

Ordained Servant

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Attitude in Apologetics

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March 2017

From the Editor

How incompatible is an edgy witness with the cross of Christ? No wonder Peter tells us: “In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15). The “yet” is telling. Peter seems to anticipate our sinful tendencies of wanting to win an argument or respond in anger to persecution. Brian De Jong addresses this concern about our attitude in witness in “Behavioral Apologetics.”

In the history department, denominational historian John Muether offers the third installment of Reformed Confessions with “The First Helvetic Confession (1536),” as we see Reformed orthodoxy take confessional shape. Danny Olinger presents the sixth chapter of his biography of Geerhardus Vos, “Confessional Revision” in which the ecclesiastical battle for Reformed orthodoxy in the late nineteenth century is visibly joined.

I review James Smith, *You Are What You Love*, in my review article, “Consider the Liturgies of Life.” This is an unusually challenging book on the habits of the Christian life as they flow from public worship.

Iain Duguid reviews Sidney Greidanus’s *Preaching Christ from Psalms*, commenting on the great value it has for the preacher without diminishing academic integrity and depth. Its detailed analysis of twenty-two specific psalms makes the work especially useful.

David Booth reviews Leland Ryken’s *How Bible Stories Work*, recommending its uniqueness in teaching the average Bible reader the dynamics of biblical stories in order to help them understand their meaning and application.

Ryan McGraw reviews the second of three volumes of the so-called *Leiden Synopsis*, *Synopsis of a Purer Theology*, demonstrating the value of this newly translated collection of academic theological reflections immediately after the Synod of Dort in response to the Arminian system of theology.

Finally I offer a poem reflecting on a recent encounter with Bell’s Palsy. This mysterious result of a suddenly compromised immune system appears in people of all ages, and may have lasting effects on facial muscles, which mine thankfully did not.

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

CONTENTS

ServantWitness

- Brian De Jong, “Behavioral Apologetics”

ServantHistory

- John Muether, “Reformed Confessions: The First Helvetic Confession (1536)”
- Danny Olinger, “Geerhardus Vos: Confessional Revision”

ServantReading

- Iain Duguid, review of Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms*
- David Booth, review of Leland Ryken, *How Bible Stories Work*
- Ryan McGraw, review of *Synopsis of a Purer Theology*, vol. 2 (1625)
- Gregory Reynolds, review of James Smith, *You Are What You Love*

ServantPoetry

- G. E. Reynolds, “Bell’s Palsy”

FROM THE ARCHIVES “APOLOGETICS”

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

- “Exposing the Darkness: The Biblical Theological Foundation, Part 2.” (Brian L. De Jong) *Ordained Servant Online* (June 2016), http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=559&issue_id=116.
- “Exposing the Darkness: A Call for Presuppositional Elenctics, Part 1.” (Brian L. De Jong) *Ordained Servant Online* (May 2016), http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=552
- “Lord Defender: Jesus Christ as Apologist.” (Brian L. De Jong) 24 (2015): 58–62.
- “The Post-Modern Paradigm Shift and the Biblical, Reformed Presuppositionalism of Van Til.” (Larry E. Ball) 5:4 (Oct. 1996): 87–90.

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

Behavioral Apologetics

by Brian L. De Jong

You may have encountered them yourself—I know that I have. They are neither the “Thoroughly Reformed” nor the “Barely Reformed.” These are the “Pugnaciously Reformed.” Whether by the chip on their shoulder, or the curl on their lip, they are not difficult to spot. Such folk are theological wrecking balls out to demonstrate that they are RIGHT. Sadly, they sometimes employ the tools of presuppositional apologetics to win argument after argument as they vanquish their foes. Their rude air of intellectual superiority and their self-congratulatory manner upset, offend, and insult their victims.

What ought never to be, is at times distressingly common in the Reformed community. As arguments are won, people are lost. In the name of apologetical correctness, the reputation of the Savior is dragged through the mud by overeager advocates of truth. Never pausing to consider the damage they are doing, these apologists are missing a key ingredient to biblical/covenantal apologetics—the behavioral component.

Good behavior is an indispensable ingredient for sound apologetical practice if one wishes effectively to defend the faith. This is true in a general sense, and it is particularly the case in our apologetical methodology. In this article I wish to explore how good behavior fuels our defense of the faith. I also would give special attention to how Dr. Van Til and his successors have recognized the behavioral aspect of apologetics. I hope to conclude with some thoughts on how to use your good behavior to your apologetical advantage.

Our basic calling as Christians is to be a holy people, even as the Lord our God is holy. We must share in his holiness if we hope to see the Lord. God has given his law of liberty to guide us in godly living. The “third use” of the law is vitally important for our spiritual development as believers. James reminds us in the first chapter of his epistle that it is not enough merely to hear the Word. We must do what it says if we would live the righteous life that God desires.

This directly relates to the process of sanctification—that slow but steady growth in grace, as we put off the old man and put on the new man. By the inward work of the Holy Spirit, we are being increasingly conformed to the image of Christ. The more we resemble our Elder Brother, the more our lives are distinct from the world around us. The gap between our conduct and that of the pagan culture should be increasing, not decreasing. The fact of being set apart unto God is gradually manifested in our experience. The concept of a disobedient Christian is really a contradiction in terms, albeit a sadly common occurrence.

This general obligation intensifies when we focus upon church officers, and especially upon ministers of the gospel. According to 1 Timothy 3, the overseer must be above reproach, temperate, prudent, respectable, not pugnacious, but gentle and peaceable. This holds true not only for relationships within the church, but he must have a good reputation

with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. Paul echoes these expectations in Titus 1:7–9, saying the overseer

must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. 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 those who contradict it.

If a man does not possess these qualities, he is not fit to be ordained for service. If a minister lacks these attributes, it will undermine his ministry and give cause for the unbeliever to dismiss the truth. So while good behavior is generally needful for all Christian apologists, it is doubly necessary for ordained apologists.

Looking at that classic passage on apologetics in 1 Peter 3:15–16, we find this behavioral emphasis woven through the context. Reaching back into the previous chapter, we find these words: “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Pet. 2:12).

Good conduct on the part of Christians has two effects. First, it blunts the criticism of the Gentiles. They speak against Christians as evildoers, and the honorable behavior of the Christian gives the lie to their accusations. More importantly, the excellent conduct of believers will cause the Gentiles to glorify God on the day of visitation. Having observed the good deeds of those whom they slander, they will be forced to admit that God is true, and that his servants have lived holy lives.

This emphasis comes up a few verses later in 2:15–16 when Peter says, “For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.”

Again it is the good behavior that silences the ignorance of foolish people. When God’s children use their liberty to serve the Lord, God is glorified. Were they to exploit their freedom as a cover-up for evil actions, God’s name would be dishonored among the heathen.

This call to good behavior includes situations where suffering ensues. While it is not commendable to suffer for our sinful conduct, it is laudable to patiently endure ill treatment for doing what is right. Through the remainder of chapter 2, Peter shows us the example of Christ. Jesus suffered for no cause in his own personal conduct. His behavior was pristine, yet he did not revile in return for the ill treatment he received. In this he purposefully left an example for believers, so that we might follow in his steps.

Moving into chapter 3, Peter counsels wives to embody respectful and pure conduct (v .2). Likewise husbands must behave honorably toward their wives. He then sums up in these words in chapter 3:8–9, “Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.” What is all this but a call to good behavior?

Peter’s summary is then reinforced with a quotation from Psalm 34, which states the believer must “turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it” (1 Pet. 3:11). The quotation concludes with a promise and a solemn warning: “For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is

against those who do evil” (v. 12). All of that revolves around the concept of behavior—either doing good or practicing evil.

A rhetorical question in 3:13–14 continues to drive the point home: “Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.” This is the immediate context for the charge to sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always ready to make a defense to everyone. Notice how seamlessly Peter moves from good conduct to defending the faith.

If the connection is not obvious enough from the context, it can’t be missed in these words in verse 16, “yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.” The manner of our apologetical ministry must be “with gentleness and respect.” More broadly, we must maintain a good conscience in our apologetical work. Why? Because our opponents will slander and revile us for our good behavior in Christ. But this false charge will lead to their shame when our excellent conduct becomes unmistakably obvious. No honest person will believe their wicked reports because our good behavior has been observed by witnesses who can attest to our purity. So if you suffer for doing what is right in your efforts to defend the faith—well and good.

Van Til and his Successors

For Cornelius Van Til, the need to be gentle and reverent in apologetics was important. In his book analyzing the thought of Van Til, John Frame states, “Van Til was fond of the slogan *suaviter in modo, fortiter in re*: gentle in the manner of presentation, powerful in substance. As we have seen, his writings are not always *suaviter in modo*, but this one [“Why I Believe in God”] is a good example of that principle.”¹

In his pamphlet entitled “Toward A Reformed Apologetics,” Van Til references his motto when he says:

Finally, it is my hope for the future, as it has always been my hope in the past, that I may present Christ without compromise to men who are dead in trespasses and sins, that they might have life and that they might worship and serve the Creator more than the creature. Rather than wedding Christianity to the philosophies of Aristotle or Kant, we must openly challenge the apostate philosophic constructions of men by which they seek to suppress the truth about God, themselves, and the world. To be sure, it is the grace of God which we proclaim to men, and we must proclaim the gospel *suaviter in modo*, but nevertheless, we have not been true to Christ if we do not say with Paul: “Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe (I Cor. 1:20–21). We are children of the King. To us, not to the world, do all things belong. It is only if we demand of men complete submission to the living Christ of the Scriptures in every area of their lives, that we have presented to men the claims of the Lord Christ without compromise. It is only then that we are truly

¹ John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ; P&R, 1995), 331.

biblical first and speculative afterwards. Only then are we working toward a Reformed apologetic.²

In an unpublished manuscript on the Ten Commandments, Van Til applies the ninth commandment particularly to officers when he writes:

For office-bearers and especially for ministers it is necessary to remember at this juncture that in order to develop truthfulness they must seek to elicit confessions of untruthfulness by a friendly tactful method. To be *suaviter in modo* benefits him who himself lives in a glass house. Any pretense at perfection in accomplishment will repel instead of attract. Thus one does not develop but rather retards the development of truthfulness.³

In the tenth chapter of *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* Van Til links this gentle methodology to Calvinism, saying:

If one follows Calvin there are no such troubles. Then one begins with the fact that the world is what the Bible says it is. One then makes the claims of God upon men without apologies though always *suaviter in modo*. One knows that there is hidden underneath the surface display of every man a sense of deity. One therefore gives that sense of deity an opportunity to rise in rebellion against the oppression under which it suffers by the new man of the covenant breaker. One makes no deal with this new man. One shows that on his assumptions all things are meaningless. Science would be impossible; knowledge of anything in any field would be impossible. No fact could be distinguished from any other fact. No law could be said to be law with respect to facts. The whole manipulation of factual experience would be like the idling of a motor that is not in gear. Thus every fact—not some facts—every fact clearly and not probably proves the truth of Christian theism. If Christian theism is not true then nothing is true. Is the God of the Bible satisfied if his servants say anything less?⁴

This is not to say that Van Til always practiced this gentle and reverent approach, as Frame recognized. In the pamphlet already mentioned, there is a remarkable section entitled “Retractions and Clarifications.” With transparent honesty, Van Til critiques himself on this score:

Have I been consistent with myself in the writings mentioned in this pamphlet? Should not I now retract certain statements made in earlier days? Would not I approach the subjects on which I have written differently now, if I could? When I ask myself such questions as these, I think that as far as the manner of presentation is concerned, I have often not lived up to my own motto on this point of *suaviter in modo*. I beg forgiveness of those whom I have hurt because of this sin of mine. Then, so far as content is concerned, I have often not lived up to my own motto on this point either. I have not always made perfectly clear that in presenting Christ to lost men, we must

² Cornelius Van Til, *The Works of Cornelius Van Til, 1895–1987*, ed. Eric H. Sigward (New York: Labels Army Co., 1997), CD-ROM.

³ Cornelius Van Til, “The Ninth Commandment: Truth,” in *The Ten Commandments* (unpublished manuscript, 1933).

⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *The Works of Cornelius Van Til, 1895–1987*, ed. Eric H. Sigward (New York: Labels Army Co., 1997), CD-ROM.

present Him for what He is. He has told us what He is in the Scriptures. Apparently I have given occasion for people to think that I am speculative or philosophical first and biblical afterwards.⁵

Two scholars who have followed in Van Til's footsteps also saw the need for a gentle and reverent method in confronting unbelievers. Greg Bahnsen comments on this in his massive work, *Van Til's Apologetic, Readings and Analysis*:

Thus, Peter, aware of the different ways an argument can be conducted, specifically reminded his readers to offer their reasoned defense "with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:15). Paul wrote: "The Lord's servant must not quarrel, but be gentle toward all, apt to teach, forbearing, in meekness correcting those who oppose themselves" (2 Tim. 2:24–25). The proponents of conflicting viewpoints can trade arguments and engage in intellectual dispute in a manner that exhibits or leads to being puffed up—something that Paul censures in a multitude of ways throughout 1 Corinthians (especially as it stems from a lust for persuasive words of worldly wisdom, 2:4–5). However, there is nothing in the nature of the case which requires argumentation to be conducted in a proud and unloving fashion. Apologetics can be pursued with a humble boldness, one which displays true concern for the error of the unbeliever's thinking and the destructiveness of his ways. This does not mean giving even an inch on any issue of truth over which we disagree with the unbeliever. But it does mean, as Dr. Van Til would always say, that we keep buying the next cup of coffee for our opponent.⁶

Likewise, K. Scott Oliphint interacts with this methodology in his *Covenantal Apologetics*:

In 1 Peter 3:15, as Peter commands the church to be ready to defend her faith, he is careful to note the ethos in which such a defense must be given. Defend your faith, Peter is saying, "with gentleness and respect." This reminds us that our defense is not a defense that depends on us; it is not something that is successful only to the extent that our oratory is polished. Rather, it is a defense that recognizes that Christ is Lord, that it is he who accomplishes the purposes that he desires in that defense. We need not, therefore, be hostile or abrasive or pugnacious in our defense. Christ reigns. We serve him. Our defense should reflect Christ's sovereignty and our willing service to him. To be gentle and respectful does not, of course, obviate boldness. Paul knew that he might have to display such boldness to the Corinthians, even as he implored them with the meekness and gentleness of Christ. But boldness is not caustic or harsh. It stems from our confidence in Christ and his lordship. Boldness, we could say, is meek and gentle confidence in what we have to say. What should also be obvious concerning the ethos of persuasion and what we have not broached to this point, is that in our defense of Christianity, as in the entirety of our Christian lives, we are to be a holy people. We are to mirror the holiness of our Father in heaven. We cannot and should not expect that anyone in our audience will be anxious to listen to us, or be persuaded by us, if our own character is obviously and explicitly immoral or otherwise suspect.⁷

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic, Readings & Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998), 32.

⁷ K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 144.

So what can we conclude about this connection between excellent behavior and the defense of the faith? First of all, our apologetical commitments should exist within the larger context of personal holiness. The would-be defender of the faith should make a long-term commitment to growing in his sanctification. There is simply no substitute for personal holiness, and personal holiness cannot be conjured up in a moment. True piety gradually develops over years of ordinary, faithful Christian living.

Second, that process of sanctification should manifest itself in how we treat others—whether believer or unbeliever. Showing kindness, patience, gentleness, and earnest concern can become habitual as we work to display these graces toward our fellow man. We must learn to love our neighbors as ourselves, if we would be of any spiritual assistance to them. This is crucial if we hope to persuade them of the truth we advocate. Persuasion involves more than just proving that “I am right, and you are wrong.” Persuasion is far subtler and nuanced than winning an abstract intellectual argument. As Oliphint reminded us above, “We cannot and should not expect that anyone in our audience will be anxious to listen to us, or be persuaded by us, if our own character is obviously and explicitly immoral or otherwise suspect.”

Third, we should recognize that our manner will impact our message, either for good or for ill. If we live holy lives, we recommend the truth that we defend. Our lifestyle of godliness becomes a silent confirmation of the truth. But if we live scandalously, then our behavior actually contradicts the very truth we defend. Furthermore, we give fodder to the skeptic, who will predictably dismiss our message because of our personal hypocrisy. An absence of personal holiness will cripple the Christian apologist while emboldening the unbeliever in his rejection of the gospel.

As we grow in godliness, we should cultivate an ability to speak to unbelievers in non-threatening ways. This includes going onto their turf and taking an interest in their lives. Waiting for them to come pouring through the doors of our churches will prove a fruitless approach. The task of making disciples presupposes that we are “going.” Whenever we go, wherever we go, as we go, we are to make disciples. In this effort to engage the unbelievers in our communities, we ought to discover where they congregate, and find out what interests them. Becoming all things to all men suggests that we take something of an interest in what matters to them. This is Paul, strolling through the streets of Athens, seeing all of the various altars to the “gods” that the Greeks worshiped, and taking special note of their altar to the “Unknown God.” Paul could then speak intelligently to the Athenians about the Unknown God they claimed to worship.

As we cultivate conversations with our unbelieving neighbors, we need to respect their feelings and not trample carelessly upon them. We should never misrepresent their positions, or belittle them for their unbelief. Question-and-answer dialogue is invaluable as we not only respectfully answer their questions, but we pose our questions to them.

As conversation develops, we should “buy the next cup of coffee.” Picking up the check at a lunch discussion can convey friendly engagement and genuine respect. Doing those things while maintaining the give-and-take of ideas will stimulate deeper disclosure. Thus our gentle approach can be used by the Holy Spirit to bring unbelievers to understand and accept the truth—to become convinced of that gospel which we defend and proclaim.

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ServantHistory

Reformed Confessions: The First Helvetic Confession (1536)

by John R. Muether

After the death of Ulrich Zwingli on the battlefield in 1531, his pupil and friend, Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575) was appointed his successor in Zurich. There he consolidated and advanced the Swiss Reformation through a forty-four-year tenure as the chief minister of the city.

Meanwhile, Pope Paul III, sensing that the Protestant Reformation was no longer confined to a few preachers, launched efforts to call a council. (Delayed in convening until 1545, it would become the Council of Trent.) Upon hearing of those plans, Protestant cantons in Switzerland sought to unite around a common confessional statement.

The result was the First Helvetic (Swiss) Confession. Bullinger is largely regarded as the principal author of the confession, working in collaboration with four others (Samuel Gyrnaeus, Leo Jud, Kaspar Megander, and Oswald Myconius), with Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito serving as advisors. Its twenty-seven articles summarize major themes of Protestant theology, including Scripture (articles 1–5), doctrines of God, sin, Christology, and salvation (6–11), the benefits of grace applied by the Spirit (12–14), followed by a lengthy section on the ministry of the church (15–23), and concluding with articles addressing church order, heresy, schism, and marriage.

In its teaching on the Supper, the confession sought language that might unite the Swiss with the Lutherans. Although Martin Luther expressed approval when he was presented with the Lutheran-leaning first draft, revisions aligned more closely with Zwingli. The sacraments are affirmed as signs of “sublime, secret things.” “However, they are not mere, empty signs, but consist of the sign and the substance” (article 20). Thus they “present and offer the spiritual things they signify” (22). Luther’s enthusiasm would not last, and his polemics against the Swiss churches resumed.

A noteworthy feature in the confession is its early criticism of the Anabaptists. The brief chapter on baptism is largely a defense of infant baptism: “We baptize our children in this holy bath because it would be unjust if we were to rob of the fellowship of God’s people those who have been born of us for a people of God” (21). Later, article 25 identifies Anabaptists as chief evidence of heretics and schismatics “who do not hear and heed the warning of the Church and Christian instruction, but obstinately want to persist in their contention and error.” The confession urges that “they should be punished and suppressed by the supreme power, in order that they may not poison, harm, or defile the flock of God with their false doctrine” (article 25). The clear intention is to distance the Swiss Reformation from the anarchy of the radical Reformation.

If the First Helvetic Confession failed to unite the Swiss with Lutherans, it succeeded in uniting the Reformed churches in Switzerland when it was unanimously adopted by delegates from seven cities. It served as a Reformed counterpart to the Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530) and established the precedent for national creeds in the Reformed confessional tradition (followed by French, Scottish, and Belgic Confessions). Three decades later Bullinger would build on its foundation in his far more expansive Second Helvetic Confession in 1566.

An Excerpt from Article 18, “The Office of Ministers”

The highest and chief thing in this office is that the ministers of the Church preach repentance and sorrow for sins, improvement of life, and forgiveness of sins, and all through Christ. In addition they are to pray unceasingly for the people, to apply themselves earnestly and diligently to Holy Scripture and the Word of God, in reading and devout meditation, and with God’s Word as with the sword of the Spirit to pursue the devil with deadly hatred by every means, and to crush and weaken his power so that they may defend Christ’s stanch citizens and may warn, repel and put away the wicked. And when the wicked in their sacrilege and shameless vices are forever determined to scandalize and destroy the Church, they are to be expelled by the ministers of the Word and the Christian government instituted for that purpose, or they are to be punished and corrected in some other suitable and proper way until they confess their error, change and are restored. But when a citizen of Christ, who has been delinquent and derelict and has been expelled, is converted and earnestly confesses and admits his sin and error (for this is the purpose of the punishment), willingly seeks remedy for his failing, yields to spiritual discipline and gladdens all the pious with his new diligence and zeal in the exercise of piety, he should be accepted again into the Church.

The Sequence of Confessions

Sixty-Seven Articles of Ulrich Zwingli (1523)
Tetrapolitan Confession (1530)
First Helvetic Confession (1536)
French Confession of Faith (1559)
Scots Confession (1560)
Belgic Confession of Faith (1561)
Heidelberg Catechism (1563)
Second Helvetic Confession (1566)
Canons of the Synod of Dordt (1619)
Westminster Confession & Catechisms (1643)

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ServantHistory

Geerhardus Vos: Confessional Revision

by Danny E. Olinger

William Henry Green's death on February 10, 1900, marked the end of an era at Princeton Seminary. The 1851 General Assembly had appointed the twenty-four-year-old Green, then pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, as Oriental and Old Testament professor. Over the next five decades, Green served at Princeton with Archibald Alexander and Joseph Allison Alexander at the end of their ministries, with Charles Hodge in the prime of his ministry, and then with Benjamin Warfield and Geerhardus Vos at the start of their service.

Green's impact upon Vos was undeniable. He not only had recommended the publication of Vos's first book in 1885, *The Mosaic Origin of the Pentateuchal Codes*, but also had recruited Vos personally to fill the inaugural chair of Biblical Theology at Princeton. Charles Augustus Briggs, Union Seminary's choice in 1890 to fill their chair of Biblical Theology, had maintained that the modern exegesis of the Bible had exposed the deficiencies of the traditional Presbyterian views on systematic theology, Scripture, and confessional Calvinism. Green believed the man needed for the new position of Biblical Theology at Princeton was someone with exegetical and philosophical ability, yet committed to the cause of Scripture and confessional Calvinism. In Green's judgment, Vos stood above everyone else, and Princeton should not be satisfied with anything less than his acceptance of the position.¹

When Vos finally relented to Green's pursuit and accepted Princeton's offer in May 1893, Green and Warfield had been fully engaged with Briggs for the previous five years. In 1888 the Princeton faculty had elected Warfield, who had just finished his first year teaching at Princeton, to serve with Briggs as co-editor of *The Presbyterian Review*.² The co-editing arrangement between Warfield and Briggs lasted less than a year. Warfield

¹ Green wrote to Vos, "We feel that interests of the utmost consequence to religion and to the church are in jeopardy. If it were not for the present theological crisis and the position that Princeton holds before the church, the case would be very different. If it was the mere question of the temporary prosperity or abasement of the Seminary—and other seminaries would do Princeton's work, the case would be different. But as matters stand, if Princeton goes down, the cause of orthodox theology and evangelical religion will receive a heavy blow. This is the reason that such grave issues hang upon your decision and that we cannot regard the possibility of your adhering to your declination with any equanimity. If you could be brought to see the real situation of things and how much depends upon your acceptance, I think you could not hesitate for a moment. I must renew my earnest request that you will not decide adversely without coming to Princeton and allowing us to put the case before you in the proper light." Letter, William Green to Geerhardus Vos, March 19, 1892, in James T. Dennison Jr., ed., *The Letters of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005), 31.

² A decade earlier, Briggs had encouraged Union's President William Adams to write Archibald Alexander Hodge at Princeton to see if the two schools could show solidarity in the Presbyterian Church by producing a common review. Hodge agreed to the proposal, and *The Presbyterian Review* was started in 1880 with one editor being from Princeton and the other from Union. See, David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary, Volume 2* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1996), 83–84.

resigned after objecting to the content and tone of Briggs's report on the 1889 General Assembly that would appear in the October 1889 issue of the *Review*.³

What had upset Warfield was Briggs's negative reaction to the work of the Committee to Revise the Proof-texts of the Church's Standards that had been erected the previous year. Briggs noted with concern that Green was the only Old Testament exegete on the Committee. He also lamented that Green was joined by two other conservative New Testament exegetes. It would have been wiser, Briggs argued, for the Assembly to have added "recognized exponents" of the newer exegesis.⁴

Warfield also did not like Briggs's commentary on whether the Church should revise its Confession of Faith. Fifteen of the two hundred nine presbyteries in the Presbyterian Church had sent overtures to the 1889 Assembly to revise the Confession of Faith. The assembly answered with two questions for the presbyteries: (1) Do you desire a revision of the Westminster Confession of Faith? and (2) if so, in what respects and to what extent?⁵

Those in favor of revision cited a dissatisfaction with what they thought was the overly Calvinistic teaching of chapter 3, "Of God's Eternal Decree," and chapter 10, "Of Effectual Calling." There was also a perceived lack of emphasis upon the love of God and human responsibility. Briggs thought it was hard to determine exactly how far the movement for revision had gone in the church, but he believed he knew which side had the momentum. He wrote:

The opposition to the motion in the Assembly was so slight, and the action itself was so hearty, that it would appear that the movement has already assumed great dimensions, especially among the younger and more silent members of the Presbyteries, and that the leaders of the Church have come to recognize the fact.⁶

Still a professor at the Theological School in Grand Rapids at the time, Vos's reaction to what had happened at the 1889 General Assembly was one of alarm. He wrote Abraham Kuyper that he believed that the Reformed faith was in the balance with a potential revision. "The issue is whether she will officially remove the Calvinistic doctrine of election from the symbols of Westminster and replace them with Arminian formulas."⁷ Vos then added that he believed there was a side in the Presbyterian Church that would resist the revision, but he was afraid "that side is in the minority and only time will tell how deeply it is rooted in the Reformed faith."⁸

³ After Warfield resigned, Briggs also resigned, and Union Seminary recommended the dissolution of *The Presbyterian Review*. The Princeton faculty agreed.

⁴ Charles Augustus Briggs, "Editorial Notes: The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA," in the *Presbyterian Review* 10, no. 39 (1889): 465.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 466. What Briggs did not reveal in his commentary was his own stance on the issue, which he had made public in his book published earlier that year, *Whither? A Theological Question for the Times*. He argued that Presbyterians, particularly Warfield and A.A. Hodge at Princeton, had departed from the teaching of the Westminster Standards and put in its place the false teaching of "orthodoxism." See, Charles A. Briggs, *Whither? A Theological Question for the Times* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1889).

⁷ Geerhardus Vos to Abraham Kuyper, February 1, 1890, in Dennison, *Letters*, 135.

⁸ *Ibid.*

The same day that Vos wrote Kuyper, he also wrote Herman Bavinck and expressed the same concern. “If the revision movement goes on as it began, then the symbols of Westminster will be changed in an Arminian tone and I fear that the right wing will put up with it. The Presbyterian Church finds itself in a very critical period.”⁹

At the 1890 General Assembly, which met at Saratoga, New York, the responses of the presbyteries to the two questions regarding a potential revision of the Confession of Faith were reported. One hundred and thirty-four presbyteries favored a revision, including twenty-five presbyteries who even presented models of a new creed. Sixty-eight presbyteries answered that they were entirely satisfied with the Confession of Faith. Sixty-seven other presbyteries insisted that no changes should be made that would impair the system of doctrine taught in the confession.¹⁰

After the conclusion of the assembly, Vos updated Kuyper on what had happened. Rather than revise the Confession of Faith, the assembly erected a special committee to answer the objections raised against the teaching of the confession. The assembly instructed the committee that the Calvinistic character of the Confession of Faith had to stay intact. Vos, however, was not comforted by this safeguard. In words that reflected a knowledge of Charles Hodge’s position regarding the short-sidedness of the reunion on the part of Old School Presbyterians following the Civil War, Vos wrote:

In my opinion, however, that does not matter much. It is not easy to say how strict or broad the term “Calvinistic System” has to be taken. Some are (though themselves orthodox) broad-minded enough to include Amyraldianism in it. Also the terms “spirit of the Confession” and “system of doctrine” are used so often in all kinds of ways in the last years, even at the signing of the creed, and they are interpreted and practiced so freely, that such a phrase, added as a restriction with the revision assignment, cannot inspire much confidence. In 1871, when after a separation of thirty-four years the reunion between Old School and New School occurred, the following three points were removed: (1) universal or individual redemption; (2) direct or indirect imputation of Adam’s guilt; (3) moral or natural impotence of fallen man. At that time they permitted a non-Reformed way of thinking to exist within the church, and what they have justified in principle they will not be able to stop in its consequences.¹¹

Part of the reason that Vos was informing Kuyper about what had happened was that Kuyper a few months earlier had sent his article, “Calvinism and Confessional Revision,” to Vos to translate for publication in the *Presbyterian and Reformed Review*.¹² After Vos began working on the translation, it was clear that the article exceeded the allotted word count that Warfield as the editor had set. When Warfield received the finished translation,

⁹ Letter, Geerhardus Vos to Herman Bavinck, February 1, 1890, in Dennison, *Letters*, 132.

¹⁰ Benjamin Warfield, “Editorial Notes: The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA,” in *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 1, no. 3 (1890): 490.

¹¹ Letter, Geerhardus Vos to Abraham Kuyper, July 12, 1890, in Dennison, *Letters*, 141. For the issues involved in the reunion and Charles Hodge’s role, see, D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, “Turning Points in American Presbyterian History: Part 7: The Reunion of 1869,” in *New Horizons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* 26, No. 7 (July 2005): 10–11.

¹² Vos mentioned to Herman Bavinck in his May 13, 1890, letter that he had received Kuyper’s large paper, “Calvinism and Revision” (originally titled). See, Dennison, *Letters*, 153.

he told Vos that it would be impossible for the *Review* to print so long a paper. Warfield asked Vos if he would approach Kuyper about the difficulty, and to see if Kuyper would give Vos permission to condense the article.

What Vos preferred was that Kuyper would let him know which parts could be shortened or eliminated. Still, Vos did give his opinion to Kuyper on what he deemed essential to the paper. “If I may say something in this regard, I would like to remark that the answer on the fourth question ought to stay and also that I would frown upon a change in the more theoretical and abstract part in the whole article.”¹³

Kuyper’s fourth question asked, “To what conditions is the revision of these symbols, in the case of a progressive development of Calvinism, to be bound?”¹⁴ In the answer, Kuyper rehearsed the debate about revision that had occurred between the Calvinists and the Arminians at the 1618 Synod of Dordt. Neither side at Dordt questioned the right to revise the creeds. The question concerned the manner. The Arminians argued that confessions were human products that could be amended at any time. The Calvinists maintained that the Lord in his providential governing of all things had created more than an ordinary movement in the life of his church. The Synod of Dordt agreed with the Calvinist position and added that any complaint against the confession must be made on the basis of the Word of God. If it were found that the Word and confessions differed, then the churches must enter into revision in order that the sovereign rights of the Word of God over the confessions might continue intact and inviolable.¹⁵

Kuyper expanded upon Dordt’s ruling and said that four conditions must be met for revision of a Reformed confession on the ground of a richer spiritual development. First, there must be a richer unfolding of the Calvinistic principle; second, there must be near unanimous testimony of the churches for revision; third, Calvinistic theology must furnish the churches with the means for revision; and, fourth, the foreign Reformed churches must also be agreed.

Kuyper did not believe these conditions for revision were satisfied in Europe at that time. He wrote, “If anything then this is certain, that the most recent development of theology, starting from Schleiermacher, does not carry out the Calvinist principles at all.”¹⁶ The time for a revision “will not arrive until after our Churches shall have succeeded in purifying their atmosphere of heterogeneous elements.”¹⁷ Kuyper also indicated that he would also feel duty bound to dissuade those in America in favor of revising the Westminster Confession.

As Vos was corresponding with Kuyper about the potential confessional revision, he was also finishing his *Reformed Dogmatics*. In it Vos wrote about the importance of creeds for the church and warned against rash revisions that would change what a church taught.

A church, if one wishes to reason in the abstract, can exist without confessional documents, and has existed without such. These, however, were exceptional

¹³ Letter, Geerhardus Vos to Abraham Kuyper, October 27, 1890, in Dennison, *Letters*, 144.

¹⁴ Warfield eventually changed his mind about the length and published the article at its submitted length. Abraham Kuyper, “Calvinism and Confessional Revision,” *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 2, no. 7 (July 1891): 371.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 393.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 395.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 398.

situations. It is impossible to guide someone though Scripture in its entirety or to ask him his opinions concerning the whole of Scripture. The essential things must be gathered together in order that the church may show how it understands Scripture in the light of the Spirit. The authority of these creeds is always bound to Scripture; they are susceptible to improvement, but may not be lightly revised, inasmuch as they are not a compendium of theology but the ripe fruits of the spiritual developments of the church, sometimes obtained through a long struggle. A true revision does not tear down the old but explains and confirms it and further illumines it in connection with new times and circumstances. But it remains true that the Scripture is the norma normans [norming norm]. The confession the norma normata [normed norm].¹⁸

The revisionist movement slowed greatly the next year when Briggs became embroiled in controversy over his decidedly modern views regarding the inspiration and authority of Scripture. The 1891 General Assembly vetoed his appointment to the Chair of Biblical Theology at Union Seminary by a 449 to 60 vote. Two years later, Briggs was brought to trial and suspended from the ministry by the 1893 General Assembly. At the same assembly, none of the proposed twenty-eight amendments to the Confession of Faith received the necessary two-thirds majority vote for approval.

Although things were quiet in the Presbyterian Church regarding revision for the rest of the decade, the fact that eighteen of the twenty-eight overtures for amendment had been supported by a majority of presbyteries indicated that the issue was not going to fade away.¹⁹ A little more than three months after the death of Green, who had been the unquestioned leader of the conservative opposition to the revision in the early 1890s, the issue rose again at the 1900 General Assembly. Thirty-seven of the two hundred fifty-two presbyteries sent overtures for revision to the Confession of Faith. In response, the assembly appointed a “Committee of Fifteen” to study the issue, receive recommendations from the presbyteries, and to report to the 1901 General Assembly. Benjamin Harrison, who had served as the twenty-third president of the United States, and standing Supreme Court justice John Harlan, were appointed to the Committee of Fifteen, as was Benjamin Warfield. Warfield, however, declined the opportunity to serve on the committee. He declared it grieved him to see the Presbyterian Church “spending its energies in the vain attempt to lower its testimony to suit the ever-changing sentiment of the world around it.”²⁰

Once organized, the Committee of Fifteen sent four questions to the presbyteries:

1. Do you desire a revision of our Confession of Faith? or
2. Do you desire a supplemental explanatory statement? or
3. Do you desire to supplement our present Doctrinal Standards with a briefer statement? or
4. Do you desire the dismissal of the whole subject?²¹

¹⁸ Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 5, *Ecclesiology, the Means of Grace, Eschatology*, trans. and ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 41.

¹⁹ Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), 83.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 84. Warfield’s replacement on the committee was Henry Van Dyke, a revision advocate and later opponent of J. Gresham Machen during the Presbyterian controversy.

²¹ *Ibid.*

The Biblical Importance of the Doctrine of Preterition

Vos immediately wrote on the subject for *The Presbyterian*, whose editorial leadership opposed the revision.²² The topic he chose was “The Biblical Importance of the Doctrine of Preterition.” The doctrine of preterition concerns the non-election of individuals to salvation. The proposed revisions, defining God as a God of love only, would remove preterition from the confession.

In the article’s opening lines, Vos made clear why he believed the revision movement did not bode well for the future of the Presbyterian Church. Those urging revision were not making a serious appeal to the Scriptures for the changes proposed. He stated, “One of the gravest symptoms of the revision movement in the Presbyterian Church today consists in the absence of serious appeal to scriptural authority for the changes of confessional statement that are advocated.”²³ Public sentiment, and not the infallible Word of God, had assumed the role of the recognized rule of faith. Vos argued:

Consequently there is reason to fear that the spirit in which revision is sought forebodes greater evil to the church than any material modifications of the creed to which revision may lead. Even if the Calvinistic system of doctrine embodied in our standards were seriously mutilated in result of the present movement, so long as the great body of believers feel themselves in conscience bound to yield unquestioning faith to the Bible, there is always hope for a rehabilitation of the principles temporarily abandoned. But when once the sense of allegiance to the Word of God as the only authoritative rule of faith has become weakened, or, while still recognized in theory has ceased to be a living force in the minds of believers, then the hope of a return to the truth once forsaken is reduced to a minimum.²⁴

To prove his point, Vos explained the modern dislike of the doctrine of preterition. This doctrine was thought by many to be only a logical inference and not part of biblical teaching. Vos not only argued that it was a biblical teaching, but also presented three reasons why it was essential to the system of doctrine.

First, the Bible subsumes all things under the sovereign decree of God. The unbelief on the part of some in rejecting the gospel is as much the subject of the divine decree as the faith by which others believe the gospel and are saved.

Second, the particular terms found in Scripture regarding the divine decree that speak to the bypassing of some are as strong and unequivocal as those used in regard to the salvation of the elect. It was God acting in result of his eternal will, not his willing in advance of his temporal act.

Third, election brings into view the understanding that there is a discrimination implied in the divine choice of some to eternal life. This idea cannot be completed without positing at the same time the doctrine of preterition. Vos wrote, “For this reason it is an utterly futile endeavor to attempt to construe a formula which shall adequately

²² Ibid.

²³ Geerhardus Vos, “The Biblical Idea of Preterition,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 412.

²⁴ Ibid.

reproduce the scriptural doctrine of election, and yet leave unexpressed the correlated doctrine of preterition.”²⁵

In closing, Vos stressed the practical importance of this doctrine in the exaltation of the grace of God. It impresses upon believers “the conviction of the absolutely gracious character of their redemption.”²⁶ Salvation is of God. It has nothing to do with anything meritorious in man. Rhetorically, Vos asked, “Can it be safe for any church to erase from her creed a mode of expressing the divine grace, which God Himself has used to instruct us, on the plea that she deems its use unpopular and inexpedient? Shall man be wiser than God?”²⁷

1901 General Assembly

When the 1901 General Assembly convened that May in Philadelphia, the Committee of Fifteen reported. The majority report of the committee recommended a comprehensive revision that included both amendment to the Confession of Faith and a new brief statement of the faith to stand side by side with the Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms.

The minority report of the committee was in favor of revision, but only to specific chapters of the Confession of Faith. It sought to eliminate those statements that a majority of Presbyterians found objectionable, but without harm to the system of doctrine.

When the three-day debate on the floor of the assembly opened, those opposing revision of the Confession of Faith moved a resolution to dismiss. The motion to dismiss was defeated by a margin of three to one in a standing vote. The recommendation of the minority report then became the main motion. In the final session before recess on Saturday, May 25, it was defeated as 230 men voted for it and 270 men against it.²⁸

On Monday when the assembly resumed, a substitute was moved in the place of the adoption of the recommendations of the majority report. The substitute was that the assembly appoint a committee to prepare for the next assembly a brief statement of the Reformed Faith, prepare amendments of Confession of Faith chapter 3 (Of God’s Eternal Decree), chapter 10 (Of Effectual Calling), chapter 16 (Of Good Works), chapter 22 (Of Lawful Oaths and Vows), and chapter 25 (Of the Church), and add new statements concerning the love of God for all men, missions, and the Holy Spirit. The substitute closed with the statement, “It being understood that the revision shall in no way impair the integrity of the system of doctrine set forth in our Confession and taught in Holy Scriptures.”²⁹ The substitute passed overwhelmingly.

The Scriptural Doctrine of the Love of God

As the members of the Presbyterian Church received the news of the action of its general assembly that summer, Vos was preparing for the opening convocation address

²⁵ Ibid., 414.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ DeWitt, “Ecclesiastical Notes: The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA,” in *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 12, no. 48 (1901): 676.

²⁹ Ibid., 677.

for the ninetieth session of Princeton Theological Seminary. In the address, “The Scriptural Doctrine of the Love of God,” Vos exposed the confessional revisionists’ lack of appeal to Scripture. According to Vos, the revisionists possessed an exegetical shallowness that resulted in a non-biblical understanding of the divine attribute of the love of God. Sadly, in the modern church there had developed “a widespread demand that God’s love, and nothing but his love, shall be made the keynote of every message Christianity has to bring to the world.”³⁰

Vos attributed this mindset to a shift among Christians from an emphasis on the intellect to an emphasis on the will and emotion. In previous generations, knowing God was tied to glorifying God, which was why “the natural tendency was to make this knowledge as comprehensive and as many-sided as possible—to have it mirror the full content of the divine nature, and not merely a single one of its perfections.”³¹ Whatever faults may be charged against the intellectualism of the church when orthodoxy reigned supreme, that is, when the Westminster Standards were produced in the seventeenth century, the church at least appreciated the infinite complexity and richness of God.

The music of that theology may not always please modern ears, because it seems lacking in sweetness; but it ranged over a wider scale and made better harmonies than the popular strains of today. On the other hand, it is plain that, where the religious interest is exclusively concentrated upon the will, and entirely exhausts itself in attempts at solving the concrete, practical problems of life, no strong incentive will exist for reflecting upon any other aspect of the nature of God than His love, because all that is required of God is that He shall serve as the norm and warrant for Christian philanthropic effort.³²

He then added the ominous note, “It is a well-known fact that all heresy begins with being a partial truth. So it is in the present case.”³³

Vos realized after this initial trumpet blast that the objection would be that no one could possibly argue against the belief that God is love. He assured his audience that he was not denying the importance of the love of God. But, it was possible to overemphasize the love of God to the neglect of other biblical doctrines, especially the sense of sin and the necessity of Christ’s substitutionary atonement and justification.

Although the assembly had taken pains to assure members of the church that proposed revision would not harm the integrity of the confession’s system of doctrine, Vos believed this was an empty claim if the love of God were made the supreme maxim. There would be not only a displacement of the previous balance of the truth, but also a continuing endeavor to justify this new belief by a corresponding reconstruction in time of the entire system of doctrine.

Vos illustrated how this was the case with Ritschlian theology, which Vos believed was responsible for the push among liberal Presbyterians for a revision of the traditional formulations. The primacy of the love of God and the restriction of religion to the will are

³⁰ Geerhardus Vos, “The Scriptural Doctrine of the Love of God,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, 425.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 425–26.

³³ *Ibid.*

the supreme tenets to whose sway the religious consciousness is made subject. The content of theology would inevitably turn from what God has objectively and supernaturally revealed concerning himself to what can enter into man's subjective religious experience. The old names for the attributes of God are retained, but the content has been changed. The omnipresence of God means that God's love can help anyone anywhere. Righteousness becomes the consistency of God's love in saving. The kingdom of God ceases to be a kingdom of redemption, but rather is the totality of the moral relationships that the divine love prescribes for us.

The older theology was exceedingly careful in how it handled the doctrine of the love of God. The primordial love that existed among the Trinity was distinguished from the ectypical love that went out to the creatures. The manifestation of God's love in saving his own, "rising in its absoluteness and sovereignty above every possibility of being either originated or checked or extinguished by aught in the creature,"³⁴ was upheld in its uniqueness against other manifestations of God's love of a more common character.

Given the concrete significance that these issues had assumed in the confessional crisis, Vos declared that it would not seem amiss to review the scriptural doctrine of the love of God. Looking first at the Old Testament teaching, Vos stated that up to the book of Deuteronomy, no explicit use is made of the word love to designate the attitude of God toward his own. This did not mean, however, that the concept was wanting.

Man is said to have been made in the image of God, and obviously the underlying idea is that in his very constitution he is adapted and designed for communion with God. The entire mode of God's seeking our first parents immediately after the fall reveals the most tender care and solicitude. In the promise that enmity will be put between the serpent and the woman and their respective seeds, the pledge of friendship with Him who puts this enmity is implicitly contained.³⁵

This pledge of friendship was seen in God's love for his chosen people, Israel. The book of Deuteronomy in particular put special emphasis upon the elective character of this love. It was not so much that God loves his people, but that God had set his love upon them to the exclusion of all other nations. This love springs from God independently of any qualities, ethical or otherwise, inherent in Israel. This is why Israel is exhorted to love God alone.

But, the Old Testament witness did not reduce the character of God to terms of his love for the creature. He was also a consuming fire. If God did not punish sin, he would not be himself, since his righteousness and wrath are necessary elements in his nature. From the Law to the Prophets in the Old Testament, the love of God was never allowed to swallow up God's righteous justice.

In the New Testament, the teaching of the love of God occupied a central and controlling place, but not so as the other attributes of the divine character were reduced to the element of love. "While Jesus invites us to love the heavenly Father, He, on the other hand, also exhorts us to fear the God who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell."³⁶ Vos concluded that as long as the church recognized the doctrine of eternal punishment

³⁴ Ibid., 428.

³⁵ Ibid., 429–30.

³⁶ Ibid., 441.

as an integral part of Jesus's message, then it will also have to admit that he knows of a relation between God and man determined by the principle not of love, but of justice.

Nevertheless, the theme of the gracious love of God was a principle theme of Jesus's preaching. In order to appreciate why Jesus made it central, Vos stated that the historical circumstances must be understood. In Judaism, religion had been put on the basis of a commercial exchange with God. Over against this misuse it was necessary to awaken in man the fact that God is personally interested in man, and lovingly gives himself to man, and desires to be loved in return. "By taking our Lord's gospel out of its historic environment and by refusing to construe it in harmony with the larger movement of revelation as a whole, we may be easily led to impute to Him principles which He would have repudiated."³⁷

Vos continued, stating that, from a biblico-theological point of view, Paul did not see the love and righteousness of God as mutually exclusive. "On Christ as the substitute of sinners the love and righteousness of God terminated in perfect harmony, both so far as God and the Saviour's own religious appreciation were concerned."³⁸

Rather than lessening the doctrines of predestination and election as some revisionists proposed in order to accommodate the love of God, Vos argued that the scriptural doctrine of the love of God was closely connected to these doctrines. God's electing choice was rooted in love, which was why it was "impossible to maintain that the decree of predestination has no bearing whatever on the question of the love of God, as if from the totality of mankind he selected certain persons to be saved with a choice resting on ground unknown."³⁹

Vos finished the address with a warning of what would happen if the Presbyterian Church revised its Confession of Faith to introduce the doctrine of the universal redemptive love of God. First, it would lessen God's special love for his people. It is this form of love, not God's general benevolence, that the Bible everywhere emphasizes and magnifies. Secondly, the Scripture did not teach that God's love for those intended to become his own was the same as his love for wider groups of humanity. Every revision that would obscure this fundamental distinction ought to be at the outset rejected as unbiblical. "The divine love for the elect is different not only in degree but specifically from all the other forms of love, because it involves a purpose to save, of which all the other forms fall short."⁴⁰

Vos argued that if the Presbyterian Church wanted to go in the Amyraldian direction of ascribing to God a universal redemptive love, then it should understand the consequences.⁴¹ Amyraldianism made the special relation of God to the elect a secondary consideration. The love of God for his own becomes an afterthought and loses the better part of its value. Vos urged the greatest caution with any revision of the Confession of Faith that would give confessional expression to the Amyraldian doctrine. He said:

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 447.

³⁹ Ibid., 454.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 456.

⁴¹ Moise Amyraut (1596–1664) taught that God loved all humanity and sent his Son, Jesus, to die for the sins of all. But, Amyraut also taught only those who accept the offer of the gospel in faith and repentance are actually saved.

The fact that the one historic attempt to reduce the principle we have been considering to a theological formula has been a signal failure, ought to fill the church of today with great humility and make her proceed with extreme caution in the task which, wisely or unwisely, she has set herself; the more so since, as we have seen, the air is rife with extravagant unCalvinistic, unscriptural notions on the subject.⁴²

Vos closed with the admonition to the Princeton students that the church must preach the good news to all, but the church must also never forget that the secret things belong to the Lord. Those things which are revealed belong to believers and their children and are to be obeyed.

Three months after the address, it appeared as the lead article in the January 1902 issue of the *Presbyterian and Reformed Review*. Still, it was apparent that the momentum in the Presbyterian Church was for some sort of change to the Confession of Faith. When the general assembly gathered in New York City on May 15, 1902, the excitement over the report of the Special Committee on the Revision to the Confession of Faith was topped only by the appearance of President Theodore Roosevelt. Addressing the assembly at Carnegie Hall in celebration of one hundred years of organized Presbyterian home missions activity, President Roosevelt, a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, recalled his own personal affiliation and affection for the Presbyterian Church having attended the Madison Square Presbyterian Church in New York City until the age of sixteen.⁴³

The assembly determined to send to the presbyteries eleven overtures for approval, including a declaratory statement that addressed chapter 3, “Of God’s Eternal Decree,” and chapter 10, “Of Effectual Calling,” and adding two new chapters, chapter 34, “Of the Holy Spirit,” and chapter 35, “Of the Love of God and Missions.” The recommendations also included textual changes regarding the sin of refusing to take an oath, the good works of the unregenerate, and the labelling of the Pope as the antichrist.

The declaratory statement did what Vos had warned against. The statement explained that chapter 3, “Of God’s Eternal Decree” was not in conflict with the teaching that God loves all mankind. It also said that the phrase “elect infants” in chapter 10, “Of Effectual Calling,” should not be understood as teaching that there were infants who die in infancy who are lost. The added chapter 35 also expressed what Vos believed was contrary to the teaching of the Word of God, the belief that God loved all mankind.

The presbyteries responded with approval to the eleven overtures, and the revisions were adopted by the 1903 General Assembly. Having lost the fight, Vos did not comment upon the revisions either in correspondence or his writings. His attention had turned to finishing the book that would prove to be perhaps his most popular work, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church*.

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⁴² Ibid., 457.

⁴³ Henry Minton, “Ecclesiastical Notes: The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA,” in *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 13, no. 52 (1902): 620.

ServantReading

Preaching Christ from Psalms by *Sidney Greidanus*

by Iain Duguid

Preaching Christ from Psalms: Foundations for Expository Sermons in the Christian Year, by Sidney Greidanus. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016, xx + 595 pages, \$40.00, paper.

Resources in biblical exegesis aimed specifically at preachers are an all too rare commodity. Too often, academic commentaries answer all the questions that no preacher is asking and no congregation needs to hear, while so-called homiletical resources are often academically flimsy and theologically lightweight. It is therefore always welcome to see another book from the pen of Greidanus, the author of a well-regarded textbook on preaching Christ from the Old Testament.¹ Alongside his homiletic textbooks, he has now given us volumes on Genesis, Ecclesiastes, Daniel, and the Psalms, allowing us to watch over his shoulder as he crafts Christ-exalting sermons from a variety of Old Testament genres.

The book is comprised of a forty-five-page introductory chapter, “Issues in Preaching Christ from the Psalms,” followed by detailed analysis of twenty-two specific psalms. Because Greidanus has chosen to follow the sequence of the *Revised Common Lectionary*, these psalms are not in the scriptural order—Psalm 1 is chapter 2 in the book, while Psalm 2 is chapter 10. The book concludes with six appendices, giving brief summaries of the author’s method of expository preaching, sample sermons by the author and his students, and suggestions for sermon series on the Psalms.

In the introductory material, Greidanus defends preaching from the Psalms (as opposed to simply praying or singing the Psalms), and discusses the different genres of the psalms, along with various devices and features of Hebrew poetry. He briefly explores the role of the literary context within the psalter, noting the greater attention paid recently in academic scholarship to the editorial placement of each psalm (unfortunately, he finished his work before the appearance of O. Palmer Robertson’s recent book, *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering Their Structure and Theology* (2015), which is an excellent full-scale treatment of the subject). He rightly discourages attempts to reconstruct the supposed historical background from which the psalm comes, which is in many cases elusive. He also has a few general comments about moving from psalm to application: often the pathway lies through an analogy between the psalmist and the congregation, or between Israel and the congregation. At other times, the psalm seeks to

¹ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

address a need that we too share (43–44). Ultimately, the goal is always to preach Christ, and Greidanus believes that the seven methods he has outlined in his earlier works apply equally well here in the Psalter.

This introductory material provides a fair survey of academic scholarship: its brevity means that it serves as a good refresher for those familiar with these topics, though beginners might wish for a bit more detail. One or two suggestions will raise eyebrows in more conservative Reformed circles, such as the idea that the reading of Scripture might be “supported by mime or drama” (44). More seriously, Greidanus argues that modern preachers cannot adopt the apostolic hermeneutic, suggesting that it must be replaced by “a responsible, modern hermeneutic method” (8). Greidanus is far from alone in this assessment of the NT use of the OT, but Dennis Johnson, Gregory Beale, and D. A. Carson have provided a substantive response, defending the apostles from the charge of irresponsible exegesis.² Certainly we want to avoid arbitrary eisegesis in our expositions, but I believe that is very far from what the New Testament writers were doing.

I was also surprised to find no substantive help in this book for preaching the imprecatory portions of the Psalms—surely one of the most significant issues for anyone in preaching from the Psalms. There is a very brief mention of Psalm 137 under the preaching method of “Contrast,” which treats this psalm as embodying the exact opposite of Christ’s teaching (interestingly, Greidanus’s discussion of this same psalm is lengthier and more circumspect in his earlier *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*³), but none of the psalms selected as examples are imprecatory psalms. He says in his preface, “my first inclination was to help preachers with especially difficult psalms such as the imprecatory psalms” (xiii). Unfortunately, although critiquing the *Lectionary* for omitting Psalm 104:35a (409), and providing a brief exposition of that verse on page 499, he provides little help for the more challenging passages—many of which find an echo in the New Testament, especially in the Book of Revelation, which suggests that they cannot simply be neatly wiped away under the heading of contrast.

The meat of the book, the substantive work that makes this book worthwhile for every preacher to own, lies in its individual expositions. There is a wealth of material here that will repay every reader, distilled from Greidanus’s wide reading and research. Even when you disagree with his application or how he gets to Christ, the process of thinking through your disagreement with him will sharpen your insight into the text. Read this book alongside Edmund Clowney’s classic article “The Singing Savior”⁴ and Robertson’s book on the *Flow of the Psalms*, and it will be astonishing if you are not significantly more motivated, inspired, and equipped to preach Christ from the psalms, which were after all “written about him” (Luke 24:44).

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² G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007); G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012); Dennis Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007).

³ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 275.

⁴ Edmund Clowney, “The Singing Savior,” *Moody Monthly*, July-August 1979, 40. Also available on a number of internet sites.

ServantReading

How Bible Stories Work *by Leland Ryken*

by David A. Booth

How Bible Stories Work: A Guided Study of Biblical Narrative, by Leland Ryken. Wooster, OH: Weaver, 2015, 129 pages, \$9.99, paper.

A large part of becoming educated is learning to read well. For the Christian, far more is at stake than merely cultivating erudition. Rightly knowing God through his Word is dependent upon our skill as listeners and as readers. Wouldn't it be great if there were a series of reliable and accessible guides designed to teach lay people how to read God's Word better? Now there is. For nearly half a century Leland Ryken has been teaching Christians to read God's Word with greater care, sensitivity, and depth. *How Bible Stories Work* is the first of six volumes by Professor Ryken, published by Weaver Books, designed "to equip Christians to understand and teach the Bible effectively by giving them reliable tools for handling the biblical text" (7). We could scarcely ask for, or even imagine, a better guide.

Every pastor and ruling elder faces the challenge of teaching Christians that proverbs are not unconditional promises from God and that figurative language should not be understood woodenly. In these obvious ways we are already modeling and teaching aspects of hermeneutics. Nevertheless, I suspect that few pastors have ever systematically taught their congregations how stories work, even though the majority of God's Word comes to us in the form of historical narrative. This book provides a clear and helpful framework for rectifying this oversight.

The basic premise of this book is that understanding how stories work precedes grasping what the stories are trying to teach. To put the matter positively, the better we become at interpreting the Bible as literature the more fully and accurately we will grasp the Bible's theology. The opening chapter explains how "the subject of literature (whatever the genre) is universal human experience, concretely embodied" (17). Unless readers fully grasp this principle, they will have great difficulty relating literature, including biblical literature, to life (25). Regretfully, Professor Ryken sometimes pushes this principle in unhelpful ways. For example, Professor Ryken describes God's judgment on the Tower of Babel by saying: "This story tells us about a failed experiment in living on a grand scale" (22). Now, it might be easier to relate to a story "about a failed experiment in living on a grand scale" than to one about God judging all the people on earth who were united in rebellion against him, but the story of the Tower of Babel is about wickedness and judgment rather than a failed experiment. What makes literature engaging is the combination of "universal human experience" and the particular, even sometimes the unique, ways in which those experiences are "concretely embodied."

In my judgment, one of the most common errors in evangelical Bible study is the over-identification of the reader's experiences with the events of biblical history. If the Bible were a collection of moralistic fairy tales it would be essential for the reader to be just like Moses when the LORD meets with him at the burning bush. But since the Bible is a revelation of God's character and saving work, rather than a collection of moralistic fairy tales, such distinct encounters teach us the most when we don't attempt to flatten them to fit within our own experiences. Thankfully, this book contains few such lapses.

The heart of the book is found in six chapters which explore setting, characterization, and plot. Trained pastors, and other experienced readers, will have largely internalized how they assess the setting and characterization in stories, and therefore we can easily forget that most lay people need to be taught how to analyze these literary features. Professor Ryken strikes a helpful balance toward this goal by providing sufficient detail to be clear without overwhelming the reader with minutia. The heart of the book is rounded out with insightful chapters on "plot structure and unity" and "plot devices." Professor Ryken notes that "the track record of study Bibles and commentaries on the subjects of plot structure and unity is not as good as it should be" (78); he helpfully warns against some of the common pitfalls found in "published material on Bible stories" (79). While these warnings are important, one of the most helpful features of this book is that it guides individuals into thinking clearly about how stories work rather than providing readers with a long list of technical rules to apply. The book closes with a chapter on "Hero Stories," which Ryken calls "a neglected and fruitful narrative genre," and a final chapter on how we find theological significance in narrative texts.

This thin volume is an excellent resource for a pastor or elder who wants to lead an eight- to ten-week study on how to read biblical narrative. Each of the eight chapters in this book is crafted with the right balance of detail, illustration, and brevity to be covered in a single class. This book would also work well in a discussion-based adult Bible study where each participant reads through the book on his or her own prior to class. Pastors will want to augment this book by explaining how Hebrew narrative differs from modern English stories and also by demonstrating how the didactic portions of the Bible both explain and limit the ways in which biblical stories are to be read. In the series preface Professor Ryken writes: "The Bible can be trusted to reveal its extraordinary qualities if we approach it with ordinary methods of literary analysis" (8). That is undoubtedly true, and this book will help God's people use the tools of literary analysis to grasp better the priceless treasure of his Word and apply it to their lives.

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ServantReading

Synopsis of a Purer Theology by *Walaeus et al.*,
edited by *Henk van Den Belt*, translated by
Riemer A. Faber, volume 2

by Ryan M. McGraw

Synopsis Purioris Theologiae (*Synopsis of a Purer Theology*), by Walaeus et al., edited by Henk van Den Belt, translated by Riemer A. Faber, volume 2. Leiden: Brill, 2016, 738 pages, \$154.00.

This is the second volume in the anticipated translation of the so-called *Leiden Synopsis*. This work represents a “survey of academic theology” immediately following the Synod of Dordt and in response to the theological system of the Remonstrants, or, Arminians (1). As such, it is a compendium of Reformed thought by four renowned Professors of theology that brings the English-speaking world into contact with the key ideas of the Reformed system of theology in one of its classic expressions.

Volume 2 of the *Synopsis Purioris* treats a wide range of issues including predestination, Christology, the application of redemption, and the doctrine of the church and its ministers. The translation is clear and accurate. The inclusion of the Latin text alongside the English translation makes this volume even more useful, since many key theological terms are difficult to translate in a way that retains the technical vocabulary current in Reformed orthodoxy. For example, the translator renders *habitus spiritualis* as “spiritual disposition,” correctly capturing its meaning (276–77). However, readers unfamiliar with Latin theological terminology will not likely pick up on the technical language of habits and acts that was rooted in Medieval theology and flowed seamlessly into Reformed thought. Comparing key terms in the original text with their English equivalents enables readers to build a Reformed theological vocabulary in a way that furnishes them with vital vocabulary and its meaning and function in seventeenth-century theology. The footnotes added by the editors are helpful as well, since they provide historical background related to the authors cited, they explain the historical context at key points, and they include comparisons to contemporary authors across confessional lines. This increases the value of the translated text by making it serve as an introduction to early seventeenth-century High Orthodox theology.

Another useful feature of the *Synopsis* is the consistent application of Trinitarian theology to the entire theological system. The authors appeal to the doctrine of the Trinity and to the appropriate works of all three divine persons in relation to each locus treated. Doing so was a standard feature of Reformed orthodox systems of theology that gradually disappeared in later times. This fact provides insight into the robust way that

Reformed orthodox authors employed Trinitarian theology in relation to the entire system of doctrine, which should offset the common criticism that Reformed theology treated the Trinity merely as an appendix to the doctrine of God.

As I noted in relation to the first volume of the *Synopsis Purioris*, this work does not include a full treatment of every relevant scholastic question in relation to each locus. The authors of the Leiden Synopsis often included less material in the chapters of their work than other authors, such as Wollebius, did in shorter theological systems. Moreover, they omit many theological distinctions that appeared in later systems, such as Turretin's *Institutes*. Questions that other authors addressed at length with extensive proofs and arguments, the *Leiden Synopsis* sometimes stated in a single sentence. However, the subjects treated by its authors clarify many important theological distinctions by providing clear definitions of terms and their use in Reformed thought. This means that while the *Synopsis* is somewhat incomplete compared to comparable Reformed systems, it nevertheless introduces readers to many key concepts in the context of the early seventeenth century.

In spite of the cost of these volumes, this ongoing translation of the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* has potential to serve a diverse body of students. It will be invaluable to scholars of Reformed orthodox thought. Those familiar with the Latin language can use this publication to gain access to a carefully developed semi-critical text of the *Synopsis*. The translated text will provoke thought and fruitful research as scholars interact with the Latin original. This work can serve Reformed pastors as well. The fact that many Reformed ministers no longer gain proficiency in the Latin language in their theological training means that they are effectively cut off from most of the classic systems of theology in their own theological tradition. It is important to understand how this system developed historically if ministers hope to understand where expressions in historic Reformed creeds came from and what they mean. Such material is also vital for evaluating continuities and discontinuities between classic and modern Reformed thought. This provides readers with more theological options to draw from as they grapple with interpreting Scripture in conversation with the church. For both scholars and pastors, these volumes are a welcome addition to Reformed literature in the English-speaking world for those who are willing and able to obtain and read them.

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ServantReading

You Are What You Love *by James Smith*

by Gregory E. Reynolds

You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit, by James K. A. Smith. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016, xii + 210 pages, \$19.99.

My few complaints about this book would never challenge its great value. At the outset Smith does evince a somewhat over-realized eschatology when he declares, “This book articulates spirituality for culture-makers” (xi). But its focus is on the culture of the church with worship at its center, as the motivating force of the formation of our chief love. This is paramount.

In highlighting the biblical emphasis on love, Smith at times comes close to eclipsing the place of knowledge. However, given the tendency toward focusing almost exclusively on knowledge of doctrine among the Reformed, Smith’s emphasis has a needed place. “So discipleship is more a matter of hungering and thirsting than of knowing and believing. . . . To follow Jesus is to become a student of the Rabbi who teaches us how to *love*” (2). Smith has witty ways of making his case: “ ‘You are what you think’ is a motto that reduces human beings to brains-on-a-stick” (3). He clarifies our concerns about knowledge when he explains, “A follower of Jesus will be a student of the Word ‘one whose delight is in the Law of the LORD’ (Ps. 1:2)” (4). The gist of his message is not that we need less thinking or doctrine but that we need to reckon on the power of habit in our view of human nature and the Christian life. “Our *telos* is what we *want*. . . . a vision of the ‘good life’ that we desire” (11).

Furthermore, love is a habit that involves formation through the patterns or liturgies of life that orient and cultivate our desires. This should be the aim of all education. Learning “isn’t just information acquisition; it’s more like inscribing something into the very fiber of your being” (18). “This means that Spirit-led formation of our loves is a recalibration of the heart, a reorientation of our loves by unlearning all the tacit bearings we’ve absorbed from the other cultural practices” (22). Missing in Smith’s analysis of our misdirected loves is the problem of total depravity and original sin. However, he picks up on Calvin’s image of the fallen human heart as an “idol factory” (23). The thesis of this excellent book is summed up at the end of chapter 1: “To be human is to be a liturgical animal, a creature whose loves are shaped by our worship” (23).

Chapter 2 focuses on the secular “liturgies of desire.” These are often contrary to what we think. What we really desire is revealed in the habits of our daily lives (29). These loves often exist subconsciously, as second nature, because we underestimate the power of habit. “If you think of love-shaping practices as ‘liturgies,’ this means that you could be worshipping other gods without even knowing it” (37). We can identify these by being aware of cultural practices as liturgies or rituals of everyday life. Smith goes on to demonstrate how the mall is a religious site that has messages of the “consumer gospel”

built into it—and these messages are after our hearts (41). The analysis is profound. “[T]he mall is a *formative* space, covertly shaping our loves and longings” (55).

Chapter 3 shows how historic worship is designed to reorder our disordered loves (57). Smith strongly advocates returning to “historic” worship and ecclesiology. “The church—the body of Christ—is the place where God invites us to renew our loves, reorient our desires, and retrain our appetites” (65). So, public worship enculturates us in the life of our new kingdom, participating in the “life of the Triune God” (66, 70). Smith’s advocacy of historic patterns of discipleship is refreshing in a culture that is always craving novelty. In McLuhanesque fashion he understands that cultural forms are not neutral, but are freighted with messages of secularism, so that when they enter the church through worship they fail to challenge our worldly loves (76).

If worship is formative, not merely expressive, then we need to be conscious and intentional about the form of worship that is forming us. . . . If we think of worship as a bottom-up expressive endeavor, repetition will seem insincere and inauthentic. But when we see worship as an invitation to a top-down encounter in which God is refashioning our deepest habits, then repetition looks very different: it’s how God rehabituates us. In a formational paradigm, repetition isn’t insincere, because you’re not *showing*, you’re *submitting*. This is crucial because there is no formation without repetition. (80)

While I sometimes tire of what seem to be contemporary clichés like “narrative arc” and “recalibration,” the point Smith is driving at is well worth our perseverance. And his writing skills are, in the main, considerable. So, in chapter 4 worship is depicted as the story of the gospel that captures the hearts of worshipers. This liturgy is designed to win our hearts to the *telos* or purposes of our God, which are embodied in Christ and his gospel story (90). After a summary of the formative power of elements of the historic liturgy, Smith concludes that “immersing yourself in this Story is how the Spirit is going to change your habits” (99).

Smith’s literary sensibilities enter his argumentation in an engaging way. “Desire-shaping worship isn’t simply didactic; it is poetic. It paints a picture, spins metaphors, tells a story . . . Stories stick” (107). Because the gospel story we encounter in worship is one we are to inhabit throughout the week, chapter 5 deals with the liturgies of the home. In contrast to the “marriage industry,” the ritual of marriage calls us to serve God and others (125). (I wish he did not connect the Lord’s Supper with the marriage ceremony.) While some, including me, will object to the liturgical calendar as an ecclesiastical imposition, Smith’s suggestion for its use seems to be more of an informal aid to family worship (129).

We might say that the sacramental power of Christian worship “enchants” our everyday lives, reminding us that the world we inhabit is not a flattened “nature” but rather a creation charged with the presence and power of the living Spirit. (130)

Chapter 6 focuses on education, asking “What if education weren’t first and foremost about *know* but about what we *love*?” In this chapter the section on youth ministry is worth the price of the book. “Youth Ministry for Liturgical Animals” (143–54) accurately

depicts much of contemporary youth ministry as moralistic and concerned primarily to avoid boredom (144). Tending to divorce young people from public worship, youth ministry limits the exemplars of their imitation to their own generation. Focusing on exciting, emotive expression limits the message portion of meetings to the “dispensation of information,” leaving young people no different than when they came to the meeting (145). Relevance is purported reason for importing secular liturgies into the church through youth ministry (146).

While I was not impressed with the example of the Taizé community, a French ecumenical monastic group,¹ Smith’s point about them is well taken. What young people “really crave is not liberation from ritual but rather liberating rituals” (150). He makes a superb point about the importance of strangeness in liturgy. Church growth has emphasized relevance and comfort, while worship is intended to offer a weary world something markedly different from the disenchanting world (151). Here Smith’s book would have been improved by reference to the rich treasure of Reformation liturgies at our disposal. Smith concludes this section with three suggestions for formative youth ministry: 1) enfold youth in congregations committed to historic Christian worship; 2) invite youth into “a wider repertoire of Christian disciplines;” 3) replace entertainment with service (152–53). The remainder of the chapter discusses “Schooling the Imagination.” Here, Smith suggests rituals for higher education that seem odd.

The concluding chapter is a weak ending to an otherwise superb book. Smith’s work is suggestive, creative, interesting, and convincing. Officers should read this book and glean the best from its compelling theme.

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¹ Taizé worship has no preaching and the Taizé brothers take vows of celibacy. The ecumenical quest to unite Catholics and Protestants mutes theological differences. For these reasons Reformed people cannot affirm the value of this community.

ServantPoetry

G. E. Reynolds (1949–)

Bell's Palsy

“They also made bells of pure gold,
and put the bells between the pomegranates all around the hem of the robe,
between the pomegranates—a bell and a pomegranate,
a bell and a pomegranate around the hem of the robe for ministering,
as the LORD had commanded Moses.” (Exod. 39:25–26)

Paul spoke not of this
Particular debilitation,
But of a general
Wasting away, robbing
One of one's faculties,

But not a little nerve damage,
For that is an hors d'oeuvre,
A small taste of the crossing
Into the realm of bells, the bells
Of priestly robes and pomegranates.

Picture the pomegranates, making
My dessert like a garden of the LORD.
Let the bells of grace, pure
Grace, ring and ring with liberty.
This is where my palsy ends.