

ordained servant
fishers of men

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From the Editor

Whether it is the discipline of elenctics, apologetics, or evangelism proper, winning sinners to Jesus Christ is the goal.

The painting on the cover pictures native Americans fishing at the great granite falls of Amoskeag on the Merrimac River which runs through Manchester, New Hampshire. In 1997 an Orthodox Presbyterian mission work named Amoskeag Presbyterian Church began worshiping less than a mile from these falls.

It is believed that the Indian word “Amoskeag” (Probably originally Namoskeag) means “one takes small fish,” “great fishing place.” In 1651 John Eliot, “Apostle to the Indians,” preached to the Pennacook Indians, part of the Algonquin nation, just north of us. The first Christian worship ever conducted within the present limits of the city of Manchester was conducted in the language of the native Algonquins—either by John Eliot himself or one of the native preachers.¹ Jesus said to his disciples, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19).

In this month’s *Ordained Servant Online*, Brian L. De Jong brings Van Til’s presuppositional apologetics to bear on the branch of apologetics known as elenctics in “Exposing the Darkness: A Call for Presuppositional Elenctics.” Part 2 will be published next month. Elenctics is the minister’s Spirit-empowered work in exposing the darkness within the fallen souls of people. John 16:8, “And when he [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict (ἐλέγξει *elengxei*) the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.”

On a related topic James Baird brings Van Til’s presuppositional apologetics to bear on philosophy in “Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Toward a Union of Spirit, Wisdom, and Word.” Baird seeks to bring a more self-consciously Reformed Christology and theology of the Word to bear on Paul Moser’s “Christ-Shaped Philosophy Project.”

Finally, on the themes of apologetics and biblical theology Danny Olinger reviews William Dennison’s *In Defense of the Eschaton: Essays in Reformed Apologetics* in his article, “How Vosian Is Van Til?” He concludes that Dennison, Vos, and Van Til are all on the same Reformed page.

Andrew Selle reviews J. Cameron Fraser’s *Developments in Biblical Counseling* in his article, “Reflections on Biblical Counseling.” This is a wonderful account of the counseling revolution started by Jay Adams in the 1970s and its productive offshoots.

Our last review this month is Bryan Estelle’s look at Walter Kaiser Jr.’s *I Will Lift My Eyes Unto The Hills: Learning From The Great Prayers Of The Old Testament*.

To add some edifying humor, our sleepy friend Eutychus II has emerged from his slumbers to tease with “Lest We Remember.”

¹ Thomas Chalmers, *The Town Church of Manchester* [Manchester, NH: The Jubilee Committee, 1903], 16.

Don't miss William Austin's "Chanticleer." Austin was a contemporary of the Bard. He was a barrister of Lincoln's Inn, and resided for many years in Southwark, where he acquired a great local reputation.

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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

Servant Witness

Exposing the Darkness: A Call for Presuppositional Elenctics, Part 1

by Brian L. De Jong

A parable from modern times: When I was first ordained as a minister, I served as a campus minister to international students at the University of Florida in Gainesville. During my two years there, I became interested in their football team. Since then I have followed the ups and downs of Gator football. During the Tim Tebow years, the Gators marched up and down the field at will, scoring touchdowns and collecting national championship trophies with apparent ease. After Tebow's graduation, and the departure of coach Urban Meyer, the university hired a defense minded coach. In the coming years, that coach built a ferocious defense that was annually ranked among the nation's best. At the same time, the offense became more and more offensive to fans, seemingly unable to master the mechanics of the forward pass. Calling their offensive unit "inept" would be a generous assessment. Each week a sportswriter at the local newspaper would "grade the Gators" for their game performance. While the defense frequently got As, the grades for the offense ranged from D to F most weeks. Not surprisingly, no championships were won during those years.

It often seems that the Reformed world is not that different. In presuppositional apologetics we have a ferocious defense. When it is practiced rightly, it stops the unbeliever in his tracks and leaves even outspoken atheists spluttering. But where is the offense? Do we know how to attack the unbelief of unbelievers? I think we fail miserably on the "offensive side of the ball."

The reason for this lack of offense is due to ignorance of the science of elenctics. Elenctics is a much neglected facet of the Christian life, of gospel ministry, and of presuppositional apologetics. Indeed, the very term "elenctics" is unfamiliar to most believers, although it is a thoroughly scriptural concept. David Hesselgrave has called elenctics "a neglected subject in contemporary theology"¹

In these articles I propose to correct this oversight by introducing the reader to the concept of elenctics. In part 1 we will consider a definition of elenctics, sketch some of its chief characteristics, and consider a three-pronged model for ministry. In part 2, we will look in depth at the biblical foundations of the concept of elenctics.

In my estimation, the practice of elenctics should be central to our engagement with the world around us—a world that is increasingly covered in the thick darkness of unbelief, skepticism, cynicism, and creeping secularism. When it is properly grasped, elenctics will enable us to let our light so shine before men that they may see our good

¹ David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 419.

works, that the wickedness of this evil age will be effectively exposed, that the darkness of sin will be scattered, and that our Heavenly Father might be more properly glorified.

The term “elenctics” comes from the Greek verb ἐλέγχω (*elengchō*), which means “1. to bring to light, expose, set forth; 2. to convict or convince someone of something; 3. to reprove, correct; 4. to punish, discipline.”²

Dutch missiologist J.H. Bavinck explains the development of the term in *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*:

In Homer the verb has the meaning of “to bring to shame.” It is connected with the word *elengchos* that signifies shame. It later underwent a certain change so that the emphasis fell more upon the conviction of guilt, the demonstration of guilt. It is this later significance that it has in the New Testament. Its meaning is entirely ethical and religious.³

Consider the following occurrences of the verb ἐλέγχω (*elengchō*) in the New Testament:

John 16:8, “And when he [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict (ἐλέγξει *elengxei*) the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.”

Hebrews 12:5, “And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved (ἐλεγχόμενος *elengchomenos*) by him.’ ”

John 3:20, “For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed (ἐλεγχθῇ *elengchthē*).”

1 Timothy 5:20, “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke (ἐλέγχε *elengche*) them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.”

2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof (ἐλεγμόν *elengmon*), for correction, and for training in righteousness.”

Titus 1:9, “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke (ἐλέγχειν *elengchein*) those who contradict it.”

Titus 1:13, “This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke (ἐλέγχε *elengche*) them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith.”

² William F. Arndt, Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick William Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 249.

³ J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), 221.

Titus 2:15, “Declare these things; exhort and rebuke (*ἐλεγχε*) with all authority. Let no one disregard you.”

Ephesians 5:11, 13, “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose (*ἐλέγχετε elenchete*) them But when anything is exposed (*ἐλεγχόμενα elengchomena*) by the light, it becomes visible.”

Luke 3:19, “But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved (*ἐλεγχόμενος elenchomenos*) by him for Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done.”

From the number of these passages, their relative significance, and the strength of their exhortations, we can see that elenctics is not a peripheral practice on the edges of Christianity. In fact, this is an essential component of Christian ministry if such ministry is to be considered thoroughly biblical.

The concept of elenctics, then, finds its roots in the New Testament. The discipline of elenctics, however, was first articulated by Abraham Kuyper in his *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology*.⁴ In a class on elenctics taught at Westminster Theological Seminary, Professor Harvey Conn argued that Kuyper saw elenctics as a defensive science and tended to treat it in isolation from apologetics. In Kuyper’s thought elenctics became an abstract intellectual tool for changing epistemologies rather than a missionary instrument for changing people.

Kuyper’s concept was later developed by two prominent Dutch theologians: J. H. Bavinck and Cornelius Van Til. Bavinck’s contributions on elenctics were greater than Van Til’s, although Van Til’s work in apologetics dovetails nicely with elenctics.

In his introduction, Bavinck takes elenctics in a different direction from Kuyper. Bavinck places elenctics in a more intimate relation with missions and practical theology, thus avoiding Kuyper’s weaknesses. Bavinck writes:

Elenctics is strongly controlled by the missionary motive. It is not primarily a defense against the dangerous power of non-Christian religions, but it is rather itself a direct attack upon them. As we have already seen, elenctics calls the non-Christian religions to a position of responsibility, and attempts to convince their adherents of sin and to move them to repentance and conversion.⁵

Bavinck’s missionary thrust is further seen when he says “In all elenctics the concern is always with the all-important question: ‘What have you done with God?’ ”⁶ He adds, “*Elenchein* does not in the first place refer to arguments which show the absurdity of heathendom. Its primary meaning refers to the conviction and unmasking of sin, and to the call to responsibility.”⁷

Van Til, in his apologetics, deals with a similar concept:

⁴ Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, trans. J. Hendrik De Vries (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1898).

⁵ Bavinck, *Introduction*, 232.

⁶ Ibid., 223.

⁷ Ibid., 226.

The natural man at bottom knows that he is the creature of God. He knows that he should live to the glory of God. He knows that in all that he does he should stress that the field of reality which he investigates has the stamp of God's ownership upon it. But he suppresses his knowledge of himself as he truly is. He is the man with the iron mask. A true method of apologetics must seek to tear off that iron mask.⁸

The unmasking of the non-Christian in order to call him to repentance and faith is the method of both Bavinck and Van Til. This is the high water mark for elenctic theory, up to this point in history. Others, including Donald McGavran,⁹ John Stott,¹⁰ and Samuel Zwemer¹¹ have touched on the subject, but none have surpassed the Dutch theologians.

What, then, would be a working definition of elenctics? Bavinck defines elenctics as “the science which unmasks to heathendom all false religions as sin against God, and it calls heathendom to a knowledge of the only true God.”¹²

In another place he adds, “Elenctics is the science concerned with a very special aspect of the approach: our direct attack upon non-Christian religiosity in order to call a man to repentance.”¹³

Abraham Kuyper saw elenctics as Christian ethics in their antithetical relationship to pseudo-Christianity, pseudo-religion, and pseudo-philosophy. Elenctics is the Christian response to such false thought.

Harvie Conn taught:

Elenctics for Kuyper is the discipline setting Christian faith and life over against false religions. Kuyper tried to reject any neutral understanding of elenctics. Elenctics presumes the inadequacy and falsehood of religions over against the absoluteness and purity of the Christian faith.¹⁴

Conn himself treated elenctics as a theory of approach to the world religions. He saw it as more closely connected to apologetics than to missions. He did not, however, equate elenctics with apologetics nor did he make it merely a subdivision of apologetics.

For our purposes, I propose to define elenctics as the offensive counterpart to apologetics. Whereas apologetics is “the vindication of the Christian philosophy of life against various forms of the non-Christian philosophy of life,”¹⁵ elenctics is the direct attack upon the various forms of the non-Christian philosophy of life. It is the public exposing of sin as sin, and the call for repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

Having understood a definition of elenctics, let us next consider some leading characteristics of elenctics.

⁸ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 101.

⁹ See Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 223.

¹⁰ See John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 73.

¹¹ See “Princeton Semiannual Bulletin.”

¹² Bavinck, *Introduction*, 222.

¹³ Ibid., 233.

¹⁴ ???

¹⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), 1.

The first characteristic of elenctics is that it is *spiritual*. By this I mean that elenctics is the work of the Holy Spirit upon the human spirit. As we saw in John 16:8, the Holy Spirit is said to elencticize the world. Bavinck comments:

The Holy Spirit is actually the only conceivable subject of this verb, for the conviction of sin exceeds all human ability. Only the Holy Spirit can do this, even though he can and will use us as instruments in his hand. Taken in this sense, elenctics is the science which is concerned with the conviction of sin. In a special sense then it is the science which unmasks to heathendom all false religions as sin against God, and it calls heathendom to a knowledge of the only true God. To be able to do this well and truthfully it is necessary to have a responsible knowledge of false religions, but one must also be able to lay bare the deepest motifs. Elenctics is possible only on the basis of a veritable self-knowledge, which is kindled in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.¹⁶

Van Til also stresses the work of the Holy Spirit in elenctics when he says: It is upon the power of the Holy Spirit that the Reformed preacher relies when he tells men that they are lost in sin and in need of a Savior. The Reformed preacher does not tone down his message in order that it may find acceptance with the natural man. He does not say that his message is less certainly true because of its non-acceptance by the natural man. The natural man is, by virtue of his creation in the image of God, always accessible to the truth; accessible to the penetration of the truth by the Spirit of God. Apologetics, like systematics, is valuable to the precise extent that it presses the truth upon the attention of the natural man. The natural man must be blasted out of his hideouts, his caves, his last lurking places.¹⁷

Secondly, elenctics is *intrapersonal*. If a Christian is not undergoing the elenctic work of the Spirit in his own life, he will not be able to effectively elencticize others. Indeed, the Christian ought to search his own heart and life for sin against God. The Christian is commanded to put off the old man with his practices—to mortify his own sin. Only then will he be able to help others deal properly with their sin. As Bavinck says, “Elenctics can actually occur only if one recognizes and unmasks these same undercurrents within himself.”¹⁸

Third, elenctics is *interpersonal*. Bavinck notes that knowing a religious system is never enough. We must know what the particular adherent believes and experiences. We must deal not with abstract religious and philosophical systems, but with an individual person's understanding and expression of his religion. Only by asking appropriate questions can we determine what the person actually believes, and what he experiences. Then we can begin to formulate an elenctic plan.

Fourth, elenctics is *contextual*. Bavinck rightly says:

Abstract, disembodied and history-less sinners do not exist; only very concrete sinners exist, whose sinful life is determined and characterized by all sorts of cultural

¹⁶ Bavinck, *Introduction*, 222.

¹⁷ Van Til, *Defense*, 105.

¹⁸ Bavinck, *Introduction*, 222.

and historical factors; by poverty, hunger, superstition, traditions, chronic illnesses, tribal morality, and thousands of other things. I must bring the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ to the whole man, in his concrete existence, in his everyday environment.¹⁹

Fifth, elenctics is *full-orbed*. Man is organically united in his essential being. His physical existence cannot be divorced from his spiritual life, his body is not separate from his soul, or vice versa. The elenctic approach must recognize the organic unity of man, and by word and deed encounter the whole man in his total depravity. We must bring the whole counsel of God to bear upon his entire sinful condition, settling for nothing less than wholehearted repentance and thorough-going faith in Jesus Christ.

Sixth, elenctics must be both *narrow* and *broad*. An individual sinner's particular sins must be exposed as sin, and that specific person should be called to individualized repentance. But it is also true that the sinful worldviews of large groupings of humanity must be exposed, dissected and refuted. For instance, not only should an individual Muslim be shown that his personal rejection of Christ is wrong and requires repentance and faith, but the religious system of Islam must also be evaluated, critiqued and disproven as a system. Elenctics can and should be practiced both specifically and generally at a micro level and a macro level.

Seventh, elenctics must be *patient*, *humble*, and *gracious*. Especially in the Pastoral Epistles, patience, humility, and graciousness are presupposed for the effective overseer. As elenctic work is part of every pastor's duty, the humility and patience of a pastor must undergird his elenctic encounters. He extends the grace and mercy of God as he helps sinners to recognize their sin and to repent and believe. This can only happen, again, if we are regularly performing elenctics upon ourselves.

In conclusion, what would an elenctic ministry look like? Perhaps the following might be something of a model for carrying out the principles from this study.

The minister of the gospel understands and accepts his duty to defend the Christian faith, to challenge the unbelief of others, and to positively present the good news of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. By understanding apologetics, elenctics, and evangelism, he develops a three-pronged approach.

First, when he encounters the non-Christian, he readily defends the Christian philosophy of life against the attacks of the non-Christian. He does this by implementing the main components of a covenantal, or presuppositional apologetic. He knows his own system thoroughly enough to give a reasonable defense to everyone who questions his commitments, always going to the root issues. He does not answer the fool according to his folly, lest he be like him. Rather, he rigorously defends the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

Secondly, he challenges the non-Christian's adherence to a false religious and philosophical system. He diagnoses, dissects, and exposes the beliefs of the non-Christian as rebellion against God the Creator. By patiently and persistently interacting with the non-believer, he can determine particular lines of thought and lifestyle. Graciously and winsomely, he can show the unbeliever where and why his perspective is wrong. He can also demonstrate how the unbeliever's life is sinful and self-defeating. In this sense he is answering the fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

¹⁹ Ibid., 81.

Thus, having defended his own religious commitments and also having exposed the non-Christian's commitments, he can present the positive facts of the gospel of Jesus Christ. At every step, whether defending Christianity, exposing unbelief, falsehood, and sin, or presenting the gospel facts, there is a direct and urgent call for repentance and faith. Depending on the power of the Holy Spirit to establish a work of grace in the heart of the unbeliever, he relies upon God alone for the outcome. As he sees the Spirit quickening the unbeliever, all credit, praise, and glory goes to the God who saves. Even when his efforts result in the hardening of an unbelieving acquaintance, praise is given to the sovereign God for his wisdom and justice.

Not only is the minister carrying out such a ministry personally, but he is equipping the saints for the work of ministry. He is training the congregation in this three-pronged approach, and encouraging them as they put this approach into practice. Being a man of prayer, the minister also intercedes to the Lord for the folk among whom he lives and works—both believers and unbelievers.

In all of this, the minister is careful to maintain truly Christian conduct and a good conscience. He speaks and he acts with gentleness and reverence, even when dealing with the provocations and hostility of an unbeliever. The minister's exemplary behavior stands as a silent witness to all whom he encounters, reinforcing the message he communicates verbally. He realizes all too well that hypocrisy will undermine his testimony and give the unbeliever an excuse for dismissing the truth claims of Christianity. Therefore even when he sins, he is careful to repent, and to exhibit deeds in keeping with repentance. His faith in Christ burns brightly before men as he walks daily by faith in the Son of God. By living in this way, he will put to shame those who revile his good behavior in Christ, and leave them truly without excuse before the Judge of all the earth.

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ServantTruth

Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Toward a Union of Spirit, Wisdom, *and Word*

by James D. Baird

Introduction

The Evangelical Philosophical Society has held an online colloquium for the past three years called the “Christ-Shaped Philosophy Project.”¹ This project has centered on constructive engagements with Paul K. Moser’s model of Christian philosophy, which construes Christian philosophy as a distinctively *Christ-shaped* discipline. Moser has articulated his model with the utmost care and precision, engendering responses from a plethora of Christian philosophers representing a broad range of perspectives. Some of these Christian philosophers have provided a more friendly response to Moser than others, but nearly all of them have focused in one way or another on whether his model of Christian philosophy qualifies as legitimate philosophy.

It seems clear to me that Moser’s work on Christ-shaped philosophy is courageous, incisive, and timely. Moser has called for Christian philosophers to adopt a process of wisdom acquisition that is characterized by obedience to the redemptive authority of God in Christ. He has largely used the letters of Paul as the departure point for his model of Christian philosophy which is a refreshing breath of spiritual air in a discipline that is dominated by stagnate, religiously neutral professionalism. Nevertheless, while many of Moser’s peers have asked the question whether his model should be considered a model of *philosophy proper*, too little has been said about whether Moser’s model should be considered *Pauline*. In this brief paper, I will first outline Moser’s model of Christ-shaped philosophy. Second, I will argue that because Moser’s model purports to be Pauline, it should require Christian philosophizing to submit to Christ’s inward agent-power *and* to the Word of God.²

Moser’s Christ-Shaped Philosophy

Moser intends his model of Christ-shaped philosophy to be decisively Pauline.³ He devotes much of his exegetical work to Paul’s writings, especially his epistle to the

¹ All of the papers from this colloquium cited in the present paper are available at <http://bit.ly/ChristShapedPhilosophyProject>.

² By the “Word of God,” I mean what theologians call *special verbal revelation*; that is, God’s interpretation of his divine being and action expressed to human creatures via oral or written communication that is accommodated to fit their creaturely cognitive capacities. For a helpful outline of the nature of revelation in its various forms, see Richard B. Gaffin Jr. “The Redemptive-Historical View,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Beth M. Stovell (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 91–93.

³ Moser’s model is intended to be Pauline, but not *solely* Pauline. As I allude to below, Moser also designed his model after what he takes to be the example of Jesus. See Paul K. Moser, “A Reply to William Hasker’s Objection to ‘Christ-Shaped Philosophy’,” *Christ-Shaped Philosophy Project* (2012), 2–3 and 6.

Colossians, and has thence concluded that the discipline of philosophy must be brought under the Lordship of Jesus. More specifically, Moser understands the correct mode of Christian philosophy in terms of the characteristics that exuded from Jesus throughout his earthly ministry: willing submission to the power of God's Spiritual love. This divine, Spiritual love floods the Christian's experience via what Moser calls *Gethsemane union with Christ*; that is, "the inward agent-power of Christ working, directly at the level of psychological and motivational attitudes, toward a cooperative person's renewal in God's image as God's beloved child."⁴ So, Moser argues, the Christian philosopher must embrace and enrich his Gethsemane union with Christ by placing his most devout attention on transformation after the image of Christ's life of self-giving love. Moser eschews definitions of philosophy that do not move beyond the systematic application of reason to include the transformative project of God's Spirit in Christian philosophers.

Perhaps Moser's Christ-shaped philosophy model could be best construed as a call for Christian philosophers to see Jesus as their Rabbi—as their teacher—rather than, say, Socrates. And in calling Christian philosophers to see Jesus as their teacher, Moser has (self-consistently) elicited the teaching of Jesus himself: "A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). As Christian philosophers, Moser has reminded us that we are first and foremost disciples of Jesus. Our primary philosophical aim, therefore, should be a wisdom that forms us into Christ's image.

Uniting Spirit, Wisdom, and Word

So far as I have expositioned it, Moser's model is in line with the teaching of Paul (see 2 Cor. 10:5; Col. 2:8, 3:1–17). The divergence between Moser's model of Christian philosophy and Paul's model appears most clearly in how Moser and Paul conceive of the Spirit's role in forming Christian philosophers after Christ's image. From what I can tell, Moser's reading of Paul assigns the Spirit of God with the responsibility to work in the Christian with redemptive authority, calling her to cooperate with divine love, molding her after the image of Christ, quite apart from the Word of God.⁵ Paul does not, however, bifurcate the Spirit of God and the Word of God in the way Moser's model suggests. From passages like Romans 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:18 and 15:1–2; Ephesians 1:13 and 5:25–26; Philippians 2:14–16; Colossians 1:28 and 3:16; as well as 2 Timothy 3:16–17, it is clear that Paul sees the Word of God as having a vital role in the Spirit's internal work, especially when that Word is proclaimed and preached. Paul's thinking in this respect is most succinctly summed up in Galatians 6:17: "the sword of the Spirit . . . is the word of God."

From Paul's perspective, the Spirit works *by* and *with* the Word of God to shape Christians in the image of Christ. For example, Paul teaches that the Spirit shines "in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6) *through enlightening* "the open statement of the truth" of God's Word, the "gospel," and the proclamation of "Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Cor. 4:2–5; cf. John 15:26, 16:13–14). For Paul, the Spirit's redemptive and authoritative informing of the Christian is tethered to the Word of God.⁶ The two divine realities of the Spirit and Word⁷ function

⁴ Paul K. Moser, "Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United," *Christ-Shaped Philosophy Project* (2012), 4.

⁵ For example, see *Ibid.*, 2–5.

⁶ Hence Paul's strong words to Timothy: "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:1–2). The "word"

together in a harmonious union toward the same end: the cognitive and affective renovation of God's children. It seems to me, then, that a model of philosophy that wishes to be Pauline (like Moser's) must characterize the Christian philosopher's redemptive authority in terms of the Word of God as enlightened and enlivened by the Spirit.⁸

A more systematic account of Paul's teaching might categorize the Word of God as the *objective principle* and the Spirit of God as the *subjective principle* of Christian philosophical reflection, but we need not enter into that detailed discussion here.⁹ However the Spirit and Word might be precisely defined and related, according to Paul they are *both* the Christian's redemptive authority—that much is abundantly clear from Paul's letters—and as the Christian's redemptive authority, they are regulative of the *mode* and *content* of Christian philosophy. For Paul, the Spirit and Word are determinative for *how* Christian philosophers should go about deriving conclusions and taking stances on particular theoretical issues (for example), and determinative for *what* conclusions they derive and stances they take (Gal. 5:22–23; 2 Cor. 10:5–6; Col. 2:8; 2 Tim. 3:15–4:5). The Spirit and Word do not grant outright solutions to every philosophical problem, but they do say plenty of pertinent things about philosophical issues, and these pertinent things should be taken *most* seriously by the Christian philosopher.¹⁰

But what *is* the Word of God? The passages listed above show that for Paul it is *at least* the Hebrew Bible and the gospel message of “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2), although good arguments exist for Paul's having granted authority to the apostolic witness as a whole.¹¹ It is doubtful, however, that Paul believed the 66 books of the Bible were the Word of God when he was alive, since some New Testament books were written after his death. This being so, it is not necessary for Paul to have assented to the 66 books of the Bible

that Paul commands Timothy to preach here alludes to “all of Scripture” in 2 Timothy 3:16. These passages taken in conjunction, therefore, give strong credence to the idea that the authoritative role Paul assigns to the word (of God) cannot be filled by Paul's gospel *alone*, but rather necessitates a canon of “sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). In other words, on my reading of Paul, his teachings demand philosophy to take on a good news orientation that is bolstered by the Word of God as a body of authoritative texts, not merely by a kerygma as Moser argues (see Moser's “Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United,” *Christ-Shaped Philosophy Project* (2012), 2–3 and *The Elusive God* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008], esp. chapter 3 and chapter 4).

⁷ Of course, the former divine reality is God himself, while the latter is merely God's special verbal revelation. Nevertheless, granting this important distinction, Herman Bavinck insightfully insisted on a close link between the Godhead and the Word of God: “It is not the authenticity, nor the canonicity, nor even the inspiration, but the *divinity* of Scripture, its divine authority, which is the true object of the testimony of the Holy Spirit. He causes believers to submit to Scripture and binds them to it in the same measure and intensity as to the person of Christ himself. He assures them that in life and death and all the crises of life, they can bank on the Word of God and even fearlessly appear with it before the Judge of heaven and earth.” (Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:596. Emphasis in original).

⁸ Throughout this paper, I am arguing for a refinement of Moser's *model* of Pauline philosophy, not his *practice* of Pauline philosophy. In many ways, Moser's use of the Bible is exemplary; the problem is that on his model, as I understand it, his use of the Bible is unnecessary for his philosophy to qualify as Pauline.

⁹ Preliminarily, I submit that the fact that the Spirit and Word are (organically) related in Paul's thinking as objective and subjective philosophical principles follows from the aim of Pauline philosophy: wisdom “not of this age” (1 Cor. 2:6). See Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 9–10 and 116–118.

¹⁰ See Joseph N. Partain's “Christian Philosophy and Philosophy's Perennial Problems,” *Christ-Shaped Philosophy Project* (2013).

¹¹ See Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 240–241 and 483. See also Ridderbos's *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1988) and Meredith G. Kline's *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

as the Word of God in order to argue (as I would like to) that Christian philosophers desiring to be Pauline (like Moser) must grant to the whole Bible the same high divine status and spiritual use that Paul attributed to the Word of God. Christians know directly by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God.¹² It follows, therefore, that Christian philosophers must treat the Bible as Paul treated the Word of God if they are to follow Paul’s example. To insist otherwise would be to follow the letter of Paul’s teaching while neglecting the Spirit.

Conclusion

If we are to be Pauline, uniting wisdom and Spirit is not enough, contra Moser. Distinctively Pauline philosophy must set up a disciplinary model that unites Spirit, wisdom, and *Word*. Such a fully Pauline conception of Christ-shaped philosophy should call Christian philosophers to submit themselves and their quest for wisdom to authoritative inquiry by Christ’s Spirit speaking *in* and *through* the Word of God.¹³ Christ must be preeminent in all things, even in philosophy (Col. 1:18)—and if Christ is to be preeminent, his Word must be preeminent as well (Col. 1:23; cf. John 15:26; 16:12–15; 17:3, 8, 12, 17–19). Rather than undermining the better thrust of Moser’s labors, supplementing his model in the way I am proposing should enhance his vision for a Christian philosophy that is cast principally as messianic discipleship. After all, it was the Messiah himself who saw most clearly the causal link between obeying his divine words and acquiring wisdom: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man” (Matt. 7:24).¹⁴

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¹² See Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “Systematic Theology and Hermeneutics,” in *Seeing Christ in All of Scripture: Hermeneutics at Westminster Theological Seminary*, ed. Peter A. Lillback (Philadelphia: Westminster Seminary Press, 2016), 40–41: “The conviction expressed (or that ought to be expressed) in saying, ‘The Bible is God’s Word,’ arises immediately from being exposed directly to Scripture—not only, perhaps not even primarily, to its explicit self-witness in passages like 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:20–21, but also to Scripture throughout. This conviction, produced by the Holy Spirit, may not be called into question.” The great Reformed confessions take the position outlined here by Gaffin. The Belgic Confession article 5 reads: “We receive all these books [of the Bible] and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith. And we believe without a doubt all things contained in them—not so much because the church receives and approves them as such but above all because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they prove themselves to be from God. For even the blind themselves are able to see that the things predicted in them do happen.” See also the Westminster Confession of Faith 1.4 and 1.5. Building on the work of John Calvin (cf. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960], 1.7.2), these Reformed Christian confessions describe a cognitive process of acquiring knowledge about the divine origin and authority of the Bible similar, but different in important respects, to Alvin Plantinga’s extended A/C model. See his *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹³ Here, I am in agreement with Partain: “This ‘redemptive inquiry by God in Christ’ (that which calls for Moser’s ‘obedience mode’ in a Spirit-empowered, ‘Gethsemane union with Christ’) is itself—at every point— informed and guided by biblical content” (Joseph N. Partain, “Christian Philosophy and Philosophy’s Perennial Problems,” 7).

¹⁴ I would like to thank William D. Dennison, Joel Carini, Paul K. Moser, and Tedla G. Woldeyohannes for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

ServantReading

How Vosian Is Van Til? A Review Article

by Danny E. Olinger

In Defense of the Eschaton: Essays in Reformed Apologetics, by William D. Dennison, edited by James D. Baird. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015, xxviii + 197 pages, \$27.00, paper.

In his 1985 book, *Paul's Two-Age Construction and Apologetics*,¹ William Dennison argued that the Apostle Paul used a two-age construction for the starting point of a Christian apologetic. Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 1–3 that the church defends the wisdom of the age to come against the wisdom of the present evil age. Dennison then argued that Cornelius Van Til's Reformed apologetic corresponded to this Pauline structure and imperative. For Van Til, apologetics was the vindication of the Christian philosophy of life (the wisdom of the age to come) against non-Christian philosophies of life (the wisdom of the present evil age).

During the thirty years that have followed, Dennison, a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Covenant College in Chattanooga, Tennessee, has filled out this thesis with articles and reviews. These writings have been collected and edited by James Baird in the anthology *In Defense of the Eschaton: Essays in Reformed Apologetics*.

Dennison understands that Van Til put forth his apologetic within the traditional rubric of systematic theology. Dennison embraces that apologetic, but he seeks to show that historical and eschatological elements were also foundational for Van Til's system. Namely, he argues that Van Til followed after his teacher Geerhardus Vos as Van Til grounded his apologetic in the history of redemption as revealed in Holy Scripture.

This redemptive-historical emphasis put Dennison at odds with two other leading Van Tilian proponents, John Frame and the late Greg Bahnsen. Dennison interacted with Frame in a 1995 essay marking the one hundredth birthday of Van Til, "Analytic Philosophy and Van Til's Epistemology" (9–35), and with Bahnsen in his 2004 review of Bahnsen's *Van Til's Apologetic*.²

In the former, Dennison praises Frame for acknowledging that Van Til presented a holistic biblical system. Frame rightly refers to the first principles of Van Til's thought, the theological introduction that lies behind the theological system. Where Frame falls short is that he focuses primarily upon analytic philosophy and modern language theory

¹ William D. Dennison, *Paul's Two-Age Construction and Apologetics* (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 1985; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000).

² Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic, Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998).

when dealing with Van Til. Van Til used the language of idealism, but the entrance into Van Til's methodology is not idealism, but history. Dennison writes, "According to Van Til, his epistemology is built upon the foundation of a philosophy of history. It is within this context that Van Til developed his famous Creator-creature distinction and the other aspects of his epistemology. To my knowledge, Frame's writings have not noted this key point" (21). Dennison continues:

In the broad context of analytic philosophy, [Frame] rejects (or at least has the tendency to overlook) a sole Archimedean point that explains the whole picture of an individual's thought. Hence, his Van Tilian epistemology is formulated within the context of a perspectival conception of knowledge, whereas the main rubric of Van Til's epistemology—the philosophy of history—is not even investigated or presented. (21)

Frame for his part does not recognize himself in the critique. In his endorsement of *In Defense of the Eschaton*, Frame writes, "Professor Dennison and I have not seen eye-to-eye with regard to Van Til, and after twenty years I am still bewildered by his critique of my approach (chapter 2 of this book)." He then graciously adds, "But Dennison and I both seek to honor Jesus Christ and to recognize his claims on human thought, and I honor him for that."

Dennison praises Bahnsen even more than he does Frame, but ends up with the same criticism. Bahnsen's *Van Til's Apologetic* is a "welcome addition" (155). Bahnsen "provides insightful commentary as he maps out the position of Van Til's opponents while providing further analysis into Van Til's own position" (156). Dennison concludes, "Bahnsen's work may be the finest and fairest encapsulation of Van Til's apologetic system to appear in print" (158), but he adds that it has a flaw. In Dennison's judgment, "it fails to grasp the control that biblical progressive revelation had upon Van Til's apologetic" (158).

To prove his point, Dennison interacts with Bahnsen's discussion of Van Til's view of logic. Bahnsen rightly quoted Van Til as saying, "Human logic agrees with the story, because it derives its meaning from the story" (158). Rather than Bahnsen penetrating why Van Til declared this, Dennison notes that Bahnsen turned to a discussion of the laws of logic. Dennison writes:

Ironically, as a Van Tilian, Bahnsen fails to apply Van Til's transcendental analysis upon Van Til. In other words, he fails to grasp the transcendental starting point of Van Til's view of logic and how Van Til applied his starting point to the philosophical issues dealing with the "laws of logic." In more than one place in his writings, Van Til was clear that "logic" and "facts" only have meaning in the context of the "story." For Van Til, the "story" is the "Christian story"—meaning the story of redemption unfolding progressively upon the pages of Scripture. Specifically, logic and facts have no meaning outside the redemptive-historical revelation of Christ. (158)

In Dennison's judgment, the area where Frame and Bahnsen struggled in their analysis is the area where John Muether succeeded in his biography, *Cornelius Van Til*. In his glowing review of the book, Dennison writes:

Muether has correctly understood that the history of redemption, conditioned by God's covenant, grounds Van Til's view of antithesis. On this exact point, he has correctly assessed the influence of Vos upon Van Til's apologetic—often missed by others. (161)

This thesis, that the history of redemption grounds the antithesis in Van Til's apologetic, is a thread that runs through the chapters of *In Defense of the Eschaton*, even though Part 1 (chapters 1–5) is labeled "Van Til Studies" and Part 2 (chapters 6–8) is labeled "Redemptive History and Apologetics." The trump card that Dennison smartly plays in multiple essays is illustrating Van Til's doctrine of common grace. Dennison contends that Vos's redemptive-historical teaching was foundational to Van Til's reassessment of this doctrine.

This comes out clearly in Dennison's 1993 essay, "Van Til and Common Grace." According to Dennison, Van Til appreciated the traditional Reformed position on common grace, that God restrained man's sinful state through history, and God enabled man to express gifts as an image-bearer through history. But, Van Til also believed that common grace had to be understood eschatologically. He believed common grace dealt with the question, "What do entities which will one day be wholly different from one another have in common before the final stage of separation is reached?" (48).

The example that Dennison supplies to explain Van Til's position is that of a Christian and a non-Christian fishing. One catches a bass. They measure it and agree that it is sixteen inches long. However, they disagree on how the bass came to be. The Christian believes God created it. The non-Christian believes it the chance product of evolution. Apparently, the result is a commonness of description but a difference in explanation. Dennison opines that most Christians would rest content with that explanation, but not Van Til. Dennison writes, "Van Til maintained that every description is an explanation of a fact—the description of a fact is not a neutral category that exists irrespective of God" (46).

Van Til did not accept the dichotomy between description and explanation because he believed that definition and description belong to God alone. The believer is self-conscious of his dependence upon God to describe and explain the facts. The non-believer is self-conscious of his rejection of God to describe and explain the facts.

This is why Van believed that Christian and non-Christian cannot have any fact in common. They stand opposed in their epistemological self-consciousness. At the same time, the two stand together in that they are both created in the image of God and living in the same universe. This is why the two can agree that the bass is sixteen inches long.

In coming to this conclusion, Van Til appealed to a right understanding of pre-redemptive revelation, which Vos had laid out in *The Biblical Theology*.³ In the garden, Adam, created upright, fellowshiped with God. Furthermore, Adam's relationship to God was covenantal at every point. There was no interpretation of what was before Adam in the garden apart from God. Adam was in an environment where natural and special revelation were not separated. Dennison remarks:

³ Geerhardus Vos, *The Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 19–44.

For Van Til, herein lies the notion of common grace. In this pre-redemption state, all men in Adam (the elect and reprobate) have a unified understanding and interpretation of the revelation of God and his creation. God's revelation is everywhere; all men have a consciousness within them that God created them in his image and all men have a testimony of God that he is the Creator and sustains all things. In this condition, all men have a common ethical reaction of goodness to the common mandate of God (which some refer to as the cultural mandate); according to Van Til, "they are all mandate-hearers and mandate-keepers." God has the *same* favorable attitude to all. Being in union with Adam's original status, mankind has a holistic consciousness of pre-redemptive revelation within them and the testimony of a holistic pre-redemptive revelation to them that continues throughout all the stages of history, even to the final consummation. Van Til calls the continuation of this original status common grace. (50)

In his 2011 article "Antithesis, Common Grace, and Plato's View of the Soul" (55–80), Dennison revisited Van Til's conception of common grace to help examine Christian education. He observed that many historic Reformed institutions of higher learning had become secularized. In asking why, he concludes that Christian scholars too often invoked the doctrine of common grace and allowed natural and general revelation to become a shared point of integration with non-Christian scholars. The result was the loss of antithesis at the institutions.

According to Dennison, Van Til had anticipated this decline and urged Christian scholars to proceed with the understanding that antithesis must precede common grace. A particular element in the non-Christian's system may be a common grace insight, one shared by both Christian and non-Christian. But, it is only a common grace insight if it is in compliance with the truth of God's Word.

As an example, Dennison turns to an analysis of Plato's teaching that the soul is immortal. Is Plato's teaching the same as Scripture's teaching? Plato's conception demands a belief in reincarnation and the existence of a Form world at the top of a chain of being. Dennison writes:

Simply put, the interrelationship between the Form world and the immortal soul is not the Archimedean point on which the Bible predicates the immortality of the soul. For this reason, Plato's holistic construct of the immortality of the soul is antithetical to the holistic teaching of the immortality of the soul found in Holy Scripture. (73)

The Bible teaches that God created man after his own image with an immortal soul, which distinguished human beings from brutes.

After showing the difference that exists, Dennison challenges scholars to prove that the decline of once outstanding Christian institutions is the result of stressing the antithesis between Christian thought and non-Christian thought too much. He declares,

The secularization of any such institution occurs because the epistemological, metaphysical, ontological, and ethical truth of the integrative and progressive infallible revelation of the triune God of the Bible has been compromised under what Reformed thought refers to as common grace. (77)

In his 2011 essay “Van Til and Classical Christian Education” (81–103), Dennison questions whether Christians should be enthusiastically embracing the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic) in educating their children. Van Til pointed out that the Greeks thought that it was reasonable to ask what the facts are before they asked where the facts come from. If God himself followed this method of the Greeks, then God could deny his own being in order to gain knowledge and interpretation of the facts. When Christians adopt the Greek model in education, human reason enters into a partnership with God with a goal of producing a moral life. But, there is nothing inherent in the *trivium* to bring about the ethical transformation of a person in the biblical sense. Dennison writes:

Human beings have no release from the bondage of sin and corresponding freedom unto eternal life without Christ’s central redemptive-historical work. Life in Christ through his Spirit is absolutely and solely the gift of grace; our reconciliation comes solely from the power of Christ’s death and resurrection. Can the Christian find such a truth in classical pagan literature? No—nor can it be found in any construct of the *trivium* in classical education. (99)

The opening two essays in Part 2 of *In Defense of the Eschaton*, “The Christian Apologist in the Present State of Redemptive History” (105–17) and “The Eschatological Implications of Genesis 2:15 for Apologetics” (118–31), share the same thesis. The believer, united by faith to Christ in the heavenly places, is called to defend the holy presence of Christ from every evil advance against Christ and his kingdom.

In the “The Christian Apologist,” Dennison contends that Christians and non-Christians do not share in a common cognitive process of reasoning and experiencing. The non-Christian binds reason and experience to an earthly existence. The Christian binds reason and experience to being joined to Christ in the heavenly places. This contrast is why the apologist must not make a neutral appeal to reason (logic) or temporal experience (empirical data). The believer, through Christ’s Spirit, is already draped in the glorious atmosphere of Christ’s presence in heaven. Hence, the apologist’s task is a defense of the final state of heavenly life, or as the title of the anthology proclaims, a defense of the eschaton.

In “The Eschatological Implications,” Dennison appeals to Genesis 2:15 (“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and to keep it”) to explain the relationship between eschatology and apologetics. Following the exegetical insights of Gregory Beale and Meredith Kline, Dennison sees Adam as a priest, and the garden as a creational representation of the heavenly temple of the Lord. Adam is immediately placed in God’s presence to guard the garden-sanctuary. In that defense, Adam does not begin with natural revelation and then move to special revelation. Rather, God condescends and reveals himself to Adam. Dennison writes:

According to Genesis 2:15, Adam is to perform his apologetic task by defending and serving the Lord and his Word; he is to live by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. The eschatological dimension of God’s revelation determines the method of the apologetic task: He must start with God, and he must end with God; or

it can be said that he must start with God's Word, and he must end with God's Word. (125)

The last essay in the book, "A Reassessment of Natural and Special Revelation" (132–53), holds personal meaning for Dennison as he acknowledges a dependence in writing it upon the insights of his older brother Rev. Charles G. Dennison (1945–1999). It is apparent that William enjoyed a great period of creativity/productivity when Charles was living, and the two could bounce redemptive-historical conclusions off each other, and this essay seven years after Charles's death is a fine tribute.

In the essay, Dennison challenges the traditional Reformed reading of Psalm 19:4 as belonging to the category of natural revelation in light of Paul's use of Psalm 19:4 in Romans 10:18. Dennison believes that Paul quotes Psalm 19:4 in regard to the gospel, that is, in regard to special revelation. He writes, "Paul tells us by quoting Psalm 19:4 in Romans 10:18 that the heavens have witnessed the supernatural activity of God upon the plane of the natural creation, and furthermore, that the creation proclaims that testimony every single day to all men" (145). Although there are two forms of revelation, natural and special, the biblical teaching is that they are inseparable. He explains:

The creation (natural revelation) declares the supernatural deeds/acts of the Lord (special revelation). This observation does not mean that the creation (natural revelation) tells us that the death of Christ will be on Calvary, or that Christ's resurrection will occur in the tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea (John 19:38). Even so, the creation witnesses that Christ died on the cross, and the creation witnesses that the resurrected Christ broke the bonds of the tomb (Matt. 27:45, 50–54; 28:2–3). The creation has witnessed the entire story of redemption and testifies to that entire story by virtue of its pattern of existence—suffering waiting for the exaltation of Christ and the church! Within the fabric of natural revelation lies the essential blueprint (pattern) of special revelation. (144)

In many ways, reading Dennison is like reading Van Til. Both are unashamed about being militantly Reformed, that is, standing fully behind the divinely inspired Word of God, the Reformed confessions, and ecumenical creeds. Both are criticized for not understanding properly those with whom they disagree. Both tend to make their case more easily in the negative, showing the inconsistencies of Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, and liberal Protestantism. When stated positively, their arguments can at times sound like abstractions.

Where they differ is often not in content, but in the exegetical emphasis that Dennison adds. Van Til allowed Vos, and his colleagues at Westminster Theological Seminary, John Murray, Ned B. Stonehouse, and Edward J. Young, to provide the exegetical arguments. Van Til was focused more on running with that exegesis in a systematic fashion. Dennison is more focused on running with the same exegesis in a redemptive-historical direction.

Consequently, it is not without significance that Dennison dedicates the book to Richard B. Gaffin Jr. Gaffin self-consciously endeavored to unite Vos and Van Til in theology; Dennison as Gaffin's student has self-consciously endeavored to unite Van Til

and Vos in apologetics. In a sentence that could serve as a summary statement of what unites Van Til and Vos, Dennison writes:

What belongs to believers in Christ's redemption is grounded in one's state of existence prior to the fall, and what was designed in the pre-fall state was predicated upon the final eschatological existence in Christ's total redemption for all believers of Christ's bride. (77)

The centrality of the death and resurrection of Christ, and the significance of believer's union with the risen Christ take center stage. When you are standing in the presence of God in Christ, 1 Corinthians 2, you are not dependent upon rational proofs.

In Defense of the Eschaton is attractively laid out, and Baird is to be commended for his efforts in convincing Dennison to go along with the project, but certain editorial decisions are puzzling. Baird changes the wording of the original article titles for many of the chapters. The omission of Dennison's article "Dutch Neo-Calvinism and the Roots for Transformation"⁴ was a missed opportunity to explore how Dennison does not agree with certain elements of Neo-Calvinist activism, even though Abraham Kuyper influenced Van Til greatly. The nineteen endorsements, "Forward," "Preface," "Acknowledgments," and two-tiered "Introduction" that covered nearly forty pages left this reviewer wondering what could be added in a review article even before reading page one of the first essay.

Those are minor quibbles compared to what Baird does right in his systematic ordering of the articles chosen. Baird allows Dennison to build his case for a right understanding of Van Til's apologetic and Vos's biblical theology in a manner that benefits both layman and scholar.

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⁴ William D. Dennison, "Dutch Neo-Calvinism and the Roots for Transformation," *JETS* 42, no. 2 (June 1999): 271–91.

Reflections on Biblical Counseling

A Review Article

by Andrew H. Selle

Developments in Biblical Counseling, by J. Cameron Fraser. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2015, 144 pages, \$12.00, paper.

A Personal Backdrop

In 1973, as a naïve young Christian fresh out of college, I landed my first real job—a live-in counselor in a half-way house for troubled teens. Their parents were either independently wealthy, in the military, or from Massachusetts (presumably the only state willing to pay the big money for treatment). This was a seriously high-end clinical treatment facility, well-regarded in professional circles. I was shocked by what went on there. Psychologists (in crisp fifty-minute sessions) recommended all manner of immorality as therapeutic. Psychiatrists experimented with various drugs (legal and otherwise) to treat their “mentally ill” patients. Practical consequences for behavior (either good or bad) seemed non-existent. After three months I either quit or got fired—and I’m a bit vague about which. In God’s providence, about that time a landmark book by Jay Adams (JA) landed in my hands. *Competent to Counsel*¹ lobbed hard-hitting criticism at the whole institution of secular counseling.² His desire to reclaim the counseling field for Christ and his high view of the church resonated deeply with me. Two years later I sat in JA’s classes at Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS).

Read the Book

Cameron Fraser was one of my classmates there, so I was delighted to read his superbly distilled book about the modern biblical counseling movement. He is knowledgeable and fair in assessing the various actors, sympathetic with their concerns while identifying weaknesses, and remarkably comprehensive in observing the multiple strands of the movement since JA. His quotations and bibliography alone would be a rich source for further study. Fraser, who grew up in the Scottish Highlands, brings an important contribution by citing sources, including European ones, unfamiliar to most North Americans. He also uncovers the deeper historical roots of true Christian counseling in a provocative final chapter, “Biblical and Puritan Counseling.” My only criticism is the omission of one important figure, who is mentioned below—C. John Miller. This review will complement

¹ Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970).

² With adversarial chapter titles such as “Freud: An Enemy, not a Friend” and “Mental Illness: A Misnomer,” we can understand the controversies that ensued.

Fraser's work, at some points overlapping with his observations, but mainly adding my own reflections—with the goal of affirming the good work that has been accomplished and encouraging us toward that which is yet to be done. Regarding terminology: instead of repeating the term “biblical counseling” or “biblical counseling movement” I will use “Private Ministry of the Word,” abbreviated “PMW” throughout.³

Foundational Consensus

Fundamentally, JA charged that the “psychotherapeutic professions were a false pastorate, interlopers on tasks that properly belonged to pastors,”⁴ and he wanted to train ministers to use the Word of God with authority, both publically through preaching and privately through counseling. The context of the two is different, but the content identical. That message of PMW resonated not only among conservative Presbyterians but across a broad swath of Evangelicalism, creating a curious ecumenism between groups of believers who did not share JA’s Reformed convictions.⁵ Yet the founders and developers of the movement were confessionally Reformed and primarily Presbyterian.

Before delving into differences that arose between biblical counseling proponents, we consider the areas of agreement among them.

1. **Biblical Inerrancy and Authority:** Plenary inspiration means that although God progressively revealed his Word over millennia, and it bears the stamp of multiple cultural contexts, yet the whole of it is “breathed out” by the Holy Spirit. The Bible is, therefore, as trustworthy and authoritative as God himself, our final rule for faith and practice. We do not need to update it to adapt its teachings to enlightened modern or post-modern sensibilities. Quite true, this immutable Word speaks to vastly different people who live in fluid and ever-changing situations; good counselors seek to know both the persons and their situations when they are mucking through life’s morasses with no solid path out. At those times we are to walk by faith not by sight, knowing (sometimes just hoping) that bedrock is somewhere beneath us. God is there. His Word is true. He controls our every situation. Jesus loves us. This we know.

2. **Biblical Sufficiency:** “Scripture contains all the divine words needed for any aspect of human life.”⁶ Our standards declare,

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and

³ “Private” in contrast to public ministry through preaching and teaching—“publicly and house to house” (Acts 20:20).

⁴ This description is by David Powlison in *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2010), xvii. This volume, a recast of his doctoral dissertation, is the most thorough treatment of PMW and an important source for Fraser’s book. The glaring weakness of Powlison’s work is the omission of his own absolutely crucial role—which is typical of David’s humility. If Adams was the Luther of the movement, swinging ax to root, Powlison is a Calvin, skillfully using a surgeon’s tools with care and precision. He is brilliant and thorough and without peer as a theologian of PMW. Another recent critique from within the movement came from Powlison’s student: Heath Lambert, *The Biblical Counseling Movement after Adams* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

⁵ I don’t know if this is typical of other practices, but the pastors who most enthusiastically refer people to me often are Reformed Baptists, independent fundamentalists, and mainstream charismatics. They typically are leaders with a deep love for God and his Word and appreciative of a Reformed worldview.

⁶ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 618.

necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture; unto which nothing at any time is to be added. (WCF 1.6)

We must state clearly what this means and does not mean for PMW.

Obviously, Scripture does not provide exhaustive information about everything; for instance, it does not tell you how to get rid of cancer. It does, however, tell us everything we need when we face cancer.⁷ We trust him in our trials, and learn holiness through them. God created our bodies, and therefore he wants us to take care of them with appropriate medical treatment. We are not alone because God placed us in the church family, so we humbly receive the prayers and assistance of others. He loves us and hears the cry of the needy, so we pour out our hearts to him when we are at our lowest. He answers prayer and heals the sick, so we earnestly ask him for life. He redeemed our bodies and someday will raise them up again to live forever, and therefore, we do not fret death. The Bible is sufficient in the sense that “there is no situation in which we . . . are placed, no demand that arises for which Scripture as the deposit of the manifold wisdom of God is not adequate and sufficient.”⁸

JA correctly grasped the profound implications of this doctrine for PMW. The “integrationist”⁹ approach at its best uses Scripture as a filter that sifts out the bad stuff so Christians can “plunder the Egyptians” of all their wonderful psychological insights. We concede (thankfully) that many who are in that camp are dedicated and wise believers who do, in fact, attempt to re-interpret secular approaches in biblical ways. At its worst, however, the failure to appreciate biblical sufficiency sanitizes Word ministry right out of the counseling field. We might leave room for pastoral labors within narrow areas, but then insist that to *really* understand people and help them we must employ the methods practiced by mental health care professionals, trained psychologists, and psychiatrists. Thus we capitulate to a cadre of secular prophets and high priests whose unspoken declaration is, “This work is *waaay* too complicated for you preacher-boys to grasp, so you should leave it to us pros and mind your own business. Just talk about spiritual things, and say nice things to people to make them feel better. We’ll do the real psychotherapy.” (Forgive me if my sarcasm is too sharp. I’ve been rehearsing it since 1973.)

3. Presuppositional Apologetics: Certainly, JA and the major figures of the movement—John Bettler, Wayne Mack, Edward Welch,¹⁰ Paul Tripp, David Powlison, and other counselors and authors at the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF) all drank from the same streams at WTS where Cornelius Van Til’s portrait still hangs prominently in Machen Hall. One’s worldview, Christian or non-Christian, becomes the crucible into which all perceptions are poured, and out of which flows all of life—including counseling. Correctly understood, presuppositionalism is “evidential” in the highest sense. *Everything in creation* proclaims the glory of God. The problem is with sinners who have no eyes to comprehend it. Only by God’s prevenient grace do we see; “by

⁷ See <http://www.ccef.org/dont-waste-your-cancer> for a moving personal testimony by John Piper and David Powlison.

⁸ John Murray, *Collected Writings*, 3:261, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 64, commenting upon 1 Timothy 3:15–17.

⁹ I think JA invented this term of disdain, meaning the mixing of both worldly and biblical ideas in counseling theory or praxis.

¹⁰ Of these figures, only Ed Welch does not have a degree from WTS. He studied at Biblical Theological Seminary and the University of Utah, and is professor of practical theology at WTS. He has become a prolific and gifted author for PMW in many areas.

faith we understand.” On this solid foundation we have tremendous freedom to use the tools of science without wringing our hands about the faith (or lack thereof) of the scientist. We only must remember that all information gathered by “common grace” must be radically recast into a biblical, Christ-centered worldview that informs all counseling theory and praxis.

Needless Tensions Develop

Given the remarkable consensus in these very specific doctrinal commitments, we might wonder what is left to fight about. Fraser’s careful study demonstrates an essential unity, yet some significant tensions arose after JA left CCEF. His sharp-edged polemic was understandable and perhaps necessary at the time, in view of the church’s abdication of its pastoral responsibilities. However, if he agreed at all with the essentially-positive Reformed view of science and culture, it was not well-expressed in his writings. As David Powlison (DP) stated, “The relationship of presuppositionally consistent Christianity to secular culture is not simply one of rejection.”¹¹ It would take a great mind like DP’s to expand the horizons of PMW and pay attention to the nuances and complexities of the field. One important implication of that complexity: we must admit the advantage of specialized training, sometimes in quite narrow sub-areas of PMW and related fields.¹²

The most significant area of tension within the movement arose from the growing interest in the role of *motivation* in human problems and counseling.¹³ John Bettler, JA’s protégé and the second director of CCEF, led the way, and DP’s penetrating writings grounded our understanding of the inner life upon sound biblical exposition. Their work was needed. JA had emphasized the replacement principle—putting off the works of the “old man” and putting on the “new man” in concrete and measurable ways.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, JA’s detractors criticized him as merely offering a behavioristic approach with a Christian veneer. That assessment is too severe, yet it is fair to say JA’s attention to the inner aspects of PMW was undeniably weak. At this point DP picked up the challenge and developed a comprehensive anthropology and a praxis for PMW that encompasses both the inner (“heart,” “root”) and the outer (“walk,” “fruit”) perspectives. The data for both is replete in Scripture, and any biblical counseling worthy of the name must address both. We want to understand *what* you are doing and *why* you are doing it—and especially which God (or gods) you are serving.

Meanwhile, during all this ferment at CCEF, outside its ivy-covered walls a reinvigorated integrationist movement grew. It attacked JA’s “nouthetic counseling”,¹⁵ as little more than a

¹¹ Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement*, 255.

¹² JA’s contention that counseling is the responsibility of elders is based on the premise that it is Word ministry for the conversion of sinners and sanctification of the church. Yet even if we grant that narrow definition, we should not exclude other gifted and trained counselors, both men and women, from serving with their gifts. This takes us into ecclesiology and church polity, well beyond the scope of this review.

¹³ Some of this tension could be felt between CCEF and the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC). NANC more recently changed its name to The Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, and the former tensions appear absent.

¹⁴ JA gives an example, which I’ve repeated many times since: if a kleptomaniac stops stealing but is still not working and giving, he has not really changed (Eph 4:28). He is just an “off-duty thief.”

¹⁵ Adams chose this term from the Greek word and its cognates, meaning “change through confrontation out of concern,” from *Ready to Restore: The Layman’s Guide to Christian Counseling* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1981), 9; also cited by Fraser. The clear implication of this definition: biblical counseling in the narrow sense can only be given to believers, since its goal is sanctification. I disagree with Adams at this point

poor man's cognitive-behavioral therapy, sprinkled with holy water, but without the academic rigor of solid research and the professionalism of mental health care experts. Some regarded him as a "crypto-disciple"¹⁶ of his secular mentor, O. Hobart Mowrer. It's hard to imagine a more devastating critique of JA and his work.

JA paid scant attention to those critics, but he most certainly cared about the direction of CCEF and respected those who served there. He feared that all this talk about "heart" issues would lead to morbid navel-gazing—or worse, intense witch hunts by counselors desperately trying to expose all those hellish motives that *must* be lurking under even the most godly-looking behavior. "Don't you know, 'The heart is deceitful above all things.' We need to expose the hypocrisy of the flesh so you can *really* repent." As a result, that strong and clear put-off/put-on dynamic of sanctification would be undermined by a pietistic obsession with the inner life. Fraser's view, and mine, is that extreme criticisms from both sides are simply unfair and do not do justice to the whole system taught by their opponents. No doubt we have different emphases and plenty of blind spots, but in this case we really *are* climbing the same mountain.

Puritans Old and New

Fraser's last chapter recognizes that CCEF's emphasis on motivation finds deep roots in the old Puritans—men such as Richard Baxter,¹⁷ Thomas Brookes, John Bunyan, John Flavel, and the late American Puritan, Jonathan Edwards. They cared much about the "affections of the heart." As Timothy Keller put it, "The Puritans looked not just at behavior but at underlying root motives and desires. Man is a worshipper; all problems grow out of 'sinful imagination' or idol manufacturing."¹⁸ Making a similar point, DP comments about a common Evangelical catchphrase.

Usually "trust in the Lord" is vague and ineffectual because it is tossed like some season-all into the stew of a person's life. Counselees in effect trust the Lord to give them their ruling desires, without ever repenting in depth of those desires. But "trust the Lord *instead of* trusting in . . ." does work because it is biblical. It has the concrete two-sidedness of biblical repentance and mind renewal.¹⁹

To conclude this review, it is important to highlight a significant figure Fraser neglected to mention. C. John ("Jack") Miller founded and pastored New Life Presbyterian Church in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania,²⁰ and spearheaded a revival movement with a far-reaching legacy

on the grounds of common grace, by which we certainly may offer a "cup of cold water in Jesus's name" and give practical biblical counsel to anyone. "If you conduct your marriage in this way, you will have a great marriage. It won't save you, but you'll have a great marriage."

¹⁶ Fraser's apt description of their charge, 51; Mowrer was a psychologist with whom JA briefly studied.

¹⁷ Fraser did much research on Baxter's work under the supervision of J.I. Packer, whose 1954 doctoral dissertation was about Baxter's approach to redemption and restoration.

¹⁸ Timothy J. Keller, "Puritan Resources for Biblical Counseling," *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 9, no. 3 (1988). Fraser quotes extensively from this article.

¹⁹ Powlison, *Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context*, 246.

²⁰ An OPC (now PCA) church plant that began with an evangelism class Miller taught at WTS and then burgeoned into a thriving network with an impact far beyond confessional Presbyterian circles. He was pastor there from 1974 to 1990. World Harvest Mission™ (now Serge™) traces its origins to the short-term missions of this one congregation on three continents.

that remains to this day.²¹ He also taught practical theology at WTS—at the same time as Jay Adams!²² But unlike JA, who was not enthralled with the Puritans, Miller closely identified with the New Light side of the Great Awakening, particularly Jonathan Edwards. Gospel-centered Christian living means daily repentance from heart-level idols, daily returning to our foundation in justification and adoption,²³ daily trusting in a fresh empowering of the Holy Spirit. The Christian life is always “faith working by love.”²⁴ Miller had a low view of externalism and never hesitated to preach the gospel even to professing Christians. More than one seminary student was known to publicly declare his recent conversion. That raised some eyebrows. It also led to suspicion, even opposition from some quarters, including from JA. Meanwhile, both DP and Edward Welch served as elders at New Life—while they evolved the new CCEF, and PMW, in a distinctly Puritan direction.

Conclusion

Today’s CCEF affirms the strengths of JA’s work while balancing and correcting its deficiencies—and avoiding those pitfalls he feared. A steady stream of outstanding counselors, pastors, authors, and professionals from a wide-range of fields are developing a robust PMW with a level of excellence and practicality never seen before.²⁵ DP still serves as the movement’s premier theologian and editor of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*. In the end, we have to be impressed not only with the women and men behind this true revival of biblical counseling over several decades, but with the Lord of the church who continually drives us all back to his Word and opens the eyes of our hearts (Eph. 1:18). We always build on the work of those who went before us, others taught by God. We can thank Cameron Fraser for his fine research, thoroughly yet succinctly presented. May it give us a long view of the Holy Spirit’s work of illuminating the Word of God to the people of God over the course of many human lifetimes.

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²¹ Timothy Keller and John Frame both acknowledge Jack Miller as a major influence upon them. Regarding Keller, I have vivid memories of visiting his first church in Virginia for a week-long ministry lead by Miller. This is before Keller’s stint at WTS and his move to NYC to plant the Redeemer Presbyterian Church network. Frame (who I regard as the finest systematic theologian alive today) taught at WTS Philadelphia until 1982, and claims that Miller influenced him profoundly. Tongue in cheek, he writes, “I suppose that Jack’s greatest influence on me was to make me willing to endure the scorn of traditionalists in the church” (“Backgrounds to my Thought” at <http://frame-poythress.org/about/john-frame-full-bio/>). After moving to Westminster Seminary in California, Frame, who was the associate pastor, became the elder in charge of worship at New Life Presbyterian Church in Escondido, CA.

²² Edmund P. Clowney was the third practical theology professor. What an honor to sit under the teaching of these three men of God, so vastly different yet so influential in the worldwide church.

²³ His “Sonship” discipleship program began with a handful of seminary students meeting in his garage, was packaged and well-organized by his son, Paul, and still used by Serge (nee World Harvest Mission).

²⁴ Gal. 5:6. On-going faith is the “man-ward” side of our union with Christ. This is no charismatic innovation, but simply the doctrine of vital union with Christ, which Miller wanted the church to reclaim as an overwhelming and experiential mindset. Of course, vital union comes together with a personal grasp of our federal union with Christ, and justification/adoption not as a doctrinal appendage but the very ground we stand on. Miller loved the introduction to Luther’s commentary on Galatians.

²⁵ Among many others, besides David Powlison and Edward Welch, we could include Paul Tripp, Tim Lane, Diane Langberg, and Wayne Mack.

I Will Lift My Eyes Unto The Hills by Walter Kaiser Jr.

by Bryan Estelle

I Will Lift My Eyes unto the Hills: Learning From The Great Prayers Of The Old Testament, by Walter C. Kaiser Jr. Wooster, Ohio: Weaver, 2015, 176 pages, \$12.99, paper.

Walter Kaiser has written a book surveying significant prayers made by prominent Old Testament saints. The prayers come from familiar sections of the Hebrew Bible and are offered by significant characters of the Hebrew Bible: Abraham, Moses, Hannah, David, Solomon, Jonah, Hezekiah, Nehemiah, Ezra, and Daniel. Kaiser introduces each chapter with a translation of the passage, followed by contextual and historical analysis. At the end of each chapter there is a summary of the points made throughout the exposition followed by a list of discussion questions that may easily be adapted for small group Bible study or Sunday school lessons and probably for family worship in the home as well. In short, Kaiser seeks to derive important lessons from the prayers that can be applied to the New Testament believer.

One of Kaiser's main goals is to inspire Christians to take up the work of prayer based on the examples of the prominent place of prayer in the lives of Old Testament people. Indeed, it is striking to be reminded of the piety of these Old Testament saints. However, although the author seeks to demonstrate that prayer did hold a prominent place among these notable Old Testament saints, time and time again they failed to act on prayer. This should serve, in Kaiser's view, as a notable warning for believers today.

One strength of this little book is Kaiser's sensitive reading of texts. It is obvious that much work in the Hebrew and in the historical background of the passages that contain these prayers informs Kaiser's discussion. It is also rewarding to see that he takes pains to focus on exalting God's glory and majesty throughout the book. The publisher, Weaver, has a target audience of lay people in view. Kaiser has admirably written at a level and with clarity that matches this goal. The reviewer found no typos in the book.

There are some weaknesses however. First, Kaiser uses too many exclamation points for effect. This is distracting. Second, there is a tendency to lift "timeless principles" out of these narratives and seek to apply them concretely in present circumstances within the lives of New Testament saints. This reviewer would have liked to have seen more sensitivity to the so-called principle of periodicity (cf., Geerhardus Vos). That is to say, Kaiser could have been much more helpful to the reader if he had dealt with each of these prayers in its own covenantal context. Let me explain. Take an example from the prayer of Solomon. Kaiser asks in the study questions and discussion starters section at the end of this chapter: "In what sense are your prayers the source of exercising responsibility for securing the blessing and peace of God on the nation to which you belong? Are we in any sense the keepers of our nation?" (85). In the previous chapters there is no discussion of

the uniqueness of the theocracy of Israel. Nor is there any lengthy discussion about how the promises of tenure in the land of Canaan or exile from it were unique to God's people of that age. This would have been a great benefit for Christians reading this book. Surely the Apostle Paul makes clear that we are to pray for our civil leaders and the nations in which God has placed us. But how is this different than the manner in which the Old Testament saints prayed. More explanation on this point would have strengthened the book.

Third, Kaiser opens himself up to another criticism as well. It would be helpful to discuss in the book the prayers of these Old Testament saints in light of the whole canon of Scripture, especially the work, ministry, and role of our Lord Jesus Christ as Mediator (WCF 8). Moreover, discussion about a responsible use of typology (WCF 7.5–6) and Spirit-wrought obedience in the work of prayer among the saints (WCF 16.5–6) would have greatly enriched these meditations. Much of the discussion, but not all, seems to fall within the category of timeless principles being extracted from the Old Testament without due respect for covenantal contexts. This often leads to setting forth these saints and their prayers as mere examples for New Testament saints without duly noting the important ways in which the anticipatory work of Messiah Jesus should inform the instruction.

This does not mean that this work cannot be used profitably within the church. However, a trustworthy guide or leader will be necessary in order to redress the above concerns. Then, this new published study on the great prayers of Old Testament saints may bear profitable fruit in the lives of saints in God's church today.

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ServantHumor

Lest We Remember

by Eutychus II

Here is an episode that has occurred countless times in three decades of marital bliss. I will recall a story in our past and punctuate it with some colorful detail. This will prompt the missus to exclaim, “How do you remember? I had completely forgotten all of that!” Which in turn inflames pride in my faculties of recollection.

A recent encounter with an old friend in ministry put me in a strange reversal of roles. The two of us were reminiscing over some adult beverages. We broached an episode that took place over two decades ago, when the two of us shared the experience of being victims in a minor miscarriage of justice by our presbytery. My friend proceeded to rewind the tape with the precision of a near-photographic memory. I was stunned at what he remembered—the wound was as raw as though it happened yesterday. It struck me how much better off I was, unable to let this fester.

As I steadily near the expiration of my warranty (see Psalm 90:10), what impresses is less the evidence of the fragility of the body (though there is plenty of that), than the fallibility of memory. Old men forget, as Shakespeare’s Henry V put it plainly. It is not so much that I am losing my memory. Instead, I have come to appreciate how selective and idiosyncratic it is. I have even come to reinterpret the words of my wife. She may not have been paying me a compliment after all, but perhaps more of a gentle chastisement. “*Why do you remember that?*” is what she really intends to ask. “Why devote your obviously limited mental resources to preserving that useless set of details? And how do you still forget what day of the week is recyclable pickup?”

There are dangers of forgetting, to be sure. We know the fate of those who forget the past in Santana’s famous warning. There is a short distance between forgetting and denial. Let us be glad the OPC has invested in cultivating its corporate memory and hope that our denominational archives will preserve the historical record for this vital end.

But are we at risk in placing too much importance on memory? Is it wise to shame forgetfulness as if it is some moral failure? I don’t mean to make light of the challenge of Alzheimer’s for patients and caregivers. We rightly treasure our memories. But memory is never pure or innocent. It is fragile and superficial and as sin-stained as the rest of our faculties. It can manipulate the past in the interests of self. And if there even is such a thing as a photographic memory, is that a blessing or a curse? My minister friend seemed to wallow in a prison of self-absorption.

If I have moved on from such unpleasant memories, how much more have I forgotten my own offenses? This too is the grace of God, who, in Isaac Watts’s colorful take on David’s penitential psalm, will “blot their memory” from his book.

Of course, Scripture constantly calls us to remember. But when, for example, our Lord instructs us to partake of his supper “in remembrance of me,” he is not asking for feats of mental strength. Rather, we eat and drink in the confidence that our God remembers. And we are not to doubt that his covenant promises are forever.

ServantPoetry

William Austin (1587–1634)

Chanticleer

All this night shrill chanticleer,
Day's proclaiming trumpeter,
 Claps his wings and loudly cries,
 “Mortals, mortals, wake and rise!
 See a wonder
 Heav'n is under,
From the earth is ris'n a Sun,
 Shines all night though day be done.”

“Wake, O earth, wake ev'rything!
Wake and hear the joy I bring;
 Wake and joy; for all this night
 Heav'n and every twinkling light,
 All amazing
 Still stand gazing.
Angels, Pow'rs and all that be,
 Wake, and joy this Sun to see.”

Hail, O Sun, O blessed light,
Sent into the world by night!
 Let thy rays and heav'nly pow'rs
 Shine in this dark soul of ours;
 For most duly
 Thou art truly
God and man, we do confess:
 Hail, O Sun of Righteousness!