of conscious rejection, but out of simple ignorance. Thus, to correct or offer a better way comes across as a slight, or as an expression of superiority.

Now, perhaps you are thinking, “Who does Reynolds think he is?” I, too, used to subscribe to Spurgeon's little dig about Dr. Tweedle, D. D. And I agree that we all properly reject the arrogance that sometimes goes with titles and manners in general. Today, virtually all formalities are labeled elitist. But have you ever asked why these forms were invented? Are they really meant to assert superiority? Must we assess all formalities after the deconstructionist instinct of literary criticism? That is, are all manners and traditional formalities reducible to assertions of power?

I contend that manners and traditional formalities are an essential expression of our humanity, however some may distort or corrupt them. To ignore forms is to deny all that is created. The lowercase “we're just folks” phenomenon, is often a political or commercial ploy, used by the new elite to trick the rest of us into thinking they are just like us. Instead, they set stealth boundaries, which are meant to assert and protect a sense of superiority. But the boundaries set by publicly recognized good forms and manners protect everyone. While I am not an advocate of the “courtship movement” per se, I think the older tradition in many ways protected women from the abuse and exploitation to which they are subjected in our culture.

Witness the new hunger for British writer Jane Austen—formality in relationships makes her characters more human; and also starkly reveals bad characters. Good manners and social forms

preserve and cultivate the best of our humanity, especially in a fallen world where sin needs to be kept in bounds. The crude revelations of Oprah Winfrey and her ilk make us long for a world of manners, of social boundaries that take all human relations with the utmost seriousness. These are the manners that foster the keeping of vows.

### **Egalitarianism and the Internet: Tracking the Cult of Informality**

Our inventions incarnate ideas or narratives that interpret reality. The technological narrative especially advances the idea of freedom and control. Our technologies form us often in unintended ways, but we also form our technologies—they grow out of our pursuit of various purposes and ideals. The Baconian ideal of controlling nature combined with the Romantic ideal of absolute freedom joined in the twentieth century to marshal a massive cultural assault on all traditions. Now each of us is, ostensibly, utterly free to control our own lives according to our own vision of the good life. Perhaps the unintended consequences are simply an unrecognized aspect of the vision. Each day the Internet, with its Gnostic tendencies, chips away at the forms that offer continuity with the past. Space-time realities play second fiddle. Digital perceptions trump all else. The technological society we have created is forming our idea of freedom in ways that undermine all traditional forms, from liturgy to attire. Nothing is immune to reinvention.

Hence, the mantra of “change.” Where does this come from? Discontent has become a commodity. In fact, modern culture cultivates commodities instead of passing on a heritage. The modern world has made us discontent with things that remain the same, whether it is marriage or manners. People are generally impatient with fixed forms of every kind. Why? Because novelty is adored as the only road to progress. Electronic, especially visual, media foster novelty, because they are essentially new in every moment. The pace of electronic media demands novelty and continuous changes of form. Fixed forms like liturgy are out. Instead of enjoying the blessings of the permanent

things in the midst of the changing world, we are becoming naturally impatient with them.

As I have mentioned earlier, a woman from a charismatic, contemporary worship church recently visited our congregation. She had lost her mother and was grieving deeply. The reason she came to our church—a congregation in which she knew no one—is because she said she needed “stained glass and structure.” She craved something serious and permanent.

### **Enter Emily Post: An Elitist?**

In 1972, having been mercifully extricated from that caldron of post modernity, known as the counter culture, I began to muse on manners. My generation had mounted an assault on formality. During my year at a small Bible institute in St. Johnsbury, Vermont, a group of us, who had come out of the hippy movement, dined together each evening in the little cafeteria that had once housed a fish hatchery. We began discussing table manners. As new Christians, we had an idea that we might have abandoned something worthwhile. We rediscovered what Emily Post had been saying a half century before.

Emily Post wrote her first book of social etiquette in 1922. It was titled *Etiquette, The Blue Book of Social Usage*. Raised in the exclusive upper crust community of Tuxedo Park, New York, she was cultivated in the ways of the “Best Society.” All of these externals exude elitism to the modern sensibility. But beneath the surface is a surprise.

Richard Duffy, the editor of Post’s publisher, Funk and Wagnalls, wrote a winsome introduction titled “Manners and Morals,” that functioned like an apologia for manners, connecting moral absolutes with the forms of social courtesy.

The kinship between conduct that keeps us within the law and conduct that makes civilized life worthy to be called such, deserves to be noted with emphasis. . . . Conventions were established from the first to regulate the rights of the individual and the tribe.<sup>2</sup>

2 Richard Duffy, “Introduction: Manners and Morals,” in Emily Post *Etiquette: The Blue Book of Social Usage* (New York:

Duffy relates the story of French soldiers during World War II who were asked (sarcastically) by Allied soldiers why they were eating their battlefield “grub” with “such a fuss.” The French soldiers responded, “Well, we are making war for civilization, are we not? Very well, we are. Therefore, we eat in a civilized way.”<sup>3</sup> Duffy acknowledges that “Good taste may not make men or women really virtuous, but it will often save them from what theologians call ‘occasions for sin.’”<sup>4</sup> However, he concludes “Such was the ‘beauty’ of the old manners, which consisted in ‘acting upon Christian principle, and if in any case it became soulless, as apart from Christianity, the beautiful form was there, into which the real life might re-enter.’”<sup>5</sup>

Duffy concludes his defense of good manners with Emily Post’s classic definition:

Best Society is not a fellowship of the wealthy, nor does it seek to exclude those who are not of exalted birth; but it is an association of gentlefolk, of which good form in speech, charm of manner, knowledge of the social amenities, and instinctive consideration for the feelings of others, are the credentials by which society the world over recognizes its chosen members.<sup>6</sup>

One of the human instincts corrupted by original sin is “consideration for the feelings of others.” This instinct is the essence of good manners and at the heart of the most important commitments represented by vows. By nature we are called to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. As Christians, we have an elevated calling to love others as Christ has loved us.

Next time you lament the ease with which

Funk and Wagnalls, 1927), xi–xii.

3 Ibid., xiii.

4 Ibid., xv.

5 Ibid., xvi.

6 Ibid., xvii.

vows are broken in the modern world, remember the cult of informality, and think about Emily Post, who was neither stodgy nor an elitist, but considered good manners an expression of care for one’s neighbor. Sound familiar? ■

## Perfecting the Imperfectible

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* April 2008<sup>1</sup>

by Gregory Edward Reynolds

In response to the question, Can scientists actually alter human nature? Christian apologist Ken Myers warned that human nature cannot be altered, but great damage can be done in trying.

Performance-enhancing drugs, like steroids, are excellent examples of the danger inherent in seeking to redesign or enhance human nature. Such temporary enhancements prove costly for future physical health and present ethical integrity. Granted, much in human nature requires cultivation and development, such as virtues, intelligence, and natural gifts. What remains fixed is often referred to as the *givenness* of human nature. I like this word because it refers not only to the unalterable, but positively emphasizes the divine origin of that unchangeable aspect of human nature referred to by theologians as the *imago dei*. The givenness of human nature cannot be denied, however much it may be ignored.

In the present historical situation (referred to as a “state” by older theologians like Thomas Boston<sup>2</sup>) there are two dimensions to the givenness of human nature: what God created us to be, and our fallenness in the First Adam. Our essential humanity as God’s creatures is what Scripture and our Confession refer to as the image of God

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=96](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=96).

2 See Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State* (1720).

(*imago dei*). But the intrusion of sin and death has altered human nature in a profound way. It is only as we understand our humanity in covenant with our Creator in each of the interrelated four states of man that we may properly understand human nature in the present.<sup>3</sup> It is especially the fallenness, or mortality, of our humanity that is tacitly denied by many of those in the vanguard of biotechnology.

Everyone, from conservative columnist George Will to University of Chicago evolutionist Professor Jerry Coyne, misses the reality of the curse and original sin by asserting that the design of things doesn't appear to be very intelligent, riddled with disease and unspeakable natural disasters as it is. They have missed what Nathaniel Hawthorne profoundly understood in his story "The Birthmark." Autonomous rationalism makes Frankenstein in seeking the perfection of the human apart from the knowledge of the Creator and Redeemer of humanity. Our fallenness, or imperfection, invites such a quest, but only in the gospel is the quest properly fulfilled.

Church officers need to explore and understand the new and burgeoning field of biotechnology from the perspective of historic Christianity, to help distinguish between its promises and perils, especially as the various technologies present possibilities of therapy and enhancement in human life.

The meaning of the human is one of the most important issues of our day. What does it mean to be a human being? Is our nature subject to change or even redesign? As Christians we know better. We are "fearfully and wonderfully made." So says Psalm 139:14. This verse teaches us that we are created, "made," creatures of God the Creator, and made in his image. We have been designed by him to cultivate our humanity in his service and for his glory. That is our true happiness and enjoyment. As "fearfully" made, we are meant to live in relationship with, and in worshipful reverence of,

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3 Classic Reformed theology is exemplified by the four states enumerated by Thomas Boston in *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*. They are: 1) the state of innocence (Eden) 2) the state of nature (sin) 3) the state of grace 4) the eternal state. Danny Olinger has wisely suggested that the confusion or elimination of these four states is the root of all bad theology.

God. This is only possible as he condescends to live in covenantal relationship with us. Since the fall of Adam, this becomes a reality through his gift in establishing the covenant of grace through the Second Adam, Jesus Christ. Finally, we are "wonderfully" made in God's image. We are mysterious beings because we are God's creation, and especially because we uniquely reflect and relate to him. We are incomprehensible in a finite way even as he is infinitely. Our spiritual and physical nature cannot be fully understood by us. Only in relationship to God can we have a proper understanding of who we are. Even then, only he comprehends us fully. Modern rationalistic, materialistic science believes precisely the opposite in rebellion against the true knowledge of God. The response to the discovery of the human genome system is a classic example of modern man's hubris. It is widely believed that we can unlock the code to human nature, which is assumed to be reducible to material reality, and ultimately solve all human problems, which are assumed to be rooted in physical reality, including death.

Apart from the admitted difficulties of dealing with the particular ethical and spiritual questions that biotechnology raises for the church and its officers, the present milieu offers a unique opportunity to present the only real solution to the problems of sin and death—the gospel of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. Church officers must not lose sight of this in the face of the overwhelming cultural consensus that is rooted in our technological conceit. Philosophical materialism is as old as the Stoics and Epicureans to whom Paul preached in Athens (Acts 17:16–34).

One day the now imperfectible will be perfected in the eschatological glory of the Lamb. There is no more stirring, glorious, and practical message than this:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I

heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. (Rev. 21:1–7)

The excellence and humanity of this message must be protected and promoted in our ministries as people look for the guiding wisdom of church officers in answering the difficult questions posed by biotechnology.

It is also incumbent upon us to appreciate and appropriate advances in medicine and biotechnology to the degree that they have a therapeutic, rather than a transformational, goal. This is God’s merciful provision to alleviate human suffering in a fallen world. This is the prudential heritage of our Puritan forefathers, who were enthusiastic supporters of advances in science and medicine. There is often a fine line between seeking the alleviation of pain and seeking a pain-free life. The latter seeks to deny the reality of mortality and its cause—sin.

A good place to begin consideration of these difficult questions is a Report by the President’s Council on Bioethics. The rest of this editorial will review that book.

### **THE MEANING OF THE HUMAN: A Review of *Beyond Therapy***

*Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness.* A Report by the President’s Council on

Bioethics. Foreword by Leon Kass, M.D., Chairman. New York: ReganBooks, HarperCollins, 2003, xxi + 328 pages, \$14.95 (free upon request), paper.

Leon Kass and the President’s Council on Bioethics (I shall refer to the author as Kass, although some other members of the committee wrote various portions of the book) are disturbed by the lack of public discussion about the subject of biotechnology. You will never read a more compelling government report. Many of Kass’s colleagues have objected strenuously to his introduction of ethical questions into the discussion about biotechnology.

Such discussion is complex and thus requires arduous intellectual work. We are not trained as a culture to engage in such discussion. We are tempted by the immediacy of the electronic media to think such discussion unnecessary, since the benefits of biotechnology—similar to the benefits of electronic media—seem so obvious. If we have the technology, then we may, and even ought to, use it. In the face of this naïve, and often pernicious, culture-wide opinion, Kass courageously asserts that the book is “not a research paper but an ethical inquiry” (xx).

### **The Contents**

This is an essential book because it raises the right questions and gives a detailed account of actual and potential biotechnologies and how they intersect with several major areas of concern.

The introduction “Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness” lays out the general terrain and purposes of the book. Then four major areas of biotechnological experimentation are explored: “Better Children,” “Superior Performance,” “Ageless Bodies,” and “Happy Souls.” In each chapter, technologies related to these subjects are discussed in some detail, benefits and liabilities are explored, and conclusions are drawn. “General Reflections” sums up the observations and concerns common to the four areas.

The thematic phrase “beyond therapy” makes a critical distinction between the ordinary “healing” task of medicine and the quest to move be-

yond this task with “enhancement.” Kass acknowledges the ambiguity of these terms, but insists that they are a good starting place. While Kass, et al., show appreciation for the many benefits of the new technologies, their tone is cautiously pessimistic—a tone I recommend to sessions and diaconates considering these matters. This should be our attitude toward all of our inventions—none of which is neutral—all of which are extensions of our humanity and have the potential to affect us for better or worse.

Truth to tell, not everyone who has considered these prospects is worried. On the contrary, some celebrate the perfection-seeking direction in which biotechnology may be taking us. Indeed, some scientists and biotechnologists have not been shy about prophesying a better-than-currently-human world to come, available with the aid of genetic engineering, nanotechnologies, and psychotropic drugs. “At this unique moment in the history of technical achievement,” declares a recent report of the National Science Foundation, “improvement of human performance becomes possible,” and such improvement, if pursued with vigor, “could achieve a golden age that would be a turning point for human productivity and quality of life.”<sup>4</sup> “Future humans—whoever or whatever they may be—will look back on our era as a challenging, difficult, traumatic moment,” writes a scientist observing present trends. “They will likely see it as a strange and primitive time when people lived only seventy or eighty years, died of awful diseases, and conceived their children outside a laboratory by a random, unpredictable meeting of sperm and egg.”<sup>5</sup> James Watson,

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4 Citing National Science Foundation, *Converging Technologies for Improving Human Performance: Nanotechnology, Biotechnology, Information Technology and Cognitive Science*, Arlington, Virginia: National Science Foundation, 2003, p. 6.

5 Citing G. Stock, *Redesigning Humans: Our Inevitable Genetic Future*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002, p. 200. A similar

co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, put the matter as a simple question: “If we could make better human beings by knowing how to add genes, why shouldn’t we?”<sup>6</sup>

Yet the very insouciance of some of these predictions and the confidence that the changes they endorse will make for a better world actually serve to increase public unease. Not everyone cheers a summons to a “post-human” future. Not everyone likes the idea of “remaking Eden” or of “man playing God.” Not everyone agrees that this prophesied new world will be better than our own. Some suspect it could rather resemble the humanly diminished world portrayed in Aldous Huxley’s novel *Brave New World*, whose technologically enhanced inhabitants live cheerfully, without disappointment or regret, “enjoying” flat, empty lives devoid of love and longing, filled with only trivial pursuits and shallow attachments. (6–7)

### What Is Biotechnology?

“Biotechnology” is the technology that enables human beings more and more to control life in plants, animals, and humans (1–2). Human potential rather than the technologies per se should

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opinion has been voiced by Lee Silver: “[W]e’re going to be able to manipulate and control the genes that we give to our children. It’s just over the horizon. . . . All of these new technologies are going to change humankind as we know it.” (“Frontline” interview, www.pbs.org.) See also Silver, L., *Remaking Eden: Cloning and Beyond in a Brave New World*, New York: Avon, 1998. Silver’s enthusiasm for the post-human future is diluted only by his fear that not everyone will have equal access to its enhancing benefits. For an examination and critique of these views, see Fukuyama, F., *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2002.

6 Citing James D. Watson, quoted in Wheeler, T., “Miracle Molecule, 50 Years On,” *Baltimore Sun*, 4 February 2003, p. 8A. At a symposium in Toronto in October 2002, Watson went further in his support of enhancement: “Going for perfection was something I always thought you should do. You always want the perfect girl.” (Abraham, C., “Gene Pioneer Urges Human Perfection,” *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 26 October 2002.) The article further quotes Watson’s response to the charge that he wants to use genetics “to produce pretty babies or perfect people”: “What’s wrong with that?” he countered. “It’s as if there’s something wrong with enhancements.”

be the central focus of concern. The meaning and goals are not given by the technologies but by the inventors and users. “The benefits from biomedical progress are clear and powerful. The hazards are less well appreciated, precisely because they are attached to an enterprise we all cherish and support and to goals nearly all of us desire. All the more reason to try to articulate the human goods that we seek to defend and the possible threats they may face” (24).

Kass raises the problem and prospect of redefining the human. Redefining the human is an Enlightenment project. Technology is the means of perfecting human nature by altering it. Seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes, sounding like his older contemporary Francis Bacon, asserted that the new science will make us “like masters and owners of nature” (11).

### Strengths of the Book

1. Many of the right questions and the elements of the debate are carefully articulated in the book. “What is the good life? What is the good community?” (11) How is human happiness and perfection achieved? (22)
2. The available and possible technologies and their uses in the various professions and in culture are described in informative detail.
3. The discussion is framed by understanding the proper relationship between technology and the human, or the “primacy of human aspirations.”
4. The book identifies the dangerous tendency of biotechnological enhancement to alter and redefine human aspirations.

**Weaknesses of the Book** (Many assumptions are only hinted at; remember it is a government report.)

There is no account of the historic fall. Thus, the anthropology of the book assumes that the life cycle beginning with birth and ending in death is “natural” or “given.”

There is no detailed definition of man and

his nature. Thus, there is no substantial alternative to the *tabula rasa* of the Enlightenment—the idea that man’s mind is a blank slate, emphasizing nurture at the expense of nature.

### Building on the Book—Areas of Christian Concern in the Debate

1. Beginning with a biblical theological anthropology, man needs to be defined as the *imago dei*. His value and nature are inextricably tied up with the human relationship with the Creator God.
2. Man’s spiritual and moral nature, as a finite replica of God’s character, needs to be understood as an important aspect of the “boundaries of human life.”
3. The uniqueness of each person in terms of gifts and abilities forms an important God-given boundary.
4. The mysterious interconnection of body and soul, physical and spiritual, must be understood to counteract the materialist reduction of some modern science.
5. The historic fall, along with the consequent state of “sin and misery,” needs to be understood as an important aspect of the “boundaries of human life.”
6. Human aspirations need to be defined in terms of those boundaries stated above: the *imago dei*; individual uniqueness; and the fall into the estate of sin and misery, defining our present mortality.
7. Human aspirations must be considered in terms of the autonomous tendency of fallen human nature (original sin) and the original purpose of man to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Kass observes, “What’s at issue is not the crude old power to kill the creature made in God’s image but the attractive science-based power to remake ourselves after images of our own devising” (11).
8. Human happiness and perfection are wholesome aspirations when defined by God in his Word; but they are only achieved through the redeeming power of

the Second Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ.

As officers we must help foster a degree of contentment in our present imperfection “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...” (Eph. 4:13). Only God in Christ can perfect the imperfectible. ■

## Transforming Presence: A Meditation on the Lord’s Supper

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by Gregory Edward Reynolds

When I administer the Lord’s Supper—as I do each Sabbath—after distributing the bread, I say, “Take eat, this is my body ...” I never say, “Our Lord said,” or words to that effect. I say the same for the wine. Why? Because I seek to implement the Calvinistic doctrine of the real presence of our Lord. He is the resurrected, enthroned, living host of the Supper. It is *his* Supper. I speak in his place, thus, not as if he were absent. Liturgically it is important that those partaking understand that there is more going on in the Lord’s Supper than meets the eye. By his Word and Spirit the Lord is present, and his presence is a transforming one.

Of course, there is a sense in which he *is* absent, and that is why I speak in his place. “I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine *until* that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom” (Matt. 26:29, emphasis added). We have not yet entered into the complete enjoyment of the glorious achievement of our mediator, the second Adam—the consummate and continuous communion symbolized by the marriage sup-

per of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6–10). Jesus’ statement is a promise that leads us on—a hope that forms the bright horizon of the Christian life. We feed now by faith and not by sight. But the Word of God gives us substantial food, a spiritual foretaste of the coming union of heaven and earth. That nourishment we receive now.

For sustenance, we remember Christ’s once-for-all work on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins. This strengthens us in the reality of our completed redemption, and assures us of God’s love and care, and of his faithfulness to bring us to that day. More than a mere signification, the Lord’s Supper is a seal of all of the benefits he has won for us in his death and resurrection, by virtue of our union with him. By faith we “receive, and feed upon Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death” (WCF 29.7). The Supper is also a “bond and pledge of [our] communion with him, and with each other, as members of his mystical body” (WCF 29.1). So a present blessing is communicated by Christ’s Word and Spirit. He is present with us by these means. Our mediator is, as it were, mediated to us by his Word and Spirit through our participation in the meal. This is a real presence—a transforming presence.

The experience of eating in space and time, in our bodies—fallen though they are—in the presence of the congregation, which is the body of Christ, is a significant form of communion almost lost in our world. Fast food and gourmet dining (as a kind of hobby) have both distanced us from the idea of a meal as personal communion—as a celebration and affirmation of personal relationships, especially as they are bound in covenants. In contrast to the lack of true dining in our world, the Lord’s Supper accentuates the reality of the incarnation of our Lord as the first of a new humanity, a new creation, who summons us to join him in celebrating and enjoying his accomplishment.

This communion is meant to have a transforming influence on its participants by virtue of our Lord’s presence in the meal. Such presence in everyday life and in the sacrament is severely threatened by the discarnate tendency of electronic mediation, which disconnects us from the pres-

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=107](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=107).



ence of others in ways that are often too intangible to be fully appreciated. We can only wonder how much the pervasiveness of electronic mediation has contributed to the lack of transformed lives in the modern church. Oddly, this very same tendency toward disembodiment is directly related to the reduction of life to molecules and formulae—to bits, bites, and pixels. We are impatient with mysteries—with anything we cannot control or define. It is these attitudes that hinder us from fully appreciating the importance of the Supper, and yet draw us to it as a necessary antidote to our worst tendencies as a culture.

The love of God, demonstrated so concretely in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, assures us that that love is really communicated to those who eat and drink at the feast by the host who has invited them. This, in turn, calls the guests to serve the gracious host, learning the ways of his holy kingdom. The Supper is a corporate feast, shared with the body, and meant to nurture our relationships with one another in a loving, holy community of the new creation in Christ.

Presence is a mysterious and irreplaceable reality intrinsic to our creaturehood. Media critic Stephen Talbott tells the story of a young boy whose father took him for a day hike in the woods. On the trail they encountered a beautiful snake and spent time watching it. Upon returning home the boy exclaimed to his father, "That was the most wonderful day of my life." Why did this outing seem so extraordinary to the boy? Talbott goes on to envision a typical boy's day in which he is surrounded by electronic media—his entire day mediated by various technologies. His first-hand experience is marginal. This makes the snake on the hike exceptional—nothing like the prosaic experience of seeing a hundred such snakes on a nature program. The actual presence of the father, the woods, and the snake left a deep impression on the boy.

The Lord's Supper, like the preached Word, and public worship as a whole, is an experience of our risen Lord's presence through his chosen medium. As we see, and smell, and taste, along with our brothers and sisters in Christ, we are as-

sured that our Lord's love for us is historical and real. The Latin *praesentia* means "being at hand." Without leaving heaven—because his body is fully human and therefore finite—Jesus is at hand, coming alongside us, by his Word and Spirit.

The coming again of Jesus is described by Paul as his appearance, his presence (*παρουσία parousia*). "Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him ..." (2 Thess. 2:1). As we long for the final and permanent visit of Jesus to his people, he calls us on the way to his promised land through his presence in the Supper. In our feeding on Christ, he imparts and seals the promise of resurrection glory that he has won at the cross and presently enjoys in his exalted state. His body and blood are communicated to us in the heavenly mode as "wholesome food for our souls ... a spiritual repast ... effected through the secret virtue of his Holy Spirit," as Calvin expressed it in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:24.

So our Savior's presence is a transforming presence. The purifying hope of his future and final visitation is fortified by the Supper. As John tells us, this hope has a sanctifying influence on us in preparation for the heaven land. "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure" (1 John 3:2–3). His formative influence upon us is visible. "Now when they [the temple authorities] saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). So the transformational power of the Supper should make it evident to those around us that we have been with Jesus. ■

# God Still Speaks: The Power of Orality

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by Gregory Edward Reynolds

Charismatics insist that God still speaks. We should agree, rather than disagree, because the Reformed tradition has always insisted that God still speaks through the ministry of his Word. Thus the basic instinct of Charismatics is healthy. God is a living God who continues to communicate with his people. How he does this is another matter. This is where we strongly disagree with our Charismatic friends. We properly insist that God speaks—with reference to special revelation—through his written, infallible Word, and that alone. The Charismatic response would be something to the effect that we believe in a dead letter. That is not living speech. The rejoinder to this accusation, which many of us have sadly forgotten, is that the primary way in which God addresses his people is through the preaching of the Word. This is a living speech in which God directly addresses his church. To underestimate or deny this is to denigrate God's power, and undermine his primary means of communicating grace to us. Ministers and members of the church must cultivate this awareness.

In our important effort to protect the inspiration and authority of Scripture, we oppose the neo-orthodox notion that the Bible becomes the Word of God during the act of preaching. We properly maintain that the Bible on our book shelf is still the Word of God. However, in our defensive posture, we may fail to appreciate that the primary means of God addressing his people, since the close of the canon, is the preaching of his infallible Word. It is easy to forget that few believers before Gutenberg had access to the text of the Bible, and that the text itself is crafted to be heard not seen. Our seminary training is almost exclusively literary in nature. This is as it should be since we

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=108](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=108).

are a people formed by the text of Scripture and the tradition of interpreting God's Word. But we have underestimated, and thus undervalued, the place of orality in preaching and in the seminary curriculum. The following is a summary of two sections of my book *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Preaching in the Electronic Age* dealing with orality in preaching.<sup>2</sup> I will present two biblical indicatives and two consequent imperatives.

## Preaching Is the Voice and Presence of the Great Shepherd

This obvious excellence of preaching is often referred to in pastoral theological literature as the "Incarnational Principle." Unfortunately, this principle has often been associated with the immanence of Liberal and Process theology—a call to social activism. Because the Eternal Son came in the flesh, taking to himself a complete human nature, except without sin, the presence of a live preacher, called and commissioned by the Lord as his ambassador, is the most suitable means of communicating God's Word. So the secular dilemma of coordinating transcendence and immanence is obviated, not only by the covenantal character of God's revelation, but by the incarnation. The One who inhabits eternity becomes a man and enters history. So in preaching, the transcendent Lord is immanent through the living announcement of his gospel Word.

The Old Testament looks for a shepherd-king who will faithfully lead God's people. A few types of the hoped for divine shepherd (Joseph, Gen. 49:24; Moses; David, 2 Sam. 5:2, 7:7, Pss. 23, 80) contrast with the many leaders who left "the congregation of the LORD ... as sheep that have no shepherd" (Num. 27:17). How glorious are the words of Isaiah's prophesy of the coming of the great shepherd of the sheep: "He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young" (40:11); he will

2 Gregory E. Reynolds, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Preaching in the Electronic Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), chapter 9, "Tongues of Fire: God's Chosen Medium," 338–45, and chapter 10, "Trumpeter of God: The Effective Preacher," 378–385.

build the temple of God (Isa. 44:28); and he will feed the Lord's flock: "And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd" (Ezek. 34:23).

When he comes he assures us: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). The great shepherd calls undershepherds to lead and feed his people (1 Pet. 5:2, 4). The Word given to the apostles is the voice of the Good Shepherd after the ascension: "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and *they* are life" (John 6:63). His words, which are the words of the entire Scripture (1 Pet. 1:10–11), are the food upon which his sheep feed. This is the task of preaching: "Feed my lambs" (John 21:15). The One who has visited his people in history continues to visit them through his Word and Spirit in the person of the preacher. Nothing—especially electronic media—can replace the personal presence and the living voice of the minister of the Word.

The importance of face-to-face encounter is central to the incarnation. The face, more than any other aspect of the physical nature, reveals the person. Thus, John wanted more than any other means of communication to see his spiritual children "face to face." Even writing a personal letter could not replace personal encounter: "Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete" (2 John 12). The consummate reality for the Christian will be seeing the face of Jesus Christ in resurrection glory. Until then, we see the reflection of that glory through the preaching of Christ from his Word, mediated by the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit.

The face-to-face presence of the preacher is a reminder of what is coming (Rev. 22:4); a down payment on eschatological glory. Commenting on Haggai 1:12, Calvin says: "We may then conclude from these words, that the glory of God so shines in his word, that we ought to be so much affected by it, whenever he speaks by his servants, as though

he were nigh to us face to face."<sup>3</sup> Preaching is the primary means by which the good shepherd visits his people in the interim. Paul saw the preacher, not as a doctrinal lecturer, but as a pastor, who imparted his very life to the flock: "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:8). "It is the job of the preacher to make the Word of God, the Word of the prophets put into writing, a living reality for the congregation."<sup>4</sup>

The Internet and other forms of electronic communication tend to seek to transcend and, at points, even to deny space and time. While these media may in one sense overcome the limits of space and time, they also forfeit the locality of personal presence which may never be transcended by creatures. In *Acts* we see the apostles employing the "footpower of the gospel." Novelist Larry Woiwode comments: "In order to deliver that gospel in our age, you have to walk up to somebody, even if you've arrived earlier on a Concorde, and there is no proof that the spirit a Christian carries, or the Spirit who applies the gospel to a congregation, is transmitted over television. In *Acts* the delivery of the gospel is a personal act."<sup>5</sup>

The modern world has never been better "connected" electronically, but is starving for lack of personal and local connectedness. The local church provides this in a way that no other institution can, because at the center of the community is God's speech in the preaching and presence of his appointed vicars (ambassadors functioning in the place of another). The worst tendencies of mass culture will be overcome by the promotion of live pastoral preaching as the center of the church's

3 John Calvin, *Commentary on Haggai* (1540–1563. Translation and reprint. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847. Reprint. vol. 15. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 343. I owe this quotation to my friend and colleague Stephen Doe.

4 Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: Volume 1 – The Biblical Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 59.

5 Larry Woiwode, *Acts* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 121.

life. There is no better antidote to the electronic dispersion of our day.

### Preaching Is the Unique Power of a Living Voice

There is a concreteness and a power to the voice that reflects the power of God's voice in his image-bearer. In prayer we have a greater sense of the reality of our communication with God when we pray aloud. "With my voice I cry out to the LORD; with my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD" (Ps. 142:1). The Bible has much to say about the power of human speech. "There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing" (Prov. 12:18).

In his masterful apology for orality, *The Presence of the Word*, Walter Ong asserts: "Man communicates with his whole body, and yet the word is his primary medium. Communication, like knowledge itself, flowers in speech."<sup>6</sup> Despite Ong's often-too-negative assessment of the written, he rightly laments the absence of the "winged word" in modern life. Only by the living word may persons enter into the consciousness and life of others.<sup>7</sup> "Sound unites groups of human beings as nothing else does. . . . human community is essentially a union of interior consciousnesses."<sup>8</sup> Preaching accents and cultivates this communion. Only through preaching does the Word of God have wings to fly into the hearts of people in our day.

There is in the power of the voice—of the spoken word—a mystery, which stands as a poignant testimony against the flatness of modernity and the superficiality of postmodernism. The gospel message is equated by Paul with God's creative word spoken in Genesis 1: "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the

6 Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967; repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 1. Citations are of the 1981 reprint.

7 Ibid., 15.

8 Ibid., 122, 146.

glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:5–6). The staccato commands of Genesis 1 demonstrate the power of God's spoken word in the miraculous immediacy of his creative acts. Paul links the effect of God's spoken word in creation with the power of preaching in the new creation. This is the nature of the sound of the human voice as a replica of God's voice.

Sound alone, Ong maintains, penetrates surfaces.<sup>9</sup> "One does not produce words in order to get rid of them but rather to have them penetrate, impregnate, the mind of another."<sup>10</sup> This supports the fundamental assertion of the primacy of preaching, which is rooted in the original preacher, the logos who inhabits eternity and is incarnate in time (John 1).

The biblical concept of teaching in its relation to the effect of the voice is captured in the word catechize (κατηχέω *katēcheō*). It literally means *to sound around* or *resound*: "*to sound a thing in one's ears, impress it upon one by word of mouth.*"<sup>11</sup> This potency of voice is used to describe the activity of the teacher of the law (Rom. 2:18), and the preacher of the gospel (Gal. 6:6). The voice of the preached word is effective, as God blesses it through the illuminating power of his Spirit. Ong observes "the word as sound establishes here-and-now personal presence. Abraham knew God's presence when he heard his 'voice.'"<sup>12</sup> This is why we refer to the act of preaching as the "preaching moment." Despite all the imperfections of the human messenger, God is acting in the "acoustic event" of preaching.<sup>13</sup>

The public reading and preaching of the written Word seals what is written on the corporate consciousness and memory of the church, which has been entrusted with the deposit of the

9 Ibid., 74.

10 Ibid., 98.

11 Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1853).

12 Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 113.

13 Clyde E. Fant, *Preaching For Today* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 157ff.

written Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:15). As normative covenant document, the Bible has a unique power to unite. Eric Havelock states that the Bible is unique among printed books in remaining immune to McLuhan’s critique of the printed word.<sup>14</sup> The private reading of Scripture is always also a communal reading, because the Scriptures are a covenant document uniting God’s people in all ages. However, Ong’s concept of the word as event is very important to the preacher as he approaches the preaching moment and considers the unique God-given power of the human voice, especially when it is used to communicate the message of God’s written Word. “No other speech has the public and yet private nature of preaching.”<sup>15</sup>

The concreteness of the spoken word has no peer among media in general. It is the primary means of human communication because it is God’s primary way of communicating. Thus, preaching is his chosen way to address people in all ages precisely because it is unmediated by technology. Furthermore, biblical preaching is God’s chief antidote to idolatry. A people of the Word will accept no substitutes. The Word of God preached has no peer among spoken words. It is God’s means of imprinting his Word on the hearts of his people, whom he is molding after the image of his Son.<sup>16</sup>

What are the implications of orality for preachers?

### Develop Orality

Because God has chosen live pastoral preaching to be his chief medium for communicating his Word, the preacher must develop the finest oral skills as a communicator. This is our best antidote against the poisonous idea that we need the latest

14 Eric Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) 49.

15 Gerald Hamilton Kennedy, *His Word Through Preaching* (New York: Harper, 1947), 8.

16 Cf. Fant, *Preaching For Today*, 162. Quotes Thomas Aquinas: “Therefore it is fitting that Christ, as the most excellent teacher, should adapt that manner of teaching whereby his doctrine would be imprinted on the hearts of his hearers.”

technology in our worship in order to be relevant.

First, the preacher must learn to distinguish between oral and written. The written is for the eye, while the oral is for the ear.<sup>17</sup> The greatest problem for the seminary trained preacher—few men can do without such training—is that we have had rigorous literary training. We are book, text, and lecture oriented. Lectures are content heavy and meant basically to inform, not to move or persuade. Listen to J. C. Ryle: “English composition for speaking to hearers and English composition for private reading are almost like two different languages, so that sermons that ‘preach’ well ‘read’ badly.”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps there is some truth to the provocative statement that “people today are not tired of preaching, but tired of *our* preaching.”<sup>19</sup>

Second, put the results of your study in an oral format. Homiletics is the art of translating the meaning of the text, in the context of systematic and biblical theology, into a form designed to transform God’s people. Theology serves homiletics not vice versa. Think of your preparation as soil for the sermon, not the sermon itself. Don’t bring your study into the pulpit. Bring the results; and bring them in oral form. *Extemporaneous preaching* is live preaching, fully prepared for, but exclusively oral, not tied to the manuscript. “The written text of the New Testament itself is ordered to ... oral activity.”<sup>20</sup>

Thus, your sermon notes should be structured more as a set of visual cues than a manuscript to be read or memorized. Use two manuscripts, if necessary: one is a written summary of your exegesis and application put in the order of your sermon; the other is a one page abbreviated form for the pulpit.

Clyde Fant’s *Preaching for Today* is especially

17 Ibid., 162.

18 Iain Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), 345.

19 John W. Doberstein, Introduction to Thieliicke, *The Trouble with the Church* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), viii, referring to a statement by Paul Althaus, emphasis added.

20 Walter Ong, Review: *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (William A. Graham) in *America* (Mar. 4, 1989): 204.

helpful in this area.<sup>21</sup> He deals with some of the unique mechanics of oral preparation. Write like you speak; do not speak like you write. If you have ever read a written transcript of one of your sermons, you will be horrified at how badly it reads. That is as it should be. This does not mean that poor speech patterns or grammar is acceptable orally. After exegeting and discovering the meaning and unity of the text, begin communicating it out loud, and then write down the main points of the logic of what you have said. Fant calls this the “rough oral draft.” Then go back after more reflection on exegesis and the rough draft and make a “final oral draft.” From this he recommends a final one page “sermon” brief.<sup>22</sup> Those who use limited notes in the pulpit, or only pay attention to highlighted full notes, already practice something like this.

Furthermore, each genre of biblical literature requires a different approach, a varied use of outlines. The systematic announcement of “headings” may be helpful in preaching from the logically argued epistles of Paul, but the narrative of Judges will be better preached by following the story sequence and leaving the logical divisions “invisible” in the preaching moment. The distinction between oral and written logic should not be exaggerated in this discussion. No one can think, speak, or write without logic. But the logic of narrative and the logic of epistles are quite different. They require different ways of ordering our thoughts, not a logic different from the way we think. The text itself dictates this. Much more work needs to be undertaken within this area of homiletics.

Third, general preparation is crucial for developing orality in preaching. Reading widely on a daily basis is absolutely essential to the development of the mind and spirit of the preacher. As Joel Nederhood counsels: “Be addicted to reading.”<sup>23</sup> This does not contradict the need to distinguish between written and oral *in the pulpit*.

21 Fant, *Preaching For Today*, 159–173.

22 Ibid., 166–169.

23 Joel Nederhood, “Effective Preaching in a Media Age,” class notes, Westminster Theological Seminary in California, 1990.

Furthermore, being a good reader and writer enhances logical and rhetorical skills in public speech.<sup>24</sup>

One of the best ways to develop oral skill is to read aloud and pay attention to the best oral presentation outside the pulpit. Baseball announcers are an excellent example of the kind of speech that engages the listener. The preacher must cultivate a love for the English language, especially the spoken word. Ransack the best dictionaries. Above all *read aloud*. Choose the best poetry and prose and read it aloud. Read the Psalms, George Herbert, Dylan Thomas, Shakespeare, the essays and stories of G. K. Chesterton, Hillaire Belloc, Stephen Leacock, Christopher Morley, *aloud!* The *King James Version* is best suited to the practice of reading Scripture aloud, not because it is a perfect or even the best translation, but because it was produced in a golden age of orality, the Elizabethan Age of Shakespeare. In this period the literary and the oral were held in excellent balance. The *Authorized Version* was translated to be read aloud in churches (as the title says: “appointed to be read in churches”). Let the beauty of the best of the richest language in history sink into your oral memory. Words are your tools. Court them. Work with them to become a wordsmith. Fall in love with them. As McLuhan said, “language itself is the principal channel and view-maker of experience for men everywhere.”<sup>25</sup> “The spoken word involves all the senses dramatically.”<sup>26</sup> The preached Word is the most powerful “view-maker” of all, as it corrects the idolatrous “view-making” propagated by the electronic media, and inculcates the redemptive “view-making” of the heavenly reality of the incarnate logos.

Take the greatest care in reading the Scriptures aloud. Hughes Oliphant Old has titled his

24 Richard S. Storrs, *Preaching without Notes* (New York: Holder and Stoughton, 1875), 45ff.

25 Marshall McLuhan, “Catholic Humanism and Modern Letters,” in *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, edited by Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szlerek (Toronto: Stoddart, 1999), 154.

26 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 77–78.

multivolume history of preaching: *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, because of the essential difference between the written and the preached Word of God. When we read the Scripture we are saying: This is the source of what we are about to preach.<sup>27</sup> We are reading the word of the King. The synagogue and the ancient church read the Scriptures through, seriatim, on a regular basis. Copies of the Scripture prior to the Gutenberg era were rare and expensive. The average person did not have a copy to read privately. In the electronic age, we must not assume that people are reading their Bibles regularly—or at all. Even when they are, they may not be reading the “whole” of Scripture. Even then there is a unique value for God’s people to hear the Word with their ears as the church. The immediacy of the effect when Scripture is read properly has a unique place in the life of the church. But we must cultivate this. The way that we read Scripture aloud, as well as our entire demeanor surrounding the reading, will determine the attitude of our hearers, especially in their reception of what we preach after we read.

In Nehemiah 8:8 we read: “So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped *them* to understand the reading.” Acts 13:15: “And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, ‘Men *and* brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on.’” 1 Timothy 4:13: “Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.” We normally consider this “reading” private, and silent. Its connection with exhortation militates against that individualistic interpretation. Consider Revelation 1:3: “Blessed *is* he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time *is* near.” This is public reading. The public reading of Scripture does not replace private reading or preaching, nor does preaching replace the reading of Scripture. Rather the public reading of Scripture demands the preaching of it. In both, the oral dimension is

27 Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, vol. 1, 52, 58.

its special power. The immediate presence of God in the voice of the reader/preacher of his Word is subversive to the sinner’s rebellious position in the First Adam, and represents a living call to repentance and faith in the Second and Last Adam.

### Trust the Power and Presence of God

Trust the Holy Spirit in the preaching moment. The greatest folly of our age is trusting the means, the techniques of doing things. The means of preaching, unlike any other form of public speaking, is uniquely dependent on God’s blessing. Reformed preachers know the folly of trusting the Spirit without preparation; but we need to deal with the equal folly of sticking slavishly to our manuscript in the act of preaching, and thus trusting our preparation as if we do not need the Spirit. Pray for the presence of the only power that can make the medium you use effective.

*Unction* is not a human attribute; it is the secret and mysterious influence that God’s Spirit bestows on faithful preaching. Thus, it is not a tone of voice or style of delivery. The Sovereignty of the influence is meant to move us to pray and depend humbly on God’s power in our preaching. He alone has access to the secret recesses of your hearers’ hearts. Paul instructs the church to be “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication ... and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak” (Eph. 6:18–20). Prayer is no substitute for study, but it must also not be a *mere* article of our faith, unpracticed in our private preparations for the pulpit. The effectiveness of our preaching will always be directly related to our dependence on God’s power through all of our studious, intellectual efforts in opening God’s Word. The Spirit influences the hearer and the preacher alike. As Augustine insists, the true preacher “is a petitioner before he is a speaker.”<sup>28</sup>

The Reformation conception of preaching

28 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, translated by D. W. Robinson, Jr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1958), 141.

is embodied in the *Second Helvetic Confession*: “The preaching of the word of God is the word of God.” Our Lord, the incarnate Word, has identified the preaching of his ordained spokesmen with his Word: “He who hears you hears Me” (Luke 10:16). Expositor Herman Hoeksema correctly insisted that the Greek of Romans 10:14 should be translated as the *American Standard Version* has it: “And how shall they believe in Him *whom* they have not heard?” as opposed to “Him *of whom* they have not heard?”<sup>29</sup> Thus it is “the preached Word rather than the written Word” which is the primary means of grace.<sup>30</sup> Christ is immediately present as the true Speaker in the preaching moment. “The implication is that Christ speaks in the gospel proclamation.”<sup>31</sup> Preaching is not speaking about Christ, but is Christ speaking.

In his biography of James I. Packer, Alister McGrath gives Packer’s excellent definition of preaching: “The event of God bringing to an audience a Bible-based, Christ-related, life-impacting message of instruction and direction from himself through the words of a spokesperson. Preaching was thus defined, not in terms of human performance or activity, but in terms of divine communication.”<sup>32</sup> Paul said it clearly to the Thessalonian church: “When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess. 2:13). The preacher should never be satisfied with anything less than a congregation that is “taught by God” (1 Thess. 4:9). While recognizing that he is a mere man like each of his congregants, and a sinful man at that, the preacher must have the confidence which God has connected with his

29 David H. Schuringa, “The Preaching of the Word As a Means of Grace: The Views of Herman Hoeksema and R. B. Kuiper.” Th. M. thesis (Calvin Theological Seminary, 1985), 18–22. Later in chapter III (34–43) a convincing case for the grammatical correctness of this translation is made.

30 Ibid., 33.

31 Ibid., 43.

32 Alister McGrath, *A Biography of James I. Packer: To Know and Serve God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), 256.

preaching ministry. If, as an ambassador, he sticks to the message of his King, he may be assured that God’s word, and not his own, is what the church receives. Calvin recognized God’s condescension in this arrangement in commenting that God “deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them.”<sup>33</sup> The egalitarianism which favors dialogue does not favor faith, as Peter Berger notes: “Ages of faith are not marked by ‘dialogue’ but by proclamation.”<sup>34</sup> This is our task as ambassadors of Christ. ■

33 John Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.1, in James Daane, *Preaching With Confidence: A Theological Essay on the Power of the Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 15.

34 In Daane, *Preaching With Confidence*, 16.

## Mystery without Mysticism: The Place of Mystery in Reformed Theology

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by Gregory Edward Reynolds

Is the idea of mystery in theology simply liberal mush, the pietistic evasion of doctrinal precision, or the symptom of irrational mysticism? No, mystery, rightly—that is biblically— understood, is itself an article of orthodoxy. The wonderful clarity of Reformed doctrine, expressed in its confessional, academic, and popular theology, leaves us open to the temptation to desire comprehensive rational clarity in every area of doctrine and life. Of course, as we shall see, one of the wonderfully clear doctrines of Reformed orthodoxy is that God

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=113](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=113).



is incomprehensible as well as knowable. In an era in which theological imprecision is often touted as a virtue, the temptation to theological rationalism is especially attractive to those who take our revealed religion seriously. This tendency, however, is as dangerous as that to which it reacts. Theological rationalism will tend toward intellectual idolatry and arrogance, by subverting the Creator-creature distinction and undermining the goal of theology—that we should bow in reverence and awe before the majesty and grandeur of our triune God. Herman Bavinck begins his exposition of the doctrine of God with this idea succinctly stated: “Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics.”<sup>2</sup>

The biblical doctrine of mystery is meant to protect the Creator-creature distinction. It is one aspect of declaring the aseity (*aseitas*, the absolute independence or self-existence of God) of God. Thus, in our Confession the doctrine of the covenants is introduced with the bold statement:

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant. (WCF 7.1)

Thus the Bible, as the final and full revelation of God to his people, teaches us that God is incomprehensible. It is precisely *because* the Bible is our final authority that we submit, for example, to the mysterious doctrine of the Trinity. The true, saving knowledge of God is entirely dependent upon God’s special self-revelation. The very need for such a revelation accents his inexhaustible greatness as the quote above confesses. The very

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<sup>2</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 29. Van Til drank deeply at the well of Bavinck’s theology, which has only recently (2003–2008) been translated into English. See John R. Muether’s excellent new biography of the life and work of Van Til, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008).

nature of God—which is the heart and soul of the dogmatic enterprise—is incomprehensible. That is to say, we cannot wrap our minds around him or his ways. The boundlessness (infinity) of God in all of his attributes necessitates his incomprehensibility.

But the limitedness of our creaturehood does not imply that we cannot know God—ending in an irrational mysticism, or a hopeless agnosticism. Knowledge may be true and reliable, without being exhaustive. This is true of all human knowing. For example, one need not have an exhaustive, or even extensive, knowledge of plant growth to be a successful farmer. In fact, exhaustive knowledge of anything in the created order is impossible for any creature. But this is especially true of our knowing God. To appreciate the limits of our knowledge of God is not to extinguish the profound and essential reality of knowing God and, therefore, trusting and worshiping him. Ours is not a blind faith, but one that knows the triune being whom we are trusting. True knowledge of God, according to the Bible, has always been an essential aspect of biblical faith—first of the definitional trio *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*.

We will always face the accusation that doctrines such as the attributes of God and the Trinity are purely speculative, perhaps the fruit of philosophy rather than biblical exegesis. Mystics and rationalists alike have been known to level this charge, the former claiming that doctrinal precision is contrary to the nature of Scripture and our relationship with God, the latter precisely because unanswered questions and mystery leave them uncomfortable. Both the rationalist and the mystic, in their extreme manifestations, appear to be evading God’s lordship over his people.

Those uncomfortable with theological precision, and systematic theology, often pit post-Reformation theologians against Calvin as if he were a pure exegete, while his followers lapsed into neo-scholasticism. We should remember that the authors of our Confession—the Puritans—sought to be rigorously biblical in their theologizing. They did not see organizing such theology into biblical categories as contrary to being biblical. Nor did

being biblical prevent them from interacting with a wide range of other minds, including those with whom they would staunchly disagree in the end. Such intellectual inquisitiveness and humility was considered a biblical requirement. Richard Muller has been making this case for many decades in what is proving to be a monumental contribution, not only to historical theology, but to theological methodology. In the end, post-Reformation theologians were intensely interested in expounding special revelation as clearly, and as systematically, as possible, in order to form the worship and life of the church.

As we think about the biblical doctrine of mystery as an important theological category we must recognize that mystery has several definitions. There are two kinds of mystery taught in the Bible and in our theological tradition. One kind of mystery is something unknowable to humans because it is by nature incomprehensible, such as God, the Trinity, or the two natures of Christ. The second kind of mystery is something known only when God chooses to reveal it. We are not capable of perfectly and completely understanding even that kind of mystery.

Bavinck sums it up nicely:

He [God] can be apprehended; he cannot be comprehended. There is some knowledge (*γνῶσις*) but no thorough grasp (*καταληψις*) of God. This is how the case is put throughout Scripture and all of theology. And when a shallow rationalism considered a fully adequate knowledge of God a possibility, Christian theology always opposed the idea in the strongest terms.<sup>3</sup>

I do not intend to deal here with the knowledge of God in creation, which is a true but not a saving knowledge. Such knowledge is only true in the sense that it leaves the knower inexcusable, and the knower's suppressing activity distorts that knowledge (Rom. 1:18–22).

3 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, 47–48.

## Unknown and Unknowable, Cannot Be Revealed

As Bavinck in his summary of the history of the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God points out, there has been substantial unanimity on the impossibility of knowing the essence of God.<sup>4</sup> Luther's categories of the hidden and revealed God nicely sum up the polarities between which the history of this doctrine has oscillated. What Scripture reveals about the hidden aspect of God is that God will always be mysterious because he alone is God. So, our Confession actually refers to God as "incomprehensible" (WCF 2.1), citing Psalm 145:3 as a proof: "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable."

Scripture brings us face to face with the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God, confessed and expounded by the greatest of the post-Reformation theologians, the Puritans.

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding." (Job 38:1–4)

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

Not only the nature of God, but his works of creation and providence are incomprehensible. Here the Westminster divines use the word "mystery":

4 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, 27–52.

The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men, attending the will of God revealed in his Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel. (WCF 3.8)

The biblical claim that there is much that is unknowable, especially about God, should not be confused with the Kantian construction that virtually eliminates the possibility of metaphysics and theology, and thus the knowledge of God. All *a priori* categories of understanding for Kant are limited to those related to experience. Thus, the idea that God would speak truth to his people by special revelation, or through natural revelation, has no place in this or subsequent epistemologies. Kant's distinction between theoretical and practical reason could not save the objective knowledge of God and his moral law. The very relativism which Kant sought to avoid seems inherent in his philosophical construct; the inability to posit any real knowledge of God leaves us with an ungrounded ethics. And this leads inexorably to the death of both God and moral absolutes in the thinking of our world. Thus, the second sense in which mystery is used in the Bible stands foursquare against this most common (post)modern<sup>5</sup> assumption about the knowledge of God. The biblical position of historic Christianity, as Westminster systematic theology professor Lane Tipton has so helpfully pointed out,<sup>6</sup> gives priority to the Bible's divinity, which in

5 I owe this way of referring to the modern age to David Wells. It nicely combines the two commonly used words into one, thus accenting the common element of human autonomy that makes postmodernism simply the latest expression of modernism. It is a mistake to accentuate the difference as is so often done by both secular and Christian writers.

6 Lane Tipton, "Incarnation, Inspiration, and Pneumatology: A Reformed Incarnational Analogy," *Ordained Servant* (June-July 2008), [http://www.opc.org/os9.html?article\\_id=109](http://www.opc.org/os9.html?article_id=109).

turn fully qualifies its humanity.

### Unknown, But Knowable When Revealed

Where the word "mystery" is used in the Bible, especially the New Testament, it invariably refers to the unveiling of something previously known only to God, but which he has chosen to reveal to his people. This is clear in the following two texts:

Then the mystery (רָזָה *razah*) was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night. Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven. (Dan. 2:19)

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery (μυστήριον *mystērion*) that was kept secret for long ages. (Rom. 16:25)

But, even in the case of this commonly understood use of mystery in the Bible, we must be careful not to think that we have God's perspective on the things he has revealed to us. The divine epistemology involves an exhaustive knowledge impossible to the creature, whose knowledge is limited by the nature of creaturehood, albeit at times extensive knowledge.

### Knowable, But Not Exhaustively, Even When Revealed

Even when something like the relationship between Christ and his church is revealed in terms of the analogy of marriage, an overriding element of mystery is present. "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). The word translated "profound," μέγα (*mega*), simply means "great." We may say many intelligible things about this relationship between Christ and his church in terms of the metaphor of marriage, as well as give important practical applications—Paul does so in verses 22–31 and 33—but the reality of which we speak is a mega-mystery:

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of

godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. (1 Tim. 3:16)

It is humbling to affirm the Creator-creature distinction. For that very reason the unbeliever has a vested interest in denying it. The distinction undermines the sinner's vaunted autonomy. Our theologizing ought, therefore, to humble us under the mighty hand and mercy of God. Most important of all, our ministries, especially our proclamation of God's Word, should communicate confidence in the true knowledge of God in Christ, while humbling God's people before his august majesty. We should proclaim with thanksgiving that God has spoken to his people, and invited a lost world to know him through the reconciling message of his Son.

In true post-Kantian fashion, the modern world labors under the conceit that, given the time and talent, it can figure anything out. We must be careful of this horizontal penchant of the technological society. We have a vertical connection with the heavenly realm through our union with Christ. This should humble us in adoration of the one who has gifted us with a true knowledge of himself, at the heart of which is the revelation of his sovereign and mysterious majesty.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb. 12:22–24) ■

## Your Father's L'Abri: Reflections on the Ministry of Francis Schaeffer

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by Gregory Edward Reynolds

The year 1968 was a momentous year for me—revolution was in the air. I was a freshman architectural student in Boston. Having been raised with generally conservative morality in a liberal Congregational church, there was nothing to prevent me from being radicalized. I soon joined the Boston Resistance and felt sure that I was part of a movement as important as the American Revolution. I was there in the Boston Public Garden when radical Abby Hoffman referred to the John Hancock building as that “hypodermic needle in the sky.” It was the Boston Tea Party all over again. This was actually the name of a live-rock night spot—a worship place for the revolutionaries—where the hymnody of Cream and the Velvet Underground stoked us for battle.

Raised to believe that Christian ethics were attainable without the supernatural religion of the Bible, I soon affirmed the moral and spiritual relativism that came with the American countercultural amalgam of eastern religiosity and American idealism. All religions were heading for the same glorious summit. The autonomous spirit of modernity was taking on a new form in reaction to the impersonal mass cultural tendencies of the technological society. Postmodernity was emerging. The Beatles, The Grateful Dead, and the Incredible String Band, were a way out of the monodimensional culture of the late Enlightenment in its Eisenhower military-industrial form. We were on the cutting edge of history—an avant-garde altering civilization for the better. We believed in

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=117](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=117).

nothing less than changing the world—but nothing more, ultimately, than ourselves.

Ironically, the same generational conceit that we exuded is present in the “Not Your Father’s L’Abri.”<sup>2</sup> title of a March 2008 *Christianity Today* article. In fact, your father’s L’Abri may not be outmoded like his Oldsmobile. I lived at your father’s L’Abri for six months, so I thought a firsthand reflection to be in order.

### Enter Francis Schaeffer: Cultural Apologist and Evangelist

Living in a communal setting for a summer in Oregon chastened my naïve understanding of humanity’s ability to better itself. I returned to Cambridge, Massachusetts in the fall of 1970, literally singing the blues, feeling abandoned by my own ideals. I settled into the cynical Jack Kerouac’s macabre New England temper. This is where Unitarianism and Transcendentalism lead. My forays into the I-Ching and other versions of eastern mysticism left me with a yawning emptiness of soul.

My personal bankruptcy led me to open my Bible—the one religious book I had neglected—late one night in the winter of 1971. My blues proved themselves to be a revelation of my own sin. That was the real problem with the world—my rebellion against my Maker, and my sadness that happiness thus eluded me. My existential despair was my alienation from God. There, in my basement room, gospel light shown brightly on my dark soul and I realized that the Christ of Scripture was the true and only Savior from sin and death. This was truth like no other I had ever encountered—yes, as Schaeffer would say “true truth,” unlike the murky mysticism I had lost my way in. This gospel was true and all else I had believed was not. This was the living and true God—one to whom I could speak, and who spoke to me in his Word, the Bible.

I returned home to New Hampshire on weekends to attend my mother’s Baptist church. She had become a Christian just before I left for college. Still wrestling with the questions of my gener-

2 Molly Worthen, “Not Your Father’s L’Abri,” *Christianity Today* (March 2008): 60–65.

ation, I found little understanding for my concerns in the church, until one day a perceptive member gave me a book titled *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* by Francis Schaeffer. Here was a Christian who understood my world and spoke my language. I rapidly devoured everything Schaeffer had written up to that point, as well as Edith Schaeffer’s *The L’Abri Story*. These books equipped me to speak with the others in my cooperative living situation about my newfound faith—a Kierkegaardian existentialist, a Vietnam vet who considered himself a warlock, a high-strung cellist, an argumentative law student, a sensitive poet, and two feminist lesbians. The exclusive claims of the gospel were offensive to most, but several became Christians, recognizing the wonder, beauty, and liberating power of Jesus Christ. By August 1971, I was at L’Abri in Switzerland. For someone with no theological or philosophical training this was truly a high-altitude experience.

The day after I arrived, I was treated to a taped lecture given by Os Guinness on “Christian Truth and Verification,” in which I learned of the demise of Logical Positivism and the influence on Schaeffer’s thinking of a theologian named Van Til. Heady stuff for a hippie. I ended up becoming the assistant host, helping Bruce Nichols greet and settle newcomers, and living in the main chalet, *Les Mélèzes*, where the Schaeffers lived on the second floor. Young Franky lived with his new wife, Genie, on the lower ground floor (see my review of his 2007 memoir *Crazy for God*).<sup>3</sup> I took Os Guinness’s place. And while he was away getting married in the UK, I was able to use some of his books in the bookcase next to my bed. This was a dream come true, although I had no idea who Guinness was. But I knew that living in Schaeffer’s chalet would give me many opportunities to ask questions.

Apart from the breathtaking beauty of the setting, at an elevation of three thousand feet in the Swiss Alps, overlooking the *Dent du Midi* and the *Mont Blanc Massif*, three refreshing realities were present. They stood in stark contrast to my

3 Gregory E. Reynolds, “Too Frank by Half: What Went Wrong with Frank Schaeffer,” *Ordained Servant* (October 2008).

experience in the fundamentalist churches I had known briefly in America as well as my communal experience as a hippie. First, L'Abri was a genuine community where true Christian faith was practiced—where people worked, studied, and discussed together. Second, earnest engagement of the mind was fostered, but never in a merely academic way. There was no one like Schaeffer in our day. He filled a niche. Third, along with intellectual nurture, the Schaeffers encouraged a true appreciation for, and involvement in, creativity and the arts. Edith's *Hidden Art* helped rescue my mother from the culturally suffocating influence of her fundamentalist church. It was easy to think of L'Abri as a kind of Mecca. But as my English friend Tony Morton later reminded me, "You don't have to go to L'Abri to enter the kingdom of God." L'Abri wasn't for everyone, nor was it without its faults, although it was not easy for me to see this at the time.

Living so close to the Schaeffers, I saw their imperfections—which they were usually happy to admit themselves. After leaving in early 1972, I discovered more—the dangers of celebrity and hero-worship (probably more a problem for Schaeffer's followers than for him). And, more important in my own future thinking and ministry, I discovered the superficiality of some historical and philosophical aspects of Schaeffer's published work. Anyone stimulated by Schaeffer's thought, who then dug deeper into a given discipline, soon realized this. I was shocked to observe—as I helped expand the Schaeffer bedroom by cutting through the partition into Franky's old room—that the great thinker had no study and seemed to read only magazines, besides his Bible (although the stairway was lined with full bookcases). He placed a large blotter at the end of his bed, and that was his study. I realized that in order to communicate with my generation he had worked hard to understand the basic thought-forms of the postwar twentieth-century West, especially as they were manifested in popular culture, along with developing a commensurate vocabulary. Not big on primary source material, he never claimed to be a scholar, but painted in broad strokes to try to give us the big picture.

L'Abri lived up to its name for me—it was a true shelter that fortified me in the truth of historic Christianity: its intellectual heritage and its practical piety. It exhibited the reality of living before God by faith, and seeking to worship and serve him as a whole person in the community of God's people. Schaeffer's evangelistic engagement of modern culture taught me to empathize with the predicament of modern man. This was an authentic element in Schaeffer's thinking, despite weaknesses in his scholarship and apologetic theory. I had occasion to meet the painter Francis Bacon in a pub in Soho on my trip home from Switzerland. Bacon's *Head IV* appeared on the cover of Hans Rookmaaker's (close friend and colleague of Schaeffer's) *Modern Art and the Death of Culture* (1970). Reinterpreting Velasquez's portrait of the pope, Bacon distorts 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. The futility, horror, and despair portrayed in the painting 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.

Schaeffer had a private meeting with Timothy Leary in the fall of 1971. Leary, for those who don't remember, was a Harvard professor of psychology who dropped out, advocating the therapeutic use of psychedelic drugs, and became a counterculture guru. He was in Switzerland evading drug charges. Nichols and I were privy to his visit with Schaeffer because we lived in Schaeffer's chalet (October 2, 1971 according to my journal entry). At dinner, Leary was very self-absorbed and not a little blown out from all of the LSD he had taken. He proved to be very obnoxious company. But Schaeffer had been compassionate enough to spend an afternoon in conversation with him about the gospel, telling no one of his encounter with this famous man.

At the beginning of this editorial I referred to Schaeffer's "ministry." This was intended as a reminder that the value of Schaeffer should be assessed in terms of his entire evangelistic endeavor.

This is not to minimize the theoretical weaknesses of his approach, but only to say that apologetics proper was not the centerpiece of his ministry. His bold attempt to step outside the box of his Fundamentalism and demonstrate true compassion for sinners, by working to understand their world, in the context of a true Christian community formed in grace and truth, was a visible—if imperfect—reality.

While studying under Gordon H. Clark at Covenant College in the 1970s, I began to recognize some theoretical weaknesses in Schaeffer's apologetics. It would take Cornelius Van Til to clarify this discovery as he acquainted me with a profounder analysis of man's fallen condition.

### Enter Cornelius Van Til: Theological Apologetics

One Sunday evening in New Rochelle, New York in the early 1980s our little mission work, which met in a dingy little room with rickety chairs, had the unusual privilege of hearing the famous professor. In his mid eighties, Van Til was a bit rickety on his feet, but as he rose to preach he leapt from his chair with an energy and enthusiasm that demonstrated that preaching and the church were first in heart.<sup>4</sup> He counted his most important degree to be his V.D.M. (*Verbum Dei Minister*).<sup>5</sup> All of his theological acumen was used in the service of the church and was focused in proclaiming the kingdom of heaven.<sup>6</sup>

As noted above, the first time I encountered Van Til's thought was at L'Abri in the summer of 1971. The context was a heady discussion of A. J. Ayer's logical positivism, showing that this form of truth verification was self-refuting. The leader

4 As Scott Oliphint observes: "The central point of Van Til's teaching and ministry is this: *for Van Til, there could be no separation between a defense of the Christian faith, on the one hand, and the preaching of the gospel, on the other.*" K. Scott Oliphint, "Van Til the Evangelist," *Ordained Servant* (October 2008).

5 Edmund P. Clowney, "Preaching the Word of the Lord: Cornelius Van Til, V.D.M.," *Westminster Theological Journal* 46.2 (fall 1984): 239–240.

6 As John Muether proves in his recent biography *Van Til: Reforming Apologist and Churchman* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008).

mentioned Van Til as an important influence on Schaeffer's thinking. A book list I was later given, titled "A Selective List of Christian Books to Start Your Library with," recommended Van Til's *Defense of the Faith*. At the time, I was unaware of the theoretical differences between Schaeffer and Van Til. When I studied at Westminster Theological Seminary from 1976 to 1979, I was privileged to meet informally with Van Til on several occasions. Van Til's essential writings were required reading in the classes of professor John Frame.

"Would-be autonomous man" was a favorite Van Til description of the sinner. It was his penetration to the anthropological center of the apologetic enterprise that finally clarified the problem with Schaeffer's apologetic. While Schaeffer often distinguished between the use of reason, as creatures made in God's image, from rationalism, which asserts the sufficiency of reason without revelation, he also exhibited some rationalistic tendencies. As Westminster Seminary apologetics professor William Edgar points out:

There is an underlying rationalism in much of Schaeffer's thinking. His view of truth is abstract, in that it is not strictly equated with God, but is a more general idea of which God is only the "final screen." Furthermore, Schaeffer often spoke of Christianity conforming to "reality," or "what is," without clearly distinguishing between the Creator and the creature.<sup>7</sup>

For Van Til, the sinner must be challenged at the heart of his problem—his audacious quest for autonomy. According to Van Til (following Paul in Romans 1), the sinner's quest involves the continual suppression of the truth that he is a creature of God, living in God's world. Schaeffer, on the other hand, was more of an evidentialist of ideas, seeking to show the inconsistencies of the sinner on his own terms.<sup>8</sup> However, Schaeffer echoed many of

7 William Edgar, "Two Christian Warriors: Cornelius Van Til and Francis A. Schaeffer Compared," *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (spring 1995): 72–73.

8 Bryan A. Follis, *Truth with Love: The Apologetics of Francis*

Van Til's fundamental insights, and sometimes the differences between the two warriors have been exaggerated.<sup>9</sup> I heard Schaeffer confront sinners in their rebellion, and there is plenty in his writings that does the same, even using the term "autonomy" frequently.

When it comes to the basics of a Pauline trajectory, Van Til's theoretical and theological consistency are peerless. And apart from his academic calling, and his often turgid writing style, there may be more to evangelicalism's present neglect of Van Til than meets the eye. His approach does not comport well with an agenda of cultural transformation. There appears also to be a logical connection between Schaeffer's shift in the transformationist direction in the last decade of his ministry and the weaknesses in his apologetics. This is a theme worth exploring.

It is, therefore, not surprising that there is no mention of Van Til's apologetics in a recent article in *Christianity Today* on the state of contemporary Christian philosophy and apologetics.<sup>10</sup> William Lane Craig contends that there is no essential difference between modernism and postmodernism, but holds out for a version of the evidentialist approach—high probability at best. Surely he is correct in contending that modernism and postmodernism are children born of the same parent. However, his analysis and alternative are not sufficient to meet the challenge. The would-be autonomy of man is the common element in both versions of man's autonomous hubris. What evidentialism fails to do is to challenge sinful people at the root of their own rebellious covenant commitments. Van Til understood this clearly. The evangelical penchant is to seek to win the world on its own terms. The Pauline approach, as Van Til would insist, was to challenge the sinner on God's terms. Thus, the profundity of Van Til's theoretical analysis of the unbeliever cannot be

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*Schaeffer*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 111.

9 Edgar, "Two Christian Warriors."

10 William Lane Craig, "God Is Not Dead Yet," *Christianity Today* (July 2008).

overstated. But comparing him to Schaeffer is something of an "apples and oranges" enterprise (as I will explain in my review of Follis) and may leave Schaeffer without the appreciation he is due in our circles. By the end of his life, Schaeffer was certainly the darling of evangelicalism, although the most important things he taught us may have been largely forgotten.

As a philosophical apologist, Van Til never saw his role to be that of a cultural critic. Schaeffer, however, was able to connect with the baby boom generation precisely because he was a cultural critic with a heart for evangelism. In the end, his apparent identification of secularism, instead of man's would-be autonomy, as the final enemy of the gospel, amplified this theoretical weakness in terms of a cultural transformationist agenda. Perhaps this is one of the dangers of cultural criticism. As Follis points out, Schaeffer is neither presuppositionalist or evidentialist, but rather a "verificationist," seeking to convince the unbeliever that his core beliefs (presuppositions), are inconsistent with reality, unlike the true presuppositions of Christianity.<sup>11</sup> William Dennison's critique of Tim Keller's *The Reason for God* seems to place Keller in a similar mold. The vertical focus of the gospel takes a back seat to the horizontal concern.

If Molly Worthen's reportage on the present state of Swiss L'Abri is accurate then student ambivalence about Schaeffer's legacy is tragic, if partially understandable.<sup>12</sup> His alignment with the Christian Right in his later ministry is truly problematic, as even the present leadership admits.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps it was even a logical outcome of his apologetics, as I suggested earlier. But it is tragic to miss the thrust of his earlier two decades of ministry (1955–1973) in which he was countercultural in

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11 Follis, *Truth with Love*, 99–122.

12 Worthen, "Not Your Father's L'Abri," 60.

13 Ken Myers, "The Bohemian Temptation: Francis Schaeffer and the Agenda of Cultural Apologetics." This article was originally presented at a gathering to honor the 20th anniversary of Schaeffer's death. The event was sponsored by the Witherspoon Fellows program of the Family Research Council, but the article is no longer available on their website. Myers helpfully distinguishes the bohemian from the bourgeois Schaeffer.



the best sense.

In true postmodern fashion, it seems that Schaeffer's approach—which the Worthen article connects with Van Til—was to challenge sinners with the inconsistencies of their own assumptions about reality. One present student opined “Now the question is, Is there truth at all?”<sup>14</sup> Anyone who reads the Schaeffer of “their father's L'Abri” will soon discover that this was not an unknown question in our day. More serious is the presence of an apparently postmodern epistemology among the staff, evinced by John Sandri's statement, “I'm not an inerrantist, but I'm not an ‘errantist’ either. . . . The modernist agenda is behind them both.”<sup>15</sup> This is not liable to encourage the certitude that present students at the Swiss L'Abri seem sadly to lack. They might profit from some of their father's L'Abri. As Follis argues, Schaeffer rejected evidentialism precisely because it is “rooted in classical foundationalism.”<sup>16</sup> Whether one agrees with this assessment or not, no one will doubt Schaeffer's staunch defense of the absolute truth of historic Christianity.

The Reformed church awaits a cultural critic, evangelist, of Schaeffer's stature, sensibilities, and energy, who is consistently Van Tilian in his approach. Until then, cultural engagement will be aligned with relevance and transformation in the place of radical engagement with the message that turns the world upside down. Whatever else might be said about the differences between Van Til and Schaeffer, they had one very important passion in common: to see sinners won to King Jesus. I will be forever grateful for the shelter provided by L'Abri as it pointed me to the only final shelter found under the wings of the Almighty, whose Son covers our sins and has inherited glory for us. This was your father's L'Abri. ■

14 Worthen, 64.

15 Ibid., 63.

16 Follis, *Truth with Love*, 103.

## Biblical Theology and the Confessing Church

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by Gregory Edward Reynolds

Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy insisted that the libretto for his famous oratorio *Elijah* be the dramatic story depicted in Scripture rather than the moralistic composition suggested by his theological advisor. No wonder, Felix's grandfather was Moses Mendelssohn, a well-known Jewish philosopher and Hebraist. His grandson's instinct, however, was distinctly Christian and biblical. To wrench Christianity from historical context, or shall we say text, is tantamount to denying the faith. The historical, exegetical discipline of biblical theology has always been an essential part of the fabric of the church's confession.

Geerhardus Vos's oft quoted statement, “The Bible is not a dogmatic handbook but a historical book full of dramatic interest,”<sup>2</sup> puts a point on Mendelssohn's insistence. At first glance, it might seem that to Vos biblical theology was inimical to systematic categories, and thus the enterprise of dogmatic theology, and so even to creedal or confessional theology itself. This is a very injurious myth, which I hope to help dispel. For Vos, at least, nothing could be further from the truth. As a Christian, a theological professor, and an academic he was firmly committed both to the classic rubrics of systematic theology and the dogmatic confessions of the church.<sup>3</sup> As a result, his

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=122,127](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=122,127). The substance of this article was originally presented as a lecture at the Kerux Conference, Lynnwood, Washington, May 12, 2005.

2 Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 24, 26.

3 Vos's first academic appointment at Theologische School (CRC) in Grand Rapids was as professor of didactic and exegetical theology. He wrote almost 1900 pages of dogmatic theology. *The Letters of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. James T. Dennison (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005), 29–30.

development of a true biblical theology required filtering its essence from the polluted waters of the Enlightenment liberalism that characterized the earliest developers of biblical theology as a formal discipline.<sup>4</sup>

### **Biblical, Systematic, and Confessional Theology Defined**

A definition of terms will help our understanding of the important place biblical theology has in the church's confessional theology, its public expression of what it believes.

**Biblical Theology** – This is the academic theological discipline that Vos preferred to call “The History of Special Revelation.”<sup>5</sup> Vos defines biblical theology as follows:

The study of the actual self-disclosures of God in time and space which lie back of even the first committal to writing of any Biblical document, and which for a long time continued to run alongside of the inscripturation of revealed material; this last named procedure is called the study of *Biblical Theology*.<sup>6</sup>

Biblical Theology is that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

Biblical Theology, rightly defined, is nothing else than *the exhibition of the organic*

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4 William D. Dennison, “Reason, History, and Revelation: Biblical Theology and the Enlightenment,” in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church*, ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 340–60. Cf. J. V. Fesko, “On the Antiquity of Biblical Theology,” 443–77, in the same volume.

5 *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), xiv.

6 Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 13.

7 *Ibid.*

*progress of supernatural revelation in its historic continuity and multiformity*.<sup>8</sup>

Biblical theology reveals God *in actu* rather than *in potentia*. The mode of revelation is essentially drama, story, and narrative. Systematic categories in themselves tend to undermine this historical-vertical axis. In himself God is *actus purus* (aseity, self-existent perfection). But in history, relative to his creation, God is *in potentia ad extra*. We only know him through his self-revelation in *opera Dei ad extra*, that is as he interacts with his creation in the history of redemption. Thus, all of the church's systematic categories must be exegetically rooted in the meta-narrative of Scripture.

**Systematic Theology** – The name itself refers to the structure of this type of theology, headed as it is under the thematic rubrics of the six classic loci: theology, anthropology, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Dogmatic theology is commonly synonymous with systematic theology. However, names define natures. Thus, perhaps some of the dangers of systematic theology are accentuated, and to some degree perpetuated, by the use of the name. The stock in trade of Enlightenment rationalism is systems imposing controllable order on the universe—a concept viewed with just skepticism by postmoderns, but unjustly applied to the theological discipline of systematic theology. Moreover, the academic nature of systematics leaves it open to the tendency to create a distance between the system and the church, believer, and text of Scripture itself. But, this need not be so when the topics themselves are gathered from Scripture through careful exegesis. This was the genius of post-Reformation theologians, culminating in their greatest creedal production, the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The potential weakness or misunderstanding created by systematic theology, I submit, is not inherent in the quest to organize the truth of God's

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8 Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 15.

historic revelation into biblical categories. It is the church's business to do so. Our own Westminster Confession and Catechisms are a clear testimony to this fact. We even require church officers to take the second vow: "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church, as containing *the system of doctrine* taught in the Holy Scriptures?" (emphasis added).

*Scripture itself points up the importance of forms and patterns of truth: a word pattern reveals a faith and life pattern. A word pattern is what? Words rooted in the historical accomplishment of redemption (see 1 Cor. 15:1–7). In 2 Timothy 1:13–14 Paul commands, "Follow the pattern [ὑποτύπωσιν hypotypōsin, form, standard] of the sound [ὑγιαίνοντων hygiainontōn] words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you."*

Perhaps, reintroducing the word "dogmatic" into our definition may help to emphasize the place of systematized truth in the life and thinking of the church—as the church's declaration of biblical certitudes. Dogma today is used in an almost entirely pejorative way to mean an arrogant assertion, whereas in the church's history it refers to the certainties of revealed truth; and most especially the "accepted doctrines of the church."<sup>9</sup> Luke's stated purpose for writing his gospel was "that you [Theophilus] may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:4). The word "dogma" is transliterated from the Greek word used by Luke in 2:1, "In those days a *decree* [δόγμα *dogma*] went out from Caesar Augustus..." (emphasis added). The word sounds a strong note of authority. That very certitude being promoted by Luke is asserted at the beginning of a document the religious truth of which is inextricably rooted in history. It is history, divinely inspired and interpreted. The same root word appears with special reference to the decisions of the church in Acts 16:4, "As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance *the decisions*

<sup>9</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 18.

[τὰ δόγματα *ta dogmata*] that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem" (emphasis added).

A helpful dictionary definition of dogma is: "A doctrine or a corpus of doctrines relating to matters such as morality and faith, set forth in an authoritative manner by a church."<sup>10</sup> Thus, the church has a fundamental interest in the systematic enterprise, and must have as its primary concern the witness to the dogmatic certainty of God's work in history.

**Confessional Theology** – This type of theology is the corporate answer to the question: "What do you believe the Bible teaches?" Thus, "What do we believe the Bible teaches?" Confessional theology is the crown jewel of the entire exegetical, theological enterprise.

Like biblical theology, confessional theology is concretely related to the church's actual existence in history. It is a work in progress, responding to the questions and challenges which the church's historical situation brings to the infallible text of Scripture. Confessional theology is always in progress (*semper reformanda*), interacting with the situation and history of the church.

Abraham Kuyper comments:

Dogma has no existence at first, but it originates only by degrees, and it is unthinkable without the Church that formulates it. If thus we would avoid the mistake of formulating our dogmatics unhistorically directly from the Scripture, but rather seek to derive it from the Scripture at the hand of the Church, then the Church as a middle-link between Bible and Dogma is absolutely indispensable.<sup>11</sup>

The description "confessional" as opposed to "systematic" or even "dogmatic" emphasizes the fact that this is biblical theology *ecclesiastically*

<sup>10</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. "dogma."

<sup>11</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *The Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, transl. by Henrik de Vries (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898), 635.

systematized. Unlike the broader enterprise of systematic theology, confessional theology is a consensus of the confession of the one holy, apostolic church—what the church agrees is true for all people, in all places, and at all times.

We have so distanced ourselves from the Roman Catholic apotheosis of tradition that we jettison the idea of tradition altogether or, at best, simply give the subject short shrift. Presbyterians cannot afford to do this. The egalitarian impulse of the electronic environment faces us with a powerful temptation at this point. We must return to the dogmatic drawing boards and explain to the church the biblical rationale for confessions. Confessional theology is an authoritative road map of the territory of Scripture, an authoritative statement of what the church believes, and is thus willing to live and die for. Such statements define who we are in relation to the triune God. While no one will confuse the map with the actual terrain it defines, we ought to think ourselves fools if we ignore the map and consign ourselves to being lost. And lost we will be in the pantheon of modern idols.

Thus, both systematic or dogmatic theology and biblical theology serve the interests of the confessing church. This systematizing instinct of the confessional church has been present from the earliest period of church history as the so-called Apostles' Creed attests. What is also notable is that the confessional categories are embedded in the history of redemption. So while biblical theology as an academic discipline is relatively new, and the academic discipline of Reformed biblical theology is even newer, the historical nature of God's revelation in Scripture has been recognized by the church since its inception.

### **Confessional Theology Is Rooted in Biblical Theology**

Biblical theology is necessary to the development of confessional theology. As I have said, all historic confessions are rooted in the historical truth of the Bible. Biblical theology has always been at the heart of the church's confession of what she believes. In this respect we must be careful not to act as if Vos was the first to have biblical

theological insight. Vos was the father of the academic theological discipline of Reformed biblical theology, the first chair of which was instituted at Princeton Theological Seminary when it called Vos to be its first professor of biblical theology in 1892.

For example, in the Apostles' Creed the Father is the "maker of heaven and earth." The Son "was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; ... The third day he rose again from the dead," and so forth. The Trinitarian confession is deeply and explicitly embedded in the history of redemption with special focus on the incarnation. Thus, even such nascent biblical theology also notably yielded a Christocentric emphasis.

Confessional theology is tied to Scripture through the fabric of history. All True confessions of the church are deeply rooted in redemptive history. With the Westminster Confession historical concerns became more self-conscious, explicit, and detailed. In particular, the doctrine of the covenants emerged as a central concern in the Reformation and post-Reformation eras.

In the WCF, the concept of covenant is the unifying idea, emerging in the unfolding, historic drama of redemption in the form of several types of covenants, and developing in several historical periods. The systematic theology of the Reformation was rooted in a movement back to the text of Scripture and the history of redemption. A genuine covenant theology emerged from the return to Scripture. As Westminster Seminary California professor Michael Horton explains:

Rather than seeing the Bible as a sourcebook for timeless truths, it was regarded as a covenant between God and God's people, orienting it to history and dramatic events interpreted by the primary actor in those events. ... The current recovery of interest in eschatology as the very warp and woof of theology, rather than as an appendix to systematics, was anticipated in these sixteenth- and seventeenth-century

Reformed thinkers...<sup>12</sup>

Vos, first name Ridderbos, and Richard Gaffin have built on this theology. Horton quotes Ridderbos:

It is not dogma that is central, but the fact of redemptive history itself, which makes such announcements as justification possible. Without minimizing the importance of the former, it is not the *ordo salutis*, but the *historia salutis*, which is primary for Paul.... The whole Pauline doctrine is a doctrine of Christ and his work; that is its essence.<sup>13</sup>

The Reformed Scholasticism of theologians like Frances Turretin, often maligned as abstract rationalism, was entirely committed to Scripture's authority as its starting point, and fundamentally historical in its approach to systematizing. To highlight my point in favor of dogma in its relation to biblical theology, let me revise Ridderbos's assertion about redemptive history and dogma: it is not speculative, abstract dogma, but dogma affirming the divine accomplishment of redemption in history in the person and work of the Incarnate Son that is central for Paul.

The idea of the covenants is the structural matrix of the Westminster Confession, reflecting a mature expression of post-Reformation theology. As Vos asserts,

The Westminster Confession is the Reformed confession in which the doctrine of the covenant is not merely brought in from the side, but is placed in the foreground and has been able to permeate at almost

every point.<sup>14</sup>

The Westminster Confession begins by affirming a thorough commitment to the covenant document of Scripture itself as the self-interpreting (*analogia fide*) revelation of God in history to his people. WCF 1:9, "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself."

Covenant figures prominently (nine times), as would be expected, in Chapter 7 "Of God's Covenant with Man." It also figures prominently (16 times) in Larger Catechism questions 30–36 dealing with the accomplishment of redemption in Christ. This section expands Shorter Catechism questions 20–21 where "covenant" is used once. WSC 20, "Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery? A. God having, out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer."

Prominent also is the two covenant structure—covenant of works and covenant of grace—of redemptive history and the centrality of Christ the Mediator in that history. Not mentioned, but no less germane or directly related, is the eschatological aspect of the WCF. But, enough has been discussed to demonstrate my thesis that: biblical theology is necessary to and not new to the confessions of the church; biblical, systematic, and confessional theology are distinct but not mutually exclusive to one another; and that this trio of disciplines is essential to preserve the church's identity, worship, and witness.

In our non-confessional, and often anti-confessional, climate we have a large task ahead of us.

### Confessional Theology Is the Church's Confession

American egalitarianism has always been inhospitable to confessional theology. Until recently,

12 Michael Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 30.

13 Ibid., 30–31. Cf. Herman Ridderbos *When the Time Had Fully Come* (Jordon Station: Ontario, Canada: Paideia, 1982); and *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, transl. by John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

14 Geerhardus Vos in *A Geerhardus Vos Anthology*, Danny Olinger, ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005), 356. There are 50 uses of the word "covenant(s)" in the Westminster Standards (cf. WCF 17; WLC 28; WSC 5).

confessionalism has taken a back seat even within the Presbyterian and Reformed community. I have already suggested that the Westminster Confession of the Faith should be considered the crown jewel of theological achievement in the post-Reformation era.

Postmodern reaction to Enlightenment rationalism, and to Cartesian equations that boast perfect control over reality, has wrongly associated confessionalism with this mentality. We should reject the modern penchant to impose an artificial pattern on reality. However, the provisionalism of postmoderns, with its understandable aversion to dogmatic certitudes, should be appreciated for its acknowledgement of the limits of human knowing, but not be allowed to deny all certainties.<sup>15</sup> The post-Reformation theology that systematized biblical truth was a very different enterprise, and, occurred prior to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The pattern the Puritans used to organize their theology was not artificial because they didn't invent it out of thin air and impose it on the church. Rather they discovered what is already in Scripture. This was not, however, done in a confessional vacuum, but built on the creedal wisdom of the church in the past—the church that had also gleaned its categories from the infallible Word of God. This knowledge was not used as the Enlightenment would use scientific knowledge to distance us from the world in order to control it. Rather, it was used to understand our relationship to God as *he* has revealed himself in Scripture. So Scripture is studied and organized to enter into a covenantal relationship with God, his salvation, and his way of living.

The mature coordination of the theological disciplines, especially exegetical, biblical, systematic, and confessional theology, is essential to the renewal of confessional consciousness in the modern context. Therefore, we need to develop

15 For more on this important theme see Craig Holdrege and Stephen Talbott *Beyond Biotechnology: The Barren Promise of Genetic Engineering*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2008); *The Virtues of Ignorance: Sustainability and the Limits of Knowledge*, ed. Bill Vitek and Wes Jackson, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2008); and Peter J. Leithart, *Solomon among the Postmoderns* (on Ecclesiastes), (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008).

an apologia for confessions, demonstrating that the Bible itself warrants such articulation of the church's beliefs. Historic Christianity has always been confessional. Not to be so is to eclipse of the truth of the gospel, as theologian David Wells noted over a decade ago, "The word *evangelical*, precisely because it has lost its confessional dimension, has become descriptively anemic."<sup>16</sup>

### The Church Must Teach the Purposes of Its Confession

We should begin to argue for confessional theology by answering the question: Why do we need confessions? Our answer may be found in the following four propositions.<sup>17</sup>

1. Confessions are necessary in order to instruct the church in the truth of Scripture. The confession functions as a road map of the terrain of Scripture, helping us to learn the essential features of the biblical landscape.<sup>18</sup> The Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms were specifically designed for this purpose. They communicate the doctrines of the Confession to the members of the church.<sup>19</sup> In turn, the preaching and teaching of these doctrines form disciples after the image of Jesus Christ. Inculcated truth makes worshippers and servants, sanctifying them as the Word is applied by the Spirit of truth (John 13:26; 14:26; 15:26; 16:8). This is why the fourth membership

16 David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 134. For a detailed and cogent argument on jettisoning the term *evangelical* see Darryl Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

17 A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, (1879; repr., London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), 114.

18 Cf. Gregory Edward Reynolds, "The Necessity of a Doctrinal Road Map," *Ordained Servant* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2007): 11–13; [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=32](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=32).

19 Cf. Darryl Hart, "The Religion of the Catechism," *Ordained Servant* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2007): 73–78; [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=33](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=33); Mark A. Garcia, "Pilgrimage in the Mode of Hope: Thoughts on the Usefulness of Catechism," *Ordained Servant* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2007): 79–84; [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=34](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=34).

vow in our church is tantamount to confessional membership, although allowing more latitude. It is also why officers must carefully instruct prospective members in the system of doctrine so that they know to what teaching they are being called to submit.

2. Confessions are necessary in order to function as the church's constitution, or as Princeton theologian Charles Hodge stated, "To act as the bond of ecclesiastical fellowship among those so nearly agreed as to be able to labor together in harmony."<sup>20</sup> In this way, a confession unites the visible church on the basis of a doctrinal consensus. We should remember, as Peter Wallace points out in his article "Catholicity and Conscience," the ancient church adhered to the ecumenical creeds because there was only one church in several regions of the Roman Empire. These were united in their confession. Individual agendas did not prevail, as we see in point 4 below.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, no individual is sufficient unto himself. Wallace summarizes Calvin's attitude in this regard: "*Heinrich Bullinger once sent to John Calvin a book he had written with an apologetic comment, suggesting that Calvin really didn't need to read it since he already knew everything in it. Calvin responded with a passionate rejection of Bullinger's attitude. Calvin insisted that he needed Bullinger to keep his own thinking in line. To paraphrase Calvin's letter: 'by myself I'm a heretic.'*"<sup>22</sup> *Confessional theology binds the church together as a corporate entity, and so represents a radical challenge to radical individualism.*

3. Confessions are necessary to record theological progress in the church's history. Hodge said that confessions, "mark, preserve, and dis-

20 Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 114.

21 Gregory E. Reynolds, "On Being a Confessional Church," *Ordained Servant* 13:1 (Jan. 2004): 11–13.

22 Peter Wallace, "The Presbytery's Role in Shepherding Pastors," *Ordained Servant* 8:3 (July 1999): 59. Cited from *Calvin's Selected Works: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet; vol. 5, ed. Jules Bonnet, trans. David Constable (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 306. Letter to Bullinger, March 12, 1551. "[T]he gifts of the Spirit are so distributed among us, that no one individual is sufficient for himself."

seminate the attainments made in the knowledge of Christian truth by any branch of the church in any grand crisis of its development."<sup>23</sup> The Trinitarian and Christological controversies of the ancient church served as the anvil upon which the Nicene and Chalcedonian formulations were forged. So the history of creeds is also a history of the development of doctrine, a history of the church's discernment of the truth of Scripture as it applied to the demands of the times. We must not allow the provisionalism and the relativism of our age to prevent us from at least considering new formulations of doctrine in response to particular errors.

As early as 1936, J. Gresham Machen declared,

We are living in a time of widespread intellectual as well as moral decadence, and the visible church has unfortunately not kept free from this decadence. Christian education has been sadly neglected; learning has been despised; and real meditation has become almost a lost art. For these reasons, and other still more important reasons, I think it is clear that ours is not a creed-making age. Intellectual and moral indolence like ours does not constitute the soil out of which great Christian creeds may be expected to grow.<sup>24</sup>

Machen predicted that the great outlines of Christian doctrine had probably already been achieved in the Westminster Confession of Faith. However, "all real doctrinal advance proceeds in the direction of greater precision and fullness of doctrinal statement."<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, "there can be no real progress unless there is something that is fixed."<sup>26</sup> Finally, as if Machen were thinking of our

23 Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 114.

24 J. Gresham Machen, "The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance," in *Scripture and Confession: A Book about Confessions Old and New*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 156.

25 *Ibid.*, 151.

26 *Ibid.*, 156.

own day, he reminds us, “The creeds of Christendom are not expressions of Christian experience. They are summary statements of what God has told us in His Word.”<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the greatest progress we can make in our day is to revive our confessional tradition by cultivating anew a confessional mentality in the church.

4. Confessions are necessary in order to preserve or safeguard apostolic doctrine. Here the subtlety of Hodge illuminates: confessions serve “to discriminate the truth from the glosses of false teachers, and accurately to define it in its integrity and due proportions.”<sup>28</sup> Not only does confessional truth teach doctrinal discrimination, accurately arming the church against false teaching, but positively helps delineate the doctrinal system. Truth has an internal consistency, a pattern, by which the whole is constituted to be more than the sum of its parts. This is the perfect protection against the incursion of special agendas that isolate particular truths, thus distorting the whole. It also warns us against what church historians call the “central dogma” approach to theology. So biblical truth must not be viewed through the lens of any one doctrine, but rather as a whole, the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). As we saw earlier, the doctrine found in Scripture forms a pattern of sound words (2 Tim. 1:8–14).

### Church Officers Must Teach the Confessional Identity of the Church

As church officers, especially elders who teach and oversee the ministry of the Word, and most especially ministers of the Word, we must demonstrate the biblical integrity of our Confession and Catechisms in the ministry of the Word. The following are some ways by which we can inculcate a confessional mentality in the church.

Ministers of the Word, should refer to the Confession and Catechisms in sermons, and read appropriate portions in unison with the congregation as a response to the preaching in a confession of faith. Because we normally preach expository

27 Ibid., 150.

28 Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 114.

sermons (and I hope always textual sermons), by quoting from the Confession and Catechisms we are exhibiting the connection of the historical and doctrinal categories found in the Bible with our creedal documents.

We should also be teaching the Confession and Catechisms in Sunday School and perhaps in the midweek meeting. The Larger Catechism has been largely neglected in recent Presbyterian history. It has a pastoral richness that exceeds both the Confession and the Shorter Catechism. The latter is mnemonically superior, but the longer catechism is pedagogically opulent. In teaching and preaching it is helpful to point out whole phrases from the Confession and Catechisms that are direct quotes from Scripture—there are many. Then, of course, there are the extensive proof texts provided for our Confession and Catechisms. This requires alerting people to the context of these proofs, lest people be misled to believe that the Puritans were naïve about the redemptive historical and thematic nature of Scripture texts. They were meticulously exegetical in their approach, and for this reason they were inclined not to add proof texts until they were required by Parliament.

The children’s *First Catechism* and *The Shorter Catechism* are built into our Great Commission Publications curriculum. There are excellent catechetical and teacher resources available at the GCP website.<sup>29</sup>

In conclusion, I have attempted to make the case for the place of biblical theology as a theological discipline in our confessional heritage, and in doing so to demonstrate that systematizing doctrine is neither contrary to biblical theology nor to the Bible. As the church studies the Bible, and understands its doctrinal categories in their redemptive historical settings and development, she is compelled by this very enterprise to formally confess what she believes the Bible clearly teaches, in order that the church may stake her life and witness on the glorious certitudes of God’s Word. ■

29 Great Commission Publications, [www.gcp.org](http://www.gcp.org), catechetical resources [www.gcp.org/catechism.asp](http://www.gcp.org/catechism.asp), teacher resources <http://goteach.gcp.org>. The GCP curriculum is designed as a unified, sequential way of teaching catechism and the history of redemption. There is no other Sunday School curriculum like it.



# Servant Witness

## How Should the Reformed Church Respond to Islam?

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by Bryan D. Estelle

Only a month ago, the following corporate (almost imprecatory) prayer was uttered from an Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) pulpit during the morning worship service, “Oh Lord, we do pray for the destruction of Islam and our enemies (read, ‘Muslims’).” Recently, following many discussions on an executive board of a local Reformed Christian school and evaluation of results from a survey disseminated among students’ families, a board member registered a lonely negative vote at a board meeting. He was opposed to the retention of the current school mascot name and the mascot itself, which was a Crusader mounted upon a mighty warhorse with pike in hand, ready for battle. One of those was subsequently changed.

These experiences, and the emotions attached to them, would probably not have surfaced fifteen or even ten years ago, at least with the same passion that they seem to generate these days. Today, however, we live in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Furthermore, Islam is growing rapidly. There are at least one hundred mosques or Islamic centers and over 350,000 Muslims in Chicago alone. New York is home to at least 700,000 Muslims. An average of one new mosque opens each

week in the United States.<sup>2</sup> One thing is clear from the above statistics. Orthodox Presbyterian officers and church members will probably have more and more opportunity to interact with and bear testimony to Muslims in the years to come. We have become neighbors with many in the world through the mass media and ease of travel.<sup>3</sup>

My primary objective in this brief article is to talk about how the Reformed church, *as a church*, should respond to Islam. My point is simple: we have one duty and that is to bring the gospel to bear upon the souls of Muslims as we have opportunity. Although I did learn Arabic in graduate school and have had some contact with Muslims and converts from Islam, I know little about Islamics. My experience is very limited. Nevertheless, the time to think and write on this subject is long past due.

In the OPC, we could talk about the duty of individual military soldiers, for some in our congregations are soldiers and will have very real contact with Muslims in other countries around the world: sometimes confrontations of violent combat. However, that is not the focus here. We could talk about what engagement with Islam would mean for those in our church that are involved in national security, for some church members are protecting the safety of our country through their work in the intelligence community. However, that is not the focus of this article, either. Rather, I want to answer the following question: How should the Reformed church and her officers, *as a corporate church*, respond to Islam, a growing and thriving religion in this country, Europe, and around the world?

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2 The Statistics quoted above come from Bruce A. McDowell and Anees Zaka, *Muslims and Christians at the Table: Promoting Biblical Understanding Among North American Muslims* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1999). Also see more recent statistics in J. Dudley Woodberry, Russell G. Shubin, and G. Marks, “Why Muslims Follow Jesus,” *Christianity Today* (October 2007): 80–85.

3 Bassam M. Madany, *The Bible and Islam: Sharing God’s Word with a Muslim* (Palo Heights, IL: The Back to God Hour, 1987), 109.

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1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=84](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=84).

## Prolegomena (or First Things)

Bernard Lewis is one of the world's foremost scholars on Islam. He has been hailed as the "doyen of Middle Eastern studies." As the Cleveland E. Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies (emeritus) at Princeton University, not only does he possess an extraordinary command of Middle East languages, including Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and Indonesian, he is also a first class historian.<sup>4</sup>

One repeated theme in Lewis's books is the distinctiveness of Christianity through the ages with regard to understanding the difference between the realms of the secular and the sacred, or stated differently, the relationship between the state and the church. He writes tersely in *What Went Wrong?*

Throughout Christian history, and in almost all Christian lands, church and state continued to exist side by side as different institutions, each with its own laws and jurisdictions, its own hierarchy and chain of authority. The two may be joined, or, in modern times, separated. Their relationship may be one of cooperation, of confrontation, or of conflict. Sometimes they may be coequal, more often one or the other may prevail in a struggle for the domination of the polity. In the course of the centuries, Christian jurists and theologians devised or adapted pairs of terms to denote this dichotomy of jurisdiction: sacred and profane, spiritual and temporal, religious and secular, ecclesiastical and lay.<sup>5</sup>

Lewis takes pains, in his books, to distinguish between Christianity's recognition of the separation of church and state early in Christian history and the rise of real secularism, which he sees as

4 See Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

5 Lewis, *What Went Wrong?* 98. Also see 103. See also, Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans*, 319.

a fairly recent development.<sup>6</sup> Lewis's point (and mine as well here) is that this distinction between the authority of Caesar and the authority of God and the church— and the different duties owed to each— has been a fundamental teaching of Christianity from the beginning; not so with Muslims.<sup>7</sup>

Lewis's recognition of a separation of church and state authority and the respective duties owed to each since the beginning of Christianity is legitimate, and it is an idea that has been revived in a report recently submitted to our own General Assembly in the form of the doctrine of two kingdoms, the *regnum gratiae* (kingdom of grace) and the *regnum potentiae* (the kingdom of power). Stating the two kingdoms doctrine succinctly, the *Report on Illegal Aliens* asserts:

The *regnum gratiae* is Christ's rule over the *ecclesia militans* (the church militant) where he governs, blesses, and defends the church in its earthly pilgrimage for the sake of the salvation of believers. The *regnum potentiae*, on the other hand, is universal, general or natural—that is, Christ's rule over the world and its affairs through the civil magistrate, though his rule is based not upon his role as mediator but as the second person of the trinity.<sup>8</sup>

Respecting this as God's organization of the post-fall world, with its different ends and purposes for the church and the state, will help us in our attempts at the correct response to Islam as a church. In the secular civil sphere, natural law and the power of the sword primarily guide governmental rule. As the *Report on Illegal Aliens* recognizes, this position about natural law may presently be a controversial statement among some in the relatively newly formed OPC. But that should not deter us from accepting that our current perspective may need adjusting. Professor of biblical interpretation

6 See, for example, Lewis, *What Went Wrong?* 104–116, and Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans*, 57.

7 Lewis, *What Went Wrong?* 103–104.

8 *Report on Illegal Aliens*, 1617.

at Wycliffe College, University of Toronto Christopher Seitz, for example, is spot on when he says, “it is uncontroversial that until the nineteenth century, reason and natural law cohered and derived their status as Christian authority because of scripture’s own revealed word about creation and God’s sovereign design therein.”<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, in the church, conduct is formed and instructed by the word of God in the power of the Spirit. State authority is a manifestation of common grace for the purpose of stability in society and the restraint of evil. The visible church, however, is a manifestation of the outworking of the covenant of grace, whereby God pities the nations and brings in all his elect to be edified by his appointed means of grace, the administration of the Word and sacraments.<sup>10</sup>

From the standpoint of the Westminster Confession, it is clear that the church is the spiritual kingdom ruled by Christ through his Word and filled with his Holy Spirit. Herein lies the great difference between civil and ecclesiastical power as poignantly stated by Thomas Peck years ago:

Christians are all agreed that Jesus, their Saviour, is King of kings and Lord of lords, not only in the sense that He is the greatest of kings, but in the sense that all earthly kings and lords are subject to His authority. But the question is, whether civil rulers derive their authority from Him, as Mediator, or whether they derive their authority from God, as moral governor of mankind. Christ says that, “His kingdom is not of this world.” This is His solemn testimony before a civil magistrate whose authority He recognises. (See John 19:10,11; Rom. 13:1, etc.)<sup>11</sup>

9 Christopher R. Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 60.

10 See *Agenda for 74<sup>th</sup> GA* (2007), 1615–1621.

11 Thomas E. Peck, “Church and State,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 16:2 (Oct. 1863): 121–144, especially 135.

Although this doctrine of the two kingdoms is often caricatured as only a Lutheran teaching, such views are not novel in Reformed circles, nor are they merely idiosyncratic to Lutheran theology; rather, they have a long and well-established pedigree in Reformed doctrine and practice, although in the last century they have largely been neglected. Although there have been attempts to read Calvin differently (including those by neo-Dooyeweerdians and neo-Calvinist transformationalists), it is clear that Calvin himself held to a two kingdom understanding of church and state.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, until relatively recent years, the two-kingdom ideas expressed up to this point were a common staple in Reformed theology, although theologians and ministers did express themselves somewhat differently on these matters.<sup>13</sup>

Another related doctrine, albeit largely forgotten or at least abused and neglected recently, is the spirituality of the church. This doctrine should also inform our response to Islam. Far from merely being the lackey doctrine of the southern church to justify holding slaves, the doctrine of the spirituality of the church has been articulated by Presbyterian ministers in the South and the North (Charles Hodge, for example). This doctrine is not a new invention in the nineteenth century; rather, it is a restatement of the biblically warranted mission of the visible church. Her mission as the corporate church is limited to administering the Word of God rightly, the sacraments correctly, and church discipline when necessary.<sup>14</sup>

12 See David VanDrunen, “Natural Law, Custom, and Common Law in the Theology of Aquinas and Calvin,” *University of British Columbia Law Review*, vol. 33, no. 3 (2000): 699–717; VanDrunen, “The Context of Natural Law: John Calvin’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” *Journal of Church and State* 46 (Summer, 2004): 503–25; VanDrunen, “The Two Kingdoms: A Reassessment of the Transformationalist Calvin,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 40 (2005): 248–266; See also, Paul Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 347–388; William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 73–76.

13 See David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (forthcoming).

14 The secondary literature on the Presbyterian doctrine of the spirituality of the church is enormous. One may begin

The state is inclined to tear the crown from Christ's head when it transgresses its proper boundaries and this bestial impulse must be checked but it does not remove the secular state's legitimacy as a divinely ordered institution. Similarly, according to the Westminster Confession of Faith (31.4), the church, especially her synods and councils, must be held in check, and those courts are

to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, *if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate* (emphasis mine).

These are the divinely wrought institutions of God: church and state. The state, when performing its divinely restricted duties does not function spiritually, and yet glorifies God within its prescribed limitations. This is most felicitously stated in the American revision of the Westminster Confession of 1788, chapter XXIII, Sect. 3. We may thank God for this revision since it greatly improved the old confession and brought its principles into greater harmony with the Word of God. As William E. Boggs said years ago, in his inaugural address to the chair of ecclesiastical history and church polity at Columbia Theological Seminary, "We should see everywhere the deplorable consequences of making religion and the church a part of the machinery of civil government."<sup>15</sup> With these preliminary matters before us, we are now ready to ask how these doctrines may inform the Reformed church's response to Islam.

### The Church and Her Responsibility

How should the Reformed church respond

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with D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, "The Spirituality of the Church," *Ordained Servant* 6, no. 1 (1997).

15 William E. Boggs, "Church and State in their Reciprocal Relations and Fundamental Contrast," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 35/1 (January, 1884): 137–180, especially on 154.

to Islam and Muslims? The answer is simple if we keep in mind that we are talking about the church's responsibility *as the church*, that is, the function of the church in her corporate capacity. Our founder, J. Gresham Machen, gave an answer in another day and context that is simple, elegant, and timely for this question in our present context:

The responsibility of the church in the new age is the same as its responsibility in every age. It is to testify that this world is lost in sin; that the span of human life—nay, all the length of human history—is an infinitesimal island in the awful depths of eternity; that there is a mysterious holy living God, Creator of all, Upholder of all, infinitely beyond all; that he has revealed himself in his Word and offered us communion with himself through Jesus Christ the Lord; that there is no other salvation, for individuals or for nations, save this, but that this salvation is full and free, and that whosoever possesses it has for himself and for all others to whom he may be the instrument of bringing it a treasure compared with which all the kingdoms of the earth—nay, all the wonders of the starry heavens—are as the dust of the street.<sup>16</sup>

Remembering the importance of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church will help us in another area of our witness to Muslims. That memory will be prophylactic medicine against the toxic mixing of Western cultural messages with our gospel proclamation. This is very important to Muslims. Those who have extensive experience in sharing God's word with Muslims recognize the importance of proclaiming the liberating message of the gospel and not mingling Western culture with that proclamation.<sup>17</sup>

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16 J. Gresham Machen, "The Responsibility of the Church in Our New Age," *The Presbyterian Guardian* 36:1 (January 1967), 13.

17 See Madany, *The Bible and Islam*, vii, 9, 42, 45.

## What about Islamization?

In light of the tremendous growth of Islam, what should our rhetoric be? In fact, historically, where Muslim governments reigned, they were often tolerant of other religions and diverse opinions.<sup>18</sup> In other words, I suggest that it is not a *fait accompli* that the growth of Islam in America (or Europe) necessarily means the rape of those countries and the reduction of vibrant Christianity. If the previous point is accurate, it might mean developing a different attitude towards Muslims, Arabs, and Islamic countries in particular. Consider the government of Dubai, part of the United Arab Emirates, which recently was working on a financial deal that could make it the first government in the Middle East to hold a large stake (and two out of sixteen board seats) in a U.S.-based stock operator, the London Stock Exchange.<sup>19</sup> I share this example for illustrative purposes. Should such a business undertaking be viewed suspiciously as a possible surreptitious attempt to destroy the U.S. financial markets? Or, is it possible that a robust doctrine of common grace would have us welcome this potential financial development with Dubai as a way of fostering mutual involvement and exchange between East and West and discouraging isolationism? How we officers in the church parse these questions will undoubtedly affect our attitudes about current events in several areas.

The fact is that not all Muslims are Islamic Fundamentalists. Sometimes this term is explained as an impulse among Muslims to return to the fundamentals of Islam as a response to world affairs.<sup>20</sup> More often, however, the term Islamic Fundamentalist is loosely associated (often in a not very apt manner) with the militant and radical movements in certain particular countries that are trying to undo the secularization of the last century and return to the holy law of Islam and an Islamic

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18 Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans*, 70.

19 See "Dubai Exchange Vies for Global Role," in the Money & Investing section of the *Wall Street Journal* (Thursday, September 20, 2007), C1–C2.

20 See Madany, *The Bible and Islam*, 97–104.

political order.<sup>21</sup> This is the case especially in Iran, Afghanistan, and Sudan, and the same trend is growing in other parts of the world. The enemy is defined in various ways in these countries; however, it is not merely Christians that are singled out. In fact, in an Islamic fundamentalist's mind, secularization is the archenemy.

Even so, this previous point should not be construed as unthinking naiveté concerning the trends of Islamic Fundamentalists and what those trends have done to change the political and social landscape of certain Arab and Jewish nations in the Middle East. Christian minorities have often been hard pressed, and migrated elsewhere as a consequence. Such a reduction of a Christian presence in the public square of certain countries in the Middle East may produce less stability in a part of the world that is already known for its fragility and violence.<sup>22</sup>

## We Must Know Our Audience

When I began to read more about Islam, I realized how ignorant I was of Islam worldwide and especially in the modern Middle East. No specialist in Semitics, even in the ancient Near East, can afford to be ignorant of the contemporary scene.<sup>23</sup> But neither can officers in the church of Jesus Christ remain uninformed. Consequently, I am educating myself about major branches of Islam, the Sunnis and the Shi'ites, and the differences between them. I did not know what Sufism was, and so I needed to read about this, as well, since there are numerous Sufi orders present in the United States. Islamics is a huge and complex field of study. Indeed, one could spend a life time learning about it. My point is merely this: as Reformed Christians and officers in the church, we must be willing to familiarize ourselves with our audience to share the gospel with sensitivity and power. Islam is a complex phenomenon, and

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21 Lewis, *What Went Wrong?* 96–116, especially 106–08.

22 See, for example, Charles M. Sennott, *The Body and the Blood: The Holy Land's Christians at the Turn of a New Millennium* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001).

23 Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans*, 10.

it warrants careful study in preparation for our sharing the gospel. In my experience, most North American Christians are unable, and ill-equipped, to deal with Islam despite its growing influence in this country. This includes many in the OPC.

To become sensitized to a Muslim audience takes real work. The Muslim, for example, thinks of the Word of God in categories simply of law.<sup>24</sup> We must show the Muslim both the law and the gospel. Islam's view of mankind is definitely deficient. A Muslim thinks too highly of the goodness of mankind. In our view, man is wicked at his core, and he stands in desperate need of redemption from sin. In a word, he needs grace. Here lies the apt contribution of Reformed theology vis-à-vis Roman Catholicism. The Muslim needs grace, but as Apologetics professor Michael Horton has recently said, "grace does not elevate nature, but liberates it from its bondage to sin and death."<sup>25</sup> We must learn how to communicate this truth so that the Muslim may see that God has come to offer liberation from the imperialism of sin.<sup>26</sup> There are other areas in which Christianity can provide solid answers for the Muslim: in the area of the so-called problem of evil, how to gain the peace of personal assurance of entitlement to heaven, our views on the sacraments, the temple, Israel and the land promises, the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible and particularly the Gospels, and the alleged corruption of the Bible through transmission.

In all of these areas and others, we will need work very hard. The compassion of God and the doctrine of the free offer of the gospel did not adequately seize the early church's conscience. Otherwise, our forefathers would not have been so tardy in translating the Scriptures into Arabic.<sup>27</sup> The plight of Muslim men, women, and children has probably not gripped the young OPC yet either.

24 See Madany, *The Bible and Islam*, 55–57.

25 Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union With Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 193.

26 Madany, *The Bible and Islam*, 39.

27 Madany, *The Bible and Islam*, 76.

Anyone who knows the history of the Crusades recognizes that it was a brainchild of the Roman Catholic Church in Europe. How could it be otherwise at that time in history? But this does not release Protestants from *thinking* about what this means in the modern world and its residual consequences. It is true that Pope Urban II organized these military quests as a way to expand Rome's power. After his speech delivered at the Council of Clermont in 1095, which purposed to unite Christians in an effort to free Jerusalem from the infidels, the result was a frenzied crowd crying out, "Deus hoc volt!" (God wills this!).

Charles M. Sennott, a reporter assigned to the Middle East during the last decade, writes of the lasting impression those Crusaders left upon the so-called Holy Land:

The Crusaders carried out bloody assaults on Muslims and Jews (and local Christians of the Eastern Orthodox churches often were not spared), to shouts of "Deus hoc volt!" For three days they systematically slaughtered more than 30,000 inhabitants of Jerusalem – until there was no one left to kill. Crusade chroniclers were not shy about describing the "rivers of blood" spilled in the name of the Lord. Legend has it that tens of thousands of Muslims were slaughtered at Al-Aqsa – perhaps an exaggeration, historians say, but not by much. Jews were crowded into their synagogue and burned alive. The butchery is still seared into the memory of this land, scarring relations between Christianity and the other two religions of Abraham.<sup>28</sup>

What is a wise and appropriate response to this history?

We are at war on terror even as I write this. We should be concerned for our military personnel and particularly for our Christian brothers and sisters who are in harm's way. We should be concerned for the families of those who have been killed and also for those who have been injured

28 Sennott, *The Body and the Blood*, 9.

physically, psychologically, and emotionally by the horrible ravages of war.

Even so, I wish the reader to return to the focus of this brief article. How should the Reformed church respond to Muslims and Islam? What is an appropriate prayer from an OPC pulpit on the Lord's day concerning Islam? As officers in the church, let us remember that we should be thinking deeply about the complex world events swirling around us. And furthermore, *as a corporate church*, our mission has not changed: we are to bring the claims of the gospel upon souls. ■

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## Van Til the Evangelist

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by K. Scott Oliphint

Unlike some readers of *Ordained Servant*, I never had the opportunity to study under Cornelius Van Til. My initial introduction to him came through his many writings. I immersed myself in those writings, seeing, for the first time in my Christian life, a man whose method (based, as it, was on Reformed theology) was able to decimate all pretensions and permutations of unbelief, including those residing in my own heart.

When I determined, as a result of reading Van Til, to attend Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, I had the opportunity to stay with him for a time. One of the advantages of staying with him was the occasion to walk with him on his "daily constitutional." After almost thirty years, two things still stand out to me about those walks. First,

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1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=118](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=118).

even as an octogenarian, Van Til could maintain a rigorous pace. Second, and more importantly, I remember that every one of Van Til's neighbors, to whom I was introduced by him, said virtually the same thing to me: "I suppose he's talking to you, too, about this Jesus."

What became clear to me during that time has become even clearer to me since. I had read it in his writings, but now I had also seen it in action. The central point of Van Til's teaching and ministry is this: *for Van Til, there could be no separation between a defense of the Christian faith, on the one hand, and the preaching of the gospel, on the other*. As obvious as this may sound to us now, we should not miss the fact that it is only obvious because of the profound and sweeping impact that Van Til's thought has had in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Perhaps a couple of reminders will serve to highlight this central point.

First, any student of Van Til's will readily see the influence both of his Dutch Reformed roots (in Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck particularly), as well as his Princeton education (in Machen, and the influence of Warfield behind him). It could easily be argued that to understand properly the ways in which Van Til incorporated the best of Kuyper and Warfield is to understand the scope of Van Til's project. But a proper understanding of Van Til's *incorporation* of these two Reformed giants requires, as well, an understanding of just where he was forced to distance himself from them.

For Kuyper, the discipline of apologetics was a relatively useless enterprise. As Warfield indicated, Kuyper's theological taxonomy relegated apologetics to "a subdivision of a subdivision."<sup>2</sup> In his massive three volume, *Encyclopædie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid*, Kuyper's discussion of apologetics occupies around ten pages of volume 3.<sup>3</sup> The rea-

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2 Warfield contends that if Kuyper's classification and delineation of the task of apologetics is correct, then Christianity remains "the great assumption." B. B. Warfield, "Introduction to Beattie's *Apologetics*," in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 2:95.

3 Note, for example, the place of apologetics, according to Kuyper: "That which [apologetics] must defend is Dogma, either

son for this “misprision of apologetics” (as Warfield calls it) in Kuyper is due, as Van Til makes clear, to Kuyper’s (mis)understanding of the antithesis. The antithesis, as Kuyper develops it, is unable to take into account the notion of the *sensus divinitatis* (the knowledge of God within all human beings), which notion came to its fruition in Calvin (following Paul in Romans 1:18ff.). Therefore, it takes on the connotation of a kind of *metaphysical* antithesis, in which the “two kinds of men” of which Kuyper speaks, really and truly have nothing (religiously) in common.

In fairness to Kuyper, we should not miss the historical point that, in his own time, there was little available to him in terms of a consistent, Reformed approach to the discipline of apologetics. Due to the influence of the Enlightenment, in which reason was pitting itself against all calls of submission to God’s revelation, apologetic approaches that had their foundation in some notion of neutral reasoning had shown themselves to be thoroughly bankrupt, unable to address the prevailing onslaught of unbelief.<sup>4</sup> For Kuyper, then, it was the *principium* of revelation, not of reason, that alone was able to rescue men from the foolishness of would-be autonomy. Since revelation was the acknowledged *principium* of the church, there seemed to be no common ground between the regenerate and the unregenerate, according to

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in its specific details, or in the grounds wherein the Dogma rests, or in the conclusions (*gevolgtrekkingen*), which follow from the Dogma. It is not diathetical, since it does not *describe* Dogma, it is not thetical, since it does not *postulate* Dogma, nor *prove* it, but it is *antithetical*, since it directs its plea in behalf of Dogma over against that which pseudo-philosophy raises against Dogma, its grounds or effects. Its place is thus not *before* but *after* Dogmatics and Ethics.” Then, further on, Kuyper says: “From this it follows that Apologetics is confined to two tasks. In the first place to disqualify pseudo-theology from its *vitium originis*, which men come to adopt from the side of philosophy; and in the second place to maintain the principles which are inseparable from Dogma, as actually the only trustworthy ones to maintain, over against false principles of wayward Philosophy.” Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopaedie Der Heilige Godgeleerdheid*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1894), 3:459, 461.

4 For an insightful critique of the failure of apologetics in nineteenth century academia, see George Marsden, “The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia,” in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

Kuyper.

Warfield rightly saw the weakness in Kuyper’s approach to apologetics. He saw that such an approach would relegate the question of Christianity’s truth-claims to an appendix, at best. Speaking of the other theological disciplines (such as systematic theology, church history, and biblical exegesis), Warfield says, “Not until all their labor is accomplished do they pause to wipe their streaming brows and ask whether they have been dealing with realities, or perchance with fancies only.”<sup>5</sup> According to Warfield, the “truth question” in Kuyper’s construal was anything but paramount in the theological encyclopedia.<sup>6</sup>

The genius of Van Til was that, due to his thorough grounding in Reformed theology, he was able to address the weakness in Kuyper’s view of the antithesis by highlighting the strengths of Reformed thought. Van Til sought to make clear that the radical nature of the antithesis, which Kuyper was concerned to stress, itself presupposed a universality that was embedded in who we are as God’s covenant creatures.<sup>7</sup> That universality is the image of God. In other words, the fact that all men are either in Adam or in Christ has its final reference point in the prior fact that all men are covenantally related to the God who made them and to whom, ultimately, they relate.<sup>8</sup> And

5 B. B. Warfield, “Introduction to Beattie’s *Apologetics*,” 2:96.

6 Of historical interest (and the reason that all M.Div. students at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, are required to take *two* courses in apologetics) is Machen’s assessment of this discussion. In private correspondence, Machen wrote, “You will not take it amiss that I still agree rather strongly with Dr. Warfield about the *place* of apologetics” (emphasis added). Machen to Gerrit H. Hospers, Ontario, New York, December 27, 1924, Machen Archives; quoted from Paul Kjosv Helseth, “The Apologetic Tradition of the OPC,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 60, no. 1 (1998): 127.

7 Note Van Til’s point, “For myself, I have chosen the position of Kuyper. But I am unable to follow him when from the fact of the mutually destructive character of the two principles he concludes to the *uselessness of reasoning with the natural man*,” (emphasis mine), Cornelius Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 351.

8 So, says Van Til, “For the spiritual deadness of the natural man is what it is as suppression of the knowledge of God given man by virtue of creation in God’s image. Hence Warfield was



this objective fact of our universal relationship to God—a relationship that is characterized either by wrath (in Adam) or by grace (in Christ)—has its subjective ground in the fact that God has never, and will never, leave himself without a witness. More specifically, just *because* we are all covenant creatures, we inevitably and for eternity, *know this covenant God* who made us, and to whom we owe allegiance (Rom. 1:18–19, 32).<sup>9</sup>

This leads to the second reminder. What is distinctive about Van Til’s approach to apologetics, and what was instrumental in giving him critical insight into all forms of unbelieving thought, was his thorough acquaintance with Reformed theology. This, too, may seem obvious, but the emphasis and implications of this point have not always been properly understood.

What is, perhaps, the most radical apologetic point that Van Til asserts, especially given the history of apologetics before him, is his insistence that apologetics, like theology (indeed, like all of life) must begin with the ontological Trinity. Van Til puts it like this:

According to the principle of Protestantism, man’s consciousness of self and of objects presuppose for their intelligibility the self-consciousness of God. In asserting this we are not thinking of psychological and temporal priority. We are thinking only of the question as to what is the final reference point in interpretation. The Protestant principle finds this in the self-contained ontological trinity. By his counsel the triune God controls whatsoever comes

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quite right in maintaining that Christianity is objectively defensible. And the natural man has the ability to understand intellectually, though not spiritually, the challenge presented to him. And no challenge is presented to him unless it is shown him that on his *principle* he would destroy all truth and meaning. Then, if the Holy Spirit enlightens him spiritually, he will be born again “unto knowledge” and adopt with love the principle he was previously anxious to destroy,” Van Til, *Defense*, 352.

9 For this reason, among others, it seems best to dispense with the terminology of “presuppositionalism” as an adequate description of Van Til’s approach. The term itself is fraught with confusion, especially given postmodernism’s co-opting and abuse of it. Van Til’s approach is best described, rather, as “covenantal.”

to pass. If then the human consciousness must, in the nature of the case, always be the proximate starting-point, it remains true that God is always the most basic and therefore the ultimate or final reference point in human interpretation.

This is, in the last analysis, the question as to what are one’s ultimate presuppositions. When man became a sinner he made of himself instead of God the ultimate or final reference point. And it is precisely this presupposition, as it controls without exception all forms of non-Christian philosophy, that must be brought into question. If this presupposition is left unquestioned in any field all the facts and arguments presented to the unbeliever will be made over by him, according to his pattern. The sinner has cemented colored glasses to his eyes which he cannot remove. And all is yellow to the jaundiced eye. There can be no intelligible reasoning unless those who reason together understand what they mean by their words.

In not challenging this basic presupposition with respect to man as the final reference point in predication the natural man may accept the “theistic proofs” as fully valid. He may construct such proofs. He has constructed such proofs. But the god whose existence he proves to himself in this way is always a god who is something other than the self-contained ontological trinity of Scripture.<sup>10</sup>

To put the matter simply, Van Til argues that one must “begin” one’s apologetic with the ontological Trinity.<sup>11</sup> Contrast this with the view of

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10 Van Til, *Defense*, 100–101.

11 “Begin” is in quotes here because it is not the case that Van Til thinks we must begin our conversation, or our discussion, with an assertion of the ontological Trinity. Rather, to “begin” with the presupposition of the ontological Trinity is to recognize that unless God is who he says he is, we (meaning all human beings) cannot think or live consistently. We cannot, therefore, think that there is an area of neutrality in which we might reason with unbelievers. If we “begin” with God and who he says he is,

apologetics set forth by Aquinas. For Thomas, and those who follow him, there is a “twofold mode of truth in what we profess about God.” There are those truths which can be proved by natural reason, unaided by revelation. “Such are that God exists, that He is one, and the like.”<sup>12</sup>

In other words, for Thomas and Thomistic apologetics, what is to be proved is that God *is*, perhaps that he is *one*, and other similar matters. What should be most obvious and shocking to any who espouse a Reformed approach to theology is that this approach to apologetics, by definition, eschews any idea that God’s revelation in general, and Scripture in particular, is the *principium* from which we are to reason and argue.<sup>13</sup>

And now we can begin to see why and how it is that, for Van Til, apologetic methodology is itself inextricably bound to the preaching of the gospel. Given what we have said above, the following points can be seen to converge:

1. God is only truly known as he has revealed himself. For this reason, it will not do simply to attempt to show that God exists, or that he is one. Any attempt of this nature seeks to limit the knowledge of God to what can be comprehended by reason alone. But it is not within the purview of man’s responsibility before God to conjure up a notion of him that is rationally palatable. Our responsibility, instead, is to submit ourselves to what he has said, especially and primarily, what he has told us about himself.

2. Creation is what God says it is. With respect

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we recognize that the unbeliever himself depends on the God he will not acknowledge in order to reject, in his thinking and living, this same God. Thus, a nice summary of Van Til’s approach can be this: “Atheism presupposes theism.”

12 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Charles J. O’Neil, 4 vols., vol. 4 (Notre Dame and London: Notre Dame University Press, 1957), 1:63.

13 For one example of how Thomas’s approach disallows a direct appeal to Scripture, see the essay by William Lane Craig, “Classical Apologetics,” in Stephen B. Cowan, *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 25–55. In that essay, after arguing for a generic theism, Craig can only resort to a notion of the testimony of the Holy Spirit, which is itself quite independent of the Word. The separation of Scripture from apologetics is, as this essay illustrates, a necessary part of its methodology.

to the antithesis, therefore, it is not the case, as Kuyper argued, that there is no way (apologetically) to reach those who are unregenerate. Objectively, we all have, and are responsible to, the same Triune God. Subjectively, it is the *sensus divinitatis* that provides the “bridge” between those who are in Adam and those who are in Christ. To what, then, do we appeal in our defense of Christianity? We appeal to that which God himself has provided in all men, i.e., to the knowledge of God that renders us inexcusable before him.

If we see the connection of these two crucial points in Van Til’s approach, we’ll begin to see that the preaching of the gospel itself must inevitably be the *telos* (ultimate object or aim) of this approach. Given that we must start our discussion with what God has said about himself, we begin with the Triune God of Scripture. This is simply to say that we do not ask one who is outside of Christ to use the best of his rational capacities to move, with us, *toward* theism. Rather, we appeal to the *true* theism, the *only* true theism, that is already embedded in their souls. Given that they know God already, and that such knowledge, as suppressed, will bring sure condemnation, we “connect” that knowledge with the content of our apologetic in order that the unbeliever, by the Holy Spirit, might move from suppression to submission.

And just what is the content of our apologetic that will inevitably “connect” with the unbeliever? It is, in sum, the gospel itself. It is that this God who is known (though not acknowledged) has commanded repentance, and that such repentance can only come as one bows at the foot of the cross, recognizing that God alone can rescue us from the slavish quagmire that is our own deep and murky sinfulness.

In other words, to begin with the ontological Trinity is to begin with biblical revelation. And to begin with biblical revelation is not to pick and choose certain generic aspects of that revelation that might suit an unbelieving mind. Rather, it is to begin with “the whole counsel of God.” A Reformed theology demands a Reformed apologetic. Conversely, any apologetic that is not Reformed

has, at its root, a non-Reformed theology.

This is the depth, the richness, and the beauty of Van Til's Reformed approach to apologetics. In the last essay of the *estschrift* in Van Til's honor, *Jerusalem and Athens*, Fred Howe criticized Van Til for not making clear the distinction between his apologetic approach and evangelism. Van Til's response to Howe is worth quoting in full:

Dear Dr. Howe:

You are certainly right in saying that I did not, in the discussion among Mr. White, Mr. Grey, and Mr. Black, make any sharp distinction between witnessing to and defending the Christian faith. I am not convinced by the evidence from Scripture which you cite that any sharp distinction between them is required or even justified. My defense of the truth of Christianity is, as I think of it, always, at the same time, a witness to Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We do not really witness to Christ adequately unless we set forth the significance of his person and work for all men and for the whole of their culture. But if we witness to him thus then men are bound to respond to him either in belief or disbelief. If they respond in disbelief they will do so by setting forth as truth some "system of reality" that is based on the presupposition of man as autonomous. I must then plead with them to accept Christ as their Savior from the sin of autonomy, and therewith, at the same time, to discover that they have been given, in Christ, the only foundation for intelligent predication.

—C. V. T.<sup>14</sup>

In a sidebar comment to Van Til's interview in *Christianity Today*, Grady Spires noted: "Van Til's task was to make both despisers and defenders of the faith 'epistemologically self-conscious.' For him *the journey from philosophical apologetics to*

14 E. R. Geehan, ed., *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 452.

*evangelism was a mere adjustment in style, not in basic content.*"<sup>15</sup>

A "mere adjustment in style, not in basic content." For that reason, it seems to me accurate to think of Van Til's apologetic approach as "premeditated evangelism." It is an approach to the gospel that carries with it a biblically directed thoughtfulness, thinking through the truths of Scripture and their implications for those who are outside of Christ.

But isn't this "premeditation" what ministers of the gospel do each and every Lord's Day as they seek to bring the truth of Scripture to bear on the Lord's people? Of course it is.<sup>16</sup> While the emphasis may be different when we prepare to speak to those who are not in Christ, the fact remains that any time we seek to apply the truth of Scripture to the lives of people, we are involved in pressing the claims of Christ on them.

Edmund Clowney rightly drew attention to this radical aspect of Van Til's approach:

Van Til, then, is not simply a philosopher with a heart for preaching. Indeed, he is not merely a theologian with a heart for preaching. He is a preacher, concerned to begin where a preacher begins, with the authority of God's own revelation, and to do what a preacher does, confront unbelief and nourish faith with "thus saith the Lord." In all his apologetic labors he continually stands with the Apostle on Mars Hill, not debating the probability of God's existence, but proclaiming the Creator God who holds all men accountable before the judgment of the risen Christ.<sup>17</sup>

15 David E. Kucharsky, "At the Beginning, God," *Christianity Today* XXII, no. 6 (1977): 20 (emphasis added).

16 Not only so, but since apologetics is mandated in Scripture, *all Christians* are called to apply the truth of Scripture to any aspect of unbelief, whether in our own hearts, our congregations, or to those who do not know Christ. For a fuller discussion of this, see K. Scott Oliphint, *The Battle Belongs to the Lord* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003).

17 Edmund P. Clowney, "Preaching the Word of the Lord: Cornelius Van Til, V.D.M.," *Westminster Theological Journal* 46, no. 2 (1984): 242–243.

No other apologetic method allows for such a deep and penetrating application of the Word of God. No other apologetic incorporates “the power of God for salvation” in the warp and woof of its method. No other apologetic moves seamlessly from philosophical objections to the Christian faith to a call for faith in Christ. Therefore, if I may be so bold, no other apologetic is worth the time or the effort. Any apologetic approach that cannot abide the authority of God’s revelation is simply vanity, and a striving after the wind.

If I may offer one final anecdote—I met a man years ago who, as a Westminster student in the 1950s, had been given the task of driving Van Til to Johns Hopkins University to speak to a group of philosophers. The man related to me that, due to a traffic jam, they arrived at the meeting with little time for Van Til to deliver his address. Realizing that his time was short, I was told, Van Til took what little time he had, laid aside his talk, and preached on Jonah. It was not that he decided to do “something else” in his address to these philosophers; instead, he went straight to the conclusion.

Many have seen the picture of Van Til, standing on Wall Street in New York City, Bible in hand, preaching to any and all who would stop and listen. To those who could not see, he was just an old man, past his prime and past the point of embarrassment, looking for any who would listen. To the rest, he was doing what he had been doing for almost half a century—holding forth the claims of the self-attesting Christ of Scripture as the power which alone can break the chains of unbelief. Is it any wonder that his neighbors were convinced that any who spent time with him would inevitably hear those same claims? ■

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# ✦ Servant Word

## The Voice from the Pulpit: John Calvin and Preaching

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by Steven Doe

### Monday Morning Thoughts

Preachers are used to the old joke about only working one day a week and then only working for a few hours. Those whose calling it is to proclaim the Word of God week by week can easily lose a vision of the importance of their labor through the sheer discouragement that can come from seeing little apparent fruit from the investment of time in preparation. If the summary of your work is the ephemeral business of the spoken word, that old joke can sting. On Monday morning, a preacher may feel like the pastor who complained of the poor attendance, of people who came wanting to be entertained, of others who came and fell asleep, of some people who said that the sermon was too short, of others that it was too long, of still others who complained that the pastor never said anything new or, on the other hand, that he had too many innovations. That's how Chrysostom felt on Mondays back in the fourth century!

Preachers have faced the same challenges in all times and places. Do God's people receive too little in the sermon? Does the teaching go over their heads? Is there scriptural application? Is it too much or not enough? How long should be spent on a single verse? There can be envy of others who

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=110](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=110).

seem to have congregations which are hungry for the strong meat of doctrinal preaching, congregations urging the preacher on by their attentiveness. Does anyone appreciate the devotion, the time, the passion that you have for preaching?

### Considering Calvin

In 2009 the Reformed community around the world will be celebrating the five hundredth anniversary of John Calvin's birth. The events planned will only serve to heighten the already huge and intense interest in the Reformer. The bibliography of Calvin studies is vast, beyond the ability of any one person to master; therefore there are more specialized areas within the larger field. Even here the sheer number of articles and bounty of material is overwhelming. For instance, one library has 234 entries in its section on Calvin's preaching.<sup>2</sup> The reprints and new translations of Calvin's sermons have continued to multiply.

Here are some of the major entries in the Calvin corpus now available in English: Baker Books: *Sermons on the Ten Commandments*; Banner of Truth Trust: *Sermons on Acts 1-7, the Beatitudes, Ephesians, Galatians, Job, II Samuel*; Old Paths Publications: *Sermons on the Deity of Christ, on Election and Reprobation, on Galatians, on Melchizedek and Abraham, on Psalm 119*; P&R: *Sermons on the book of Micah*; Westminster Discount Books: *Men, Women, and Order in the Church: Three Sermons by John Calvin*.

It is unlikely that any Orthodox Presbyterian will ever write anything to compare with the impact of Calvin's *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*,<sup>3</sup> but Orthodox Presbyterian preachers can take heart from a brief study of Calvin's preaching.<sup>4</sup> Calvin began his preaching ministry

2 The H. Henry Meeter Center at Calvin College.

3 References will be to John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

4 When this paper was originally prepared, some twenty years ago, the wonderful introduction to Calvin's preaching by Steven J. Lawson, was unavailable. For anyone wanting to get acquainted with Calvin's preaching, it is a good place to start. Lawson, *The*

in Geneva in 1536 as “Professor of Sacred Letters in the Church of Geneva” with expositions on the letters of Paul. It is important to understand that Calvin actually considered his preaching ministry the most significant thing which he did, more important than the theological treatises, than his massive correspondence, than even the *Institutes*. Christians of Calvin’s day understood this. His sermons in French editions, and in English and Latin translations, went through many printings in the late sixteenth century. His sermons on Job, for instance, went through five editions in a very short time; Admiral Coligny, the French Protestant leader, read through those sermons continually until his death.

Calvin wanted first of all to be thought of as a pastor bringing God’s Word to God’s people in the local church. One incident illustrates this. In 1538, Calvin and first Guillaume (William) Farel were ejected from Geneva. In 1541, Calvin was called back. On that first Sunday back in the pulpit of St. Peter’s, on what did Calvin preach? Was it a rebuke to the citizens of Geneva for their fickleness, or a vindication of his previous ministry? No, Calvin began again exactly where he had left off three years before, picking up on the next verses in the text, as if to show that he saw that there was nothing more important than his task of feeding God’s flock from the Word of the Lord. Calvin sought to not let his personal feelings shape what texts he chose in preaching, but what edified God’s people.

It is instructive to look at Calvin not only because he lends his name to that system of theology to which the Orthodox Presbyterian church is committed, but because he was a practicing pastor, a very busy preacher. For instance, in 1549, he preached at 6 o’clock in the morning and 3 o’clock in the afternoon on Sundays, and then once a day every other week, so that in the space of two weeks he was preaching ten times! These sermons were considered so valuable that the Company of Strangers, the church of refugees in Geneva, employed a secretary, to copy down each of Calvin’s

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*Expository Genius of John Calvin* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2007).

sermons that they might be available for study and meditation. The full story of Calvin’s preaching can be found in T.H.L. Parker’s volume, *Calvin’s Preaching*.<sup>5</sup>

Although Steven Lawson enumerates thirty-two lessons to be drawn from Calvin’s preaching,<sup>6</sup> we will look at only three. We will work in reverse order of importance, because the last point is perhaps the most crucial encouragement for preachers. Of course, every preacher also likes to have a strong conclusion!

### Freedom in Preaching

In the first place, Calvin the preacher carried out his calling as both a brave and a busy man. His courage is seen in his willingness to address sins very boldly in his sermons, not simply the sins of the enemies of the gospel far away in Rome, but also the sins of those sitting in front of him in St. Peter’s, among whom he lived. His level of activity, the sheer production of his pen and his practical leadership is well known. What is less well known is that Calvin did not prepare a sermon outline or sermon manuscript. He took no notes with him to the pulpit, but preached extemporaneously. He disliked the idea of using a manuscript because it would hinder the preacher from responding freely to the Holy Spirit’s illumination and the needs of the congregation.<sup>7</sup> Here is how he described the kind of preaching which he longed to see in the churches:

All these considerations [the problems particular to pre-Elizabethan England] ought not to hinder the ordinance of Jesus Christ from having free course in the preaching of the Gospel. Now, this preaching ought not to be lifeless but lively, to teach, to exhort,

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5 T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

6 Lawson, *Expository Genius of Calvin*.

7 On the Reformed understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in preaching see Arturo G. Azurdia III, *Spirit Empowered Preaching: Involving the Holy Spirit in Your Ministry* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 1998).

to reprove, as Saint Paul says in speaking thereof to Timothy, (2 Tim. iii). So indeed, that if an unbeliever enter, he may be so effectually arrested and convinced, as to give glory to God, as Paul says in another passage, (1 Cor. xiv). You are also aware, Monseigneur, how he speaks of the lively power and energy with which they ought to speak, who would approve themselves as good and faithful ministers of God, who must not make a parade of rhetoric, only to gain esteem for themselves; but that the Spirit of God ought to sound forth by their voice, so as to work with mighty energy. Whatever may be the amount of danger to be feared, that ought not to hinder the Spirit of God from having liberty and free course in those to whom he has given grace for the edifying of the Church.<sup>8</sup>

Calvin is not, of course, a charismatic in the modern sense, expecting the Holy Spirit to give him his message as he stepped into the pulpit. Calvin did what every careful preacher should do; meditate on the text, do one's exegetical homework, and study the best resources. For Calvin that included the commentaries of the early church fathers, of the scholastics, and of his contemporaries. But his aim was to enter the pulpit with only the Scriptures before him and his preparation in mind and to speak pastorally to the congregation.<sup>9</sup> One looks in vain for Calvin to develop a three-point outline, use alliteration, or other modern homiletical techniques. He focused squarely on the verses before him, and while his skill in analyzing and systematizing is seen in how he relates his text to the whole of Scripture, there is also a sense in which he lets the passage stand on its own. Perhaps because of where he stood in the history of inter-

8 Letter to the Protector Somerset, October 22, 1548 in *Calvin's Selected Works*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 190.

9 "[Calvin] would rather have his sermons heard no farther than his own sheepfold." Conrad Badius, cited in Bernard Cottret (English translation), *Calvin: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 292.

pretation, Calvin did not develop a redemptive-historical approach as fully as we might expect for the father of Reformed hermeneutics.<sup>10</sup> Calvin may have done this deliberately because of his concern both for the ability of his hearers to understand, and also for the integrity of the text, letting the verses stand on their own. All this is debatable, but the lesson to be drawn here is recognizing Calvin's simplicity and immediacy. When a preacher finds himself racking his brains to get a third point for his outline, struggling with alliteration to use as a "hook" for the sermon, for a memorable phrase or two, perhaps Calvin's concern for directness and plain unfolding of the text is important to remember. The preacher, above all, Calvin would say, needs to be clear and understandable, to remember that it is not posterity but the people in the pews to whom he speaks, and that freedom, which follows careful preparation, is a gracious work of the Spirit.

### Continuous Exposition

Secondly, on *what* did Calvin preach? He, with the other Reformers, believed in *sola scriptura* and *tota scriptura*, and with them he also practiced *lectio continua*, verse by verse continuous exposition. In other words, Calvin preached through books verse by verse. Usually he would take several verses at a time, not necessarily a pericope or "thought unit" of a passage, but Calvin simply took verses in their sequential order. Aside from the book of Revelation, he preached on virtually every book in the canon of Scripture, verse by verse and chapter by chapter. Although we have an incomplete record of his preaching, we know that Calvin preached 200 sermons on the book of Deuteronomy, 159 sermons on Job, 174 sermons on Ezekiel, 189 sermons on Acts, 55 sermons on 1 Timothy, and so on. How many twenty-first-century preachers would feel comfortable preaching 174 sermons on the book of Ezekiel, in order, straight through the book?

In reading his sermons, one sees that Calvin

10 Dawn DeVries, "Calvin's Preaching," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (New York: Cambridge Press, 2004), 120ff.

was very aware of the amazing relevancy of all of Scripture to God's people in every age. Although a fuller development of the covenant would be articulated in coming years, Calvin knew that the whole Bible was for the people of God so he balanced preaching from the Old Testament with preaching from the New. He also understood that, through Christ's Spirit, the people at St. Peter's were being addressed by God as powerfully as the original recipients had been. For instance, as he preached on "Enduring Persecution for Christ," a sermon on Hebrews 13:13, Calvin spoke of those who were at the moment facing martyrdom for the Gospel's sake in various countries of Europe. He also applied the passage to the Geneva congregation, calling them to wholehearted zeal and commitment to Christ in light of these current examples. He preached comfort to the suffering believer repeatedly from the book of Job. He applied Micah 6:6-8 to the temptations which the church of Rome held out to God's people to turn away from the pure Gospel, to say the "our Father," or to go to Mass. Calvin found that *all* of God's Word spoke to the needs of God's people simply by proceeding through it in the order in which God gave it.

Here is, perhaps, help for the preacher who wonders how much topical preaching is appropriate. Does a congregation need to hear another series of sermons on loving one another? Certainly there are instances when such series are fitting. But Calvin would encourage us to preach expositionally through whole books of the Bible, not avoiding any part of Scripture, trusting that God will address all the needs of a congregation over the course of time. Calvin also teaches us something about the nature of the pastoral ministry itself. That is, Calvin was taking the long view of preaching, as a pastor will do if he is committed to ministering to a congregation over a number of years. If he preaches expositionally through whole books, by the design of God in Scripture and the working of the Holy Spirit, he will be speaking those things which God wants his people to hear. In other words, there is in this approach a kind of patience which we may lack today. God's people are not instructed overnight, God's truth is not

unfolded in a four-week series. Maybe, as we look at Calvin, we might think about the long-term commitment to the ministry of the Word which is required in a given congregation.

### The Voice from the Pulpit

Finally, there is a point which underlies all that we might say about Calvin's view of preaching. Generally, in Reformed circles there is a high view of preaching in the life and the worship of God's people. Perhaps, however, we have been too affected by the evangelicalism around us. There can be more focus on preaching *gifts* (important as they are), than on the preaching *office*. In spite of the number of reputed pulpit giants in our day, the evangelical world generally denigrates the sermon as a traditional, but relatively ineffective, part of church life.<sup>11</sup>

Here is where Calvin startles and shocks the modern mind. His view appears often, but listen to what he writes in the *Institutes* 4.1.5:

We see the way set for it: the preaching of the heavenly doctrine has been enjoined upon the pastors. We see that all are brought under the same regulation, that with a gentle and terrible spirit they may allow themselves to be governed by teachers appointed to this function ... all those who spurn the spiritual food, divinely extended to them through the hand of the church, deserve to perish in famine and hunger. God breathes faith into us only by the instrument of his gospel, as Paul points out that "faith comes from hearing" [Rom. 10:17]. Likewise, the power to save rests with God [Rom. 1:16]; but (as Paul again testifies) He displays and unfolds it in the preaching of the gospel ... For among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is a singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in

11 For the challenge to that view see Gregory Edward Reynolds, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Preaching in the Electronic Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001).



order that his voice may resound in them.

What has Calvin just said? That the preacher, speaking the Word of the Lord before the congregation, is used by the Spirit of God to bring blessing or judgment upon God's people. But do you see the daring force with which Calvin speaks? He is not setting up the preached word over against the written word, nor is he saying that the preacher is inspired in the same sense that Scripture is inspired. The authority of the preacher comes because it is the authoritative and holy Word of the Lord he proclaims. Calvin *is* saying something about the working of the Holy Spirit in the act of preaching the Word. This raises the task of preachers to an awesome height. Calvin says in another place, "We may then conclude from these words, that the glory of God so shines in his word, that we ought to be so much affected by it, whenever he speaks by his servants, as though he were nigh to us, face to face..."<sup>12</sup> Jesus Christ addresses his people Sunday by Sunday through his servants! He has made provision for the nurture of his people in giving his Word, but the *preaching* of the Word is also from Him. Christ, as it were, stands in the midst of his people, addressing them through the words of the preacher. This is why the preaching of the Word has to be one of the marks of the church, for if Christ does not speak to his people in the preaching of his Word, then the church will die. Now Calvin knew very well the problem that arises as God's people see their pastors, whom they know, standing before them with the Word of the Lord. Preachers are sinful, fallible men. The treasure of God is given in earthen vessels (cf. *Institutes* 4.1.5); this is Calvin's principle of accommodation, of God bending himself down to meet the needs of his people in ways which sometimes veil his glory. This is the way he puts it in the *Institutes* 4.1.5:

This is doubly useful. On the one hand, he proves our obedience by a very good test when we hear his ministers speaking just as if he himself spoke. On the other, he also

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<sup>12</sup> *Commentary on Haggai* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 343 (Hag. 1:12).

provides for our weakness in that he prefers to address us in human fashion through interpreters in order to draw us to himself, rather than to thunder at us and drive us away. Indeed, from the dread with which God's majesty justly overwhelms them, all the pious truly feel how much this familiar sort of teaching is needed.

The grace of God is seen in the act of preaching. God in mercy draws near to his people and gives them his Word. He shows their utter dependence on him for words to live by, yet humbles them in bringing that precious Word to them through human instruments.

Here is the point of Calvin's thought. The task of preaching the Word of God is no avocation, no part-time job, no dispensable part of the service. The Lord would have his people fed, and it is through his Word that salvation is set out and bread is provided. Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church, illumining both preacher and people, this happens in the assembly of the saints. The Westminster Larger Catechism reflects this in Question 155, developing the idea of the "outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his mediation" from the previous Question (154):

*How is the Word made effectual to salvation?* The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but *especially* [emphasis added] the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.

Ronald Wallace sees Calvin saying the same thing:

Through the preaching of the Word by his ministers, Christ therefore gives his sacramental presence in the midst of his Church, imparts to men the grace which the Word promises, and establishes his Kingdom over the hearts of his hearers. The preaching of the Word by a minister is the gracious form behind which God in coming to men veils that in Himself which man cannot bear to behold directly.<sup>13</sup>

### Encouragement to Preachers

The great calling of the preacher, as he stands in the pulpit, is to have confidence in the Lord and his Word, being faithful to what God has said. It outwardly seems a discouraging calling, yet Calvin encourages the preacher as he comments on Genesis 17:23:

Today, when God wishes his gospel to be preached in the whole world, so that the world may be restored from death to life, he seems to ask for the impossible. We see how greatly we are resisted everywhere and with how many and what potent machinations Satan works against us, so that all roads are blocked by the princes themselves. Yet each man must perform his duty without yielding to any impediment. At the end our effort and our labors shall not fail; they shall receive the success which does not yet appear.<sup>14</sup>

All Europe was electrified by Calvin's preaching because he spoke with utter confidence in God and his Word. Whose word does the preacher proclaim, his own or the Lord's? Boldness and fervor should accompany the knowledge that it is the address of God to his covenant people. This is a vision which will help to keep and heighten the

13 Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, reprint (Tyler, TX: Geneva Divinity School Press, 1982), 84. It is curious that Steven Lawson does not refer to Wallace's well known work.

14 *Commentary on Genesis*, translated and edited by John King (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 465.

power of preaching in the church today:

"Let him who speaks," he says, "speak only the words of God" [I Peter 4:11]; that is, not hesitatingly and tremblingly as evil consciences are accustomed to speak, but with the high confidence which befits a servant of God, furnished with his sure commands. What is this but to reject all inventions of the human mind (from whatever brain they have issued) in order that God's pure Word may be taught and learned in the believers' church? What is it but to remove the ordinances, or rather inventions of all men (whatever their rank), in order that the decrees of God alone may remain in force? These are those spiritual "weapons...with power from God to demolish strongholds"; by them God's faithful soldiers "destroy stratagems and every height that rises up against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" [II Cor. 10:4-5, Comm.]. Here, then, is the sovereign power with which the pastors of the church, by whatever name they be called, ought to be endowed. That is that they may dare boldly to do all things by God's word; may compel all worldly power, glory, wisdom, and exaltation to yield to and obey his majesty; supported by his power, may command all from the highest even to the last; may build up Christ's household and cast down Satan's; may feed the sheep and drive away the wolves; may instruct and exhort the teachable; may accuse, rebuke, and subdue the rebellious and stubborn; may bind and loose; finally, if need be, may launch thunderbolts and lightnings; but do all things in God's Word.<sup>15</sup>

In Geneva there were weekly meetings of the pastors and theologically attuned laymen to discuss Scripture. At the beginning of each meeting, they began with this prayer:

15 *Institutes* 4.8.9.

We pray to our God and Father, asking that it may please him to pardon us for all our faults and offenses and illuminate us by his Holy Spirit to have true understanding of his holy Word, giving us the grace to be able to discuss it purely and faithfully for the glory of his holy name, for the edification of the church, and for our own salvation. Which we ask of him in the name of his only beloved son, Our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup> ■

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16 Cottret, *Calvin Biography*, 296.

# ✦ Servant History

## Irenaeus and Redemptive History

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by James T. Dennison, Jr.

He has been called the most important theologian of the Christian era's second century. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, has been given the encomium "father of Christian theology." I believe Irenaeus would have transferred that accolade to Justin Martyr, his predecessor, and, in many ways, his mentor in the Christian faith. But with allowances for Irenaeus's demur, he stands next to Justin as a giant overshadowing a dwarf. It is not the first time in church history that the student outstrips his teacher. The theological work of Irenaeus is rich—rich in its Christ-centered maturity, rich in its biblical foundation, rich in its passion for the church. While the problematic elements in Irenaeus's system remain matters of debate (his theology of the Eucharist; his alleged chiliasm or historic premillennialism), the heart of his teaching is catholic, evangelical, and, I am bold to say, in places even Reformed.

I want to examine Irenaeus's concept of recapitulation to encourage us with the redemptive-historical or biblical-theological method of the early church fathers. Recapitulation (in Latin *recapitulatio*; in Greek ἀνακεφαλαιώσασις *anakephalaiōsasis*) is Irenaeus's term for the parallels between Adam in the Garden and Adam in the Incarnation. Or to put it succinctly (as he does), Christ Jesus as second Adam undoes what the first Adam did. The organizing principle in Irenaeus's

view of the history of redemption is the two Adams. And since the second Adam is the Son of God, the very image of the Father, we are not surprised to find Irenaeus describing the first Adam, created in the image of God, as "son of God" (even as Luke does in his genealogy of Christ, Luke 3:38; see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.22.3, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:455—hereafter *AH*). In Christ, second Adam, all of the history of redemption is summed up, recapitulated, inverted, fulfilled. "[Christ] has therefore in his work of recapitulation, summed up all things, both waging war against our enemy and crushing him who had at the beginning led us away captives in Adam . . . that as our species went down to death through a vanquished man, so we may ascend to life again through a victorious one" (*AH* 5.21.1; 1:548–49).

### Life and Works

Irenaeus was not a native Westerner. He was born in the East—in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), perhaps in the vicinity of Smyrna (see Rev. 2). Smyrna is suggested as his childhood locale because he mentions that he heard Polycarp of Smyrna preach when he was a boy. Did the execution of Polycarp (ca. 155/56 A.D.) send Irenaeus to the West? We do not know for certain, but he did spend time in Rome before finally settling in Lyons in the Roman province of Gaul (modern day France). Martyrdom affected his life in Lyons too. While he was away from the city on an embassy to Rome in 177 A.D., more than forty Christians in his adopted city were executed by the Romans. The amphitheater where this carnage occurred is still visible in that French metropolis. One of those martyred was Bishop Pothinus. On his return from Rome, Irenaeus was elevated to the episcopal vacancy and became the bishop of the city until his death.

Irenaeus's reputation as a magisterial theologian of the church rests upon his two surviving major works. The famous *Against Heresies* (or more technically "Examination and Refutation of the Falsely Named 'Knowledge'") was directed against the Gnostics, especially the heresies of the arch-Gnostic, Valentinus; it was written circa

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=124](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=124).

180–85 A.D. The second volume extant is his *Proof or Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, a handbook detailing the relationship between the Old and the New Testament—a relationship, as Irenaeus portrays it, of promise and fulfillment. This was written circa 190–95 A.D. While ancient writers listed this second work among the writings of Irenaeus, it was not until 1904 that a copy was discovered in Armenia. It was subsequently translated into English for the first time by J. Armitage Robinson in 1920.

### Hermeneutic and *Historia Salutis*

The hermeneutic of Irenaeus in both his major extant works is not a proof-text approach. While the extraction of verses, and phrases from verses, may function as proofs in both earlier and later patristic theology, the Bishop of Lyons is interested in an unfolding of revelation—a progress of revelation, if you will. This progressive self-disclosure of God is supremely disclosed in the person of his Son. Hence, Irenaeus is self-consciously Christocentric even as he is self-consciously Theocentric. The fullest expression of God’s self-revelation is found in his Son and that means, for Irenaeus, that all of Scripture is oriented to the revelation of Christ—both in the fullness of time and in every anticipation of that fullness. For Irenaeus, the biblical theologian, the Old and New Testament are complementary, disclosing the promise as well as the advent of the Son of God. And the Son of God has been revealed in order to redeem sinful men and women. The economy of salvation—the history of redemption (*historia salutis*)—is central to Irenaeus’s biblical theology. Man, imperiled by his fall into transgression, is in need of restoration to divine favor. Estranged and separated from his Creator by sin, man must be united again to the God from whom he first rebelled at the instigation of Satan. If God and man have been disunited by the defection of sin; God and man must be reunited by salvation from sin. And this reunion is by way of incarnation; to again join together alienated God and sinful man will necessitate a union of God and man. In part, it is the purpose of the incarnation of the Son of God—union of God and

man—to join together what man in his sin had put asunder. “For all things had entered upon a new phase, the Word arranging after a new manner the advent in the flesh, that He might win back to God that human nature which had departed from God” (AH 2.10.2; 1:424). “[T]he Word of the Father who descended is the same also that ascended, He, namely, the Only-begotten Son of the only God, who, according to the good pleasure of the Father, became flesh for the sake of men . . . flesh . . . which was of old formed for Adam by God out of the dust” (AH 1.9.3; 1:329).

### Anti-Docetic and Anti-Gnostic

Notice here the emphasis upon the reality of the flesh which the Logos/Word assumes. Irenaeus is emphatic that the Son of God assumes the flesh of a genuine human nature—he does not merely appear or seem to appear in the flesh. A mere fleshly appearance—a fleshly phantasm in the Logos—would destroy the reality of the incarnation; it would, in fact, destroy the truth of the incarnation. An incarnation which only appears to be “in the flesh” is no incarnation at all. “Vain indeed are those who allege that He appeared in mere seeming. For these things were not done in appearance only, but in actual reality. But if He did appear as a man, when He was not a man,” there was no “degree of truth in Him, for He was not that which He seemed to be” (AH 5.1.2; 1:527). Irenaeus is burdened to underscore the reality of the Son of God/the Logos taking real flesh—a genuine human nature—because in his day he is facing an insidious denial of the reality of the incarnation. Gnostic anthropology or particularly Gnostic Christological anthropology (i.e., Gnosticism’s view of the incarnation) was docetic. The Son of God/Logos according to the Gnostics only appeared (Greek, *δοκειν dokein*) to take on a human nature. The seeming flesh of Christ was in fact only a phantasm, a chimera—the divine nature of the Logos could not unite with the human nature because the divine and human arenas were incompatible. Gnostic religion was a religion of escapism—escape from the corrupt, evil, human, created arena for the pure, pristine, divine

arena (Greek, πνεῦμα *pneuma*). The purpose of the advent of the Son of God for Gnosticism was to show man the way to escape from the corrupt and enter the incorruptible. To escape required the proper knowledge (Greek, γνῶσις *gnosis*)—the proper instruction, the correct initiation into the secrets of the divine arena. Knowing how to escape from the physical, the fleshly, the carnal—that was salvation. Jesus showed the way by knowledge of the truth—the truth that fleshly physicality was not real—pneumatic spirituality was real. The docetic Christ is Gnosticism’s repudiation of the reality of the incarnation. For Irenaeus, this was not only error; it was damnable error because it left man with no hope of union with God. Irenaeus is as vigorously anti-docetic as he is anti-Gnostic. Mankind’s true salvation in the flesh is at stake.

### Deity and Humanity of Christ

But if Irenaeus is emphatic in his defense of the reality of the incarnation, he is as emphatic in his defense of the deity of Christ, i.e., that the Son of God is God, or the Logos is God. Irenaeus asserts this clearly: “the Son of God shall come who is God” (AH 3.20.4; 1:451). And then, citing Habakkuk 3, he continues: “God shall come from the south, the Holy One from Mount Effrem” and by this the prophet “indicates in clear terms that He is God” (ibid.). As the Gnostics questioned the humanity of Christ, so the Ebionites challenged his deity. The Ebionites were a Jewish-Christian group who argued that Jesus was fathered by Joseph through carnal intercourse with Mary and, thus, was a mere man (*nudus homo*, “bare man” or “mere man,” to use Tertullian’s phrase—*De carne Christi*, 14; *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 3:534). The Son of God is the only-begotten of the Father so that for Irenaeus, the Father begets the Son and the Son is begotten of the Father. Thus, the Christ of Irenaeus is God, but he is also a distinct person of the Godhead as Son of God (“the Father only who begat, and the Son who was begotten,” 2.28.6; 1:401). As to the mode of the Son’s generation, Irenaeus does not speculate (“If any one, therefore, says to us, ‘How then was the Son produced by the Father?’ we reply to him, that no man understands

that production, or generation . . .,” ibid.). The relational terms—Father and Son—and the divine eternity suggest consubstantial deity, Father and Son (as well as Holy Spirit). “The Son eternally co-exist[s] with the Father” (AH 2.30.9; 1:406). “The Son of God did not then begin to exist [i.e., at the creation or at the incarnation], being with the Father from the beginning” (AH 3.18.1; 1:446). There is a mutual cohesion of deity in Father and Son: “the Son, who is in the Father, and has the Father in himself” (AH 3.6.2; 1:419). “The unmeasurable Father was Himself subjected to measure in the Son; for the Son is the measure of the Father, since He also comprehends Him” (AH 4.4.2; 1:466).

The genuine humanity and deity of the Son/Logos is crucial to Irenaeus because the Bible tells him so. And the Bible also tells him that mankind is in a state of desperate separation from God so that man’s redemption requires a Savior who is God and man. A mere man (*nudus homo*) will not do; a divine phantasm who only appears to be man will not do. Irenaeus’s doctrine of the person of Christ is forged in concert with his doctrine of salvation. Christology and soteriology are intimately united in Irenaeus (as in the Bible).

### Recapitulation

Virtually all students of Irenaeus have noted his famous recapitulation concept. Based upon the apostle Paul’s remarks in Ephesians 1:10, Irenaeus transfers the “summing up” (ἀνακεφαλαιώσασις *anakephalaiōsasis*) of Paul’s epistle to the divine economy or the history of redemption. He, therefore, positions the *historia salutis* around the recapitulatory relationship between the first and second Adam. Soteriology involves anthropology. Christology integrates theology, anthropology, and soteriology. The advent of Christ, Son of God, is the reversal, the inversion, the turning back, the overturning, the antithesis, the volte-face of the lapse of Adam, the son of God. For Irenaeus, the whole of human history from creation to consummation is summed up in two persons—Adam the first and Adam the last. Or to use terminology Irenaeus does not use, but I believe is compatible

with his thinking: all of human history is summed up (recapitulated) in the protological Adam and the eschatological Adam.

I would like to pause to allow this point to soak into our consciousness. Setting aside Irenaeus's dependence on Justin Martyr, his predecessor historically speaking, we have a massive work dating from 180 to 185 A.D.—a work which is universally regarded as the dominant theological work of the second century church—we have a work a century removed from the apostolic era, doing precisely what the apostle Paul does with the history of redemption in Romans 5, 1 Corinthians 15, Philipians 2, etc.—i.e., organizing the whole of human history around two figures, two Adams, two heads of humanity. I reinforce this point to underscore that Irenaeus is thinking in Pauline fashion like a biblical theologian. In fact, most modern history of doctrine textbooks denominate him in precisely these terms: “the biblical theology of St. Irenaeus”; Irenaeus proceeds as a “biblical theologian”; Irenaeus articulates a *heilsgeschichte* (“holy history” or “salvation history”) methodology; Irenaeus of Lyons works out of the history of redemption.

In further analyzing Irenaeus's recapitulation of history in two Adams, let us first ask, at what time does this recapitulation occur. Irenaeus declares that the recapitulation occurred in the “last times,” “in the end, rather than in the beginning.” Redemptive history—that is, history in which the last Adam recapitulates the first Adam—has entered “the last times”; or, as we would put it, redemptive history has entered the eschatological times. The eschatological Adam enters history in the eschatological era. Irenaeus is conscious that with the recapitulatory advent of the man from heaven, the end of history—the end of the world—is upon us. And as a further token of that eschatological era—that end of the world era—which has dawned in the coming of the Son of God, Irenaeus points to the salvation of the Gentiles. Here is Irenaeus articulating precisely what Paul and other New Testament writers announce—that the salvation of the nations—mankind in its universal, not Jewish particularistic, context—marks the end of history. “God hath concluded every man

in unbelief that He may have mercy upon all . . . describe[s] on what account the Word of God became flesh and suffered; and relate[s] why the advent of the Son of God took place in these last times, that is, in the end, rather than in the beginning [of the world]; and unfold[s] what is contained in the Scriptures concerning the end [itself] and things to come; and [is] not silent as to how it is that God made the Gentiles, whose salvation was despaired of, fellow-heirs, and of the same body and partakers with the saints . . . That is a people who was not a people; and she is beloved who was not beloved” (AH 1.10.3; 1:331).

With the advent of Christ, with the ingathering of the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve from the nations, the end of history is as the beginning of history. There was an Adam at the beginning; there is an Adam at the end; there was an Eve at the beginning; there is an “Eve” at the end. For Irenaeus, the new Eve is more the virgin Mary than the church as the Bride of Christ; but the parallel allusion nonetheless is suggestive.

“God recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man” (AH 3.18.7; 1:448). This recapitulation is gracious—done wholly and entirely at the sovereign good pleasure of God: “not by ourselves, but by the help of God, we must be saved” (AH 3.20.3; 1:450). For Irenaeus, salvation is by the “grace of Jesus Christ our Lord” (ibid.). “He graciously poured Himself out, that He might gather us into the bosom of the Father” (AH 5.2.1; 1:528).

### Redemptive-Historical Reversal

Irenaeus proceeds to describe how this gracious salvation recapitulates the miserable rebellion of Adam and Eve, reversing the reversal. “As our species went down to death through a vanquished man, so we may ascend to life again through a victorious one; and as through a man death received the palm [of victory] against us, so again by a man we may receive the palm against death” (AH 5.21.1; 1:549). “Our Lord took up the same first formation [in the flesh] for an incarnation, that so he might join battle on behalf of his

forefathers and overcome through Adam what had stricken us through Adam” (*Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 31; Robinson ed., p. 68).

The protological Adam brought an inversion or reversal in mankind’s relationship with God, our Creator. He brought us into bondage by his original sin; Christ inverts the reversal by delivering us from bondage. Sinful man’s bondage is expressed by Irenaeus in terms of bondage to Satan; and it is this emphasis which has misled some to suggest that Christ’s death for Irenaeus is a ransom paid to Satan to release us from bondage to the prince of darkness. But as theologian Gustav Wingren pointed out, Christ’s death as a ransom is not a payment made to Satan; it is a payment to God the Father to reverse and break the shackles of sin, death, and judgment. There is no ransom to the Devil in Irenaeus’s doctrine of the atonement. When Irenaeus suggests man’s bondage under sin to Satan, he means a willing enlistment of rebellious mankind in the war which Satan himself first waged against heaven. In other words, sinful Adam voluntarily enlists in Satan’s alienation from his Maker. Adam’s bondage to Satan is a willing alliance with the archrebel.

The most dreadful consequence of the first Adam’s transgression was death—the sentence threatened against him by his Creator-Lord. The inversion to death means the protological Adam (and all mankind in him) lost life—the breath of life given to him by God was forfeited. “He who was a living soul forfeited life when he turned aside to what was evil” (AH 5.12.2; 1:538). “What was it, then, which was dead? Undoubtedly it was the substance of the flesh; the same, too, which had lost the breath of life and had become breathless and dead” (AH 5.12.3; 1:538). Anyone attached to the first Adam is dead, even as that first father became dead. There is no life in them because death now dominates their existence. Irenaeus dismisses any notion of spiritual life in Adam and those joined to him. In fact, he suggests they have no natural life since, for Irenaeus, natural life means life from the hand of God as Adam received life in the beginning. Thus to be “in Adam” is to be not living, but dying. Life is only in the second Adam and

union with him. This is a significant antithesis in Irenaeus: life for sinful man is not life—it is death and cannot be designated by a term reserved for God’s own arena. Life and not death is only found in the new man—the second Adam, the man from heaven who became a life-giving spirit. “Therefore . . . the Lord came to quicken, that as in Adam we do all die, as being of an animal nature, in Christ we may all live, as being spiritual, not laying aside God’s handiwork, but the lusts of the flesh, and receiving the Holy Spirit” (AH 5.21.3; 1:538). It is as a bearer and bestower of the Holy Spirit that the eschatological Adam becomes a life-giving spirit (“These things, therefore, He recapitulated in Himself, by uniting man to the Spirit, and causing the Spirit to dwell in man,” 5.20.2; 1:548). Possessing the Holy Spirit as possessing union with the second Adam alone is life—all else is death.

The first Adam brought death—temporal and eternal; the second Adam brought life—real and everlasting. Bondage to sin; death; loss of the breath of life: Adam’s sin also brought enmity—“by transgressing [our Maker’s] commandment we became His enemies” (AH 5.17.1; 1:544). The inversion of Adam’s sin made friends enemies; and enemies friends. Mankind in Adam from the Fall became enemies of God and friends of Satan. The reversal had to be reversed if man was to become a friend of God once more. “And therefore in the last times the Lord has restored us into friendship through His incarnation” (ibid.). The reversal of Adam the first (alienation) is itself reversed in Adam the last (reconciliation). Friendship with God, which is enmity with Satan, is accomplished in the one who is from the Father’s bosom and the archenemy of Satan. The Son of God is Friend and Bringer of Peace (Reconciliation). Adam’s greater Son, Jesus Christ, has befriended us to the Father by resisting the Devil, declaring himself an implacable enemy of the Tempter, and joining our lives to his life of reconciliation, peace, and friendship with God. From this blessed peace flows new communion and fellowship with God. If the last Adam, eschatological Son of God, utters “Abba Father,” then because of him and his wondrous recapitulation, we too may cry “Abba



Father.” Communion with God is rooted in the communion of the Son with the Father, the Father with the Son. Paraphrasing Irenaeus—the eschatological Adam is the eschatological Friend of God; in him, no more alienation, no more enmity, no more disunion—in him, eschatological union and communion. “The Lord thus has redeemed us through His own blood . . . and has also poured out the Spirit of the Father for the union and communion of God and man, imparting indeed God to man by means of the Spirit, and, on the other hand, attaching man to God by His own incarnation” (5.1.1; 1:527).

I would be derelict if I did not mention Irenaeus’s recapitulatory doctrine of the cross. With fascinating and penetrating insight, he associates the protological and the eschatological tree: “as by means of a tree we were made debtors to God, [so also] by means of a tree we may obtain the remission of our debt . . . For as we lost it by means of a tree, by means of a tree again was it made manifest to all, showing the height, the length, the breadth, the depth in itself; and as a certain man among our predecessors observed, ‘Through the extension of the hands of a divine person, gathering together the two peoples to one God.’ For these were two hands because there were two peoples scattered to the ends of the earth; but there was one head in the middle, as there is but one God, who is above all, and through all, and in us all” (AH 5.17.3–4 sic; 1:545–46). And did you notice that other interesting observation—not only the summing up by means of the relationship between protological and eschatological tree, but the two outstretched hands of the crucified Christ gathering into one, under his headship, Jew and Gentile alike. For Irenaeus, the cross is not only the healing of sinful man; the cross is the healing of the nations.

### Irenaeus and Paul

The biblical-theological, the redemptive-historical, the Adamic recapitulation is clear. Irenaeus of Lyons, with the inspired apostle Paul, sees all of history oriented around two figures—two men—the *urgeschichtlich protos Adam* and the *endgeschichtlich eschatos Adam*. “Nor would the Lord

have summed up [recapitulated] these things in Himself, unless He had Himself been made flesh and blood after the way of the original formation [of man], saving in his own person at the end that which had in the beginning perished in Adam” (AH 5.14.1; 1:541). “What we had lost in Adam . . . we . . . recover in Christ Jesus” (AH 3.18.1; 1:446). “As in the natural [Adam] we all were dead, so in the spiritual we may all be made alive” (AH 5.1.3; 1:527).

This recapitulation concept has, in Irenaeus, a fascinating feature. As Christ recapitulates Adam, so he recapitulates every stage in Adamic human nature. That is to say, Irenaeus believes that the recapitulation is not merely redemptive-historical, he believes it is also personal-historical. For Irenaeus, Jesus recapitulates man’s history by undergoing the phases of man’s history. Is man born a child? Jesus recapitulates man’s history in being born a child. Does man grow to boyhood? Jesus recapitulates man’s history in growing to a boy. Does man progress to adolescence? Jesus recapitulates by becoming an adolescent youth. Does man mature to adulthood? Jesus recapitulates by maturing as an adult. Does man enter old age? Here Irenaeus surprises us: Jesus recapitulates man’s story as old man. According to Irenaeus, Jesus is crucified when he is about fifty years old (John 8:57 literally!; AH 2.22.5–6; 1:392). Jesus recapitulates the phases of man’s physical maturity—from infancy to adulthood. Why does Irenaeus insist on this physiological recapitulatory pattern? Because Christ sanctifies each phase of man’s development: infancy, childhood, youth, adulthood, old age. No phase of man’s maturation has *not* been experienced by Christ; so that in Christ, each phase of that history may be delivered up unto God as a sanctified possession.

### Eschatological Paradise

Before concluding, I want to note one other significant aspect of the two Adams motif. Is the work of the second Adam a mere restoration of the work of the first Adam? Does Christ as eschatological Adam merely place man back in the garden with the protological Adam? Or does Irenaeus

sense that even the first Adam is destined for more than the earthly Garden of Eden? When Irenaeus changes his focus from the first to the second Adam to define the nature and reality of the recapitulation, he is implicitly answering our question. As the second Adam exceeds the first in dignity and glory, so that which the Logos inhabits from eternity to eternity (albeit as incarnate Logos from eternity future) exceeds what the first Adam inhabited. Paradise protological is exceeded by Paradise eschatological as Adam protological is exceeded by Adam eschatological.

This is particularly emphasized in Irenaeus's discussion of the Logos (Son of God) as the image of God and the incarnate Logos as the restorer of the image of God in man. Without confusing the Creator/creature distinction, Irenaeus relates the Adamic image of God to the image of God in the Son/Logos. In other words, the model for Adam as son of God (Luke 3:38) was the Logos as Son of God. The image of God which the Logos reflects is paralleled by the image of God which Adam reflects. Holding to the discontinuity between the image of God in a created being and the image of God in an uncreated Being, Irenaeus still relates the categories of lost and defaced *imago* to ontological *imago*. The perfect *imago Dei* is not Adam, but Christ. Thus even *imago* points beyond itself (as does Adam, the Garden, the promise of life, the threat of death).

### Conclusion

Irenaeus of Lyons joined together the Word/Logos consubstantial with God the Father; and the flesh, consubstantial with Adam. He embraced this union of God and man in order to join heaven and earth. Any suggestion of discontinuity between heaven and earth (as in Gnosticism) was to make redemption/salvation impossible. Gnosticism had no doctrine of redemption—that is, redemption of man—flesh and spirit. Gnosticism had no history of redemption—that is, incarnational or intrusion-ary acts of God in time and space. Gnosticism had no biblical theology—that is, no progressive unfolding of God's revelation to his people in history. Gnosticism had no recapitulation—that is, no

summing up of mankind's history in the last Adam, Jesus Christ. Gnosticism had only escape, appearance, illusion, (secret) gnosis. How could salvation for sinners arise from such a system of despair? It could not!

Irenaeus knew that the Lyons martyrs of 177 A.D. had died in Christ—real human lives in real union (body and soul) with the One who united himself to them (God and man). Irenaeus knew that the apostles saw, heard, and handled a God-man in the fullness of time. Irenaeus knew that the church was the assembly of the saved—the body of the One who lived (God in the flesh) for them, who died (God in the flesh) for them, and who was raised again (God in the flesh) for their salvation. Only a recapitulation—only an eschatological recapitulation—could bring such glorious good news to lost sinners. ■

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## Catholicity and Conscience

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by Peter J. Wallace<sup>2</sup>

In the Apostles' Creed we confess, "the holy catholic church." In the Nicene Creed we confess, "I

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=128](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=128).

2 His dissertation, "The Bond of Union: The Old School Presbyterian Church and the American Nation, 1837–1861," available at <http://www.peterwallace.org/dissertation.htm>, provides a detailed history of Old School Presbyterianism and the relationship between catholicity and conscience.

believe one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.” In the Westminster Confession of Faith we confess,

The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation. (WCF 25.2)

Today there are those who would say, “I profess the true religion, so I am a member of the visible church, regardless of whether I am a member of a particular church.” But this is not what our Confession says. After all, in the very next section we confess,

Unto this catholic visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth, by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto. (WCF 25.3)

All three of these creeds were written during the age of catholicity. They were written by men who believed that the unity of the visible church was a central tenant of the Christian faith.

### **Catholicity in the Early Church**

The Nicene Creed is a good example. The Council of Nicea expressed the unity of the visible church catholic very well. During the fourth century, each regional church was essentially autonomous. Each one had its own baptismal creed, its own liturgy, and for that matter, its own form of government. For instance, in North Africa only bishops were allowed to preach (presbyters could only administer the Lord’s Supper), and so every little dusty village had its own bishop. In Italy and Alexandria presbyters were allowed to preach and administer the sacraments, and so they tended to

have fewer bishops.

Nonetheless, although each regional church had its own local flavor, there was essential unity in the faith. All of the local baptismal creeds followed the basic pattern of what we now call the Apostles’ Creed. While there was some variety of detail in the liturgies, they all followed the same basic pattern (enter worship on the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; reading and preaching of the Word; prayer; eucharist).

The bishop of the leading city in the region was generally responsible for convening synods whenever the need arose. Regional synods were usually able to resolve matters of controversy before they spread too widely, and the decisions of regional synods were supposed to be respected by bishops in other regions to maintain fellowship.

But in the 320s, as the Arian controversy spread throughout the church, it became clear that regional synods were unable to resolve the dispute. So Emperor Constantine (note that there was no one bishop with the authority to call a universal synod) called an ecumenical council to deal with the matter and maintain unity in the church and the empire.

Therefore, when the Nicene Creed states, “I believe one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church,” it is not referring to one international *organization*, but one international *fellowship* of regional churches.

### **Catholicity in the Reformation**

This is the model that the sixteenth-century Reformers tried to restore. They objected to Rome’s attempt to establish an international organization, and reestablished the patristic model of an international fellowship of regional churches. This is why Geneva frequently requested the opinion of the other Reformed churches before taking momentous actions. This is why the sixteenth-century confessions look so much alike. For that matter, this is why twenty-four of the eighty-six members of the Synod of Dort came from the Reformed churches of England, Scotland, the Palatinate, Brandenburg, Hesse, Zurich, Berne, Basle, Geneva, etc. (It should be noted that the churches

of England and Scotland were at this time episcopal, while the rest were presbyterian. As in the early church, differences in polity did not preclude joint participation in the international fellowship of regional churches.) This was the model that is reflected in chapter 25 of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

It is important to remember that each region only had one church. (I recognize that some might call these “national” churches, but I think regional church is a more descriptive term; the term “city church” would better denote the patristic and reformed presbytery.) Even when James I restored bishops to Scotland, the Presbyterians did not start a new denomination. They understood that the catholicity of the visible church was not negotiable. They would seek to reform the church from within. They recognized that when Paul addressed the corruptions of the Corinthian church, he did not say, “get out!” Rather, he called upon them to reform (and of course the epistle of 1 Clement noted that the Corinthians had not entirely reformed even a generation later!).

Sure, there were anomalies. During the fourth century there was a schism in the church of Antioch, which resulted in more than fifty years with two orthodox bishops. And in some parts of Germany there were Reformed and Lutheran churches side by side. But these were considered temporary aberrations—not models for the future.

Yet today there are more than thirty orthodox Reformed denominations in the United States alone! The bewildering array of evangelical denominations is staggering. How did this happen? There are many factors, and I will not attempt an exhaustive explanation. Instead I will suggest one aspect: the triumph of conscience over catholicity.

### **Conscience and Catholicity**

The exaltation of conscience over catholicity did not happen overnight. It grew steadily from the late Middle Ages through the twentieth century. The Reformation complained about the false catholicity of the Roman church (a catholicity rooted in tradition rather than Scripture), and sought to restore equilibrium, but the Anabaptists

and later the Independents and Separatists went to the opposite extreme, exalting conscience over catholicity.

Liberty of conscience was defended by the Reformation, but it always remained within the context of the catholicity of the visible church. We are no doubt familiar with Westminster Confession of Faith 20.2:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

But 20.4 does not seem to garner the same attention these days:

And because the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another, they who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God.

In the seventeenth century this statement had powerful implications. George Gillespie, one of the members of the Westminster Assembly, had refused to be ordained by a bishop because he believed that only Presbyterian ordination was lawful. Therefore, he waited and became the first ordinand in the wake of the revolution of 1638. There were dozens, if not hundreds, of ministers in the Church of Scotland who agreed with Gillespie, yet they did not leave the church to start a new denomination. Instead they worked patiently for reform. Liberty of conscience and the catholic-

ity of the visible church are supposed to reinforce one another—not destroy one another.

Certainly the establishment principle was part of what held the church together during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But this was not true of the Reformed Church of France or of the Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland, neither of which had any relationship to the state. Yet neither of these churches suffered any division until after the decay of catholicity eroded the unity of the established churches elsewhere. Further, there was neither state support nor central organization during the first three centuries of the church, yet the principle of the catholicity of the visible church was so strong that the church fought off Gnosticism, Ebionitism, and numerous other heresies long before the Arian controversy arose.

How did the churches maintain conscience *and catholicity* in the midst of controversy? Because they believed that the catholicity of the visible church was nonnegotiable. Certainly there might be decades (or even whole centuries) when the regional church of Alexandria and the regional church of Antioch were out of fellowship. But both sides were convinced that this was not the way it was supposed to be, and the regional churches of Rome and Jerusalem might attempt to reconcile the warring brethren.

### Conscience versus Catholicity

The problem today is that we live in an age of conscience, in which true catholicity is nearly impossible to practice. Whereas our Reformed forefathers tried to find a way for all Reformed ministers to maintain a clear conscience within the visible church catholic, today the tendency is to impose the convictions of our conscience upon the rest of the church. We tend to follow our conscience and trust that the result will be good for the church. But if conscience becomes more important than catholicity, then all we are left with is a postmodern Babel in which each group tries to establish dominance over all others. And, like Babel, the only possible result is schism and fragmentation.

It is interesting to note that until the twentieth century most Presbyterian and Reformed churches

had closer relationships with Episcopalians than with Baptists. Today this has become reversed. Perhaps this is partly due to the fact that many Episcopalians turned High Church in the nineteenth century and Modernist in the twentieth century, but it may also be because Presbyterians have generally turned away from the catholicity of the visible church and have appropriated the Baptist emphasis on individual conscience.

While the triumph of conscience over catholicity has been a long process, one key turning point may be located in the 1830s. This decade saw the emergence of several radical movements that demanded that catholicity yield to conscience: (1) New School Presbyterians argued that the catholicity of the *invisible* church is all that really mattered—and that, therefore, voluntary associations were the best way to engage in missions. (2) The temperance movement began to insist that alcohol was inherently evil and that Jesus really turned water into grape juice. Several presbyteries and synods begin moving to exclude all those who drank, sold, or manufactured alcoholic beverages from membership (thereby enforcing the dictates of a modern conscience regardless of the historic catholic practice). (3) The abolition movement declared that all slaveholders must be excommunicated and that support for gradual emancipation was wicked. (4) Proslavery “fire eaters” in South Carolina called for the Synod of South Carolina to withdraw from the Old School Presbyterian Church because they did not wish to be in fellowship with antislavery men (and when the Synod refused to withdraw, they started their own independent presbytery). (5) The Oxford Movement made extravagant claims regarding the necessity of an apostolic succession of bishops and emphasized the importance of minor liturgical details.

These movements all reveal the ways in which conscience was overthrowing catholicity. One of the most amazing examples of this was the 1845 decision of the Old School General Assembly to declare Roman Catholic baptism invalid, by a vote of 173–8. What makes this vote especially remarkable is that James H. Thornwell and others who denied the validity of Romish baptism could

not find one single Reformed theologian prior to the nineteenth century who agreed with them. John Calvin, John Knox, Francis Turretin, and the Westminster divines had all granted the validity of Roman Catholic baptism. The Presbyterian and Reformed Churches of Scotland, Northern Ireland, England, Switzerland, France, Germany, and The Netherlands had always accepted Roman baptism, as did the American churches. But by the end of the three days of debate (nineteenth-century General Assemblies were ordinarily two weeks long), only eight men were willing to accept Roman baptism. Conscience had defeated catholicity. In fairness to the Old School, I should note that even the opponents of Romish baptism admitted thirty years later that the majority of Old School churches had ignored the General Assembly and continued to accept Roman Catholic baptism. The official policy after the reunion in the 1870s was to allow individual sessions to decide for themselves—which attempted to keep catholicity and conscience in balance. The problem, however, was that if one session accepted Roman baptism and then the person transferred to a congregation that did not accept Roman baptism, the latter session would be left in a very awkward position!

### **Catholicity and Conscience**

Today liberty of conscience almost invariably trumps catholicity, because the catholicity of the visible church has become virtually impossible to believe or practice in any meaningful way. If we truly believed that the catholicity of the visible church was as nonnegotiable as liberty of conscience, how would it alter our practice?

1. We might consider the term “fraternal relations” to encompass our fellowship with every part of the visible church catholic. This would have implications at both the congregational and presbytery level. The General Assembly could continue to focus on those churches with whom we are more closely related, but at the city church level we should seek to maintain fellowship with all churches that confess Jesus Christ as Lord. For instance, the worldwide Anglican Fellowship is currently initiating discipline against the Episcopal

Church USA for tolerating heretical bishops and violating biblical sexual ethics. Faithful ECUSA churches are rejoicing in this. How can we encourage them? Joint prayer meetings, conferences, and diaconal projects are all ways to maintain this fellowship, not to mention a joint Saturday picnic at a local park!

2. Along similar lines, we should attempt to establish local ministerial fellowships with evangelical brethren which provide for the mutual respect of one another’s discipline and perhaps include discussion of key theological issues. If we are convinced that the Reformed faith is the most faithful summary of biblical teaching, then we should seek to winsomely engage with our evangelical brethren, praying for the reformation of the church in our local region.

3. In matters of controversy, we might be slower to insist that the whole church agree with our particular interpretation of Scripture. Is this issue important enough that we must bind the whole church to my position? The Westminster divines found ways of stating things that included both those who affirmed and those who denied that the active obedience of Christ was imputed to us in our justification. Surely we can allow some room for one another’s consciences in the church today.

4. We could work towards an international fellowship of Reformed churches that might occasionally hold ecumenical councils to resolve matters of supreme importance. This would not work unless and until we bring conscience and catholicity into harmony (otherwise the decisions of such an ecumenical council would be meaningless). But at least, when we have major issues to decide, perhaps we should follow the example of the Synod of Dort and include members from Reformed churches around the world in our deliberations (and maybe even in the vote?).

5. If the goal is to establish unity at the regional level, then perhaps our efforts toward organic union should focus on the city and region, rather than the “national” level. Something like Robert Godfrey’s “Reformed Dream” (from *Modern Reformation*, Sept/Oct, 2005) could be very fruitful

in encouraging local and regional efforts toward union. ■

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# ✦ Servant Truth

## A Christian Anthropology for Contemporary Bioethics

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by David VanDrunen

Some of the most difficult pastoral situations that ministers and elders face today revolve around questions of bioethics. Infertile couples seek counsel about pursuing artificial means of reproduction, sick parishioners solicit advice about whether to undergo experimental (but risky and expensive) treatment for a life-threatening illness, and uncertain saints ask when it might be proper to discontinue artificial nutrition and hydration for a permanently unconscious relative. From one perspective, the very fact that we face such questions gives us much to be thankful for: because of great advances in medical technology, we are able to cure physical ailments and prolong life in ways impossible in previous generations. But with these blessings have also come perplexing ethical problems with which previous generations did not have to wrestle. As medical technology continues to progress at astounding speed, ministers and elders can only expect that such problems will become both more complex and more common.

A large part of the difficulty surrounding bioethics questions for Christians is the lack of explicit biblical instruction for dealing with them. It is simply a fact that Scripture provides no specific guidelines about overcoming infertility through in vitro fertilization or about traveling to Mexico

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=98](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=98).

to receive an obscure course of treatment unapproved by the FDA yet offering a faint possibility of cure for an otherwise terminal illness. Making moral choices under such circumstances is difficult, but Christians are not left without resources. Perhaps most crucial is having a solid theological foundation along with the wisdom to perceive the implications of that foundation. Regarding bioethics, perhaps no doctrine is more important than anthropology. Having a biblically grounded anthropology certainly does not guarantee an easy answer to every bioethical question, but it does provide necessary context for evaluating bioethics conundrums.

In this essay, I reflect upon two aspects of a Christian anthropology particularly important for bioethics. First, I consider the image of God, and then I explore the curse of mortality and the promise of immortality described in Scripture. Both of these matters, we will see, ought to shape profoundly the way in which we approach the pastoral challenges provoked by bioethics.

### The Image of God and Bioethics

An understanding of the image of God has been central not only to Reformed anthropology but also to the anthropology of the other major Christian traditions. I focus in this first section upon three aspects of the biblical, Reformed doctrine of the image of God that are foundational for a proper approach to bioethics.

The first aspect may seem rather obvious to many, but it is worth mentioning nonetheless: the doctrine of the image of God reminds us of the inherent value and dignity of every human being. The fact that we bear God's image means that we were created with moral responsibility toward God with the goal of everlasting fellowship with him. Recognition of this simple yet profound truth explains why the conception, birth, dying, and death of every human person are radically different from these same events in the animal world. However biologically similar the origin and end of human and animal life may appear, a world of difference separates them morally. This Christian perspective stands out most starkly in comparison with radical



contemporary voices such as that of Peter Singer, whose conflation of human and animal life simultaneously overvalues animals and undervalues human beings (at least those whose disability renders them something less than *persons*). The ethical implications of these diverse perspectives are clear regarding many controversial social issues, such as abortion, embryonic research, euthanasia, and assisted suicide. Every human being—no matter how small, vulnerable, or sick—is worthy of care and protection. These high-publicity social issues probably seem like easy ethical issues to most office-bearers in Reformed churches, but surely there are plenty of temptations for us to live inconsistently with the implications of this aspect of the image of God. We ought to beware, for example, of begrudging the pastoral effort that the disabled, infirm, or dying may demand when we could be devoting time to the healthy and wealthy members or budding seminarians who offer far greater prospects for contributing to the well-being of the church.

Another significant aspect of the image of God that is not as often recognized, but which also has weighty bioethical implications, is the idea that God's image-bearers are inherently social creatures. From the beginning God made his image-bearers "male and female" (Gen. 1:27) and gave them tasks—multiplying and exercising dominion (Gen. 1:28)—that are impossible to carry out as solitary individuals. This basic reality remains unchanged in the fallen world and is in fact heightened by our re-creation in the image of God through the work of Christ. We have been "predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn *among many brothers*" (Rom. 8:29). Christians are not only made to be members of the broader human community but also, and especially, recreated to be members of the redeemed community of the church which will find its consummation in the perfect community of the everlasting heavenly kingdom. To be an image-bearer means to live in mutual responsibility and accountability.

What bioethical situations might prompt ministers and elders to keep such truths in mind?

Consider a married couple, for many years unable to have children, who comes seeking guidance about whether they should pursue remedies that promise to be emotionally, physically, and financially trying. Assuming for the moment that they are not considering a remedy that is inherently sinful, what sorts of considerations should their pastor or elders bring to their attention? First, they might be reminded that as God's image-bearers they were made male and female, designed for marriage and called to be fruitful in that relationship. This inherently social aspect of the image should assure them that their desire to have children is healthy and righteous, and they need not feel guilty about pursuing this desire. At the same time, they might also be reminded that the social character of the image of God extends beyond their own familial relationships. They also have responsibilities toward others in the human community and especially toward their fellow saints in the church. Just as Paul himself recognized that having no wife allowed him to serve God in ways that his married colleagues could not (see 1 Cor. 7:7, 32–35; 9:5), so there are certainly opportunities for service in civil society and in the church that those without children may be better able to pursue: serving as missionaries in a dangerous place (or pursuing a socially beneficial secular calling in a dangerous place), offering regular and generous hospitality for the needy, giving lavishly to the promotion of the gospel, or even adopting a child or children from among the numerous orphaned and abandoned children of the world. Infertile couples, finding one avenue for expressing the social character of the image of God closed to them, can be challenged to see other avenues opening for them. Such considerations do not in themselves provide a quick and easy answer to this couple's original dilemma. But a solid anthropology can help people to see the various dimensions of their moral choice.

This social aspect of the image of God has many other ramifications for bioethics. To mention just one more, it should certainly affect the way in which we counsel people who are contemplating in advance what kind of care they wish to receive

should they become incapacitated. A number of options now exist for people to consider. A *living will* specifies what kind of medical interventions a person desires under particular circumstances if he is unable to make that decision himself. A *power of attorney for health care* designates an agent to make such medical decisions on behalf of the incapacitated individual. Wisdom suggests that such matters ought to be dealt with in advance and with due reflection, before an emergency or crisis situation occurs. But what sorts of provisions for the future are appropriate? One common concern is that we not be a burden to our family members who will have to care for us or be financially implicated when we reach the last stages of life. The social character of the image of God indicates that this concern is quite proper. Only an image-denying selfishness would make inordinate demands for one's own care and preservation at the expense of the other ongoing responsibilities and financial health of the next generation. Yet concern for the social character of the image of God cuts in the other direction as well. A principal part of this concern is that we ought to care for each other, which includes expending time and money to help family members and Christian brothers and sisters who are in need. We should not only be willing to *give* such care but also to *receive* such care. None of us, no matter how strong or wealthy at the moment, is an autonomous individual who can insulate himself from any need for help from others. Taken together, these considerations suggest that planning for our health care future demands a balance that both avoids undue demands upon loved ones and allows them to provide for us in our weakness. This also entails that we not be overly confident in our ability to specify in advance exactly how we think we should be treated, but instead should be willing to entrust important decisions about what kind of care we need to loved ones whose judgment we trust.

One other consideration related to the image of God is important to mention briefly. Though the divine image has been terribly corrupted by the fall into sin, Reformed theologians have generally recognized that it has not been expunged

completely (see Gen. 9:6; James 3:9). One of the implications of the lingering remnant of the image of God is the moral knowledge and responsibility of unregenerate humanity. From the beginning, bestowal of the image meant that human beings were moral creatures (see Gen. 1:26, 28 and Eph. 4:24), and retention of the image, however marred, ensures that people continue to know their basic moral responsibilities and their accountability toward God. If human beings are image-bearers by nature, then by nature they know something about God and his moral character. Paul reflected on this reality even concerning the unregenerate in Romans 1:18–32 and 2:14–15. This has implications for bioethics. For one thing, as Christians enter the public health care system in which they necessarily deal with many non-Christians and as they participate in public policy debates about bioethics issues, they may derive confidence from the fact that, at the very least, general revelation impresses upon unbelievers' consciences many truths about the human condition. Of course, unbelievers suppress this knowledge and often deny it, but even when this is the case, Christians can appeal to the inherent dignity of each person and other such truths being confident that all people *know* that they are true even if they refuse to acknowledge it. Thanks to common grace, however, it is also the case that unbelievers often recognize and live according to the truths of general revelation in their outward lives. Unbelievers often make great contributions to medicine, defend humane bioethical positions, and instill wisdom in people winding their way through the health care maze. In light of these considerations, pastors and elders may find occasion to offer encouragement to their anxious sheep who must deal with medical issues in reliance upon and collaboration with those who do not share their faith.

### **Mortality, Immortality, and Bioethics**

A second issue in anthropology that has far-reaching ramifications for bioethics is the nature of human mortality and the blessing of immortality that comes in Christ. Since issues related to illness and dying are among the most common and

controversial in contemporary bioethics, having a proper grasp of the nature of death is of particular importance. Surely all people by general revelation know important things about the character of death, but Scripture clarifies crucial aspects of this matter and reveals what general revelation cannot relate, namely, that death has been defeated through the work of Christ. In this section we will consider how these truths should mold the way that Reformed pastors and elders instruct all of their sheep about the inevitable reality of death and especially those for whom death is imminent.

Crucial to a biblical anthropology is that fallen human beings are mortal. This may appear to be a rather banal claim, since human mortality seems to be a fact that no one would dare to deny. And yet many people do try to suppress or even to overcome it. The United States of America has arguably the best health care system in the world, offering prospects for treatment of illness and preservation of life never before seen in human history. But polls tell us that discontentment with the health care system is one of the predominant concerns of Americans today, and this sour mood promises to shape much of the rhetoric of the 2008 presidential campaign. The best medical care in the world—yet people continue to get sick, treatments continue to fall short, people continue to die. As long as these things happen, there will never be satisfaction. The more that medicine can do, the higher people's expectations become. The stupendous accomplishments of modern medicine combined with a stubborn refusal to accept the fact of human mortality has, in fact, spawned the recent rise of "transhumanism," a movement whose goal is to transcend the present limits of human nature and to transform us into a new kind of death-defying being.

The present cultural discontentment with advanced modern medicine is put into stark perspective by a biblical anthropology. There is, of course, nothing wrong with seeking further progress in fighting disease and seeing medicine's achievements benefit more people. However, a biblical anthropology confronts us with the fact that human suffering and death are not obstacles

that might be overcome by our own ingenuity, but a curse and punishment placed upon the human race by God on account of sin. Human effort can never overcome what God has ordained. For Christians, the question cannot be *whether* we will suffer in this life, but *with what attitude* we will suffer. The question is not *whether* we will die, but *how we will prepare* to die, both when it seems far off and when it seems near. Ministers and elders must guard themselves against the temptation to join in the contemporary discontentment and instead strive to refocus the church's sights on gaining a proper attitude toward our inevitable suffering and death.

What is a proper attitude toward death? A biblical anthropology instructs us, first of all, that death is a horrible and frightening thing. Human death is not something natural, in the original sense of how God created things to be, but is the result of Adam's fall into sin (Gen. 2:17, 3:19; Rom. 6:23). As such, death is a curse, a judgment—and it is a judgment and curse of the most horrifying kind. As the Reformed doctrine of the covenant of works teaches, God originally called man to *life*—not to a continuing life in the Garden, but to an everlasting life of confirmed righteousness in eschatological glory. When God threatened death upon disobedience, then, he was threatening much more than temporal death in this world, the dissolution of soul and body. He was threatening an everlasting death of confirmed condemnation in eschatological torment.

Unbelievers are surely not ignorant of this grim reality. Romans 1:32, concluding a long discourse on how people pervert the *natural knowledge* of God and his law, states frankly: "Though they *know* God's decree that those who practice such things *deserve to die*, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them." Little wonder it is, then, that for many people death has been a subject to be avoided and a reality to be denied even when its onset is at hand. Some readers will be familiar with John Gunther's 1949 book, *Death Be Not Proud*, an account of his seventeen-year-old son's battle with and death from a brain tumor. Though this book is moving and

filled with characters who are admirable in many respects, it is striking to observe that neither the doctors nor his parents ever told this teenage boy that he was going to die. The author-father states explicitly that they repeatedly deceived him about the state of his cancer and the success of the treatments, and he clearly considers this to have been the humane and obvious course of action. Gunther explains that they did not want to take away his *hope* nor derail his *courage*. But can a person exercise true hope or true courage when he is, perhaps through no fault of his own, deluded about the truth and acting upon false premises? Surely, Christians must be encouraged to face the truth about death—including their own. Death is far too momentous a thing to be ignored or denied. The reality of death must be confronted and dealt with; otherwise there can be no experience of hope or exhibition of courage.

Cultural mores seem to have swung in the opposite direction since the days of Gunther's memoir, however. Now conventional wisdom tells us that we must indeed face up to our death and the feelings of grief that dying evokes. Due to the efforts of figures such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and the hospice movement, the topics of death and dying have been brought into the open in ways that they were not before. Undoubtedly, this development has had some beneficial results from an earthly point of view, such as in improving relationships among family members of the dying as a result of open and honest conversation. But other aspects of this development make it decidedly insufficient and even unhelpful from the perspective of biblical anthropology. Most importantly, it holds out the goal of deaths that are inherently peaceful and acceptable as part of the natural course of things, with or without faith in Christ (different programs have different views about the place of religion in the dying process). Yet given the reality of death as a dreadful curse and a gateway to everlasting punishment, no death can be truly peaceful that is viewed apart from Christ. Whatever honesty is gained by facing up to the approach of death is lost by the need to package death as something other than the divine judgment that it is.

When they acknowledge the reality and inevitability of death on the one hand and the fearsome character of death on the other, Christians take an honest perspective. But there is no comfort or encouragement in this *per se*. Ministers and elders are able to offer encouragement in the face of death only in light of Christ's great acts of redemption. The Lord Jesus Christ became one of us in body and soul, endured human suffering beyond what any of us will suffer, and experienced not only the dying process but even death itself, through the separation of soul from body and the burial of his body in a tomb. And, in enduring all of these things, he knew not only temporal death but also eschatological death, as he took upon himself the wrath of his Father against sin. By faith we have died and been buried with him and know that he has died once and for all on our behalf (Rom. 5:8; 6:3–4). But even this would be of little comfort were it not for Christ's resurrection, by which he, in human flesh, attained the eschatological life to which Adam was originally called. Scripture therefore announces that death has been defeated (1 Cor. 15:54–57) and the one who has the power of death has been destroyed (Heb. 2:14–15). Even now we have been raised with Christ (Rom. 6:5; Col. 3:1–4) and look forward with great assurance to our own bodily resurrection on the last day (1 Cor. 15:20–23).

At this point a biblical anthropology is transformed by biblical soteriology and eschatology. For those who belong to Christ, the human condition has been altered in fundamental ways, and in no case is this more evident than in regard to death. Believers remain subject to death in this world, and their deaths will look the same biologically as the deaths of unbelievers. But they should be urged to approach death with a radically different attitude; for though death still produces godly grief in them, it has lost its sting. Death has become the gateway to heaven and, one day, to the resurrection of the body. Reflecting the Christian's new attitude, the Apostle Paul could honestly and openly contemplate his own death and *nevertheless* acknowledge death as preferable to life in this world due to the prospect of being with Christ

(Phil. 1:20–23; 2 Cor. 5:6–8). Believers may face death with true hope, that is, the *absolute assurance* of good things to come, not (as commonly in our everyday speech) the *possibility* (however remote) of a happy ending. And believers may face death with true courage, that is, boldness and perseverance in the face of great trial because they know that God will not let them be tempted in this life beyond what they can bear and will bring them safely to their everlasting rest.

Reflecting upon this anthropological transformation that the work of Christ effects provides key resources for shepherding God's children through the valley of the shadow of death. We may remind those whose suffering is severe, for whom the idea of assisted suicide or mercy killing seems attractive, that Christ has suffered every human affliction as their great high priest (Heb. 2:17–18), has called us to suffer with him for a little while (Rom. 8:17), and has promised never to leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5). We are precious to God in our dying (Ps. 116:15), and those dying in Christ are blessed (Rev. 14:13). But these great truths of a transformed anthropology may also serve to remind dying saints who still have a strong desire to live that there is a time to die. When exactly is the right time to forego further treatment is a very difficult question that cannot be explored here. But such a decision can be a godly one precisely because in Christ we have come to recognize that life here on earth is not the highest good. It is surely not something to which we should cling tenaciously no matter what the cost. There is a time to recognize that our labors on earth are ending, by God's will, and that we may look forward with joy to our imminent departure to be with Christ.

## Conclusion

The recent advances in modern medicine have indeed given birth to a slew of new and challenging ethical issues that have also become trying pastoral issues for the church. Knowing biblical, Reformed doctrine does not eliminate the need for wisdom in order to understand the moral significance of particular circumstances and the spiritual state of particular saints. But being grounded in a

sound anthropology, on matters such as the image of God and human mortality and immortality, provides indispensable resources by which the shepherds of Christ's church may guide the flock through many of the hardest situations that they will face. Contemplating the implications of our anthropology is a task that should engage all of us as office-bearers as we navigate through increasingly complicated medical waters.

## Pastoral Resources

John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004). Though there is relatively little written on bioethics recently from a distinctively Reformed perspective, several chapters in this book by a Reformed writer discuss important bioethics issues.

Gilbert Meilaender, *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). Meilaender is a conservative Lutheran theologian and ethicist. This book is wise and helpful in its treatment of a range of bioethics issues.

Scott B. Rae and Paul M. Cox, *Bioethics: A Christian Approach in a Pluralistic Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). This book covers many common bioethics questions. It is written from a broadly evangelical perspective, though Reformed readers should find it generally reliable theologically and insightful in applying biblical truths to concrete issues.

Leon Kass, *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics* (San Francisco: Encounter, 2002). Kass is a Jewish scholar, though he does not write from a decidedly religious perspective, and he served as chair of the President's Council on Bioethics. Readers may find his reflections on a number of bioethics issues here to be very thought-provoking.

Albert R. Jonsen, *The Birth of Bioethics* (Oxford University Press, 2003) and *The Story of Bioethics: From Seminal Works to Contemporary Explorations*, ed. Jennifer K. Walter and Eran P. Klein (Georgetown University Press, 2003).

Both of these works (neither by Reformed writers) provide information for readers curious about the history and development of the field of bioethics generally. ■

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# Incarnation, Inspiration, and Pneumatology: A Reformed Incarnational Analogy

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by Lane G. Tipton

## Introduction

Incarnation, inspiration, and pneumatology—how do these theological realities relate to one another? How should one be distinguished from the other? While each topic is clearly worth a study in and of itself, precisely how we relate these three theological realities is important as well. Indeed, at stake is a proper understanding of Scripture, not to mention the person of Christ.

I propose in this essay what I take to be a Chalcedonian incarnational model and draw some meaningful analogies to the nature of inspiration. My thesis is that the proper analogy to the incarnation with reference to inspiration and hermeneutics resides not first in anthropology but in

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=109](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=109).

pneumatology. The incarnational analogy ought to yield both a theology of Scripture and a hermeneutic that take into account the primary theological and hermeneutical significance of the Holy Spirit's agency, on the one hand, and the subordinate theological and hermeneutical significance of human agency, on the other hand. The primacy of the divine in Pneumatology finds a clear analogue in the primacy of the eternal person of the Son of God.

Therefore, the proper and central theological category from which to draw an analogy to the event of the incarnation is Pneumatology—the divine person and work of the Holy Spirit. And it is the centrality and primacy of the divine that must always and at every point frame the human, placing the human and historical in proper theological context. The eternal persons of the Godhead remain primary whether we speak of the human nature assumed by the eternal Son of God in the incarnation, or whether we speak of the human agents inspired by the eternal Spirit of God in inscripturation. The *person* of the Son and the *Word* of the Spirit remain divine in both the acts of incarnation and inspiration/inscripturation, while relating truly and meaningfully to the human and historical.

## The Incarnational Model: Its Analogical Application to Inspiration

### Preparing the Way Forward: A Chalcedonian/Reformed Incarnational Model

Chalcedonian orthodoxy offers us much more about the incarnation than a statement regarding the full deity and true humanity of the Son of God. Chalcedon also provides a formulation that maintains both the *proper distinction* and the *real relationship* between the eternal person of the Logos and the assumed human nature.<sup>2</sup>

According to Chalcedon, and as later affirmed by the Westminster divines, in the incarnation the eternal Son of God assumed a human nature, without ceasing to be a divine person, “so that two

2 Chalcedon refers to the orthodox doctrinal formulations emerging from the fourth ecumenical council of the Christian Church, held at Chalcedon in 451.

whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. And this person is truly God, and truly man, yet one Christ” (WCF 8.2). Chalcedon affirms with admirable clarity and cogency both the dual natures and unipersonality of the God-man, avoiding the errors typically associated with Nestorianism, on the one hand, and Eutychianism, on the other hand.

But this formulation raises the question *how* we ought to relate the eternal person of the Logos to the assumed human nature. Understanding more precisely how the divine and human relate in the incarnation will allow us to develop a sufficiently nuanced incarnational model, from which we can begin to draw appropriate analogies to inspiration.

Moving in the proper direction Chalcedonian orthodoxy maintains that the Son of God is essentially and eternally divine, yet contingently and truly human. This is the baseline logic of the incarnation.<sup>3</sup> This affirmation is reflected in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (8.2) where it states that “the eternal Son of God became man.” The Son of God preexists that point in history in which he assumed a human nature. For this reason, the Son of God is essentially divine, yet contingently and truly human, by virtue of the hypostatic union.<sup>4</sup>

More specifically, the human nature of Christ has no personality in itself, but derives personality from its union with the eternal person of the Logos.<sup>5</sup> As such, there is no human personality of

*Christ*. It would not be correct, however, to say that the person of the Mediator is divine only. The incarnation constituted him a complex person, constituted of two natures . . . The human nature has its personal existence *in the person of the Logos*. It is *in-personal* rather than *impersonal* . . . His human nature is not lacking in any of the essential qualities belonging to that nature, and also has individuality, that is personal subsistence, *in the person of the Son of God* . . . the Logos assumed a human nature that was *not personalized, that did not exist by itself*” (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], 322, emphasis added). In addition, Francis Turretin makes precisely the same point when he observes, “By this union . . . the human nature (which was *destitute of proper personality and was without subsistence* [anypostatos] because otherwise it would have been a person) was assumed *into the person of the Logos* . . . (the Logos may be said to have communicated his own subsistence to the flesh by assuming it into the unity of his own hypostasis so that the flesh is not a hypostasis, but real [enypostatos]; not existing separately, but sustained in the Logos[as an instrument and adjunct personality joined to it] in order to accomplish the work of redemption)” (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 2 [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994], 311, 317, emphasis added). Herman Bavinck summarizes an hypostatic christology within the Reformed tradition with characteristic penetration: “This, now, is how Christ’s human nature is united with the person of the Son. *The Son does not just become a person in and through human nature, for he was that from eternity. He needed neither the creation nor the incarnation to arrive at himself, to become a personality, a spirit, or a mind.* The incarnation does mean, however, that the human nature was formed in and from Mary did not for an instant exist by and for itself, but from the very first moment of conception was united with and incorporated in the person of the Son. The Son created it in himself and, by creating, assumed it in himself. Yet that human nature is not for that reason incomplete, as Nestorius and nowadays still Dorner assert. *For though it did not complete itself with a personality and selfhood of its own, it was nevertheless from the start personal in the Logos*” (*Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006], 306–307, emphasis added). John Murray observes, “. . . the consciousness of his intradivine Sonship is in the foreground as *defining the person that he is*. And the inference would seem to be that our Lord’s *self-identity and self-consciousness* can never be thought of in terms of human nature alone. *Personality cannot be predicated of him except as it draws within its scope his specifically divine identity*. There are two centres of consciousness but not of self-consciousness” (“The Person of Christ,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1977], 2:138, emphasis added). John Owen makes virtually identical observations when he says, “We deny that the human nature of Christ had any such subsistence of its own as to give it a *proper personality, being from the time of its conception assumed into the subsistence with the Son of God*” (*The Works of John Owen*, vol. 12 [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1979], 210, emphasis added). In addition Owen makes a critical and nuanced distinction between the assumption of the human nature and hypostatic union proper (cf. *Works*, volume I, 225–26 [my thanks to Carl Trueman for these references from Owen]). The quotations above, spanning from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, represent the historic Reformed doctrine of anhypostatic christology. Revisionists, who are impacted by actualistic ontology and deny the *Logos asarkos* and *extra Calvinisticum* (e.g., Bruce McCormack, “Grace and Being: The Role of Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed.

3 Cf. Scott Oliphint, “Something Much Too Plain to Say: A Systematic Theological Apologetic,” in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.*, ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Wadlington (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 361–382.

4 The Westminster Shorter Catechism, answer 21, sums up the hypostatic union as follows: “The only Redeemer of God’s elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God became man, and so was, and continues to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever.”

5 This statement encapsulates the dominant Reformed view of anhypostatic (literally “no person”) christology. Louis Berkhof writes, “*The Logos furnishes the basis for the personality of*

Christ *per se*. Nor is not possible to speak coherently about the human nature of Christ apart from its union to the eternal Logos—the *Logos asarkos*. To isolate the human nature of Christ as a thing in itself, or to focus on the human nature of Christ independently of its assumption into the person of the eternal Logos, is an abstraction.

Chalcedonian Christology, therefore, ought to constrain our Christological formulations in at least two ways. First, we must never construe the human nature of Christ to have any significance independent of the divine person of the Logos to which it is united in the hypostatic union. Second, we must always maintain that the eternal person of the Son of God remains the primary theological category. *The divine and human in the God-man therefore are not equally ultimate, existing in some sort of parity with one another. The divine is primary; the human, while real, is subordinate.*<sup>6</sup>

### The Analogy: Christology and Pneumatology

How might we go about correlating this incarnational model with a theology of inspiration? I believe we do well to recognize this guiding principle: in the strict sense, the hypostatic union remains distinct from all other divine-human relations. While there may be analogies between incarnation and inspiration, there certainly can be no identity regarding the relationship between the divine and human in the incarnation of Christ, on the one hand, and the divine and human in the inspiration of Scripture, on the other. Any analogy we suggest will need to be clearly articulated, carefully qualified, and presented in a way that avoids ambiguity and misunderstanding. In other words, the incarnational analogy is something that needs careful, even painstaking, theological articulation

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John Webster [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 97–102), may assert that the quotations above do not express the historic Reformed view on the matter. Such a position, however, would prove indefensible if primary sources were properly understood.

6 As G. C. Berkouwer asserts, expressing agreement with Herman Bavinck, “The human nature, though without any deficiency, is thus subordinate to the Logos” (“The Impersonal Human Nature” in *The Person of Christ* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973], 311).

and is, therefore, not to be introduced or applied in a popular or loose way. The issues are too complex and far too important for such a treatment.

B.B. Warfield is helpful along these lines. Regarding the limitations of an analogy between incarnation and inspiration, he observes that

it has been customary among a certain school of writers to speak of the Scriptures, because thus “inspired,” as a Divine-human book, and to appeal to the analogy of our Lord’s Divine-human personality to explain their peculiar qualities as such . . . Between such diverse things there can exist only a *remote analogy*; and, in point of fact, the analogy in the present instance amounts to no more than that in both cases Divine and human factors are involved, though very differently.<sup>7</sup>

Commenting with greater precision, Warfield observes:

There is no hypostatic union between the Divine and the human in Scripture; we cannot parallel the “inscripturation” of the Holy Spirit and the incarnation of the Son of God. The Scriptures are merely the product of Divine and human forces working together to produce a product in the production of which human forces work under the initiation and prevalent direction of the Divine.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly Warfield is basically correct. The hypostatic union is ontologically unique, and the analogy between incarnation and inspiration is in a sense remote. But this raises the question: What does a Chalcedonian model of the incarnation actually yield in terms of an incarnational analogy for Scripture? What is the “remote analogy” between incarnation and inspiration? Can we state more

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7 B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R), 162.

8 Ibid.



precisely the sense(s) in which the analogy might prove useful?

I suggest that the incarnational model outlined earlier demands that we correlate as closely as possible Christology and pneumatology in the development of an incarnational analogy, recognizing the appropriate limitations in such a correlation.

Laying some groundwork for this observation, New Testament scholar Vern Poythress has recently observed that, strictly speaking, there is no human author of the Decalogue. The oral form of delivery is simply the divine voice, whereas the written form of delivery is the finger of God. And this model becomes paradigmatic for divine communication to and through prophets. Hence, the formula of the prophet, “Thus says the Lord.”<sup>9</sup> Divine authorship is therefore paradigmatic and central for understanding Old Testament prophetic literature.

The well-known *locus classicus* for the doctrine of inspiration, 2 Timothy 3:16, offers a conception of Scripture that is thoroughly and unapologetically *pneumatic*, focusing on the Spirit’s agency in the divine authorship of Scripture. Scripture is the “expiration” (or out-breathing) of the eternal Spirit of God, the third person of the ontological Trinity. And this pneumatic qualification supplies the *most basic category* for our understanding of the nature of Scripture. What we understand Scripture, as a whole, to be follows from Scripture’s own self-witness to its pneumatic origin; it is God-breathed, the product of the Holy Spirit.

It is at this point that the incarnational analogy seems warranted and useful. Just as Christ’s person remains divine in the act of incarnation, so also the Spirit’s Word remains divine in the act of inspiration. Just as assuming a human nature in the incarnation in no way compromises the divinity of the incarnate Word, so also using human intermediaries in the act of inspiration in no way compromises the divinity of the inspired Word.

9 Vern Sheridan Poythress, “The Presence of God Qualifying Our Notions of Grammatical-Historical Interpretation,” a paper presented at the November 2005 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, 5.

Jesus Christ remains truly divine, even though he assumes a human nature in the incarnation. The Spirit’s Word remains truly divine, even though he employs subordinate human authors in the act of inspiration.

Notice the extremely close correlation of Christology and pneumatology that grows out of a Chalcedonian incarnational analogy. Just as the primary theological category for classifying the incarnate Word is the *divinity* of the Son in his person, work, and Words, so also the primary theological category for classifying the inscripturated Word is the *divinity* of the Spirit in his person, work, and Words. The eternal Son assumes a human nature; the eternal Spirit inspires human authors of Scripture. This is one area where the incarnational analogy appears both warranted and useful.

Therefore, the primary *locus* for our discussion of both incarnation and inspiration is the *divinity* of the person and Word of the Son and Spirit, respectively. The primacy of the divine with respect to inspiration does not deny human authorship of Scripture any more than it denies the assumed humanity of Christ. But it does deny that divinity and humanity are *equally basic*, or share some sort of ontological parity, when it comes to either incarnation or inspiration. The divine is *always* primary in matters pertaining to incarnation and inspiration, *since the divinity of the Son and the Spirit supply the presuppositions for the possibility of incarnation and inspiration.*

And this critical fact of the inspiration of the Scriptures must provide the presuppositional point of departure for understanding the analogy between the incarnate and inscripturated Word in relation to mere human persons and texts. For example, if we investigate the phenomena of Scripture in relation to ancient Near East (ANE) literature, we must *begin* with the categorical uniqueness of Scripture as the divine Word of God. Likewise, if we investigate the phenomena of Jesus in relation to his Jewish context, we must begin with the categorical uniqueness of Jesus’ divine person. *We must never temporarily suspend the full truth of biblical revelation as the Word of God in order to investigate historical matters in some neu-*

tral manner (i.e., in the sense of being blind to that revealed truth). On the contrary, we must affirm from the outset the nonnegotiable ontological distinction between the Word of God (incarnate and inspired), on the one hand, and all other human beings and human documents, on the other.

These assertions are not some species of Doctrinism, which would imply a denial of the humanity of Christ or human authorship of Scripture. We must never lose sight of the human nature the Son of God assumed in the act of incarnation nor the human agents the Spirit used in the acts of inspiration. But we must always recognize that the human aspect of both the incarnation of the Son and the inspiration of the human author is nonetheless subordinate to the divine in theological importance and hermeneutical significance.

In fact, certain theologians within the Dutch Reformed tradition have argued in precisely this way. A Chalcedonian and Reformed incarnational analogy has accented the essentially divine, yet contingently and truly human, character of both the incarnate Word and the inspired Word. Abraham Kuyper is representative on this point. He says:

In Christ and the Holy Scripture we have to do with related mysteries. In the case of Christ there is a union between divine and human factors. The same is true of Scripture; here, too, there is a primary author and a secondary author. To maintain properly the relationship between these two factors is the great work of dogmatics . . . Everything depends here on the right insight that the Word has become flesh in Christ and is stereotyped in Scripture.<sup>10</sup>

Richard B. Gaffin Jr. pinpoints Kuyper's concern nicely when he observes:

The basic thrust . . . is plain: Scripture, like Christ, is both truly human and truly

10 Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *God's Word in Servant Form: Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavink on the Doctrine of Scripture* (Jackson, MS: Reformed Academic Press, 2008), 22.

divine. Yet in the case of Scripture, as for Christ, these two factors are not equally ultimate; the priority and originating initiative belong to the divine, not the human. Specifically, the Word, in his antecedent identity as the Word, became flesh; and God is the primary author of the Bible, in distinction from the secondary human authors. This specifies the "related mysteries" of Christ and the Bible.<sup>11</sup>

In short, then, a Chalcedonian/Reformed incarnational analogy turns on the fact that both in Christ and in Scripture, the divine and human are *not* equally ultimate. Rather, the priority and originating initiative belongs to the divine, not the human. And this entails God's primary authorship of Scripture, with human authorship being an important, yet subordinate, consideration.

### **Toward an Incarnational Analogy: Three Implications**

What implications can we draw from the line of reasoning pursued up to this point? Let me briefly outline three areas where I believe we need to be particularly careful as we develop a Reformed incarnational analogy.

First, I believe we need to correlate as closely as possible the Spirit's Word in relation to historical context(s), on the one hand, and the person of the Son in relation to the assumed human nature, on the other hand. Just as the assumed human nature of Christ is related to the unconditioned, yet all conditioning, divine person of the Logos, so an analogy emerges in the case of divine inspiration. The human author, and the culture in which he operates, are related to the unconditioned, yet all conditioning, divine Person of the Spirit. *Both the divine Word that becomes incarnate and the divine Word that becomes inscripturated provide the eternally unconditioned, yet all conditioning, context in terms of which we frame the human and the historical.* This means that just as the human in the incarnation is not ultimate, so also the histori-

11 Ibid.

cal in inspiration is not ultimate. Both the human and the historical are subsumed under the primary divine categories of Christology (the divine person and work of the Logos) and pneumatology (the divine person and work of the Spirit).

Therefore, my suggestion is simply that the way Christ's assumed human nature relates to his eternal person as the Son of God provides a paradigm for understanding the way human agents and historical context relate to the eternal person of the Spirit. In this sense, pneumatology is a powerful antidote to historicism and skepticism. The divine person and work of the Spirit supplies the ultimate context framing all hermeneutical considerations; the historical is not ultimate.

Second, we must recognize the primary hermeneutical significance of the dual authorship of Scripture—the divine primary, the human subordinate. Pneumatology, not anthropology, provides the most basic interpretive category for our understanding of a host of hermeneutical issues, including the New Testament use of the Old Testament, particularly when viewed in light of the analogy to the incarnation.

To clarify this point, the Spirit freely uses unique men in diverse historical circumstances as secondary, human authors, but these men and places remain subordinate to the divine meaning and intention of the Spirit as the primary author of Scripture. This is true even though access to divine intention involves discerning, as best we are able by the Spirit's illumining agency, human intention and meaning.<sup>12</sup>

Third, perhaps it is worth raising the question regarding the adequacy of a merely incarnational model. Incarnation is simply *one aspect* of the humiliation of the Son of God, and the humiliation of the Son of God cannot be artificially isolated from his resurrection and exaltation. An incarnational model must, perhaps ironically, include more than the incarnation alone; it must include the full complex of what is involved in Jesus'

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12 For an extended and insightful discussion of this point, consult Vern Sheridan Poythress's article, "Divine Meaning of Scripture" in *The Right Meaning from the Wrong Texts: Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, ed. G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 82–113.

humiliation, as well as its outcome in resurrection and glorification. Because of this, our pneumatology must include a hermeneutic of the *cross and resurrection* to account for the Spirit's agency in regeneration and illumination (as well as the Spirit's agency in giving general illumination by common grace for understanding any fact whatsoever). Biblical hermeneutics, then, to the extent that it is truly incarnational, must press on in developing a much fuller pneumatological approach to hermeneutics—one that is God-centered to the core and safeguards at every point a rebellious assertion of human autonomy.

### Summary and Conclusion

I have sketched what I believe to be the proper analogue to the incarnation with reference to inspiration, which is found in the divine person and work/Word of the Holy Spirit. The way forward in both biblical and systematic theology is a recovery of the theological and hermeneutical function of divine authorship. What Reformed theology needs at this juncture of its development is more, not less, attention given to the reality and theological-hermeneutical implications of divine authorship. The way out of the maze of postmodern historicism and relativism lies in a full-blown development of pneumatology in both the production and interpretation of Holy Scripture, the very Word of God written. ■

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# Developing a Trinitarian Mind

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by Robert Letham

In a chapter of my book, *The Holy Trinity*,<sup>2</sup> I describe at some length how the worship of the Western Church has been truncated by the comparative neglect of the doctrine of the Trinity. For most Christians—and I include members of Reformed churches—the Trinity is merely an abstruse mathematical puzzle, remote from experience. Despite our reservations about many aspects of the Eastern Church, Orthodoxy in contrast has maintained a pronounced Trinitarian focus to its worship through its liturgy, which has roots in the fourth century. This is no incidental matter; worship is right at the heart of what it means to be Christian and what the church should be doing. The sole object of worship is God. The God who we worship has revealed himself to be the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three distinct persons in indivisible union. I have argued elsewhere that this is his New Covenant name (Matt. 28:19–20). It follows that our worship in the Christian church is to be distinctively Trinitarian. Yet if we were to thumb through any hymnbook, we would be hard pressed to find many hymns that contain clearly Trinitarian expressions, while many of our favorites could equally be sung by Unitarians—think of “Immortal, invisible” or “My God, how wonderful thou art.” As for the average person in the pew, why not try a random survey next Sunday—ask a random selection of half a dozen people what the Trinity means to them on a daily basis, and see what results you get? Then compare your findings with the words of Gregory of Nazianzus, who wrote of “my Trinity” and “when I say God, I mean

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=114](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=114).

2 Cf. Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004). See Lane Tipton’s review in this issue.

the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

If this problem is as real as is generally recognized but yet as important as I have presented it, how do we go about seeking to redress it? There are no easy, slick solutions. This is not a matter to be resolved by a quick twelve-step program or in an adult Sunday school class. It will take much thought, careful teaching, and a concerted plan to put right what has for so long been askew—since I argue this has been a problem for centuries, with notable exceptions, at least since Aquinas. What is needed is to instill in our congregations a mindset directed, as of second nature, to think of God as triune. From there will come ripple effects on the way we think of the world around us, and of the people with whom we mix. What we need is to develop a thoroughly *Christian* view of God, the world, the church, ourselves, and others.

The first, and indispensable, steppingstone is ourselves as leaders of the church, and in particular those who are ministers of the Word. It is of the utmost importance that we saturate our minds with reflection and meditation on God, for we stand in the pulpit as no less than his representatives in speaking his Word. It means our consistently contemplating God in Trinitarian terms. John Stott has been accustomed to begin each day with a threefold greeting to the Holy Trinity; how far are your own prayers and thoughts of God shaped in this way? It takes disciplined thought and prayer, consistently day in, day out deliberately to think of God biblically, theologically, and ecclesially as triune. As leaders of the church, you are called by God to do this. You cannot expect the congregation committed to your charge to follow suit unless you are leading the way. It means your being shaped and driven not by some man-made purpose or by the concoctions of management gurus but by the truth of the triune God himself drawing and molding you.

There are definite and particular ways in which your congregation can be taught to develop its grasp of the Trinity. The first such avenue is in your preaching and teaching. How often have you preached on the Trinity? The Church of England, in following the church year, has Trinity

Sunday the week after Pentecost; this can provide an opportunity to draw attention to the Trinity at least once a year, as Advent is a reminder of the incarnation, Good Friday of the atonement, Easter Sunday of the resurrection, and Pentecost of the coming of the Holy Spirit. However, this is a bare minimum—just about starvation rations. Perhaps a short series may help, providing it is not something that is forgotten as you move on to other things. Much better is, on top of that, to refer consistently to God not always as “God” or “the Lord” but as “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” always bearing in mind that he is three in indivisible union.

The same principles apply to praying as to preaching. You may not be able to preach on the Trinity every week—it would be unbalanced if you did!—but you can pray every week. When you pray, pray “Our Father in heaven.” What an amazing way to address God! It means that we, through Christ the Son, have been granted by adoption the same relationship to the Father that he has by nature! It immediately throws us into the context of prayer to the Father by the Holy Spirit (see Rom. 8:26–27) through the mediation of Christ the Son. We should bring this to expression regularly in our public prayers. We should show the congregation that this is the way we pray. We should show them that in prayer we are saturated in a Trinitarian atmosphere, given to share in communion with the triune God. We should impress upon our people that in the Holy Spirit, God the Trinity has come to dwell with us, indwelling—better, saturating—us and making his permanent residence with us (John 14:23).

This leads us to the nature of church worship and the structure of the service. In all the works of God he takes the initiative. He created in accordance with his free and sovereign will; no one was there to advise him. In grace, the Son became incarnate “for us and our salvation”; this too was the result purely of the grace of God, undeserved, unprompted. In our own experience, God himself brought us to new life by his Spirit; our faith and repentance is a response to his prior grace. We love him because he first loved us. Is it any

different in worship? Is that primarily something we do? No, first of all God goes before us. He has called his church to himself. He is there to greet us. As we gather, it is to meet with him, but first he has drawn us. Moreover, our acts of worship are accepted because they are offered in union with Christ. He, in our nature, is at the Father’s right hand. From this it follows that the elements of worship are a dialog in which the holy Trinity takes the initiative. Through his ordained servant, the Father through his Son by the Holy Spirit calls us to worship. He speaks to us in his Word read and proclaimed. He receives our praise and prayers. He communes with us in the sacrament. In the benediction, he dismisses us with his blessing—which is far from a pious wish or prayer that such things might be, if it is the will of God. Rather, the benediction is a declaration of a real state of affairs, undergirded by his covenant promises. This is a dynamic view of worship, one that follows squarely in the Reformed tradition and is rooted in biblical teaching. Our congregations need to hear it, they need to understand it, they need to imbibe it and be permeated by it. At my previous church, our regular bulletin expressed this. Periodically we would draw everyone’s attention to it and sometimes produce a written two-page memo explaining it, so as to keep it fresh in mind.

The call to worship is a good place to begin. I often use a congregational response to the call. It is based on Ephesians 2:18, where Paul says “For through him [Christ] we . . . have access by one Spirit to the Father.” These words impress on the mind the point that our worship can *only* be Trinitarian. So too does the famous passage in John 4:21–24, where Jesus says that those who worship the Father must worship in spirit and in truth. Every occurrence of πνεῦμα (*pneuma*, spirit) in John, except two, is a reference to the Holy Spirit, while the truth is consistently a reference to Jesus (John 1:9, 14, 17; 14:6). Hence, acceptable worship of the Father is in the Holy Spirit and in Christ, the Son. It is important that this is stamped upon the service right from the start. Christian worship is worship of the holy Trinity, nothing less.

The church where we now attend has, im-

mediately after the call to worship, a short Trinitarian doxology which the congregation sings in response; it is varied from time-to-time so as not to get monotonous. Then the first hymn is very often, if not invariably, Trinitarian, a practice I have come to use myself as often as I can. Calvin thought this was the most appropriate way to begin too, so we are in good company. However, as I remarked, there is a considerable lack of explicitly Trinitarian hymns. Many from the ancient and medieval church have this focus. Our former music director in Delaware, Peter Merio—a graduate of the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, who also taught there—brilliantly arranged one gem from the fifth century that we dug up from the *English Hymnal*, edited by Ralph Vaughan Williams in 1933; but there are very few in Reformed circles with his capabilities. Some recent favorites try hard but fall into heresy—an ever-present danger in this area. The hymn “There Is a Redeemer,” which I have heard sung in the OPC, is generally excellent but has a refrain, “Thank you, O our Father for giving us your Son, and *leaving* your Spirit till the work on earth is done.” The Father does not *leave* the Holy Spirit; the Eastern and Western Churches divided over arguably less.

We have looked at preaching and teaching, prayers, the call to worship and benediction, hymns; there remain the sacraments. Baptism is into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Dare anyone say the Trinity is a recondite matter for advanced philosophers when every single member of the Christian church has the name of the Trinity pronounced over him or her? According to Matthew 28:18–20, it is the foundation for Christian discipleship. Similarly, in the Lord’s Supper we receive and feed on Christ really and spiritually; this is by the Holy Spirit who makes the sacraments efficacious. Moreover, since the works of the Trinity are indivisible, in feeding on Christ by the gracious enabling of the Holy Spirit, we are given access to the Father in the unity of the undivided Trinity.

In short, every aspect of Christian worship is an engagement with the Trinity or, rather, a way in which the Trinity engages us. As leaders of Christ’s

church, we have the indescribable privilege of leading his people into the realization of something of what this entails. It is a task far beyond our capacities; we are utterly ill-equipped to deal in such transcendent matters. The Bible records that, when given a revelation of the *veiled* glory of God, human beings are brought to their knees, overcome, broken (e.g., Isa. 6:1–5, Ezek. 1:1–3:15, Acts 9:1–9, Rev. 1:9–18). Yet in his grace, our God has admitted us to fellowship, communion, and union with him as his adopted children, so that we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another by the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18). The Father and the Son have made their permanent residence with us in the person of the Holy Spirit (John 14:15–23). As ministers of the Word, we have been co-opted as instruments by which the Christ’s flock is changed into his image by the Spirit so that Christ will be the firstborn among many brothers. Doesn’t that thrill you? Doesn’t it make you want to know him better? Doesn’t it impel you to develop a mind shaped by the knowledge of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and to lead your congregation on to that goal, too? ■

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## The Puritan Theological Method

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by John V. Fesko

### Introduction

Within the Presbyterian community, the Puritans receive a great deal of admiration, praise, and

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=54](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=54).

respect for their spirituality, devotion, and theological acumen. Publishing houses such as Banner of Truth and Soli Deo Gloria are a testimony to their enduring value. A number of Puritan theologians of greater and lesser recognition have been resurrected from historical obscurity through the republication of many of their works. Who has not seen the works of John Owen (1616–83), Richard Baxter (1615–91), Thomas Goodwin (1600–79), or John Flavel (1628–91) adorning ministers’ shelves? They are often read with great admiration for their theological depth, precision, and pastoral care. However, it seems that many who read them fail to appreciate a dimension of their theology—namely their theological methodology. In other words, when a person is asked what time it is, he will give the time of day. However, ask this same question in a watchmaker’s shop, and one might receive a different answer. As one is surrounded by various timekeeping pieces ticking away, some silently, some noisily, others ornate and garish, and still others austere and utilitarian, the watchmaker might offer explanations as to how a particular watch functions and how it was made. Too often, readers of Puritan works are merely interested in asking them what time it is, when the Puritans are like a watchmaker sitting in his shop surrounded by hundreds of watches. In other words, we merely read the Puritans looking to see how we can be moved by a particular passage or to search for some sort of insight. How often do we read the Puritans and take note of how they have come to their conclusions, and in particular, what sources they have employed?

To illustrate this point, we can examine several key quotations from the Puritans to look beyond the answers they give to the underlying sources, and in this way peer into a small cross-section of the Puritan theological scholarship. Hopefully, we can be inspired and educated in our own theological studies and devotional life. To illustrate the Puritan theological method, we will examine three Westminster divines, Jeremiah Whitaker (1599–1654), William Twisse (1578–1646), and George Gillespie (1613–48). With Whitaker, we will look at a fragmentary statement from the

debates during the composition of the baptism chapter in the Westminster Confession. With Twisse, we will analyze one small section from his theological work, *The Riches of God’s Love*. And, in Gillespie, we will explore a theological defense of the hermeneutical principle of a good and necessary consequence. Why use these three theologians? There are two chief reasons. First, they are part of the radix of the formation of Presbyterianism, as they all participated in the creation of the Westminster Standards. Second, Whitaker and Gillespie were known as preachers, and Twisse an academic scholar, but one will nevertheless find the same methodology in all three.<sup>2</sup> This means that the Puritan theological method was not restricted to the more scholarly types but was also used by ordinary pastors. Let us therefore delve into the Puritan mind and catch a glimpse of their theological method.

### Jeremiah Whitaker

We turn first to Jeremiah Whitaker and the debates surrounding the composition of the statements on baptism for the Westminster Confession. As interesting as the debates must have been (though like any assembly of Presbyterians there were undoubtedly boring moments as well), they are important for our purposes because they allow us to see the Puritan mind at work. It is one thing for a theologian to write when he has his library surrounding him and when he has hours to search for information, skim various volumes, and write the perfect sentence. In the midst of debate, however, one is forced to recall information from memory. In one sense, what one is able to muster in the heat of debate is often an indicator of what one’s mind has soaked up in reading. This certainly seems to be the case in a fragmentary statement from Whitaker on baptism. Whitaker states: “That it does confer grace I do not find, but our divines

2 For brief biographical sketches, William Barker, *Puritan Profiles: 54 Contemporaries of the Westminster Assembly* (Fearn: Mentor, 1999), 18–21, 110–112, 136–139; James Reid, *Memoirs of the Westminster Divines*, 2 vols. (1811; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 1.32–67, 2.216–246, 278–283.

do hold it. . . . When they oppose the Papists, they say it is more than a sign and seal. . . . Chamier says the grace that is signified is exhibited, so it is in the French Confession; it does *efficaciter donare*. . . . I conceive that it does not confer it *ex opere operato*.”<sup>3</sup> Now, it should be noted that the ellipses are part of the original minutes—they are gaps in the record, not editorial elisions.<sup>4</sup> However, there are several things to note in this incomplete statement.

First, notice that Whitaker makes appeal to French Reformed theologian Daniel Chamier (1565–1621), who was trained under Theodore Beza (1519–1605) at Geneva.<sup>5</sup> Second, he also appeals to the French Confession (1559), specifically: “We believe, as has been said, that in the Lord’s Supper, as well as in baptism, God gives us really and in fact that which he there sets forth to us; and that consequently with these signs is given the true possession and enjoyment of that which they present to us” (§ 37).<sup>6</sup> Third, further in Whitaker’s statement, he says: “From the union of the sign and the thing signified which is in the analogy, . . . and in *conjuncta exhibitione* as Ursin[us] . . . when we lawfully receive it.”<sup>7</sup> Here Whitaker appeals to Zacharias Ursinus’s (1534–83) commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism. Ursinus writes:

The names and properties of the things signified are attributed to the signs; and, on the other hand, the names of the signs

3 Alexander F. Mitchell and John Struthers, eds., *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1874), 174. William Barker, *Puritan Profiles: 54 Contemporaries of the Westminster Assembly* (Fearn: Mentor, 1999), 136–140.

4 David F. Wright, “Baptism at the Westminster Assembly,” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, vol. 1, ed., J. Ligon Duncan (Fearn: Mentor, 2003), 163–166.

5 Samuel MacCauly Jackson, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, vol. 3 (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1909), 1.

6 Philip Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (1931; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 3.380–381.

7 Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes*, 176.

are attributed to the things signified, on account of their analogy, or on account of the signification of the things through the signs, and on account of the joint exhibition and reception of the things with the signs in their lawful use.<sup>8</sup>

Though the information is sparse, from this small window we can peer into Whitaker’s mind and notice the theological method. We see that Whitaker was very well read. He references Chamier, the French Confession, and Ursinus’s commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism. In other words, though Whitaker was an English theologian, he was familiar with Continental Reformed theology. We see the same pattern in Twisse, though in Twisse we find a broader theological knowledge that extends far beyond the Reformed world.

### William Twisse

William Twisse was the moderator of the Westminster Assembly until his death, but beyond his churchmanship, he was known as a learned theologian. One can find an example of his learnedness in a statement he makes in his theological work where he traces the origins of absolute predestination. Twisse was compelled to trace the history of absolute reprobation because there were critics who believed that the doctrine was of recent origin, specifically, that it had come from Theodore Beza, John Calvin’s (1509–64) successor at Geneva. Twisse writes:

Now judge I pray with how little judgment, or modesty this author intimates Beza to be the author of the doctrine of absolute reprobation. Perhaps he will say his meaning is, that he was the author of the upper-way, as touching the making of the object of Predestination, mankind not yet created. But to this I answer, that Beza does so indeed, but he was never called to

8 Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (repr. 1852; Phillipsburg: P&R, n.d.), 355.



a conference hereabouts, and consequently he never declined it. And that which was declined, he makes to be declined by the abettors, as well as the authors; which cannot be understood of this nice and logical point, as touching the object of reprobation. The main question is, whether there be any cause of reprobation, as touching the act of God reprobating: the negative whereof, was maintained very generally amongst the school-divines before Beza was born.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, Twisse argues that the doctrine of absolute reprobation did not find its origin in Beza. Rather, Twisse believed it had roots in medieval theology.

In defense of his doctrine of predestination, Twisse argues that his explanation of “this doctrine is not only approved by Dr. Whitaker, Doctor of the Chair in the University of Cambridge . . . but [it is] justified and confirmed by a variety of testimonies both of schoolmen, as Lombard, Aquinas, Bannes, Peter of Alliaco, Gregory of Rimini . . . Bucer at Cambridge, by Peter Martyr at Oxford.”<sup>10</sup> What is of great interest here is the host of names he cites. Twisse begins with William Whitaker (1548–95), an influential English Reformed theologian. He also references Peter Lombard (1100–60), author of the chief theological work of the Middle Ages before it was replaced by Thomas Aquinas’s (1225–74) *Summa Theologia* as the standard text for theological instruction. Twisse also mentions Peter of Alliaco (d. 1425), a fifteenth-century Roman Catholic theologian, and Gregory of Rimini (c. 1300–58), a fourteenth-century Augustinian. It should also be noted that Twisse edited *De Causa Dei*, a work by another fourteenth-century Augustinian, Thomas Bradwardine (1290–1349).<sup>11</sup> Lastly, he also invokes the names of

9 William Twisse, *The Riches of God’s Love unto the Vessels of Mercy* (Oxford: L. L. and H. H. Printers to the University, 1653), 1.61. Quotations have updated spelling.

10 Twisse, *The Riches of God’s Love*, 2.10–11.

11 John Leith, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in*

two predecessors, Martin Bucer (1491–1551) and Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562).

Again, setting aside theological issues, however interesting they might be, we see that Twisse was very well read. Not only was he knowledgeable about the theology of his Reformed predecessors, such as William Whitaker, Bucer, and Vermigli, but he was very knowledgeable of medieval theology. Moreover, his knowledge was not merely of one or two key figures, but rather he was familiar with theologians spanning several centuries both within and without the Reformed tradition. We turn to the last of our figures, George Gillespie, in whom we find the same pattern.

### George Gillespie

In the work of Gillespie, we can briefly explore his defense of the hermeneutical principle, the *good and necessary consequence*. In his work *Treatise of Miscellany Questions*, Gillespie defends and explains the following proposition: “That necessary consequences from the written word of God do sufficiently and strongly prove the consequent or conclusion, if theoretical, to be a certain divine truth which ought to be believed, and, if practical, to be a necessary duty which we are obliged unto, jure divino.”<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note the variegated streams of theological thought that flowed into the theology of the divines. Gillespie points to a diverse body of authorities in his explanation: John Cameron (1579–1625), professor of theology at the Academy of Saumur in France, Aquinas, John Gerhard (1582–1637), the well known Lutheran theologian, as well as Rabbinic literature, including the Talmud.<sup>13</sup> Once again we see that Gillespie had a knowledge that went far beyond the bounds of the Reformed tradition.

### Observations concerning Their Methodology

With this brief survey of these three Westminster

*the Making* (Richmond: John Knox, 1973), 39.

12 George Gillespie, *Treatise of Miscellany Questions* (Edinburgh: Robert Ogle and Oliver & Boyd, 1854), 100.

13 Gillespie, *Treatise of Miscellany Questions*, 100–103.

ster divines, we can draw some observations. First, we should note that the divines were in no way parochial. They did not have a narrow knowledge of one particular thread of Reformed theology, or even theology in general. Second, their theological reading evidences an important historical point, namely that Reformed theology did not begin *de novo* with the posting of Luther's Ninety-five Theses, theologians having only their Bibles. Rather, there is an organic connection between the Reformation and the Middle Ages. Hence, many Westminster divines were well read in medieval theology. Third, the divines were willing to explore the writings of non-Reformed theologians, such as John Gerhard, or even the writings of unbelievers, as with Gillespie's appeal to the Talmud. And, though not surveyed here, one can find that the Puritans had a great knowledge of the liberal theology of their day, including Socinian, Anabaptist, and Roman Catholic works. These three observations have important implications for how we do our theology today.

Often times we read the Puritans with great appreciation. We are awe struck by their piety and theological depth. We admire them, much like a child might admire a baseball great like Babe Ruth, as he struts to the plate, takes a powerful swing, crushes the ball over the centerfield wall, and then trots around the bases in the glitter of camera flashes and the thunderous roar of the crowd. Yet, we forget that we are not spectators. We are on the team, the same team as every other Reformed theologian who has stood behind the lectern or pulpit to teach or preach the word of God. If this is the case, is it enough merely to read the Puritans and go no further? Should we not bring the same dedication, devotion, and work ethic to the theological task as they did?

Seminary graduates sometimes have great gaps in their theological knowledge—they know Calvin, the Westminster Standards, Berkhof, or the other classic works. But few have read Aquinas, Luther, Melancthon, Chemnitz, the Church Fathers, or contemporary theologians such as Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, or Robert Jenson. Moreover, when these same seminar-

ians get into their pulpits, they make little effort to remedy the situation.

Yet it is easily within reach to begin to fill the gaps. One can incorporate documents such as Luther's Small Catechism or the Heidelberg Catechism during devotional times, or identify a medieval or contemporary theologian to add to one's reading list. There are also a number of helpful resources, such as introductions to the church fathers, which have selections from various well-known patristic theologians.

It also seems that the Westminster divines, or more broadly the Puritans at large, are employed by Reformed fundamentalists in an effort to maintain doctrinal orthodoxy. This is sometimes evidenced in the bibliographies that follow papers submitted by seminarians to candidates and credentials committees. The bibliographies are hundreds of years old, with little to no interaction with contemporary sources, commentaries, and theological works. Such an employment of the Puritans has more in common with fundamentalism than it does with the spirit of the Puritan theological method.

It was Paul Tillich (1886–1965), one not known for his orthodoxy, who observed the great chasm between sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestant theology and contemporary fundamentalism. Tillich first distinguishes between classical Protestant orthodoxy, the genus under which one would find the theology of the Westminster Standards, and fundamentalism:

We must also be sure to distinguish between orthodox and fundamentalism. The orthodox period of Protestantism has very little to do with what is called fundamentalism in America. Rather, it has special reference to the scholastic period of Protestant history. There were great scholastics in Protestantism, some of them equally as great as the medieval scholastics. . . . Such a thing has never been done in American fundamentalism. Protestant Orthodoxy was constructive. It did not have anything like the pietistic or revivalistic

background of American fundamentalism. It was objective as well as constructive, and attempted to present the pure and comprehensive doctrine concerning God and man and the world. It was not determined by a kind of lay biblicism as is the case in American fundamentalism—a biblicism which rejects any theological penetration into the biblical writings and makes itself dependent on traditional interpretations of the word of God. You cannot find anything like that in classical orthodoxy. Therefore it is a pity that very often orthodoxy and fundamentalism are confused.

So, then, Tillich was certain that fundamentalism and Protestant orthodoxy were beasts of a completely different stripe.

Tillich goes on to explain specifically how Protestant orthodox theologians are different than American fundamentalists:

One of the great achievements of classical orthodoxy in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was the fact that it remained in continual discussion with all the centuries of Christian thought. Those theologians were not untheological lay people ignorant of the meanings of the concepts which they used in biblical interpretation. They knew the past meanings of these concepts in the history of the church which covered a period of over fifteen hundred years. These orthodox theologians knew the history of philosophy as well as the theology of the Reformation. The fact that they were in the tradition of the Reformers did not prevent them from knowing thoroughly scholastic theology, from discussing and refuting it, or even accepting it when possible. All this makes classical orthodoxy one of the great events in the history of Christian thought.<sup>14</sup>

14 Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967–68), 103.

Tillich's description is certainly evident in this small survey of Whitaker, Twisse, and Gillespie. However, one can find this same pattern in the theology of many of the great Reformed theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Some read the Puritans exclusively, as a bulwark against liberalism, and do not engage and read a wide theological spectrum. This is to ask the watchmaker what time it is with no interest in how the watch is made. Our task is not simply to tell people the time, but also to build watches.

## Conclusion

When we reflect upon the Puritan theological method, we find a rich and impressive breadth of knowledge and learning, one that spans the centuries. If we only read the Puritans to the exclusion of others, can we say that we advance the Puritan legacy well? If the Puritan theological method as found in Whitaker, Twisse, and Gillespie is any evidence of their devotion to Christ in their pastoral and academic endeavors, then it behooves Reformed pastors to dedicate themselves in a similar fashion. Instead of reading a Puritan work the next time we go to the bookshelf, why not read in the spirit of the Puritans and pick up the work of a church father, a medieval theologian, or a contemporary theologian? Why not read the work of a Lutheran, Baptist, or Roman Catholic theologian? In seeking to broaden our reading habits, we should read as the Puritans read—seeking to engage, critique, and even learn from these sources. Hopefully, such a commitment will enrich our theological studies to the benefit of the church and future generations and will glorify Christ. ■

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# ✦ Servant Living

## Does Divorce Terminate Marriage “in God’s Eyes”?

### A Look at Matthew 5:31–32 in Context

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* March 2008<sup>1</sup>

by Brenton C. Ferry

Some people believe that divorced couples prior to the death of one spouse are still married “in God’s eyes,” because passages like Matthew 5:31–32 call remarriage “adultery.” More moderately, others believe marriage is dissolvable, but only on condition of adultery or abandonment.<sup>2</sup>

According to variations of this view, if you are divorced and remarried, then you have more than one wife, and you are not eligible to serve as a deacon or elder. According to this view, the reason why Paul tells Christians to reconcile with their divorced spouses or to otherwise remain single, is because such couples are actually still married to one another “in God’s eyes.” (Though Paul’s use of the description “unmarried” actually assumes the

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=92](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=92).

2 John Murray, *Divorce* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R), 25. Murray says, “Illegitimate divorce does not dissolve the marriage bond and consequently the fact of such divorce does not relieve the parties concerned from any of the obligations incident to marriage. They are still in reality bound to one another in the bonds of matrimony and a marital relation or any exercise of the privileges and rights of the marital relation with any other is adultery. Whatever the law of men may enact, this is the law of Christ’s kingdom and to it the laws of men should conform.”

opposite.) According to this view, the reason why Paul says a spouse is “bound” for life to the other is not simply because divorce is against God’s law, but because illegal divorce is impossible to effect.

When I was in college, I worked for a man who was divorced. His church would not let him get remarried, because “in God’s eyes” he was still married to his former wife. To get remarried would have been to enter into a life of perpetual adultery. I heard of a man who was divorced, then remarried, then had a family with his second wife, then adopted the view that he was still married to his first wife “in God’s eyes.” Then he divorced his second wife (to whom he was never actually married “in God’s eyes”). Then he remarried his first wife and brought her into his second home where everyone lived together! As a pastor I have had to counsel a person against divorcing his second wife for this reason.

Does divorce really terminate marriage? In all circumstances, yes! If not, divorce would be an impossible sin to commit. Then what do we make of passages like Matthew 5:31–32 which refer to remarriage as adultery?

First, in Matthew 5, the word “adultery” is used loosely, simply as a placeholder for the seventh commandment. Jesus means only to say remarriage is a violation of the seventh commandment (which encompasses all sexual sin, not just adultery proper). For example, earlier he likens anger and name-calling to murder. But that is not to say that anger and name-calling are equal to murder. He only means such behavior falls under the jurisdiction of the sixth commandment. Similarly, he likens lust with the eyes to adultery. But that is not to say that lust with the eyes is equal to adultery. Rather, lust with the eyes violates the seventh commandment. Likewise, when Jesus likens remarriage to adultery, he means it violates the seventh commandment. He is not implying that the former marriage was never terminated. Only that the seventh commandment was violated.

Second, Christ is limiting the scope of his discussion to noncontact sins that fall short of the worded commandments mentioned. Name-calling and anger fall short of literal murder, and do not

imply the death of the victim. Looking at someone with the eyes falls short of literal adultery, and does not imply sexual contact. Remarriage falls short of literal adultery and does not imply a continuation of the former marriage. So again, it is contrary to the movement of the passage to infer that the charge of adultery implies an intact marriage.

Third, Jesus is using a figure of speech called irony, in which a sense contrary to the strict meaning of the word is used. Isn't it ironic that you can "murder" someone by simply calling him a name or being angry with him? Isn't it ironic that you can commit "adultery" with someone by simply looking at her? Isn't it ironic that you can commit "adultery" against someone to whom you are not even married? The force of irony depends on a nonliteral use of the word "adultery." Far from implying the continuation of marriage, the force of irony depends on the literal termination of the marriage, just as the sense of irony depends on the fact that the ones hated and lusted after were never actually touched by their perpetrators.

Therefore, to infer that the charge of adultery implies the indissolubility of the marriage is like saying that someone is literally "dead in God's eyes," if you call him a fool. It is like saying you can literally get someone pregnant by looking at her with lust. Rather, the whole force of Jesus' teaching rests on the terminated state of the marriage. You can sin against your spouse even if you are no longer married to one another! The option of divorce and remarriage is no avenue of escape from the reach of the seventh commandment.

Divorce really terminates marriage. That is why God hates it. That is why it is a sin (in all but two circumstances). To infer that the charge of adultery implies the indissolubility of marriage is to miss the point. ■

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## Broken Vows

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by G. I. Williamson

It was quite a few years ago that I first read Professor John Murray's essay on "*The Sanctity of the Moral Law.*"<sup>2</sup> That article, written at the height of the struggle in the Presbyterian Church USA between orthodoxy and modernism, drew attention to the fact that orthodoxy is not concerned with doctrine only. Murray writes:

The orthodox Christian . . . has been too concessive when he has tolerated even the suggestion that the difference between him and the modernist is largely confined to the realm of what we more specifically call doctrinal belief. For the attack upon the Christian Faith is not a whit less in the realm of standards of moral obligation . . .<sup>3</sup>

He goes on to focus this concern on the signers of the Auburn Affirmation!

Does the seriousness of the Auburn Affirmation confine itself to the realm of what we call doctrinal belief? Oh, not at all! Another aspect of it is equally if not more serious, because in that aspect of it, it evidences departure from the very principle of truth itself. These same men have solemnly vowed belief in and adherence to these great verities which they have either denied or branded as mere theories. In justice and truth their continuance in the Presbyterian Church can only last as long as they are faithful to these vows. It is manifest that they are not faithful to these vows. What

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1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=93](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=93).

2 *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 193–204.

3 *Ibid.*, 193–194.

does this mean? It means simply blatant breach of trust, of the basic principle of honesty, in one word, of truth.

. . . Modernism in doctrine and modernism in ethics are ultimately one.<sup>4</sup>

These powerful words made a deep impression on me, and I call them to your attention because I believe we very much need to hear them. Even at the time this was written (seventy-one years ago), Mr. Murray went on to suggest that too often orthodox people seem to be lacking with respect to the ethical side of the matter. After all, it isn't only modernists who seem to take their ordination vows lightly. No, I am more and more convinced that Mr. Murray was right when he, in effect, warned us against a "loss of the consciousness of the sanctity of the moral law, and of its implications in truth and justice."<sup>5</sup> What concerns me in this article is the vital connection between doctrine and morality (or ethics) as defined by Chapter 22 of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

1. A lawful oath is a part of religious worship, wherein, upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calleth God to witness what he asserteth, or promiseth, and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he sweareth.

2. The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear, and therein it is to be used with all holy fear and reverence. Therefore, to swear vainly, or rashly, by that glorious and dreadful Name; or, to swear at all by any other thing, is sinful, and to be abhorred. Yet, as in matters of weight and moment, an oath is warranted by the Word of God, under the New Testament as well as under the Old; so a lawful oath, being imposed by lawful authority, in such matters, ought to be taken.

3. Whosoever taketh an oath ought duly to consider the weightiness of so solemn an act, and therein to avouch nothing but what he is fully persuaded is the truth: neither may any man bind himself by oath to anything but what is good and

4 Ibid., 194–195.

5 Ibid.

just, and what he believeth so to be, and what he is able and resolved to perform.

4. An oath is to be taken in the plain and common sense of the words, without equivocation, or mental reservation. It cannot oblige to sin; but in anything not sinful, being taken, it binds to performance, although to a man's own hurt. Nor is it to be violated, although made to heretics, or infidels.

5. A vow is of the like nature with a promissory oath, and ought to be made with the like religious care, and to be performed with the like faithfulness.

Those who receive the privilege of serving as ministers of the OPC do so on the basis of solemn vows—made before the face of almighty God—to do the following things: (1) "receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures;" (2) "approve of the government, discipline, and worship of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church;" (3) "promise to be in subjection to . . . brethren in the Lord;" (4) and "to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the gospel and the purity, the peace, and the unity of the church, whatever persecution or opposition may arise . . . on that account."<sup>6</sup>

It seems to me that any man who makes these vows in the conscientious way specified by the Westminster Confession of Faith—to which he is subscribing on oath—would never do such things as these: (1) withdraw from the ministry of the OPC merely because of not getting his own way in a particular instance; (2) intentionally preach any doctrine or engage in any practice in the execution of his office which is contrary to the constitution of the church to which he has vowed adherence; or (3) abort the process of administrative or judicial discipline without first exhausting the full provisions of due process. I do not think that I need to cite any specific examples for the readers of *Ordained Servant*, because I am confident that you will also recognize that there is reason for concern

6 Form of Government, XXII.13.c, in *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, PA: Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2005), 42.

about this issue.

But what troubles me just as much as any particular instance of the deviations listed above, is what I see as the tendency of some to be willing to minimize this sin, and therefore too easily restore the reputation of those who have broken their vows for one reason or another. What they seem to be doing is substituting their own personal evaluation of things for the urgently needed—but too often selfishly aborted—final results of a faithful adherence to due process. It is my view, that when a man simply renounces the jurisdiction of the OPC, during the process of discipline, he is not entitled to claim—nor to be quickly believed by others on the basis of his claim—to be in the right while the Church is in the wrong. Even if he could have been proved right, through the full use of the due process provided by our constitution, the very act of aborting the process is itself a breaking of the sense and meaning of his vows, and that by itself renders him guilty.

But I am even more amazed when brothers say to me “we agree with you on the principles involved, but disagree in this case.” The principles to which we commit ourselves by our vows involve accountability. And one of my vows is to the effect that I submit to my brothers in the Lord. It is always possible, of course, that even with full process there might result a miscarriage of justice. We see that clearly in the deposition of J. Gresham Machen. But even in the corrupt and deteriorating PCUSA of his day, that great man did not refuse to follow constitutional process until the miscarriage of justice was evident.

Men who have broken their vows do not deserve to be treated as if they had done nothing wrong. I do not even think they deserve to continue in office—certainly not unless and until they sincerely repent of their sin. And I do not think we are really doing the Church of Jesus Christ a service when we treat them as if nothing has happened.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Book of Discipline held by the old UPCNA (until 1925) said (X:6), “Church officers deposed may be restored to church privileges, on evidence of repentance; but they ought not, especially ministers, to be restored to the exercise of their office until it is obvious that the religious community is prepared to receive

We are living in a degenerate culture in which vows (marriage vows are a glaring example) often seem to mean nothing. It is a time in which “every man does what seems right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:5, 21:25). But should we be surprised at what we see in our present-day culture generally, when we see such “loving” treatment of office-bearers in the church who break their vows? The Scripture says “it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God” (1 Pet. 4:17). It certainly is.

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them in their official character.” To much the same effect is our own Book of Discipline (VI,C.3D1): “An officer deposed because of a commonly known offense shall be restored only after the judicatory has assured itself that the restoration will not be attended by injury to the cause of the gospel.”

# Servant Exchange

## Rethinking Weekly Communion

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* May 2008<sup>1</sup>

by Todd Bordow

### Introduction

Depending on your point of view, the recent movement among Reformed and Presbyterian churches toward weekly communion is either a long-awaited breath of fresh air or a dangerous turn in the wrong direction. The profusion of recent literature and Internet discussion on a weekly partaking of the Lord's Supper suggests that this movement is no passing fad, but a permanent alteration in the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of quarterly or monthly communion. It is my position that we should not so quickly eschew the tradition and wisdom of our forefathers who saw the possible dangers in weekly communion and practiced quarterly or monthly communion.

### Biblical Overview

The Protestant church has always left the frequency of the Supper to the discretion of each church. This is because neither the Lord Jesus nor the apostles addressed the issue of frequency of communion, or commanded how often the church should partake of the Supper. Let us briefly consider the relevant passages proponents of weekly communion use to support their conviction.

### Acts 2:42

Proponents of weekly communion argue that

<sup>1</sup> [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=101](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=101).

Acts 2:42 implies weekly communion, for since the central elements of new covenant worship are listed in this verse, it seems the “breaking of bread” was observed as regularly as hearing the Word and prayer. Most expositors have been careful not to follow that line of reasoning for at least two reasons. For one, there is ambiguity whether the term “breaking bread” in Acts 2:42 refers to the Lord's Supper (as in Acts 20:7), or to simply sharing meals (as in Luke 24:30, Acts 27:35). Also, even if this term refers to the Lord's Supper, expositors have been careful to note the unique redemptive-historical circumstances occurring in the Book of Acts, thus, cautioning against seeing certain practices as prescriptive examples of how the church was to worship later on. For example, because it was the Festival of Pentecost, and because first Christians were all gathered in Jerusalem for the occasion, the new believers could gather daily at the Jerusalem temple to worship. We should not presume from this that the church should always seek to meet daily for worship instead of weekly, or worship at the Jerusalem Temple for that matter. It is simply asking too much of Acts 2:42 to provide us with answers concerning the exact frequency of these worship activities.

### Acts 20:7

In Acts 20:7 we read of a worship service described as a gathering together to break bread. Here the breaking of bread clearly refers to communion. Pro-weekly advocates assume that because this particular service included the Supper, and the service is even summarized as “breaking bread,” the practice of the early church must have been to partake weekly of the Supper. But again, this conclusion assumes too much. It is just as likely that the Supper was celebrated on that Sunday because of the special occasion of Paul being present, as well as the date's nearness to the Festival of Unleavened Bread (v. 6). Even John Calvin, himself a pro-weekly advocate, sees the possibility of a special occasion for the Supper when he writes on verse 7, “Therefore, I come to the conclusion that a solemn day, that was going to be more convenient for all, was appointed among



them for celebrating the Holy Supper of the Lord” (commentary on Acts).

### 1 Corinthians 11:26

Here the Apostle Paul, in addressing the proper understanding of the Supper, writes that these principles apply “as often as” you eat this bread and drink this cup. Historically, the church has understood this phrase, “as often as,” as evidence that each church is free to discern how often the Supper should be celebrated, as long as there is some regularity to its frequency. The church has recognized the exegetical force of this phrase as referring to a regular frequency for the Supper without stipulating the exact frequency of the custom. The phrase “as often as” is simply too ambiguous to use as an argument for any exact level of frequency, and the church has historically showed wise restraint in not using this text for such a purpose.

It is important to remember when dealing with particular texts regarding the Supper that, besides Paul’s correction of the abuse of the Supper in 1 Corinthians 11, not a word is devoted to the Lord’s Supper in the twenty other epistles (general and pastoral). Clearly there is a primacy in the New Testament of the preached Word compared to the Lord’s Supper. The church historically has seen that the preaching of the gospel is the primary means of grace, and there is no worship without it. But the Supper is a secondary means of grace; it is subject to the preached Word and is only effectual when it is fenced and explained by the Word. The Supper is not necessary to every worship service, nor does its absence make the preaching of the gospel any less effectual to save and sanctify God’s people. There are plenty of examples in the New Testament of sermons without any mention of the Supper.

### Historical Overview

When scanning the recent literature proposing weekly communion, one cannot help be surprised at how confident the supporters of the position are that the Bible clearly teaches their view. In their thinking, the New Testament clearly sets the

pattern for weekly communion. But one cannot help wonder: If the Bible is that clear on the matter, why did our spiritual forefathers miss this for hundreds, even thousands of years?

Augustine reported that in his day the frequency of communion was different *in different places*. Augustine saw there was no Scriptural rule for the frequency of communion and urged his people to “conform to the practice which he finds prevailing in the church to which it may be his lot to come” (Epistles 54.2). Martin Luther, in his Preface to the Small Catechism, wrote:

We are to force no one to believe, or to receive the Sacrament, nor fix any law, nor time, nor place for it, but are to preach in such a manner that of their own accord, without our law, they will urge themselves and, as it were, compel us pastors to administer the Sacrament.

The Westminster *Directory for the Public Worship of God* (1645) leaves the frequency of communion a matter of freedom left to each session to decide. Louis Berkhof, in his *Systematic Theology*, devotes fourteen pages to the Lord’s Supper and never even mentions weekly communion. Berkhof only writes that the Supper should be celebrated regularly; he seems fine with his own non-weekly tradition. Charles Hodge devotes eighty-one pages, in his *Systematic Theology*, to the Lord’s Supper and never once mentions the need for a weekly celebration of the Supper.

The question begs to be asked, If the Bible is clear that the pattern left to us is weekly communion, why did Augustine, Luther, the Westminster divines, and the vast majority of our best Reformed theologians fail to see in the Scriptures what the weekly communion proponents see so clearly?

A common response in the pro-weekly literature is that the Reformed churches and theologians overreacted to Rome, and that overreaction has continued to the present time. I do not believe this is a very satisfying explanation. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church offered the people the Lord’s Supper

once or twice a year (Calvin's *Institutes* IV.17.44). Would not an overreaction to the Roman practice be a more frequent partaking of the Supper than the monthly or quarterly practice of the Reformers? Also, have men like Berkhof and Hodge not proven that they are driven by proper exegesis, regardless of a possible misuse of the doctrine? A view of the Westminster divines, which suggests that they failed to see a clear truth of Scripture because they were simply overreacting to Rome, fails to do justice to these men, their proven character, and their exegetical commitments. It is fairer to say that they simply did not see the Bible teaching weekly communion. This, in itself, should cause weekly proponents to pause before suggesting that weekly communion is clearly implied by either the Acts or I Corinthians passages.

D. G. Hart and John Muether, in their pro-weekly communion article in an issue of *Ordained Servant*, wrote,

While the OPC in her confessional standards officially rejects a Zwinglian view of the sacraments, we would do well to ask if we have become Zwinglians in practice, when the supper becomes an infrequent addition to the ministry of the Word. As Donald MacLeod has suggested, "there are more Zwinglians among Presbyterians today than one would hazard to guess."<sup>2</sup>

One wonders if such a negative view of our past and present Presbyterian brothers is warranted, simply because they did not practice weekly communion. If one is to argue that the majority of our forefathers overreacted to Rome by refusing to celebrate communion weekly, could one just as well argue that the pro-weekly advocates are overreacting to Baptists? These types of arguments simply fail to advance the cause. Have our OPC brothers for the last seventy years failed to see the Supper as a means of grace simply because they have not practiced weekly communion?

This brings us to John Calvin. Weekly communion proponents almost uniformly cite John

2 *Ordained Servant* 6, no. 4 (1997): 97.

Calvin as the one who was correct on this issue. A few comments on Calvin's position are warranted. First, it is true that Calvin believed communion should be celebrated weekly. The literature is clear on this. But Calvin did not believe the preached Word was less effectual without the Supper, or more effectual because of the Supper. There is no evidence to suggest that Calvin believed the church was violating a Scriptural command by not practicing weekly communion. For Calvin was willing to practice monthly communion, knowing his own position was the minority one.

Hart and Muether write in that same article,

Infrequent communion, Calvin claimed, was a superstitious horror, "a most evident contrivance of the devil," and he considered it among the worst of the many abuses of worship in medieval Catholicism. For Calvin, weekly communion was no less important than other reforms he sought, such as the use of the cup by the laity and worship in the language of the vernacular.<sup>3</sup>

One might come to the conclusion from the above paragraph that Calvin was horrified by the Protestant practice of quarterly or monthly communion in his day. But actually, it was the Roman Catholic practice of once a year communion and withholding the cup from the laity that caused Calvin to write those words. It was the Roman Catholic practice Calvin labeled a "superstitious horror" (*Institutes* IV.17.46).

As a concession to the majority, Calvin asked for monthly communion instead of quarterly, but there is no evidence to suggest that weekly communion was as important to him as the other reforms he sought. Calvin did not concede any ground to his opponents in matters of fencing the table, or to the Lutherans or Zwinglians on the presence of Christ in the Supper, or to the Anabaptists on the efficacy of the meal, yet he did concede on the frequency issue. Therefore, it is hardly accurate to suggest that for Calvin weekly communion was as important as the other reforms

3 *Ibid.*

he sought.

### Practical Consequences

Given that the Protestant church historically has seen that the Bible does not regulate the frequency of communion, what then are the practical consequences in a local church that changes its worship to a weekly communion practice? I believe there may be negative consequences (for some, unintentional) in making such a substantial change in worship practice. These negative consequences affect both the unity of the broader church and the outreach of the local church.

First, let us consider the effect of weekly communion on the unity of the broader church. Proponents of weekly communion find themselves in a difficult position. On the one hand, as Presbyterians they serve in bodies where the majority of churches do not practice weekly communion. They do not want to disparage their brothers who practice quarterly or monthly communion, or suggest that the worship in these churches is not biblical. But at the same time, they teach their people that the reason they are making the change to weekly communion is because their position is biblical, and Christians are better fed by both the preached Word and Supper together on a weekly basis. As much as proponents of weekly communion try to avoid disparaging their brothers, the reality is that their people will come to believe that non-weekly churches do not feed their people in a fully biblical manner. Simply put, such a substantial shift from past communion practice will inevitably lead their people to make unhealthy comparisons to other churches, churches even in their own denomination.

I have received a number of phone calls enquiring about our church, and the first question asked is not about the gospel, but the frequency of communion. When they find out we do not practice weekly communion, they resume their search for a church that will, in their minds, more fully feed them. This is unfortunate.

One wonders whether the weekly communion proponents have considered the ramifications of their views on their members who relocate. In our

mobile society it is likely a majority of our members will need to change churches at least once in their lives. If these members have been convinced that weekly communion is both biblical and necessary for the feeding of their souls, they will have a difficult time finding a church in an area where the Reformed or conservative Presbyterians do not practice weekly communion. They may feel compelled to worship in unhealthy churches that are harmful to their souls in other areas simply because they are convinced of their need for weekly communion. They will also be tempted to disparage good churches that would greatly benefit them simply because those churches do not share the same frequency conviction. Thus, a change in worship to weekly communion can have unfavorable effects on the greater unity of the church, as the justification for such a change will lead to a disparaging view of those who do not follow such practice.

Second, let us consider the possible unfavorable effects of weekly communion on the outreach of the church. The conservative Presbyterian church has many obstacles before her in reaching people in the modern American cultural context. We often do not understand how we are perceived by people visiting our churches from a non-Reformed background. Our worship is reverent, yet some of our people drink, smoke, and see movies. We preach on man's inability to save himself, yet call people to believe in Christ for salvation. We value strong doctrine, yet as covenant theologians we see much symbolism in the Bible. We practice infant baptism while the majority of Protestant churches do not.

For those from a non-Reformed background, there are numerous perceptions and misperceptions one must overcome in order to join our churches. We must maintain certain positions and practices because we cannot compromise the preaching of sovereign grace, infant baptism, or Christian liberty. Because of how strange we appear, we often lose visitors who visit and then look elsewhere for a church.

Knowing this, why would we want unnecessarily to introduce a new practice that makes us

even stranger to average people? If our goal is to reach people in the community, as well as attract Christians who are looking for sound teaching, why make matters more difficult by compelling them to change from a well-established practice to one they likely have only seen practiced in Roman Catholic churches? Consider also what impediment arises in the minds of some of our members as they consider inviting friends to worship in our churches.

In conclusion, proponents of weekly communion should be careful not to dismiss the wisdom of our forefathers who did not view weekly communion as required by Scripture, and who for good and wise reasons were not compelled to advance such a practice in their denominations and churches. And weekly communion proponents need to give more thought to the possible adverse consequences of their position on the unity and growth of the church. ■

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## Why Weekly Communion?

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by T. David Gordon

It would be desirable that the Holy Supper of Jesus Christ be in use at least once every Sunday when the congregation is assembled, in view of the great comfort which the faithful receive from it as well as

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1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=104](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=104).

the fruit of all sorts which it produces—the promises which are there presented to our faith, that truly we are partakers of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, His death, His life, His Spirit, and all His benefits, and the exhortations which are there made to us to acknowledge and by a confession of praise to magnify those wonderful things, the graces of God bestowed upon us, and finally to live as Christians, joined together in peace and brotherhood as members of the same body. In fact, our Lord did not institute it to be commemorated two or three times a year, but for a frequent exercise of our faith and love which the Christian congregation is to use *whenever it is assembled*.<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

In the typical American evangelical church the Lord's Supper is observed quarterly or monthly. Because this practice is so common, many people might be surprised to know that both Luther and Calvin believed the Lord's Supper should be observed at least weekly, in contrast to the (then) practice of the Roman Church of observing the supper only once annually.

Please God, gentlemen, that both you and we may be able to establish a more frequent usage. For it is evident from St. Luke in the Book of Acts that communion was much more frequently celebrated in the primitive Church, until this abomination of the mass was set up by Satan, who so caused it that people received communion only once or twice a year. Wherefore, we must acknowledge that it is a defect in us that we do not follow the example of the Apostles. —John Calvin, Letter to the Magistrates of Berne, 1555

Contemporary Protestants should not feel

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2 John Calvin, Articles presented to the Geneva Council in 1537, cited in Howard G. Hagemann, *Pulpit and Table: Some Chapters in the History of Worship in the Reformed Churches* (Richmond: John Knox, 1962), 25 (emphasis added).

themselves obliged to follow Luther and Calvin, however, except where Luther and Calvin followed the Scriptures. The question before us, then, is whether Luther and Calvin (and others) were following the Scriptures in their concern to celebrate the Lord's Supper weekly.

### **Biblical Considerations in Favor of Weekly Communion**

Biblical Christians do not always entirely agree on what it means to be "biblical." For some, a matter is only "biblical" if it is *expressly* biblical, or *clearly* biblical. For others, a matter is biblical if it is a good and necessary consequence (inference) from Scripture, as the Westminster Confession says: "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture" (WCF 1.6). Thus, consistent with the Westminster Confession, I believe weekly communion is biblical, not because there is an express or clear command that says: "Thou shalt observe communion weekly," but because weekly communion is a good and necessary consequence of what Scripture teaches about the matter itself, and that it is a good and necessary consequence of what the Bible teaches about the relation between Word and Sacrament.

My understanding of "good and necessary consequence" goes beyond merely affirming that the Scriptures can teach something without doing so expressly or clearly. My understanding is this: when alternative views are proposed, the one that enjoys more biblical support than the other(s) is the one the Scripture teaches. So I frame the question differently than some. I do not ask, Do the Scriptures contain an airtight inferential argument for weekly communion? Rather, I ask this: "Is the inferential argument for weekly communion better than the inferential argument for monthly, quarterly, or annual communion?" Framed this way, the question is easily answered, because Jesus expressly commanded us to remember him in this rite (and when do we meet that we do not remember him?); because the apostolic practice appears

to have been weekly (Acts 2:42, 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:20–21); and because the nature of the relation between Word and Sacrament is such that there is no good reason to separate them. Do I wish there were more passages that address the matter? Sure, of course I do. But God in His wisdom has given us the Scriptures we have, and our duty is to raise and answer fairly the question: Is there any biblical evidence at all for any of the four positions (weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually)? Framed this way, there is some evidence for weekly communion (though that evidence is neither explicit nor unambiguously clear), and zero evidence for the other practices. For me, by my understanding of what "good and necessary consequence" means, this is sufficient to settle the matter. For those, on the other hand, who begin with the assumption that they have "squatter's rights" to their current opinion, unless/until they are expressly or clearly proven wrong, the evidence is and always will be insufficient to persuade them.

The Lord's Supper was instituted directly by Christ, in the upper room with his disciples. While none would dispute this, the significance of Christ himself instituting the rite is frequently overlooked. To belittle the importance of what Christ has instituted is, at least indirectly, to belittle his wisdom or love in instituting it. If the reason for not observing the Lord's Supper more frequently is that we deem it less important or less significant than other parts of our worship, we need to reconsider the fact that Christ himself instituted this sacrament, whereas he did not personally institute preaching, or singing hymns, for instance.

Further, and closely related, is the fact that Christ instituted this meal as a means by which he wished to be remembered. "Do this in remembrance of me." If given the opportunity to instruct others in how we would wish to be remembered after we leave this world, we would choose a remembrance that was very important to us. Christ chose the Lord's Supper as that by which he wishes to be remembered. Yet what do we do each Lord's Day if not remember Christ, and his saving work on our behalf? Do we really believe we can choose a way of "remembering" this better than that which

Christ himself has chosen?

The church under apostolic oversight appears to have observed the Lord's Supper each week. In their assemblies, they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship (or, better translated "collection"), to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Since this text describes not what the early Christians *happened* to do on a particular occasion, but what they "devoted themselves to," Calvin and Bucer considered this instruction very significant for ordering the church's worship. The word translated "devote" is used also in Acts 6:4, when the apostles appoint deacons to oversee the daily distribution of the church's resources to the widows in the church. The apostles appoint others to do this, saying, "But we will *devote* ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word." In each passage, it is evident that the word means what it sounds like; the deliberate choice to do one thing rather than another. It is the language employed when one has distinguished that which is nonnegotiable from that which is negotiable. Under direct apostolic supervision, these early assemblies deliberately chose to do certain things in their assemblies, and the Lord's Supper was one of the things to which they were devoted.

This is reflected also in Acts 20:7: "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them..." In this very brief comment, Luke records something very significant, namely that the "gathering" of the saints on "the first day of the week" was "to break bread." Today, we might refer to our Sunday gatherings as gathering "to hear the Word of God," or, possibly, "to pray," but I doubt we would describe our gathering as Luke describes this. The implication is not that they did nothing else on the Lord's Day, but that the Lord's Supper so *characterized* their assembly that it could accurately be designated as a gathering "to break bread."

Again, in 1 Corinthians 11:20, Paul refers to the ecclesiastical assembly of the Corinthians as being *characterized* by the observance of the Lord's Supper, even though in this case it is actually a mis-observance. "When you meet together, it is not the Lord's Supper which you eat..." Although this

text refers to a great abuse of the Lord's Supper, it nevertheless indicates that their "meeting together" could be characterized by this particular rite, even though they defiled it. With Acts 2:42 and 20:7, this passage suggests that the earliest assemblies of the Christian church on the Lord's Day were characterized by the observance of that supper by which Christ wished to be remembered.

### Is There a Rationale for This Biblical Practice?

Although these particular passages describe the practice of the early church, they do not record a complete rationale for why they considered this rite so important. A full evaluation of all that the Bible teaches about the sacraments, and especially what it teaches about the Lord's Supper, would be necessary to reveal that rationale. I believe that rationale is accurately summarized by the Westminster Confession of Faith 29.1:

Our Lord Jesus, in the night wherein He was betrayed, instituted the sacrament of His body and blood, called the Lord's Supper, to be observed in his church, unto the end of the world, for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of himself in his death; the sealing all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in him, their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto him; and, to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him, and with each other, as members of his mystical body.

These benefits are so numerous and so healthy, that anyone who really believed that these benefits were found in the Lord's Supper would want to observe it as frequently as possible. Who would not want a perpetual reminder of the sacrifice of Christ? Who would not wish to have "all benefits" of his sacrifice sealed unto true believers? Who has such a sufficient amount of "spiritual nourishment," as not to desire more? Who among us does not need a bond and pledge of our com-

munion with Christ and with each other?<sup>3</sup>

Even the reading and preaching of the Bible do not do some of these things, because both unbelievers and believers read the Bible. Thus, Bible-reading (or biblical preaching) does not function as “a bond and pledge of their communion with Him, and with each other, as members of His mystical body.” Nor does the Bible “put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church and the rest of the world” (WCF 27.1). Indeed, the invention and widespread use of the “altar call” during the last 125 years is probably due to the absence of the Lord’s Supper in Christian worship, which necessitated the church creating some other “pledge of their communion with him.” Calvin greatly appreciated these benefits, and because of his appreciation for them, urged a return to the practice of the apostolic church.

Since the benefits of the Lord’s Supper are so great, one wonders why we would not do it as frequently as possible. The apostolic church apparently understood and appreciated the great benefits associated with the Lord’s Supper, and therefore observed it each Lord’s Day when they gathered. We hardly need its benefits less than they, and we should consider again whether we are not obliged to remember Christ in the way that pleases him and assists us.

### **Why Do Some Protestants Not Observe the Lord’s Supper Weekly?**

There appear to be four reasons why some people have chosen not to observe the Lord’s Supper on a weekly basis. We must examine these reasons, and determine whether they are better, sounder, more biblical reasons than those we have just considered.

Some Protestants have been influenced by Ulrich Zwingli, a reformer who denied that baptism and the Lord’s Supper were true sacraments. Zwingli argued that the Lord’s Supper was merely a memorial and that the sustaining, saving grace of Christ was not actually offered in this rite. Zwingli

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3 Sessions must take these rhetorical questions seriously, because the Supper is the only ordinary means of grace that they can withhold from their people.

denied that the kinds of benefits recognized by the Westminster Assembly could be found in the Lord’s Supper. Some Zwinglians may not consider the Lord’s Supper sufficiently beneficial, then, to be frequently observed. Zwingli believed, however, that the memorial act of the Lord’s Supper was very important, and several Zwinglian denominations today observe weekly communion.

Others choose not to observe the Lord’s Supper frequently because of the logistical difficulties of preparing for it. Someone must purchase the elements, secure a clean tablecloth, etc., and this is a lot of trouble. While it is true that the observance of the Lord’s Supper takes effort, it is also true that the preparation of a sermon takes a substantial amount of effort. The careful preparation of hymns and prayers also takes effort, but we do not hear anyone arguing that we should have sermons only four times annually, or prayers or hymns once a month. Similarly, it is also true that observance of the Lord’s Supper would lengthen the service, but this is true of other elements of worship as well, yet we rarely, if ever, hear people argue that we omit prayers or preaching from the service, in order to shorten it. Every aspect of public worship requires energy and time in preparation. To us, the real issues are whether we perceive the *benefits* to be worthy of the preparation, and whether we wish to remember Christ as he wishes to be remembered.

Still others appear to believe that frequent communion will make unbelievers feel unwelcome, since they are not prepared to participate in communion as Paul commands in 1 Corinthians 11. Interestingly, the Westminster Assembly considered this “separation” of the believer from the unbeliever to be one of the *benefits* of the Lord’s Supper:

Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and his benefits; and to confirm our interest in him: as also, to *put a visible difference* between those that belong unto the church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, ac-

ording to his Word. (WCF 27.1, emphasis added)

The Westminster Assembly believed that the difference between those who belong to Christ and those who do not is the most significant difference that exists; a difference that has the grave consequences in and after this life. Therefore, it is helpful to remind people of this important difference as frequently as we can. Perhaps the greatest service the church can do for unbelievers is to remind them, gently and graciously, that they have not yet made peace with God through Christ. The celebration of the Lord's Supper, in which believers are invited to participate and unbelievers are warned not to, may be one of the most appropriate ways of reminding unbelievers of their condition.

Finally, there are some who argue that the frequent practice of communion will cause it to become less meaningful. To this, there are three responses. First, how does one know this, without having tried it? How can one who has never observed the Lord's Supper frequently know that such observance would render it less meaningful? Second, if it is argued that anything done often loses its significance, then should we not "save" the significance of preaching by doing it less frequently? Should we not make prayers extremely meaningful by only praying annually? Should we not make the singing of praise more meaningful by singing only once a quarter? Third, unless we are willing to decrease the frequency of other elements of worship, what makes us think this *particular* element will become less meaningful if done frequently?

It is right to remember Jesus in the way that he has commanded us. It is wise to follow the example of the apostles who were trained by Jesus. The benefits of the Lord's Supper are so great, and some of them distinct from the benefits of other means of grace, that it is wisest to avail ourselves of this gift from Christ as frequently as did the apostolic church.

### Is Weekly Communion a Panacea?

While I believe in weekly communion, in the

sense earlier mentioned, as the best inference we can draw from the Scriptures as we have them, I do not believe weekly communion, of itself, will prove to be an unmitigated blessing if adopted in all congregations. Insofar as Calvin perceived the Supper to seal the Word preached, if the preaching is not Christ-centered, the transition to the Supper is extremely awkward. If Christ is effectively forgotten in the preaching, he cannot be well-remembered in the Supper. In some churches, the preaching would need to change drastically for the Supper to function as Calvin thought it should. Further, in some churches, the so-called "fencing of the table" militates against the very purposes for which the sacraments were instituted. WCF 27.1, for instance, says: "Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and his benefits; and to confirm our interest in him..." I have been present in services where the so-called "fencing of the table" seems to *question* our interest in Him rather than *confirm* it; and in such churches, frequent communion would be of little benefit.<sup>4</sup>

Weekly communion, therefore, is not merely or primarily weekly. I prefer to think of it as "integrated communion," integrated with other aspects of Reformed thought and liturgy. When it is not so integrated, when it is a tack-on, or when it creates an awkward transition from preaching, its frequency is comparatively insignificant. For those who do not grasp its relation to the other aspects of the Christian assembly, it is probably wiser for them to continue to commune less frequently rather than more.

I am aware that some claim that "our tradition" does not, and has not, believed in weekly communion. I disagree with this claim. To me, one must distinguish a "tradition" from a mere "habit." Humans are creatures of habit, and often do some things many times without ever developing an

4 Indeed, I find the very language of "fencing the table" to be not only out of accord with the *language* of our standards (as a simple matter of fact, it occurs nowhere in Presbyterian confessional literature, and in no books of order), but out of accord with the *substance* of WCF 27.1 as well. The PCA Book of Church Order uses the verb "invite" to describe the minister's directions at the Table; it does not say he is to "fence," "guard," or "uninvite" (BCO 58-4).



gument for the practice. Has anyone, for instance, ever argued that watching television is a satisfying, uplifting, or humane use of our leisure? No. Do people watch television habitually? Yes. Something that is done commonly, yet without theological rationale, is different from something that is done commonly *with* a theological rationale. I am middle-aged and still have never encountered a theological or biblical argument for annual communion; I have never read such an argument for quarterly communion or monthly communion. There are annual, quarterly, or monthly habits; but no arguments. Therefore, insofar as theologians such as Calvin and Luther have studied and argued the matter, I believe our tradition favors weekly communion, even though the habits of many in our tradition differ from that tradition. ■

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# ✦ Servant Humor

## *From the Back Pew*

Eutyclus II continues the tradition of Eutyclus I, Ed Clowney’s pen name in the initial issues of *Christianity Today* (1956–1960). As Clowney explained in his later anthology, *Eutyclus (and His Pin)*: “Eutyclus was summoned to his post as a symbol of Christians nodding, if not on the window-sill, at least in the back pew.” Like his namesake, Eutyclus II aims at “deflating ecclesiastical pretense, sham and present-day religiosity.” This nom de plume will remain a cover for this ecclesiastical sleuth—to maintain his anonymity, and thus his freedom to poke fun.

## Call Me Church Governor

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March 2008<sup>1</sup>

by Eutyclus II

You can tell a lot from an author’s byline. The standard Dagnet approach—“just the facts, ma’am”—informs readers of the author’s name and what he does: “John Jones teaches environmental history at Capital State University.” Sometimes the byline allows the author a chance to plug his new book: “John Jones teaches environmental history at Capital State University and is the author of several books including most recently, *The Fascination with Carbs: How to Reduce Your Carbon Footprint While Losing Weight*.” And then there is the tag line that reveals too much information

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=95](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=95).

about the author: “John Jones teaches environmental history at Capital State University, walks three miles to work each day, and is the father of two overweight children.” The latter tendency reveals not simply more than we need to know, but also that the editor has probably lost the ability to control his writers.

Every author is tempted to be clever with his byline. (Word of warning to writers: don’t be more clever in identifying yourself than your prose is.) This may explain why I once tried to get past an editor the byline, “Eutyclus II is a bishop in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and generally brilliant.” Surprisingly, the editor had less trouble with the brilliant part than with the ecclesiastical title. The editor in question is a Roman Catholic and knows bishops when he reads them. “Eutyclus II,” he shot back, “is no bishop.”

Technically, this editor was wrong and Eutyclus II in a rare instance of brilliance was right. According to the OPC’s *Book of Church Order*, it is proper to call those called by Christ to minister with authority “evangelist, pastor, teacher, bishop, elder, or deacon” (V.2). The BCO adds that “those who share in the rule of the church may be called elders (presbyters), bishops, or church governors” (V.3). Since Eutyclus II is an elder in the OPC, calling him a bishop would be perfectly legitimate.

Of course, my Roman Catholic editor may have had reservations about the use of the word *bishop* because of his own church’s teaching about officers not in fellowship with the bishop of all bishops, the Pope. But equally understandable may have been my editor’s refusing to believe that Presbyterians actually believe in bishops. Reformed Protestants are, after all, presbyterian in polity, not episcopal. Lutherans and Anglicans and even the Methodist Episcopal Church might have bishops, but Presbyterians and Reformed do not. They have elders.

The reasons for wanting to use *bishop* instead of *elder* may be admirable or lamentable. In the latter category may be an Anglophilic mentality that apes all things British and uses the titles, forms, and style of Episcopalians to gain religious stature. And as much as Reformed Protestants

share with Protestant Episcopalians, giving Presbyterianism a boost by climbing the episcopal ladder is a tactic sure to backfire at some stage and betrays a lack of appreciation for the genius of presbyterian polity.

But among the better reasons for describing a Presbyterian elder as a bishop is the increasing confusion over the title of elder. On a recent flight, a conversation with a passenger confirmed the original reason for trying to get bishop past my Roman Catholic editor. After talking about church backgrounds, religion, and the 2008 presidential contest, my fellow passenger asked me if I were a pastor in the OPC. When I replied that I am an elder, this twenty-something lapsed Roman Catholic with a master's degree from the London School of Economics said, "huh, I thought only Mormons had elders."

There you have it—the dilemma of being an elder in twenty-first century America. Mormons are, of course, more numerous than Presbyterians and Reformed and the confusion of the American public about the title *elder* may be understandable. But to have one of the greatest contributions of Reformed Protestants to church government now readily associated with the strange faith that Joseph Smith dug up in the vicinity of Rochester, New York is indeed ironic, if not also humiliating.

What can Presbyterians do to make up for this deficiency in ecclesiastical literacy? One approach would be to increase the number of Presbyterians. The more Christians there are who know that elders are part of John Calvin's church reforms, instituted in sixteenth-century Geneva, not a cabal of caffeine-abstaining older gents meeting in Salt Lake City, the better the chance that average Americans would place the title and office in the correct denominational column. Another approach might be to institute a public relations campaign that shows handsome well groomed men (sort of like Mitt Romney) carrying *Robert's Rules* on their way to session and presbytery meetings. My favorite tactic is to write a book so that I can identify myself as "Eutychus II, the author of the recently published *Ruling Elders Rule!*"

My fear, though, is that none of these strate-

gies will be successful in the short term. And as an elder, both literally and ecclesiastically, I doubt whether the associations of eldership with Mormonism will change in my lifetime. Of course, elders could simply opt for the Greek and go by *presbyter*, but this would invite endless and tedious conversations about the intricacies of presbyterian polity. If you think associations with Mormonism receive strange reactions from fellow travelers, consider the effects of explaining two- and three-office views, with the added wrinkle of accounting for that rare breed, four-office Presbyterians, who count teachers of the word instructing future pastors at seminaries.

In the meantime, to avoid being taken for a Mormon and having my interlocutors go glassy-eyed, I'm going to try "church governor." One advantage of this title, in addition to being listed in the BCO, is that it is novel and tasteful. No one has ever heard of it and so cannot draw unsavory connections. At the same time, the words *church* and *governor* are so familiar as to sound dignified and appropriately official. And for Presbyterians who revel in decency and order, *church governor* is sufficiently bland and descriptive to achieve that wonderful Reformed balance of decency and orderliness. Using the byline "Eutychus II is a church governor in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the author of *Called to Govern*" may not clarify my ecclesiastical duties, but it should rescue me from false impressions about being linked to Brigham Young. ■

## Yin and Yang Theology

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* November 2008<sup>1</sup>

by Eutychus II

Consider two sentences. The first is this: "John Doe is a Presbyterian, but he prays like a Baptist."

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=125](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=125).

The second is like unto it: “The key to the Christian life is to believe like a Calvinist and to work like an Arminian.”

I have heard those and similar expressions from Reformed folk from time to time, and perhaps you have, too. The sentiment behind them is understandable—these comments are designed to challenge Reformed believers from becoming complacent or presumptuous in their spiritual lives. That may be a good idea, but it is very badly executed.

What is dismaying about those statements is the assumption that the Reformed faith offers, by itself, an inadequate approach to sanctification, and it needs to be supplemented from other Christian traditions. I call this the “yin and yang” approach to Reformed spirituality. Two opposing phenomena, Reformed doctrine and evangelical life, if held in precarious balance, actually serve to complement each other, the one supplying the deficiency of the other. So, for example, the light of the Old School needed the heat of the New School. And blended worship allows the reverence of the old and the joyfulness of the new.

My most recent yin and yang sighting was in *Christianity Today*, last May, where a professor at Calvin College defined himself as a “Reformed Charismatic” or a “Pentecostal Christian.” Worshiping at a charismatic church actually made him a better Calvinist, he gushed (unaware, it seems, of the Pelagian accent in the expression, “better Calvinist”). This was because he was freed from Reformed constraints better to experience the sovereignty of God in worship. Don’t be scared of this, he urges cautious Calvinists. Jump in because the water is fine.

The folly of this and similar approaches is at least twofold. First, this is really an insult to Charismatics. Charismatic Christianity is wrong on several scores, but it deserves our respect at least in this sense: its theology and practice are consistent. The Reformed could stand to learn something about the alignment of faith and practice from the charismatic movement.

As popular as this approach may be today, from a Reformed perspective it is ultimately sui-

cidal. This is to be Reformed only on the condition that one’s faith contains ideas without consequences. Calvinism is pretty deep stuff, just don’t get too carried away with it.

A half-century ago, the Peniel controversy in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church was another manifestation of this alleged tension, when sympathizers of the Peniel Bible Conference in New York accused the OPC of lacking Christian warmth and charity. Would the doctrinally rich OPC be a stronger church today had it found a way to incorporate the exuberant evangelical piety of Peniel into her corporate culture? The late Charles Dennison did not think so, and here is the lesson he thought Orthodox Presbyterians needed to learn from this episode in their history:

A more profitable approach to the doctrine/life problem is to realize that both sides carry within them what is perceived to stand opposite to them. If both the doctrine and the life side are distinct temperaments in their approaches to Christian faith, they stand holistically, as “systems” complete in themselves. Therefore, the doctrine side has its own perspective on the Christian life; while the life side is not devoid of doctrine but possessed of doctrine essential to its character.<sup>2</sup>

Charlie Dennison saw the Reformed faith as J. Gresham Machen did: it was neither experience, nor mere doctrine. Christianity, Machen wrote, was “a way of life founded upon doctrine.” Reformed doctrine yields a Reformed way of life, and other traditions produce their own distinctive expressions of Christian piety.

So much then for yin and yang. Since this is an election season, let me close by paraphrasing the great Barry Goldwater. Consistency in the cultivation of Reformed piety is no vice; eclecticism in the pursuit of Presbyterian identity is no virtue. ■

2 Charles G. Dennison, *History for a Pilgrim People*, ed. Danny E. Olinger and David K. Thompson (Willow Grove, PA: Committee for the Historian of the OPC, 2002), 144–145.

# ✦ Servant Reading *Book Reviews*

## What Went Wrong? and The Crisis of Islam

by Bernard Lewis

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*  
January 2008<sup>1</sup>

by Donald Poundstone

*What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, by Bernard Lewis. New York: HarperCollins, 2002, 186 pages, \$12.95, paper.

*The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, by Bernard Lewis. New York: Random House, 2004, xxxii + 190 pages, \$12.95, paper.

Christians in recent decades—at least since the Ayatollah Khomeini’s Iranian Revolution of 1979—have grown increasingly aware of the challenge presented by the religion of Muhammad. As a knowledgeable friend said to me at the time of the Gulf War (1990–1991), resurgent Islam will make the threat once posed by a communist Soviet Union seem tame by comparison. Especially after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, American Christians realize we face ruthless, determined enemies. But what do we know of Islamic history, culture, and beliefs?

To gain a deeper understanding of all things

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=87](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=87).

Muslim, we could do worse than listen to Bernard Lewis, Cleveland E. Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies (Emeritus) at Princeton University. Lewis, born to Jewish parents in London and still active at ninety-one, is widely acknowledged as one of the world’s foremost scholars and authorities on Islam. He is thoroughly conversant with Turkish, Arab, and Persian language, literature, and history. The author of more than 20 books and numerous academic articles on the subject, Lewis’s most recent works are two brief volumes aimed at explaining the Muslim world to the general public.

In *What Went Wrong?* completed shortly before the attacks of 9/11, Lewis elegantly rehearses the dismay and anguish of modern Muslims as they come to grips with the undeniable fact of their own decline vis-à-vis the West in areas they once held sway—military prowess, economic power, and the various arts and sciences of civilization. For centuries Muslims looked down on non-Islamic peoples, when they thought of them at all. Convinced that Islam is the final and only true revelation of God, Muslims were confident they had little or nothing to learn from ignorant infidels and barbarians. For many years after the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople in 1453, it seemed that Islam would advance irresistibly and eventually overwhelm Christendom. That reality began to change with the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the technological revolution. But Muslims only slowly came to realize the dramatic shift in cultural dominance.

The Ottomans certainly had inklings of their weaknesses. From the sixteenth century they began to recognize the infidels’ strength at sea. The West also enjoyed success on the battlefield and in the marketplace. Unfortunately for their civilization, Muslims lacked the cultural openness and curiosity to benefit from advances and discoveries in the rest of the world. In exploration, science, technology, economic prosperity, warfare, governance, diplomacy, and human rights Islam fell behind the West. The Ottoman Empire finally crashed in the wake of World War I. The West then carved up much of the Islamic world into little fiefdoms to be ruled by European powers.

Lewis observes that when things go wrong in a society a common question to ask is, Who did this to us? The answer most often lays the fault on domestic minorities or foreigners abroad. The Ottomans asked a different question: What did we do wrong? Answers to both these questions are still being debated in the Middle East today, with Americans and Jews usually getting most of the blame.

*The Crisis of Islam* deals with the Muslim dilemma from a military and political perspective following the terrorist attacks on 9/11. As in *What Went Wrong?* Lewis surveys significant developments in Islamic history, focusing, this time, on militancy, terrorism, and international relations, particularly during the twentieth century.

Readers will learn how Muslims view the Crusades, the American and French Revolutions, European imperialism, and relations with the old Soviet Union. Lewis provides a brief but lucid account of the rise among Saudi rulers in Arabia of Wahabism, one of the most radical and militant Islamic movements, and its relation to present-day terrorism.

Lewis makes much of our Lord's saying, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21). He sees this clear separation between government and religion as a fundamental difference between Christianity and all forms of Islam. It reflects the differing histories of Jesus (humiliation and crucifixion) and Muhammad (military victory and triumph during his lifetime), and has deeply influenced the contrasting attitudes and behavior of their followers. Christians have learned meekness and suffering with Christ; Muslims typically pursue armed conflict and the forcible subjugation of their enemies.

These are learned yet accessible books that take us behind today's bloody headlines. They make no attempt to give an adequate summary of Islamic doctrine and cultic practice; there are many books on the market that do that quite well. Nor does Lewis analyze Islam religiously from an orthodox Christian point of view, although he clearly sympathizes with ideals of freedom, toler-

ance, and representative government championed in the modern world by most Christians and Jews. He respects Islam and admires many of the followers of Muhammad. He is probably more sanguine about a peaceable future for Islam than most Christians are. While recognizing the militant and often coercive features of Islamic civilizations, he is also aware that in places the Koran promotes quite humane practices. Such verses represent what Abraham Lincoln in another context called the "better angels of our nature." Lewis also knows that many modern Muslims yearn for the freedoms so widely enjoyed in the West.

Christians ought to pray and labor for the advance of the gospel among Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere. They have proven very resistant to the good news concerning Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. Bernard Lewis may not admit that Islam's hostility to the Son of God is a primary source of its internal problems. He is, nonetheless, an engaging and valuable guide to learning about the history and current struggles of the world's more than one billion Muslims. Reformed pastors and ruling elders, as well as other believers, will profit from reading these books. ■

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# The Truth about Islam

by *Anees Zaka and Diane Coleman*

## Ten Steps in Witnessing to Muslims

by *Anees Zaka*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* January 2008<sup>1</sup>

by Gregory E. Reynolds

*The Truth about Islam: The Noble Qur'an's Teachings in Light of the Holy Bible*, by Anees Zaka and Diane Coleman. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004, xx + 194 pages, \$11.99, paper.

*Ten Steps in Witnessing to Muslims*, by Anees Zaka. Philadelphia: Church without Walls, 1998, 71 pages, \$5.00, paper.

With the plethora of books on Islam flooding the market, Reformed Christians will find the works of Anees Zaka refreshing. These two books are a perfect complement to help prepare church officers to engage our Muslim neighbors with the gospel. *The Truth about Islam* compares Islam and Christianity based on the texts of their respective scriptures. *Ten Steps in Witnessing to Muslims*, as the title tells, is a practical manual describing the evangelistic engagement itself. This review will focus more on *The Truth about Islam*.

*The Truth about Islam* fulfills its subtitle admirably through the inclusion of numerous charts and tables (31 tables in all) contrasting the Bible and the Noble Qur'an with quotations on a variety of topics. Zaka and Coleman have packed a great deal of primary source material into a small space. This adds significantly to the value of the book. A

fine example of this contrast is found in Tables 20 and 21 (100–01) in which brief direct quotations from the Noble Qur'an and the Bible describe the attributes of Allah and Yahweh. The difference is startlingly clear.

The first six chapters contrast Christianity and Islam on the concept of truth, the identity of Muhammad, the identity of Jesus Christ, the Bible and the Noble Qur'an, the concept of God, and the ways of living in each religion. The seventh and final chapter deals with communicating the gospel to Muslims in the post 9/11 world.

The sixth chapter on grace and law is marred, in my opinion, by seeking to demonstrate the centrality of Christianity in the founding of the American republic. "Grace in action permits cultures to flourish" (147). What the numerous quotes from the founding era actually demonstrate is that the ethics of Christianity, not the grace of the gospel, were co-opted in the service of the new political order. Suddenly, instead of one religion contrasted with another, the implied contrast—and thus conflict—is between two civilizations, Islamic and Christian. That many elements of the Christian view of humanity, institutions, and virtues, helped create the soil in which our constitutional republic was possible, I do not doubt. However, to link the cause of the gospel to any particular culture assures the doom of the entire gospel enterprise. Identifying its religion with government and culture is part of the problem of Islam, as Zaka and Coleman point out in other places. But to imply that democracy is an answer to Islam sets up a false conflict, which incidentally exacerbates the problem by raising the specter of the Crusades. Is this the sort of warfare we see in the New Testament? I do not doubt that Islam according to its own scriptures is not conducive to democracy in any form, as Zaka and Coleman rightly assert. Nor do I doubt that consistent Islam represents a serious threat to our civil freedoms. What I do doubt is that it is the church's job to fix that problem by "recapturing the culture." Such an agenda simply finds no warrant in the text of the Holy Bible. Nor is such an enterprise the proper response to the world-dominating intentions of Islam. In fairness to Zaka and

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=86](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=86).

Coleman, the point they are trying to make is that democracy requires Christianity. The very freedom of thought that Zaka and Coleman laudably praise comes precisely from the Christian doctrine of the spirituality of the church, which promotes civil tolerance in the interest of separating church and state; but this is not the gospel. The gospel is supremely intolerant in the sense that it claims to be exceptional. But American exceptionalism is not the message of the church. The very freedom that the clear separation of church and state allows is not a call for Christian civilization, whatever the benefits Christian presence may have on a given culture. If some Muslims use this freedom in the quest to impose the will of Allah, it is the business of the state to stop them from committing treason or other crimes. It is the business of the church to preach the gospel. Raising this issue in the way the authors do confuses the very cause of evangelizing Muslims and, oddly, undermines the very point they are making so clearly in the rest of the book.

Furthermore, it is an open question whether or not the beguiling prosperity of American culture, combined with its vague religion of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism<sup>2</sup>, can be resisted by Muslim immigrants. In any case, whether we are slaves to pleasure (à la Huxley) or slaves to the state (à la Orwell), all loyalties to any aspect of the created order are challenged by the Lord of heaven through the gospel of his Son. Oddly, and fortunately, in the last chapter the following excellent statement is made in apparent contradiction to some of what is said between pages 144 and 151: “Understand and clarify that Western culture is not biblical Christianity” (169).

The final chapter happily gets back on track with some excellent advice on how to be faithful witnesses to our Muslim neighbors. Using John 4, Luke 24, and Acts 2 and 17 as models, principles for engagement are clearly summarized. Two additional books are recommended by the authors in this concluding chapter: for apologet-

2 This is the name given by Christian Smith for what he thinks is an emerging replacement for American civil religion. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of America's Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

ics Greg Bahnsen's *Always Ready*, and for Muslim evangelism Samuel Zwemer's *The Muslim Christ*. Additionally an excellent bibliography suggests many more fine resources. The most notable feature of this chapter is the “Church without Walls” concept of gathering with Muslims for respectful, honest discussion of what is taught in the scriptures of Islam and Christianity, seeking to break down the walls of hatred, distrust, isolation, misunderstanding, miscommunication, and conversion (168–169). “Most biblical Christians are intimidated by the militancy of Islam, but it need not be so” (173). The book continues with the counsel that Christians should have confidence that Muslims need the gospel, and that many consequently have a deep sense of sin and emptiness. This calls for compassion in befriending and communicating the love of God to Muslim neighbors.

The clear exposition of biblical, historic Christianity makes this book function like an expanded tract, and with care may be used as such (174), though it is meant more to be a primer for Christians evangelizing Muslims. The theology of the Noble Qur'an, in comparison with that of the Bible, is an arid spiritual landscape, one which should make us yearn, as Paul did for his countrymen in Romans 10, to see them come to know the Lord of grace and glory. The continuous prayer that separates each of the seven chapters beautifully expresses the authors' motivation.

*Ten Steps in Witnessing to Muslims* duplicates some of the material in *The Truth about Islam*, but is unique in providing more detailed information about the culture, customs, manners, and religious practices of Muslims. It reminds us that because Muslims are made in God's image, and because they have some roots in Judeo-Christian ethics, they have many admirable virtues.

The clear organization of the two books makes them very accessible for continued future reference. Their usefulness is greatly enhanced by the confessional Reformed commitment of Pastor Zaka (a PCA minister), together with his clear presuppositional approach (read Van Tillian apologetics). Despite my one serious disagreement expressed above, I highly recommend both books



as helpful aids in understanding and witnessing to Muslims. ■

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## Singing and Making Music

*by Paul S. Jones*

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Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* February 2008<sup>1</sup>

by Darryl G. Hart

*Singing and Making Music: Issues in Church Music Today*, by Paul S. Jones. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006, xvi + 315 pages \$16.99, paper.

In the worship wars of the last two decades, Presbyterians who are suspicious of novel forms are prone to look for help and encouragement wherever they can find it. The trend among evangelical Protestants has been running so decisively toward music and styles designed to interest “seekers” that any defense of older forms of worship will be greeted wholeheartedly. This is especially true for congregational song where older musical tastes and musical idioms have come under assault without serious or obvious rejoinder.

In this context comes a welcome book by Paul S. Jones, the music director at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia (PCA). This center-city congregation, partly through Jones’ own efforts, has resisted mightily the recent innovations in worship while also maintaining a tone and order of service that characterized American Protestant-

ism throughout most of the twentieth century until the worship wars began. Jones’ book is a plausible defense of traditional Protestant song and worship music. It offers much wisdom on how to think about the selection of hymns, performance, and the function of music in worship, while also introducing readers to some of the great hymnody and worship music from the church’s history. But these assets come with a cost. Jones’ conservatism does not accurately reflect the convictions and teaching that informed Presbyterian and Reformed Christianity from the Reformation until the awakenings of the eighteenth century. Instead the book presents a conservative Protestant perspective rather than a Reformed one. Consequently, while those looking for arguments against the innovators will find considerable help from *Singing and Making Music*, readers desiring a more consistently Reformed argument will have to look elsewhere.

Jones excels on so many fronts that to fault him for not being sufficiently Reformed may seem like nit picking. At the practical level the book brims with good advice about appropriate ways to use music in worship, from the selection of hymns to criteria for selecting an organ. Jones also provides valuable historical perspective on various hymn writers, answers misconceptions about them (such as the oft-repeated remark that Luther used bar tunes), and the origin and function of service music (e.g., the prelude, introit, offertory, and postlude). Most of Jones’ instincts about church music stem from a sober understanding of worship as a time when frivolity and informality are inappropriate. For instance, in a chapter on criteria for church music, Jones writes, “Text and music should be well matched. At times one will encounter a solid, doctrinal text set to a trivial tune— this can be true of contemporary music or of a favorite hymn” (280). He adds, “Worship of God should be somehow set apart from the mundane tasks of everyday life . . . . Music used to worship God should be meaningful and other than ordinary.” The book is especially effective in countering the standard arguments that have been used in favor of “contemporary” over “traditional” worship. Jones is convinced that the reasons for replacing hymns

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1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=90](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=90).

with praise songs originate from an approach based more on the spirit of the age than on biblical norms. “A ‘me-focused’ age . . . is hardly one that should inform and define our approach to God,” he laments, “And yet, it does.” Even so, as much as the contemporary church seems to be shunning psalms and hymns, Jones argues that “both forms are biblical and necessary” (191–192).

Despite Jones’ good sense on various matters related to church music and congregational song, he departs significantly from the sort of outlook that had informed Presbyterian worship up until the rise of hymns during the revivals of the eighteenth century. Granted, the case of exclusive psalmody is not going to resolve the worship wars, or, if it does its success will be to make everyone feel like the vanquished. But the bulk of Reformed theologians for close to two centuries after the Reformation believed that psalms were the only appropriate form of congregational singing. The Christian Reformed Church, for instance, only introduced hymns early in the twentieth century and the Covenanters still sing only psalms. Unfortunately, Jones does not spend much time with the Reformed argument against hymns but instead argues, following Hughes Old, that Calvin’s psalter was simply his preference for the congregations in Geneva. When Jones confronts the Westminster Standards which also maintain exclusive psalmody, thus showing how lasting the conviction was even down to the 1640s, he accepts Robert Rayburn’s argument that chapter twenty-one of the Confession also refers to hymns “in a wider sense” than only psalms (101). Aside from not doing justice to the older argument against hymns, Jones’ logic also belies an insufficient appreciation for the regulative principle of worship which requires the church to find a biblical warrant for the elements of worship (what should be sung) rather than simply discovering that Scripture does not prohibit a specific practice (any form of song is permitted).

Other problems attend Jones’ failure to work within Reformed boundaries. One is the matter of office and whether churches should have paid musicians directing the musical component of a congregation’s worship. Jones tries to justify

church musicians by citing the singers and musicians who were part of Levitical worship. But such an appeal (following the regulative principle) would require all churches to have musicians, not merely provide grounds for their possibility. Perhaps even more difficult is the appeal to part of Old Testament worship that Reformed Christianity has typically regarded as being fulfilled in Christ and so no longer necessary. Aside from questions of office and redemptive history, the use of musical instruments itself was generally forbidden among Reformed Christians until the nineteenth century. Jones seems to be unaware of the objections to musical instruments that Columbia Seminary’s John L. Girardeau raised forcefully at the time when congregations began to make the organ an essential piece of church furnishings and congregational singing. One last concern of note is the function of song in worship. For those like Calvin, song was a form of prayer (thus making the psalms highly pertinent for worship). But for Jones, song functions as both sermon and prayer (the subjects of his first two chapters respectively). Whether or not one follows Calvin on song as prayer, to consider song as a form of proclamation invites a blurring of the elements of worship, as well as the differences between officers and church members, that will further the confusion now surrounding Presbyterian worship.

From one angle, then, Jones’ book is a valuable counterweight to the trend that flouts good taste and common sense in worship. And to his credit, he does try to ground his points in the Bible, not merely in standards of good music. Such standards, by the way, should not be discounted, since as the creator God is also the author of them. But from another angle, one that relies on the insights of historic Reformed teaching about worship and the ministry of the word, Jones’ book obscures the biblical theology that gave Presbyterians a form of worship that was distinct from Lutheran, Anglican, and evangelical practices. His book is a helpful reminder that conservative or traditional worship is not the same as Reformed worship. It may even have the added value of showing how biblical historic Reformed worship was. For rather

than looking to Scripture alone for what it says about song. Calvin, the Westminster divines and subsequent church officers reflected theologically on the epoch-making significance of Christ's ministry and the changes necessary for Christian worship, especially for the way God's people sing. ■

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## Keeping House: The Litany of Everyday Life by Margaret Kim Peterson

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by Diane L. Olinger

*Keeping House: The Litany of Everyday Life*, by Margaret Kim Peterson. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007, xiii + 175 pages, \$21.95.

In the preface to *Keeping House: The Litany of Everyday Life*, the author, Margaret Kim Peterson, tells us of a guaranteed conversation killer. When asked what you do, you respond by saying “I keep house.” She writes of her own experience, “I had the uncomfortable sense that virtually any other answer would have been more acceptable. People would have been happy to hear that I was an artist or a writer, that I was developing a small business, that I was practicing the piano or taking flying lessons. But keeping house? I might as well have said, “I’m wasting my time.” In this eight chapter book, Peterson, both a housewife and a theologian,<sup>2</sup>

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=94](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=94).

2 She is theologian in residence at the First Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) at Norristown, PA and teaches theology at Eastern University in St. Davids, PA. As such, Peterson might

briefly examines the historical development of our contempt for housework and those who do it and then asks us to look at the subject “not through the postindustrial and postfeminist lenses provided to us by our culture but through the lens of Christian scripture” (12).

“Before industrialization, women and men had worked together in and around the home at complementary unpaid tasks” (9). After industrialization, men (and some women, mostly single) “went to work,” in other words they went to factories and other workplaces and earned wages. Women (especially wives) “stayed home” where they did “housework.” Housework became low-status “women’s work,” and was suspected of not being work at all. Contempt for the work transferred to contempt for the worker. In a recent survey on attitudes toward gender and the workplace, respondents ranked business women favorably, similar to their rankings of business men and millionaires, while ranking housewives as similar in competence to the elderly, blind, retarded, and disabled (11–12).

In striking contrast to this cultural contempt, Scripture teaches us that God cares about the physical needs of his people and desires that his people should care about these matters as well. The Gospels, in particular, teach us of the Christian duty to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless. (See, e.g., Matt. 25:34–40.) “Housework,” notes Peterson, “is all about feeding and clothing and sheltering people who, in the absence of that daily work, would otherwise be hungry and ill-clad and ill-housed” (3). Although housework is only a beginning to our duty of merciful service, not an end, it is a beginning. Not a sidetrack.

Peterson surveys Scripture showing us that “God does not appear to think as lowly of housework as members of our culture are apt to” (12). Scripture portrays God as a homemaker and house-dweller (Psalm 104); God provides food,

not be someone readers of *Ordained Servant* would be likely to think of as a resource for women in the OPC. In light of such concerns, you may wish to read the book (yes, a book for women and about housekeeping!) before approving it for wide distribution.

clothing, and shelter for his people (Gen. 3:21, Ex. 16:4, Deut. 8:4, Lev. 23:43); God's presence with his people is mediated through dwelling places, the tabernacle, the temple, and finally in the person of the incarnate Christ (12–14). The story of redemption is a journey from home (Eden) to home (New Jerusalem). During this journey, we are “resident aliens” with an eschatological expectation of a home that will truly satisfy our human longings, which are frustrated in this life as a consequence of sin (24–25, 146).

As the book's subtitle suggests, Peterson views housekeeping as the litany of everyday life. “When we have prayed through a litany, we may not have prayed at great length about everything of concern to us, but at least we have covered the bases” (19). Similarly, housekeeping is about a lot of different things (errands, meals, clothes, messes) and is characterized by repetition (a meal is cooked and is eaten; a few hours later, everyone is hungry again). This comparison is extended to other “sacred routines that shape the corporate life of the church,” like the cyclical church calendar. These comparisons did not resonate with me, coming, as I do, from a different tradition than the author. Nor do I think they prove much other than that all things should be done decently and in good order, whether at home or in the church. True, as far as it goes.

The interior chapters of *Keeping House*, 2–7, contain Peterson's musings, sometimes based on Scripture, sometimes just based on common sense, regarding housing, clothing, and food, two chapters each. A wide variety of topics are covered, from walk-in closets to sock darning to farm markets. Peterson analogizes housework to God's creative and providential work, e.g., comparing God's creative work of bringing order out of chaos, to the task of turning a “heap of damply repulsive clothes” into “stacks of neatly folded laundry,” (39). I generally saw this as an uplifting attempt by Peterson to see God's image in the keeper of the house and to apply Luther's doctrine of vocation to housework, though she does not speak in these terms. Rather, she describes what she is doing as showing us how “the patterns of our lives . . . echo

and emulate the patterns of the larger story that we, as Christians, believe is the true story of the world” (21).

Peterson's thesis is that housekeeping matters. It's not all that matters, and it doesn't matter most. But, it does matter. This is common sense, and one might think that it hardly warrants a book length treatment with biblical exegesis to support it. But, for Christian women who keep house (whether a little or a lot—Peterson's book is not aimed solely at the “stay-at-home” housekeeper) and who struggle from time to time with the societal contempt Peterson so aptly describes, it is a good reminder. In addition to the book's use in encouraging those with such struggles, readers of *Ordained Servant* might find *Keeping House* helpful in counseling new homemakers (whether singles or newlyweds) or in providing a theme for a women's retreat. ■

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## Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman

by *John R. Muether*

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by William D. Dennison

*Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman*, by John R. Muether. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008, 288 pages, \$24.99.

John R. Muether's *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman* is a triumph as an

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=120](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=120).

ecclesiastical biography! Muether's well-written and easy to read volume is not for the casual reader of biographies; rather, his achievement comes with a challenge as each page demands reflection and candid engagement. Our OP historian masterfully coordinates the narrative to entice the reader into being an engaging spectator of Van Til's life journey. If you have a passion for the Reformed faith, then you will share in the concerns, anxieties, disappointments, frustrations, delights, joys, and triumphs of this churchman, apologist, seminary professor, husband, father, grandfather, confident uncle, and respectful sibling. You will be gripped by a penetrating look into his difficult decisions: farmer or academician, Christian Reformed or Orthodox Presbyterian, Calvin Theological Seminary or Westminster Theological Seminary (a few occasions), the nature of his respect and critique for fellow Reformed comrades (e.g., Hodge, Warfield, Kuypers, Bavinck, Jellema, Daane, the DeBoers, Masselink, Clark, Carnell, Dooyeweerd, Schaeffer, Gerstner, and Clowney), evangelicals (e.g., Buswell, Henry, Graham, and Lewis), and the modernists (e.g., Barth, Marty, etc.). While using primary and secondary sources effectively, Muether's exhaustive labors into letters of correspondence and personal interviews pull the reader into the inner dynamics of his subject.

Usually the work of a good historian and biographer is timely. Muether's effort is seasonable for the life of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). He correctly appraises Van Til's contribution to the identity of the first 50 years of the OPC and the first generation of Westminster Theological Seminary. In my estimation, the highpoint of Muether's urgent challenge and thesis comes from the words of Van Til himself: "By 1979 Van Til regretfully described the student population at the seminary as 'a generation that knows not Van Til'" (224). In the same paragraph, Muether carries the same idea into the OPC, pointing out that Van Til also feared "that the OPC was losing its militant edge" (224). The author's assessment of Van Til's concern for the OPC is crucial. Herein, Muether's aim comes to the forefront—he informs us from the beginning that the volume is about an apolo-

gist and a churchman (15–20). He is not writing another volume on Van Til's apologetic method and system, although he demonstrates a firm grasp of both. Rather, Muether pleads that the OPC must self-consciously reflect upon the Lord's work in Van Til. After all, the faces among OP church officers and membership have changed significantly over the last 15 years. Do most in the OPC know Van Til and the identity that the church took over the course of his generation—i.e., no compromise with the Christ of Scripture as articulated in the orthodox creeds and the Reformed Confessions? While the world, modernism, and evangelicals have despised such a commitment to biblical revelational theology, by God's grace, this is the identity that Van Til carved for the OPC. Sadly, like Machen before him, the twilight of Van Til's life was an experience of continued marginalization and disenfranchisement, even within the churchman's OPC. Nevertheless, Muether's closing section on "the ecumenical Van Til" (237–240) may be his most brilliant and most penetrating section to the soul of the reader. Muether captures what ecumenicity truly looked like through the eyes of a biblically conscious and militant Van Til and how it needs to be defined currently if the OPC is going to be truly an ecumenical denomination within Protestantism. Does such an ecumenical spirit exist in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church today?

Before moving to specifics, I must stress that I found each section instructional and a delight to read. In light of personal interests, I found chapters 4 and 5 particularly enlightening. "Reformed or Evangelical?" (chapter 4) contains an excellent section on "debating the theology of Gordon Clark" (100–113). "The New Machen against the New Modernism" (chapter 5) expounds Van Til's assessment of Karl Barth's theology and the personal pain that accompanied his appraisal. Some general observations, Muether grasps correctly Van Til's view of the antithesis of the Creator-creature distinction, as well as Van Til's view of the relationship between antithesis and common grace. Furthermore, Muether has correctly understood that Van Til's view of antithesis is grounded in the history of redemption, conditioned by God's

covenant. On this point, he has correctly assessed the influence of Geerhardus Vos upon Van Til's apologetic—often missed by others. From here Muether notes well that a wrong assessment of the depth and breadth of Van Til's antithesis leaves the door open for evangelicalism, or modernism, or secularism.

Are there some gaps in the work? Like any work, there are, but those gaps do not damage its fine quality. For example, although I understood Muether's point, I found his section on "Van Til and Hodge" in the last chapter (232–234) to be a trivial inclusion. Also, his discussion on "debating common grace" (152–153) lacked a clear synopsis of Van Til's unique and intriguing position on common grace.

Permit me to conclude by issuing a challenge to Mr. Muether and the OPC. First, I wish to encourage Mr. Muether to write a study volume, essentially a synopsis of each chapter and questions that relate to the main substance of each chapter. Mr. Muether, your masterful volume needs to be studied in the Sunday schools of our churches. Second, every officer in the OPC needs to read this volume; it is essential reading for understanding the identity of our denomination and its humble tradition. Third, Candidates and Credentials Committees in the OPC need to consider it as required reading for any candidate for licensure and/or ordination. Last, it is imperative to reflect upon what it means to be a churchman. In some circles, the term has received popular use, yet it seems to have a vague meaning.

Mr. Muether, thank you for a splendid study; it is truly a gift to Christ's church from our church historian! ■

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## Salvation Belongs to the Lord

*by John M. Frame*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* November 2008<sup>1</sup>

by John V. Fesko

*Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, by John M. Frame. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006, xi + 382 pages, \$16.99, paper.

John Frame has written an introduction to the discipline of systematic theology based on material he originally prepared for a survey course in systematics. The book is written for beginning students of theology, those who are looking for a basic introduction to the discipline (x). Frame sets out to survey the loci of systematic theology through the exegesis of key passages, a commitment to the Reformed faith, and the desire to focus upon the Lordship of God and of Jesus Christ (x–xi). There are many places throughout his book where Frame accomplishes his stated goals. He communicates the basic teachings of the various loci of systematic theology in a clear manner.

There are a number of points where one finds traditional Reformed teaching that is helpful to the beginning student: man's fourfold estate (97), the historicity of the fall (106–07), the covenants of works and grace (118–20), the threefold office of Christ (146–58), definite atonement (151–55), the cessation of prophecy (167–68), the doctrine of election (177–78), justification by faith alone and the imputation of the active and passive obedience of Christ (200–05), exclusivity of male elders (257), rejection of the memorial view of the sacraments (278), the biblical legitimacy of infant baptism (280–82), and the inseparable relationship between theology and ethics (314–27). The author

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<sup>1</sup> [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=123](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=123).

also includes a helpful bibliography at the end of the book to help beginning students identify key theological works for further reading.

There are, however, some peculiarities that detract from the overall stated goal of presenting the reader with an introduction to systematic theology.

The first peculiarity is Frame's use of triads. If one is familiar with the theology of Frame, then his use of triads in his theology should be no great surprise. Throughout the book, he identifies a number of triads by which he explains various doctrines: he explains revelation in terms of "the triad of general revelation, special revelation, and *existential revelation*" (57; also 69, 103, 195, 200, 253, 261, 275). Now, to be sure, Frame does state that his use of triads is a pedagogical device by which one can understand the doctrines of the faith (330). However, one wonders whether such a method is truly helpful to the beginning student of theology, especially given that such a method is unique to Frame? Is it not better to give the key elements of a doctrine regardless of how many points there are, rather than run the risk of forcing a doctrine into a triad unnecessarily? The author's triad may fit his system but risks confusing the student who will, it is hoped, go on to read other works that do not use such definitions.

The second peculiarity is Frame's perspectivalist approach to theology, one in which he divides theology into the normative, situational, and existential perspectives. This is perhaps one of the features that could be most confusing to a neophyte. For example, Frame writes: "I think of election as normative, because it is the plan of God that governs everything. The atonement is situational, for it is the objective fact by which we are saved. And the *ordo salutis* is existential, for it happens within the experience of each of us; for that reason it is sometimes called *subjective soteriology*" (177). In light of what Frame says elsewhere, this statement is confusing. When he defines his three perspectives, he states that the normative is what God's revelation says; the situational is "trying to understand the situations we get into," and the existential is when a person seeks to know himself, "In this perspective, you focus on yourself" (77). If

the situational is trying to understand the situations we get into, how does this fit with Christ's atonement? Is the author trying to point to sin and the need for atonement? But then, is that not the existential perspective? Similarly, does not the *ordo salutis* have normative elements, such as forensic justification and adoption? In places, Frame caveats regarding the three perspectives, "Each perspective in? reality includes the whole reality; and each perspective therefore includes the other two" (329). If this is so, then why even try to separate these perspectives?

It is these two key peculiarities that detract from the book's overall intention. One can call them *peculiarities* because they are peculiar to Frame's theology. One does not find a perspectivalist triadic theology in any major work of Reformed systematic theology (i.e., Calvin, Turretin, Hodge, Berkhof, Bavinck, Berkouwer, etc). Given these peculiarities, it seems such a presentation would only hamper and confuse the beginning student. The beginner would learn Frame's unique approach only to discover that no one else employs it, and then, have to relearn the most basic categories and definitions so he can learn the traditional terminology and methodology. If the goal, then, is to assist the beginning student in interfacing with Reformed systematic theology, then these peculiarities provide the reader with some obstacles. On the other hand, this book provides an excellent introduction to Frame's theology and an entry point to his other more technical works. In this regard, perhaps the book's subtitle should be: *An Introduction to the Theology of John Frame*. There is certainly no shame in such a book, and it could be quite helpful to the one interested in understanding Frame's theology. However, if one is looking for a basic introduction to Reformed systematic theology, Berkhof's *Manual of Christian Doctrine* is still perhaps the better choice. ■

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# Review Articles

## City on a Hill: Caesar's or God's?

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* January 2008<sup>1</sup>

by Richard M. Gamble

*A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State*, by Darryl Hart. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006, 288 pages, \$26.95.

*Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion*, by David Gelernter. New York: Doubleday, 2007, 240 pages, \$32.00.

In November 16, 2007, Republican presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani addressed the Federalist Society's twenty-fifth anniversary National Lawyers Convention in Washington, D.C. The program celebrated the "Shining City Upon a Hill: American Exceptionalism." In the spirit of the occasion, the former New York City mayor reaffirmed the popular notion of John Winthrop's vision of the American destiny. He intended to link his candidacy to Ronald Reagan—who often added the word "shining" to Winthrop's metaphor—unaware, perhaps, how much bipartisan support Winthrop's words have attracted over the years from Democrats John F. Kennedy, Walter Mondale, Mario Cuomo, and most recently John Kerry. Nevertheless, in quoting Winthrop, Giuliani unambiguously embraced America's "divinely inspired role in the world," a role that includes "mak[ing] sure that . . . democracy and freedom [are] upheld, preserved, and expanded everywhere in the world."

The very ordinariness of Giuliani's speech makes it significant. This sort of misappropriation of a biblical metaphor has become invisible to most Americans, including Christians. The

nation-state now owns the metaphor that Christ gave to his church. If a new book were to appear with the title *A City Upon a Hill*—as one recently has—how many people would assume for a moment that the book covered church history or offered an exegesis of Matthew 5? To a remarkable degree, the American identity has eclipsed the church's identity in the public imagination. In *A Secular Faith*, historian Darryl Hart takes up the confusion of church and state in modern America exemplified by Giuliani's speech. In his trademark way, Hart steps out of the unimaginative historical framework that arranges political and theological conflicts in America along a spectrum from "liberal" to "conservative." Instead of that conventional device, he works through a set of popular but largely unexamined "truisms" about the right ordering of church and state in America to show that these cultural presuppositions cut right across categories of liberal and conservative, fundamentalist and modernist, evangelical and mainline, postmillennialist and premillennialist, Catholic and Protestant. Underneath the public wrangling, adversaries within American Christianity and politics—such as Jim Wallis and Richard John Neuhaus—essentially agree about the church's mandate to transform the culture. Since Winthrop first "fused divine intentions for the church with human efforts to construct a just and harmonious society," Hart writes, Americans of all varieties have had the bad habit of measuring the church's success or failure by the degree to which it perpetuates Christendom, redeems politics, promotes public order and morality, gets a voice in the "public square," and sustains liberal democracy.

Hart's argument stands on the refreshingly countercultural premise that Jesus and the apostles founded Christianity to be an otherworldly, apolitical, and unavoidably divisive faith practiced largely in private by adherents who live "hyphenated" lives as citizens of two cities. Hart sees these attributes as normative for the Christian life. In its "classic formulations," he writes, Christianity "has very little to say about politics or the ordering of society." It has *something* to say, certainly, and its fundamental teachings have demonstrably had

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=85](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=85).



“implications for politics.” But it offers no blueprint. Simply put, “the basic teachings of Christianity are virtually useless for resolving America’s political disputes, thus significantly reducing, if not eliminating, the dilemma of how to relate Christianity and American politics.” While ancient Israel had indeed been founded as a theocracy that fused cult and culture into a single whole, Christianity divided the state off into a separate, though legitimate, realm. The church, not the state, inherited Israel’s status as the chosen nation. “Christianity,” Hart writes, “separated what the Old Testament bound together.” The secular state has no calling and no capacity to become the City of God. Its legitimacy as an institution in no way hinges on its being sanctified by the church. Separation helps maintain the integrity of both church and state by allowing each of them to fulfill its calling without transgressing or co-opting the other’s. Unlike the Israelites of old, Christians are called to live a “double life” as exiles and strangers, often forced, as was the Apostle Paul, to choose between the conflicting demands of God and Caesar.

Hart finds American Christianity confused and distracted by its quest for political and cultural influence. Christians of all types distort and misconstrue their faith by substituting a new calling and mission for the Church’s biblical mandate. In their well-meaning but misguided quest to enhance Christianity’s cultural and political relevance in the world, activist Christians end up trivializing their faith. They trivialize their spiritual liberty into demands for crèches in front of city hall and trivialize weighty biblical doctrine into merely good advice for upholding public morality. To those who sense that something is wrong with the dominant political theology in America, Hart reintroduces the possibility that Christianity was never meant to make a good civil religion. The secular realm usually finds its defenders among ideologues who fear that the church poses a grave threat to the health of the state. To a degree, Hart concurs. But he defends the secular realm primarily as a means to defend from politicization the church’s higher calling.

If *A Secular Faith* succeeds only in making

Christians more self-conscious about how they think and speak, more alert when politicians appropriate the church’s metaphors, more likely to return to first principles when they defend their model of the church, then Hart will have made a significant contribution to maintaining the integrity of both church and state. He may even open the modern Christian’s imagination to the possibility that the much-criticized secular state carves out the very environment in which the church is freest to be the church. As for those who care more about a robust Americanism than a healthy church, Hart invites them to “find another religion.”

David Gelernter has done just that. In *Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion*, Gelernter preaches a utilitarian religion powerful enough to remake the world in America’s image. More than a civil religion or ordinary patriotism, the “American Religion” offers broken humanity nothing less than “a theological idea of great depth and beauty and power.” He begins with two alleged “facts” about the American national identity that throughout the book never rise above the level of assertion: “America is a biblical republic” and “Americanism [is] a biblical religion.” By “biblical,” Gelernter means that Americanism is an extension of both Judaism and Christianity, and of a particularly vigorous Old Testament brand of Christianity in the form of Puritanism. By “Americanism” he means “the idea that liberty, equality, and democracy were ordained by God for all mankind, and that America is a new promised land richly blessed by and deeply indebted to God.”

He argues that these incontrovertible facts about the American identity are “supported by mountains of evidence.” That Americans since the first settlers have defined themselves in biblical terms as God’s new Israel or even as the Messiah among nations is impossible to miss in countless sermons, speeches and poems spanning four hundred years. Showing that Americans have talked this way about themselves is easy. Showing whether Americans ought to have done so would require a more sophisticated theological and historical analysis than Gelernter bothers with.

John Winthrop's, Abraham Lincoln's or Woodrow Wilson's appropriation of the Bible proves nothing about the legitimacy or wisdom of that use. Whether a statesman, such as Lincoln, ought to have transferred biblical metaphors for Israel and the church to the American nation-state requires some principle of judgment other than habit and utility. By the book's end Gelernter merely proves that from the time of the first settlers in New England, Americans have said these sorts of things about themselves, not that they ought to have said these things, not that the nation is indeed a biblical republic or Americanism a biblical religion.

Gelernter's religion of Americanism—which, for reasons he never makes clear, supposedly carries for Jews and Christians no danger of blasphemy or idolatry—comes complete with its own creed (“liberty, democracy, and equality”); its own prophets (John Winthrop, Abraham Lincoln, and Woodrow Wilson); its own sacred scriptures (the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln's speeches, and the Battle Hymn of the Republic); and its own Great Commission (to spread the creed to all the world), along with its own version of the new birth and the new covenant and a bit of mystical ecstasy thrown in. Belief in God, however, is optional: “You can believe in Americanism without believing in God—so long as you believe in man” (20). His use of redemptive imagery is unmistakable: America truly is the “city set upon a hill,” the “light of the world,” and a nation called to set the captives free.

*Americanism* thrives on precisely the kind and degree of confusion of church and state that Hart tries so meticulously to sort out. Indeed, Hart's careful dichotomizing between these institutions would prove lethal to Gelernter's entire argument. For Gelernter there need be no inherent tension between Caesar and God, between being in the world but not of it, between being an American and being a Christian. He would never concede Hart's premise that the United States could, in some sense, be more “biblical” by being more secular. He sets up a false opposition between a wholly biblical republic and an aggressively atheistic secularism, as if these are the only options

available to America. Unintentionally, he reminds Christians that the most momentous conflict, now as always, rages between true religion and false religion, not between the church and the secular state. While Hart emphasizes both Jesus' teaching that his kingdom is not of this world and Christianity's otherworldly character, Gelernter believes “America' is an idea that results from focusing the Bible and Judeo-Christian faith like a spotlight's beam on the problems of *this* life (not the next) in the modern world, in a modern nation.” “In America,” he emphasizes, “religion *must* be political, *is in fact* political; in America religion concerns the citizen *and* the city.”

In Augustine's *City of God* (XIX.17), the North African bishop reflected at length on what the earthly city and the heavenly city can and cannot have in common. Despite their opposed loves, the two cities temporarily share a common need to pursue “the things necessary for the maintenance of this mortal life.” In matters of worship, however, the two cities occupy no common ground, and “the heavenly city has been compelled in this matter to dissent, and to become obnoxious to those who think differently, and to stand the brunt of their anger and hatred and persecutions. . . .” Darryl Hart's *A Secular Faith* brings a timely reminder of this Augustinian and biblical insight and calls the church to an urgent self-examination of just how much of its calling and identity it may have surrendered to the state. David Gelernter's *Americanism* shows Christians just how real and urgent the problem is becoming. Transformed into a religion, the nation-state demands the very worship that Christians must never render to it. If ever pushed to this extremity of false worship, faithful Christians in America would be compelled to dissent. How doubly tragic if Christians themselves blessed and nurtured this idolatry. ■

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# Jumping off the Mark: A Response to Rob Bell's *Velvet Elvis*

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by Dale Van Dyke

*Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, by Rob Bell. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005, 208 pages, \$19.99.

By all accounts, Rob Bell, the founding pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville Michigan, is a very “hip” guy. As Andy Crouch, a writer for *Christianity Today* remarked, “You could say he puts the *hip* in discipleship.”<sup>2</sup> But Bell is hip with an agenda. Inspired by Brian McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian*, Bell and other emergent pastors are “looking for a faith colorful enough for their culturally savvy friends, deep enough for mystery, big enough for their own doubts.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the stated goal of Bell’s new book, *Velvet Elvis*, is to help us “re-paint” the Christian faith in a way that helps people connect with Jesus today. On the his book’s back cover, Bell invites the reader to “test everything.” This review is an attempt to do just that; to examine Bell’s rendering of the Christian faith and life, as it is presented in *Velvet Elvis*, in light of the Word of God.

I believe that Rob Bell is well intentioned. He is passionate about helping Christians break out of the drudgery of a traditional religion into a vibrant relationship with Christ and a culture transforming lifestyle. He is very eager to help people actually experience living out the commands of Christ. This is commendable and explains, in large part, his appeal to the largely churched Grand Rapids Christian community. We can learn from him here. It would be easy simply to take pot shots at

Mars Hill and *Velvet Elvis* without acknowledging that “Christianity as usual,” in this country and even in our own community, truly is far less than what it ought to be!

However, *Velvet Elvis* is not a healthy book and the emergent church soil from which it springs is not healthy soil. Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, and other leaders of the emergent church desperately want to redefine Christianity. However, these men seem to have confused the fundamentalist and/or megachurch circles they have come out of with historic Christianity. Consequently, instead of a careful, biblical critique of the evangelical model and a pursuit of a biblically sound, full-orbed Christianity, they have uncritically hitched their wagons to an intentionally postmodern model of Christianity which, being married to the spirit of the age, is doomed for quick widowhood.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, although emergent church leaders disagree with the seeker-sensitive, church-growth model, they share the same underlying principle of pragmatism. The reason we need to “re-paint” and “rediscover” Christianity is because the old model doesn’t work anymore. Authors like Leonard Sweet argue that we need a new kind of Christianity, a postmodern Christianity, if we have any hope of reaching a postmodern world.<sup>5</sup> Beyond the subtle arrogance of such a proposition, there is a beating principle of pragmatism. This movement seems to be fundamentally driven by the question, “What will work?” instead of the

4 Os Guinness has a terrific discussion of this in his book *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993). While emergent church leaders would almost certainly agree with Guinness as he challenges the megachurch’s unwitting adoption of modernism, it seems they have committed the same errors in relation to post-modernism. The core problem of cultural compromise remains.

5 The subtitle of his recent book, *Soul Tsunami*, is telling: “Sink or Swim in the New Millennium Culture” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999). In Sweet’s view the church has two choices—either become emergent or disappear into cultural irrelevance. As Sweet explains, “The Dick-and-Jane world of my 50’s childhood is over, washed away by a tsunami of change. . . . While the world is rethinking its entire cultural formation, it is time to find new ways of being the church that are true to our postmodern context. It is time for a Postmodern Reformation” (17).

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=89](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=89).

2 Andy Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique,” *Christianity Today*, November 2004, 38.

3 Ibid.

biblical question, “What has God said?”<sup>6</sup> In the pursuit of relevance and authenticity—the holy grail of the seeker-sensitive movement 20 years ago and the liberal church before that—this movement is also in danger of leaving historic, biblical Christianity behind. Consequently, it is destined to be one more “ism” in church history which ends up in the garbage heap of failed philosophies.

As I read the emergent leaders and Rob Bell in *Velvet Elvis*, I feel like I’m living in J. Gresham Machen’s classic *Christianity and Liberalism*. It seems the emergent church is going down the same road precisely that the liberal movement took 100 or so years ago. The liberals were saying that the key to understanding real Christianity and the “real” and “relevant” Jesus was through a higher-critical, “scientific” analysis of the Bible. This pursuit was seen as essential for reaching out to a scientific age. The emergent movement seems to have replaced higher criticism with Jewish studies and postmodern epistemology. Now the key to understanding real Christianity and the “real” and “relevant” Jesus is through an analysis of first century Jewish practices and a “Hebrew” mind-set which embraces mystery and doubt and prefers questions to answers. But both movements end up undermining the Bible as the authoritative Word of God; both undermine the gospel as the central issue of Scripture and calling of the church; and both, in the name of “enlightenment,” devastate the church.

## SPECIFIC CONCERNS

### 1. Bell’s View of the Bible as Metaphor

Bell sees the Bible not primarily as God’s revealed word but as the

expression of the spiritual experience of God’s people through the ages. . . . We have to embrace the Bible as the wild, uncensored, passionate account it is of people experiencing the living God. Doubting the

6 Read D. A. Carson’s splendid critique of the Emergent Movement in his recent book *Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

one true God.<sup>7</sup>

The Bible is a “human product . . . rather than the product of divine fiat.”<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the Bible is helpful not primarily as the factual revelation of God’s real acts in history, but as a metaphor to help us understand our own experiences.

Is the greatest truth about Adam and Eve that it happened or that it happens? This story . . . is true for us because it is *our* story. We have all taken the fruit. We have all crossed boundaries. . . . This is why the Bible loses its power for so many communities. They fall into the trap of thinking that the Bible is just about things that happened a long time ago.<sup>9</sup>

Now this seems attractive in that it appears to make the Bible alive and dynamic. But it does not square with how the Bible represents itself. The biblical writers do not use the Bible primarily, or even secondarily, as a metaphor to interpret one’s own personal experience. The Bible is the account of God’s acts of redemption and these things *matter*, first and foremost, because they are historically true—they really happened! Luke and Paul, for example, emphasized the historical detail and accuracy of the gospel events:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1–4).

7 *Velvet Elvis*, 062–063. Editor’s note: the zeros in the page numbering of the Bell book are in the original.

8 *Christianity Today*, November 2004, 38.

9 *Velvet Elvis*, 058–059.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me (1 Cor. 15:3–8).

The biblical writers obviously believed that the purpose of Scripture is to tell us what God has actually done for us, not to provide stories to be used as metaphors of our own experience. Contrary to Bell, the primary importance of the fall is not that it “happens” but that it “happened.” It is the historical and theological reality behind all the rest of the Bible, including Christ’s coming. We are not asked to experience these stories metaphorically but to believe in the redemption they point us to. The experiential link between the reader and the text is not metaphor but faith! “These are written *so that you may believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that *by believing* you may have life in his name” (John 20:31, emphasis added).

In other words, the key to experiencing and engaging the Scripture is not trying to discover a comparable experience in one’s own life, but in believing, and trusting in, and learning from the experiences of Jesus’ life. It is, after all, a book about *him*.

## 2. Bell’s Understanding of the Christian Faith

Bell, as a postmodern believer, emphasizes mystery and doubt as the keys to genuine Christian experience. Objective truth and concrete propositions concerning the nature of God, the Bible, and even Jesus Christ are seen as secondary at best, and at worst “bricks” which hinder a lively faith. Speaking with Andy Crouch, Bell’s wife, Kristen, confesses, “I grew up thinking that we’ve figured out

the Bible, that we knew what it means. Now I have no idea what it means. And yet I feel like life is big again—like life used to be black and white and now it’s in color.”<sup>10</sup> The core elements of postmodern Christian faith do not seem to be “knowledge, assent and trust,” but mystery, doubt, and doing. This, of course, shifts the focus of faith from its objective content, Christ Jesus and him crucified, towards the individual’s experience of faith.

Faith, according to Bell, is a trampoline with doctrine functioning as the springs— they are helpful but not the point. The problem with many Christians is that they are so wrapped up in the nature of the springs they can’t enjoy the real “point” of Christianity, the experience of jumping. Bell compares these doctrinally minded people to masons who build their faith as a wall of bricks, each brick/doctrine carefully laid on top of the other. The problem with this view of faith is that if you pull out one of the bricks, the whole wall collapses.

What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archeologists find Larry’s tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of the Mithra and Dionysian religious cults that were hugely popular at the time of Jesus, whose gods had virgin births? But what if, as you study the origin of the word “virgin” you discover that the word “virgin” in the gospel of Matthew actually comes from the book of Isaiah, and then you find out that in the Hebrew language at that time, the word “virgin” could mean several things. And what if you discover that in the first century being “born of a virgin” also referred to a child whose mother became pregnant the first time she had intercourse? What if that spring were seriously questioned? Could a person keep on jumping? Could a person still love God? Could you

10 Crouch, *Christianity Today*, 38.

still be a Christian? Is the way of Jesus still the best possible way to live? Or does the whole thing fall apart?<sup>11</sup>

Bell's answer? "If the whole faith falls apart when we reexamine and rethink one spring, then it wasn't that strong in the first place was it?"<sup>12</sup> In other words, Bell advocates a faith that is impervious to a mythologized virgin birth. This faith can "go on jumping" even if it were shown that Jesus was born of Larry and the gospel writers knowingly "threw in" myth.

There are two points I would like to make in response to this. First, it is important to realize that Bell, himself, believes in a literal incarnation. "I affirm the historic Christian faith, which includes the virgin birth and the Trinity and the inspiration of the Bible and much more."<sup>13</sup>

But the issue of orthodoxy is not simply what one personally chooses to believe concerning Christ, but what is necessary to believe concerning Christ. The church has historically understood the creeds to be a summary of what is necessary to believe in order to be an orthodox Christian. The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds both clearly profess that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit *as a necessary component of true faith*. A literal virgin birth as a necessary doctrine is not simply a hang-up of modernistic evangelicalism. It has been a part of the church's profession through all its ages and in all its branches from the beginning. By failing to insist on a literal virgin birth as part of what is necessary to believe, Bell has taken the sadly well-traveled road of liberalism. Many of the 1,293 Presbyterian ministers who signed the Auburn Affirmation of 1923 personally affirmed the literal truth of the five fundamentals.<sup>14</sup> But they did not

11 *Velvet Elvis*, 026.

12 *Ibid.*, 027.

13 *Velvet Elvis*, 027.

14 The Auburn Affirmation was a protest against the perceived "fundamentalism" in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. The document claims that while a "literal" understanding of the virgin birth, miracles, inspiration of Scripture, substitutionary atonement, and Jesus' resurrection is acceptable, they should not

believe a literal interpretation should be deemed *as necessary* in order to be a minister in good standing in the Presbyterian Church! As they wrote:<sup>15</sup>

Some of us regard the particular (literal) theories contained in the deliverances of the General Assembly of 1923 as satisfactory explanations of these facts and doctrines. But we are united in believing that these are not the only theories allowed by the Scriptures and our standards as explanations of these facts and doctrines of our religion, and that all who hold to these facts and doctrines, whatever theories they may employ to explain them, are worthy of all confidence and fellowship.<sup>16</sup>

The line that divides heresy from orthodoxy is not fixed on what one personally believes concerning Christ, but what one understands as necessary to believe. Bell, here, is simply on the wrong side of orthodoxy.

Secondly, Bell seems to be both adopting the liberals' method and doing so for the very same reasons. Bell wants to strengthen faith by resting it on the experience of Christ rather than certain historical facts. A faith which needs a literal virgin birth was "not that strong to begin with."<sup>17</sup> In the onslaught of the scientific revolution, well-intentioned but misguided theologians tried to protect faith from the attacks of nosy archeologists and persistent scientists in the same way. Thus the "experience" of the spirit of Christ was the "resurrection" that mattered. Bell agrees. "We live in metaphors . . . The tomb is empty because we have met the risen Christ—we have experienced Jesus in a way

be the only accepted "theory" of interpretation allowed in the church. A literal interpretation of these things was not *necessary* for true faith.

15 This is not to say that there are not areas in the Confession that do not allow a proper Christian liberty. The length of the creation days would be an example of this in the OPC.

16 Quoted from an article by Gordon Clark entitled "The Auburn Heresy." Available online at <http://opc.org/cce/clark.html>.

17 *Velvet Elvis*, 027.

that transcends space and time. And this gives us hope.”<sup>18</sup>

But what does the Bible really say about all this? Does the resurrection matter as a metaphor or as a historical reality? In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul responds to those who wanted to take out just that one pesky “spring” concerning a literal resurrection from the dead. With no appeal to metaphor he said, “But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. . . . you are still in your sins” (1 Cor. 15:13–14, 17).

Is a literal virgin birth any less essential to a true biblical faith? Would Paul not say the same thing to Rob Bell? A faith which does not need a literal virgin birth is not a faith that saves because, in the end, it doesn’t need a historical Jesus at all. It’s all about jumping.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Bell’s View of the Nature of Sin

Rob speaks of a time in his life when he was getting burned out trying to be “super-pastor.” He reveals his counselor’s advice which helped him come to grips with the essence of his sin. “He said, in what has become a pivotal moment in my journey, ‘Your job is the relentless pursuit of who God has made you to be. Anything else you do is sin and you need to repent of it.’”<sup>20</sup>

Once again, this sounds appealing and there are parts of this which are helpful. In this portion of the book, Rob is trying to help people stop living under the burden of an idealized version of what they are supposed to be and accept who they are.

18 Ibid., 061.

19 It is astonishing that Bell, a product of evangelical bastions such as Wheaton College and Fuller Seminary, cannot discern the rank liberalism flowing off the tip of his own pen. His evangelical fathers fought those who had adopted Bell’s position. The liberals insisted that emphasizing a literal virgin birth, real miracles, an inspired inerrant Scripture, substitutionary atonement, and the physical resurrection of Jesus would leave the faith vulnerable to the attacks of science. But in their attempts to “strengthen” the faith, they gutted it. Now, as the evidence of that failed experiment in heterodoxy are more prevalent than ever, why would Bell want to head down this same path?

20 *Velvet Elvis*, 114.

This is an important part of accepting God’s grace.

And yet . . . the Bible speaks of sin and grace in so much more profound and accurate terms. Where does the Bible ever suggest that our primary calling is “the relentless pursuit of who God has made us to be”? Bell makes it sound as if the essence of godliness is self-realization. His “sin” was that he was trying to be “super-pastor,” something which went contrary to his personal make-up. He’s too creative and spontaneous to fit that mold. His “repentance” was a matter of deciding to “kill super-pastor” and be true to himself.

How is this not simply a baptized version of our cultural morality where the greatest “sin” is precisely the failure to be true to yourself? I just don’t see this emphasis in Scripture. When did Paul ever suggest that his primary calling was to discover himself or be true to his own personality traits? He refused to be a “super-apostle” not because it wasn’t true to his personality, but because it was untrue to the gospel! Others relied on their speaking gifts; Paul relied on the power of the Holy Spirit. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 11 and 12, Paul boasted of his weaknesses, not his unique abilities, so that the power of Christ would be evident in and through him. And when Paul tells the church to live according to what they *are*, “children of the light” (Eph. 5:8), he is calling them to imitate God and his Son, Jesus (Eph. 5:1–2)! The critical issue isn’t being true to their personality traits or interests, but being true to their calling to think and act and live like Christ! What separates and distinguishes *Christian* morality from all other morality is precisely the person of Christ. (The devil is profoundly “true to himself” and “authentic.”)

Why doesn’t Bell talk about sin like the Bible does? The Bible speaks of sin and godliness with an intentionally, consistently Godward reference. Sin is anything and everything which falls short of the glory of God. Holiness is speaking and thinking and being motivated in all my actions by a pure love for and fear of God. Isn’t this the message a self-saturated culture like ours needs to hear?

### 4. Bell’s View of God’s Faith in Man

The self-ward bent of Bell’s teaching continues

when he speaks of God's faith in man. Bell adopts his self-professed rabbi Ray Vander Laan's teaching that Jesus chose his disciples just like every other rabbi of his day—because he believed in their innate abilities. In one of the most painful parts of the book, Bell reminds us of the story found in Matthew 14:22ff. where Peter rushed out of the boat to meet Jesus walking on the water. Peter began to sink and Jesus rebuked him for his lack of faith.

Who does Peter lose faith in? Not Jesus; he is doing fine. Peter loses faith in himself. Peter loses faith that he can do what his rabbi is doing. If the rabbi calls you to be his disciple, then he believes that you can actually be like him. As we read the stories of Jesus' life with his talmidim, his disciples, what do we find frustrates him to no end? When his disciples lose faith in themselves . . . Notice how many places in the accounts of Jesus life he gets frustrated with his disciples. Because they are incapable? No, because of how capable they are. He sees what they could be and could do, and when they fall short it provokes him to no end. It isn't their failure that's the problem, it's their greatness. They don't realize what they are capable of . . . God has an amazingly high view of people. God believes that people are capable of amazing things. I've been told I need to believe in Jesus. Which is a good thing. But what I'm learning is that Jesus believes in me. . . . God has faith in me.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, according to Bell, God has such great faith in the abilities of men that Jesus "left the future of the movement (the church) in their hands. And he doesn't stick around to make sure they don't screw it up. He's gone. He trusts that they can actually do it."<sup>22</sup> This is a shocking reinterpretation of the Christian faith. When the gospel

21 *Velvet Elvis*, 133–134.

22 *Ibid.*, 134.

becomes the message of God coming to earth and dying on a cross to help men believe how great they really are, something is horribly amiss. This has the stench of blasphemy.

Even a cursory review of what the Bible actually says shows the utter fallacy of this teaching. When Peter heard Jesus' words and was rescued by him he didn't apologize for failing to realize his full potential. He worshiped Christ with the other men, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God" (Matt. 14:33). When Jesus ascended into heaven, he clearly instructed them to remain in Jerusalem and "wait for the promise of the Father" (Acts 1:4) and reminded them, "behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). This is the same Jesus who told his disciples, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). This "new teaching" simply fails the Berean Scripture test (Acts 17:11).

Whenever the Bible speaks of why God chooses people to follow him, it *never* suggests that it's because God believes in us. Just listen to a familiar verse reinterpreted according to Bell's teaching.

And God said to Joshua, be strong and very courageous because I know you can do this. You've had great military training, you have a keen mind, and you are a great commander. Go in and take the land. Do not be afraid. I chose you because I believe you are capable of amazing things.

Does that sound right? What does the text actually say? "Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, *for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go*" (Josh. 1:9, emphasis added). And Joshua got the point. As the people came to the Jordan, we read: "Joshua said to the people, 'Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow *the LORD will do wonders among you*'" (Josh. 3:5, emphasis added).

The whole story of the Exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan is intended to highlight *God's* amazing abilities, not man's. In fact, whenever the Bible speaks of why God chooses people it always highlights the *inabilities* of man so that



God's receives all the glory!

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples. (Deut. 7:7)

Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Know, therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for *you are a stubborn people*. (Deut. 9:5–6, emphasis added)

Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, *so that no human being might boast in the presence of God*. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, "*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.*" (1 Cor 1:26–31, emphasis added)

Bell has erred in taking a practice of the Jewish rabbis and ascribing it to God who says, "My ways are not your ways." Bell's view is not only misleading, it is directly contrary to what God himself

actually says. This teaching robs God of the glory of his condescending grace in salvation and actually ascribes glory to the sinner. This is a tragic and serious misstep, for the Living God takes his glory very seriously. "For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another" (Isa. 48:11).

## 5. Bell's View of the Nature of the Atonement

Bell teaches that Jesus died for everyone and has actually reconciled everyone to God. Everyone is already loved by God the Father as a reconciled, forgiven sinner in Christ. They simply need to choose to live in that reality or not.

So this reality, this forgiveness, this reconciliation, is true for everybody. Paul insisted that when Jesus died on the cross he was reconciling "all things, in heaven and on earth," to God. This reality then isn't something we make true about ourselves by doing something. It is already true. Our choice is to live in this new reality or cling to a reality of our own making.<sup>23</sup>

According to Bell, Jesus' death actually and really accomplished the forgiving of everyone's sins and the reconciliation of everybody to the Father. In other words, God's wrath has been propitiated for everyone. He now loves everybody in the same way and sees everyone as robed in Christ's righteousness. All that is left is for people to "live in this new reality."

But, again, how does that match up with what the Bible actually says? Jesus says, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but *the wrath of God remains on him*" (John 3:36, emphasis added).

Peter seemed to share Jesus' belief that, apart from gospel faith and repentance, people are not yet forgiven by God or reconciled to him. When the crowd at Pentecost asked Peter, "What must we do to be saved?" he did not assure them that they were already forgiven and reconciled. Rather,

<sup>23</sup> *Velvet Elvis*, 146. Implied is the lack of the necessity of repenting and believing the gospel.

he called them to “repent and be baptized” in order to receive the forgiveness of their sins. Paul pleaded with sinners to “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). He clearly believed that God’s wrath was a remaining reality and present danger for all those who had not yet confessed Christ. In fact, he told the Jews that “because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed” (Rom. 2:5). Hardly the words of a man who believed “everybody” was already reconciled. Rather, Paul called people to “save themselves from the wrath that is to come” by repenting and believing.

How can you square Bell’s reading of Paul’s ministry with Paul’s own description offered in Acts 19:19–20? Paul, defending his ministry before King Agrippa, says: “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. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.”

Once again, Rob Bell seems to be teaching something directly contrary to the Word of God. This doctrine is not only erroneous, it has disastrous results. Bell’s error here is precisely what has led to the abysmal decline of missions in the mainline churches. After all, if the nations are already reconciled to God because of Christ, why bother them with pesky fundamentalist missionaries who demean them by telling them they still need to be saved from the wrath that is to come? If Bell’s teaching is true, think of all the martyrs (beginning with Stephen) who needlessly died because they insisted that people needed to repent to be saved.<sup>24</sup> How many missionaries could have

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24 Bell’s theology does not seem to require a biblical version of repentance since he believes that Christ’s death has actually, truly procured peace with God for everyone. No one is outside of God’s favor. In a recent article he decrees, “The whole system that says these few people, because of what they said, did, believe, etc., are going to Heaven and everybody else is going to Hell, is deeply flawed and must die.” (*Relevant Magazine*, No. 31, Jan-Feb 2008, 67.) In other words, gospel faith and repentance are not necessary for peace with God or escape from divine wrath. In his recent “the gods are not angry” tour Bell defined repentance as “what happens when your eyes are opened and you see what has already been done. I’ve missed it, and now I see it.” (Empha-

escaped martyrdom by telling people they simply “need to live in a new reality”? Where is the offense in Bell’s gospel? And if it isn’t there, how can it possibly be the gospel of Christ?

## Conclusion

If nothing else, *Velvet Elvis* serves as a terrific wake-up call to the Reformed community. The enthusiastic support Bell receives in the “Reformed bastion” of Grand Rapids needs to stir us to action. Well-meaning people are being influenced by Bell’s ministry simply because they are looking for a vibrant faith. The spiritual lethargy and too-common spiritual dryness of confessional Christianity has left many believers open to the enthusiasm of Bell’s ministry. While we need to stand against the errors of Bell’s theology, we also need, with equal vigor, to pursue vibrant, Spirit-filled, biblically sound ministries of our own. The best argument we can make for the truth that the gospel is good news *about Christ Jesus*, and that *Christ* sovereignly saves sinners and builds his church to be vibrant examples of that fact. As is so often the case, false teaching is the heritage of lethargic orthodoxy. May God find us faithful. ■

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sis mine. For a great review see Jesse Johnson’s post at <http://www.sfpulpit.com/2007/11/21/rob-bell-the-gods-should-be-angry/>). Paul Kaiser attended the lecture and adds: “Bell mangled the definition of repentance, stating that repentance is not turning from sin. Rather, he says it is a “celebration” of life in Christ. He further stated that anyone who tells you that you need to repent is not talking about Christianity” (“The gods may not be angry but has Rob Bell went [sic] mad?” <http://reformedevangelist.com/?p=558>, accessed Nov. 28, 2007).

# Defining the Human: Personal Identity in Theological Perspective

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by A. Craig Troxel

*Personal Identity in Theological Perspective*, edited by Richard Lints, Michael S. Horton, and Mark R. Talbot. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006, 225 pages, \$20.00, paper.

As the tide rises with increased interest in theology the waves inevitably wash ashore the residue of anthropology from the prevailing currents of thought. The doctrine of God and the doctrine of man rightly go hand in hand, and so renewed interest in the Creator naturally provokes reflection on his image-bearer.<sup>2</sup> We find ourselves at such a moment. Among the plethora of books and essays springing from various academic disciplines, one collection of essays on theological anthropology may peak the curiosity of devoted readers of theology, and in particular, biblical anthropology. This collection of essays in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective* grew out of a theological colloquium held in Colorado Springs in 2002, unapologetically composed of contributors writing within their confessional traditions.

The book begins, quite appropriately, with a chapter by Robert Louis Wilken on the church fathers (“Biblical Humanism: The Patristic Convictions”), and, in particular, Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa, the latter being “the first to deal systematically with the Christian doctrine of man in its fullness” (14). Wilken discusses how the fathers expounded the *imago dei* (“image of God”) preeminently

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=97](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=97).

2 Several contributors make this observation, Lints (3), Wilken (28). And both Talbot (160) and Horton (45) cite Calvin’s well-known introduction to his *Institutes* where he states that man’s knowledge of himself and God compliment one another.

from Genesis 1:26 (which records the unique phenomena of God deliberating upon his creation of humankind). Gregory and Augustine clearly explain that although the image is tarnished and disfigured by the fall, it is not eradicated; an acute observation that anticipates the careful balance of Calvin, Bavinck, and others. Furthermore, the fathers saw the important implications of Christ’s resurrection for an adequate anthropology (23), as well as maintaining man’s psychosomatic unity (27). Wilken also seeks to exonerate the fathers’ use of terms like “divinization” and “deification” to describe the Christian’s fellowship with God. He contends that, “the line between creator and creature is never crossed” by the fathers (24).

William C. Weinrich looks at the Lutheran tradition in his contribution, “*Homo theologicus: Aspects of a Lutheran Doctrine of Man.*” Luther’s contention is that, whereas philosophy could only explain man in relation to this world, theology considers man “in relation to his efficient and final causes,” God and eternal life (32). This assumption, which “is central to Luther’s anthropology” (32), naturally leads to his well-known principle, that, if man’s purpose and image pertain to that which transcends man’s physical life and capacities, then with sin comes the loss of the image. Sin destroys and the Gospel restores what man is. Weinrich concludes with his discussion of Luther’s idea that Christ became the “greatest sinner” so that those justified by faith might participate in the “happy exchange” and become “like God” (42).

Michael S. Horton (“Post-Reformation Reformed Anthropology”) briefly but skillfully reviews the covenants of redemption, creation (works), and grace, demonstrating how covenant theology operates as the central construct or model for anthropology. Secondly, Horton relates how both Calvin and the succeeding Reformed Orthodox emphasized the worth of those passages that describe the believer’s renovation in order to define the *imago dei* (e.g., Eph. 4:24, Col. 3:10). Horton rightly uses the well-known axiom that one way to discover a person’s definition of the *imago dei* is to find out what he or she thinks is retained and what is lost of God’s image after the fall. Here

I think Horton understates the significant difference between Lutheran and Reformed theology. (Herman Bavinck is especially helpful at this point in stressing the distinction *and* the inseparability of the *imago dei* in both the narrow and broad sense.<sup>3</sup>)

Stanley J. Grenz (“The Social God and the Relational Self”) argues that postmodernism represents the rebirth of the “self,” which looks to relationships for its identity (77).<sup>4</sup> This assumption presents an opportune nexus with the *imago dei*, which corporately involves participation in the “new humanity” (84), and eschatologically means participation in the *imago Christi*, the true goal of the *imago dei*. One must applaud Grenz, who along with people like Donald Bloesch, have long bemoaned the overemphasis of evangelicalism on the individual. But one wonders if Grenz was moved more by postmodern, post conservative sociological convictions than by the mandates of Scripture, as our *principium*.

Nancy Murphy (“Nonreductive Physicalism”) challenges anthropological dualism and trichotomism in favor of physicalism—“the view that humans are composed of only one ‘part,’ a physical body” (95–96). To avoid the critique that physicalism is reductionistic and boils human behavior down to something determined by the laws of neurobiology, Murphy argues that the consciousness of our memories, the virtue of our character, and our relationships with others also compose our identity. Her discussion of free will exasperates for its evasion of all things theological as does the increasingly common habit of postmodern/post-liberal/evangelicals to posit false antitheses. This habit is exhibited by Murphy’s contention that dualism places too much emphasis on “the soul and its final destiny,” in opposition to “Jesus’ concern with the kingdom of God” (97). On the other hand, “What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world (physical?) and forfeits his soul (*psuche*)?”

3 Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2004), 530–562.

4 Grenz crisply summarizes his incessant coddling of postmodernism throughout his essay when he states that, “postmodern sensitivities... stand at the apex of the intellectual trajectory from Montaigne to Foucault” (86).

Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse (“Anthropology, Sexuality, and Sexual Ethics”) maintain that the “true self is both discovered and formed” (126). As contemporary anthropologies emphasize the importance of inward discovery, the goal becomes the attainment of happiness and fulfillment. So, to deny one’s sexuality “is akin to denial of ‘one-self’” (127). Christian anthropology does not look primarily to such subjectivity to define the self but to the objective meanings given by God’s revelation and lived out in a community of faith through the transformative process of sanctification (formation). It is “obedience and disobedience that marks us and makes us” (128). They pursue this assumption with its implications for sexual ethics, and in particular homosexuality (reflecting some of their larger work on homosexuality and scientific research).

In his essay, “Personal Bodies,” David Kelsey pursues the definition of personhood, which he contends is defined in contemporary culture by means of *classification* (to distinguish from nonpersonal beings), *description* (who man is metaphysically), and *evaluation* (to assess our status). Kelsey dedicates himself to addressing the question “What is a ‘person?’” within the doctrine of creation, and not with the question “Who am I?” within the doctrine of eschatology or soteriology (153).

In “Learning from the Ruined Image,” Mark R. Talbot contends that personhood is not just about how we are “hardwired.” It also includes the “software” we acquire along the way. For example, we measure our children’s growth in part by how well they meet the expectations of society as they learn to discipline themselves (not giving into whatever impulse happens to be strongest at the time). This formation of our personhood also proceeds appropriately as we learn the narrative vocabulary of life. We are meant to “flourish in societies” as “verbivores,” deriving our “taste for living” by being word-eaters. As Christians our understanding of this is shaped by the “final vocabulary” in Scripture.

In his second essay, “Image and Office,” Michael Horton seeks an alternative paradigm to classical and modern anthropologies, one that is based on biblical categories. Horton believes that the proper question is not “What is man?” (ontology),

but “Who am I?” (ethics). And its proper answer can only come by situating “the character of the *imago dei* in the context of covenant and eschatology” (179). That is to say, the image of God is best seen “as an office or embassy, a covenantal commission with an eschatological orientation” (184). The image is constituted by four characteristics: sonship/royal dominion, representation, glory, and prophetic witness (185), and it is “official rather than essential; ethical rather than ontological; eschatological rather than metaphysical” (195). Horton is careful to avoid the polar pitfalls of seeing self as the exclusively individualized self or the communalized (social) self.

Richard Lints (“Imaging and Idolatry”) affirms that theological anthropology has clearly swung from the individual to communitarian “notions of personhood” in concert with revived interest in Trinitarian theology (204–205), and in particular away from evangelicalism’s over-emphasis on the “solitary minds” of modernity. “Essentialist” approaches (which define the essence of humankind *via* a set of attributes) and “functionalist” approaches (which define the image *via* humankind’s spiritual responsibility or calling) do not sufficiently take into consideration that a person is not a person outside of relations. But Professor Lints raises the yellow flag about the “social self” in recent trends of thought in which the “subject-in-relation” is defined with little apparent regard for our ultimate purpose, to honor and delight in the living God (223). In particular, man as an image-bearer ought to reflect the relational identity or “divine community” of the Trinity in “worship, honor, completion and satisfaction.” Idolatry, which is the subversion of this, re-makes the idolater in its image through “perversion, corruption, consumption and possession” (209). Christ, “the very image/likeness of God,” is the one who shapes and re-creates the believer in the inner man, (221).

Those who will find this book most helpful are probably only those who teach or read widely on the doctrine of man. Many of the pieces assume a finely-tuned competency of the field, and in some instances, acquaintance with philosophical and historical developments. The chapters by Grenz and Murphy will have little or no appeal to most

readers of *Ordained Servant*, as their postmodern assumptions and flair will exasperate those of us of the confessional stripe. Wilken’s and Weinrich’s pieces are interesting historically, as are Kelsey’s and Talbot’s for their philosophical bent, but again, they are probably too specialized for most OS readers. But those teaching a study or even a Sunday school on the doctrine of man would profit from even a cursory reading of this collection of essays.

Many of the contributors faithfully decry evangelicalism’s iniquitous over-emphasis on individualism. But not all the authors seem equally concerned about over-emphasizing the other extreme, the socialized self. It is possible in our zeal to correct individualism—as David Wells has noted—ultimately to end up with a Christian faith that is impersonal. This is especially the case with a theological anthropology that is not well-disciplined by an appropriate biblical *telos*. Is our “chief end” to glorify and enjoy God or is it to meld into a community of relationships? The emphasis on community in postmodern theology (as seen for example in the emerging church movement) owes much of its genesis not from a concern to reform according to Scripture, but to the conviction that our knowledge is a social construct, contextualized in community.<sup>5</sup> Here the chapters by Lints and Horton provide helpful balance. (Both Lints and Horton also richly mine the work of OPC minister and scholar Meredith Kline.) The chapter by Jones and Yarhouse merits special comment, as it represents in my mind, the outstanding contribution to the book. Readers will find a helpful aid for apologetics in the area of sexual ethics, as well as suggestions on how to think more clearly about the importance of the formation of the soul. Although I will not commit reviewers’ delirium (“It’s worth the price of the book!”), I can assure you that you will never approach pastoral counseling the same way again after reading this chapter.

As Professor Lints rightly observes in his introductory essay, the doctrine of the *imago dei* has been the controlling concept of anthropology while its controlling framework has been the

5 This concern finds its roots in the “New Communitarians” (Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael J. Sandel, Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer), and ultimately in the important work by Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society* (1887).

fourfold state of man.<sup>6</sup> Rereading Thomas Boston's collection of sermons, *Human nature in its Fourfold State* provides a good review. For the image of God, you should still look at Francis Turretin, Charles Hodge, Kline's *Images of the Spirit*, and the appropriate chapters in Murray's *Collected Writings* (especially on Trichotomy). But Bavinck satisfies like no other in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. His historical erudition superbly informs the context into which he breathes biblical truth and insights. I would also suggest reading *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting* by John Cooper (Eerdmans, 1989), which defends "holistic dualism," the majority view in the Reformed camp on the inner man. It provides a helpful corrective to Murphy's physicalism.

The tide of the world's reflections on anthropology may ebb and flow, but the Reformed faith is vast and deep as it ponders what the sovereign God has revealed about the one who *is* his image, and those who will be like him when he comes again. ■

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6 This observation confirms my recent experience in teaching a "Doctrine of Man" course to seminary students.

## God's Judgments?

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by Darryl G. Hart

*God's Judgments: Interpreting History and the Christian Faith*, by Steven J. Keillor. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007, 223 pages, \$18.00, paper.

Was 9/11 an instance of divine judgment upon the United States? This is a question that Stephen Keillor, an independent historian and fellow at the MacLaurin Institute, thinks has tremendous significance even if Protestants of all stripes are reluctant to answer in the affirmative. It is obviously important to the way that Christian historians, like Keillor, interpret America's past. But whether historians are capable of discerning God's designs in history is small potatoes compared to what assessments of 9/11 may reveal about the current fecklessness of American Christians. Unless they can say that events like the attack on the World Trade Center are instances of God's judgment on the nations, Keillor argues, Christians do not take God's righteous designs seriously.

Keillor himself is coy about whether 9/11 was a manifestation of divine judgment. He writes that it was "possibly God's judgment on us for our materialism, for our cultural exports seducing others into immorality, and our use of terrorist guerilla units against the Soviets" (59). But the meaning of 9/11 itself is less consequential to Keillor than his contention that the idea of judgment itself has largely disappeared from American Christians' understanding of God and salvation. He believes that the predominance of worldview thinking among evangelicals, the idea of understanding Christianity as an intellectually coherent way of looking at the world, has put a gag rule on interpreting events like 9/11 as judgments of God. (This is one of many contentious claims in a self-consciously contentious book, a claim that could have been

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1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=105](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=105).

eliminated if only to stay on point about divine judgment and the believer's ability to discern it.)

Keillor spends several chapters developing the idea of judgment in Scripture and showing how the divine sifting out of good and evil (*mishpat*) pervades the Old Testament. He deduces from the Israelites' experiences that "God is an active judge," not only of Israel and her foreign rivals but also of nations today. Keillor even believes that God put "nineteenth-century democratic, liberal nationalism through its paces to find out what it was made of, morally" (74). This is no less true despite his concession that the New Testament is largely silent on instances of divine judgment. Jesus himself resisted rendering judgments against the nations of his day, Keillor rationalizes, because such verdicts would have heightened improper expectations of his work as Messiah. Neither did the apostles offer judgments the way Old Testament prophets did, according to the author, because their message was to small groups and individuals. But New Testament silence about national judgment does not invalidate the pattern established in the Old Testament. Keillor argues that Christ himself is the ultimate judge of the nations as revealed in the New Testament. In effect, the New Testament only heightens the reality of God judging the nations. To the extent that nations, states, and rulers do not bend the knee in submission to the savior, they will ultimately be condemned. Those rulers who especially set themselves up as rivals to Christ's lordship, Keillor warns, commit idolatry and will be judged.

The Bible's teaching on judgment is the wedge by which Keillor tries to show that God found nineteenth-century America morally wanting. The British invasion of the United States and burning of the capital in 1814 could likely have been instances of judgment upon the nation's elites' disdain for Christianity. But the revivals of the Second Great Awakening showed sufficient faithfulness among Americans and enabled the nation to survive. So, too, the Civil War was a judgment on America for the evil of slavery. Keillor is not so crude as to assert a one-to-one correlation between these military skirmishes and God's

righteous intentions. "An omniscient God can use the same war," he writes, "for an almost infinite number of purposes." "Varying, contradictory notions of God's purposes point to the danger of assessing God's will during a crisis, from a partisan stance or with false certainty" (151).

Squaring Keillor's nuance with the fact that he wrote this book is exceedingly difficult for me and will likely challenge most readers. If God can use a political crisis or war to sift out nations, peoples, families, persons, for purposes he only knows, then why would Keillor attempt to make sense of 9/11 or the Civil War as an instance of divine judgment on America? By insisting on the pervasiveness of divine judgment, Keillor does try relatively admirably to introduce a subject—God's condemnation of sin and unbelief with destruction and death—that many evangelicals would too easily ignore, not simply in political or historical analysis but also in Lord's Day sermonizing. But by admitting that God's judgments remain hidden, Keillor appears to be as guilty of the agnosticism that he detects and condemns among evangelical intellectuals when writing about events like 9/11.

This inconsistency is all the more glaring when Keillor turns to contemporary affairs that call for sober responses from Christians. Human genetic engineering, he believes, is "the most serious challenge for the church this century" (171). But rather than invoking the threat of divine judgment, Keillor faults evangelical pundits and pastors for letting modern political conventions such as liberal individualism, democracy, church-state separation, and free markets mute their properly prophetic voices. What the church needs to say and what the modern West needs to hear is that God judges humanity collectively and individually and that the only hope of escaping it is by trusting in Christ, the one who bore that judgment on the cross. This truth will be a corrective to what Keillor finds lacking in contemporary evangelical political activism. It will wean evangelicals from the idolatry of partisan politics, of making the left, right, or center the basis for a believer's political participation. It will prevent Christians from thinking that politics can avert disasters or crises. And

it will protect the church from thinking that she is immune from judgment. Even ignorance of the details of divine judgment will not change Keillor's "fundamental message" to American democracy:

It must decrease and (Christ) must increase, sooner or later. It can choose voluntarily to decrease by exalting him as history's meaning and thus secure for itself decades of humble blessings as the best current system for making mundane decisions. Or it can rebel and be forced to decrease as its self-referential, self-idolizing discourse leads it to exalt itself as history's goal and humanity's last, best hope and leads to its fiscal and moral bankruptcy. Either way, it decreases (201).

Why Keillor's prophetic voice is any more biblical than say Randall Terry, who condemns the United States for abortion, or Jim Wallis who inveighs against America for wealth and privilege, is not a question that Keillor answers.

Even so, Keillor should be highly commended for making such a theologically courageous argument. At the same time, he may need to give more careful consideration to his theology of judgment. On the one hand, he does not do justice to the New Testament's silence on God's verdict against the nations. He presumes to do what he admits Jesus and the apostles did not attempt—interpret contemporary events in the light of God's righteous demands. Even trying to do what the Old Testament prophets did when invoking divine judgment is a problem for contemporary Christians because the canon is closed: we do not have access to on-going divine revelation to make sense of events in Indonesia, the Middle East, or North America. Keillor concedes this problem but will not let it curtail his efforts to retrieve judgment as a category for 9/11. Consequently, he won't consider that silence about divine judgment in contemporary events for some Protestants stems not from too little theology but from too much—from understanding the sufficiency of Scripture, and from recognizing the limits of what God has revealed in

his word.

On the other hand, Keillor is not successful in attempting to transcend partisan politics and arrive at a truly Christian approach. In fact, his analysis is too political. He wants to invoke the category of divine judgment to interpret aspects of U.S. political history, like the heterodox statesmen who founded the nation, or to condemn social institutions and practices, like slavery and cloning. These examples suggest that Keillor's mind runs too much in the direction of the affairs of this world. One could argue on the basis of Scripture that idolatry, that is worshiping false gods or worshiping the true God blasphemously, is one of the most heinous sins that God punishes throughout the Bible. Why then wouldn't Keillor regard the practice of Mormonism or Roman Catholicism in the U.S. as instances of wickedness that deserve God's judgment? Or to raise the stakes, what about the revivals of the Second Great Awakening that tainted American Protestantism with an Arminian understanding of salvation and sanctioned the widespread use of the altar call? By looking only at the effects of unbelief on the political order of the United States, instead of examining the conditions of the nation's churches, Keillor suggests that politics matters more than worship.

These objections, while serious, should not detract from the unusual and thought-provoking argument that Keillor produces in *God's Judgments*. It is a book well worth reading by anyone who has pondered the meaning of history or the place of divine judgment in the affairs of principalities and powers. It certainly does not include a number of considerations that need to inform a contentious topic like this. Nor does it always say clearly the points that Keillor tries to make. But if we stopped reading imperfect books we would be left with reading only the Bible. To find a flawed book that raises theological challenges about provocative subjects is a rarity and a good reason for recommending Keillor's book. ■

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# The Divine Voice

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by Gregory E. Reynolds

*The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound*, by Stephen H. Webb. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004, 244 pages, \$24.99, paper.

Rarely do recent books on homiletics contribute anything new to the discipline. A few decades ago one homiletician declared that every book on homiletics since John Broadus is a rehash of his classic *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (1902 Dargan edition). That may be pedagogical hyperbole, but it comes close to the truth.

While Broadus has some excellent things to say about the use of the voice in the pulpit, he was not living in the electronic environment that we inhabit. The challenge of this new environment calls for the expansion of homiletical wisdom. In particular, the critical insights of the new discipline of media ecology<sup>2</sup> are capable of some significant contributions to the literature of homiletics. Stephen Webb's book is just such a contribution. It is an opulent resource for preachers who would like to think more about the unique nature of preaching as the powerful Word of God to his people. The mediation of our conscious lives by electronic media makes a significant difference in the way we understand our task as preachers and execute that task in the preaching moment. A nuanced appreciation of the power of the human voice will help us be better preachers.

I should like to break with the tradition of reviewers of saving criticism until last because

1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=112](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=112).

2 Media ecology is the critical discipline of studying the relationship of media to their cultural environment. Marshall McLuhan, Jacques Ellul, Walter Ong, and Neil Postman are among the most prominent founders of the movement. The University of Toronto and New York University are the best known institutions in which the discipline may be studied.

I want to focus on the unique contribution that Webb makes to the importance of the human voice in worship and preaching. Webb has strong affinities with the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth.<sup>3</sup> This is evident in the sheer number of references he makes to Barth. While the seriousness of Barth's theological errors in prolegomena, especially the doctrine of inspiration, and soteriology should not be overlooked, much of what he had to say about the importance and immediacy of preaching is of great value to preachers today, as we stand against the tidal wave of electronic substitutes. This is Webb's focus as he spends 15 pages on "The Radically Rhetorical Barth" (167–181). Webb concisely states the classic orthodox problem with Barth's view of the Bible, "Barth's nuanced position is that God can cause the Bible to be God's Word, but the Bible does not intrinsically represent God's voice . . . This is Barth's position: When we hear in the Spirit, Scripture *becomes* the Word of God, but outside of this event, it is not possible to say that Scripture *is* the Word of God" (173, 174). Webb cautiously distances himself from this position by describing it as a "negligent handling of the doctrine of inspiration" (173). While admitting Barth's problems with inspiration, Webb seeks to appreciate Barth's focus on the importance of the preaching moment. He claims that Barth affirms the importance of Scripture being written to protect the church against mistaking "its own voice for the voice of God" (177).<sup>4</sup>

In several places Webb's speculations will raise orthodox eyebrows. Webb claims that the Son has "some kind of spiritual-material body" (191–197). He also hints at favoring women's ordination by referring to a preacher as "her" (116).

Webb is professor of religion and philosophy at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana. He was raised in a self-consciously anticonfessional

3 Stephen Webb, *Refiguring Theology: The Rhetoric of Karl Barth* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).

4 For a full critique of Barth's theology cf. Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946); *Has Karl Barth Become Orthodox?* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1954); *Christianity and Barthianism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962).

tradition, and after a brief sojourn in the Lutheran church—presumably when he wrote the book under review, since he refers extensively to Luther—he officially came into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church in 2007. On his Web site, he refers to himself as “a conservative Christian Theologian” (stephenhwebb.com).

Webb begins with a profoundly theological statement: “Christians believe that all sound has its origin in God because God spoke the world into being” (14). But the problem in the electronic environment is that “our hardness of hearing is compounded today by a cacophonous soundscape” (16). Webb’s chief concern is “the proper relationship of the sound of worship to the voice of the sermon” (27). He calls this the “acoustemology of the church” (27). Like Walter Ong, Webb accents the importance of orality in the Christian life, worship, and preaching.<sup>5</sup> And, like Ong, he often exaggerates the importance of sound over sight, hearing and speaking over reading. His section “Revisiting Walter Ong” reveals the influence of this media ecology mentor on Webb’s thinking, and I think mostly for the good.

The book is peppered with provocative, pithy sayings about sound like “sound is the essence of personhood” (39). Claiming that speech is primarily a public act, Webb says “the voice, coming from within, turns us inside out” (58). The creation account proves that “sound precedes light” (47). Championing the superiority of sound over sight, citing Psalm 29, Webb observes, “The Bible is extremely modest about God’s appearance . . . but not about God’s voice” (47). This concentration of interest in sound has a consciousness-altering effect on the reader, probing and getting us to think differently about sound and its importance in human life and preaching. Erasmus’s alteration of

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5 Walter Ong was a Jesuit who wrote *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967. Reprint, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1981). It is a foundational study of the primacy of the oral/aural and the radical nature of the change in the human sensorium which printing and the electronic media have initiated. It contains some of the best insights into the power, immediacy and effect/affect of the oral in divine and human life, by a Jesuit who interacts with Scripture. Ong is somewhat neo-orthodox and takes his cue from Teilhard de Chardin’s evolutionary perspective on redemptive history.

the Latin Vulgate in John 1:1 signaled a significant change in conception of the word. In the phrase “In principio erat verbum” he replaced *verbum* with *sermo*, which means speech instead of word (131). Webb is clearly advocating a return to this Reformation trajectory.

Webb demonstrates a strong appreciation for the recovery of the Word in the Reformation era: “The Protestant Reformers taught that the invisible God is revealed primarily through the audible, not the visual” (42). He understands the Reformation as “Revocalizing the Word,” with the emphasis shifting from Medieval images to preaching and the power of sound (105ff). “The Reformation was characterized by an outpouring of words in service to the biblical Word of God” (106). Focusing on the Puritan emphasis on the plain style of preaching, quoting *The Art of Prophesying* by William Perkins, he concludes, “To speak plainly is to be charged with telling the truth in the moment. The plain style puts the emphasis on a natural voice, but it does so with great enthusiasm for the drama of the Word” (124). This reminds me of what Broadus says after enjoining preachers to digest and make the truth they preach their own. He advises, “Speak out with freedom and earnestness what you think and feel.”<sup>6</sup>

One of Webb’s most important themes is that theology serves the interests of proclamation (167). Proclamation, in turn, stands at the center of worship and involves God addressing his people. “Preaching is not merely preparation for worship; it is worship” (141). Luther’s emphasis on the centrality of preaching in worship was a radical change from the Medieval concept. Luther insisted that the gospel should “really not be something written, but a spoken word which brought forth the Scriptures, as Christ and the apostles have done” (144). Preaching thus, according to Luther—sounding very much like a similar assertion in the *Second Helvetic Confession*—“must be viewed and believed as though God’s own voice were resounding from heaven” (188). Webb devotes more than a

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6 John A. Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, ed. Edwin Charles Dragan (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1902).

dozen pages to Calvin's preaching (150–163). Calvin turned classical rhetoric from its ancient moral telos into an instrument of gospel proclamation in the interest of focusing on God not the preacher (155, 157, cf. 146n37).

Webb has a delightful section on "The Joy of Public Reading," in which he displays a needed understanding of the nature of that reading: "Reading the Bible out loud is an act of interpretation" (209).

Until Gutenberg, the church was essentially a hearing (not a reading) church. The Middle Ages saw the image dominate. Now we are becoming a hearing *and* image dominated culture. Mediated sound and images now control our consciousness, and thus distract and disenchant us in ways that require our stewardship of the media. At the center of this ecology is the demand for a well-crafted use of sound in the church's worship. The way we sing, pray, and preach makes all the difference in binding the community of faith together in the gospel. But Webb does not diminish the importance of the written Word. "By turning the oral tradition of the apostles into scripts, the Gospels provided for a more permanent and thus more powerful rendition of Jesus' life, which guaranteed the confidence and efficacy of the church's spoken word" (68).

Taking all of this into account, I think the benefits of Webb's apologia for a theology of sound and Christian proclamation far outweigh the liabilities for the theologically discerning reader. This is a book rich in intellectual interest for the serious preacher. ■

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## The Reason for God

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by William D. Dennison

*The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, by Timothy Keller. New York: Dutton, 2008, xxiii + 293 pages, \$24.95.

John R. Muether's fine biography entitled *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman* suggests that Van Til was marginalized by Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS) and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) by the end of his life. Concerning WTS, in 1979 Van Til speculated whether its academic environment understood his apologetic.<sup>2</sup> Van Til's assessment in 1979 may have been skewed, but if he were alive today, his assumption may have been confirmed as he listened to Dr. Timothy Keller's approach to apologetics on March 11, 2008 in the very hall that bears Van Til's name.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, if one truly understands Van Til, one would know that Dr. Timothy Keller's *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* exists outside the bounds of Van Til's own method. Countless pages of ink flowed from Van Til's pen in opposition to the apologetic that Keller presents. Although Dr. Keller's presentation at WTS did not indicate fidelity to Van Til's apologetic method, hopefully a consistent attitude of commitment to Van Til will be advanced in the OPC when reviewing Keller's volume.

Keller's volume is divided into two parts: 1) "the leap of doubt" and, 2) "the reasons for faith." In light of his ministry in the Manhattan borough of New York City, Keller addresses the "seven biggest objections about Christianity" he has

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1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=119](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=119).

2 John R. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 224.

3 Westminster Theological Seminary Media Center: Video. [http://www.wts.edu/flash/media\\_popup/media\\_player.php?id=117&paramType=video](http://www.wts.edu/flash/media_popup/media_player.php?id=117&paramType=video).

confronted over the years of his ministry (part one), and then he examines “the reasons underlying Christian beliefs” (part two). The apologetic aspect of the volume addresses the urban skeptic who Keller describes as “sophisticated and yet ignorant of Christianity,” meaning that the individual is highly educated in their field of specialization (vocation) and, yet, has many misconceptions of the Christian religion.<sup>4</sup> The underlying thesis to the entire volume is that the requirements for proof that the skeptics apply to the Christian faith should be applied consistently to their own belief system. In this exercise, the skeptics should discover that their doubts are not as solid as they seem to be (xviii).

In part one, the reader is presented with the typical objections to Christianity: the claim of one true religion, a good God allowing suffering, Christianity as an enemy to freedom, the church as a source of injustice, a loving God sending people to hell, science proves Christianity false, and the Bible cannot be viewed literally. To each objection, Keller employs an argument that attempts to remain consistent to his thesis, but it needs to be noted that his argument employs an inductive method, i.e., evidence for Christianity is more rational and probable than any argument to the contrary. In the second part, Keller presents the essential biblical narrative of the Christian story. Herein, God is presented as a playwright whose “drama” provides many “strong clues” (“divine fingerprints”) in the universe as evidence for the Christian religion. The analogy of “dance” is also employed to depict the interrelationship between God and all he has created (213–226). Although Keller tells us more than once that “there cannot be [an] irrefutable proof for the existence of God” (127), in the second part he argues that God’s play “has greater power to explain what we see and experience than does any other competing account” (213). In fact, for Keller, “the gospel . . . is not just a moving fictional story about someone else [Jesus]. It is a true story about us” (200).

With this overview before us, I now turn to assess the volume’s two sections, making no apology

4 Ibid.

for my commitment to Van Til and his importance for the OPC. My appraisal proceeds in two directions: 1) Keller’s apologetic method in relationship to Van Til’s method and, 2) Keller’s depiction of the Christian story.

First, Keller has stated that he is interested in how consistent his work is with Van Tilian apologetics.<sup>5</sup> In terms of the holistic method of Van Tilian apologetics, no resemblance exists. No matter what percentage one gives to the strength of an evidential argument for God’s existence, Van Til would not give credibility to any probability argument. This criticism dominated Van Til’s analysis of any apologetic method that applied the inductive method to apologetics, a method that he found embodied in Bishop Butler and those whom he called the “less-than-consistent Calvinists” (Old Princeton). Ironically, Keller jumps on the current bandwagon of criticizing Enlightenment Cartesian foundationalism (rationalism; 118, 268n6), and yet he employs the late Renaissance and early Enlightenment use of the inductive method (empiricism) as embodied in Bacon’s *New Organon* (1620) to encounter modern skepticism. Again, Van Til would claim this is a flaw in Keller’s approach. Keller is attempting to meet the skeptic on his own ground. (In fact, in Descartes’s *Meditations* [1641], he attempted to meet the revival of Pyrrhonian skepticism on the skeptic’s ground as he constructed his foundational rationalism. Keller seems to be telling us that he prefers meeting the skeptics on their own turf with a method that incorporates Enlightenment inductivism [empiricism] rather than Enlightenment deductivism [rationalism]).<sup>6</sup> If one attempts to meet the skeptic on his own ground, Van Til says that the Christian apologist has already given away the merchandise

5 Ibid.

6 A digest of the fine works of Richard H. Popkin on skepticism during the Enlightenment can be very instructive concerning the problems that both deductive and inductive reasoning faced encountering the skeptics, e.g., Popkin’s, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). Also incredibly challenging to anyone putting confidence in deductive and inductive arguments for God’s existence is Alan Charles Kors’s volume, *Atheism in France, 1650–1729: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

since the apologist is allowing the skeptic to define the epistemological ground of the discussion (the probability of truth). Perhaps it would be helpful to think about the issue this way: as you stand in the presence of God, do you think God would affirm that there cannot be any irrefutable proof for his existence? In fact, on the basis of the Word of God and God's providential sovereign activity in history, can we not hear the Lord's response—the triune God of the Bible irrefutably exists! According to Scripture, God's existence is indubitable, and all of humanity is without excuse because the irrefutable proof of his existence is clearly seen in his activity (Rom. 1:18–25). Paul does *not* teach in Romans 1 that humanity is without excuse because God provides more rational and probable evidences than the argument to the contrary. Van Til echoes Paul's sentiment, but Keller does not. In fact, the modern skeptic's questions, which Keller wishes to give so much sympathy, fairness, and credence, are nonsense before the presence of God.<sup>7</sup>

The directive of Keller's argumentation relies heavily upon the cultural milieu. His argument on each subject follows a basic pattern. The skeptical question is raised in its cultural context, and then a statement or argument of response from a prominent cultural figure is placed before the reader (e.g., Stephen L. Carter, Dostoevsky, G. K. Chesterton, David L. Chappell, Robert Bellah, Ian Barbour, Jan Vansina, Alvin Plantinga, and foremost, C. S. Lewis and N. T. Wright). The response is used to turn the question of the skeptic on its head so that Keller can proceed to demonstrate that it is more reasonable to believe the Christian position. For this reason, one will strain to find

7 At this point I need to be fair to Dr. Keller. Of course, in his pastoral role he needs to be gracious and loving to the questions of the modern skeptic; he needs to listen well and make every attempt to respond to their concerns. His book clearly indicates that this is his honorable passion. My point is this: although the gospel demands that we be pastorally gracious to the skeptic's questions, the believer must also realize that the skeptic's questions come from a heart of unbelief. Thus, those questions against God are unfair because they are against the authority and the fulfilled eschatological work of our Godhead. One may wish to consult an instructive article by B. B. Warfield (see "Doubt," *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield—II*, ed. John E. Meeter [Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973], 655–659).

any example of Keller confronting the skeptic with the absolute authority of the triune God and his Word. One may wish to counter my observation by arguing that the content of biblical revelation is presupposed in the initial part of the volume, but I found it to be an afterthought at best. Specifically, the apologetic directive found clearly in Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 1.4 and 1.5, which was employed so masterfully by Van Til, is clearly missing in Keller. WCF 1.4 tells us that the Holy Scripture is to be believed because it is the Word of God (God is truth). The absolute authoritative claim that Scripture makes about itself *precedes* the evidence that it is the Word of God (WCF 1.5). Van Til applied the same principle to any discussion about God's existence. Van Til grounds his epistemology in a philosophy of history: this means that he begins with the self-attesting and self-authenticating activity of the triune God in history as declared in Holy Scripture. The evidences for God's existence are constitutive of this covenantal/redemptive historical paradigm as the trinity discloses himself in his revelation. In the scope of biblical historical revelation, God, history, facts, and God's interpretation of those facts are inseparable. Keller never uses this biblical paradigm to respond to the modern skeptic. Rather, he exchanges the irrefutable proof that God provides in revelational history for a probability argument of God's existence in the relative cultural context of his own era. From God's perspective, however, the argument is over; redemptive and covenantal history is fulfilled. On the authority of God's work in Christ, all men everywhere stand presently before God and need to repent and believe (Acts 17:30–31). God's providential history is not a "play" in which humans are the spectators trying to rationally comprehend, understand, and put together the "clues" that God has left for us (127). Rather, from God's perspective, the play, if you wish, portrays facts that must be believed without reservation since today is the day of salvation (2 Cor. 6:2).

Furthermore, one should not be surprised about the popularity of Keller's volume. Christians are enamored with being relevant about culture. For the most part, however, the same popular

questions of skepticism arise in every age since the skeptics of each era think they are reinventing the wheel. In reality, they are not thinkers; they just drift through history espousing the “same old, same old,” yet updated, versions of their popular notions—repeating the self-whimsical pompous criticisms of academicians; supposed intelligent inquiries from friends and blogs; amoral discussions in locker rooms, dorm rooms, chat rooms, bars and the work place; the recurring themes in music, film, and stage; and the continual therapies of psychological anxiety and alienation. The products of culture always demand a cultural response. Keller capitulates to that culture. In contrast, the genius of Van Til’s apologetic is to engage the culture by beginning with the God of the Bible who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow—demanding that the culture conform its existence to the eternal and constant truth of the gospel.

So what about the story of the gospel, which is Keller’s focus in the second part of the volume? Does he present the story found in the Bible as summarized in the historic Reformed confessions? Interestingly, Keller defends the content of the historic ecumenical creeds from the early church, but the Reformed confessions are mysteriously missing. This omission is important. Van Til maintained that the starting point for the defense of the Christian faith is the self-attesting Christ of Scripture and that the best summary of the message of Scripture is found in the ecumenical creeds as well as the Reformed confessions. In other words, the true defense of the Christian faith is the defense of the Reformed faith! Van Til’s position has not been popular within evangelical and Reformed circles. Obviously, his position did not find sentiment in Keller’s volume. So what view of Christianity is Keller defending? I found it difficult to come to a precise response to that question, but it was apparent that certain eclectic nuances emerged, e.g., there is a Reformed element (salvation by grace), an evangelical element (experiential and relational emphasis on community without any depth of covenant consciousness or a doctrine of the church), and a liberal element (social restoration).

From a historic Reformed perspective, the

reader should be surprised to learn that Martin Luther King had a “deeper and truer” view of Christianity with respect to justice,<sup>8</sup> that the existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard provides the launching point for the truth about sin, and in perhaps the strangest chapter, that Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s life is “the marvelous example of human forgiveness to understand the divine” (191). After all, according to Keller, “no one embodied the costliness of forgiveness any better than Dietrich Bonhoeffer” (190). In terms of Christ’s death on the cross, Keller comments, “As Bonhoeffer says, everyone who forgives someone bears the other’s sins. On the Cross we see God doing visibly and cosmically what every human being must do to forgive someone, though on an infinitely greater scale” (192). Personally, I find Keller’s endorsement of Bonhoeffer’s notion of human forgiveness as a bearer of another’s sin perplexing. How can such a position be reconciled with the Bible’s teaching that Christ’s sacrificial atonement is a once and for all expiatory and propitiatory event on behalf of sinners (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 10:8–18)? Christians forgive each other not as bearers of sin but because Christ forgave us. Even so, Keller’s puzzling language about the cross of Christ continues: “This is a God who becomes human and offers his own lifeblood in order to honor moral justice and merciful love so that someday he can destroy all evil without destroying us” (192). Although one will find the terminology of the satisfaction view of atonement scattered throughout Keller’s presentation, it would seem that he is advocating more directly the moral theory of the atonement. Hence, the reader should not be surprised that the justice achieved by Christ on the cross is a restoration of the social order of human activity (196–197). Ironically, I am *skeptical* whether the reader will find an exposition of the penal substitutionary work of Christ’s atonement

8 As I point out in my classroom discussion of King’s famous “Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” his key paragraph in presenting his view of justice is an eclectic synthesis of Aquinas, Martin Buber’s “I-thou” concept, and Paul Tillich’s view of sin. These three men are not pillars of Reformed orthodoxy, and thus a serious employment of the transcendental critique is needed of King’s view of justice before it is affirmed as a “deeper and truer” view.

as taught in the Reformed confessions in Keller’s presentation of the “true” story of the cross. In my estimation, Keller’s exposition appears dangerously close to Horace Bushnell’s moral theory on the atonement, which was assessed and critiqued correctly by Charles Hodge.<sup>9</sup>

Since a biblical and confessional view of the atonement is in question in Keller’s presentation, what can be said about the grand narrative of the biblical story? Herein, Keller adopts the popular neo-Calvinist scheme: “creation, fall, redemption, and consummation” (214). This “story line” has its roots in nineteenth century Dutch neo-Calvinism, which eventually evolved into a paradigm that teaches the “absolute harmony of humanity with nature” (222). Moreover, Keller endorses the neo-Calvinist’s canon when he writes: “The purpose of Jesus’ coming is to put the whole world right, to renew and restore the creation, not to escape it” (223). Herein, justice and *shalom* finally embrace. Keller continues: “The work of the Spirit of God is not only to save souls but also to care and cultivate the face of the earth, the material world” (223). Keller’s approval of the neo-Calvinist horizontal scheme of the biblical story is quite distant from Calvin’s pastoral gem regarding the believer’s pilgrimage in this creation: “If heaven is our homeland, what else is the earth but a place of exile?”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, with respect to the WCF, a serious revisionist view of the biblical narrative is put in place by the scheme and content of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Although one can *infer* this pattern as a subordinate scheme in the WCF, that blueprint is *not* the self-conscious model of the authors of the Confession. Rather, the paradigm of the WCF is the “fourfold state of man.” The ninth chapter reveals the broad

9 I recommend the reading of Keller, Bushnell, and Hodge alongside of each other. See Horace Bushnell, *The Vicarious Sacrifice: Grounded in Principles Interpreted by Human Analogies* (1877; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, n.d.), 1:449–552, and Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1899), 2:566–573. Hodge refers to Bushnell’s *Vicarious Sacrifice Grounded in Principles of Universal Obligation*, published in 1866.

10 Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), III.9.4.

outline of the Confession: state of innocency (9.2), state of sin (9.3), state of grace (9.4), and state of glory (9.5). For the authors of the WCF, the focus of God’s activity in the creation is *anthropology* (God in covenant with man, i.e., from the covenant of works to the covenant of grace in Christ). But during the nineteenth century a paradigm shift occurred, mainly in continental Reformed thought. This shift emphasized God’s activity in the *creation*. Herein, man is called as a servant and instrument in God’s teleological plan to restore and secure the *creation*. This post-Enlightenment paradigm shift from anthropology to creation reached its high point in the famous quip by Herman Bavinck, “grace restores nature.” For many, Bavinck’s phrase has come to define the canon of neo-Calvinist dogma for the twentieth century and beyond as the content of that quip has evolved.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps a simple way to state the difference between the two paradigms is this: the WCF understands that the believer’s end (Christ’s bride) is the inheritance of God himself, through Christ, in the glorious transcendence of heaven (WSC Q#1), whereas neo-Calvinism understands the end as a restored creation in which believers “labor” in “deeds of justice and service” with the “expectation of a perfect world” (225). I would suggest that the neo-Calvinist needs to reread Romans 8:18–25. Paul teaches in Romans 8:18–25 that creation serves redemption, nature serves glory, the universe serves eschatology—specifically, creation serves the “sons of God” (the church: see also Matt. 6:24–34; Eph. 1:15–23; Phil. 3:20–21; 2 Cor. 4:16–5:8; Heb. 3:14; Rev. 21:22–22:5). In my judgment, the neo-Calvinist’s scheme is guilty of deconstructing the vertical realm of eschatology taught clearly in Holy Scripture and our Reformed standards. More importantly, however, it is deconstructing

11 An introductory survey of the neo-Calvinist movement appears in an article by William D. Dennison entitled, “Dutch neo-Calvinism and the Roots for Transformation,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42 (June 1999): 271–291. This same article can be retrieved at: [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3817/is\\_199906/ai\\_n8875062](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3817/is_199906/ai_n8875062). A succinct counter to the neo-Calvinist horizontal view of eschatology is found in the superb sermon by Geerhardus Vos, “Heavenly-Mindedness (Hebrews 11: 9–10),” *Grace and Glory: Sermons Preached in the Chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary* (1922; repr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994) 103–123.

the entire biblical narrative and replacing it with a post-Enlightenment gospel of cultural and social relevance.

Well, in light of this analysis, is there something positive to glean from Keller's book? Yes. Although the holistic character of Keller's apologetic method is antithetical to Van Til's method, he does provide certain particular (common grace) perceptions into the skeptic that can be used by a perceptive Van Tilian reasoning from the "impossibility of the contrary."<sup>12</sup>

Members of the OPC need to seriously adopt a discerning spirit with respect to Keller's volume. We must remain steadfast to the directive that Van Til placed before us. We must not turn the question of God's existence over to Keller's method of "critical rationality" (120–121). "Critical rationality" assumes that "belief in God offers a better empirical fit, it explains and accounts for what we see better than the alternative account of things. No view of God can be proven, but that does not mean that we cannot sift and weigh the grounds for various religious beliefs and find that some or even one is the most reasonable" (121). Keller's position does not provide "the" reason for God; rather, his empirical method puts its trust in human rationality to bow before the most rational and probable argument for a certain religion. In contrast, one would be better served by bowing before the method of God's infallible self-witness of his own activity in covenant and redemptive history. After all, the Bible is God's own infallible commentary on his own activity. In his Word, his testimony is self-authenticating. No unbeliever stands presently or in the future before the God of biblical history with justified skepticism. Furthermore, it is imperative for the OPC to remain faithful to our Confessional standards as the true summary of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We must not cave to a revisionist view of biblical history in order to be socially and culturally relevant in our

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12 To look into Van Til's notion, see Van Til's "My Credo," #5, which appears in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (n.p.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1971), 21; Gregory Bahnsen, *Van Til* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998), 4–6, 113, 485–487.

era. Such a revisionist position ends up altering the core of the gospel from Genesis to Revelation. ■

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## Francis A. Schaeffer: A Unique Evangelist

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by Gregory E. Reynolds

*Truth with Love: The Apologetics of Francis Schaeffer*, by Bryan A. Follis. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006, 206 pages, \$15.99, paper.

As the title of Bryan Follis's book suggests, he explores the full range of Schaeffer's ministry. Schaeffer was as much a cultural critic as an apologist—and, as each of these, he was an evangelist. He developed a wide-ranging generalist's knowledge of Western culture to serve the purposes of his calling. This is what made him unique.

In reviewing my journals and notes from L'Abri in the fall of 1971,<sup>2</sup> I am astonished at the range of material that was covered in just a few months. A sample of the topics covered in a combination of live and taped lectures, beginning the day after my arrival includes: logical positivism, the significance of the blood of Christ, prayer, common grace, "The East No Exit," Huxley's humanism, assurance, apologetics, McLuhan, "Basic Answers," the influence of Kant on modern

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1 [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=121](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=121).

2 I was there from August 20, 1971 to February 1972, spending several weeks in Madrid assisting an International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (InterVarsity International) missionary with English ministry at the University of Madrid.



culture, taped lectures by Os Guinness on the history of the counterculture,<sup>3</sup> Thomas Mann, art in the Bible, existentialism, and lectures on Romans 1–8 (mandatory for all students)—and was only three weeks into my stay. It was an intellectual and spiritual feast. I also heard about Hodge, Warfield, Van Til, and Robert Dick Wilson. I think of myself as having been born again with a silver spoon in my mouth. So Schaeffer was not only an evangelist to the lost, but a pastor to those who needed to learn how to understand and communicate with the modern world.

An example of how Schaeffer used cultural observation to serve the ministry occurred the week after I arrived in late August. The Ollon-Villars Grande Prix ran directly through the L'Abri community. Formula One cars sped past chalet *Les Mélèzes* on the perfectly paved switchbacks leading up the mountain. It was an astonishing sight—drivers flirting with death as the cowbells clanged their bucolic sounds. I shall never forget the sermon Schaeffer preached that Sunday. He lamented the death wish of modern culture exemplified by the quest for speed, and pointed us to the Christ of Scripture.

Painting in broad strokes of cultural assessment was just what many of us needed. Unlike any evangelical Protestant of his time, he spoke our language. Having been raised in a liberal Congregational home where the arts were appreciated; and having imbibed the thinking of the 1960s as an architectural student in Boston, I discovered that Schaeffer understood where I'd been in a way that no one else did.

Follis captures the range of Schaeffer's ministry, a ministry that left an indelible impression on this reviewer. While the years have revealed the weaknesses of Schaeffer's thinking and ministry, my appreciation for the part he played in my early development as a Christian has only increased. "Truth with love" captures Schaeffer's ministry nicely. Follis does a masterful job in covering the terrain.

3 The lectures given by Os Guinness during this period would eventually be published as *The Dust of Death: A Critique of the Establishment and the Counter Culture—and a Proposal for a Third Way* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press 1973).

## Apologetics: "Truth"

At the outset, Follis observes a continuity between Calvin and Schaeffer in respect for the place of reason, common grace, and natural law; and in understanding humanity, even in its fallen condition, as still, in a broad sense, imaging God (17–25). He goes on to posit the genetic influence of Jonathan Edwards and B. B. Warfield in the Scottish Common Sense philosophical tradition. He further notes the Dutch continental challenge to that tradition with Abraham Kuyper's insistence that traditional apologetics could not prove the existence of God (29). Follis makes the questionable assertion that Van Til's "presuppositional apologetics has become the majority view within contemporary Reformed apologetics" (29). He then proposes a similarity between Schaeffer and Van Til in the evangelistic technique of "placing yourself on your opponent's ground for the sake of argument" (29). He goes on to observe Machen's profound influence on Schaeffer, who continued the "Old Princetonian approach of rational apologetical argument." (30).<sup>4</sup> Follis concludes this introductory section by stating his thesis that Schaeffer was neither a presuppositionalist nor a traditional evidentialist. He later makes a case for Schaeffer's being a "verificationist," seeking to convince the unbeliever that his core beliefs (presuppositions), are inconsistent with reality, unlike the true presuppositions of Christianity (99–122).

Follis does not shy away from dealing with Schaeffer's critics, focusing in detail on Cornelius Van Til, Edward Carnell, Clark Pinnock, Thomas Morris, and others. He is to be highly commended for the fairness of his account of these critics. His interaction with Van Til will prove of most interest to readers of this journal.

Comparing Van Til to Schaeffer is not an easy task as they were each complex with different temperaments and backgrounds. Van Til was a brilliant and rigorously consistent academic apologist, whereas Schaeffer was an evangelist dealing with the ideas of late-twentieth-century Westerners at his dining room table. This distinction, however,

4 I first encountered Machen at L'Abri where I read "Christianity and Culture," republished by L'Abri Fellowship in 1969.

should not be pressed too far for two reasons. First, I think some have failed to appreciate what the two had theologically and apologetically in common. Second, I believe Schaeffer would have been all the sharper had he interacted more with Van Til, when invited to by Van Til in his correspondence. Follis seeks graciously to excuse Schaeffer on this point. William Edgar helpfully enumerates the agreements and disagreements of Schaeffer and Van Til in his article “Two Christian Warriors.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, as Scott Oliphint demonstrates, Van Til was an ardent evangelist himself within his own circle of neighbors and friends. Each, as Edgar says was a “Christian warrior,” functioning in very different callings, in different settings, and with very different gifts.

In a lecture in 1981, Schaeffer said of Van Til, “I highly honor him.” He went on to express his indebtedness to Van Til for his courageous, profound, and groundbreaking critique of Barth. But then, when asked about the difference between his and Van Til’s apologetics, Schaeffer demonstrated a serious misunderstanding of Van Til by insisting that Van Til left no place for discussion with the unbeliever. He stated that “apologetics must lead to evangelism,”<sup>6</sup> as if Van Til’s apologetics failed to do so. As Scott Oliphint correctly observes, for Van Til apologetics *is* evangelism.<sup>7</sup> Follis comments, “Schaeffer did not believe that you have to require the non-Christian to presuppose God before you can have a meaningful discussion with him” (109). He goes on to accurately record Edgar’s objection to Schaeffer’s account of Van Til on this point, as well as the significant difference in Schaeffer’s and Van Til’s uses of the term “presupposition” (110–111).

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5 William Edgar, “Two Christian Warriors: Cornelius Van Til and Francis A. Schaeffer Compared,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (spring 1995): 57–80.

6 Francis Schaeffer, “Apologetics,” The L’Abri Audio Library (Chesterton, IN: Sound Word, n.d. ca. 1981), CD X483. In this lecture Schaeffer comments on the appendix on apologetics in the Collected Works version of *The God Who Is There*. This was intended to answer critics.

7 K. Scott Oliphint, “Van Til the Evangelist,” *Ordained Servant* (October 2008), [www.opc.org/os9.html?article\\_id=118](http://www.opc.org/os9.html?article_id=118).

It seems clear that it is exactly at this point—the different concepts of “presupposition”—that Schaeffer seriously misunderstood Van Til. Van Til never required that non-Christians presuppose God—he insisted that they already do and are vigorously suppressing this fact of consciousness. Rather than avoid discussion, he sought to bring the unbeliever to recognize his suppressing activity. For Schaeffer, the unbeliever holds to assumptions about reality that are inconsistent with the way things really are, but is capable of understanding the true nature of facts and reason (112). It seems to me that Van Til was simply more profound in describing in Pauline fashion the way things really are in relationship to God. His is a more penetrating Reformed anthropology and epistemology.

Schaeffer certainly understood “presuppositions” in a way quite different from Van Til. Van Til’s concept was rooted in the epistemological givenness of man’s knowledge of God—the *sensus divinitatus*. No human thought or conversation can take place without the existence of God and the revelation of him to the consciousness of man. Man’s problem is his moral rebellion, which is expressed in his continual attempt to suppress this knowledge. “Schaeffer genuinely believed that Van Til’s apologetics prevented meaningful discussion” (110). This is precisely what I heard at L’Abri, and again in the 1981 lecture mentioned above. Since I had never heard of Van Til, I accepted Schaeffer’s statement in 1971.

Schaeffer, on the other hand, defines presuppositions as the core beliefs of the unbeliever, which are inconsistent with the way things really are in God’s world. The apologist-preacher must show the unbeliever this inconsistency and present the alternative of the gospel. Schaeffer, like Van Til, exposed the presumption of autonomy. But, he seemed to limit this to a problem on this side of the historical “line of despair,” which accords a positive place to reason prior to the Kantian-Hegelian shift (a shift that Van Til wisely denied). Human sinfulness is the fundamental problem of man, not irrationality (112).

Schaeffer insists that affirming the importance

of reason as an acknowledgement of the unique human ability to think logically in “antithesis,” is not the same as rationalism. Rationalism asserts reason’s ability to figure out “final answers” to the questions raised by the reality of “what is.” Schaeffer was surely not a rationalist in this sense. I must differ with Follis by suggesting that there is a rationalistic tendency in Schaeffer’s approach, along lines noted in my editorial.<sup>8</sup> Schaeffer often referred to the “revelation of the universe,”<sup>9</sup> including the truth of what man is (the “mannishness of man”). This gives the impression of an abstract reality apart from God. It also underestimates the sinfulness of man on man’s ability to verify the credibility of the evidence for the truth of Christianity (114–16). Schaeffer insisted that Christianity is not a “probable” answer to the “questions posed by reality,” but the only final answer, which is given in the revelation of the Bible.<sup>10</sup> With respect to irrationalism, Follis points out the importance of Schaeffer’s insistence on the intellectual content of biblical faith (82–85).

Follis is very helpful in exploring the historical roots of Schaeffer’s apologetics and the nature of his synthesis of Van Tilian presuppositionalism and evidentialism (99–129). The notes in my journal entry for the August 26, 1971 lecture on apologetics record, “Schaeffer’s apologetics are classical and presuppositional.”<sup>11</sup> Barry Seagren, one of the leaders at L’Abri when I was there, accurately suggests that Schaeffer should be seen as “an evidentialist of ideas” (111).

One thing is notably absent in Follis’s account. It was also absent in my experience at L’Abri: the importance of the confessional Reformed church. Schaeffer reacted to his fundamentalist past and the lack of love in his experience with

8 Gregory E. Reynolds, “Your Father’s L’Abri: Reflections on the Ministry of Francis Schaeffer,” *Ordained Servant* (October 2008).

9 Schaeffer, “Apologetics.”

10 Ibid.

11 This may have been a tape in Farel House, titled “Apologetics,” from 1963.

Carl McIntire at Faith Seminary by not emphasizing Reformed faith as such. I remember that my naively asked questions about Calvinism—particularly the five points—were not warmly received. Thus it is not surprising that Schaeffer would be gun-shy about Van Til’s insistence that a Reformed theology demands a Reformed apologetic. Scott Oliphint rightly insists that “no other apologetic is worth the time or the effort.”<sup>12</sup> But where Van Til was theologically consistent and apologetically profound, Schaeffer was culturally and evangelistically perceptive. For all of their differences, their similarities are perhaps as important for us to appreciate as we face the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Follis does not deal with Schaeffer’s alignment with the Christian Right in the last decade of his ministry. However, the theme of these last years provides a cautionary tale. It is ironic that one who had worked so hard at cultivating cosmopolitan, international sensibilities should confine himself to the uniquely American Christian notion that America is a Christian nation. Follis blames this imbalance on Schaeffer’s son, Franky (123). But perhaps something in Schaeffer’s approach to history propelled him in this direction. The “rise and fall of nations” approach lead him to emphasize the place of a Christian “consensus,” while underestimating the importance of common grace. When asked a question along these lines after his 1981 lecture on apologetics, he said that the reason certain great nations became dominant without any Christian influence was based on their inconsistency with their autonomous presuppositions.<sup>13</sup>

While Follis treats Van Til, as well as other critics, fairly, and has clearly done his homework in assessing the critics and letting them speak accurately, in the end the author believes that Schaeffer was correct in his approach and has been either misrepresented or misunderstood by those who disagree. He argues that Schaeffer should be viewed as a “verificationist,” thus not fitting the transcendental approach of presuppositionalism or

12 Oliphint, “Van Til the Evangelist.”

13 Schaeffer, “Apologetics.”

the foundationalist rationalism of classic evidentialism (99–122).

### Community: “with Love”

My journal entry on the day I arrived at L’Abri on August 20, 1971, reads “I feel so welcome.” Community forms people in profound and subtle ways. L’Abri had a formative influence as a community living out a shared truth. Its weakness was that the idea of the church was not as strong as it is in the Reformed tradition. Thus, the importance of creeds and confessions, as well as worship, were never seriously discussed, although Schaeffer demonstrated a high view of worship in practice. He preached in a tuxedo; and the Lord’s Day was taken seriously. Ecclesiastically, there was a session that admitted members to the local church, which was part of a denomination started by various L’Abri ministers throughout Europe called the International Church.<sup>14</sup>

The last half of the book deals with love as the final apologetic. Oddly, the first few pages deal with postmodernism, emphasizing the correctness of Schaeffer’s opposition to relativism and irrationalism (131–35). Missing is the more trenchant Van Tilian critique of the would-be autonomy of man manifested with the polarity between rationalism and irrationalism. However, the value of this section lies elsewhere. Schaeffer believed that apologetics must be imbued with pastoral compassion and wisdom (136). This means a willingness to answer the questions of sinners, having carefully listened to their concerns (138–41). Furthermore, demonstrable love within the Christian community, was for Schaeffer, the “final apologetic” (137). This was plainly evident in Schaeffer’s life.

There are several lessons that we Reformed officers should take from Schaeffer’s remarkable ministry. Schaeffer rightly reacted to a mechanical approach to evangelism, especially the mass evangelism of our day. His emphasis on the uniqueness of persons, both in evangelism and in the church, is a crying need in our impersonal times.

Schaeffer met people on their own ground,

14 Colin Duriez, *Francis Schaeffer: An Authentic Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 129.

outside the walls of the church, all-the-while knowing and affirming that they live in God’s world and are made in his image. His compassion for sinners was exemplary. So, as we make accurate criticisms of Schaeffer’s theoretical apologetic, let us also make sure that we are willing to do the hard work of identifying with sinners, so that we may call them away from their tragic rebellion and blindness. Schaeffer feared that apologetics can be used to create a safe house to live in, a fortress rather than a means of ministry (161). While I believe that one legitimate purpose of apologetics is to fortify Christians in their faith, I also believe that we have a penchant to rest on the truth, rather than ardently spread it.

Schaeffer’s emphasis on the importance of the believing community of the church as the arena to demonstrate the reality of the truth of historic Christianity is much needed in our day. While the doctrine of the church and the nature of Reformed confessionalism were not priorities in Schaeffer’s ministry, the imperfect, but genuine, beauty of the community of L’Abri was an important dimension of Schaeffer’s message. Divorcing doctrinal accuracy from the life of God’s people was a danger Schaeffer sought to avoid, especially given his painful experiences in his early ministry. While this may have contributed to the eclipse of certain doctrines, for Schaeffer both truth and people mattered (57). Also, inherent in Schaeffer’s belief in God as infinite and personal was his practice of prayer (167–69). This was always an integral part of daily life at L’Abri.

Despite the lack of detailed, explicit Reformed teaching, Schaeffer’s essential Calvinistic instincts are present throughout his writings. In his 1981 apologetics lecture, he said that Christianity is the easiest of religions because the triune God does everything in creation and redemption. On the other hand, it is the most difficult religion because man must give up his autonomy to become a Christian. It struck me as I listened to the recorded lecture, the first time I had heard Schaeffer since the 1970s, that what was compelling about his presentation was first, his ability to sum up important things in understandable terms that were not the

usual Christian jargon, and then his utter seriousness in presenting historic Christianity as the only ultimate truth or way of salvation. I have come away from this summer of reacquainting myself with Schaeffer profoundly thankful for his ministry. Follis finishes his fine book on that very note.

A few minor criticisms of the format. The lack of an index is a serious omission of the publisher for a popular academic treatment covering such a wide range of subjects and authors. The end notes are very numerous and difficult to access since there are no page range headings. Footnotes would have been a much better option. Finally, the typography of the headings is unique, but the numbers are nearly illegible, a bad sign for something—type face—meant to be, above all, legible.

For those who wish to read more about Schaeffer's cultural apologetics, *The God Who Is There* is an excellent place to start. As I checked the end notes along the way, I was amazed at how many times they lead to this one book. *True Spirituality* best exemplifies the other theme of Follis's book, love as the final apologetic.

I highly recommend *Truth with Love: The Apologetics of Francis A Schaeffer*. Follis has a fine sensibility for his subject. While many *Ordained Servant* readers will not entirely share Schaeffer's apologetical approach, Follis gives a balanced and accurate picture of Schaeffer's ministry and his apologetics, a ministry from which we may all profit. ■

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## 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 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 stand, but welcomes articles from various viewpoints in harmony with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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