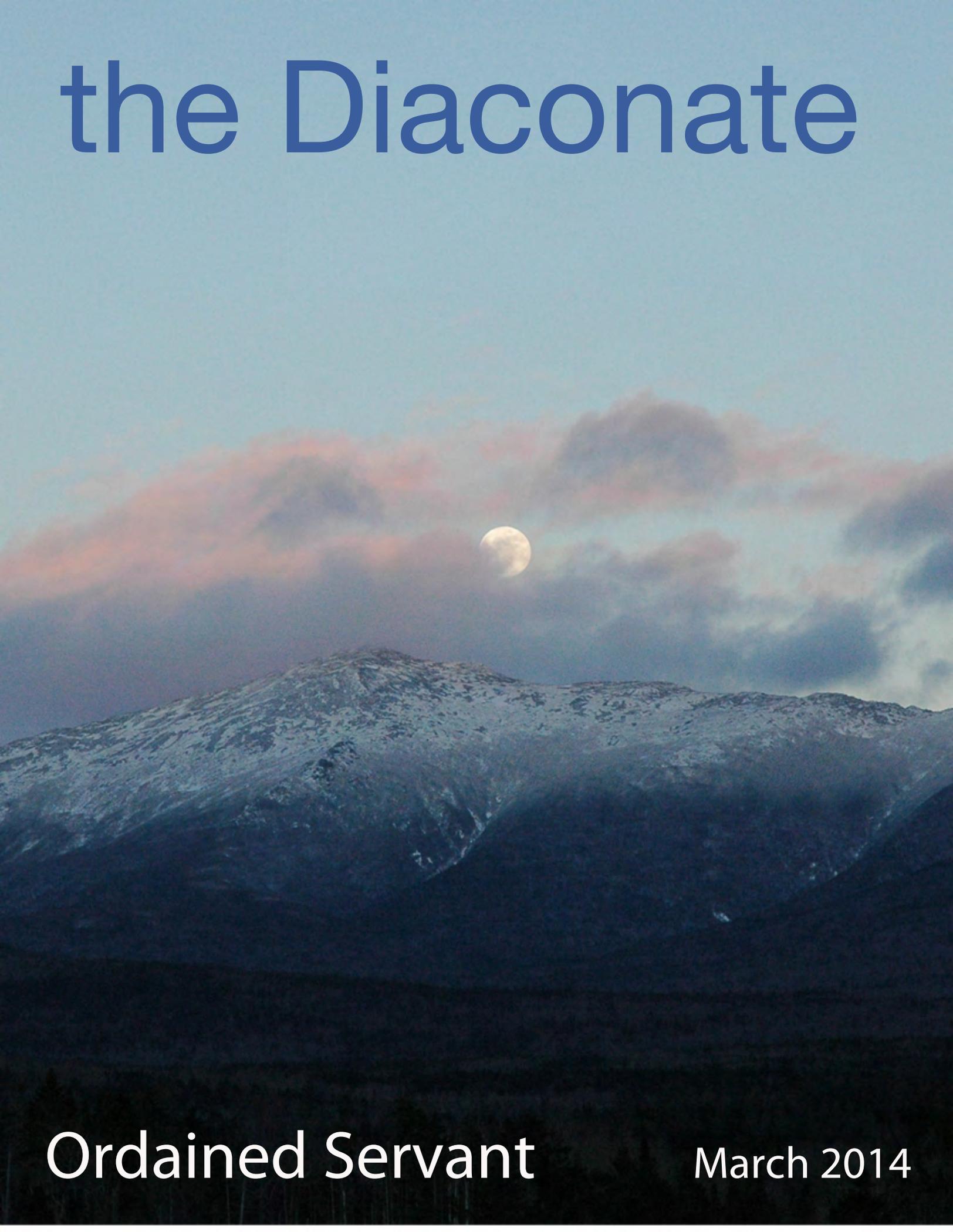


# the Diaconate

A photograph of a snow-capped mountain range under a twilight sky with a full moon and colorful clouds. The mountains are dark with patches of white snow. The sky is a mix of blue, purple, and pink, with a full moon visible in the center. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

Ordained Servant

March 2014

# *Ordained Servant Online*

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### **CURRENT ISSUE: THE REFORMED DIACONATE**

**March 2014**

### *From the Editor*

Deacons are a vital part of the leadership in Reformed churches. Theirs is an entirely spiritual ministry, as they free up the minister of the Word to pay attention to preaching and prayer, as they liberate the session to shepherd the flock, as they teach biblical stewardship, and as they administer care to the needy as a demonstration of the compassion of our resurrected Savior. “Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul” (3 John 2).

This month Nathan Trice “seeks to refresh the perspectives of deacons regarding the true significance of their office as the Lord of the church has designed it,” in his article, “If You Are a Deacon.”

An often forgotten element in the ordination of deacons, as well as ministers and elders, is the place of fasting in preparation for this solemn event. In describing the service of ordination, our Form of Government (23.7) says, “It is also recommended that a day of prayer and fasting be observed in the congregation previous to the day of ordination.” Our Directory for Worship devotes four paragraphs to “Prayer and Fasting” (5.A). The connection between fasting and ordination is exemplified in Scripture in the sending of Barnabas and Paul by the church in Pisidian Antioch:

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:2–3)

Later on their first missionary journey, ordinary church officers are ordained in Asia Minor, “And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23).

Deacon Hugh Lynn reflects on the significance of fasting in connection with his own ordination to the diaconate in his article, “On Fasting, Death, and Joy: Reflections on My Upcoming Ordination.”

Dennis Johnson gives us the third of a four-part review of Hughes Oliphant Old’s *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*. Volume six, the largest of the seven-volume set, covers “the period extending from the late eighteenth century through the mid-twentieth.”

Meredith M. Kline, who has recently been awarded the ThD from Reformed Seminary Aix-en-Provence by defending his dissertation on Ecclesiastes, reviews Peter Enns's commentary on Ecclesiastes in a review article, "A Conflicted Qohelet."

Bruce and Sue Hollister review Barbara Duguid's *Extravagant Grace*.

Finally, George Herbert writes of the profundity of the office of minister in his poem "The Priesthood." He is amazed that vessels of dust should bear God's holy Word. Also of interest is the poem (not published here) of the prolific, New England Puritan minister Edward Taylor (1642–1729), "The Martyrdom of Deacon Laurence."

Blessings in the Lamb,  
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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## FROM THE ARCHIVES "DEACONS"

[http://opc.org/OS/pdf/Subject\\_Index\\_Vol\\_1-20.pdf](http://opc.org/OS/pdf/Subject_Index_Vol_1-20.pdf)

- "Are Deacons Members of the Session?" (R. Dean Anderson, Jr.) 2:4 (Oct. 1993): 75–78.
- "Balancing Sensitivity and Stewardship in Diaconal Assistance." (the deacons of Franklin Square OPC) 7:3 (Jul. 1998): 67.
- "The Biblical Foundation of the Diaconate." (George W. Knight III) 5:3 (Jul. 1996): 66–68.

- “Biblical Qualifications for Deacons, Part 1.” (Archibald Alexander Allison) 6:1 (Jan. 1997): 4–9.
- “Biblical Qualifications for Deacons, Part 2.” (Archibald Alexander Allison) 6:2 (Apr. 1997): 31–36.
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- “The Deacons.” (John Calvin) 1:1 (Jan. 1992): 21.
- “Deacons and/or Trustees?” (Roger Schmurr) 4:1 (Jan. 1995): 20–22.
- “The Ministry of Mercy for Today [part 1].” (Peter Y. de Jong) 3: 3 (Jul. 1994): 53–58.
- “Pointers for Elders and Deacons, Part 1.” (from a Dutch periodical *Dienst* vol. 29, #1, Jan.–Feb. 1981) 2:3 (Jul. 1993): 59–64.
- “Pointers for Elders and Deacons, Part 2.” 2:4 (Oct. 1993): 79–85.
- “Pointers for Elders and Deacons, Part 3.” 3:1 (Jan. 1994): 3–8.
- “A Proposed Job Description for a Deacon.” (A. G. Edwards III) 4:1 (Jan. 1995): 3–5.
- “Reforming the Diaconate, Part 1.” (William Shishko) 1:2 (Apr. 1992): 43–45.
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- “A Training Program for Deacons” (William Shishko) 6:3 (Jul. 2000): 62–70.

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

# Servant Training

## If You Are a Deacon

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by Nathan Trice

If you are a deacon in Christ's church, you have been called by God to a high office indeed. You serve a vital role in protecting the church's primary calling of the ministry of the Word. You represent to the church our God's deep concern for the poor among his people, and particularly our Savior's own compassion toward the poor in his earthly ministry. And you have an opportunity to lead the church of Christ in adorning her witness to the world with deeds of mercy to accompany words of gospel truth.

This article seeks to refresh the perspectives of deacons regarding the true significance of their office as the Lord of the church has designed it. It is my hope that it will elevate in your mind, if you are a deacon, a sense of the tremendous importance of diaconal ministry in the church, as well as enlarge your insight into the heart of compassion of our Lord, to whom this office and its ministry is so important.

### **The Origin of Your Office**

If you are a deacon, you should understand well the significance of Acts 6 to your office. According to the traditional interpretation of the church, dating back to the days of the church fathers, this is that portion of the biblical account in which Christ institutes the office of deacon through his apostles.

The background to the institution of the diaconate involved the church leaders' struggle with what we sometimes call "a good problem to have." As evidence of the recent outpouring of the Spirit upon his church, and the resulting overflow of the love for the brethren that was the distinguishing mark of Christ's disciples (John 13:35), there had been a remarkable outpouring of material generosity toward the poor within the Christian community. Earlier, in Acts 4:34–35, we are told:

There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

No doubt the wise and equitable distribution of these funds for the poor weighed heavily upon the apostolic leadership, especially in light of the remarkable growth of the church in these days, and their primary concern for evangelism and discipleship. This burden of responsibility reached the breaking point in the account of Acts 6:1–7, triggered by a controversy that arose in the church over the distribution of funds for the poor. The Greek-speaking members of the church in Jerusalem were convinced that their widows were being slighted in the distributions, and the indignation that accompanied this conviction threatened the peace of the church. The apostles were apparently convinced

that at least part of the reason for this state of affairs lay in their having too many items to directly oversee effectively. In a meeting of the whole church, the apostles say (vss. 2b–4):

It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

The Greek word translated “serve” in verse 2 is the verb form of the word *διάκονος* (*diakonos*), from which we get our word “deacon.” It is the same word that is used elsewhere to describe a minister of the gospel as a “servant of Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 4:6). It is also a word that Jesus used to describe his own kind of ministry: “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.” (Mark 10:45). However, ever since the apostles in Acts called for men to relieve them of the responsibility of “serving tables” (a reference to money tables, most likely: the mechanism for receiving and distributing funds for the poor), the word “deacon” (servant) has come to have a more specialized reference to a certain officer in the church. The apostle Paul uses it that way in Philippians 1:1:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers (or elders) and deacons (*δικκόνους*, *diakonois*): Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

All members of the church are “servants” in a broader sense, but there are certain “servants” who are elected by the congregation and ordained by the apostles (or elders) to serve with authority.

Because the responsibilities of the new office would entail difficult decisions, interactions with members in delicate situations, and even the resolution of serious conflicts, the right men for this job needed to be “of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (v. 3). In that first deacon nomination and election process, seven such men were identified by the congregation, and the first deacon ordination in Christ’s church was held: “These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them” (v. 6). The office of deacon was now in place.

### **The Reason for Your Office (Broadly)**

If you are a deacon, you also need to recognize what is the most basic reason for your office. Acts 6 makes clear that the broadest reason for the existence of deacons in the church is to preserve and protect the church’s primary calling of the ministry of the Word and prayer.

Recall that, before the first deacons were installed into office, the apostles were carrying the full burden of leadership in the church, including the administration of mercy ministry funds. In Presbyterianism the calling and office of apostle is viewed as having ceased, and it is now elders along with the minister who have the highest authority in the local church and the final responsibility for all the ministries therein. Thus, the same partnership in ministry that was created in Acts 6 between the apostles and deacons

should continue today between elders and deacons. Though all of the affairs of the local church are under the ultimate oversight of the elders (the word “overseer” is interchangeable in the New Testament with elder), there are many important concerns of leadership that, in a congregation of any size, would inevitably divert them from what are their two most crucial tasks: ministering the Word both publically and privately, and interceding in prayer with and for the members of the church. Thus, potentially any leadership concerns that go beyond these two most vital ones may, and often should be, delegated to deacons for their oversight.

It is for this reason that the scope of diaconal duties is quite rightly very broad in our churches. This is in keeping with the broader principle of delegation established in Acts 6, in which a specific task was given to the deacons to preserve certain priorities in the apostles (elders today). Thus, not only the church’s funds designated for the relief of the poor, but the funds of the church as a whole may be delegated to the diaconate for oversight. The many decisions that arise in connection with property ownership and maintenance, the logistics of facility use, and so on can be referred by the elders to the deacons. Elders may certainly retain direct oversight of these areas if necessary, and they always are subject to the review of elders. However, it will often be wise, where qualified men may be found, for the elders to delegate many of these responsibilities of leadership to deacons. As assistants to the elders, the deacons serve an indispensable role: that of enabling the focus of the elders to remain on the spiritual lives of the saints.

Of course, there are many forms of service in the life of the church that should be shared by all the members of the church, ordained and not. Deacons are not to be “the servants” of the church in the sense that they personally do anything and everything that needs doing. They are servant-leaders in the church, who on the one hand have hearts willing to do the most menial of tasks for the sake of the body, yet who also have the authority to direct and oversee the involvement of the whole church in such tasks. The “deacon as church custodian” stereotype is shown for its folly by the high spiritual qualifications required by Scripture for deacons. With the exception of being “able to teach” (the ministry of the Word), the personal qualities prerequisite for the office of deacon are essentially the same as those required for elders (see 1 Timothy 3:1–13). The reason for this is that the office of deacon is one of leadership and authority in the church. Their service, then, should include enlisting the involvement of the broader congregation in the fulfillment of tasks fitting for every Christian to be involved with.

### **The Reason for Your Office (Particularly)**

But if you are a deacon, you also need to be aware of what is the more particular reason for your office: one that most exhibits the glory of your office and the goodness of the one who ordained it. Acts 6 also attaches to the office of deacon in a special way the calling of the church to minister to the physical and temporal needs of the poor: what is often called “mercy ministry.”

The impulse of the early Christians to give to meet each other’s material needs grew out of a profound awareness of one of the implications of the gospel: it is an expression of a holistic love on the part of God; it aims at the ultimate well-being of the whole person, body and soul. This is part of the reason that Jesus’s earthly ministry consisted not only in a ministry of teaching, but also a ministry of healing. The latter, in addition to providing attestation of his true identity as the Son of God, was also an expression of his

compassion for sinners who were suffering the physical consequences of sin. It also pointed to the kind of ultimate restoration that his kingdom would bring: the end of all human deprivation, spiritual and material, for those who put their faith in Christ. The king was revealed as one who had compassion and brought relief to sinners, both body and soul. And those who were made conformed to his image by the Spirit had an instinctive urge to meet both kinds of needs in others. As the widows in the church at Jerusalem found, life within the redeemed community was one in which relief from both spiritual and temporal woes could be found.

This mercy ministry itself has a very broad application. The form of mercy ministry found in the book of Acts was focused upon widows, those in the congregation who typically would have faced the most pressing needs. But the legitimate objects of such ministry, by extension, would include those within the church who, by reasons of health, disability, old age, or other providential circumstances, find themselves lacking basic necessities of life. Likewise, the needs felt by the widows of the early church were met primarily by means of the monetary gifts of the church. Yet there are many temporal needs within the body of Christ that are best or only met by gifts of time and effort. From this we can deduce that the mercy ministry labors of the deacons should go far beyond mere check-writing and fund management. The temporal and material needs of the body are the special concern of their office, and their calling extends to all manner of service on behalf of the needy that addresses those concerns. Whereas one member, through financial hardship, may find himself in need of help purchasing a vehicle, another member, through age or disability, may find himself in need of transportation itself by others with vehicles. Both are the proper concern of the diaconate. Again, one may need help with a mortgage payment; another may need help drafting a family budget: both are the proper concern of the diaconate. And again, the deacon serves the church best when he seeks to facilitate and coordinate the efforts of the whole congregation to minister to the needy in their midst.

Thus, the office of deacon represents a most fitting and essential complement to the office of elder in the church: together they represent the “two hands” of the church’s ministry. Whereas one has its primary expression in a ministry of Word, the other has its primary expression in a ministry of deed. According to 1 Peter 4:10–11, these are the two broad categories of gifts that the whole church partakes of—speaking gifts and serving gifts:

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies.

It is thus very natural and fitting that these two kinds of gifts be epitomized in the men that serve in the two offices of elder and deacon. And it becomes clearer why the mercy ministry of the church is a necessary complement to the gospel ministry. Without genuine compassion for the material needs of our brothers, our assurances of love for them will sound hollow (James 2:15–16). The calling of the deacons is to lead the church in such a way as to ensure that its love is not in word or talk only, but in deed and in truth (1 John 3:17–18). This is not to displace the ministry of the Word as the primary calling of the church. It is rather to strengthen it, and to render it more credible and effective.

## The Significance of Your Office

If you are a deacon, therefore, the special calling of your office happens to be a reflection of one of the major themes of the Bible: our God has a special concern for the poor. This is not something revealed for the first time in New Testament church polity. Rather, the institution of the diaconate is the fulfillment of a long-standing record of God's heart for the poor.

For example, the call for compassion for the poor is written large in the instructions given to Israel by Moses. The Israelites' own deliverance by Yahweh from poverty in Egypt was to shape their responses to the poor within their own communities. Since they themselves as a people had been redeemed from poverty, they were told by God in Deuteronomy 15:11, "You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land." Just as God had demonstrated a heart for the poor in singling out Israel among all the greater nations of the world, so his people were to have their own heart for the poor in their midst. And legislation within the Mosaic law included provisions and protections for the poor, the enforcement of which was a precursor to the diaconal ministry of the new covenant community (Exodus 22–23; Leviticus 19, 25; Deuteronomy 15, 24). When the apostle Paul committed himself so zealously to an offering for the poor in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8–9), he was acting on an ancient impulse within the law itself.

Likewise, warnings are given against taking advantage of the weakness of the poor in the wisdom literature of Israel. The reason? God identifies with the poor in a special way: what is done to the poor he counts as done to him: "Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him" (Prov. 14:31). Likewise, the poor who are abused will find a dreadful defender in God himself: "Do not rob the poor, because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate, for the LORD will plead their cause and rob of life those who rob them" (Prov. 22: 22). God's people were to recognize that their treatment of the poor had a direct correspondence to their own relationship with God: a theme which would be reinforced in the New Testament by our Lord. Jesus made this clear when he said of ministry to the poor among his disciples: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (Matt. 25: 40). God's jealousy for the poor is further underscored in a grim way as it forms a major rationale for his wrath against his people in the days of the prophets. Isaiah's opening words of rebuke for the guilty nation single out its crimes against the poor: "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (1:16–17).

This is a message brought by many of the prophets of old; God's anger against his people is stirred by their neglect of the needs of the poor, and their actual abuse of that portion of the covenant community that God was so mindful of. The repentance and reformation that God calls for is repeatedly put in terms of mercy and justice toward the poor:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you

see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isa. 58: 6–7)

This emphasis on mercy ministry as at the heart of true religion finds its echo in various places in the New Testament, particularly in the well-known words of James the brother of Jesus: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1: 27). The prophets and the apostles are one in underscoring—for all God’s people—how a heart for the poor is indispensable to a heart after God’s own heart.

Certainly the most spectacular way that the whole of Scripture underscores the significance of the work of deacons is in its casting of the work of the Messiah in “diaconal” terms. What will be the nature of the Messiah’s rule? Isaiah writes:

But with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. (11:4)

Who, consequently, will find the coming of the kingdom of the Messiah “good news”? We are told in Isaiah 29:19, “The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.” What will be this Messiah’s sense of mission? Isaiah depicts the coming anointed one as saying: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (61:1). This is a text which Jesus himself claimed to be fulfilling in his life and ministry (Luke 4:18). All of this emphasis upon the coming of Christ as a ministry to the poor explains those opening words of our Lord’s most famous sermon: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3, compare with Luke 6:20). It also further illuminates the reason Jesus devoted the larger part of his public ministry to the relatively poorer region of Galilee rather than Judea.

Of course, none of this biblical data suggests that God’s favor lies in an unqualified way upon men of material neediness. The blessings of the gospel come to those who have suffered deprivation and oppression in this life *and* who in their need look to the Lord for help. It is those who embrace the gospel by faith who will inherit the kingdom of heaven. But our Lord’s prioritizing of ministry to the poor and his relative pessimism about the prospects of gospel success with the rich (Matt. 19:23–24; Luke 6: 24), highlight the important place that ministry to the poor should have in the New Testament church. And it underscores the significance of that office which has a particular concern for this kind of ministry.

### **The Opportunity of Your Office**

Finally, then, if you are a deacon, you should be keenly aware of the opportunity that comes with your office: the opportunity to adorn the gospel that the church offers to the world. It is only through the ministry of the gospel that any sinner can find relief from the eternal consequences of sin, and this must remain the central and primary work of the church. But deacons are in a position to make that message of divine love more winsome and credible to the world by leading the church in deeds of mercy.

This, of course, reflects a certain perspective on the question of whether or not the diaconal ministry of the church should extend to the world. Should diaconal ministry work only in concert with the ministry of the Word within the congregation (edification), or does it have a place as well complementing the ministry of the Word to the world (evangelism)? It is certainly true that the primary focus of diaconal ministry within the biblical record is on the covenant community. A special priority is given to providing aid to poor “brothers,” or fellow Hebrews, in the Old Testament legislation (Deut. 15:11–12). The widows that Paul refers to as being eligible for ongoing diaconal support are obviously members of the church (1 Tim. 5:3–16), as were the widows in Acts 6. And the special offering for the poor that Paul takes among the churches is for the “saints in Jerusalem” (Acts 11: 29, Rom. 15: 26, 2 Cor. 8). All this is to be expected in the light of the fact that diaconal ministry is a vital component of the communion of the saints: it is a benefit of the unique bond of love that Christ has formed by his saving union with his church. Serving one another in love (Gal. 5:13), as well as speaking the truth to one another in love (Eph. 4:15), are both vital expressions of the unity of the Spirit. Just as the priority of the ministry of the Word each Lord’s Day is for the assembled people of God, so also the priority of the diaconal funds is for the needs of that covenant community. The church is the primary object of attention for both elders and deacons.

But it is precisely this parallel to the ministry of the Word that points to the propriety, and indeed the vital importance, of a diaconal ministry to the world. If the ministry of the Word is not intended by Christ to be exclusively for the benefit of the church, it would be surprising to find the ministry of deed restricted by Scripture for the sole benefit of the church. Even in the Mosaic law the resources of the covenant community were to be shared with the sojourner and stranger (Lev. 19:10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19–21; 26:11–13). This was because the Israelites themselves knew what it was like to be sojourners, and knew that God had a special concern for sojourners along with the fatherless and widows (Deut. 10:18–19). Likewise, we do not find the apostles limiting the ministry of deed to the church, but rather we find the apostle Paul exhorting the churches in this way: “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10).

This principle seems to embody perfectly both the scope and priority of all the church’s ministry: it is first for the household of faith, but it is also to overflow intentionally into the lives of all that we meet as we go into the world. Indeed, is this not the broad trajectory of Jesus’s own ministry? He came with a ministry of Word and deed to the covenant community of Israel, prioritizing a ministry to them (though even then not excluding entirely those outside; see for example Mark 7:24–30). However, by the time of his “Resurrection Proclamation” (also known as the Great Commission, Matt. 28:18–20), we find him calling for this ministry to be carried by his disciples to all the nations. And again, what was the template of ministry that he himself had provided and that was now to go to all the world? It was a ministry of Word *and* deed. The ministry of the Word had the clear priority, but his labors to meet material needs also clearly “adorned” the gospel of the kingdom that he preached. This is how deacons today can see their own opportunity in the church’s outward mission: to adorn the church’s proclamation of the gospel.

Diaconal ministry “adorns the gospel” by providing the tangible evidence of our true motives in preaching the gospel: love for the lost. If verbal expressions of love apart from material assistance can sometimes sound hollow to our own brothers and sisters in the

church (James 2:15–16), surely this is just as possible—if not more so—in our ministry to the world. The forgiveness of sins and a new life in Christ is what men fundamentally need, and all temporal needs are trivial in comparison. Yet a compassionate response to men’s temporal needs can encourage an openness of heart to the gospel’s provision for their deeper needs. Indeed, this seems to be our Lord’s perspective on ministry as he provided food for both body and soul to the multitudes, all the while aware that many would be initially drawn more to one than the other (John 6:26–27). It is for this reason that in the OPC we send to the mission field both missionaries and missionary deacons, theological instructors as well as medical doctors. Indeed, in certain circumstances the ministry of the Word is virtually unintelligible apart from a ministry of deed, which is why the OPC also has a mechanism for providing disaster response. The work of diaconal ministry alongside gospel ministry keeps the holistic nature of God’s love for man in clear view, and the former often opens doors of opportunity for the latter. Men are more inclined to listen to those who are undeniably and tangibly loving them.

So all this is to say that there is a kingdom-building component to the work of the diaconate, along with a covenant-nurturing component. Deacons have an opportunity to provide leadership to the church in her mercy ministry to those outside her doors, always with a view to creating avenues of access for the gospel itself. Just as elders should see themselves as having an opportunity unique to their office to lead the church in evangelism and discipleship of the lost, deacons should see themselves as having a similar opportunity in ministries of mercy. Not only can they themselves explore and pursue ministries in the community and beyond that wisely and compassionately address material needs in a Christian context, but they can promote involvement in such ministries within the congregation. Ministries of service are, in fact, accessible to many in a typical congregation who would be otherwise intimidated by pure evangelistic work. And it is often in the context of ordinary servanthood, and the human connection that it provides, that ordinary Christians find the courage to give a clear testimony to Christ and the gospel. Deed ministry opens doors for Word ministry in the heart of the giver as well as the receiver. Deacons have a unique opportunity, therefore, to lead the congregation in an outward orientation toward the needs of the lost. And few things are more needful for us as leaders in the Presbyterian tradition today.

## **You, a Deacon!**

So if you are a deacon, you have a calling that is utterly essential to the church’s mission to be a Christ-like community. Without your service in support of the elders, the primary calling of the church—the ministry of the Word and prayer—is threatened. And without your service alongside the elders, the ministry of the Word, both within and without the church, is left unadorned with the compassion of Christ. If you are a deacon, may a heightened sense of the tremendous importance of your office lead you to a fuller commitment to the responsibilities and opportunities that it entails. For it is specifically to deacons that the apostle Paul issues this promise of reward: “For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 3:13).

**Nathan Trice** *is the pastor of Matthews Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Matthews, North Carolina.*

# Servant Work

## On Fasting, Death, and Joy: Reflections on My Upcoming Ordination

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by Hugh Lynn

To me, fasting has always seemed like some sort of mechanical ritual. When church leaders have talked about fasting and state that it is a sanctioned practice in the Bible, I have always asked myself, Should I fast? What is it for? When is it appropriate?

Many people will be quick to point out that Jesus says in Matthew 6:16, “*When you fast . . .*” not “*if you fast.*” So fasting is permissible. But does that mean I should fast?

There is clearly a fast that is not beneficial to perform. In Isaiah 58:1–5, God declares that the house of Jacob has transgressed in their fast. So maybe I shouldn’t fast.

But how do I know? What is fasting for?

I think a clue can be found in Matthew 9:14–17. In verse 14, the disciples of John ask Jesus, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” Jesus’s reply is, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?”

Jesus is saying people are not to fast at just any time. When there is a celebration, when there is joy, this is not the time for fasting. But Jesus goes on to say, “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.” Fasting is a time for mourning.

Jesus gives metaphors for fasting. He says that only shrunk cloth can be used to patch an old garment. Also that new wine is put in new wineskins. The reason is clear. If unshrunk cloth is used on an old garment it will shrink in time and further damage the garment. If new wine is put in old wineskins, the fermentation process will burst the old wineskins, because they have lost their elasticity.

So will fasting destroy a person if they attempt to do it when they should be rejoicing? Fasting is for times of mourning.

So, when is an appropriate time for mourning and fasting?

What do the fasts in the Bible look like?

Moses is the first person that I know to fast in the Bible. After the incident with the golden calves, Exodus 33 and 34 recount the story of God wanting to send the people to the Promised Land without his presence. Moses interceded and asked to see the glory of God. God told Moses that no man can see God’s glory and live. God would hide Moses in the cleft of the rock and cover him with his hand. Then God would take away his hand and Moses would see God’s back. Then Moses fasted for forty days and forty nights while God gave Moses the Law.

The Bible includes accounts of fasts by David. One of these is found in 2 Samuel 1. David received news of the deaths of King Saul and Jonathan. In verses 11 and 12 it says, “Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son.”

Another one of David’s fasts is recorded in 2 Samuel 12. David’s infidelity with Bathsheba leads to the birth of a child. The Lord sent a deathly sickness to this child. Verse 16 says, “David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in

and lay all night on the ground.”

In 1 Kings 19, the story of Elijah’s fast is recounted. After killing the prophets of Baal, Jezebel desired to kill Elijah. So he flees, loses heart, and asks God for death. Elijah eats two meals and then goes on a fast for forty days and forty nights as he travels to the mountain of God. When at the mountain of God, God asks what Elijah is doing there. Elijah answers:

I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left and they seek my life, to take it away. (1 Kings 19:14)

Esther called for a fast when she risked her life to go before the king when not summoned (Esther 4:16). And it was not only her life that was at risk, but all of the Jews in the Persian Empire were in deathly peril.

In Daniel, there is the story of a gentile king, Darius, who unwittingly made a law that condemned Daniel to death. When the sentence of being cast into a den of lions was executed, Darius fasted all night because of Daniel (Dan. 6:18).

And what about our Lord? Jesus himself has a fast recorded in Scripture. Matthew 3:13–17 tells the story of Jesus’s baptism. Then, in chapter 4:1–11 Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness. Then the tempter came to Jesus and tempted him with life. In verse 3, Jesus was tempted to cling to life by commanding stones to become bread. In verse 6, Jesus is tempted to live by being protected by angels. In verse 9, Jesus was tempted to live life to the fullest by receiving all the kingdoms of the world only if he would worship the devil. But Paul says in Romans 6:3 that those “who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.”

In my quick study of fasting in the Bible, one thing stood out to make fasting appropriate—death.

Moses comes close to seeing the face of God, which no man can see and live. David fasts after the death of Saul and Jonathan. He also fasts when his child approaches death. Elijah, when fleeing for his life and even desiring death, fasts. Esther fasts when she faces death. The Gentile king, Darius, fasts when Daniel is facing death. And even death is not far away during Jesus’s fast. For his future death must have been in his mind after his baptism.

So, if I am to fast, who died? Who is dying? Who will die?

Well, me.

If I am going to do the duties of a deacon, then I must die. The list of qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 is a list that I have not, do not, nor ever will live up to. I have not, do not, and will not love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I have not, do not, and will not love my neighbor as myself.

In order for me to do so, I must die. Eventually, my body will die, and by God’s grace and mercy I will love him more than anything, and I will not love others less than I love myself. But until then, I have to die to my idolatries. I have to die to my worship of myself.

So I fast, because I know dying is hard. Dying hurts. Dying brings sorrow. I fast because this task set before me will kill me.

But with Jesus there is hope. With Jesus, death is a paradox and results in life! With Jesus, death is not the end. When we die, there is Jesus’s life in us! Paul says it nicely in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

And that is a reason to end the fast and have great, great joy.

**Hugh Lynn** is a deacon in the Presbyterian Church in America serving at Michiana Covenant Presbyterian Church, PCA in Granger, Indiana.

# ServantReading

## The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church

by *Hughes Oliphant Old*

### Series Review (Part Three)

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by Dennis E. Johnson

*The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, by Hughes Oliphant Old. Volume 6: *The Modern Age*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007, xxii + 997 pages, \$60.00.

Dr. Old's seven-volume *The Reading and Preaching of Scripture in the Worship of the Christian Church* requires and rewards slow and sustained reading and reflection. For that reason this review has been appearing piecemeal over several years. Part One, covering the first three volumes (the biblical period, the patristic age, the medieval church), appeared in the August/September 2012 issue of *Ordained Servant*. Part Two, surveying volumes four and five (the Reformation, and the subsequent era of "moderatism, pietism, and awakening"), came out in February 2013. This third segment now addresses only volume six, the period extending from the late eighteenth century through the mid-twentieth, which Dr. Old characterizes as "the modern age." A fourth and final review, yet to come, will address the seventh volume, which describes and analyzes preaching in "our own day" (mid-twentieth century through the first decade of the twenty-first).

Not surprisingly, as the series has moved toward the present day, Dr. Old has been able to consult an increasingly large treasury of resources. Thus he can give more detailed examination to more preachers, homiletical schools, and (to some extent) liturgical traditions. The vastness of these resources may explain aspects of Volume Six that seem somewhat at odds with the emphases of the series as a whole. As noted in previous reviews, two distinctive strengths of the series are its *catholicity* and its attention to the liturgical significance of the *reading* of God's Word in corporate worship (not only preaching). Old intends to be catholic by describing and evaluating the ministry of the Word not only across the centuries but also across the spectrum of Christian traditions—Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant—and, where sources allow, throughout the global church. In this volume, on the other hand, the focus is virtually exclusively on the western church in the United States (six chapters), the United Kingdom (three chapters), and the European continent (three chapters). The missionary outreach of the American Adoniram Judson in Burma (6:202–5) and the Scotsmen Robert Morrison in China (6:636–42) and Alexander Duff in India (6:675–83) are briefly discussed; and our author

regrets that he had had no access to resources on the preaching of Scotland's groundbreaking evangelist to Africa, David Livingstone (6:634). Two of the "American" chapters deal with the beginnings of black preaching (ch. 7) and German preaching to westward-bound settlers in what would become the midwestern states (ch. 8)—a reminder that in the nineteenth century these were still "missionary territory." Nonetheless, this volume is less geographically and demographically "catholic" than volumes one through five, and volume seven.

Ecumenically, this volume, despite its massive length (over 1,000 pages, including front matter) concentrates on Protestantism in a way that the other volumes do not. Dr. Old profiles Reformed and Presbyterian preachers in the Netherlands, Scotland, England, and America (with individual chapters on New England Calvinists and the Presbyterian "old school"), Lutherans in Germany and America, Southern Baptists, and what he calls "the great American school," a theologically diverse "tradition" that will be discussed below. Four Roman Catholic preachers on the continent of Europe, along with three Reformed, are profiled in the first chapter, which narrates "religious revival in a secularized Europe." Several sermons of John Henry Newman, who moved from high church Anglicanism to Rome, are treated in the chapter on "the Victorians." But that is about all the attention that Roman Catholicism receives, and even less is said of Eastern Orthodoxy in this volume.

Volume Six is also exceptional in the series because of its almost exclusive concentration on *preaching*, with little treatment of the *reading* of Scripture in the churches' worship liturgies. Earlier volumes narrated the development of lectionaries to structure the systematic and extensive hearing of the Word of God by congregations gathered for worship, and volume seven will note the influence of Vatican II on the recovery of the hearing of the Word in twentieth-century Roman Catholicism. Dr. Old has previously expressed admiration for the delight in the reading of extended biblical passages in earlier eras (2:295; 3:72, cited in my first *Ordained Servant* review). Fixed lectionaries are not the only way, of course, to ensure that the breadth of Scripture is read and heard in our worship, and Dr. Old is aware that lectionaries have drawbacks: a lectionary may place a biblical text in a particular conceptual context that differs significantly from its setting in Scripture itself (6:128). On the other hand, Dr. Old also notes that preaching *lectio continua* through biblical books, though reinforcing each text's biblical context, has its potential dangers, such as when young preachers imitate the slow pace and extended series of a master such as Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (6:949).<sup>1</sup> Old's discussion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* gives him opportunity to stress the importance of the church's continuous exposure to substantial portions of the Scriptures, heard in their biblical context (6:807–9). We who are heirs of the Westminster Assembly, which produced a *Directory for Publick Worship* instead of a revised *Book of Common Prayer*, do well to consider how our worship services can and should be permeated by God's Word, read and heard, prayed and sung, as well as preached. Perhaps the relative paucity of comment on this "reading" motif in these last two volumes reflects the "famine . . . of hearing the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11) that our author finds in

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<sup>1</sup> Despite this caveat, after deep study of "the Doctor's" sermons, which "came to my attention only rather recently," Dr. Old is persuaded that Lloyd-Jones's blend of Calvinistic conviction, exegetical fidelity, and evangelistic boldness, "rather than being a vestige of the past . . . is an intimation of the future . . . the example a whole host of young evangelical preachers intend to follow" (6:944).

the liturgies, whether fixed and formal or ad hoc, of recent Protestantism (mainline and evangelical).

As a confessional Presbyterian, I found much to appreciate in Dr. Old's description and evaluation of the various streams of post-Enlightenment Protestant preaching. I was heartened by his appreciation for the biblical insight, focus on Christ's cross and resurrection, eloquence, and personal fervor in the sermons of Abraham Kuyper (6:45–60). My appreciation grew for Charles Spurgeon's skill with language and his vivid, down-to-earth illustration, even as I was reminded that the power of Spurgeon's preaching resided not in his technique but in his confidence in God's sovereignty, his commitment to preach Christ and his grace, and his dependence on the Holy Spirit's presence (6:422–43). In chapter 4, I learned more about the preaching of Old School fathers about whom I knew something (Archibald and J. W. Alexander, John Livingstone Nevius), and I met others for the first time. His brief (eight-page) introduction to Klaas Schilder highlighted the Dutch preacher's meticulous exegesis, literary art and imagination, and sensitivity to the Old Testament's witness to Christ and his sufferings (6:856–63). My curiosity was piqued to learn more about preachers such as James Stewart, "a Presbyterian Bonaventure," under whose theological instruction and pulpit ministry Dr. Old had profited spiritually during a winter spent in Edinburgh in the 1950s (6:902–27).

I also found myself nodding in agreement with the negative assessments rendered over influential preachers and theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Friedrich Schleiermacher's sermons and his homiletical theory, Pietism's subjectivism met the Enlightenment's anti-supernaturalism to yield a message that affirmed humanity's intrinsic divinity, replaced vicarious atonement with Jesus's exemplary faith, and substituted for the apostolic testimony to Christ's bodily resurrection "a moment when the risen Savior appears to our spirits and with his life-giving power empowers us," in the words of one of Schleiermacher's Easter sermons (6:81–87). Our author aptly comments, "One cannot help but wonder if what we are hearing here is not some sort of self-realization philosophy, hiding in tabs and pulpit gown" (6: 88). It is puzzling that Dr. Old allots nine pages to New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann, who "rarely entered the pulpit" during his professorial tenure at Marburg and whom "no one would claim . . . was a great preacher" (6:764). Yet Bultmann's single volume of twenty-one sermons "have been widely acclaimed," since they express his existentialist slant on New Testament theology (6:765). Old frankly shows that these sermons clearly express both doubt and indifference toward the historical events of the gospel. He judges them to be "unbearably abstract" and questions whether Bultmann's hearers would even understand the response he sought from them, much less be moved to offer it (6:770, 773). So perhaps those nine pages are well invested, after all, as a cautionary tale about ways that error in the academy can wreak ruin in the pulpit. Moreover, it is no secret where Dr. Old's sympathies lie as he profiles two twentieth century British preachers, contrasting the Anglican William Temple's urbane explanation of "The Meaning of the Crucifixion," in which he took pains to deny "that Jesus bore the penalty that was really due us" (6:693), on the one hand, to the Methodist William Sangster's proclamation of Christ our substitute and punishment-bearer, on the other. From Sangster we hear "the historic Christian doctrine of the atonement, found so clearly in the New Testament, lost

sometimes at one point or another in the history of the church, but clearly recovered in the Protestant Reformation” (6:935).

Then again, at points Old’s theological discernment and his irenic inclination to offer a “judgment of charity” seem to stand virtually at an impasse. Take, for example, his discussion of the sermons of Harry Emerson Fosdick, a name well known to those familiar with the Presbyterian conflict that birthed the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. (In case *OS* readers wonder: No, Fosdick’s 1922 manifesto, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?,” is *not* mentioned in the 20-page treatment of “the most influential preacher of the Great American School,” 6:530–51.) Dr. Old faithfully summarizes the arguments and cites selections from several of Fosdick’s famous sermons, gently injecting his own assessment along the way. Of “On Catching the Wrong Bus,” for instance, he concludes, “There is not a trace of Calvinism in this sermon. It is Puritanism without Calvinism. There is no suggestion of grace anywhere in the sermon” (6:538). Old finds hints of grace in “No Man Need Stay the Way He Is,” but in this sermon, ostensibly on Romans 8:1, “Fosdick’s understanding of grace does not come very close to the eighth chapter of Romans” (6:541). The four pages (!) devoted to this sermon clearly demonstrate the accuracy of Old’s assessment that Fosdick’s view of grace was far removed from the Apostle Paul’s. Yet the author’s the irenic conclusion is:

This is an evangelistic sermon. It may not be quite the same gospel that other evangelists were preaching in that day, but Fosdick . . . was concerned to find some way of presenting the gospel that his generation could accept. . . . Given the presuppositions of those to whom he preached, it is probably not a bad attempt. (6:542)

I would grant that willingness to give others the benefit of the doubt is a hallmark of both Christian humility and scholarly wisdom. But how can a sermon that offers “grace” and “good news” that are unrecognizable by apostolic standards, in order to avoid running afoul of hearers’ self-confident presuppositions, be judged “not a bad attempt”?

The longest chapter (but happily only a little longer than the chapter on Old School Presbyterian preaching) surveys “The Great American School,” from Charles Finney to Norman Vincent Peale (6:445–581). The chapter opens with a clarification that helps to explain Old’s measured critiques of preachers such as Fosdick: “These volumes have been written for the heirs of this [Great American] school, to help us figure out where we fit into the big picture. . . . We have a great heritage and yet that heritage has obvious flaws” (6:448)—among them, as Old had already admitted, “a rather weak understanding of Scripture” (6:447). To retain credibility in the estimation of his primary audience, our author adopts a low-key strategy, using historical description and understated evaluations to plant the thought that preaching can and should be significantly better than many of his mainline and evangelical readers have ever experienced.

I mentioned above that this school is theologically diverse. It includes, on the one hand, popular evangelists who held to biblical inerrancy such as D. L. Moody, R. A. Torrey, and Billy Sunday; and, on the other, mainline spokesmen like Fosdick, who scorned those fundamentalists’ views of Scripture, miracles, the incarnation, and salvation. The school is broad enough denominationally to include Congregationalists (Horace Bushnell and Henry Ward Beecher), a noted Episcopalian bishop and

homiletician (Phillips Brooks), Methodists (Sam Porter Jones), Presbyterians (Sunday, Fosdick, Henry Sloan Coffin, and George A. Buttrick), and Peale, who is given this introduction, despite his affiliation with the Reformed Church in America: “With no preacher in the Great American School does Arminianism surface so obviously as with Norman Vincent Peale. . . . Here is the ultimate preacher of American optimism, the ultimate evangelist of self-help” (6:572).

What factors, then, lead Old to view men who differed in so many ways as belonging to a single school of homiletics? In general, they assumed a revivalistic, rather than a churchly-catechetical, approach to entering and maturing in the Christian faith. Some filled pulpits in established congregations, while others preached in crusades and other venues that transcended ecclesiastical oversight and tended to minimize denominational distinctive. Subjective spiritual experience and individuals’ decisions overshadowed confessional orthodoxy and corporate nurture through and accountability to covenant communities. In response to the growing influence of naturalistic science, rising democratic populism, and other social shifts, these preachers sought to attract and retain Americans’ ears both through innovative methodology and through theological adaptation of their message. In this school, preachers’ perceptions of their hearers’ and the wider society’s needs (whether abolition and “temperance” or improving self-esteem) typically took precedence over the consistent exposition and application of the whole counsel of God as historically understood by the church. Old concludes the chapter with an analysis of the once-great American school’s demise of effectiveness, and thus of influence, and with it the mainline denominations who are his primary audience. He blames not only the critical biblical scholarship that subverts confidence in and submission to Scripture, God’s Word written, but also the spreading biblical illiteracy across the whole landscape of the American church. “Even more significant in the fall of the American pulpit at the end of the twentieth century was that American Protestantism, by and large, capitulated to the secular culture of its age” (6:580).

It is against this backdrop, I believe, that Old identifies the Calvinistic, evangelistic, expositional preaching of Lloyd-Jones—which seemed to be an archaic replay of classic Reformational and Puritan proclamation of God’s sovereign, saving grace in Christ—as a harbinger of better things to come. Volume Seven will open with “the end of the mainline” before going on to profile Reformed preachers such as William Still, John Stott, Richard Lucas, Sinclair Ferguson, and Timothy Keller; the ministry of Billy Graham; contemporary preachers of Africa, Latin America, and Asia; and the proclamation of the Word in the black church in America, the Charismatic movement, post-Vatican II Catholicism, and evangelical megachurches. Not surprisingly, the preaching of God’s inerrant Word and its focal point, Christ’s gracious redemptive achievement in history, has quite easily survived the demise of a “great” homiletical school that, presumably with good intentions, sought to attract and engage an increasingly secularized audience by reconfiguring its message to suit their presuppositions. The story continues and the good news still goes out in life-changing power, for “the word of God is not bound” (2 Tim. 2:9).

**Dennis E. Johnson** *is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America serving as a professor of practical theology at Westminster Seminary California in Escondido, and associate pastor of New Life Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Escondido, California.*

# ServantReading

## A Conflicted Qohelet

A Review Article

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by Meredith M. Kline

*Ecclesiastes*, by Peter Enns. Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011, xiv + 238 pages, \$25.00, paper.

The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary series attempts to integrate exegesis with biblical and systematic theology. Therefore, the first half of this book has a traditional commentary format beginning with discussion of introductory matters like date, authorship, structure, and message (1–29), which is then followed by exegesis of the text in interaction with major commentators (30–116). The second half of the book consists of three theological essays covering the theology of Ecclesiastes (117–35), the relation of Ecclesiastes to the rest of the Bible (136–91), and contemporary application of Ecclesiastes (192–219). The book concludes with a bibliography (220–27) and indexes of authors and ancient literature (228–38).

While Qohelet is a mask for Solomon, Enns argues with the modern majority for non-Solomonic authorship, a post-exilic dating, and the need to differentiate the voices of Qohelet and a frame-narrator (16–22).<sup>1</sup> Because topics keep returning and shift abruptly, when Enns evaluates the book's structure he divides it into sixteen units based on perceived changes of theme, thus producing a linear string of sections whose logical relations are not readily apparent; he is not convinced by contemporary proposals that the book is divided into halves or quarters, or has alternating themes, or exhibits a hierarchical structure (22–25).

### Conflict within Qohelet

The standard paradigm for understanding Ecclesiastes is to see it as containing a combination of cynical (Qohelet's theme is "life is absurd, you die anyway, and God is to blame," 77) and pious sentiments. In Enns's opinion, the "tension between affirming Qohelet's harsh criticisms of God while affirming traditional Israelite theology lies at the heart of the interpretive difficulties with Ecclesiastes throughout Jewish and Christian history" (116).

Interpretations of Ecclesiastes differ in terms of how they relate its negative, positive, and pious ideas. Negative concepts include the idea that death cancels the profit of toil and the advantage of wisdom over folly, as well as the idea that divine retributive justice is absent from earthly life. Positive concepts include the idea that labor and wisdom provide

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the commonly perceived frame of 1:1–2, 7:27, and 12:8–14, Enns also attributes 1:3–11 to a narrator because 1:12 reads like the beginning of a typical ancient Near Eastern royal autobiography.

earthly benefits. That God should be feared and obeyed and that there will be an ultimate, eschatological judgment are among the book's pious ideas.

One interpretation sees the book's thrust as cynical. Its negatives express the absurdity of life, its positives are hedonism, and its pious sentiments are editorial insertions inconsistent with the book's pessimism. The interpretational tension results from apparent contradictions inherent in the received text. A common evangelical perspective perceives the book's negatives as cynicism presented for argument's sake in order to contrast it with traditional Israelite piety that is correlated with heavenly blessing. The tension is seen as a contrast between a pagan worldview that the book argues against and a biblical perspective that it promotes. A third position sees Qohelet's negatives and positives as cynicism but the epilogue as a combination of traditional piety and a critique of Qohelet. The tension is viewed as a difference of opinion between Qohelet and a frame-narrator.

Enns presents a variation on the latter option by positing that Qohelet's negatives and positives not only represent cynicism but can also reflect the doubts of a believer. This strategy by Enns moves the interpretational tension into Qohelet's mind. He is simultaneously a rebellious cynic and a doubting saint. Qohelet is painted as a spiritual schizophrenic. In addition, for Enns the frame-narrator summarizes Qohelet's cynicism in 1:1–11; approves it in 12:9–10; and supplements it in 12:13–14 with a traditional pious exhortation promoting obedience to God's law while being ambivalent about the existence of a final judgment. According to Enns, for the Israelite covenant member (and analogously for the New Testament believer), the message of Ecclesiastes is that Qohelet's "complaints are *affirmed as wise*, but the reader is challenged to move *beyond* this state, even against all reason, to one of fear of God and obedience to his commands—to continue being a faithful Israelite regardless of the absurdity" (148, italics original). The frame-narrator reinforces Qohelet's emotional conflict.

Enns does not consider eliminating the tensions associated with the standard interpretational paradigm by following an alternative paradigm which considers the book's negatives that distress a faithful Qohelet as common curse plus human folly while the positives that he appreciates are common blessing. In such a "realistic" view of providential miseries and mercies, there is no conflict of a Qohelet simultaneously criticizing and revering God.<sup>2</sup>

Enns definitely portrays Qohelet as a discontent who paints life as absurd.<sup>3</sup> Qohelet supposedly is angry with God (54, 123), who is arrogant and consuming (72), and blames him for making life meaningless and incoherent (39, 210–211). God is exasperating (67) and capricious (89), not comforting (50, 56, 60, 94), and approaching him in worship is risky (69) because he is not to be trusted (84). Qohelet rejects the idea of an afterlife (59,

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<sup>2</sup> A "pragmatist" interpretation which similarly views the negatives as normal experiences of Adam-kind while emphasizing the joy theme in Ecclesiastes differs from a "realist" perspective in not believing that Ecclesiastes teaches there is an eschatological Doomsday.

<sup>3</sup> That a cynical-Qohelet portrait dominates the interpretation of this commentary is revealed by the fact that the bibliography and footnotes (which are minimal in the theology section) do not interact with works arguing for an "evangelist" or a "realist" interpretation of Ecclesiastes, even if they cite articles by such authors on particular exegetical details. The few evangelicals referred to in the commentary section for grammatical or philological support are disregarded in the theology section. The bibliography does not include anything published after 2008, so unfortunately Enns was not able to interact with recently published Reformed works on Ecclesiastes such as the commentaries of Bartholomew, Fredericks, and Ryken or to *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes* by Greidanus.

109, “a useless theological category”—178) with a divine judgment (106),<sup>4</sup> so “God is the ultimate purveyor of injustice” (93). The fear of God “is not a healthy, covenantal fear . . . but something dysfunctional, born out of frustration” (84). Wisdom is unreliable (81) and like righteousness does not consistently pay off (83). So, “being an obedient Israelite, at the end of the day, amounts to nothing” (94), and “living life with all our strength is our biggest protest against a fundamentally unjust and absurd circumstance that God has given us” (97).<sup>5</sup> Qohelet is resigned to the snippets of joy that wise work engenders but providence snatches with death (45), making one “a pawn in a cruel game” (73–74). Although Qohelet perceives one’s portion from labor as a gift of God (3:13, 5:18 [19]<sup>6</sup>), Enns says “one’s portion is not the generous provision of a gracious God. It is humanity’s only recourse in carving out an island of provisional ‘meaning’ in the face of an ocean storm of divine injustice” (132).

For Enns, Qohelet’s epistemology is also an integral part of his cynicism: “For Qohelet, what is knowable is that which can be observed, either in time or space or in the mind’s eye. He has little patience for considering that, perhaps, there is more to reality than meets the eye. What is beyond our ability to experience is unknowable, plain and simple (e.g., what happens after death, 3:18–22)” (118). Also, “What is intriguing about Qohelet’s theology is that he undermines his own epistemology in the sense that, at the end of the day, there is very little we can know with certainty, and what one does know collapses into absurdity” (119). Qohelet is skeptical of wisdom and God. For Enns, “Qohelet’s conclusions about God and the world are drawn not on the basis of revelation but on his own vast (“under the sun”) experience” (118).<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, in his contemporary application of Ecclesiastes, Enns encourages the Christian to press on in life’s journey, trusting and obeying God despite physical, psychological, and spiritual suffering, sometimes even of horrendous magnitude. For the Christian reader the purpose of Ecclesiastes is to challenge us “*to affirm the normalcy and benefit of being in a state of struggle, despair, and disorientation in one’s relationship with God at certain stages in our spiritual journeys*” (207, italics in original). For the interpretation of Ecclesiastes, the significant portion of this sentence is what Enns did not italicize. He tries to appropriate a “cynical” negative outlook of Qohelet that he develops in his commentary section as the *sporadic* psychological doubt of a believer. For Qohelet, however, the stressful aspects of life “under the sun” apply to the whole of every individual’s life throughout earth history to the consummation. Enns understands a pagan perspective of resignation to absurdity as sometimes characteristic of a believer’s

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<sup>4</sup> The reference in 11:9 to the judgment of God is interpreted as referring to old age (106–7). Similarly the statement in 3:17 that God will judge the righteous and wicked “is at best a temporary and shallow consolation” (57).

<sup>5</sup> Enns, however, believes the frame-narrator offers counsel to persevere despite apparent injustice, thus having the frame narrator approximate a “realist” position, but Enns claims not to understand or like such advice (217).

<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew text in chapter 5 is different than the English text and thus [bracketed].

<sup>7</sup> Here, presumably, Enns means special revelation, not general revelation, but Ecclesiastes certainly has intertextual allusions to Genesis, Deuteronomy, and Kings; Solomon is surely masked by Qohelet. Also, a secularist, empirical epistemology does not jibe with Qohelet’s statement in 9:10 that there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol. How can he be sure empirically that there is no earth-like living in that realm, since some ancients provided the dead with vessels and food for post-mortem existence or since Saul had an encounter with the deceased Samuel?

psychological oscillations, but Qohelet's hating of life (2:17–18) because death wipes out earthly benefits always co-exists with his fearing of God.

## **Conflict of Qohelet and the Bible**

For Enns conflict exists not only within Qohelet's mind but also between Qohelet and the rest of Scripture. Enns thinks that the words of Ecclesiastes are counter to most other OT literature, being "not only in suggestive tension with other portions of the same Scripture, inspired by the same God, but are openly critical of those Scriptures—and even of God himself" (195). "Qohelet's words do not simply contribute a particularly discordant voice to Scripture's ultimately harmonious polyphony. He does not seek to add a dissonant note to a complex chord, thus producing an unexpected and richer harmony. His presentation of God, which is his considered and final opinion on the matter, calls into question the very notion of harmony. He neutralizes rather than adds to Scripture's polyphonic testimony. He does not wish to be in conversation with other voices; he wishes to overtake them, to silence them. Synthesizing Qohelet and other voices is not just difficult—Qohelet would consider it foolishness" (196–97).

Like his Qohelet, Enns thinks it is foolish to harmonize the clashing cynical and orthodox pieties of Qohelet and the epilogist, so he maintains the dissonance and sculpts Qohelet into a changeling who morphs back and forth between a rebellious cynic and a reverent doubter. In addition, Enns does not try to harmonize the contrasting voices of Qohelet and Moses on retribution or the supposedly incompatible ideas of Qohelet and Jesus on the afterlife.

## **Ecclesiastes and the OT**

Are the inscrutably distributed positives and negatives of Qohelet's world the capricious impositions of a divine despot that contradict the retributive sanctions of Deuteronomy or the deeds-consequences teachings of Proverbs? Or, are Qohelet's vanities and joys the common providences of an inscrutable sovereign which complement Deuteronomy and Proverbs? Enns holds the former<sup>8</sup> because he does not believe Ecclesiastes teaches there is an afterlife when divine justice will be executed and vindicated. Passages such as 3:17 ("God will judge the righteous and wicked"), 11:9 ("but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment"), possibly 8:6 (if translated "for every desire there is a judgment time"), and even 12:14 ("God will bring every deed into judgment") Enns understands as not pointing to an afterlife judgment but to the implementing of just deserts during earthly existence.<sup>9</sup> Enns is even ambivalent about 12:14 which "does not necessarily imply an eschatological judgment, although the possibility should be left open" (115; compare "is not an allusion to eschatological judgment," 156). Ecclesiastes is therefore cynical about divine retribution because it recognizes no post-death, consummation event where justice becomes evident. Nevertheless, the epilogist, says Qohelet, is wise and advises his son to commit himself to

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<sup>8</sup> Even for Enns to have the epilogist promote Torah observance with the admonition to fear God and keep his commandments is not as much in keeping with traditional Israelite piety as he imagines, since Deuteronomy in addition motivates covenant faithfulness with the pointer to divine, redemptive grace in the exhortation to *love* God and keep his commandments.

<sup>9</sup> Despite Qohelet's statements to the contrary (7:15, 8:14, 9:1–3, 11).

God “as a precondition to seeing the just God” (149). Enns adds that “this borders on the nonsensical, but this is precisely where the strength and wisdom of Ecclesiastes can be seen, not despite the despair but through it” (149). In this fashion, Enns has no need to invoke a contrast between common, inscrutable providence and typological, Israelite-theocratic, retributive sanctions or between common and redemptive grace.

Also, the way Enns handles the contrast between individual and communal experience within theocratic Israel is confusing. He feels OT wisdom has no redemptive-historical value if it reflects a common, individual rather than a theocratic, national Israelite context (164–67). Thus he transforms Qohelet’s individual complaint about common providence into a post-exilic, national, theocratic lament. But then, why is Ecclesiastes stripped of theocratic features? The activities of the Solomon-figure do not include building and dedicating the Israelite temple of Yahweh, even though in those times kings proudly produced self-glorifying texts about their temple-building and deity-honoring cultic activities, nor do they include theocratic (or even common) military victories. Even Solomon is renamed so he becomes a generic rather than a theocratic king. The book’s terminology focuses not on the sons of Israel but on the sons of Adam. Ecclesiastes is about experiencing non-retributive providence rather than theocratic sanctions. So it is inappropriate to equate the abandonment a saint feels under perplexing providence with the lament of faithful Israelites experiencing a national curse or to allegorize the latter as the former.

Enns also ends up with a post-exilic Qohelet whose response to the exile differs from other biblical folk: “The book’s relentless focus is on the deeply felt sense of disconnect between Israel and its covenant God” (166). Qohelet is a voice for an anger against God by faithful Israelites.<sup>10</sup> But such a perspective conflicts with the biblical picture that the exile was God’s punishment for national, covenant disobedience. For Enns, Ecclesiastes is about righteous Israelite captives questioning God’s ultimate goodness and justice, whereas the prayers of godly, post-exilic Israelites like Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah indicate human sin was the source of the nation’s difficulties.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Qohelet certainly sees sin as responsible for life’s personal afflictions (1:13; 3:16–17, 7:20–22, 29; 11:9–10). Also, a wise, post-exilic Israelite might have lamented the fact that God’s chosen nation warranted theocratic curses and jeopardized the reputation of its gracious God or that individually faithful covenant members experienced the national curses. But lamenting theocratic curses is not the same as a NT believer doubting the Lord’s beneficence while undergoing divine common curses, Satanic persecution of the elect, or the folly of human oppression (5:6 [7]).

By correlating Qohelet’s negative outlook with the distressing conditions of domination by foreign oppressors, Enns also undermines the emphasis of Ecclesiastes. This focus of Ecclesiastes results from having Qohelet masquerade as Solomon so that the book’s negative reality is an appropriate analysis even in the *best* of earthly times for the wisest and wealthiest human.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Thus, the fear of God in 5:6 [7] is not the reverence for God found in Proverbs but dread of a capricious deity that is accompanied by pain, anxiety, and frustration (69).

<sup>11</sup> Enns does note that the exile was a theocratic sanction against a disobedient covenantal nation (125), but he also applies individual transgression against the covenant lord to the national, theocratic rather than to the individual, common level when he deals with wisdom literature in terms of redemptive history.

<sup>12</sup> Even though Enns makes this point about 1:12 (37) and 2:1–11 (45–46), it gets overwhelmed by his post-exilic-conditioned view of Ecclesiastes.

## Ecclesiastes and the NT

When Enns compares Qohelet with Jesus, he reverts to a “Qohelet-as-cynic” view to contrast their teachings. What qualifies them both as wise sages is not their ideas but the fact that each was contrarily counter-cultural in his own context and that both utilized empirical observations of nature and human activity in their teaching, even if reaching different conclusions (172–77). What Enns blurs, however, is that Qohelet supposedly counters traditional, orthodox Israelite wisdom, whereas Jesus counters aberrant Israelite religiosity. Enns says one should not attempt to unify the divergent ideas of Qohelet and Jesus but should respect their historic conditionedness and see how they cohere (180–81). By “cohere” Enns does not mean how ideas are compatible but how when juxtaposed it is obvious they changed over time, so the ideas of Qohelet and Jesus are held in tension. Both Qohelet and Jesus are approved, even if they contradict each other.

Thus, as presented by Enns, Qohelet, as an early second-temple sage supposedly does not integrate the idea of an afterlife into his thinking, whereas Jesus, who came after second-temple developments subsequent to Ecclesiastes of belief in an afterlife with eschatological judgment, does. Not only does Enns undermine specific statements of Qohelet to the contrary, as well as the implication of Qohelet’s spatio-temporal framework, but he fits his contrast between the views of Qohelet and Jesus into a matrix of culturally determining thought. Supposedly, an exilic Israelite could not envisage an afterlife with a divine judgment,<sup>13</sup> whereas such an idea was established in the mindset of Jesus’s generation because of intervening second-temple apocalyptic literature. The ideas of Qohelet are culturally and temporally determined.

Enns does exhibit a typical, historically-*conditioned* hermeneutic in relation to Ecclesiastes whereby Qohelet’s negative outlook is purportedly derived from the distressing conditions of domination by foreign oppressors. Even though in this fashion Enns diminishes the force of Qohelet’s negatives as characteristic of the best of times, what is distressing is his historically-*determined* hermeneutic. Ironically, Qohelet as counter-cultural could undermine traditional Israelite orthodoxy but he could not question pagan disbelief in an afterlife, eschatological judgment!

Similarly, Enns’s view of Scripture as incarnational, limited by the perspectives of its human authors,<sup>14</sup> means Qohelet’s views can be inspired errors. They are not like those of Job’s friends, bad theology presented as wrong-headed, but bad theology presented as truth. They are the best he could do at the time. The Bible contains wrong views of God presented as truth: “In Scripture God allows to have ascribed to him the limited and fallen view of his creatures” (201). Enns’s hermeneutic eschews harmonizing the Bible’s theology by presuming it is impossible because of the inescapable historical confines of its authors.

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<sup>13</sup> Despite Job 19:25–26, Isaiah 24–27, or Daniel 12:2-3 (though Enns dates Daniel after the rise to prominence of the afterlife concept in later second-temple Judaism, 178 note 44). In his comments on 3:20–21 Enns inconsistently acknowledges that some Israelites must have entertained the idea of an afterlife but Qohelet “rejects it, or at least any way of knowing for sure. It is worth mentioning that some notion of the afterlife in Israel must have been current for such a denunciation to have made sense” (59).

<sup>14</sup> With the term “incarnational” Enns puts the emphasis on the human nature of the Bible: “Israel’s Scripture was an expression of self-definition” (167). But in covenant literature the suzerain, rather than the vassal, does the defining.

Enns's discussion of the relationship of Ecclesiastes to Jesus focuses on different concepts of an afterlife rather than on a redemptive-historical understanding of how Ecclesiastes and Jesus relate on such themes as the power and wisdom of God and humans, topics that the book's structure makes prominent. Enns's Christotelic instead of Christocentric hermeneutic also disapproves of typical "Qohelet-as-evangelist" or "Qohelet-as-realist" ways of preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes (27–29, 138–41, 168). A Christotelic perspective concentrates on Christ's death and resurrection while neglecting his heavenly and consummation glorification, a view which fits with Ecclesiastes' supposed disinterest in an afterlife or final judgment.

### **Missed theological issue**

Because Enns predominately portrays Qohelet as a cynic he does not deal with a theological issue that traditionally has led most evangelical interpreters in a different direction. Qohelet teaches that work is in vain, whereas Paul teaches that work in the Spirit is not in vain. A typical "evangelist" way to harmonize this contrast is to understand Qohelet as presenting a pagan perspective that needs to be repented of so that earthly toil can be perceived as worthwhile. Life is better when one fears God. Enns rightly thinks this view undercuts the force of Qohelet's position that life is difficult even when God is faithfully feared. Enns additionally disagrees with the "evangelist" interpretation since it takes the book's positives as depicting the way in which work is not in vain. Instead, Enns's view is that the book's positives present Qohelet's resignation to temporary benefits accompanying vain labor. Life is not necessarily better when God is revered.

Enns so concentrates on countering the "evangelist" interpretation that he does not deal with the contrast between Qohelet and Paul. His commentary has no interaction with a "realist" interpretation that views Qohelet's negatives as common curse and his positives as common blessing. A "realist" interpretation supports a "two-kingdom" theology. The earthly-kingdom, cultural-mandate task of producing ever-living generations of the family of the first Adam is a failure (1:3–8), whose futility Qohelet laments. His "under the sun—until the consummation" framework of a world which lacks retributive justice and implies a Doomsday is complemented by the Christian's realization that great-commission labor in building the heavenly, eternal family of the second Adam, is not in vain. Faithful perseverance in the futility of even flourishing, God-honoring earthly work serves to preserve the environment in which Christ-kindred are born by the Spirit's power.

Thus, despite properly emphasizing the comfort Ecclesiastes can provide for contemporary believers by encouraging Christians to persevere in faith despite life's hardships, Enns's conflicted Qohelet and interpretation of Ecclesiastes should be dissatisfying to preachers and confusing to suffering believers.

**Meredith M. Kline** *is the Director of the Goddard Library at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts and the librarian at First Presbyterian Church, North Shore (OPC), He has completed his PhD thesis on Ecclesiastes and is a member of First Presbyterian Church, North Shore (OPC) in Ipswich, Massachusetts.*

# ServantReading

## Extravagant Grace by *Barbara Duguid*

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by Bruce and Sue Hollister

*Extravagant Grace* by Barbara Duguid. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011, xxx + 178 pages, \$13.49, paper.

How are Christians to understand their ongoing struggle with remaining sin? In *Extravagant Grace*, Barbara Duguid brings an answer from John Newton, as she summarizes his teaching on the nature of sanctification. In particular, Duguid demonstrates the emphasis this eighteenth-century pastor brought to those he pastored: biblical sanctification is more about humility, dependence, and loving Christ, than about securing a seamless victory over besetting sin.

How are humility, dependence, and love for Christ produced? Duguid's answer may surprise some modern day believers who assume that Christians are always able to have victory over sin, if only they believe the right doctrine, faithfully apply the right principles, and pray. According to Newton, although *new* believers may enjoy a measure of victory over sin, early victory may lead to false self-confidence. *New* believers commonly conclude that their victory over sin is due in some measure to their own efforts. They have yet to understand the depravity of their own hearts.

At some point, says Newton, Christians enter into the second phase of Christian growth. Rather than granting a uniform victory over sin, God allows *maturing* Christians to struggle with sin. They now learn humility in a new way— from their experience of failure to obey God from the heart.

Duguid is brutally honest about her own struggle with sin as she seeks to illustrate the biblical concepts discussed. She thus demonstrates how God uses painful experiences of failure in order to produce inward humility and dependence upon Christ for victory over sin. While her transparency is to be commended, and is actually a strength of the book, some stories may not be helpful to all readers.

Some readers may grow impatient, as Duguid lingers on the inability of the Christian in the matter of victory over sin. They may (rightly) ask, “What, then, is the proper activity of the Christian in sanctification?” However, because Duguid believes Christians today suffer from a lack of clarity about sanctification, she does not rush to answer that question. Rather, she emphasizes that though Christians are commanded to live righteously, they are helpless in themselves to do so. God gives victory in his own time; he is entirely sovereign in the matter of our sanctification.

Ironically, learning that God is sovereign over our struggles with sin does not produce laziness; it rather energizes Christians to fuller obedience. In the latter chapters, Duguid describes how God leads Christians to maturity as they faithfully utilize the means of grace, public and private. The preaching of the Word, the Lord's Supper, prayer, and the

fellowship of believers are instrumental as Christians learn dependence upon and love for Christ in an ever increasing way.

Readers may react to some perceived theological imprecision early in the book, particularly as the author endeavors to flesh out the inward/outward dynamic of sin. However, Duguid's emphasis is insightful and her meaning becomes clear. Outward sins comprise only one dimension of indwelling sin; inward sin is a deep and complex abyss. Read the book *all the way through*, and then *read it again!* The careful reader will be richly rewarded.

**Bruce Hollister** serves as the pastor of New Covenant Community Church (OPC) in New Lenox, Illinois, where his wife **Sue** is a member.

# ServantPoetry

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George Herbert (1593-1633)

## The Priesthood

Blest Order, which in power dost so excell,  
That with th' one hand thou liftest to the sky,  
And with the other throwest down to hell  
In thy just censures; fain would I draw nigh,  
Fain put thee on, exchanging my lay-sword  
For that of th' holy Word.

But thou art fire, sacred and hallow'd fire;  
And I but earth and clay: should I presume  
To wear thy habit, the severe attire  
My slender compositions might consume.  
I am both foul and brittle; much unfit  
To deal in holy Writ.

Yet have I often seen, by cunning hand  
And force of fire, what curious things are made  
Of wretched earth. Where once I scorn'd to stand,  
That earth is fitted by the fire and trade  
Of skilfull artists, for the boards of those  
Who make the bravest shows.

But since those great ones, be they ne're so great,  
Come from the earth, from whence those vessels come;  
So that at once both feeder, dish, and meat  
Have one beginning and one final summe:  
I do not greatly wonder at the sight,  
If earth in earth delight.

But th' holy men of God such vessels are,  
As serve him up, who all the world commands:  
When God vouchsafeth to become our fare,  
Their hands convey him, who conveys their hands.  
O what pure things, most pure must those things be,  
Who bring my God to me!

Wherefore I dare not, I, put forth my hand  
To hold the Ark,<sup>1</sup> although it seems to shake  
Through th' old sinnes and new doctrines of our land.  
Onely, since God doth often vessels make  
Of lowly matter for high uses meet,  
I throw me at his feet.

There will I lie, untill my Maker seek  
For some mean stufte thereon to show his skill:  
Then is my time. The distance of the meek  
Doth flatter power. Lest good come short of ill  
In praising might, the poore do by submission  
What pride by opposition.