

End-of-Life Care



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From the Editor

While working on a commentary on Ecclesiastes, I have been reading Ecclesiastes over and over again each day. In doing so I have become intensely aware of one of its major themes—death (Eccl. 1:4; 2:14–23; 3:1–2, 19–21; 5:18; 6:12; 7:1–2; 9:2–3, 10; 12:1–8). Ecclesiastes 12:1–8 forms the grand prelude to the framer’s closing exhortation to fear God in 12:9–12. No one is exempt unless they are alive at the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus. Retired hospital chaplain pastor Gordon Cook gives church officers an abundance of important information and advice for ministering to the dying in “Hospice and Palliative Care at the End of Life.”

Chapter 15 of *The Voice of the Good Shepherd* is a companion to the previous chapter, expanding more specifically in three areas of general preparation for preaching: “Develop Your Whole Person in Three Areas.” I explore the value of good fiction, the oral power of poetry, and a word on the value of classical music.

Richard Gamble reviews *The Case for Christian Nationalism* by Stephen Wolfe in his review article, “Christianity and Nationalism.” He digs deeply into Wolfe’s sources, uncovering an author supporting the nineteenth-century social gospel and another supporting Mao and the People’s Republic of China. Worse is his appeal to French intellectual Ernest Renan, the author of *The Life of Jesus*, the notorious 1863 account of Jesus as a purely human great man. He concludes: “Christianity and Christian nationalism are separating as two theologies engaged in heated competition in our world a century after Machen. The stakes may be as high today as they were then.”

Stephen Migotsky reviews *Calls to Worship, Invocations, and Benedictions* by Ryan Kelly, recommending it as an orthodox and useful source book for ministers of the Word.

Danny Olinger reviews *Flannery O’Connor’s Why Do the Heathen Rage?* by Jessica Hooten Wilson in his review article, “Flannery O’Connor Revisited.” He finds that Wilson’s piecing together of O’Connor’s unfinished novel is unsatisfying to readers who know O’Connor’s oeuvre. O’Connor wrestled mightily with her work, constantly revising, so it is doubtful that she would appreciate its being published in unfinished form. Olinger’s knowledge of O’Connor will whet the appetites of those who are unfamiliar with her work. She was a master at depicting the dark side of human nature, leaving the reader hungry for Jesus, writing as she did from the Christ-haunted South.

Our poem this month is by a poet I have just discovered, Mary E. Coleridge (1861–1907). She was the great grand-niece of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Her poem about death was published posthumously—*Poems* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1908). Unlike some of her Romantic forebears, like William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878) in *Thanatopsis*, she sees death as an enemy of humanity and pleads with her gracious God for mercy.

The cover photo is from The Pine Hill Cemetery in Washington, New Hampshire. On one nearby stone this gospel inscription was engraved: “No prayer, no tears, his flight could stay / ‘Twas Jesus called the soul away.”

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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- “Pastoring the Dying and the Mourning.” (Joel R. Beeke) 13:4 (Oct. 2004): 76–87.
- “Death: An Old-New Terror.” (Gregory Edward Reynolds) 19 (2010): 10–12.
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- Review of *Departing in Peace: Biblical Decision-Making at the End of Life*, by Bill Davis (Gordon H. Cook, Jr.) 28 (2019): 113–14.

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 Work

Hospice and Palliative Care at the End of Life

by Gordon H. Cook Jr.

Jim, a ruling elder, was assessed for pain in his abdomen. Tests indicated cancer, and he was referred to an oncologist. When the congregation learned the news, they joined together in earnest prayer for their beloved elder. An initial round of chemotherapy resulted in shrinking the tumor, allowing surgical removal. The successful surgery was a great encouragement to all—answered prayer.

Months later a follow-up visit found abnormal bloodwork. Testing and an MRI showed multiple tumors in the abdomen, including his liver. The slightly yellow pallor of Jim's skin now took on a more sinister connotation.

His oncologist ordered a second round of chemotherapy, the same treatment which had been successful before. The church returned to earnest prayer. This time testing indicated the chemo was having little effect on the tumors. The oncologist put Jim into the hospital to administer a much stronger chemotherapy requiring continuous cardiac monitoring. Now oncology and internal medicine were joined by cardiology (the number of Jim's physicians was multiplying).

From the first treatment, the cardiac monitors showed signs of trouble ahead. An irregular pulse and widely varying blood pressures forced this round of chemotherapy to be suspended. Jim began to experience low oxygen levels, so a pulmonologist and supplemental O₂ were ordered. Jim found himself shuffled in and out of the ICU and the OR, where several urgent procedures were undertaken.

Internal medicine sounded the alarm that Jim's liver function was declining. Both oncology and internal medicine urged the immediate resumption of chemotherapy. However, cardiology and pulmonology resisted, cautioning that Jim's heart and lungs could not sustain added stress.

Jim developed a fever. Tests indicated sepsis. High dose antibiotics were administered. For a couple of days, Jim seemed to improve. Everyone's hopes soared. Then came a bowel infection. Further, the irregular heartbeat was becoming more problematic.

Thus far the family had been doing rather well in supporting Jim. But the barrage of decisions was taking its toll. They watched as common treatments gave way to last ditch efforts. The family was on an emotional rollercoaster which was becoming intolerable, with no exit in sight. The church was informed that things were getting serious for Jim and asked to pray even more.

Internal medicine, trying to deal with rapidly escalating pain due to liver involvement, asked for a palliative care consult. The palliative care doctor reviewed Jim's case, made some recommendations for pain management, and suggested that the family be given the option of palliative care. The next day, Jim's family sat down with a palliative care nurse, a social worker, and a chaplain to talk about alternatives for his care. Later, that afternoon, they all sat down again in Jim's room and offered to take him onto palliative

care. Jim, worn out from too many medical procedures, wholeheartedly agreed. The discussions then turned to various end-of-life decisions.

Have you ever watched a circus performer who spins plates on sticks. Inevitably, one of the dishes will begin to wobble. The performer will then focus all his efforts on bringing that plate back under control. But this will leave another unattended, and more plates will begin to wobble. At some point, all the plates are wobbling, and a terrible crash is just ahead. Now imagine a well-trained team of professionals who can come into the picture and gently take each plate down from its perch. With the last plate, the team may provide lunch for the performer. Welcome to palliative care! In Jim's case, most of the monitors and many of the tubes and hoses were removed, allowing him to move about freely for the first time in several weeks. Only those which were directed toward providing comfort were left in place. The four specialists stepped into the background, still available if needed, but now in a supporting role. In their place was the one palliative care physician, along with a team of professionals accustomed to working together. All of them were working together for a common purpose, to help Jim live as fully as possible, as comfortably as possible, for as long as possible.

The real world is not as idyllic as I am describing. The dying process can be challenging under the best of circumstances. But a good palliative care team can transform a situation, literally overnight, shifting from curative treatment toward comfort care. The patient who just the day before was being whisked from one procedure to another is now sitting on a recliner, uninterrupted, surrounded by his family and friends. Smiles and stories replace worried looks and endless decisions. The noisy alarms are replaced with headphones bringing favored music or a digitalized reading from Scripture. X-rays and CAT scans are now replaced by family selfies. Underlying all this is the acceptance of a shared assumption. Jim is going to die. (To be theologically accurate, I should add, "unless Christ returns first!")

If you are ready to admit it, we are all going to die unless the Lord returns first (Heb. 9:27; cf. Rom. 5:12; Gen. 3:19; Job 14:5; 30:23). This includes you, and the members of your family and of your congregation, your neighbors and friends, the people you are familiar with and those who are total strangers. A person begins to die the moment they are born, because our "first parents fell from the estate wherein they were created" (WSC 15), and so all became sinners. "All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all the miseries of this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever" (WSC 19). Thanks be to God who "having out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer" (WSC 20).

Reformed theology becomes real life experience in palliative care. What do you expect concerning your death? Do you want to die in a hospital ICU, attached to IVs, O₂ tubes, and monitors? Or would you prefer to be in your own home, comfortable in your own bed, surrounded by loved ones and friends, listening to your favorite music?

Statistically, here in America, you are slightly more likely to die in the hospital than in other settings. The statistics for 2018 in the United States¹ are as follows:

Deaths in a hospital	35.1%
Deaths at a private home	31.4%

¹ QuickStats: "Percentage of Deaths, by Place of Death," National Vital Statistics System, United States, 2000–2018. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2020;69:6111. DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6919a4>.

Deaths in an extended care facility (e.g. nursing home) 26.8%

The rise in hospice has significantly altered these statistics, allowing more people to die in their own homes.

Hospice is

a program that gives special care to people who are near the end of life and have stopped treatment to cure or control their disease. Hospice offers physical, emotional, social, and spiritual support for patients and their families. The main goal of hospice care is to control pain and other symptoms of illness so patients can be as comfortable and alert as possible.²

Palliative Care is

Care given to improve the quality of life and help reduce pain in people who have a serious or life-threatening disease. . . . The goal of palliative care is to prevent or treat, as early as possible, the symptoms of the disease and the side effects caused by treatment of the disease. It also attends to the psychological, social, and spiritual problems caused by the disease or its treatment. . . . It may also include family and caregiver support. Palliative care may be given with other treatments from the time of diagnosis until the end of life.³

Hospice and Palliative Care: A Brief History

Hospice and palliative care are often confused. They share a common history. Hospice can be traced back to the time of the Crusades, when places of respite and healing called “hospices” were established for crusaders traveling to and from the Holy Land. In 1113 AD the hospitallers of St. Johns captured the Island of Rhodes and established a hospice hospital there.⁴ The hospice tradition was revived in the seventeenth century when the Sisters of Charity opened a number of houses to care for orphans, the poor, the sick, and the dying. The Irish branch of this order founded Our Lady’s Hospice for the care of the dying in Dublin (c. 1880). Later, in 1902 they founded St. Joseph’s Hospice for the dying poor in London. In 1967, Dame Cicely Saunders opened St. Christopher’s Hospice in southwest London and served as its first medical director from 1967–1985. She based her hospice care upon her idea of “total pain,” distress which includes physical, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions.⁵

In 1963, Dame Saunders lectured at Yale University, sharing her ideas of specialized care for the dying in the United States. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D. authored *On Death and Dying*, in 1969, sparking an international discussion of end-of-life issues. In 1974, Florence Wald, along with two physicians and a chaplain, founded the Connecticut Hospice in Branford, the first hospice in the United States.⁶

² “Hospice” National Cancer Institute (NCI Dictionary of Cancer Terms)

<https://www.cancer.gov/publications/dictionaries/cancer-terms/def/hospice>.

³ “Palliative Care” National Cancer Institute (NCI Dictionary of Cancer Terms)

<https://www.cancer.gov/publications/dictionaries/cancer-terms/def/palliative-care>.

⁴ Stephen R. Connor, *Hospice and Palliative Care*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), 3–4.

⁵ Caroline Richmond, “Dame Cicely Saunders founder of the modern hospice movement, dies”, *BMJ*, 2005, <https://www.bmj.com/content/suppl/2005/07/18/331.7509.DC1>.

⁶ “History of Hospice,” National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, <https://www.nhpco.org/hospice-care-overview/history-of-hospice/>.

Also in 1974, Dr. Balfour Mount, a surgical oncologist at the Royal Victoria Hospital of McGill University in Montreal, coined the term ‘palliative care’ to avoid the negative connotations of the term ‘hospice’ in French culture. He introduced the innovations of Dr. Saunders into Canadian, academic teaching-hospitals, focusing on holistic care for people with chronic or life-limiting diseases and their families.⁷

The National Hospice Organization (NHO) was established in 1978 to promote the concept of hospice care in the United States. The US Congress included a provision to create a Medicare hospice benefit in 1982–3. COBRA (1985) made this benefit permanent, providing Medicare funding for those who choose hospice in their final months of life. The Veterans Administration’s offerings for care for veterans was supplemented by a hospice benefit in June of 1995. In 2000, the NHO changed its name to National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO).⁸ The American Board of Medical Specialties recognized the subspecialty of hospice and palliative medicine in 2006. By this time, hospice and palliative care were well established in the United States and being developed worldwide.

A Comparison of Hospice and Palliative Care

In philosophy and approach to care, hospice and palliative care are very similar:

- Both arise from a concern for compassionate care for the terminally ill.
- Both focus on comfort care, rather than curative care.
- Both place a premium on quality-of-life, rather than longevity, generally involving less aggressive end-of-life treatment.
- Both follow the express desires of patients and families, either directly or through advanced directives.
- Both employ an interdisciplinary team, bringing together a cohesive team of doctors, nurses, social workers, chaplains, associated medical professionals, and volunteers.
- Both seek to support people, enabling them to live as fully as possible, as comfortably as possible, for as long as possible.
- Both affirm life, but do not postpone or prolong death.
- Both enjoy high levels of patient and provider satisfaction.
- Both provide exceptional symptom control.
- Both result in fewer intensive hospital admissions during the final month of life.
- Both have a strong spiritual component, including regular chaplain visits.
- Both show significant cost savings when compared with typical treatment at the end of life.⁹ These cost savings have drawn the attention of hospital administrators and insurance companies, helping to explain the rapid growth in both programs.

⁷ Matthew J. Loscalzo, “Pain Management and Supportive Care of Patients with Hematological Disorders,” *Hematology Am Soc Hematol Educ Program*, 2008, 465. <https://doi.org/10.1182/asheducation-2008.1.465>.

⁸ “History of Hospice.”

⁹ Robin Bennett Kanarek, *Living Well with a Serious Illness* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023), 43.

- People with terminal illness tend to live longer with hospice or palliative care than people with the same condition who opt to continue curative treatments.¹⁰
-

The differences between hospice and palliative care include the following:

- All hospice care is palliative, but not all palliative care involves hospice.¹¹
- Hospice is funded by Medicare, along with other insurance packages.¹² Palliative Care does not share this funding source, but its cost benefits have attracted many insurance companies.
- Hospice has strict criteria for admission. The patient must have a terminal illness and a prognosis of six months or less.¹³ Because palliative care does not have this funding source, it is open to anyone regardless of prognosis. Some people receive palliative care alongside curative care. This allows palliative care to become involved in the patient's journey much earlier. Palliative care teams often provide consults for cases that do not involve terminal illness, for patients who are struggling with comfort care issues, such as pain management.
- Hospice, here in the United States, is primarily home based, including private residences and long-term care facilities. There are some hospice facilities scattered around the nation. In contrast, palliative care is generally provided in hospitals or medical treatment centers.
- Currently, hospice is more readily available throughout the United States. Many areas have two or more hospice agencies, some non-profit, others for-profit, but all Medicare certified. Palliative Care is quickly gaining ground.¹⁴
- Here in the United States, hospice has a strong volunteer component, required for all Medicare certified hospice agencies. Some palliative care programs, modeled on hospice, include a volunteer component, but this is optional.

Spirituality and Religion in Hospice and Palliative Care

As religious leaders, we are perhaps most interested in the spirituality and religious services offered by hospice and palliative care. Chaplains distinguish between a person's

¹⁰ Kanarek, *Living Well with a Serious Illness*, 25.

¹¹ Connor, *Hospice and Palliative Care*, 6.

¹² Medicare funds 100% of the costs of hospice care under Title 42 of the Code of Federal Regulations, subpart G, Payment for Hospice Care. The Hospice benefit is available to those enrolled in Medicare Part A (Hospital Insurance) or in a Medicare Advantage Plan. DHHS, US, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, *Medicare Hospice Benefits*, 2024, <https://www.medicare.gov/Pubs/pdf/02154-medicare-hospice-benefits.pdf>.

¹³ Hospice requires that a person must have a terminal illness certified by a hospice physician, meaning that if left untreated, their illness would normally result in death within six months or less. This determination can be quite challenging. While many cancers follow a predictable course, other life-limiting illnesses (e.g. cardiovascular disease, pulmonary disorders, dementia, stroke, etc.) are far less predictable. The patient must also sign a statement opting for hospice care, rather than care directed toward seeking a cure. And they must agree to receive care by a Medicare certified hospice agency.

¹⁴ As of 2014, 98% of National Cancer Institute cancer centers reported having a palliative care program. David Hui, Ahmed Elsayem, Maxine De la Cruz, Ann Berger, Donna S Zhukovsky, Shana Palla, Avry Evans, Nada Fadul, J Lynn Palmer, Eduardo Bruera, "Availability and integration of palliative care at US cancer centers," *JAMA*, 17:303 (11) (March 2010): 1054–61. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20233823/#:~:text=National%20Cancer%20Institute%20cancer%20centers,50%20%5B56%25%5D%3B%20P%20%20%3C%20>

spirituality and their religious beliefs and affiliations. Spirituality focuses upon meaning in life and meaningful relationships (with God, self, others, and the world around us). Religion denotes an organized system of beliefs and practices.¹⁵ For many within the OPC, our religion expresses our spirituality in concrete form, and our views of meaning and relationships are shaped by our religious beliefs. For others, religion plays a very small part in their lives, or no part at all, yet they are able to articulate a philosophy of life, as well as spiritual needs both met and unmet.

Chaplains, while trained and able to deal with religious issues, tend to focus on spirituality and spiritual needs. A chaplain's assessment of a patient's well-being has less to do with what faith community they attend and more to do with what makes their life worth living, how they understand their health issues in connection with that sense of meaning, and where they find the personal strength to address health issues.

In contrast, as a minister, ruling elder, or deacon your focus should be upon supporting your parishioner's faith and relationship with God through Jesus Christ, especially as they approach the end of life. Your task is better defined, but just as challenging. Spiritual concerns such as guilt, fear, isolation, alienation, the inability to participate in religious worship or reading Scripture or praying may result in spiritual distress and should be compassionately addressed.

Concerns for the Christian in Hospice or Palliative Care

The Use of Opiates

The use of opiates (e.g. oxycodone, hydrocodone, morphine, fentanyl) has become extremely controversial in our society. Today, every prescription for these and similar medications is closely scrutinized, and their use for pain management has been radically reduced.

Scripture raises important concerns about opiate use. It calls us to preserve our ability to think clearly. It does so negatively in its prohibition against drunkenness (e.g. Eph. 5:18) and positively with its call for sober mindedness (e.g. 1 Thess. 5:6), specifically to allow prayer (e.g. 1 Pet. 4:7). When opiates are used wisely for pain management alone, they can be a help to clear-mindedness. But if used excessively or for purposes other than the treatment of physical pain, they are both physically and spiritually dangerous.

Hospice and palliative care make extensive use of opiates. Both programs affirm that patients have a right to be as free of pain as possible.¹⁶ These powerful medications are used by well-trained and experienced medical professionals as important tools to relieve the significant pain sometimes associated with the dying process.

Palliative care and hospice also have other tools for pain relief. For example, pain associated with spiritual distress can be addressed by chaplains with prayer more effectively than medications.

The Use of Cannabis

¹⁵ A far more precise definition of religion and spirituality can be found in Karen E. Steinhauer, et al., "State of the Science of Spirituality and Palliative Care Research, Part 1: Definitions, Measurement, and Outcomes," *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management* 54, no. 3 (September 2017), 430. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28733252/>, doi: 10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2017.07.028.

¹⁶ "Palliative Care Methods for Controlling Pain," Johns Hopkin's Medicine. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/palliative-care-methods-for-controlling-pain>.

Along similar lines, as various States have legalized the use of Cannabis, this has been included for palliation by some medical professionals. Too often this is employed without supporting research regarding claims of efficacy. While some professionals may advocate for the use of these substances, it is the patient and the patient's family who determine if they are used.

One devoutly religious patient with throat and neck cancer was encouraged to use CBD oils to dry up secretions associated with his condition. This is one area where medical research has demonstrated real benefit.¹⁷ He spent several hours with the chaplain weighing the pros and cons of using these oils. The chaplain asked how he would know if the oils were being effective or not. He answered, "I think I would find myself writing some very funky music." The patient tried the oils but felt that the benefit was not cost effective (he was rather frugal).

Palliative Sedation

A controversial aspect of pain management for hospice and palliative care is the use of "palliative sedation."¹⁸ In palliative sedation, medications are administered to render a patient unconscious and thus free from pain. The purpose of this treatment is purely palliative, seeking to bring comfort for someone when all other options for palliation have failed. While the goal is not to kill the patient, it comes dangerously close to euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide, raising serious questions regarding the Sixth Commandment. Generally, this is limited to the final hours or days of life and only for a patient experiencing intense suffering. (In my many years of hospice chaplaincy, palliative sedation was only considered once, and then ruled out when the pain was brought under control by pain medications.)

Flirtations with Assisted Suicide

While hospice and palliative care take no side in the current debates about assisted suicide, their focus on quality of life over longevity might lead some to expect that they would favor such an approach. The fact is, when symptoms are well managed and patient dignity maintained, the pressure to end one's own life is significantly reduced.¹⁹ I have never experienced a patient who was assisted in suicide during my years of hospice chaplaincy. However, I did have patients who inquired about the availability of this option. These often led to long discussions as to why the patient might be seeking such an escape.

The Church's Role

Hospice in America has always had a strong volunteer emphasis, providing respite and other personal support for patients and families on hospice. Hospice volunteers are

¹⁷ Kifah Blal, Elazar Besser, Shiri Procaccia, Ouri Schwob, Yaniv Lerenthal, Jawab Abu Tair, David Meiri, Ofra Benny, "The Effect of Cannabis Plant Extracts on Head and Neck Squamous Cell Carcinoma and the Quest for Cannabis-Based Personalized Therapy," *PubMed* (NIH), "Cancers," 2023, 497, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36672446/> doi: 10.3390/cancers15020497.

¹⁸ The information in this section is drawn from an article by Poonm Bhyan, Michael Pesce, Utsav Shrestha and Amandeep Goyal, "Palliative Sedation in Patients with Terminal Illness," *National Center for Biotechnology Information* (January 2024). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK470545/>. It is also discussed under the expression "terminal sedation" in Connor, *Hospice and Palliative Care*, 157–159, 162–163.

Connor, *Hospice and Palliative Care*, 161.

well-trained people who show compassion and kindness regularly. They provide respite for families who provide the bulk of care for hospice patients.

This is an opportunity for members of your congregation, particularly those who are retired, to make a significant contribution in your community. It will allow your members to have meaningful interactions with people who are hurting, and thereby grow in their own walk with the Lord. Hospice volunteering is a diaconal type of ministry, not usually involving evangelism. Still, it can provide a major source of outreach into your community.

Palliative care and hospice often change our prayers for those who are dying from desperate pleas for God's healing to a recognition of God's abiding presence. They can foster an awareness that our lives are in God's hands, that he is truly good, and his steadfast love endures forever. Instead of telling God what to do in our prayers, it allows us to pray, "Thy will be done," in a more meaningful way, ready to wait upon the Lord, ready to submit ourselves to Him!

The pastor may feel that his role as a shepherd caring for the flock of God is being supplanted by the palliative care team, and especially the involvement of a board-certified hospice and palliative care chaplain. Often this is the pastor's first time dealing with matters of death and dying within his congregation, while the chaplain has supported hundreds of patients in similar circumstances. As under-shepherds of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, a pastor should be quick to humble himself, desiring the best possible care for the member of his congregation. Do this and the pastor may find his own unique role in the palliative care of this church member. The chaplain may have more knowledge and skill at assessing and intervening in the spiritual needs of this member. But it is the pastor who has the greater freedom in bringing Christ from a Reformed and biblical perspective, the good news which everyone needs to hear. Allow the chaplain to focus on the existential and emotional work which may need to be done. You focus on the ministry of Christ to the person who is dying.

Gordon H. Cook, Jr. *is the pastor of Living Hope (formerly Merrymeeting Bay) Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Brunswick, Maine. He is the retired coordinator of the Pastoral Care (Chaplain) program for Mid Coast Hospital and a retired chaplain for hospice care with CHANS Home Health in Brunswick.*

Servant Word

The Voice of the Good Shepherd: Develop Your Whole Person in Three Areas, Chapter 15

By Gregory Edward Reynolds

*As for these four youths,
God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom*

—Daniel re: himself and his three
friends (Dan. 1:17)

*Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians,
and he was mighty in his words and deeds.*

—Stephen re: Moses (Acts 7:22)

*Chesterton's work is that of: "a thinker and a poet
with a serious and comprehensive belief about the nature of life."¹*

—Marshall McLuhan

*The literary author's first task is to present human experience.
This means that the subject of literature is human experience concretely presented.
A work of literature is not primarily a delivery system for an idea; it is an embodiment of
human experience. A work of literature is a house in which we are invited to take up
residence and out of which we look at life.²*

—Leland Ryken and Todd Wilson

The Value of Fiction: The Meaning of the Human

No one among us would doubt the importance of reading for pulpit preparation.³ We love to pore over tomes of theology and volumes of commentaries. But how many works of fiction do Reformed preachers read? If the answer is “not many” or “none,” we should ask why. My guess is that many Reformed preachers do not think fiction is worth their

¹ W. Terrence Gordon, *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding, A Biography* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 32.

² Leland Ryken, Philip Ryken, and Todd Wilson, *Pastors in the Classics: Timeless Lessons on Life and Ministry from World Literature* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 13.

³ Adapted from Gregory Reynolds, “On the Matter of Notes in Preaching,” *Ordained Servant*, 16 (2007): 14–16.

time. But the best fiction probes reality—especially human reality—in a way that no other medium does. Its consideration of the meaning of the human is incomparable. Our Reformed doctrine of common grace provides a theological rationale for appreciating good fiction. It also helps us to develop an oral imagination. As Calvin taught, God gifts unbelievers in various arts and sciences—so we should not reject them.⁴

C. S. Lewis has written a wonderful treatise on the value of fiction properly read.⁵ Many English departments, especially in the university, have removed the simple pleasure of reading fiction with all their tortuous politicized methods of study and criticism. But beyond the simple enjoyment, I have discovered three homiletical benefits from good fiction, which I think are of inestimable value to preachers.

First, good fiction presents a picture of humanity that squares with reality, and thus with the biblical account—horribly fallen and yet wonderfully made in God’s image. Good fiction, whether by a believer or an unbeliever, explores this complex tension. As Harold Bloom suggests in the title of his monumental commentary on the Bard—*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*⁶—good fiction expands our understanding of the human condition and, thus, our sympathy with our fellow mortals.

We tend to read works that mirror our own attitudes, ideas, and opinions. This approach inhibits intellectual and spiritual growth; we fail to develop the skill of seeing through the eyes of another. In order to do this we must give ourselves to the author’s view. C. S. Lewis instructs us along these lines:

We are so busy doing things with the work that we give it too little chance to work on us. Thus increasingly we meet only ourselves.

But one of the chief operations of art is to remove our gaze from that mirrored face, to deliver us from that solitude. When we read the “literature of knowledge” we hope, as a result, to think more correctly and clearly. In reading imaginative work, I suggest, we should be much less concerned with altering our own opinions—though this of course is sometimes their effect—than with entering fully into the opinions, and therefore the attitudes, feelings, and total experience, of other men.⁷

Shakespeare has taught us that there is a world in every human soul; it is this world that great fiction both explores and expands in us. Our theology itself compels us to cultivate wider interests than theology proper, because we are called to minister to the people—the world—around us. Understanding them, sympathizing, and empathizing with them are not optional.

Painting is similar to fiction: to truly appreciate a work we must submit to the artist’s vision or narrative. In late Medieval and Renaissance times painting was a visual narrative—one that need not be idolatrous when appreciated outside of public worship. Christian painter Makoto Fujimura makes an eloquent plea for this sort of engagement with art in his article “Come and See.”⁸ It is amazing what he learned as he went and “stood under” in order to “under-stand” da Vinci’s “The Last Supper” in the St. Maria delle Grazie in Milan. So standing under good fiction can be an illuminating and

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.15.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 129.

⁶ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead, 1998).

⁷ Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 85.

⁸ Makoto Fujimura, “Come and See: Leonardo da Vinci’s Philip in the Last Supper,” *Books and Culture*, 12:6 (November–December 2006): 10–13.

expanding experience. As Fujimura indicates, good art offers both relief and perspective in the midst of a surfeit of vacuous images and sound bites.

By contrast, Thomas Kinkaid, the self-styled “painter of light,” depicts an unreal, illusory world. Light emanates confusingly from everything. In da Vinci’s painting there is a many-layered interplay between light and darkness. But the source is clear: God incarnate at the center.

Good fiction deals honestly with good and evil in the world. Good fiction does not revel in evil, for the sake of evil, but depicts evil as evil—for what it is in its ugliness and deformity; the very best fiction depicts evil in light of hope and redemptive grace and glory. In twentieth-century fiction, such as the novels of Graham Greene, character development is often profound in its depiction of the human predicament. Twentieth century American writer Flannery O’Connor was a master at depicting the dark side of human nature, leaving the reader hungry for Jesus, writing as she did from the Christ-haunted South. The landscapes of human life are often like the paintings of Edward Hopper, desolate and even desperate, yet in Greene’s case not without a glimmer of light and hope. In his work the hope of redemption comes in subtle rays of light penetrating darkness, only occasionally entering the horizontal world of hopeless and bleak fallen humanity.

Second, good fiction helps us become better story tellers. The Bible is, after all, the story of redemption. Thus, since God is the divine storyteller, we should imitate his essential means of communicating truth to his people.

The temptation to preach with too much doctrinal density can be resisted by helping people enter the sermon through good storytelling, especially in connecting the pericope with the story of redemption. But, of course, many texts are themselves stories. Novelist Larry Woiwode suggested to me that the use of narrative, or storytelling in preaching, slows us down so that we can better engage people with the divine message.⁹

When truth is embedded in a narrative, it is more memorable, not only because of the pace, but also because of the concreteness of human detail. Stories deal with the specific realities of life in space and time—in the history with which we are familiar. Truth is more believable when presented as history, since it is in history, not mythology, that God has dealt with his people—most pointedly in the Incarnation. Truth resides in the created order—in the world in which we live and move and have our being. All of Scripture is embedded in history—in space and time. When not situated in the narrative, doctrine alone may appear to the hearer to be the construct of the preacher’s mind. I believe this is one reason why people have enjoyed the Joseph story more than any series of sermons I have preached in thirty-five years. It is storytelling at its best. The truths of providence and salvation are never made more memorable, woven as they are into the rich drama of the Jacob cycle. This experience has moved me to use stories, biblical and otherwise, in all my preaching, especially Pauline epistles.

Our Lord often used stories, such as the good Samaritan tale, making his point stick by telling it in an unforgettable way. Such stories are set in the context of the larger story of the history of redemption. This is the way God himself has chosen to impress us with his truth. From Jesus’s example we preachers should take our cue. Reading well written fiction will help us become better storytellers.¹⁰

Third, good fiction expands the sensibilities of the preacher in the preaching moment. Perhaps some Reformed preaching is dull because of a lack of imagination—what we

⁹ From an email exchange in 2003.

¹⁰ Gregory E. Reynolds, “Preachers: Tell the Story of Redemption!” *Kerux*, 15:3 (December 2000): 26–30.

might call “oral imagination,” that expresses itself in the act of preaching. Well written fiction teaches us how to speak in colorful, euphonic ways. Rich and good-sounding language is the fabric of Scripture and the gift of human speech. As good fiction describes the world and its inhabitants in detail, it also inculcates patterns of speech that are concrete and down to earth—for contemporary fiction is up to date, giving us the best formed sounds of our world. Such patterns invite people into our sermons and help purge us of the Christian clichés to which we are all too accustomed.

Developing healthy oral imaginations also helps us to maintain a cadence of speech more reflective of the everyday world as we experience it. Electronic media, unfortunately, tend to make us impatient with the slower paces of space and time. This is one reason that I favor reading slowly, and often stopping to read a well-written passage aloud. If God took time to create, we preachers ought to take more time to communicate our thoughts to God’s people. The meaning of the human, the art of storytelling, the expansion of the oral imagination; these are all good reasons to read good fiction.

The Power of Poetry: Quintessentially Oral

Novelist and poet, Larry Woiwode, and Leland Ryken, author and professor of English, are always lamenting the lack of interest in literature and poetry among pastors. They are doing their best to make a difference. But why bother? Well, consider this.

Poet Dana Gioia, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), raised worrisome concerns about the state of literary reading in America in the 1990s. Building on an alarming trend, Gioia sounded the alarm in dramatic fashion in 2004 and 2007 with reports “Reading at Risk” and “To Read or Not to Read.” He was often criticized as a doomsayer. But, because parents and educators, including the NEA, did not simply accept this as an irreversible trend, the twenty percent decline in literary reading in the youngest age group surveyed (ages 18–24) in 2002 was reversed to a dramatic twenty-one percent increase in 2008, as presented by Gioia in a subsequent NEA report “Reading on the Rise.”¹¹ But sadly the only area of literary reading that continues to decline is poetry.

One of my favorite editorial writers recently lumped poets in with the dilettante, second-generation, trust fund rich kids. Poetry is the literature *par excellence* of daydreamers. Walter Mitty’s early twentieth-century daydreaming¹² was thought to be a disease we moderns should consider vaccinating out of existence. But, unlike polio, it is *not*, I would argue, a disease, but a cure for our modern dis-ease as I have argued in Chapter 10.

Here are several reasons why poetry is important to the task of preaching. Poetry fosters the creative pleasure and discovery that serendipity allows. Poetry affords the preacher the cultivation of meditation and daydreaming.¹³ Since it takes time to understand, it slows us down—a serious need in our hyper-active world. I believe one of the reasons poetry is generally out of favor is that we have very little time for day

¹¹ Dana Gioia, “Reading on the Rise,” <http://www.nea.gov/research/readingonrise.pdf>.

¹² James Thurber, “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” *The New Yorker*, March 18, 1939, 19–20. This was made into a movie in 1947.

¹³ Gregory E. Reynolds, “The Value of Daydreaming,” *Ordained Servant* 21 (2012): 18–20; *Ordained Servant Online* (Aug.-Sept. 2012), http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=317&issue_id=77; “Changing Pace: The Need for Rest in a Frenetic World,” *Ordained Servant* 18 (2009): 14–17; https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=151.

dreaming in our electrified lives. Thus we have little chance for the creative pleasure and discovery that serendipity allows, as I have discussed in Chapter 10.

One of the great errands of poetry is to get us to see ordinary things in a new light. The poetic sensibility cultivates attention, to notice what others miss. This in turn helps the preacher to think about what is going on in a pericope in ways that go beyond the obvious. For example, recently as I read in Matthew of the soldiers' misunderstanding of Jesus's cry of dereliction from the cross "Eli, eli, lema sabachthani" (Matt. 27:46) as a prayer to Elijah, I thought how profoundly we often misunderstand others. It is a major aspect of our fallenness. Jesus was the most misunderstood person in history. Only the Holy Spirit can clear the fog. This attentive and observant sensibility also helps us notice what is going on around us, things about people and situations we might otherwise miss.

The difficulty of understanding poetry inhibits its ascendancy in our culture because it takes meditation, time, and concentration. Of course, poetry in the past several decades has appeared in the form of poetry slams throughout America. Although this gives a glimmer of hope, it does not usually represent the kind of appreciation that grows out of a deep reading of the best poetry in the English language. One reason is because slams are timed, promoting the opposite of what is necessary to enjoy poetry. I have even encountered disdain among slammers for the forms and discipline of the greatest poets. But this is not to say they are not onto something important. They read or recite their poetry in small public settings. They are exploring orality—the beauty and interest of the sounds of words. We should remember that poetry was originally song. The carefully crafted words set to a melody were the most memorable and thus lasting way to transmit tradition.

Poetry is a thoroughly biblical medium of communication. I always begin my lectures on media ecology by asking if anyone in the audience likes poetry. Invariably only a few say "Yes." Then I tell them that I am certain that they do like poetry, because they like the Bible—God's Word is over one third poetry. Poetry's place in the Bible should inspire us to give it prominence in the preparation and practice of preaching. Would a prophet write a poem to communicate God's truth? Jacob, David, and countless others biblical writers did.

We must admit that our tendency—were we writing Scripture—would be to write a journal article or a lecture. Perhaps we even secretly wonder if the literary forms in which the Bible was written are the best modes of communicating. This is because we are mostly "silent" readers. But the original audience of both testaments would not even have had the luxury of owning manuscripts unless they were very wealthy—the average cost of a book would have been equivalent to a working man's annual income. The Bereans in Acts 17 had to go to the synagogue to search the Scriptures as they did. Ordinarily through all the millennia of Bible history the primary access to God's Word among God's people was through hearing the Scriptures read and preached.¹⁴ Thus the patterns of sound in the structure of the text would need to be memorable—and so they are. A large portion of the Bible is written in poetry and poetic structures like the chiasm. But how often do we take advantage of this in the preparation and delivery of sermons? In Ephesians 2:10 Paul says that "we are his *workmanship* (poetry, literally ποιήματα *poiēma*, emphasis mine), created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

Poetry helps foster a love of words, the basic material of preaching. In poetry every

¹⁴ This point is made over and over again by Hughes Oliphant Old in his monumental multi-volume series *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*.

word counts. The density and intensity of poetry make it especially helpful for the preacher. Poetry teaches us to love words—their sounds and their meanings. Consider Paul Engle’s poem:

Poetry is ordinary language
raised to the Nth power.
Poetry is boned with ideas,
nerved and blooded with emotions,
all held together by the delicate,
tough skin of words.¹⁵

A poem is words patterned to impress. This is the genius of hymnody. Poetry and song—the music of the human voice—are very closely related. “The poet is someone who expresses his thoughts, however commonplace they be, exquisitely.”¹⁶ I am certainly not advocating form over substance but rather substance memorably and well expressed. In his long poem *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) Alexander Pope describes poetry:

True wit is nature to advantage dress’d,
what oft was thought but ne’er so well express’d.

Frost’s definition of poetry, “the sound of sense,” gets at the essence of poetry. But the reverse does, too. W. H. Auden (1907–73) had this to say about what makes good poetry and poets:

A poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language. . . . [I]t is certainly the sign by which one recognizes whether a young man is potentially a poet or not. “Why do you want to write poetry?” If the young man answers: “I have important things to say,” then he is not a poet. If he answers: “I like hanging around words listening to what they say,” then maybe he is going to be a poet.¹⁷

Preachers should love “hanging around words,” since they are the raw material of his preaching, and preaching is primarily an oral, not a written, discipline, although the two are clearly closely related. Consider Frost’s double quatrain.

“Nothing Gold Can Stay” by Robert Frost (1874–1963)

Nature’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s a flower;
But only so an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.

¹⁵ Paul Engle, BrainyQuote.com, Xplore Inc, 2015.

<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/p/paulengle162234.html>, accessed June 17, 2015.

¹⁶ Mark Forsyth, *The Elements of Eloquence: How to Turn the Perfect English Phrase* (London: Icon, 2014), 5.

¹⁷ W. H. Auden, “Squares and Oblongs,” in *Poets at Work* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), 171.

Nothing gold can stay.¹⁸

Consider the words of Qoheleth in the framer's conclusion to Ecclesiastes:

Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find *words of delight*, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. (Eccl. 12:9–12, emphasis added)

In the age of bits and bites we are told that science alone gives us truth. Thus, we are suspicious of poetry. Many Christians believe that all talk of literary structures undermines our confidence in God's Word. The creation debates, among conservatives, often yield such ideas. Poetry enshrined the Exodus event in many Psalms. They are no less historical or true for being communicated in poetry. Poetry in the Bible presents truth in memorable form.

The inspired words of the sage in this text are carefully crafted divine wisdom—"arranging many proverbs with great care." He fashions wisdom especially designed for troubled believers living amidst the injustices and wackiness of a fallen world. We must remember to leave the mystery of God's disposition of our lives in the hands of God, recognizing our mortal and human limits. The beauty of the design of the book of Ecclesiastes is itself a testimony of the perfect control and benevolent purposes of our God in caring for us. God's Word is crafted with the original Designer's care—a care with which he gifts the writers of Scripture—"weighing and studying and arranging."

The concept of artfully wrought truth reminds me of the Roman architect Vitruvius's three rules of good architectural design expounded in his foundational *The Ten Books of Architecture*: firmness (structural integrity), commodity (usefulness), and delight (beauty). They are all necessary to one another, just as biblical truth must be expressed artfully. So the text describes its own words in two ways in 12:10.¹⁹ The first is "words of delight (*hephets* הֶפֶתִּים)." The basic meaning of "delight" is to feel great favor towards something. The Author of beauty gave literary skill to the human authors of Scripture to draw us to its meaning and transforming power. The second is "words of truth (*emeth* אֱמֶת)." These are straight or orthodox words. Truth and beauty go hand in hand. The medium is perfectly suited to the message. In God's Word content and craftsmanship are inextricably linked. The medium and the message are perfectly complimentary as they teach us the beauty of God's grace. This should give us confidence in our task of communicating God's Word in an artful way to the rising generation through preaching, teaching, and writing to the glory of God.

Reading and memorizing poetry, as I have said, trains us to meditate deeply on texts. I also think that the decline of interest in poetry is in part due to a lack of reading aloud,

¹⁸ Edward Connery Lathem, ed., *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 222.

¹⁹ We could also relate the three rules of Vitruvius to the biblical text in this way: 1) firmness (structural integrity) is found in the various literary forms of the biblical text, which serve the interests of the text's meaning—chiasm, for example, is structured to make a main point in the center; 2) commodity (usefulness) is the application of the biblical text in worship and service; and 3) delight (beauty) is the beauty of the text artfully crafted and structured to fulfill the purposes and designs of the ultimate author, God.

especially hearing poetry well read or recited. What I have discovered in my “memory walks,” on which I memorize poetry, is that by memorizing poetry, through regular oral repetition, the meaning becomes clearer with time—but it takes time. Memory muscles are exercised along with the physical. The sound and meaning of the words begin to sink in. But few of us have patience to repeat poems aloud until it is etched in our memories. That is why I have learned to combine it with my daily two mile walk.

Another reason for the decline of interest in poetry is the deterioration of linguistic depth and nuance in early exposure to language. Electronic media tend to immunize us from the nuanced use of words, spreading our attention over a thin surface of reality and addicting us to the cliché and the sound bite. Moreover, technical and scientific language dominates our culture, making poetry especially to appear useless. Thus the vernacular, the staple of poetic vocabulary, has become superficial and poorly suited to explore and express the complexities of external or interior realities. Cultural conformity cultivated by mass media has eviscerated much common language of its richness.²⁰ Birkerts observes, “every second a standardized medium is rubbing away the idiosyncrasies and burrs from our speech.”²¹ Furthermore, the egocentric nature of much modern poetry that I witness in the premier organ of poetry in the English speaking world, *Poetry*, reflects the tendency toward solipsism in our culture. Often written in a prose form much modern poetry is barely distinguishable from mediocre prose, hence making it prosaic. The Bible is full of the singularities mentioned by Birkerts, a treasure trove of interest. To this the preacher must pay careful attention.

The compression of language in good poetry forces the reader to pay attention to the details of grammar and punctuation. Sven Birkerts tells us, “Poetic composition is the most profound exercise of full human consciousness. . . . The poem is the most concentrated and refined possible use of language.”²² It thus tends to make us better oral communicators, speaking in memorable sentences, and—a near miracle for Reformed preachers—making our preaching more concise. I have often finished leading worship before noon since engaging in this exercise. Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address was a little over two minutes long (280 words), while the forgotten Oration by famed orator Edward Everett was over two hours long (13,508 words). The next day Everett wrote to Lincoln, “I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes.”²³

It is also important for those new to appreciating poetry to read more accessible poets. Herbert is surely one of them, although not every poem he wrote is as accessible as “Submission.” Even so, its depths take meditation.²⁴

“Submission” by George Herbert (1593–1633)

But that thou art my wisdom, Lord,
And both mine eyes are thine,
My minde would be extremly stirr’d

²⁰ Sven Birkerts, “The Rage of Caliban” in *The Electric Life: Essays on Modern Poetry* (New York: William Morrow, 1989), 55–77. Birkerts explores the effect of media, especially television on poetry.

²¹ Birkerts, *The Electric Life*, 75.

²² Birkerts, *The Electric Life*, 31.

²³ Bob Green, “The Forgotten Gettysburg Addresser,” *The Wall Street Journal* (June 22–23, 2013): A15.

²⁴ See my articles on George Herbert’s poem “Submission” in Gregory E. Reynolds, “Submission: A Model for Preachers,” *Ordained Servant* (2013): 13–16.

For missing my designe.

Were it not better to bestow
Some place and power on me?
Then should thy praises with me grow,
And share in my degree.

But when I thus dispute and grieve,
I do resume my sight,
And pilfring what I once did give,
Disseize thee of thy right.

How know I, if thou shouldst me raise,
That I should then raise thee?
Perhaps great places and thy praise
Do not so well agree.

Wherefore unto my gift I stand;
I will no more advise:
Onely do thou lend me a hand,
Since thou hast both mine eyes.²⁵

Poetry, also, as all good literature, gives us insight into the human condition, and in the case of sacred poets like George Herbert, insight into God, his Word, and the Christian life.

Finally, poetry helps cultivate the color and cadence of pulpit speech. As we learn the rhythms and cadences of the spoken word in reading, so the entire sermon should be varied in intensity, rich in linguistic diversity and acoustic texture. Poetry can teach us this. The verbal economy of poetry makes every word tell. Poetry can help us cultivate more concise speech patterns in our preaching.

“The Pulley” by George Herbert (1593–1633)

When God at first made man,
Having a glasse of blessings standing by,
‘Let us,’ said he, ‘poure on him all we can;
Let the world’s riches, which dispersèd lie,
Contract into a span.’

So strength first made a way;
The beautie flow’d, then wisdom, honour, pleasure;
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that alone of all his treasure,
Rest in the bottome lay.

‘For if I should,’ said he,

²⁵ George Herbert, *The Complete English Works*, ed. Ann Pasternak Slater (New York: Everyman’s Library #204, Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 92.

‘Bestow this jewell also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature:
So both should losers be.

‘Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessnesse;
Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,
If goodnesse leade him not, yet wearinesse
May tosse him to my breast.’²⁶

Poetry is invaluable in teaching us the rhythms and cadences of the spoken word. One of the best ways to develop oral skill is to pay attention to how others read—to the best oral presentation. John Gielgud’s recitation of Shakespeare’s sonnets is incomparable. Poetry in the twentieth century was primarily written but rarely recited until Dylan Thomas inspired a revival of recitation. Donald Hall relates that when his first book of poetry came out in 1955,

nobody asked me to speak them out loud. . . . To my students I recited great poems with gusto and growing confidence—Wyatt, Keats, Dickinson, Whitman, Yeats, Hardy—and worked on performance without knowing it. It was a shock when a lecture agent telephoned to offer a fee for reading my poems at a college. . . .

When my generation learned to read aloud, publishing from platforms more often than in print, we heard our poems change. Sound had always been my portal to poetry, but in the beginning sound was imagined through the eye. Gradually the out-loud mouth-juice of vowels, or mouth-chunk of consonants, gave body to poems in performance. Dylan Thomas showed the way.²⁷

A Word on the Value of Classical Music

Amuse is literally to stare stupidly or be distracted from the point at issue.²⁸ As Neil Postman has warned, we are in danger of amusing ourselves to death, especially when it comes to the television.²⁹ However, the abuse of something legitimate should not divert us from seeing its proper place. Amusement and entertainment have a proper place for humans, especially in a fallen world. Everyone needs a break from the rigors of work—even work which one enjoys—and the pressing issues of the day. The quality of the entertainment we choose, however, raises many important questions for the preacher. Not only do ethical questions need to be asked, but also epistemological questions. Beyond this, however, aesthetic questions should also be addressed. It is commonly believed that aesthetics are simply a matter of taste. Harold Bloom in his brilliant anthology *The Best Poems of the English Language* laments that “by reprinting only half a dozen poems published after 1923, I have largely evaded our contemporary flight from all standards of

²⁶ Herbert, *The Complete English Works*, 156.

²⁷ Donald Hall, *Essays after Eighty* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 40–41.

²⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971, s.v. “amuse.”

²⁹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985).

aesthetic and cognitive value.”³⁰ The dominance of popular culture has blinded us to these questions. Just as the forms of communication affect the content, so it is with forms of cultural expression. Popular culture is like the mud room of a grand mansion, in which young people get stuck, not realizing the unexplored treasures that lie beyond the second door.

Kenneth Myers has demonstrated how many secular assumptions about reality have shaped the forms of popular culture. Christians should be alert to the nature of these forms. To say that diversion from work is not sinful *per se* is not to say that all forms of diversion are of equal value. Much contemporary diversion is part of the suppression of the knowledge of God and an escape from the seriousness of life in God’s world. Myers has distinguished among “high, folk, and popular culture.” He argues that popular culture is a dangerous hybrid, which is uniquely a product of industrialized society.³¹ The wise Christian should consider these as he contemplates the value of various forms of entertainment.³²

Among the highest and best forms of cultural recreation is classical music, and like other forms of high culture, is being undermined by the overwhelming dominance of popular culture. Identity politics labels high culture as elitist.³³ The preacher must graciously overcome such comments by demonstrating the value of these forms. Like fine wine and good literature, classical music takes cultivation, which in turn takes time—not an activity for which popular culture and its powerful electronic purveyors prepare us. Musicologist Julian Johnson argues,

Classical music, like all art, has always been based on a paradoxical claim: that it relates to the immediacy of everyday but not immediately. That is to say, it takes aspects of our immediate experience and reworks them, reflecting them back in altered form. . . . it refuses the popular demand that art should be as immediate as everything else.³⁴

Classical music is simply music as an artistic expression, rather than simply for entertainment, thus going beyond the bounds of what we normally label as “classical”—jazz for example. Like religion, Johnson claims, classical music seems to the general public to come from another age very unlike the modern world and so having no important place in it.³⁵ He goes on the say, “The high value accorded to art, classical music included, derives from its opposition to the social devaluation of the particular and individual.”³⁶

The value of classical music has always been found in its relationship to “cosmology, natural science, and politics.”³⁷ Sadly, identity politics, with its issues of race, class, and gender, has made incursions into all of the arts, reducing them to quests for power,

³⁰ Harold Bloom, *The Best Poems of the English Language* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 13.

³¹ Kenneth M. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1989), 60ff.

³² Cf. T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968).

³³ Julian Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music: Cultural Choice and Musical Value* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.

³⁴ Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music*, 5.

³⁵ Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music*, 7ff.

³⁶ Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music*, 9.

³⁷ Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music*, 14.

whereas classical music has always been “considered a nonreferential art form whose value lay precisely in the transcendence of such worldly differences.”³⁸ Classical music offers a rich alternative to “how one-dimensional contemporary musical practice has become.”³⁹ It envelops the listener in grand ideas. In a tangential way it also develops our aural sensibilities. For the preacher it enhances meditation on the profound truths of orthodox Christianity. “Quintilian provides the basis for the Western liberal arts education when he advocates devotion to subjects as impractical as music.”⁴⁰ Quintilian asserts the connection in antiquity between music and rhetoric. Music, poetry, and philosophy were considered to be of divine origin. “The art of letters and that of music were once united.”⁴¹ Music, particularly vocal music, has a direct bearing on rhetoric:

Now I ask you whether it is not absolutely necessary for the orator to be acquainted with all these methods of expression which are concerned firstly with gesture, secondly with the arrangement of words and thirdly with the inflexions of the voice, of which a great variety are required in pleading.⁴²

No wonder it was one of the four subject areas in the *quadrivium*.

While other forms of music, like jazz and folk, offer various means of profound reflection, I have focused on classical music because it is the form with which I am most familiar. Other popular forms of music such as rock-n-roll are entertaining but hardly conducive to the kind of preparation for ministry of the Word I am discussing here. They may also be a helpful window into a culture’s soul, but serious music is what is needed for serious preaching.

Great classical music expands the human soul, not by way of sanctification, but by way of sensibility, which may in turn, depending on the listener, enhance sanctity.

Gregory E. Reynolds is pastor emeritus of Amoskeag Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Manchester, New Hampshire, and is the editor of *Ordained Servant*.

³⁸ Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music*, 21.

³⁹ Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music*, 31.

⁴⁰ Dave McClellan with Karen McClellan, *Preaching by Ear: Speaking God’s Truth from the Inside Out* (Wooster, OH: Weaver, 2014), 47, fn. 15.

⁴¹ Quintilian, *The Institutes of Rhetoric* (1.10.18), 169. He deals with the place of music in the training of orators in 1.10.9–33.

⁴² Quintilian, *The Institutes of Rhetoric*, 1.10.22.

ServantReading

Christianity and Nationalism

A Review Article

by Richard M. Gamble

The Case for Christian Nationalism by Stephen Wolfe. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2022, 488 pages, \$24.99.

In 1918, at the height of America's wartime prohibition of alcohol, the liberal *Christian Century* promised its readers that "Christianity plus science will bring in the Kingdom of God." Today, we are as likely to doubt science as to trust it, and such optimism seems naïve and even ludicrous. But that mathematical formula captured the essence of a bygone era's faith in science and progress, a faith celebrated a century and more ago by a cadre of Protestant leaders in the name of advancing God's work in the world.

This was the social gospel at high tide, and this was Christian nationalism. The progressives could have easily substituted "nation" for "science" and proclaimed that "Christianity plus *nationalism* will bring in the Kingdom of God." In the crucible of reform, the phrase "Christian nationalism" was common among the social gospellers, whether in reference to domestic politics, America's role in the World War, or missionary activity in India and China. This was a "national gospel," the phrase some Canadian scholars have adopted to identify the social gospel movement in Canada. Used judiciously, this alternative label minimizes our preconceptions about the relationship between theology and activism and illuminates an aspiration that brought together liberals and conservatives for the sake of saving and sanctifying the nation.

So prevalent was the rhetoric of Christian nationalism and "muscular Christianity" on the theological and political left in the Progressive Era, that it can appear in hindsight that the social gospel held a monopoly on these ambitions. I gave that mistaken impression in my own work on the social gospel and World War I more than twenty years ago. But Christian nationalism was not a monopoly of the left wing of the church. It was broadly evangelical, in some cases Reformed.

"National gospel" also helps clarify today's Christian nationalism but for opposite reasons. Our understanding of Christian nationalism does not assume that it is a product of the Left in church and state. Far from it. The dominant narrative blames the Right in church and state, especially MAGA Republicans, when in fact it was manufactured at least as much by the liberals. Critics and promoters alike miss this. The lovers and haters of Christian nationalism, and even more dispassionate observers, miss how strong the movement once was on the Left.

A good history of the origins, public expressions, and purposes of Christian nationalism needs to be written. It will require a careful historian. The trending, academically fashionable field of Christian nationalism, like the older study of civil religion, tends to be dominated by sociologists, political theorists, journalists, and

theologians. Historians have had less to say about it, for reasons unclear to me. Historians like to rain on everybody's parade. They resist, or ought to resist, the temptation to use the past to give us more reasons to believe what we already believe. History is messy, contradictory, and filled with surprises. History does not follow human logic; it does not think geometrically or syllogistically. It resists simplification. It does not keep good company with system-builders. Indeed, historical understanding, along with sound theology and ecclesiology, is the best antidote I know of for the dangers of ideology, the taking of one true thing about the world and inflating it into madness, to paraphrase C. S. Lewis.

It is hard to miss the controversy over Christian nationalism that has been brewing in the media, academia, politics, and the pulpit for twenty years at least. A quick search of the phrase on amazon.com shows its prevalence and increasing fashionableness as an academic or pseudo-academic topic. Whether it will grow into something more than a tempest in a Twitter teapot is hard to gauge. But there are reasons to be alert to its claims and potential influence in both church and nation. Many of the opponents of Christian Nationalism are shrill and alarmist. Their books are often hasty and shallow. Defenders, for their part, often pursue their cause with crusading zeal and glib dismissal of objections. Their books, too, can be hasty and shallow. A common tactic on social media is to dismiss critics as "Boomers." Surely we can do better than that.

Wolfe's Case for Christian Nationalism

Judging from the attention given to Stephen Wolfe's *The Case for Christian Nationalism*, one could be excused for thinking it is a significant work of scholarship. But Wolfe's book matters more for the stir it has created than for any weight it carries. One of Wolfe's first reviewers got it right when he said he felt compelled to review it, not because of its merits, but because so many people would take it seriously. That has turned out to be true. We must engage it even at the risk of increasing its significance. Other reviewers have pointed out Wolfe's deficiencies in handling Cicero and the Reformers, for example, so I want to focus on his mishandling of historical and other sources that readers might be less likely to notice. Wolfe says he is not reasoning from Scripture or history, and yet he uses both when it suits his purposes. When he condemns the condition of modern culture, he appeals to experience, which is an appeal to history. Past experience ought to be at least as relevant to judge Christian nationalism.

Wolfe opens his book with a dramatic retelling of the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789. He warns that "this day changed everything, and we live in its consequences." I will let the hyperbole of "everything" pass (history is a matter of both continuity and change). The consequences of the Revolution have indeed damaged Europe and America, if not the world at large. He attributes to the Revolution a radically secularized politics, the birth of "political atheism." Ominously, "The children of the French Revolution, both Christian and non-Christian, are still with us and continue the revolution" (2). (It is not clear who these Christian children of the Revolution are, but it seems likely that they are the advocates of a secular politics that Wolfe opposes, especially the political theology of so-called R2K, Radical Two Kingdom, not to be confused with Reformed Two Kingdom)

Granting for the moment the truth of this claim about the consequences of 1789, what it ignores reveals something important about Wolfe's story. The irony is that nationalism, far from the solution to our present woes, was itself one of the principal consequences of the Revolution. To embrace nationalism is to embrace one of the most destructive

ideologies of the last two centuries. To embrace nationalism is to “continue the revolution” just as much, if not more than, to embrace political atheism. Nationalism is an ersatz religion that fills the void left by the end of Christian political theology that Wolfe laments. This is what it was intended to be. Nationalism endures as the most potent ideological offspring of the French Revolution. It appropriates the language and promises of Christianity and the church, speaking of the nation as if it were the church, heir to the promises of God, and complete with martyrs, prophets, apostles, a canon of sacred scriptures, and holy wars and crusade. It has outlived liberalism, Marxism, and communism. Combined with populism and socialism, it has been particularly destructive, as the history of the twentieth century attests. Nations are old, but nationalism is not. Projecting it back across the centuries to include the sixteenth century Reformers makes no sense. It is an exercise in what historian David Hackett Fischer called “retrospective symmetry.” It is an optical illusion that only confuses the question. To be sure, the Reformers cared about the well-being of their provinces, realms, principalities, and empires, but that concern needs to be kept in proper tension with what they wrote about the mystery of divine providence and their pilgrim identity as strangers and exiles. They knew that, ultimately, they were guests in this world. Many of them lived in a “negative world” far more negative than Aaron Renn’s categorization of contemporary America, and yet they held to a profound pilgrim identity at the same time. One need only read East Anglian pastor John Rogers’s exegesis of 1 Peter 2:11 (sojourners and exiles) to see this. Rogers helped shape the consciousness of the very Puritans who settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony under John Winthrop, a go-to source for Wolfe for the communal ethics of Christian nationalism.

Do the Reading

A frequent rebuke on X/Twitter of those who criticize Christian Nationalism is “do the reading.” That is good advice, for sure. And it applies to the supporters of Christian nationalism as much as to its detractors. Let us do the reading and see what happens. Just the first few pages of the book give us a lot to consider.

Wolfe cites past uses of “Christian nationalism” to show that the phrase is not new and that it has been used in a positive sense. And that is true, as we have seen. But who used these words in a positive sense? For what audience and for what purpose? The answers to these questions are revealing and should make the reader cautious. What Wolfe says about these uses is true but not the whole truth.

In the Introduction, he quotes W. H. Fremantle’s *The World as the Subject of Redemption*:

the whole life of man is essentially religious; and politics, the sphere of just relations between men, especially become religious when conducted in a Christian spirit. Nothing can be more fatal to mankind or to religion itself than to call one set of things or persons religious and another secular, when Christ has redeemed the whole. (7)

These theological arguments were first delivered in England in a series of lectures in 1883 and published in 1885. Wolfe identifies Fremantle as “a well-respected and accomplished Anglican priest.” The Canon of Canterbury Cathedral was indeed well-respected and accomplished, but by whom was he well-respected and what exactly did he accomplish? His book is radically liberal in its theology. It rejects Augustine’s *City of*

God because the Bishop of Hippo saw the Church as having “no vocation for the redemption of human society.” Fremantle’s book found a larger audience in the US than in England thanks to its enthusiastic reception in the social gospel movement. Social gospel dynamo and economist Richard T. Ely wrote the introduction to the American edition of the book, praising Fremantle

for inspire[ing] us with zeal for rendering Christian the whole of the world and the whole of life. He shows Christians that they are fulfilling the purpose of the Founder of their religion in carrying Christianity into every sphere of social life and into every day of the week.¹

“A high ideal of national righteousness is set before us by Canon Fremantle,” he continued. “Not the isolated individual is to be saved but the individual in the nation. . .” Moreover, “In reading this book one thinks of the expression, ‘the manliness of Christ,’ for it is a manly Christ which is here presented, a Christ strong in action, Christ the Ruler as well as Christ the Consoler” (ii–iii). No wonder *The World as the Subject of Redemption* became a foundational text for the social gospel.

For his second example of the positive use of “Christian nationalism,” Wolfe quotes T. C. Chao, identifying him simply as “the Chinese theologian.” But this will not do. Chao came under the direct influence of the social gospel through American missionaries and the YMCA. He was a progressive theologian who signed the “Christian Manifesto” backing Mao and the People’s Republic of China.

The full text of Chao’s essay, reprinted from *Truth & Life* (February 1927) can be found online as “The Chinese Church Realizes Itself” in *The Chinese Recorder* (May–June 1927). The article concerns the emergence of a Chinese “church consciousness” and the need for a Christianity that is non-dogmatic, non-creedal, ecumenical, and social-service oriented. Regarding historic doctrines of the faith, Chao wrote:

In regard to the doctrines of Christianity, there are indeed some that we [Chinese Christians] have not been able to understand, some that we doubt, and some that we cannot and will not believe. (303)

Among these doctrines were belief in miracles and a literal hell.

Wolfe quotes the following passage from the article (quoted in a history of the YMCA and the social gospel in China):

Chinese Christians are Christians; but they are also citizens of China. According to them, nationalism and Christianity must agree in many things; for if there are no common points between the two, then how can Chinese Christians perform the duties of citizens? (7 in Wolfe, but 306 in the version I cite above)

The question is why Wolfe is taken in by 1) a seminal influence on the social gospel and 2) by a product of the US export of the social gospel through the YMCA in China? Why did he not identify them for who they were? I am not accusing him of deception. He has been careless and too quick to quote authors out of context. And his readers are not well-

¹ W. H. Fremantle, *The World as the Subject of Redemption*, with an Introduction by Richard T. Ely (New York: Longmans, Green, 1892), i.

served by contextless quotations meant to reassure them that Christian nationalism is nothing to worry about.

Renan

A more serious problem arises with his use of Ernest Renan later in the book, specifically Renan's 1882 lecture "What Is a Nation?"² Here again Wolfe seems not to know who Renan was.

The French intellectual Renan was the author of *The Life of Jesus*, the notorious 1863 account of Jesus as a purely human great man. He ends the biography with an empty tomb but no resurrection. Wolfe quotes a long section from "What is a Nation?" beginning with the following:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things that, in truth, are but one constitute this soul, this spiritual principle. One is in the past, the other in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. (140)

These are stirring sentiments. Wolfe says, "Renan got it right." But Renan is not as useful to Wolfe's case for nationalism as he thinks. In fact, Renan rejects many of the aspects of the nation that Wolfe depends on in the rest of the book. Let us do more of the reading.

Rather than being organic and natural, Renan argues, nations are the result of force and violence, a brutal past we need to forget or misrepresent in order to carry on as a people:

The act of forgetting, I would even say, historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings back to light the deeds of violence that took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been the most beneficial. Unity is always achieved brutally. . . (209)

This is not a happy story of social compacts and political consent. Some imagined natural, preexisting unity did not lead to nation-formation. Quite the contrary. Nations are the last step in a calculated process of imposed conformity that then turns around and pretends that we are all of one race, one language, and one history, and that our geographical boundaries are natural. Indeed, claiming that ethnicity gives a primordial right to the nation, Renan continues, "It is a great error, which, if it were to become dominant, would doom European civilization. The national principle is as just and legitimate as that of the primordial right of races is narrow and full of danger for true progress" (211). "The truth is," he argues, "that there is no pure race and that to base politics upon ethnographic analysis is to base it on a chimera" (212).

But the critical point here is that Renan offers the alternative, inspiring, "spiritual" unity of the nation because, he says, "religion cannot offer an adequate basis for the

² Ernest Renan, "What Is a Nation?" in Ernest Renan and M. F. N. Giglioli, *What Is a Nation? And Other Political Writings*, Columbia Studies in Political Thought / Political History (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

establishment of a modern nationality. . .” (214–15). Wolfe would say that we need to return to that religious basis. But what Renan proposes as the binding force of modern nations—“the cult of ancestors,” “a heroic past, great men, glory,” and a glorious past—is in fact a substitute for religion in a world of political atheism (216). “We have driven metaphysical and theological abstractions out of politics. What remains after that? Man, his desires, his needs” (217). What Wolfe endorses is Renan’s *replacement* for the theological and metaphysical basis for nations. I do not think Wolfe knows what he is doing by appealing to authorities such as Renan (and Herder and Carlyle). What Wolfe embraces as an accurate expression of Christian nationalism is in fact an ersatz religion of nationalism created to provide the spiritual glue for modern nations.

These are the concerns of a historian and a ruling elder in the OPC who has spent more than thirty years with vulnerable and confused young people, never more so than now. They hear from a certain breed of political theorist and political theologian that the American “regime” has lost all credibility, that America is an occupied country, and that the only solution is a political “strong man” who will rescue them. They hear the words “action,” “discipline,” “will,” and “solidarity.” At points, reading Wolfe is like reading Franklin Roosevelt’s First Inaugural. This is an authoritarian temptation, even if it comes in the guise of a restoration of freedom. It is the old appeal of populist nationalism. We have been here before.

Let me spell out more clearly what I have been saying. Wolfe and Christian nationalism more broadly promote a national gospel that has more in common with the social gospel than appears at first sight. Many who advanced an agenda for “Christianizing” America used a modernist theology and an earth-bound ecclesiology to remake their world. They were optimists who believed in inevitable human progress to the reign of Christ on earth. They mobilized pastors and parishioners to that end. Like Wolfe, they spoke the language of power, will, action, and discipline. They wanted to be at home in this world, despite all Christian teaching against such aspirations. Jesus told Pilate, one of those arrayed against the Lord and his Anointed, that his kingdom was not of this world, and if it were his disciples would fight. He warned his disciples that the world hated them because it first hated him. But Wolfe imagines a world populated by Christian warriors led by Christian Princes with pastors serving as the “chaplains” of Christian nationalism, as he said in a podcast interview. Sounding like Nietzsche, he warns Christians to reject their slave mentality. He feeds on resentment. If the minds and imaginations of young people, especially young men fretful about assaults on their masculinity and the rule of a “gynocracy,” are formed by the emerging vision of Christian nationalism, this generation will be disappointed and disaffected by churches committed to Word and sacrament and teaching how to live “peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Tim. 2:2, NIV). The world does not belong to us, and we do not belong to it. It is not ours to “take back.” Christianity plus nationalism will only distract us from the genuine gospel, from preparation for a life of suffering for the name of Jesus, and from embracing the scandal of the Cross. The nod to Machen’s *Christianity and Liberalism* in my title is intentional. Christianity and Christian nationalism are separating as two theologies engaged in heated competition in our world a century after Machen. The stakes may be as high today as they were then.

Richard M. Gamble is a professor of history at Hillsdale College in Hillsdale, Michigan, where he holds the Anna Margaret Ross Alexander Chair of History and Politics. He serves as a ruling elder at Hillsdale OPC.

ServantReading

Calls to Worship, Invocations, and Benedictions, *by Ryan Kelly*

By Stephen A. Migotsky

Calls to Worship, Invocations, and Benedictions, by Ryan Kelly. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2022, xlix + 223 pages, \$19.99.

Dr. Ryan Kelly is associate director of choral activities at West Chester University of Pennsylvania where he directs several choirs and teaches courses in conducting and choral music. Dr. Kelly is director of music and organist at Proclamation Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Bryn Mawr, PA. He earned his D.M.A. (Doctor of Musical Arts) in choral conducting from Michigan State University; he also has an M.M. (Master of Music) from the University of Oklahoma and a B.M. (Bachelor of Music) from Houston Baptist University. He is not seminary trained nor an ordained minister of the Word, but he is well-read in the subject.

His concern is to provide this book for ordained men and others who choose calls to worship, invocations, and benedictions for the Lord's Day worship in the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition and to help other traditions "to better understand, implement, and execute these worship elements" (xi).

In his preface, Dr. Kelly explains that his thinking is influenced both by broad study in the 500-year-old Reformed Christian liturgical tradition and the study of other liturgies. He is aware that today "worship styles are strikingly dissimilar among the greater Reformed Church." He argues that there is no "historical and universally accepted" worship style and "that there is no single authoritative Reformed practice" (xii).

However, the author is aware of the regulative principle and the danger of offering "strange fire" to God in worship (xi). "Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, *which he had not commanded them*" (Lev. 10:1, emphasis mine). He might have also referenced Jesus's teaching on humanity's desire to worship God with that "which he had not commanded," by considering Jesus's evaluation of worship during his day: "In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9).

In twenty-seven pages he gives an overview of the historical function and development of the call to worship, invocation, and benediction, as well as a defense for using them. Volumes could have been written on the topic, and the end of the book has chapters on practical and study resources which are well worth pursuing for anyone interested in more depth on the study of liturgy. Both chapters are full of articles, essays, and books on liturgy.

It might be useful to know that there is a technical language usually used in the discussion of worship—elements, forms, and circumstances of worship. Elements are those parts of worship that make it worship—prayer (sung and spoken), ministry of the Word, sacraments (baptism & Lord's Supper), sharing (*koinonia* κοινωνία). Recall that the worship "style" of the church in Acts was "they devoted themselves to the apostles"

teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). During the lifetime of the apostles, the church could have done many activities when they gathered for worship, but they committed themselves to worship using these four elements.

Forms are the actual content or words used in each element of worship. The words of a prayer are a form. The words of a hymn are a form. The words of a sermon are a form, etc. Circumstances are the physical environments of worship which are common to any public assembly of people for a religious or non-religious purpose. This book is almost entirely about the forms used in the call to worship, invocation, and benediction. Those forms are listed as such with subheadings not in biblical order, but according to Advent, Christmastide and Epiphany, New Year, Baptism of Our Lord, Transfiguration, Lent, Palm Sunday, Eastertide and Ascension, Pentecost and Holy Trinity, Reformation, All Saints, Thanksgiving, Christ the King, and Ordinary Time. If one does not follow such a calendar, then this organizational structure is less useful.

Dr. Kelly states that the Reformed traditions have lots of freedom due to a variety of differing liturgies from Calvin’s to others. The problem with human traditions is not that it is a tradition or that it is human, but that it should be evaluated as a bad, good, or better tradition than other ideas. We all should be aware of the noetic effect of sin in our thinking about any tradition. When Scripture is used in the call to worship, invocation, or benediction, the choice should be informed by careful biblical and exegetical thinking about what the Scripture meant in its original context, and the change in covenants from Mosaic Law with its worship to the New Covenant worship should be specifically considered (Heb. 12:18–29).

Before using this book (or any similar book), every pastor should be careful to do his own exegesis on passages Dr. Kelly suggests for these forms, and make sure his congregation will not misunderstand a passage to be used. The congregation must be biblically informed as certain Scripture used for calls to worship, invocations, and benedictions could be misunderstood by the congregation. As one example, there is a reason to be careful when applying Psalm 24:3–4 to a call to worship—“Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.” “Ascending the hill of the Lord” can be rightly understood as an Old Testament typological phrase about sinners reentering God’s presence with new covenant realities. If it is understood by members of the congregation as walking into the building on Sunday, it has been misunderstood. Christ is the only human being who had clean hands undirtied by sin and possessed a pure heart. If worshippers think they have to have that quality in them in order to worship, there is a problem. If worshippers think their lives are clean and undirtied by sin, there is a bigger problem. Each pastor must carefully select any biblical texts to be used in worship.

Dr. Kelly has done a great deal of work, and he has carefully referenced others’ works in footnotes and in his last chapters. Buy the book, study his suggested forms and their appropriateness for your congregation, and study his footnotes and additional references. Additional resources may be found in *The Directory of Worship* in the *Orthodox Presbyterian Book of Church Order* (2015), two books by Hughes Oliphant Old, *Leading in Prayer* (1995), *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (1975), and Samuel Miller, *Thoughts on Public Prayer* (2022).

Stephen A. Migotsky is an Orthodox Presbyterian minister and serves as the pastor of Jaffrey Presbyterian Church in Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

ServantReading

Flannery O'Connor Revisited

A Review Article

by Danny E. Olinger

Flannery O'Connor's Why Do the Heathen Rage? by Jessica Hooten Wilson. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2024, 191 pages, \$24.99, cloth.

In the July 1963 *Esquire*, Flannery O'Connor contributed an excerpt, "Why Do the Heathen Rage?" from the beginning sections of her work on a new novel. She spent the rest of the summer working on the novel "like a squirrel on a treadmill" but was questioning the quality of the material she produced. Afflicted with lupus and struggling to maintain physical strength, she said, "I've reached the point where I can't do again what I know I can do well, and the larger things that I need to do now, I doubt my capacity for doing" (42). She would die the next August at the age of thirty-nine with the book unfinished.

Now, six decades later, Jessica Hooten Wilson has gathered and edited O'Connor's manuscript pages to produce *Flannery O'Connor's Why Do the Heathen Rage: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at a Work in Progress*. Organizing the scenes that O'Connor had written into a proposed order, adding paragraphs and transitions, and hypothesizing about a possible ending, Wilson presents a version of what the book might have been if O'Connor had lived.

Positively, Wilson understands the religious dimension in O'Connor's writings, that O'Connor "created worlds where the invisible was brought high to the surface" (10). Wilson states that when people argue about whether the grandmother was saved at the conclusion of "A Good Man is Hard to Find," they are missing O'Connor's thrust. She writes, "Flannery did not set out to save the grandmother: she wanted to save her readers. Through her fiction, O'Connor vicariously points a gun at her imaginary readers and demands, 'What do you believe?'" (20).

The way that O'Connor sought to solve the challenge of how to write about spiritual realities for readers who believed in nothing was to scandalize them. That is, she dramatizes belief as a stumbling block that prohibits or obstructs a character's way followed by a moment of grace where the character chooses whether or not to believe in God.

But after O'Connor's polished opening chapter, "The Porch Scene," from which the *Esquire* excerpt is taken verbatim, I could not help but to think that with the succeeding selections—some showing the characters with different names, others showing the characters with different traits, others as short as one brief paragraph or less than two pages—O'Connor would have been displeased to have her material prematurely revealed in such a manner.

O'Connor never hid the fact that her writing process involved continual revision. When writing *Wise Blood*, she told a friend, "I don't have my novel outlined and I have to write to discover what I am doing. Like the old lady, I don't know so well what I think until I see what I say; then I have to say it over again." But, she continued, the rewriting also reflected her perfectionism, "I can't exhibit such formless stuff."¹

Wilson anticipates the objection and acknowledges that this element is not present in *Why Do the Heathen Rage?* She writes, "As much as we might wish that O'Connor had finished her

¹ Robert Giroux, "Introduction," in *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Noonday Press, 1971), ix.

third novel, we cannot invent what does not exist—a well-crafted, revised, full-length piece of fiction” (19). But she justifies moving forward with filling out O’Connor’s story nonetheless, with the contention that “to be faithful to O’Connor’s stories, especially her unfinished one, is to wonder about what happened *after* her last words” (20).

O’Connor’s method for writing her novels involved the reworking of a previously published short story as a starting point. For *Wise Blood*, she revised and expanded “The Train” to become the opening chapter. For *The Violent Bear It Away*, she rewrote “You Can’t Be Any Poorer Than Dead” to serve as the first chapter. O’Connor turned to adapting “The Enduring Chill” for *Why Do the Heathen Rage?* The “heathen” in view in the “The Enduring Chill” is Asbury Fox, an aspiring New York City writer who returns to his rural Southern home because he believes he is dying. What he has contracted, however, is undulant fever from drinking unpasteurized milk from his family’s dairy. His drinking the raw milk and the sickness that followed came about because of an attempt at communion with the two black farmhands. At every turn, however, those he deems unsophisticated when compared to what life in New York offers—the local doctor singing a hymn as he draws blood, the catechizing Catholic priest who tells him his problem is that he does not speak to God, his mother with her declarations that he is not dying, the two farmhands who refuse to drink the milk with him—turn out to be wiser than he is. When it is revealed that he is not dying, he is emptied of his arrogance. The doctor tells him that undulant fever is not so bad, it is the same as Bang in a cow. Everyone leaves the room, and Asbury stares at a water spot on the ceiling, which to him appears as the Holy Ghost descending in piercing icy terror.²

O’Connor explained why revisiting the story interested her. She wrote, “I’ve thought maybe there is enough in these characters to make a novel of them sometime but it would be a novel with this story as the first chapter and the rest of it would be concerned with the boy’s efforts to live with the Holy Ghost, which is a subject for a comic novel of no mean proportions” (42). The newness for O’Connor would be, in Wilson’s words, how to write about a convert.

In the manuscript drafts, Asbury appears in one selection, “Asbury’s Childhood,” but in the rest the protagonist is typically renamed Walter Tilman. In “The Enduring Chill,” Asbury’s father died when Asbury was young, but now O’Connor has the father, T. C. Tilman, play a major part. His stroke, from which he is diminished greatly both physically and mentally, provides the main action in “The Front Porch” scene. A repugnant figure, his racism, both past and present, is brought out, as is his poor judgment and lack of grip on reality. He is also the only Christian in the family, a Baptist.

Walter’s rebellion is also against his mother and his older sister. O’Connor describes the mother: “She never thought about Jesus himself but her sense of election had never failed her. She thought of others above herself, always did the right thing, without any fuss, and that was that” (33). A further description reveals that she stands in the same line as the grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” One thing that Walter’s mother “had always prayed was that if her children were religious, they would not be religious in a bad sense, that they would not be too religious” (33). Walter’s sister, like Rayber in the *The Violent Bear It Away*, is an atheist whose vocation is that of a schoolteacher.

The new central character that O’Connor introduces is Oona Gibbs, a social rights activist. Walter, who “wrote people he did not know and ignored those he knew” (24), had written Oona after reading her account of “Fellowship, Inc.,” a commune where everyone lived

² In the *Esquire*, published “Why Do the Heathen Rage? O’Connor ends the segment with the mother recalling seeing a passage in a book that Walter had been reading and had left open. It concerned a letter that St. Jerome wrote to Heliiodorus in A.D. 370, urging him not to abandon the battle, for the General marches fully armed. In the closing sentence, O’Connor has the mother realize who the General is. “Then it came to her, with an unpleasant jolt, that the General with the sword in his mouth, marching to do violence, was Jesus” (32).

together in love. She wrote back, a letter that repulsed and intrigued Walter simultaneously. He responded giving real and imaginary details of his family, but identifying himself as the Tilman's Negro worker, Roosevelt. When Oona replies that she wants to visit in person, Walter starts to panic.

Wilson sees the Walter and Oona relationship as the opportunity to provide her commentary on what she calls O'Connor's "Epistolary Blackface." She observes that O'Connor believed that the attempts of whites pretending to be black were preposterous and condescending. But Wilson laments that O'Connor stated that she did not feel capable of entering the mind of her Black characters and consequently presented them from the outside. She also tries to steer a middle ground on O'Connor's use of the derogatory racial language in the mouths of her older White characters.

Mark Greif in his 2015 book, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, takes the opposite side of the argument and maintains that O'Connor's posture of portraying her black characters from the outside was one of O'Connor's great strengths. Greif writes,

O'Connor certainly does not suggest in her mature prose that actual black people are worse than whites or deficient in any way. She is unusual, and more admirable than some "compassionate" white liberal writers, because she goes out of her way *not* to suggest that she has any idea what her black characters' inner lives and interior consciousness are like. She portrays them entirely from the outside, and lets her white characters talk about them without the black characters assenting, and gives her black characters autonomy, while still letting them seem human, not ciphers or symbols.³

Why Do the Heathen Rage? from that point on limps to its conclusion. O'Connor searches for how to develop the relationship between Walter and Oona. Wilson speculates increasingly about O'Connor's mindset, forces a fragment from *The Violent Bear It Away* into the narrative, and suggests a possible ending. I found myself in a position that I had never encountered before in reading O'Connor, I was uninterested in how the story ended.

That judgment sounds harsh, but one does not read Flannery O'Connor for a mixed opinion. Wilson herself notes that other scholars over the years have examined the *Why Do the Heathen Rage?* pages and concluded that they were unpublishable, which speaks to the high bar of Wilson's project. What makes O'Connor unparalleled, however, was that she did not give an inch on either craft or substance. Every word was meant to contribute, not just sentences or paragraphs or segments here or there. Every story was meant to be an encounter with Jesus. O'Connor said as a novelist,

I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means for me the meaning of life is centered in our redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in things to make transparent in fiction.⁴

Danny E. Olinger is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as the general secretary of the Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

³ Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933–1973* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 214.

⁴ Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in *Mystery and Manners*, selected and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 32.

ServantPoetry

Mary Elizabeth Coleridge (1861–1907)

LXXI

Death

i

O THOU slight word, most like to *breath*, and made
Of a few letters merely, what's in thee,
Terror of flesh, the spirit's ecstasy,
Mysterious, voiceless, shadow of a shade?
They that fear nothing else, of thee afraid,
Do call thee *Sleep* and *Passing*. Thou set'st free
Infinite shapes of all a man may be,
Yet at thy nothingness he shrinks dismayed.

If thou wert not, the Poets had been dumb,
And music silent. Yea, majestic Art
Had never sought and found her better part
Nor by the living eyes betrayed the heart.
Great prophecy were an unmeaning hum,
What-is no longer holding what's-to-come.

ii

I have wept for those who on this turning earth
Had lived more years than I—who were to me
The aim and goal of my felicity,
The dear reward of effort, crown of worth.
And I have wept for babes who died at birth,
Most deeply moved that I should never see
The flower and fruit of all the days to be,
A younger youth than mine, a merrier mirth.

But never ere this day I felt the sting
Of terror lest my burning tears should fall
For one who felt when first I felt the spring,
Heard from the wood the self-same cuckoo call,
Heard the same robin in the autumn sing,
Was one with me in life—in love—in all.

Bid me remember, O my gracious Lord,
The flattering words of love are merely breath!
O not in roses wreath the shining sword,
Bid me remember, O my gracious Lord,
The bitter taste of death!

Wrap not in clouds of dread for me that hour
When I must leave behind this house of clay,
When the grass withers and the shrunken flower!
Bid me, O Lord, in that most dreadful hour,
Not fall, but fly away!