

Three Offices or Two?



Ordained Servant Online

A Journal for Church Officers

E-ISSN 1931-7115

CURRENT ISSUE: THREE OFFICES OR TWO?

December 2013

From the Editor

One of the distinctives, and to my mind beauties, of Presbyterian government is its view of church office. In this issue, Alan Strange applies his knowledge of church history to the question of the number of church offices in “Do the Minister and the Elder Hold the Same Office?” Presbyterians up until the nineteenth century were uniform in distinguishing the three offices of minister of the Word, elder or governor, and deacon. Although some in the OPC say that they hold to a two-office view, they modify the “two-office” label to “two-and-a-half.” Functionally this results in a distinct difference between their position and what nineteenth-century theologian James Henley Thornwell would refer to as two orders within one office—hence teaching and ruling elders. With these differences in mind, it is healthy for us to continue our conversation on this important doctrine. In the new year, I hope to publish more on this topic.

Meanwhile, Robert Letham presents the third and final article in his series on “The Necessity of Preaching in the Modern World.” I recommend this as required reading for summer and year-long interns.

Don’t miss David Booth’s review of Sidney Greidanus’s *Preaching Christ from Daniel*. And our serious comedian, Eutyclus II, is back with a curious take on a contemporary topic.

Finally, George Herbert offers an arresting poem, “Christmas.”

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

CONTENTS

ServantTruth

- Alan Strange, “Do the Minister and the Elder Hold the Same Office?”

ServantWord

- Robert Letham, “The Necessity of Preaching in the Modern World, part 3”

ServantReading

- David Booth, review of Greidanus *Preaching Christ from Daniel*

ServantHumor

- Eutychus II, “Looking for Islam’s Luthers”

ServantPoetry

- George Herbert, “Christmas”

FROM THE ARCHIVES “CHURCH OFFICES”

http://opc.org/OS/pdf/Subject_Index_Vol_1-20.pdf

- “A Look at the Biblical Offices.” (G. I. Williamson) 1:2 (Apr. 1992): 30–37.
- “How Many Offices Are There? Practical Concerns.” (Larry E. Wilson) 1:2 (Apr. 1992): 38.
- “Ministry of the Word According to the Westminster Standards.” (Larry E. Wilson) 12:1 (Jan. 2003): 11–16.
- “A Reader Asks: ‘Was it Appropriate for *New Horizons* to Advocate the Three-Office View?’” (Larry E. Wilson) 12:1 (Jan. 2003): 1–4.
- “The Two- and Three-Office Issue Reconsidered.” (G. I. Williamson) 12:1 (Jan. 2003): 5–6.
- “Why I Came to a Three-Office View.” (Mark R. Brown) 4:1 (Jan. 1995): 17–19.

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

Servant Truth

Do the Minister and the Elder Hold the Same Office?

by Alan D. Strange

All Presbyterians agree that there are at least two special offices in the church—elder and deacon. The question that divides good Presbyterians, however, is this: Do the minister and the ruling elder hold the same office or is the office of minister, while sharing governance with the ruling elder, a distinct office in its own right? Let's begin our exploration of this question by focusing on the nature of "office."

Insofar as office denotes duty (Lat. *officium*, duty), all believers might be said to have a general office in that they have a duty to serve the Lord Christ in his church. All believers have vocations and are to pursue the whole of their lives as unto the Lord (Eph. 6:5–8). As well, all believers have their place of service within the body (1 Cor. 12:12 ff.), often referred to as the "general office of believers." "The power of believers in their general office includes the right to acknowledge and desire the exercise of the gifts and calling of the special offices."¹

Special office exists under both testaments—prophets, priests, and kings in the Old, as well as elders, Levites, etc. In the new covenant, we see two kinds of offices: extraordinary and temporary—as were the foundational offices of apostle and prophet (though they also had an ordinary and perpetual aspect to them); ordinary and perpetual—as are the offices of minister, elder, and deacon, given to furnish the church with the gifts of teaching, ruling, and serving. Rome would tend to emphasize special office to the detriment of the general office of the believer. The Radical Reformation would tend to emphasize the general office of the believer to the detriment of special office. The Reformers demonstrate their genius in upholding both general and special office.

With respect to the offices of minister and elder (or ruling elder, as commonly put) a question is often raised as to the distinctness of the ministerial office. Specifically this question: Do the minister and the ruling elder hold the same office? The historic Presbyterian (if not to say Calvinist) answer is *sic et non*. Yes, inasmuch as the minister is also a church governor, or, to put it another way, the minister is everything that the ruling elder is (the latter "join with the minister"² in the government of the church). No, insofar as the ruling elder is not a minister of Word and sacrament but rather, primarily, a governor of the church together with the other ruling elders and the minister(s).

Historical Considerations

This distinction in office between the minister and elder was recognized, from all the evidence, in the apostolic and post-apostolic church. Bishops and presbyters had parity of

¹ *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, Form of Government 3.1 (2011), 4.

² *Book of Church Order*, Form of Government 10.3 (2011), 13.

rule, apparently, in the apostolic church, though even at this point there is heated debate as to the range of meaning of “presbyter.” The debate is over whether “presbyter” was restricted to preaching presbyters or could also include ruling (lay) elders. And then the question is what the role of the bishop was vis-à-vis that of presbyter. Differentiation clearly occurred, distinguishing bishop and presbyter—perhaps beyond the New Testament distinction of minister and elder—at least by the early second century (Ignatius), witnessing the establishment of the supremacy of the bishop in the late second century (with the rise of the diocesan bishop, as seen in Irenaeus and Tertullian).

By Cyprian’s time in the mid-third century, presbyter had come to mean entirely the parish priest over against the diocesan bishop. There are multiple reasons for this hierarchical development: the church mimicked the political structure of the empire in a measure, to be sure, but the notion of apostolic succession, though unbiblical (the foundational office of apostle not admitting of a successor and there being no evidence of such in the Pastoral Epistles), was helpful. The Lord, in his providence, makes all things work together for the good of his people and the glory of his name: the episcopacy was useful in developing the *regula fidei* (and what Oberman called Tradition 1), serving to preserve orthodoxy against heresy at a time when the canon was still in formation. There was no biblical warrant for such, however, and Calvin and others in the time of the Reformation sought to return to a more biblical pattern of church government as they had come to understand such.

When the Reformers argued for parity of office they meant two things: a complete parity between presbyter (as it had come to be understood as the parish priest) and bishop—rejecting the distinction between higher and lower clergy—and a parity of rule between the minister and the newly-recovered office of lay governor (elder), which office had, in the development of prelacy, fallen out of the church, with the diaconate itself being a first step in attaining priestly office. The Reformers retained special office, though, even after having suffered under Rome’s abuse of office. Whatever differences the Reformers might have had about lay offices—was the office of ruling elder lifetime or temporary?—they all recognized such office (at least the Reformed did) as well as the central importance (and indeed, indispensability) of the office of minister of Word and sacrament. This is understandable, since the Word, particularly the preached Word, had brought about the Reformation. Thus the Reformers (all, including Lutherans and Anglicans as well as Reformed) were zealous to maintain a high view of the office that, through Word and sacrament, the Spirit was pleased to act for the gathering and perfecting of Christ’s church.

Exegetical Considerations

With respect to the New Testament, Edmund P. Clowney is right: the Pastorals in particular and the New Testament in general are not a book of church order.³ Lest we be dispensationalist in our polity, we must see the foundation and origins of church office in the Old Testament. Lee Irons has an excellent discussion of the eldership in the Old Testament, in his paper arguing for a three-office view, bringing a plethora of relevant texts into view and clearly demonstrating that the elders were leaders of the people who

³ Lectures on the doctrine of the church, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1988.

represented them and on whose behalf they held session in the city gate, ruling together with Moses and the Levites, who served as courts of appeal. Irons argues:

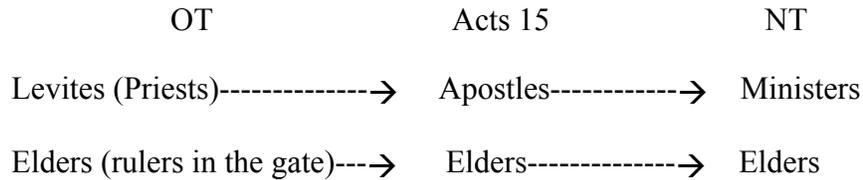
The case for the three-office view rests in large part on the office of elder as it is found in the Old Testament. The collective entity of leaders known as “the elders” (*hazzekenim*) is referred to more than 100 times in the OT and about 60 times in the NT (*hoi presbyteroi*). According to Holladay, in the OT it refers to “the totality of men (with full beard) of mature years with legal competence in a community.” As a collective unit in each village, the elders had governmental authority to rule and judicial power to function as judges in the community. The senior male heads of each household met at “the gate of the city” to deliberate in council regarding disputes that had arisen within the community (Gen. 23:10, 18; 34:20; Deut. 25:7; 2 Sam. 15:2–4; Job 29:7ff; Amos 5:10–15). For example, if a man married a woman and later thinks that she was not a virgin, then her parents are to bring the tokens of virginity “to the elders of the city at the gate” in order to refute the husband's allegations (Deut. 22: 15). The levirate marriage of Boaz and Ruth was a legal transaction that took place in the gate of the city in the presence of the elders (Ruth 4:1, 10–11). In fact, “the gate” functions as a court and is so translated by the New American Standard Bible. The gate becomes a virtual synonym for the session of elders: “Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land” (Prov. 32:23). It was the center of social, economic, civic, and judicial decision-making.

According to Numbers 11, however, the Israelite eldership was no mere sociological phenomenon but an institution of divine sanction that had ecclesiastical power as well. In response to Moses's complaint that the burden of single-handedly hearing all the judicial cases of the people was becoming unmanageable, the Lord said, “Gather for me seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and their officers and bring them to the tent of meeting” (v. 16). The Lord then took of the Spirit that was upon Moses and the Spirit on the seventy elders as well, who prophesied once but never thereafter (*sic*). The implications of this narrative are twofold. First, the eldership of Israel is of divine right—that is, it was sanctioned and authorized by divine revelation. It was not merely a human institution. This seems to be the over-riding point of the Numbers 11 etiology (i.e., a narrative explaining origins). Second, the elders were anointed by the Spirit to perform their task of judging cases, yet they only prophesied once.⁴

With respect to the New Testament, the Apostles, having replaced the Levites as teachers of the Law—whose office was rendered nugatory by the superior Melchizedekian priesthood of Jesus Christ of the tribe of Judah—are seen in the First Council (Acts 15) meeting together with the elders. After the canon is complete, there are no more Apostles, but there is an office that carries on the ordinary aspects of the apostolate (the extraordinary having ceased with the close of the canon)—the New Testament ministerium. The Apostles spun off diaconal duties and retained ministerial ones (the Word and prayer—Acts 6), including rule. The ministerium is the ordinary

⁴ Lee Irons, private paper formerly published but no longer available on the Internet. Citations omitted.

successor to the apostolate even as the lay eldership is retained from land and synagogue. One may schematize it this way:



Irons then takes up the question: Are all presbyters bishops? Certainly we must look here at 1 Timothy 3. Several positions have emerged: presbyters and bishops are the same, with both referring to pastors/preachers (Charles Hodge); presbyters can refer more broadly to lay elders as well as ministers, though bishop always refers to ministers (Calvin); in the apostolic church there were only elders “with the office of preacher being a superadded function [in post-Apostolic times] to the Presbyterate”⁵ (James Henley Thornwell); and presbyters and bishops both refer to elders and ministers alike (Thomas Witherow; Douglas Bannerman). The view that the minister and the ruling elder hold the same office (not simply that they share certain duties and not others) is a distinctly nineteenth-century Scottish and American innovation with respect to the recovered office view of the Reformation (the view that there are three, or four, offices: minister, doctor or teacher, ruling elder, and deacon).

The meaning of 1 Tim. 5:17 is also a component of this discussion. How one approaches this—and whether one hangs the whole of one’s office view on this verse—is key: all the views, save the consistent two-office view, have certain difficulties in interpreting this. Irons has an interesting proposal with respect to this verse, given its context of the care of the church for the aged: he thinks that this refers to superannuated ministers vis-à-vis those that continue active in service. No persuasive case has been made, in this writer’s estimation, that 1 Timothy 5:17 teaches a two-office view *simpliciter* and solves all the issues surrounding the two- vs. three-office debate. There remain considerable exegetical differences in interpreting this verse.

Church Order Considerations

In the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* of Calvin (1541), Calvin sees the “governors” as assistants to the minister and implies term limits for elders. His primary texts (though he does cite 1 Tim. 5:17) seem to be 1 Cor. 12:28 and Romans 12:8. The *First* (1560) and *Second* (1578) *Book of Discipline* in Scotland also address these questions. In the *First*, Knox and company use the term “seniors” rather than presbyters and limit the term to one year. The *Second*, drafted by Andrew Melville, is more mature: three-office and yet a higher view of the elder, including the view that the ruling elder is ordained to life-time service (one can have both a high view of the minister and the elder, protestations to the contrary notwithstanding).⁶

⁵ James Henley Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, vol. 4 (1875; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 119.

⁶ All references in this paragraph are from Lee Irons, private paper formerly published but no longer available on the Internet.

The *Westminster Form of Presbyterian Church-Government* (1645), part of the complex of documents comprising the work of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, makes the classic Calvinistic connection between the Levite of the Old Covenant and the minister of the New Covenant.

1. That the priests and Levites in the Jewish church were trusted with the public reading of the word is proved.
2. That the ministers of the gospel have as ample a charge and commission to dispense the word, as well as other ordinances, as the priests and Levites had under the law, proved, Isa. lxvi. 21. Matt. xxiii. 34. where our Saviour entitleth the officers of the New Testament, whom he will send forth, by the same names of the teachers of the Old.⁷

With respect to the ruling elder, Westminster refers to them as “other church governors” and says the following about them:

As there were in the Jewish church elders of the people joined with the priests and Levites in the government of the church; so Christ, who hath instituted government, and governors ecclesiastical in the church, hath furnished some in his church, beside the ministers of the word, with gifts for government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereunto, who are to join with the minister in the government of the church. Which officers reformed churches commonly call Elders.⁸

The view of the Westminster Assembly of Divines is classically three-office and well articulates the position of historic Presbyterianism.

The *Form of Government* for the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (2011 edition) in chapter 5 (“Offices in the Church”) sets forth three offices: “The ordinary and perpetual offices in the church are those given for the ministry of the Word of God, of rule, and of mercy. . . . Those who share in the rule of the church may be called elder. . . . Those who minister in mercy and service are called deacons. Those elders who have been endued and called of Christ to labor also in the Word and teaching are called ministers.”⁹ Chapters 6, 10, and 11 are, respectively, devoted to the offices of ministers, ruling elders, and deacons. Chapters 7–9 are devoted to several expressions of the ministerial office, notably those of evangelists (chapter 7), pastors (chapter 8) and teachers (chapter 9). Chapter 6 summarizes the duties of ministers as follows:

Every minister of the Word, or teaching elder, must manifest his gifts and calling in these various aspects of the ministry of the gospel and seek by full exercise of his ministry the spiritual profit of those with whom he labors. As a minister or servant of Christ it is his duty to feed the flock of God, to be an example to them, to have oversight of them, to bear the glad tidings of salvation to the ignorant and perishing and beseech them to be reconciled to

⁷ *The Confession of Faith* (Inverness: Free Presbyterian Publications), 399–400.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 402.

⁹ *Book of Church Order, Form of Government* 5.3 (2011), 8.

God through Christ, to exhort and convince the gainsayer by sound doctrine, and to dispense the sacraments instituted by Christ. Among those who minister the Word the Scripture distinguishes the evangelist, the pastor, and the teacher.¹⁰

It is true logically and inferentially that one is pushed either to episcopacy, on the one hand, or to congregationalism, on the other hand, in the rejection of the historic three-office position. If the minister and elder hold the same office, Hodge argues, this means that there is only one order of governors in the church—thus the leadership of the church is only clerical and does not properly include lay leadership, which is what the ruling elder is. The exclusion of lay leadership amounts to a practical episcopacy. Contrariwise, the genius of Presbyterianism in this regard involves the ruling elder (as representative of the congregation, as was the elder in the gate) joining with the minister in the joint rule of the church, a rule that is neither exclusively clerical nor exclusively congregational.

With respect to Reformed polity, over against Presbyterian polity, the shape of this discussion about the number of offices is somewhat different. Minister and elder in the continental schema came to be viewed as two different offices, with the ruling aspect separated from the pastoral one as if the office of minister does not entail the offices of ruling elder and deacon. In the Presbyterian view, the office of minister entails that of the elder and the deacon, even as the office of elder entails that of the deacon.

The Primacy of Preaching and the Place of the Preacher

As we address the question of the distinctness of the ministerial office, it is helpful to recognize that there is a distinct office of preacher because there is a distinct call to preach. Preaching, accompanied by the sacraments, is the central activity of the church in the gathering and perfecting of the saints. This carries on the ordinary aspect of the office of the apostles as they gave themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer. To be sure, the apostles delivered the Word of God in its inscripturated form as only the apostles and prophets could (Eph. 2:20): under the direct, immediate control of the Spirit of God—verbal, plenary inspiration. Being God-breathed, the Scripture was fully authoritative. Given its inspired and thus authoritative character it was infallible, inerrant, in a word—unique. We affirm the veracity (truthfulness), sufficiency (for doctrine and life), and perspicuity (clarity) of the Holy Bible.

The same Holy Spirit, who inspired the apostles and prophets—imbuing the Word with all of its marvelous attributes—has illumined the church through the ages to receive the inspired Word of God. The Spirit who gave the Word works in, with, and through the Word to apply to us all the benefits of the redemption purchased for us by our Lord Jesus Christ (WLC 154–155). And the chief way (WLC 155) that the Spirit makes use of the Word is through *its being preached*. For instance, Paul delivered the Word of the Lord to the Thessalonians in the power of the Holy Spirit, both as an inspired apostle *and* as a faithful preacher.

While many readers may assume that what the Thessalonians welcomed from Paul as the Word of God was the divinely inspired Word of an apostle, that does not seem the implication of 1 Thessalonians 2:13. To be sure, as an apostle Paul spoke, as noted, on

¹⁰ Ibid. 6.2, 9.

occasion, divinely-inspired Words. But not always. *More often than not he preached.* Certainly the vast majority of Paul's teaching is not inscripturated. As an apostle, Paul was also an evangelist, a pastor, an elder, and a deacon. Much of what he did in ministry is to be associated with the ordinary continuing offices that we find described first in the Old Testament in the Levitical priesthood and then as modified in the New Testament.

I take 1 Thessalonians 2:13 as referring to preaching: the Word of God which they heard from Paul, and which they welcomed/received as the Word of God, was the *preaching* of the Apostle Paul. The most significant commentators (both Luther and Calvin) regard this as referring to Paul's preaching. WLC 160 cites this as a proof text that we are "to receive the truth [preached] . . . as the Word of God." According to the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566,¹¹ there is a sense in which the "the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God." Thus all preachers who faithfully preach the Bible engage in the same sort of activity that Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 and for which reception as the Word of God Paul commends the Thessalonians.

A high view of preaching entails a high view of the office of preacher, which is to say, the minister of the Word and sacrament. Historically, there was in Protestantism a high view of the preaching office. Among the magisterial Reformers (Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Knox), the Protestant affirmation of "the priesthood of all believers" did not mean to them what it did to the Anabaptists and what it has also come to mean to many evangelicals: the leveling of all Christians and the assertion of the superfluity of special office in the church. The concept as adduced by the magisterial Reformers was anti-sacerdotal, not anti-office, even as *sola scriptura* meant that the Bible alone is God's Word not that the Bible only is to be consulted in our theological work (and creeds and confessions rejected).

Among the English and American Puritans there was also this conviction, what might be called a high view of the preaching office. The Westminster Assembly of Divines in its *Form of Presbyterial Church-Government*, as noted above, as well as in its *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* reflected such a high view of the preacher and his task (in its qualifications for preachers and in its description of preaching). The colonial New England parson, for instance, was looked to as the man in town to go to when seeking guidance, being, often, the only university trained man there. The witness of E. Brooks Holifield in *Theology in America*¹² to the place of pastor/theologians before the American Civil War is striking. There was a real appetite for serious theological teaching and preaching before the war, and it was met in the pulpits and in the writings of ministers in parish service. Unlike the years since the Civil War, those that preceded it enjoyed a higher view of the preacher and preaching. The theologian was not so much a "pure academic" as he was to become in the years following the war in which, having ravaged Germany and England, higher criticism finally took hold here. The "academic theologian" (if not the historian of religion) replaced the pastor as leading theological voice. But even more than this, the perceived need for any theological voice whatsoever faded.

¹¹ Jaraslov Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition: Reformation Era*, vol. 2. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 460.

¹² E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

What we have seen, beginning in the Enlightenment (which did not take its fuller effect in America until after the Civil War) and increasing in recent years, is a downgrade of the preaching office and of theological instruction in preaching (Bible reading becoming increasingly focused on reader-response and preaching becoming increasingly seeker-sensitive).

This downgrade was concomitant with the rise of the Intellectual, which occurred earlier in Europe than America. As McGrath notes in *The Twilight of Atheism*:

The emergence of the intellectual as a recognized social type is one of the most remarkable developments of recent centuries. Intellectuals became a secular priesthood, unfettered by the dogmas of the religious past, addressing a growing audience who were becoming increasingly impatient with the moral failures and cultural unsophistication of their clergy. At some point, perhaps one that can never be determined with historical accuracy, Western society came to believe that it should look elsewhere than to its clergy for guidance. Instead, they turned to the intellectuals, who were able to portray their clerical opponents as lazy fools who could do no more than unthinkingly repeat the slogans and nostrums of an increasingly distant past. A new future lay ahead, and society needed brave new thinkers to lead them to its lush Promethean pastures.¹³

The modernism that developed after the Enlightenment witnessed the enthroning of naturalism and the secularization of the sciences; the post-modernism that arose in the wake of the evident failures of modernism saw the rejection of propositional truth and the embracing of epistemic skepticism. Both of these post-Enlightenment developments meant further marginalization of the office of minister and the replacement of that office with the scientist or therapist or spiritualist, with the laboratory and the couch shoving aside the pulpit. The response of the church and the ministry has varied, ranging from a call to return to pre-modernism, the re-embrace of rationalism, to the embrace of post-modernism in movements like the Emergent Church. What is needed, I believe, is a recovery of preaching and thus of the office of preacher.

The democratization of American religion would seek to separate the two questions, with some agreeing that preaching is the need of the hour but arguing that any committed Christian is called to and competent for such a task. Such a denial of the preaching office can be seen in a measure to flow out of both Great Awakenings but far more out of the Second, which denied man's inability and thus had an across the board effect of wiping out distinctions. Jacksonian democracy, Restorationism, and the whole American ethos of self-reliance contributed to what is sown after the Civil War when the office of preacher is low-rated. It is not only the Intellectual and the expert (the scientist, philosopher, psychiatrist, etc.) who shove aside the minister, it is also, on the other end of the spectrum, the anti-Intellectual who senses no need for the minister in the grip of a "Jesus, my Bible, and me" mentality.

The needed recovery of preachers and preaching will not come about through manipulative techniques (drama in worship, musical productions, etc.). It will only come

¹³ Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (New York: Random House, 2004), 49.

about through the Church recognizing men who fit the bill of 1 Timothy 3, of giving such men solid theological training, and of placing such men in office, willing to receive with meekness and joy the Word of God from their lips. The cure for our spiritual ills can never be anything other than what God himself has prescribed. If our post-modern situation is rightly understood we have come full circle, in our neo-paganism, back to the pre-modern paganism of Paul's world, the world of Acts 17, to which world the Apostles, and those who followed them in the ministerial office, preached.

Preaching is not, as some post-modernists have claimed, passé, but as relevant as ever, particularly in a post-Christian world that has come more to resemble Paul's world than that of Christendom. The call to preach the gospel is a distinct call to which one is to give one's life, and it is a call that still goes out. We need to recover a high biblical Presbyterian view of both the office of preacher and the central activity to which that office is given: the preaching of the Word of the Lord, which God is pleased to use to gather and perfect the church, through the lips of those called to preach the gospel.

Alan D. Strange *is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, serving as associate professor of church history and theological librarian at Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana, and is associate pastor of New Covenant Community Church (OPC) in New Lenox, Illinois.*

Servant Word

The Necessity of Preaching in the Modern World, part 3¹

by Robert Letham

PREACHING AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Reformed confessions uniformly witness to the inseparability of Word and Spirit in all the means of grace, preaching included. This is directly counter to the Anabaptist separation of the two, a view that is rife in the wider evangelical world, particularly in the revivalist camp. It also stands in clear distinction from a purely instrumentalist view of preaching, often associated with Lutheranism and some contemporary branches of evangelical Anglicanism. Whereas the Anabaptists and revivalists tend to focus on the distinction between Word and Spirit at the expense of their inseparability, the Lutheran idea stresses that they are inseparable but tends to minimize their distinctness.

Here *The Westminster Larger Catechism* (1648) is of great help.

Q.155. How is the Word made effectual to salvation? A. The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially 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.

Q.158. By whom is the word of God to be preached? A. The word of God is to be preached only by such as are sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to that office.

Q.159. How is the word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto? A. They that are called to labour in the ministry of the word, are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully . . . wisely . . . zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people.

According to the Catechism, the demonstration of the Spirit and of power is evidenced by the faithful preaching of sound doctrine, wisdom, zeal and—above all—fervent love. Preaching is an effectual means of grace. The diligent and faithful preaching is the instrumental cause, while the Holy Spirit is the efficient cause. The two together are indispensable. The Word without the Spirit is ineffective, the Spirit without the Word is inaudible. The Spirit is the author of Scripture and continues to speak in it today (cf. Heb. 3:7, WCF 1:4, 10). The Word and the Spirit go together for that reason. However, the

¹ Adapted from a lecture given at the International Conference of Reformed Churches, Cardiff, August 2013.

Spirit is sovereign and free to work as he wills. Moreover, the Word itself—whether as the text of Scripture or as the message proclaimed by the preacher—does not have power of itself.

In this, there is a contrast with the idea that the Word works grace invariably unless it is resisted, the position associated with Lutheranism. The *Augsburg Confession* (1530) 5 states that “by the Word and sacraments, as by instruments, the Holy Spirit is given: who worketh faith, where and when it pleaseth God, in those that hear the Gospel”² going on in the same article to condemn the Anabaptists “who imagine that the Holy Spirit is given to men without the outward word.” This view of the Word as the instrument of the Spirit has commonly been connected with Lutheran sacramental theology, in which grace is given objectively and is efficacious unless there is resistance. It seems to some that this minimizes the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is held to work through the Word, rather than with the Word.

The Anabaptist and Revivalist Theology of Preaching Is to Be Rejected

The Lutheran *Augsburg Confession* (1530) 5, strongly opposes the Anabaptists “who imagine that the Holy Spirit is given to men without the outward word.”³ Theirs was a radical separation of the Spirit from the Word of God, and was adopted in order to justify claims of special extra-biblical prophetic inspiration. In more recent times, under the impact of the revivals of the eighteenth century, a doctrine of preaching has arisen, exemplified by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones,⁴ stressing the sovereign freedom of the Holy Spirit. In support of this approach to preaching, the prominent British evangelical Stuart Olyott argues that the preaching of the gospel is often powerless, urging the faithful to “strive and agonise and prevail in prayer,” to “storm the throne of grace, determined that by sheer importunity they will persuade God to accompany the word to be preached.”⁵

Lloyd-Jones makes a contrast between what he describes as “an ordinary ministry” and one characterized by an exceptional outpouring of the Spirit resulting in mass conversions and a transformation of the church. He provides a number of examples from the Welsh revivals. In each case the basis is an experience. In the story of David Morgan, it started with a certain Humphrey Jones who had a great experience of revival in the USA “who said to himself, ‘I wish my people at home could experience this.’” So he returned to Wales “and began to tell the people of his home country about what he had seen and experienced.”⁶ One night Morgan heard Jones preach “with exceptional power” and became “profoundly affected.” He went to bed that night as David Morgan and awoke “feeling like a lion.” Previously “just an ordinary preacher” he began to preach with such power that “people were convicted and converted in large numbers.”⁷ One day some time later he went to bed feeling like a lion but awoke as David Morgan once more,

² Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:10.

³ *Ibid.*, 3:10.

⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971).

⁵ Stuart Olyott, “Where Luther Got It Wrong—and Why We Need to Know About It,” *The Banner of Truth* 555 (December 2009): 27. See in reply, George M. Ella, “Where Olyott Got It Wrong,” *Biographia Evangelica*, n.d., <http://www.evangelica.de/articles/where-olyott-got-it-wrong/> (accessed 21 December 2012); *idem*, “Where Luther Puts Olyott Right,” *Biographia Evangelica*, n.d., <http://www.evangelica.de/articles/where-luther-puts-olyott-right/> (accessed 21 December 2012).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁷ *Ibid.*

and thereafter “exercised a most ordinary ministry.”⁸

This school of thought was influenced by the Welsh revivals. These brought large scale additions to the church but left in their wake an emotionalism that has proved an inoculation against biblical Christianity. Wales is now the most resistant area of the United Kingdom to the gospel. In the recent UK census it led the country in the proportion of avowed atheists and pagans. It has the lowest percentage of church attendance in the UK. A similar scenario is evident in the USA, where New England and upstate New York, where revivals aplenty occurred, are the hardest areas to reach with the gospel. There can be no denying that remarkable things happened at those times. However, the point I am making is that *Lloyd-Jones to a certain extent constructs his theology of preaching around these experiences* and, in so doing, distorts the picture presented in the Bible and unwittingly and certainly unintentionally undermines the regular use of the means of grace.⁹

A popular proof-text used by this school of thought as determinative is 1 Thessalonians 1:5, “Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but in power and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance.” This is used in order to assert that the preaching of the Word may be unaccompanied by the Spirit and so, as Olyott argues, preacher and congregation are to pray earnestly, persistently, and importunately for the Spirit “to visit” the preaching. However, in saying that his preaching at Thessalonica was accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul hardly implies that on other occasions this was not so. Rather, he is drawing attention to the grounds for the Thessalonians’ assurance, remembering that they were subject to outbursts of persecution (Acts 17:1–9, 1 Thess. 2:13, 2 Thess. 1:1–12). This persecution came from Jewish sources; it is probable that he is contrasting the Spirit’s power in gospel preaching with the empty words of the synagogue. In the similar passage in 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5, it is obvious that there he contrasts his preaching with the Greek hankering for rhetoric. In both cases, “word only” and reliance on “human wisdom” refer to pagan or Jewish sources, not to Christian preaching. While it would be seriously and obviously wrong to argue against prayer for the ministry of the Word, it is untenable to base a strategic doctrine on a particular, debatable interpretation of an individual clause.

While advocates of this approach to preaching have strongly resisted Barth’s theology of Scripture, their view of preaching appears to have succumbed to a similar dynamic. For Barth, revelation was an act of God, unpredictable and outside our control, to which the Bible bears witness in a human way—and therefore in principle fallibly. For Lloyd-Jones preaching was second rate and ordinary if it was unaccompanied by what he considered to be “the Holy Spirit and power.” In short, according to this line of thought, true preaching occurs when the Spirit comes in power, an event outside our control, one which we are to seek and for which we are to pray, an event that will probably transform the preacher so that he feels like a lion, but an experience that may equally suddenly and inexplicably be withdrawn. As with Barth, where God can make the Scriptures be the Word of God in this or that circumstance, so with Lloyd-Jones, God can give a quantum

⁸ Ibid., 323.

⁹ Perhaps this is connected with the fact that, in his fifty years of public ministry, Lloyd-Jones only referred to the sacraments on one occasion, and that in a Friday evening lecture and not in a regular service of the church. Such an omission is both astonishing and deeply disturbing. See Iain H. Murray, *David Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith, 1939–1981* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 790.

boost to preaching on occasions entirely at his free and sovereign determination. Ordinary preaching may bear little fruit; when these visitations of the Holy Spirit come, transformation occurs. These visitations are to be sought, and for the experience the preacher is to pray. Indeed, many in this camp refer to the Spirit as a “visitor.” That this is an erroneous view of preaching—one that has caused many a preacher and pastor to be overburdened with disappointment that their ministries have been substandard—should be clear. It entails an erroneous doctrine of the Holy Spirit, with far-reaching consequences for trinitarian theology.

So we do not seek an experience, for nowhere are we encouraged to do so. Instead, as heralds of good news, as stewards of the mysteries of God, we aim to declare the message God has given and to await those words that mean more than any other: “Well done, good and faithful servant.” The idea of the revivalist school that, without revivals, we are living in the day of small things is in error, for the day of small things ended at the ascension of Jesus Christ to the right hand of the Father. We should not talk disparagingly of “an ordinary ministry,” for no faithful ministry since the ascension is ordinary, let alone “most ordinary.” How can the ministry of the Word of God ever be “ordinary”? How can a preacher, lawfully called, expounding and speaking the Word of the risen Christ ever consider himself about regular, humdrum business? Lloyd-Jones, in using language such as that, adopted criteria at odds with the reality of the age in which we live. Even those bearing little apparent fruit are part of a vast scenario that God is working together to accomplish ends way beyond our wildest comprehension. We do not do this for “when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is preached, and received of the faithful (*credimus ipsum Dei verbum annunciari et a fidelibus recipi*).”¹⁰

So for the Reformed, the Spirit and the Word are distinct but inseparable. Lutheranism stresses the inseparability at the expense of the distinction. The Anabaptists and revivalists stress the distinctness at the expense of the inseparability. The Anabaptists stress statements like John 6:63a, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all,” referring to the Word as a dead letter, while ignoring the remainder of the verse, “The words that I have spoken to you are Spirit and life.” The revivalists for their part consider it not only possible but frequent that the Word is unaccompanied by the Spirit.

This stems from the insistence that the Word is not divine and is less than the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the Spirit is free not only to leave the Word unaccompanied by his presence and power but also to work entirely independently of the Word. While it is true that the written and preached Word are not hypostatized, and so must be understood as under the living Word, yet to make such a distinction as Hywel Jones does, that “the Holy Spirit is ‘greater’ than the Word and must not be imprisoned in it,” leaves the door open to some grave consequences.¹¹ We must assert that God’s Word carries the authority of God himself and cannot be detached from him. According to Scripture, the Word of God shares in all the works of God; it creates (Gen. 1:3, Ps. 33:6, 9, Heb. 11:3), maintains the universe (Heb. 1:3), brings about regeneration (John 5:24–25, Rom. 10:17, 1 Pet. 1:23), is Spirit and life (John 6:63), raises the dead (John 5:28–29), and will not pass away (Matt. 24:35). As Jesus said, “whoever is ashamed of me *and of my words*, of him will the Son

¹⁰ Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:237, 832.

¹¹ Hywel R. Jones, “Preaching the Word in the Power of the Holy Spirit,” *Foundations* 60 (2011): 84. To be fair, Jones does not go through this door, nor approach it himself.

of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father” (Luke 9:26).

We must affirm that the New Testament attributes efficacy to the Word (Rom. 10:17, 1 Pet. 1:18, James 1:23, John 5:25). This is due to its being the Word of the Holy Spirit, the Word of Christ, the Living Word. The Spirit who breathed out the words of Scripture, accompanies the reading and proclamation of those words. He and his words are inseparable. “Faith comes by hearing, *and hearing by the word of Christ*” (Rom. 10:17). The Spirit uses means; to write critically, as Olyott does, of “mediate regeneration” is at best misleading.¹² The Spirit does not speak, only to wander off and leave his ambassadors in the lurch. Nor does he speak in disjunction from the Word he has already and definitively spoken.

There is a close connection with the sacraments. The sacraments in themselves have no efficacy, for it is the Holy Spirit who makes them effective for the elect (WCF 27.3, 28.6, 29.7; WLC 155, 161). In this, the difference with Lutheranism is clear. However, the Spirit works in and through the sacraments so that the faithful feed on Christ in the eucharist; this is no evanescent or unpredictable matter. We should never come to the Lord’s Supper *pleading* with God to make them effectual, as if this is uncertain or unpredictable, assuming that we must “storm the gates of heaven” or else this will not be so. That is dangerously close to Pelagianism. Quite the contrary, we believe and trust that God is true to his Word. In line with the classic prayers of the Bible, we pray on the basis of God’s covenant promises. We know that he is reliable. He is our Father and we are his sons.¹³ Here the clear blue water separating the Reformed from the Anabaptists and their successors is seen vividly. In both Word and sacrament human actions and divine grace—or judgment—go together. So inseparable is the Spirit from the Word that the attributes of the one can be applied to the other.¹⁴

Expectations for Preaching

As a result we can *expect* the blessing of God upon the preaching of his Word. This is not presumption. It is simply faith, confidence that what he has promised he performs, and will continue to perform. This blessing can cut both ways; in some instances it is a form of judgment. As Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 2:1–16, “Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance of death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?”

Hughes cites Calvin to the effect that the gospel is never preached in vain, but is effectual, leading either to life or to death.¹⁵ Indeed, Calvin states that “wherever there is pure and unfeigned preaching of the gospel, there this strong savour that Paul mentions [in 2 Corinthians 2:15–16] will be found . . . not only when they quicken souls by the fragrance of salvation but also when they bring death to unbelievers.”¹⁶ Hodge comments,

¹² Olyott, “Luther.”

¹³ *Contra* Olyott, “Luther.”

¹⁴ Behind this lies the classic doctrine of the inseparable operations of the persons of the Trinity, grounded on their indivisibility in the one *ousia* of God. To posit separability in preaching is to threaten Trinitarian doctrine.

¹⁵ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians: The English Text, with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1961), 80.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries: Commentary on the Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the*

“The word of God is quick and powerful either to save or to destroy. It cannot be neutral. If it does not save, it destroys.”¹⁷ Elsewhere I have written that preaching has a two-fold cutting edge, bringing life and death wherever it goes.¹⁸ It is best to say, with Strange, that the Holy Spirit makes the Word efficacious to different people in different ways at different times, according to his sovereign will.¹⁹

Certainly, the preachers of the gospel are called and required to exemplify in their lives the work of the Spirit and to be examples to the flock (1 Tim. 3:1–7, 4:16; 2 Tim. 2:1–26; 1 Pet. 5:1–4). That should be self-evident. But the Reformed confessions are clear that the efficacy of Word and sacrament does not depend on the piety and godliness of the ones who administer them (WCF 27.3, WLC 161). If that were so, the church would be hostage to the daily uncertainties of individuals’ lives. Rather, their efficacy depends on the one who has established them, Christ to whom they inextricably point, and to the Holy Spirit who works through them. Can anything more secure be found? Against this, Hywel Jones’s claim that “no one who is in pastoral ministry has any grounds for thinking that his congregation will rise any higher than himself” is spurious.²⁰ Jones’s own concern for the freedom of the Spirit should expose the assertion as false; if it were true the Spirit’s freedom would be limited.

For the congregation, receiving the Word as blessing rather than as judgment is connected to a considerable degree to the extent to which its members have prepared themselves to hear it. In an age of egalitarianism it is quite common for professing believers to exhibit a critical attitude to anything that remotely resembles authoritative speech.²¹ The *Westminster Larger Catechism* 160 addresses this matter.

We recall that all creation was brought into existence by the Word of God (Heb. 11:3, John 1:1–3), and continues to be sustained and directed towards its ultimate destiny by the powerful Word of God’s Son (Heb. 1:3, Col.1:18). As Athanasius said, God arranged it so that the redemption of the world is by means of the same Word who made it in the beginning.²² It follows that categorizing the regular ministry of the Word as “ordinary” is literally beyond belief.

HOW SIGNIFICANT IS THE PREACHING OF THE WORD?

Is preaching a matter of life and death? No, it’s much more important than that.²³ Preaching concerns not only this life but eternity. It points to the chief purpose of human existence (WSC 1). It relates to the glory of God. It is not only anthropological in scope but ecclesiological and above all theological. It points forward to the cosmic panorama of the redeemed universe. Hence, Jeremiah’s profound turmoil when, for a time, he refrained from declaring the Word of the Lord to Judah (Jer. 20:7–9). So too, Paul

Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon (David W. Torrance, Thomas Torrance, eds. T. A. Smail, translator; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 34.

¹⁷ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Banner of Truth, 1959), 46.

¹⁸ Letham, “Preaching,” 24–26.

¹⁹ Strange, “The Centrality of Preaching,” 199.

²⁰ Jones, “Preaching,” 85.

²¹ Strange, “The Centrality of Preaching,” 228–31.

²² Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 1.

²³ This is to adapt a famous comment by Bill Shankly, manager of Liverpool FC from 1959–74, about the importance of football.

records in words that should resonate deep in the conscience of every preacher, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16).

As such, anything that diverts the attention of the hearers from the Word of God is counter to the nature and intent of preaching. Into this category come the kind of sermons that begin with a tale about the preacher’s family and their recent activities under the mistaken impression that this builds a bridge with the congregation by demonstrating that the preacher is “a regular guy,” “a buddy.” It should follow from the nature of church proclamation that the proclaimer is there to witness to Christ, not himself—“We preach not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Cor.4:5)—and by intruding personal anecdotes he is implicitly affirming that his own activities are of greater importance. In turn, the message God has called him to declare is, by implication, not so urgent after all.

So Paul’s final, parting charge to his protégé Timothy, the charge that was most vital for him and all his successors—preach the Word, in season and out of season, when it seems productive and when it meets resistance, indifference, or hostility. Whatever the circumstances, preach the Word!

For as the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa. 55:10–11)

For no Word of God will be powerless. (Luke 1:37, my translation)
In the words of Michael Horton, “though seemingly powerless and ineffective, the creaturely mediation of his Word through faltering human lips is the most powerful thing on earth.”²⁴

Disposer supreme, and judge of the earth;
who chooseth for thine the weak and the poor;
to frail earthen vessels, and things of no worth,
entrusting thy riches which ay shall endure.

Their sound goeth forth, ‘Christ Jesus is Lord!’
then Satan doth fear, his citadels fall:
as when the dread trumpets went forth at thy word,
and one long blast shattered the Canaanites’ wall.

*J.B. de Santeuil, 1630–97.*²⁵

Robert Letham, *a minister in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of England and Wales, teaches Systematic and Historical Theology at Wales Evangelical School of Theology, Bridgend, Wales.*

²⁴ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 761.

²⁵ *The English Hymnal*, ed. Ralph Vaughan Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), hymn 178.

ServantReading

Preaching Christ from Daniel

by David A. Booth

Preaching Christ from Daniel: Foundations for Expository Sermons, by Sidney Greidanus. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012, xv + 440 pages, \$34.00.

Preaching which exalts Christ is vital for the well being of the church and is an essential element in carrying out the Great Commission. Faithful preaching that consistently engages our congregations with the central message of Scripture is also demanding. Even the best preachers sometimes flop, and every preacher needs all the help he can get in this sacred task. We have been blessed with several excellent books on preaching over the past few decades that tell us how to better engage in this work. With the *Foundations for Expository Sermons* series, Professor Greidanus moves beyond telling to showing us how it is done. We couldn't ask for a better guide on this journey.

Preaching Christ from Daniel opens with an introductory chapter on "Issues in Preaching Christ from Daniel," which includes a brief discussion of authorship, the original audience, the unity and rhetorical structure of Daniel, and the purpose of this prophetic book taken as a whole. All of the introductory materials are conservative and traditional. The heart of the book consists of eleven chapters corresponding to the literary divisions that Greidanus finds in Daniel. Each chapter contains a rudimentary exegesis of the passage, a discussion of the pericope's literary features and plot line, as well as chapter-specific items such as the nature of apocalyptic literature, New Testament references, and character description. Greidanus then identifies what this passage teaches about God (the theocentric theme), along with themes which are specific to the passage under consideration. The chapter then moves to discussing how to faithfully preach Christ from this passage. Instead of simply showing one way of preaching Christ from each passage, Greidanus explores different ways of preaching Christ from each particular text before explaining why he chooses one or more for his exposition. Preachers will appreciate the nuance and care that Greidanus demonstrates in approaching this task. Rather than trying to pick Christ-centered themes like rabbits out of a magician's hat, Greidanus seeks to show that these themes develop organically from rightly understanding each portion of Daniel in its original context. Every chapter concludes with a sample exposition of the passage that is being examined.

There are many things to commend in this work. All preachers will benefit from seeing an expert on homiletics attempting to put his theory into practice as they re-think their own approach to crafting a sermon. The text is particularly strong in analyzing the plot line and literary features of a passage in a manner that is superior to most technical commentaries on *Daniel*. Inexperienced preachers will also benefit from the examples Greidanus gives on how not to preach a passage. Learning to avoid just one of these common mistakes is worth the time and effort of working through this volume.

Paradoxically, even the most obvious weakness of the book may actually provide significant benefit to the working preacher. Professor Greidanus is so committed to preaching entire literary units that he occasionally chooses impossibly long passages to preach. For example, Greidanus attempts to treat Daniel 10:1–12:4 in a single sermon. Few, if any, congregations can keep that large a section of Daniel in mind during the sermon. Using such an approach means that the preacher will not have time to refute faulty interpretations of these chapters, which many members of our congregations are likely to have been exposed to. Furthermore, several of the divisions which Professor Greidanus has made contain so many verses that the resulting expositions tend toward being extended paraphrases of the passage, lacking in specific, concrete application to his hearers. Most experienced preachers will recognize that developing smaller portions of the text more fully would provide a greater blessing to their congregations. This shortcoming in the book is a useful reminder that those Christ sends out as heralds must be more zealous to communicate and apply the King's message to his people than they are for any particular theory of homiletics.

This fine work will be far more useful to those who work through it while preaching through *Daniel* than to those who read it as a standalone work. In addition to this volume on *Daniel*, Professor Greidanus has also blessed the church with similar volumes on *Genesis* and *Ecclesiastes*. I highly recommend that the next time you preach through one of these books you take along the corresponding work by Professor Greidanus as your companion and guide.

David A. Booth is an Orthodox Presbyterian minister serving as pastor of Merrimack Valley Presbyterian Church in North Andover, Massachusetts.

ServantHumor

Looking for Islam's Luthers

by Eutyclus II

“Looking for Islam’s Luthers” was the title of Nicholas D. Kristof’s *New York Times* column a few years ago. He argued that the rigidity, oppression, and violence of Islamic fundamentalism cry out for a Reformation, and all that is waiting is a Muslim Martin Luther to light the fire: “The twenty-first century may become to Islam what the sixteenth was to Christianity, for even in hard-line states like Iran you meet Martin Luthers who are pushing for an Islamic Reformation.”¹

Kristof was not the first *Times* columnist to draw an analogy between the state of militant Islam with the medieval Roman Catholic church. Shortly after 9/11, Thomas Friedman predicted in the *Times* (prematurely, it now appears) that a “drive for an Islamic reformation” was at work in Iran.²

According to other voices in the media, Luther has already arrived. Although Mustafa Kemal Ataturk formally disavowed the title, that did not dissuade others from pinning the label on him back in 1923 when he established the secular republic of Turkey. In 2002, Hashem Aghajari pleaded for an “Islamic Protestantism” which he defined as “a rational, scientific, humanistic Islam. It is a thoughtful and intellectual Islam, an open-minded Islam.”³ Aghajari, a wounded war hero from the Iran-Iraq war, was rewarded by being sentenced to death in the Islamic Republic of Iran for apostasy. (His sentence was later commuted, and he was released from prison in 2004.)

But no one has been bestowed the label as often as Tariq Ramadan, the Swiss Muslim who has authored the recent *To Be a European Muslim*. Ramadan often waxes Lutheresque in reflecting on Swiss politics, arguing, in effect, that he would rather be ruled by a wise Christian than a foolish Turk.

Of course, these sightings stop at vague resemblance to the sixteenth-century Reformer. As Luther himself watched Suleiman the Magnificent gathering Ottoman forces on the doorstep of Vienna, his views on Islam were vocal and decidedly unecumenical. Indeed, the original version of his popular hymn “Lord Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word” contained the petition, “Restrain the murderous Pope and Turk.” Instead, the *Times* and other voices have a greater yearn for a Muslim secularist. What is really needed is someone courageous enough to dismiss the Qur’an as unscientific silliness out of touch with Enlightenment values. It is not the sixteenth century we want to invoke, but

¹ Nicholas D. Kristof, “Looking for Islam’s Luthers,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/15/opinion/15kristof.html>.

² Thomas L. Friedman, “An Islamic Reformation,” *New York Times*, December 4, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/04/opinion/an-islamic-reformation.html>.

³ Quoted in *An Islamic Reformation*, Charles Kurzman and Michaelle Browers, eds. (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2004), 1.

the humanism of our more progressive times. Simply put, can Islam come to terms with modernity?

If the Luther metaphor is a Protestant version of early modern history, it should come as no surprise that other pundits find analogies in other quarters of Christendom. *National Review* columnist Jonah Goldberg writes, “What the Muslim world needs is a pope. Large, old institutions such as the Catholic Church have the ‘worldliness’ to value flexibility and tolerance, and the moral and theological authority to clamp down on those who see compromise as heresy.”⁴ This suggestion has yet to gain traction within the editorial department of the *Times*.

Skeptics will counter that the desperate search for the elusive Muslim moderate is a feature of western naiveté that is at least three decades old now. I don’t pretend to have the foreign policy expertise to assess that claim. But what fascinates is the frequent allusion to Luther. And it leads me to wonder, can Calvinists join this discussion? That would at first seem implausible. The grim-faced theocrat of Geneva does not work as a convenient metaphor for the secular Western press. And remember that H. L. Mencken, in his deeply appreciative obituary for J. Gresham Machen, referred to Machen as a “follower of the Genevan Muhammad.”

Still, there is an “Islamic Calvinism” at work in the Muslim world. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan may not be Islam’s Calvin, but James Bratt ends his biography of Abraham Kuyper with the provocative suggestion that a form of Kuyperianism is taking root in Turkey of all places, as Erdogan combines strong Muslim roots with “the separation of mosque and state.” His economic and diplomatic success “redounds to the nation’s well-being, just as Kuyper proposed for Calvinism in the Netherlands.”⁵

While the West remains mired in economic stagnation, Istanbul’s economy is booming, and some have attributed its success to an emerging “Islamic Calvinism.” Just as sober, hard working Calvinists eschewing ostentatious displays of wealth prompted the revolutionary spirit of Geneva, a similar “Puritan work ethic” is at work in Istanbul and other booming metropolises in Turkey.

The prospects of political and economic freedom in the Muslim world don’t mean we should expect to see the Hagia Sophia restored as a place of Christian worship. Still, maybe these Reformation yearnings and alleged sightings, however desperate and far-fetched they may seem, are useful at least as reminders that a two-kingdom social theory may not be such a bad thing after all. Dare we confine it to the Muslim world?

⁴ Jonah Goldberg, “Now What? Islam Needs a Central Authority—Such as a Pontiff,” *USA Today*, April 2, 2011, 23A.

⁵ James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 382.

ServantPoetry

George Herbert (1593-1633)

Christmas

After all pleasures as I rid one day,
My horse and I, both tired, body and mind,
With full cry of affections, quite astray;
I took up the next inn I could find.

There when I came, whom found I but my dear,
My dearest Lord, expecting till the grief
Of pleasures brought me to Him, ready there
To be all passengers' most sweet relief?

Oh Thou, whose glorious, yet contracted light,
Wrapt in night's mantle, stole into a manger;
Since my dark soul and brutish is Thy right,
To man of all beasts be not Thou a stranger:

Furnish and deck my soul, that Thou mayst have
A better lodging, than a rack, or grave.

The shepherds sing; and shall I silent be?
My God, no hymn for Thee?
My soul's a shepherd too; a flock it feeds
Of thoughts, and words, and deeds.
The pasture is Thy word: the streams, Thy grace
Enriching all the place.
Shepherd and flock shall sing, and all my powers
Outsing the daylight hours.
Then will we chide the sun for letting night
Take up his place and right:
We sing one common Lord; wherefore he should
Himself the candle hold.
I will go searching, till I find a sun
Shall stay, till we have done;
A willing shiner, that shall shine as gladly,
As frost-nipped suns look sadly.
Then will we sing, and shine all our own day,
And one another pay:
His beams shall cheer my breast, and both so twine,
Till ev'n His beams sing, and my music shine.