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Church of the Messiah, North Woodstock, New Hampshire / photo: Gregory E. Reynolds

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Ordained Servant

A JOURNAL FOR CHURCH OFFICERS

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✦ From the Editor

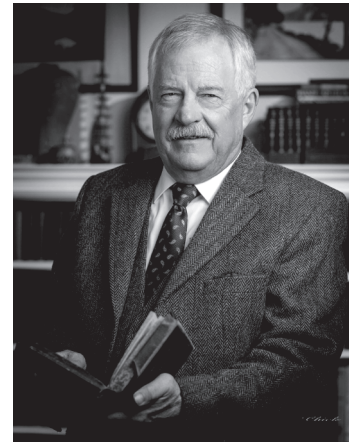
This is the twentieth annual printed edition of *Ordained Servant*, as we completed our thirty-third year of publication in 2025.

I am always amazed at the self-sacrificial service of so many who write for and help publish *Ordained Servant* online and in print.

The cover picture is the Church of the Messiah (Episcopal) in North Woodstock, New Hampshire, next to an inn we have frequently stayed at. It is next to the old Woodstock Station connected with the booming logging business of the late nineteenth century. The church building with its elegant simplicity was built in 1892 by logging magnate James E. Henry to serve the loggers and mill workers of the area.

Henry's wife had urged him to provide a place where the workers could repent of their sinful ways and worship the God of the Bible. During its early history it was a mission work at which the second bishop of New Hampshire, William Woodruff Niles (1832–1914), preached and provided preachers. A former professor of Greek and Latin, Niles insisted that the liturgy be structured around the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ with the gospel as its climax. This church was founded in the same year as Westminster Presbyterian Church in Manchester, New Hampshire, which since 1998 has been Amoskeag Presbyterian Church. The original church was also started to serve mill workers of the Amoskeag Mills.

Once again, I would like to thank the Committee on Christian Education general secretary Danny Olinger, Alan Strange (Chairman of the Subcommittee on Resources for the Churches), and the Subcommittee on Serial Publications—Darryl Hart (chairman), Stephen Tracey, and David VanDrunen—for their continued support, encouragement, and counsel. I would also like to thank the many people who make the regular online edition possible: Ayrian Yasar, Linda Foh, Stephen Pribble, and the many fine writers without whom there would be no journal. Finally, I want to thank Paul Meyer for his meticulous editorial work on the final print text, and I would like to thank Jackie Oftedahl for her excellent final proofing and formatting of this printed volume.



—Gregory Edward Reynolds
Pastor emeritus
Amoskeag Presbyterian Church
Manchester, New Hampshire

Servant Thoughts

Editorials

“Me and Her” Must Go

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
August-September 2025¹

by Gregory E. Reynolds

Major corporations throughout the West are having to train the incoming crop of business graduates in basic manners. The decline in manners began in the 1960s. As a hippy convert to Christianity, I quickly learned that I needed to become—I know it sounds shocking—a gentleman. Fortunately, in the Bible and the church I found many examples to guide me. The vestiges of good manners were drilled into me at home by nominally Christian parents. Where have all the parents gone?

The way we dressed and dined at table became obvious places to begin reform. I have become a quiet reformer against what I call the cult of informality. Since correcting people is itself bad manners, unless the people are your children, leading by example is best. I soon recognized that many customary forms of dining and dress were rooted in seeking to make others comfortable in various social spaces. Even placing others first in saying “she and I” rather than “me and her” are grammatically correct because they place others first. This is supremely a Christian instinct. Waiting to eat before others are served enforces a humility that is distinctly Christian, but there

is also a remnant of that instinct in God’s image-bearers. Dressing appropriately for each occasion in life shows respect for the occasion and for others. The forms of life make life meaningful in the garden and in the church. While these forms may change with time, making the proper distinctions does not.

Scripture is full of exhortations pertinent to good manners. The “golden rule” is a good place to begin. “And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them” (Luke 6:31). Attitude, speech, and deeds combine to craft good manners. The Latin origin of the word *manners* (*manuarius*) means “of the hand”—that is, referring to the way we act in the world. Paul reminds Titus to instill good manners in his congregation: “Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people” (Titus 3:1–2). “Perfect courtesy” stands out as a fundamental attitude in developing good manners. This is one Greek word (πραΰτης *prautēs*) usually translated “meekness” or “gentleness” (Eph. 4:2; 1 Tim. 6:11). “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,” (Col. 3:12). These are chief characteristics of Christ (Matt. 5:5; 2 Cor. 10:1). All speech should aim at being a blessing to others: “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Eph. 4:29). This is especially important in speaking to those with whom we have a strong disagreement, “correcting his opponents with gentleness” (2 Tim. 2:25).

Generally, then, good manners ease everyday relations when there is a way of doing things that everyone observes. It makes relationships congenial. Social conventions make social interactions smooth and amicable. What a lovely way of living as opposed to the awkwardness of having no rules for social engagement.

If “me and her” must go, let me suggest a hold on the ad infinitum “thank you.” “You’re welcome” has mysteriously disappeared. When

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1197.

someone thanks you, receive the gift with cheer and welcome. What is the responding “thank you” thanking the thanked for? This could lead to an infinite regress. It makes no sense to thank the thanker for thanking you. “You’re welcome” says I am happy to give you what you are thanking me for, and I would do it again.

It has been heartening, after years of teaching my children good manners and correct speech, to see them doing the same with their children. Do not give up. The late Clifton Fadiman felt that the world of “cultivation he had worked so hard to master—Western literary canon, smoked salmon on toast points—had slipped from his fingers and been replaced by vulgarity and ugliness.”² But instead of being disheartened by the decline in good manners, we can treat others with respect and care. “Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed” (Rom. 13:7). “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom. 12:10). ©

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

The Train: Belittled and Beloved

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
October 2025¹

by **Gregory E. Reynolds**

Washington Irving—under the pen name of Geoffrey Crayon—is famous for his fascinating tales “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” He hated the train coming through Sunny Side on the east side of the Tappan Zee in the mid-nineteenth century. It was a noisy industrial intrusion on his poetic solitude. Yet in our world the train is the most relaxing mode of travel compared to flying or driving. It was a fascination of our mentor J. Gresham Machen, as he famously sat outside the Westminster Theological Seminary in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania, and watched the trains pass, identifying each one, per his extraordinary observational skills.

The train, a century after Machen, despite all the complaints about Amtrak, is still a delightful mode of transportation. When my wife Robin and I travel to New York, the Red Cap assistance in boarding is a huge stress relief. We get to our seats at South Station in Boston without competition. Then the views of Long Island Sound with the moored sailboats and motorboats, and the marshy inlets with casual docks are so relaxing. The food in the café car—Acela is slightly better—is just fun but not fancy. No traffic to navigate, no constant attentiveness, no security clearances; these make train travel a dream. We can converse if my wife is with me, or I can just write, read, or sleep if alone in the quiet car—library silence. Many hours later I arrive at the Moynihan Train Hall with its marvelously restored, light-filled space. It always reminds me of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s illuminated discourses on issues that targeted the

² Anne Fadiman, *The Wine Lover’s Daughter: A Memoir* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 124.

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1204.

public good. Now I am in the Big Apple, a place of extraordinary international consequence, and I ponder how the gospel may impact this remarkable cosmopolitan space. I am grateful to the sacrificial ministry of men like Tim Keller.

I have always been fascinated by Machen's delightfully human appreciations. He loved walking, mountains, and trains. Machen would surely have had similar thoughts, as Henry Coray reminisced:

Another of his hobbies was to ride trains. When the schedule of the Broadway Limited eventually recovered from the slowdown of World War I under government control and was restored to sixteen hours from New York to Chicago, Das was really excited. He took a ride to Chicago and back just to see how that crack train ran at its new high speed.

One evening in the winter of 1932, I drove him to a railroad station in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, where he was to board a night train for Philadelphia. I expressed my sympathy because of the rough trip ahead.

"Listen, don't feel sorry for me," he said. "I love to curl up in a berth and fall off to sleep." "How in the world do you manage it?" I said. "I can never sleep on trains. They're too noisy." "Not to me they aren't," Das said. "The good old sound of wheels rumbling over tracks—that's a lullaby in my ears."² ©

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² Henry W. Coray, *J. Gresham Machen: A Silhouette* (Kregel, 1981), 25–26.

When Politics Is Not a Religion

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* November 2025¹

by **Gregory E. Reynolds**

"Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." (Rom. 12:17–18)

The deep divide in our nation troubles me as a Christian man and leader. Many of my friends are Christians with whom I share basic religious, political, and ethical agreement. Since the MAGA ascendancy, I have found that even among strong Reformed friends there are disagreements. I hear regularly of families and friends separated permanently by political differences. Yet my friendships have only deepened. Why? Because for each of us Christians, our politics is not our religion.

I have been cancelled with an Irish goodbye by a few, but only by those for whom their politics is their religion, even if they would not label it as such. They have no transcendent reality that is more important than their politics. But Christians have every reason to transcend political differences; we share a common God and a common good. With unbelieving friends and family, I have maintained a good relationship because politics and other differences are not my religion, and also because we have God's image in common, even though they do not recognize it. With some friends and family, I do not talk about the things about which we disagree, but with others we can discuss those differences without acrimony. Our friendship and my religion would never sacrifice any relationship based on these differences, and I have told them so.

Unbelieving family and friends bear God's image; so, Calvin in the *Institutes* says that not

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1211.

to love our unbelieving neighbor is to dishonor God. Some unbelieving neighbors make that exceedingly difficult, until I remember how difficult my sins made my Savior's death on the cross. The love of Christ constrains me to seek their best, especially when they do not seek mine. In seeking opportunity to explain the gospel to them, I always remember Peter's exhortation: "But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:15). The first thing about politics and many other personal preferences is that they are not the first thing. ©

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Servant Memorial

Remembering a Model Ruling Elder: Thomas Warnock

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* April 2025¹

by William Shishko

Chapter X Ruling Elders

1. Christ who has instituted government in his church has furnished some men, beside the ministers of the Word, with gifts for government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereto. Such officers, chosen by the people from among their number, are to join with the ministers in the government of the church, and are properly called ruling elders.

2. Those who fill this office should be sound in the faith and of exemplary Christian life, men of wisdom and discretion, worthy of the esteem of the congregation as spiritual fathers.

3. Ruling elders, individually and jointly with the pastor in the session, are to lead the church in the service of Christ. They are to watch diligently over the people committed to their charge to prevent corruption of doctrine or morals. Evils which they cannot correct by private admonition they should bring to the notice of the session. They should visit the people, especially the sick, instruct the ignorant, comfort the mourning, and

nourish and guard the children of the covenant. They should pray with and for the people. They should have particular concern for the doctrine and conduct of the minister of the Word and help him in his labors.²

While we rightly esteem the office of the Christian minister, it is no less important that we rightly esteem the office of ruling elder (and the office of deacon, as well). One can make the case that a rightly functioning ruling eldership (what Presbyterians call “The Session”) has been a key element in preserving the faithfulness of many churches.

One of the most important pieces of advice given to me during my internship was, “Be sure that the church to which you are called has a strong, Reformed session.” To say the least, I was blessed by that during my years as pastor of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Franklin Square, New York. And a major part of that blessing was working for all those years with Elder Tom Warnock, who went home to his eternal reward on November 20, 2023, at the age of eighty-nine. Having been ordained as a ruling elder in 1967, he served in that capacity for over half a century. He was, in every sense of the phrase, *a model ruling elder*. This tribute to him, and to God’s grace in his life, is written as a précis of the marks of those who “rule well” in the Lord’s Church. It is a way of practicing the exhortation, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7).

The first words that I heard from Elder Tom Warnock were on the evening of Ronald Reagan’s election to his first term as president in 1980. After I answered the phone and confirmed that I was, indeed, Bill Shishko, I heard, “My name is Tom Warnock. How would you like to come to Long Island to be our pastor?” That cheery, forthright

2 The Form of Government (FG), in *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2020), 13.

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1178.



Ruling elder Tom Warnock and his wife, Flo

greeting was an epitome of the spirit of the man with whom I would be privileged to serve for nearly thirty-six years.

Elder Warnock was probably one of the best-read ruling elders in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. His library equaled that of a minister. In fact, his library probably surpassed the libraries of many ministers. How many ministers have six five-shelf bookcases filled two-deep with books—and books that have obviously been well-used? His well-read and well-worn Bible was full of notes. He read the Reformers. He read the Puritans. He read other rich theological material. And the “stuff” of that reading came out naturally in his conversations and deliberations. His heart was suffused with what is often called “experimental Calvinism,” i.e., both the doctrine and the life that breathes through the Westminster Standards. His life’s pattern of being in God’s Word and faithful expositions and applications of God’s Word each day is surely a model for all Christians, and especially for church officers.

“Ruling elders, individually and jointly with the pastor in the session, are to lead the church in the service of Christ” (FG 10.3). While Tom did that in many ways, his leadership was particularly manifested in his service as Sunday School Superintendent for most of the years in which he served as a ruling elder. His “opening exercises” were rich devotional times that were clearly well prepared and earnestly presented. No doubt growing out of his own diligent reading, he took Christian

education of the congregation with the greatest seriousness. He also conducted the Franklin Square church’s Wednesday evening Bible studies held at the church facility. These already special times were made even more special as they were followed by coffee and an array of scrumptious desserts from the kitchen of his wife, Flo. This was a superb example of combining well-prepared spiritual food with equally well-prepared physical food. Tom’s management of the church book table (which would eventually become a book room) was a vital complement to these other ways in which Tom sought to disciple congregation members. Tom always knew good books to recommend to people to help them with their questions about Christian faith and life. This model elder who was always learning and growing in grace was also always about the work of helping others learn and grow in grace.

Tom was a good listener. In session meetings he listened carefully to arguments made on various sides; and he would only speak after it was obvious that he had weighed carefully all that he heard. He might not always agree with a decision, but he submitted to his fellow elders, and, because he listened well, he could articulate the session’s position both carefully and wisely. Those listening ears were always on display when the Word of God was preached. Tom loved the preaching of the Word and always gave thoughtful responses that encouraged a man who had truly “labored in the Word.” (Although he was not bashful about responding negatively to any preaching that seemed ill-prepared and that was not permeated with Scripture.) He was a model of a ruling elder who had “particular concern for the doctrine and conduct of the minister of the Word and [who helped] in his labors” (FG 10.3).

In his work of rule, Tom was not afraid to say hard things. I will be eternally grateful that, after going through a period of bitterness early in my ministry in Franklin Square, in a meeting during which the session dealt firmly but graciously with me, Tom probingly said, “Bill, we’re not upset when you speak about hell in your sermons—a faithful minister must do that; but, have you ever

wept over what you’ve had to say?” I lost sleep for three nights after that piercing question, repented both privately and publicly for my harshness, and, by God’s grace, grew in my pastoral and ministerial sensitivities through the “righteous smiting” (Ps. 141:5) of a man who was both jealous of Christ’s honor in his church and likewise concerned for the life and conduct of his pastor. Tom would say frequently that the three main marks of an elder are “gentleness, gentleness, and gentleness.” At the same time, he spoke the truth—and usually with great wisdom.

Elder Warnock was a principled man. Once, when one of our interns was pouring out his heart about a delicate matter that he knew he would need to face in his first ministry, Tom (after listening carefully) responded by saying, “Your responsibility is to do the right thing no matter how hard that may look right now. But the Lord will honor that, and you will know his blessing.” What a refreshing reminder that was to the intern, and to me as I listened in. Could any of us say that in a better way? Tom was principled and wise (and gentle!) in communicating the importance of always acting in principled ways.

Our home was blessed each year by the annual home visit of Elder Warnock. (How our churches would be transformed if all elders took seriously the responsibility of meaningful annual home visitation.) And given that the Shishkos were a family of eight, those visits were quite an accomplishment! Elder Warnock would always arrive at our home at 6:50 p.m.—ten minutes before the 7:00 p.m. meeting time! He knew that he had a full evening ahead of him! He met for about thirty minutes with each child, taking time to intersect with their lives, reviewing the Scripture memory and catechism work for their grade according to our standard text, *The Memory Work Notebook*, by Paul Settle (GCP), gently calling them to follow Christ faithfully, and praying with each of them. Then, at about 10:00 p.m., he would tell me to get the children to bed while he spent time with my wife, Margaret. At 10:30 I would join them, and Tom would cap off that long evening by encouraging us in our married lives (and gently

admonishing me if he thought that I was falling short in any of my father or husband duties) and praying with us. Our children still remember those visits, and Margaret and I praise the Lord that we were privileged to enjoy this home visitation service by one of our ruling elders—something that has been a hallmark of Reformed churches in their best expressions. Ruling elders “are to watch diligently over the people committed to their charge to prevent corruption of doctrine or morals. . . . They should visit the people, especially the sick, instruct the ignorant, comfort the mourning, and nourish and guard the children of the covenant” (FG 10.3). Elder Warnock was a model in all those things.

Tom was an enthusiastic man—as I experienced from his first words to me on that phone call in 1980. Whether it was classical music (about which—along with the best sound equipment—Tom was an expert), the birth of a child within his family or the congregation, the reception of new church members, his latest book, or his beloved Yankees, Tom was never not enthusiastic! He modeled Paul’s exhortation, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men” (Col. 3:23). This enthusiasm spilled over to his leadership of the Franklin Square church softball team—appropriately named “The Franklin Square Lions.” Tom was the lead lion! He loved the game, and he expected nothing less than the absolute best performance from each of his players. Sometimes, in his exuberant enthusiasm, he could give in to the remaining, indwelling sin (even model Christians have them!) of impatience and exasperation. But that led the team to victories; and Tom’s love of baseball was a big part of that driving force.

Perhaps above all, Tom was a man of prayer. “They should pray with and for the people” (FG 10.3)—and Elder Warnock did. Diligently! As a man who prizes action (e.g., “Well, what do we do about this?”), I would sometimes chafe when Tom’s response to a challenging issue (and we had many of them in our New York ministry!) was, “Well, we just need to pray about this.” We obviously need both, but Tom’s words were a

reminder to me and to others that the battle for the hearts of men, women, boys, and girls is not ultimately ours, but the Lord's. And how I wish that I had recorded the prayers with which Tom would close a session meeting when it was "his turn" in our session's schedule. Regardless of how late the meeting was, Tom would sweep us up into the presence of God and thoughtfully bring every matter that we had discussed before the throne of grace. When I came to Franklin Square to begin my pastorate in March of 1981, I asked the Lord to teach me how to pray as a minister. Elder Tom Warnock and his prayers were a great part of God's answer.

And no memorial to Elder Tom Warnock would be complete without mentioning his faithful helpmeet, Flo. I often think that there is something wrong if we do not instinctively put the name of the wife of a minister or ruling elder (or deacon) together with that officer. Not only is this part of a church officer being a "one wife husband" (see 1 Tim. 3:2), but, however we understand the significance of "their wives" in 1 Timothy 3:11, there is no doubt that behind every useful married man there is an equally useful wife. And that is especially true with church officers. Even as I quite naturally think of "Bill and Margaret," my fellow church officers and their wives, so I can hardly say "Tom" without also saying "Flo."

Many of our church visitors, and especially our annual Bible conference speakers, were treated to the hospitality of the Warnock home. Along with Tom's rich heavenly discussion, guests were treated to banquets at the table prepared by Flo Warnock. You did not just "eat" at the Warnock home; you feasted (always completed with a flourish by Flo's homemade ice cream.) How often did I hear from guests at the Warnock home that their time with them was a "foretaste of heaven." Not only Bible conference speakers and other guests were blessed by the extra-special Warnock hospitality, but Ministerial Training Institute (MTIOPC) pastoral theology students over many years received that hospitality as a model of the hospitality that is to be demonstrated by elders (and their wives!—1 Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:8).

Tom and Flo both took a special interest in men preparing for the Christian ministry. For many years Tom served as our presbytery's representative on the Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary's board of directors. Twice a year Tom and Flo would make the trip to South Carolina where Tom would fulfill his duties at the board meeting, and Flo would fellowship with the wives of other board members as well as with the personnel at the seminary. Tom and Flo had a shared heart for young men who were going through the rigors of the "boot camp" that meaningful seminary education is, and they would come home with stories and prayer requests that fueled the Franklin Square church's zeal to see the Lord raise up a generation of earnest preachers and pastors who were even more zealous for Christ and his Kingdom than is our generation.

These are among my precious memories of years of labor with both Elder Warnock and his faithful and loving wife, Flo. While no Christian servant is perfect—that status is only true of Christ, the Chief Shepherd and Overseer of our souls (1 Pet. 2:25)—God has his ways of causing us to forget the blemishes and to remember only the beauties of lives of forgiven sinners being wonderfully remade into the image of that Chief Shepherd and Overseer. May these reflections on model ruling elder Tom Warnock help all church officers to grow in those gifts and graces that make us true representatives of Christ to those whom we serve and to all around us. ☺

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Servant Truth

The Antithesis: Understanding the Divide between the Reflections of Believers and Unbelievers

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Camden M. Bucey

Introduction

Few theological concepts are as profound and far-reaching as the antithesis between believers and unbelievers. This fundamental divide shapes our understanding of salvation, human nature, and our relationship with God. Yet, it is often misunderstood or overlooked in contemporary Christian discourse.

The antithesis is not merely an abstract theological concept but a reality that impacts every aspect of life. It speaks to the core of our identity, our perception and interpretation of the world, and our purpose within it. Understanding this divide is crucial not only for grasping the fullness of the gospel but also for navigating our relationships, engaging with culture, and fulfilling our calling as believers.

In this article, we will consider the nature of the antithesis, exploring its covenantal and ethical dimensions. We will examine how it is grounded

in the doctrine of the covenant and illuminated by the hope of the resurrection, shaping our daily lives as we seek to live out our faith in a world that stands in opposition to it. In understanding the antithesis, we come to appreciate more fully the magnitude of God's grace and the urgency of our mission to a world in need of redemption.

The Covenantal Chasm: Defining the Antithesis

As expressed in the Reformed tradition, the antithesis refers to the fundamental spiritual and ethical divide between believers and unbelievers. It is crucial to understand that the antithesis does not imply a difference in fundamental human nature or ontological status. Believers and unbelievers are equally human, sharing the same created nature and both bearing the image of God. The antithesis is a difference in our spiritual state and relationship to God. It lies in the covenantal relationship with God and the corresponding ethical orientation that flows from it. This distinction is covenantal and ethical, not ontological.

This profound divide originated with the fall into sin and the subsequent curse, which differentiated between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). After the fall, all humans are born as objects of wrath, with sin affecting not only our moral standing before God but also our very understanding of him and the world. Our hearts are darkened, our thinking becomes futile, and our concepts of right and wrong are skewed. We are slaves to sin and in need of regeneration.

By God's grace, the elect enter into a new covenant relationship with God, receiving forgiveness and freedom from sin's bondage. Though they continue to struggle with indwelling sin, the Holy Spirit enlightens their minds and renews their wills, enabling them to embrace Christ by faith as offered in the gospel. This spiritual renewal reorients their ethical stance toward righteousness and holiness.

Unbelievers, in contrast, remain in their natural state. Their covenantal status is still "in

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1160.

Adam,” and their ethical orientation continues to be defined by their fallen nature. While they may perform moral actions, they remain fundamentally in bondage to sin, totally depraved, and in rebellion against God.

The absoluteness of this antithesis cannot be overstated. There is no middle ground between being in Adam and being in Christ. One either belongs to the fallen creation under Adam’s representation or to the new creation in Christ.

Despite this stark divide, it is crucial to recognize that all humans, even in their fallen state, retain aspects of God’s image (see Gen. 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9). As Paul argues in Romans, all individuals possess knowledge of God, though they suppress this truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). They are moral beings with the works of the law written on their hearts, though they are totally depraved (Rom. 2:15). The issue lies not in the clarity of God’s revelation, which is evident everywhere, or in the awareness of God’s righteous standards, but in humanity’s sinful desire to conceal and suppress the truth about the God they have rebelled against.

In the Reformed tradition, the concept of the antithesis has been significantly developed by thinkers like Abraham Kuyper and Cornelius Van Til. Kuyper emphasized the antithesis as a fundamental divide in worldviews and cultural engagement. Van Til, building on Kuyper’s work, further refined and deepened this understanding. He interacted critically with Kuyper’s formulation, refining it with his formulation of the doctrine of common grace and emphasizing the point of contact between believers and unbelievers found in the image of God. While his views have sometimes been misunderstood or misrepresented, Van Til rightly emphasized that the antithesis, grounded in covenant theology, affects every aspect of human thought and action. However, as we have seen, this concept did not originate with Van Til or Kuyper but is deeply rooted in Scripture and Reformed doctrine.

This understanding of the antithesis has profound implications for apologetics and

evangelism. It reminds us that unbelief is not merely an intellectual issue but a covenantal and ethical one. Unbelievers are not neutral parties but are spiritually blind to gospel truth (2 Cor. 4:4). This realization should temper our expectations in apologetic encounters and increase our reliance on God’s grace.

Our apologetic approach, therefore, must address not only intellectual objections but also the ethical implications of the gospel. We are calling people to more than a change of mind; we are calling them to a fundamental shift in allegiance and way of life. True conversion requires more than persuasive arguments—it necessitates the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, bringing individuals from death to life, from the old creation to the new. For believers, understanding the ethical dimension of the antithesis should motivate us to live in a way that visibly demonstrates the gospel’s transforming power. Our conduct should reflect our new covenantal status and ethical orientation in Christ.

While the antithesis establishes a clear divide, God’s common grace, extended to all in service of God’s special or saving grace, ensures the possibility of genuine interaction between believers and unbelievers. God restrains final judgment for a time and prevents people from utter depravity, which would be entirely consistent with their spiritual condition. Common grace explains why unbelievers can exhibit intelligence, perform seemingly good acts, and retain a sense of morality, albeit twisted by sin. While they cannot do what is truly good in God’s judgment, they remain his image-bearers, providing a starting point for dialogue, apologetics, and evangelism.

Grasping the covenantal and ethical nature of the antithesis gives us profound insight into the transformative power of salvation and the ongoing need for gospel proclamation. It shapes our approach to apologetics, evangelism, and Christian living, underscoring the radical nature of our new identity in Christ and the urgent need to share this truth with those still bound to the old creation in Adam.

From Adam to Christ: The Covenantal Basis of the Antithesis

To grasp fully the concept of the antithesis, we must explore the biblical teaching on covenant representation. This doctrine, central to Reformed theology, provides the framework for understanding our relationship both to Adam and Christ, and consequently, the nature of the divide between believers and unbelievers.

The concept of covenant representation finds its clearest articulation in Romans 5:12–21. In this pivotal passage, the apostle Paul draws a parallel between Adam and Christ, presenting them as representative heads of two distinct covenantal realities. He writes,

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned . . . For if, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. (Rom. 5:12, 17)

This text establishes the foundation for understanding both the universal problem of sin and the singular solution in Christ.

Adam, as the first man and the progenitor of the human race, stood as the federal head of all his descendants. In this capacity, his actions had far-reaching consequences that extended beyond himself. When Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, he did so not merely as an individual but as a covenant representative. His disobedience brought sin and death into the world. Everyone who descends from him by ordinary generation sinned in him and fell with him in his first transgression (WSC Q.16).

Because of the covenantal arrangement that God established, Adam’s sin was imputed to all his natural descendants. This imputation constitutes the grounds for universal condemnation. Paul emphasizes the reality of Adam’s representation by pointing to the universality of death. Even those

who have not personally sinned in the manner of Adam’s transgression still experience death, demonstrating that they too are born as children of wrath (Rom. 5:14).

In contrast to Adam, Jesus Christ stands as the second and last Adam, the representative head of a new humanity. His role as covenant representative forms the basis for our understanding of salvation and the nature of the antithesis. Where Adam failed in his obedience, Christ succeeded. His perfect life fulfilled the righteous requirements of God’s law, providing the basis for a new covenant relationship with God (Rom. 8:3–4; Heb. 9:15). Christ’s death on the cross was not merely an individual act but a representative one. As the covenant head of his people, his death atones for their sins and satisfies divine justice on their behalf.

Just as Adam’s sin is imputed to his descendants, Christ’s righteousness is imputed to all who are united to him by faith, while their sins are imputed to him (2 Cor. 5:21). This forms the basis for the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone. Paul emphasizes that through Christ believers not only escape death but are granted eternal life and will “reign in life” through him.

This underscores the absolute nature of the antithesis; one cannot belong to both covenant heads simultaneously. The antithesis is not primarily about individual actions or beliefs, but about one’s covenant status. Are we represented by Adam in his disobedience and condemnation, or by Christ in his obedience and redemption?

Salvation is not a reset to the original state; it is a transfer of covenant identity and allegiance—from Adam to Christ. This transfer is the essence of what it means to be “in Christ.” Moreover, Christ’s representative work addresses the full scope of Adam’s fall. It is not merely a matter of the forgiveness of individual sins, but about reversing the entire curse that came through Adam (Rom. 8:19–23). For believers, this doctrine provides profound assurance. Our standing before God is based not on our own merit but on the perfect work of our covenant representative, Jesus

Christ. This truth should fill us with gratitude and motivate us to live in a manner worthy of our calling in Christ.

This doctrine also has significant implications for our understanding of human nature and the extent of sin's impact. It helps us to see that the problem of sin is not just about individual transgressions but also about a fundamental alienation from God that affects every human being. This understanding should shape our approach to evangelism and apologetics, reminding us of the depth of human need and the power of God's grace in Christ.

Furthermore, this illuminates the corporate aspect of both sin and redemption. While we often think in individualistic terms, the Bible presents a more communal view of humanity. We are not isolated individuals, but members of a human race that has collectively fallen in Adam and can be redeemed in Christ. This should foster both humility and hope—humility in recognizing our shared guilt and corruption, and hope in the far-reaching effects of Christ's redemptive work.

The doctrine of covenant representation provides the theological underpinning for understanding the antithesis. It reveals that this divide is not arbitrary but is rooted in the covenantal structure of God's dealings with humanity. Through Adam, all are born into sin and death. But through Christ, believers are brought into a new covenant of life and righteousness. This reality shapes our entire approach to theology, apologetics, and Christian living, reminding us of the profound nature of our salvation in Christ and the urgent need to proclaim this truth to those still bound in Adam.

From Death to Life: New Identity in the Last Adam

The antithesis between believers and unbelievers extends beyond our present experience to encompass our fundamental identity and future hope. The doctrine of resurrection and the concept of new identity in Christ further illuminate the profound divide between those in Adam and those in Christ, revealing that this

distinction is not merely a matter of current status but of eternal state.

In 1 Corinthians 15:42–49, the apostle Paul provides a vivid contrast between our current bodies and the resurrected bodies believers will receive. He writes, “So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:42–44). This passage reveals that the resurrection is not merely a resuscitation and return to our fallen state or even to Adam's state as originally created, but an eschatological transformation.

Our present bodies, subject to decay and death, will be transformed into bodies that are incorruptible. The humiliation of our fallen state will give way to the glory of our fully redeemed state. The weakness and frailties of our present earthly existence will be transformed by the Spirit unto resurrection life. This transformation is an elevation to something far greater. It represents the fulfillment of God's original intention for humanity, surpassing even the glory of Eden.

Paul draws a crucial parallel between Adam and Christ in this context, stating, “The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. . . . The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven” (1 Cor. 15:45, 47). While this passage fundamentally compares Adam in his created state to Christ in his resurrected state (consider the quotation of Genesis 2:7 in 1 Corinthians 15:45), it also highlights the antithetical difference between those in Adam and those in Christ. This contrast becomes even more pronounced when we consider the effects of sin's entrance into the world. Adam represents humanity in its natural (and now fallen) state, while Christ, as the last Adam, represents a new humanity transformed by resurrection power. Those in Adam express an “earthly” life. After the fall into sin, they are subject to death, while those in Christ are destined for heavenly glory and eternal life. The earthly and protological mode of

life which we shared with Adam was characterized comparatively by weakness and mortality, but the heavenly and eschatological mode of life in which we participate through Christ is marked by spiritual power and immortality.

The hope of resurrection is intimately connected to our present identity in Christ. This new identity is not merely a future reality but a present transformation that anticipates our final glorification. In Ephesians 4:22–24, Paul exhorts believers “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” This passage highlights that salvation involves a decisive break with our old way of life. I prefer the literal translation of “old man” rather than “old self” for this very reason: it emphasizes that the old life is bound up with the “old man,” Adam. The “new man” we put on is Christ. Paul’s language is much more covenantal than many of our English renderings. We are renewed to reflect God’s character, marked by true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness.

Paul extends this concept in 2 Corinthians 5:17, declaring, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” This verse encapsulates the radical and comprehensive nature of our new identity. It is not just a personal renewal but participation in a new order of existence—the new creation. While we await the full manifestation of the new creation at Christ’s return, we already participate in its reality through our union with Christ. This newness affects every aspect of our being—our status before God, our inner disposition, and our outward conduct.

Our new identity in Christ through the resurrection deepens our grasp of the antithesis in several ways. It reveals that the antithesis is not temporary but has eternal consequences, determining not just our present but our eternal state. While the full manifestation of our new identity awaits the resurrection, it is already a present reality that should shape our lives now.

The promise of resurrection and our new identity in Christ provide powerful motivation for holy living, distinguishing believers from the pattern of this world. The stark contrast between the two eternal futures—resurrection unto life or unto judgment—underscores the urgency of evangelism and apologetics. For believers, the doctrine of resurrection and new identity provides a firm basis for assurance. Our hope is not in our own efforts but in the transforming power of Christ.

Conclusion

At its core, the antithesis reveals the radical effects of sin and the glorious power of the gospel. Salvation is not a mere improvement of our natural state, but a recreation and eschatological advancement, a fundamental transfer from one realm to another—from being “in Adam” to being “in Christ.” This covenantal and ethical distinction, grounded in the representative work of Christ, shapes our identity, our understanding and interpretation of reality, and our eternal future.

In today’s increasingly polarized society, the antithesis is becoming more pronounced and visible. We see this divide manifested in political debates over moral issues and policies, and even in the realm of scientific interpretation. As the epistemological self-consciousness of the secular world becomes more consistently opposed to Christ, Christians may feel overwhelmed or tempted to retreat from cultural engagement. However, understanding the antithesis as a fundamental covenantal and ethical divide equips believers to navigate these complex issues with wisdom and grace. It reminds us that the ultimate solution to societal problems is not found in political power or social reforms but in the transformative power of the gospel.

Understanding the antithesis deepens our appreciation for the grace of God. It reminds us that our standing before God is not based on our own efforts but on the person and work of Christ. This truth should fill us with humility and gratitude, spurring us on to live in a manner worthy of our calling. We must love our neighbors while standing firm in the truth as we rest in him.

We do this in the hope of the resurrection, knowing that one day the antithesis will be fully realized (Mal. 3:18; Matt. 25:31–34, 41; John 5:28–29; Rev. 20:12–15; 21:7–8). Until then, we are called to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, manifesting our new identity in Christ even as we eagerly await its full consummation. In grasping this truth, we come to see more clearly the magnificent scope of God’s redemptive work and our place within it. ©

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A Call to Read *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* May 2025¹

by **James W. Campbell**

Beloved, when I gave all diligence
to write unto you of the common salvation,
it was needful for me to write unto you,
and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend
for the faith which was once delivered
unto the saints.

—Jude 1:3, KJV

What Is It?

Many in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church have probably never heard of *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*, and perhaps fewer have studied it and thought deeply about what it has to say. I think if you have not pondered the meaning of this little book, you may have missed some significant

lessons that will help you in your spiritual quest for a deeper relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

The middle decades of the seventeenth century were times of great uncertainty and conflict in Scotland. Often called “The Second Reformation,” this conflict had to do with church government (bishops or presbyters?) and with the question of the final authority for doctrine and worship and practice in the church (Scripture alone or Scripture and something else?). All the while, the political question of the place of King over the people and the Church had to be resolved.

All of us know that this time of ecclesiastical upheaval led to the Westminster Assembly, where ministers and elders, selected by the Parliament of England and the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, produced the Confession of Faith and the Shorter and Larger Catechisms. John Murray described these standards as

the mature fruit of the whole movement of creed-formulation throughout fifteen centuries of Christian history and, in particular, they are the crown of the greatest age of confessional exposition, the Protestant Reformation.²

In addition to these formally approved documents, it was thought that a more simple summary of the truth of God’s Word ought to be prepared, especially appropriate for those being instructed in the biblical doctrines of the Gospel. It appears that two Scottish ministers in Glasgow, David Dickson (1583–1663) and James Durham (1622–58), often reflected on how this need could be met. These men served as pastors and, at various times, as professors of divinity at the University of Glasgow and the University of Edinburgh. It is said that often they walked together in the hills near the Glasgow High Kirk. These talks led them to produce this document as they contemplated the need for a simple record of

² John Murray, “A Notable Tercentenary” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 1, *The Claims of Truth* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 313.

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=208.

the truths of Scripture, especially one that would be appropriate as a guide for heads of families instructing children in the things of Christ. They were so successful in achieving that purpose that it came to be a staple of godly reading and meditation for all.

Never having received official confessional status by the Church of Scotland, nevertheless, from the beginning, this summary was printed along with the confessional documents, and even to the present day, it can be found published in a single volume with the other officially approved standards of doctrine, government, and worship. It was entitled *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*, and the subtitle gives its purpose and function: *A Brief Sum of Christian Doctrine, contained in the Holy Scriptures, and holden forth in foresaid Confession of Faith and Catechisms; together the practical use thereof*.³

So, if anyone wishes to read a concise summary of biblical teaching, either as a Christian or as an interested inquirer, he can do no better than to turn to *The Sum*.

Why Should We Read It?

Obviously, this is a matter of interest to those historically minded who wish to know more about the life and growth of the churches holding to the Reformed Faith, especially as they underwent the trials of the seventeenth century. But I believe that there are at least two other reasons why someone in the church today ought to study *The Sum*.

First, we need to recognize that even if we take the Bible seriously and accept it as the revealed Word of God to us, it is sometimes difficult to put the teachings of that revealed truth together and see it as a complete and systematic revelation of God's Word. The teachings of Scripture have, at their heart, a unified theme that can be overlooked as one focuses on specific questions that come to mind. The audience addressed here is not so much the scholar, theological student,

or teacher as it is the average Christian seeking to understand the faith he professes or in which he has a growing interest. Both sorts of people need to know what the substance of that faith is and what it ought to be doing with them and for them and to them. Matthew Vogan (the editorial director of the Trinitarian Bible Society and an elder in the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland) is a noted scholar of the church history of Scotland and has published many articles and books in that field. He wrote a preface to the edition of *The Sum* published by the Reformation Press in 2019. He states:

The Puritans and Covenanters spoke frequently of “saving knowledge.” They understood that a person could not be saved without first coming to the knowledge of what the Scriptures teach concerning God, man, sin, righteousness, judgment, the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and salvation. True saving faith always has at least three elements: knowledge, belief, and trust.⁴

Therefore, the first reason to study *The Sum* is because in our day, perhaps even more than in the past, there is great ignorance, even in the visible church, of what biblical truth really is and how we need to correctly understand it and express it.

A second reason why we should be interested in this work is to be found in its subtitle mentioned above. Durham and Dickson were concerned to produce a work that would be doctrinally and biblically sound but would also be oriented toward the “practical.” That English word comes from the Latin, which, in turn, comes from the Greek, and it means “to do, to accomplish, to engage in activity or behave in a certain way.” “Practical” was understood in distinction from “theoretical.” It was used by people to express ideas that were to have a consequence in actions; that make a difference not merely in opinions, but deeds. Words about doctrine, even when they are correct in their articulation, are not enough. There must also be thoughtful consequence in terms of actions, feel-

³ *The Confession of Faith; The Larger and Shorter Catechisms: Together with the Sum of Saving Knowledge* (Free Presbyterian Publications, 1981).

⁴ Matthew Vogan, preface, *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*, R. J. Dickie and M. Vogan, eds. (Reformation Press, 2019), 15.

ings, obedience, and trust. Our knowledge of the truths revealed to us in God's Word ought, in short, to make a difference. Here is where *The Sum of Saving Knowledge* is very helpful, as it focuses as much on what we are and what we do as it does on what we think and believe.

How Should We Read It?

We are dealing here with a document that not only seeks to convey information, but, perhaps more importantly, seeks to convey information that will lead the reader to know, to believe, to trust, and to become something better than he was before. I suggest that the call to walk close to the Son of God, our Savior, is founded not only upon what we know about God and these things of eternity, but also what we *feel* about them, how we *react* to them, and how we become different people than we were before we were aware of such things.

I hope I have encouraged you to read *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*. Let me go further and suggest that those who read this little book ought to approach it with reflective, prayerful directions such as these in mind:

1. Take time to go through the book. Become really familiar with the material, and let it become a part of your own understanding of, and practice of, your walk with God and your love for Christ.
2. Include others in your reflections. Certainly, solitary study is acceptable, but finding a way to work through this text with someone else is to be encouraged. If possible, involve your family, your friends, or a group at your church as you seek to become more adept at understanding the gospel and, especially, at living the gospel.
3. Be sure to ask yourself significant questions about what you read. These ought to be personal, not general. What does this mean for me? How ought I to be more spiritually minded? If what I understand about the biblical gospel is true, how ought this knowledge to be changing me? What is the Holy Spirit

doing to me and with me and through me in such a time of re-evaluation?

It is my hope that these words will spur people in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, especially its ministers, elders, and deacons, to draw closer to Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior of His people.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne, a nineteenth-century minister whose spiritual writings continue to inspire, encourage, and guide Christians in our own day, wrote this in his diary for March 11, 1834:

Read in *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*, the work which I think first of all wrought a saving change in me. How gladly would I renew the reading of it; if that change might be carried on to perfection.⁵

It is my hope that all who take up this book and use it in the way the authors intended it to be used might, as a result of such a study, come to know more and to experience more of that spiritual reality, which is nothing less than to draw nearer to Christ. And, thereby, all those who love the Lord might find such study to bring an increased measure of joy, a foretaste of life eternal, and a token of our response to that One who did so much for us because he loves us so, all in accordance with his Father's holy will and sovereign decree.

Resources for Further Study

David Dickson and James Durham, *The Sum of Saving Knowledge* (Reformation Press, 2019).

This edition contains the preface by Matthew Vogan referred to above.

David Dickson and James Durham, *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*, lightly edited and modernized text by David G. Whitla (Crown and Covenant Publications, 2023).

A study guide to this edition can be downloaded from the publisher.

5 Andrew Bonar, *Memoir & Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (Oliphant, Anderson, & Ferrier, 1894), 22.

The Sum of Saving Knowledge, <https://thewestminsterstandard.org/the-sum-of-saving-knowledge/>

This online edition is available on the site of Grange Press, the publishing endeavor of the Presbytery of the United States of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing).

Jonathan D. Mattull, *Reformed and Evangelical: The Historical Context of “The Sum of Saving Knowledge,”*

<https://www.grangepress.com/2019/02/14/reformed-and-evangelical-the-historical-context-of-the-sum-of-saving-knowledge/>

David G. Whitla, “A Right Channel of New Obedience: Sanctification in the Sum of Saving Knowledge” in *The Reformed Presbyterian Theological Journal*. 7.2 (Fall 2020).

The Sum of Saving Knowledge is included with the Westminster Standards in the editions published by the Banner of Truth Trust.

<https://banneroftruth.org/us/store/theology-books/westminster-confession/> and by the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. <https://www.fpbookroom.org/cgi-bin/sd000001.pl?WD=confessionwestminster&PN=Westminster-Standards-PB-2004.html#SID=45> ©

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A Confessional Certainty: Machen’s Defense of the Virgin Birth in a Shifting World

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by **Justin McLendon**

In a world of fugitives the person taking the opposite direction will appear to run away.” So claims Agatha in T. S. Eliot’s play “The Family Reunion.”² Elliot’s aphorism captures a peculiar irony of the modern age: Those who remain faithful to ancient truth are often accused of retreating from progress.

Readers of this journal are well-versed in Machen’s placement among those who remained steadfast in the bluster of theological fragmentation and disintegration. In Machen’s context, new sciences promised a mastery of nature, and historical criticism promised to cull the Bible of superstition. These deviations were thought to maintain the church’s relevance and expand its messaging among its secular observers. Predictably, our reflections on Machen’s posture and activity throughout the fundamentalist-modernist controversy tend to prioritize his forthright apologetic in his timeless *Christianity & Liberalism* (1923). Rightfully so, as Peter Lillback claims, because Machen’s classic “has become the seminal work that distinguishes historic Christianity from the subtly but utterly distinct and divergent theology of the modernizing church.”³ Across our own landscape, when

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1220.

2 T. S. Eliot, “The Family Reunion,” in *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays (1909–1950)* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952), 281.

3 Peter Lillback, “Foreword,” in J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism*, legacy ed. (Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), vii.

revisionist modernisms emerge, we tend to stabilize our responses by recalling, as Douglas Kelly summarizes, that “Machen emerged as an international champion of biblical authority and evangelical theology.”⁴ To borrow from Eliot again, Machen not only remained steadfast; he contended against the theological fugitives plundering “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

Among the college-age students I teach in theology and ministry courses, awareness of Machen is remarkably limited. His name rarely appears in their theological vocabulary, and when it does, it is usually as a faint echo of what was taught in a church history course, often confined to what we noted above. Scarce are the students who are aware of Machen’s decades-long defense of the virgin birth (or to be precise, the virginal conception). Yet within the same intellectual atmosphere that unmoored orthodoxy from its biblical and theological foundations, to affirm that a first-century Jewish girl conceived a child by the Holy Spirit appeared to many as quaint at best and delusional at worst. Harry Emerson Fosdick’s 1922 sermon “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” references the impasse:

It is interesting to note where the Fundamentalists are driving in their stakes to mark out the deadline of doctrine around the church, across which no one is to pass except on terms of agreement. They insist that we must all believe in the historicity of certain special miracles, preeminently the virgin birth of our Lord.⁵

More broadly, as Darryl Hart explains,

What was at stake in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy was not the secularization of America but the secularization of the church. During the

4 Douglas F. Kelly, “John Gresham Machen (1881–1937),” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 3rd ed., eds. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell (Baker Academic, 2017), 515.

5 Fosdick’s sermon can be found online in several places, but this quotation is from <https://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5070/>.

1920s and 1930s, Protestants faced a choice between retaining either the status of the church or the message of the Gospel.⁶

Machen refused to surrender, standing still while the world rushed past him, convinced that the Christian faith could not survive the loss of the supernatural without forfeiting its very essence. Reflecting on Machen’s *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, William Baird writes, “How Machen accomplished the immense amount of research displayed in this work while he was center of the storm that raged in church and seminary is testimony to his enduring fortitude.”⁷ In what follows, we will trace Machen’s argument and consider the significance of his defense. His presentation, as we will discover, was not the product of nostalgia or sectarianism but the steady outworking of theological conviction.

A Providential Thesis

At the dawn of the twentieth century, conservative Protestants identified what they regarded as the essential doctrines of historic Christianity: the inerrancy of Scripture, the virginal conception of Christ, and his substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection, and power to perform miracles.⁸ The General Assembly formally affirmed these as “essential and necessary” articles of faith in 1910 and yet again in 1916. The modernist’s formal response soon followed in the Auburn Affirmation (1924), which sought to distinguish between the “facts and doctrines of our religion” and the “particular theories” used to explain them.⁹ In effect, this

6 D. G. Hart, “Holding the Line,” *Tabletalk* (March 1, 2006), final paragraph, <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/holding-line>.

7 William Baird, *History of New Testament Research* (Fortress Press, 2003), 2:356. This quote was discovered in Bernard Aubert’s comprehensive and exemplary essay, “J. Gresham Machen’s *The Virgin Birth of Christ*: Then and Now,” *Unio Cum Christo*, vol. 2, no. 2 (October 2016):135–55.

8 Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 24–25; 77–79.

9 Formally titled, “An Affirmation Designed to Safeguard the Unity and Liberty of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.” See Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy*, 78.

reframing allowed one to affirm the incarnation while denying the virgin birth, thereby signaling a decisive shift in the theological fault lines of American Presbyterianism. Thus, “in the space of thirty years, an existing consensus of conservative orthodoxy had been reduced to being one option among others.”¹⁰ In response to the Auburn Affirmation, Machen argues, “The Affirmation declares the virgin birth to be a theory; Holy Scripture declares it to be a fact.”¹¹

As Hart argues, Machen does not fit neatly within the standard categories of American fundamentalism. This observation is important today, especially when easy compartmentalization blurs the boundaries of those involved in this theological struggle. Though Machen stood among the most visible defenders of orthodoxy, he was neither a populist nor a separatist. Internationally educated and deeply devoted to the Reformed confessions, he resisted both dispensational theology and the interdenominational spirit that characterized the movement. Hart therefore concludes that Machen is best understood as an intellectually robust, confessional Presbyterian whose loyalty rested firmly in the historic creeds and polity of the church.¹² Thus, Hart claims,

The best way to guard against liberalism, he believed, was not through an interdenominational union of conservatives but rather through fidelity to historic Protestant creeds, reinforced by strong church ties. . . . He repeatedly counseled conservatives

in all denominations not to abandon their confessional loyalties.¹³

Recounting his seminary studies, Machen acknowledges, “In Germany I obtained practically no contact with conservative scholarship, but listened almost exclusively to those who represent the dominant naturalistic point of view.”¹⁴ Machen’s final year of seminary required the selection of a thesis topic. Ned Stonehouse notes that his assigned subject, “A Critical Discussion of the New Testament Account of the Virgin Birth of Jesus,” was not of his own selection. As Stonehouse explains, “It is thus interesting that the subject of the virgin birth of Christ which was to fascinate him throughout his career, and which resulted in the production of his *opus magnum*, was not of his own choosing.”¹⁵ Yet what began as an academic exercise would become the defining concern of his academic life, and his thorough analysis exhibited his awareness of the academic literature and the precision with which he championed his defense.

Machen’s Defense

By 1912, Machen had already begun to lay the groundwork for what would eventually become *The Virgin Birth of Christ*. That year he published three significant essays, two of which were later reprinted as a booklet, while the third, dealing with the second century, would become the opening chapter of his later volume, placing the testimony of church history in conversation with the biblical record.¹⁶ The two exegetical studies were substantially revised and appear as chapters 4 and 5 of the completed work. These

10 Nathan P. Feldmeth, S. Donald Fortson III, Garth M. Rosell, and Kenneth J. Stewart, *Reformed & Evangelical Across Four Centuries: The Presbyterian Story in America* (Eerdmans, 2022), 258.

11 J. Gresham Machen, “The Virgin Birth, the Auburn Affirmation, and the Presbyterian Advance,” *The Presbyterian* 98 (February 9, 1928): 12.

12 See D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 151. This edition of Hart’s work can be found online (see: <https://archive.org/details/defendingfaithjg0000hart/page/150/mode/2up>) and was reissued by P&R Publishing in 2003.

13 Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 151.

14 J. Gresham Machen, “Christianity in Conflict,” from the PCA Historical Center (<https://www.pcahistory.org/documents/machen-conflict.pdf>), 255.

15 Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*, 4th ed. (Banner of Truth, 2020), 85.

16 J. Gresham Machen, “The Hymns of the First Chapter of Luke,” *The Princeton Theological Review* [hereafter: PTR] 10.1 (1912): 1–38; “The Origin of the First Two Chapters of Luke,” PTR 10.2 (1912): 212–77; and “The Virgin Birth in the Second Century,” PTR 10.4 (1912): 529–80. See, also, Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*, 197–99.

early writings formed the foundation upon which the larger project was constructed. A further development occurred in the spring of 1927, when Machen delivered the Thomas Smyth Lectures at Columbia Theological Seminary under the title “The Integrity of the Lucan Narrative.” These lectures, later published in the *Princeton Review*, became the central architecture of the book’s claims.¹⁷ While the finalized book draws upon these earlier publications, more than half of the volume represents new research and synthesis, particularly in its treatment of the historical background and the development of the doctrine within the early church.

The first eleven chapters assume the historicity of the virginal conception and present the positive evidence in its favor. The remaining chapters frame the contrary hypothesis (that the event did not occur) and then examine alternative explanations for the origin of the narratives in Matthew and Luke. The design reflects Machen’s confidence that the truth of Christianity requires no special pleading. Readers of *Christianity and Liberalism* can detect Machen’s same candor, only now exercised in a densely documented, text-by-text defense of the Gospel accounts.

Rather than exegesis, Machen begins with the witness of the early church. By the opening of the second century, belief in the virginal conception was already universal, found in creedal forms and echoed by Ignatius and others. Fringe actors who denied the doctrine did so for dogmatic rather than textual reasons. Machen concludes that the church’s confession was not an afterthought of later theology but the natural continuation of apostolic testimony. This early witness becomes Machen’s first line of argument: The doctrine is ancient because it was already embedded in the earliest Christian memory.

Machen moves from history to the Gospel of Luke, which occupies the center of his case. Luke’s infancy narratives, he argues, are not

later additions or adaptations but integral to the Gospel as a whole. The language, rhythm, and atmosphere are Semitic, revealing a Jewish milieu untouched by later Gentile speculation. Luke, though he may have used sources, is no compiler of legends. Luke shapes his material faithfully within the historical framework of his Gospel, and Machen demonstrates that every attempt to excise or minimize Luke’s references to the virgin birth creates new contradictions rather than resolving old ones. The narrative coherence depends on the miracle being genuine.

Machen subjects the theories of German criticism to exhaustive scrutiny and finds them wanting. The verses describing the virginal conception cannot be removed without undermining the narrative structure itself. The comparison between the annunciation to Zechariah and that to Mary, for instance, reveals that the virgin birth is not a tertiary embellishment but the organizing center of Luke’s story. The contrast between the aged couple who conceive in their later years and the young virgin who conceives by the Holy Spirit dramatizes the transition from the old covenant to the new.

In turning to Matthew’s account, Machen contests the notion that Matthew’s inclusion of the virgin conception results from later insertions, and such an argument lacks support in the manuscript tradition or within Matthew’s internal style. Together, Matthew and Luke present independent yet harmonious accounts that reinforce one another’s credibility. Their differences are not contradictions but evidence of separate sources, perhaps reflecting distinct family perspectives (i.e., Luke from Mary’s, Matthew from Joseph’s).

After establishing the unity and reliability of the biblical narratives, Machen widens his investigation to questions of history and worldview. Here the issue becomes philosophical as well as textual: Can one admit the miraculous at all? For Machen, the modern rejection of the virgin birth is symptomatic of a deeper and more destructive malady, the a priori denial of the supernatural. Rationalists who wish to retain the ethical core of Christianity while rejecting its miraculous frame,

17 J. Gresham Machen, “The Integrity of the Lucan Narrative of the Annunciation,” *PTR* 25 (1927): 529–86.

he contends, end by constructing another religion altogether. The decision between faith and skepticism ultimately rests on whether one believes that God acts within history.

Machen further explores the so-called accusations of silence in the wider New Testament. Critics note, for example, that Mark, John, and Paul lack direct reference to the virgin birth. Machen grants that the doctrine is less frequently mentioned than the resurrection but insists that its comparative absence is precisely what one would expect. The evangelists wrote from eyewitness testimony; Paul wrote occasional letters, and never with the intentions of a biographical treatment. Thus, the absence of explicit wider New Testament reference does not imply ignorance or denial but authorial selectivity with differing aims. Moreover, Machen reiterates, the doctrine fits perfectly within Paul's Christology: The second Adam must be a new creation, not the product of the old.

If the virgin birth were not historical, how did such a belief arise? Machen's insertion of this question provides the opportunity to survey two major hypotheses, Jewish and pagan derivation, both popular among scholars of the "history of religions" school. The Jewish theory fails, Machen notes, because the Old Testament contains miraculous births but no virginal ones, and Jewish theology of the period, with its strong sense of God's transcendence, would not have generated such a notion. The supposed link to Isaiah 7:14 cannot explain the rise of the doctrine, for Jewish interpreters did not connect that prophecy to a virgin-born Messiah.

The latter, pagan-derivation theory, fares no better. Comparisons with Greco-Roman and Near Eastern myths collapse under scrutiny, Machen explains. None of the supposed parallels truly describes a virginal conception. Even where early Christian apologists such as Justin Martyr drew analogies to pagan stories, they did so rhetorically, not as sources. The infancy narratives are stubbornly Jewish in idiom and theology, and their sober tone bears no resemblance to the extravagances of myth. In the end, Machen

concludes that if the virginal conception were not a fact, modern criticism has not yet offered a plausible account of how the story originated.

Across these fourteen chapters, Machen's method is remarkably even-handed. A first-rate scholar, Machen avoids ridiculing his opponents, yet he exposes the internal contradictions of their theories. His analysis rests on two pillars: first, the positive coherence of the biblical witness; second, the inability of rival explanations to account for the data. Together, these support the historical and theological credibility of the miracle. In the preface to the second edition (March 1932), Machen argues, "When the objections to the supernatural have once been overcome, there are removed with them, in a much more far-reaching way than is sometimes supposed, the objections to the birth narratives as a whole."¹⁸ For Machen, this was the heart of the crisis. He saw that once the supernatural was expelled from the gospel, Christianity would dissolve into ethics and sentimentalism. The virgin birth is not an isolated marvel but the necessary expression of a gospel that begins with divine initiative and ends with divine accomplishment. The miracle of Christ's conception belongs organically to the same supernatural order as the resurrection, for both are signs that salvation is God's work from first to last.

Implications

The obvious import of Machen's contribution is his demonstration that the doctrine of the virgin birth is not a removable or peripheral miracle, but an integral, "organic part of a mighty redeeming work of God."¹⁹ Its practical significance is that it fixes the time and nature of the incarnation. By his conception in Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit, the divine Son truly assumed complete human nature from its very beginning. This foundational fact assures us that our Savior is fully God and

18 J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930; repr., 1932), x. Hereafter, all page references to this book will be placed in parenthesis. This online edition can be found here: <https://archive.org/details/virgin-birthofchr0000mach/page/n5/mode/2up>.

19 Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 217.

man, ensuring that his subsequent life, death, and resurrection were truly the work of a uniquely qualified redeemer. On the other hand, denying the virgin birth inevitably leads to an impoverished or defective understanding of Christ's person. As Machen argues, those who reject the virgin birth

often profess belief in the "incarnation"; but the word is apt to mean to them almost the exact opposite of what the New Testament means when it says that 'the Word became flesh.' To these modern men the incarnation means that God and man are one; to the New Testament it means rather that they are not one, but that the eternal Son of God became man, assumed our nature, by a stupendous miracle, to redeem us from sin. Seldom does any real belief in the incarnation go along with a rejection of the miracle of the virgin birth.²⁰

From a practical theological standpoint, the virgin birth provides a necessary explanation for Christ's sinlessness and his unique position as the "Second Adam." Machen emphasizes that if Jesus had been born in the ordinary natural way, he would have been a product of the fallen human race, inheriting the same guilt and power of sin that plague all of Adam's descendants. Machen explains,

Paul clearly regarded Jesus Christ as no mere product of what had gone before Him, but as an entirely new beginning in humanity, the second Adam, the Founder of a new race. Could such a Person have been derived by ordinary generation from the men who had existed before Him upon the earth; could He, in the ordinary sense, have had a human father?²¹

The supernatural conception by the Holy Spirit, however, establishes Jesus as a new creation. The theological and practical wisdom here is rather

obvious: A Savior who needed saving would be no Savior at all; therefore, the manner of his birth guarantees his fitness to save.

Machen views the doctrine as a touchstone of one's view on biblical authority.²² Since the virgin birth is clearly and historically narrated as a fact in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, its denial fundamentally involves rejecting the trustworthiness of the biblical record in the sphere of external, supernatural events. For Machen, those who claim to accept the "ideals (or what they call 'religion') of Scripture but dismiss its historical facts are separating the gospel from its foundation in a mighty, world-changing work of God."²³ The practical choice presented to the Christian is one of supernaturalism versus naturalism. Do we believe in a God who intervenes miraculously in history to redeem humanity or one whose actions are limited by human experience? Our answer exposes our reliance upon or our rejection of the Bible's trustworthiness.

Finally, as we celebrate the incarnation with other believers, we are comforted by the

supreme wonder that not some lesser one, but the eternal Son of God, He through whom the world was made, should not despise the virgin's womb, but should consent to be born as a man and dwell among us; it is no doubt a wonder, too, that the manner in which He should come should be found in a creative act of God's Spirit in Mary's womb.²⁴

Our attention upon the incarnation testifies to the depth of Christ's condescension and willing entry into the lowliest of human circumstances for our sake. We are reminded and thus we proclaim that our salvation rests not on human effort or philosophy but on a divine work wholly outside the capacity of man. The practical wisdom is in the result-

22 Albert Mohler references Machen in his own query of biblical authority and the virgin birth. See, "Can a Christian Deny the Virgin Birth?" (December 23, 2008): <https://albertmohler.com/2008/12/23/can-a-christian-deny-the-virgin-birth/>.

23 Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 384.

24 Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 283.

20 Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 391.

21 Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 262.

ing confidence: If God performed this greatest of miracles to bring a sinless redeemer into the world, then we can rest assured in the efficacy of our redeemer's work on the cross and in the resurrection. The virgin birth is thus a constant, tangible sign of a supernatural gospel that alone can save. ©

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Machen's Best Book: *The Virgin Birth of Christ*

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by Darryl G. Hart

The Virgin Birth of Christ, by J. Gresham Machen
(Harper and Brothers, 1930).

Most Christians who know about J. Gresham Machen associate him with his most popular book, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923). Even in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and extending outward to communions in NAPARC, Reformed Christians know Machen mostly through the book he wrote at the peak of the fundamentalist controversy, the one in which he argued plausibly and provocatively that liberal Protestantism was a different religion from Christianity. Controversy generates publicity, and Machen's fame started and grew from his initial intervention into the church controversies of the 1920s and 1930s.

Yet, Machen himself considered *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, published in 1930 by Harper & Brothers, his magnum opus. The book's title and the name of the publisher underscore the ambiguity of Machen himself, the gentleman scholar who took the side of populist and sometimes crass Protestantism. On the one hand, the virgin birth was one of the doctrines that fundamentalists insisted was essential to Christianity. Machen's book, consequently, would seem to solidify his

identification with those Protestants who sought to rid churches of theological liberalism. On the other hand, Harper & Brothers was a trade (not a religious or academic) press that published American authors from a wide variety of backgrounds. In other words, fundamentalists typically would have published with Fleming H. Revell, a New York religious publisher who originally brought to print the writings of Dwight L. Moody. Harper's imprimatur indicated that despite the title, Machen's *Virgin Birth* was not designed for the controversy in the churches, even if it was related. His purpose was mainly academic. This was a scholarly book that did little to help fundamentalists who wanted a quick and easy read before heading to the next meeting to strategize on defeating modernists. Weighing in at close to four hundred pages, *Virgin Birth* was neither a quick nor an easy read.

One reason for Machen's own claim about the importance of the book was that the subject had followed him since he was a student at Princeton Theological Seminary. During his final year at Princeton (1904–05), he wrote a long paper on the virgin birth for the New Testament fellowship prize. Machen's essay not only finished first in the competition, but it also came with a scholarship that Machen used for his studies in Germany the next year. The research paper, divided in two, became Machen's first publications, both under the title "The New Testament Account of the Birth of Jesus." The first was published in 1905, the second a year later. Even though Machen's work as a lecturer at Princeton after his return from Germany took him more in the direction of the apostle Paul (which led to *The Origins of Paul's Religion*, 1921), he kept a hand in the scholarly literature on the virgin birth. One indication of this ongoing curiosity was his 1912 article, "The Hymns of the First Chapter of Luke," in *Princeton Theological Review*.

After almost two decades away from the subject, in *The Virgin Birth of Christ* Machen followed the approach he had taken in his book on Paul (which he then used for some of his points in *Christianity and Liberalism*). Machen defended

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1223.

the supernatural character of Christianity through a close reading of the New Testament. He did so for the theological reason that salvation from sin depended on a direct (supernatural) intervention by God into human affairs. Nothing within a fallen world was capable of lifting men and women out of their guilt and restoring them to a loving relationship with a holy God. Machen's emphasis on the supernatural followed from his academic purpose of taking the New Testament on its own terms. Rather than explaining away the miraculous as liberal Protestants did, Machen insisted that an honest reading of the Bible left no other conclusion but that God was from first to last the author of salvation.

As a lover of ancient Greek and Roman authors, for example, Machen was also well aware that the pagan religions were littered with supernatural events, figures, and significance. And yet, the New Testament narratives were completely different from the miraculous stories in Greek and Roman mythology. For instance, the Bible was silent on the amorous relations between gods and women that prevailed in ancient myths. In the gospels' account of Christ's birth, Machen wrote,

the lofty Old Testament monotheism is abated not a whit; the awful transcendence of God, the awful separateness of God from the world, is never lost from view. Where in the New Testament story is there found any hint of a love of God for the maid of Nazareth, which could be analogous to the love of a husband for his wife? The question can scarcely even be asked, by any man of literary taste—to say nothing of any devout Christian—without a shudder. (338)

Machen added that in the pagan literature that inspired many of the ancient authors he esteemed, “the love of the gods for mortal women” was the “very point” of the stories—“the thing without which they could not possibly exist.” But to conceive of this kind of relationship in connection with the virgin Mary was to “do violence” to the biblical material (325).

Machen used a similar approach to explain the early church's reference to Jesus as “the Son of God.” Many Gentile Christians would have come to faith in Christ after having believed that Zeus was father of gods and men. The Greek king of the gods, according to the ancient myths, begot children by human mothers. This was also true of stories about the births of figures like Alexander the Great, Plato, and the Roman emperor Augustus. “These great men were ‘sons of gods’” (335). Gentile converts to Christianity may well have read the New Testament in a similar light. But in the pagan literature, Machen argued, polytheism was pronounced, if not “the centre and core of the whole complex of ideas” (338). For Matthew and Luke, God's love for the virgin Mary had no hint of the sexual attraction a husband has for his wife. The New Testament accounts were completely chaste compared to the “the pagan stories of the loves and hates of the gods” (339).

Just as with his book on the apostle Paul, in *The Virgin Birth* Machen recovered the supernatural character of Scripture and salvation but without letting the New Testament stories become just one more instance of the alien ideas that ancient people had before the rise of modern science. Machen was a scholar steeped in the world of ancient learning and myths. Unlike his modernist Protestant opponents, he did not pit the backwardness of the ancient world against the “progress” of modern society, the rationale for adapting Christianity to modern educated people. The supernatural aspects of the Bible did not offend Machen, if only because his mental universe included a world, pagan and Christian, where deity intervened regularly in human affairs. But Machen's defense of the supernatural (and the virgin birth) was not a simplistic or wooden defense like that proposed by some fundamentalists. Machen understood Christ's birth in the context of both the Bible's plan of salvation and the ancient world inhabited by the apostles and early church.

Machen's sensitivity to the oddness of the virgin birth was also evident when he discussed the difficulties that modern Christians might

have with the origins of Christ's human existence. Here, Machen did not use the doctrine as a cudgel by which to shame theological liberals. Instead, he argued that the virgin birth aligned best with humanity's need for a savior whose entrance into the world was unlike any other leader or great man. Not only did the virgin birth mean that Jesus was born without sin—unlike the rest of humanity descended from Adam and Eve—but the virgin birth fixed the time when the incarnation began. “Did the Son of God unite with the man Jesus at the baptism as Gnostics supposed?” Machen asked hypothetically. “Was the man Jesus received up gradually into union with the eternal Son?” Such questions invited “erroneous answers” without the virgin birth as an answer. “Without the story of the virgin birth we should be living constantly in a region of surmises like the errors of the heresiarchs in the ancient Church,” he warned (394).

What still lingered at the end of the book was a question of pastoral concern—how much doctrine, including the virgin birth, was necessary to believe to be a Christian. “Some knowledge is certainly required,” Machen wrote, “but exactly how much is required we cannot say.” He acknowledged that in troubled times like the 1920s, many of little faith were unsure what to believe about the virgin birth. For that reason, Machen saw wisdom in not drawing a line in the sand that made salvation depend on belief in “the stupendous miracle narrated in the first chapters of Matthew and Luke” (395). Such a concession did not mean the virgin birth was a matter of indifference. He added that “even if the belief in the virgin birth is not necessary to every Christian, it is certainly necessary to Christianity” (396). Someone could possibly believe in the resurrection but not in the virgin birth. This was a “halfway” conviction unlikely to endure. In the end, the New Testament “account” of Jesus was most convincing when taken as a whole, namely “that Jesus did not come into the world by ordinary generation but was conceived in the womb of the virgin by the Holy Ghost” (397).

As impressive as Machen's book may have been, from its mastery of the relevant scholar-

ship to the sensitive questions of apologetics and doubt, *The Virgin Birth* was published in what was likely the busiest and most discouraging time of Machen's life. He had just lost two years of debates about the legality of reorganization of Princeton Seminary, in which he was often the target of personal attacks. He had only a year before the book appeared, led in founding Westminster Seminary, a herculean effort that left little time for anything but logistics and correspondence. And yet, in the midst of that tumult in his professional and personal life, Machen brought to completion his life-long inquiry into the New Testament's birth narratives. If *The Virgin Birth* did not appeal to readers, then or now, the way *Christianity and Liberalism* has, the reasons have little to do with the quality of the 1930 book. *The Virgin Birth* is three times longer and much more scholarly than *Christianity and Liberalism*. Yet, Machen's “magnum opus” has all the strengths of his most popular book—a defense of Christianity as a religion of redemption, based on the Bible's testimony, and resolutely a supernatural work of God. ©

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Servant Living

The Church's [Not So] New Fundamentalism

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by John W. Mahaffy

In June 1937, a year after the formation of the Presbyterian Church of America (soon to be renamed the Orthodox Presbyterian Church), the new church divided, with the group that broke off taking the name Bible Presbyterian Synod. The more fundamentalistic group that left was largely premillennial and advocated total abstinence from beverage alcohol. As the OPC approaches its centennial, the church appears to contain a growing element of new fundamentalists. Ironically, members of this group might be found smoking cigars and sipping whiskey (in moderation), and their eschatology might be postmillennial. Is this really a new fundamentalism?

Our Early History

The historian George M. Marsden reflects on the apparent unity of the diverse group of presbyters who formed the Presbyterian Church of America (not to be confused with the Presbyterian Church in America, formed decades later):

The men who met together in the First General Assembly of the PCA were well aware that they were not of one mind on every detail of doctrine and practice. Yet, from all appearances, they had reason to believe that

their essential agreement in their common faith would far outweigh their differences as to detail. All agreed that the Scriptures were the infallible Word of God, that the Westminster Standards contained the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures, and that the principles of Presbyterian church government were founded upon the Word of God.²

The battle in which the new church was engaged was a conflict between historic Christianity and those who denied the truthfulness and authority of Scripture. In *Christianity and Liberalism* J. Gresham Machen argued that theological liberalism was incompatible with historic, biblical Christianity—one is faced with a choice.³ At the same time, he recognized that some who held to liberal views, such as the denial of the plenary inspiration of Scripture, might still be trusting in Christ for their salvation.⁴ The issue was one of principle, not personalities.

In that conflict within American Presbyterianism, conservative, confessional men and women joined forces with fundamentalists as co-combatants. While Machen strongly disliked being identified as a fundamentalist, he was willing to work with them in a common cause when the truth of Scripture was at stake. He stated in 1926:

Do you suppose, gentlemen, that I do not detect faults in many popular defenders of supernatural Christianity? Do you suppose that I do not regret being called by a term that I greatly dislike, a “Fundamentalist”? Most certainly I do. But in the presence of a great common foe, I have little time to be attacking my brethren who stand with me in defense of

2 George M. Marsden, “Perspective on the Division of 1937,” in *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 301.

3 J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Eerdmans, 2009), 2, 7, 13.

4 Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 64.

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1191.

the Word of God. I must continue to support an unpopular cause.⁵

Machen's zeal was for a full-orbed faith that proclaimed *the whole counsel of God* (words reproduced in the seal of the seminary he founded). Reflecting on his own early training in the Word he observed:

When a man has come into sympathetic contact with that noble tradition of the Reformed faith, he will never be satisfied with a mere "Fundamentalism" that seeks in some hasty modern statement a greatest common measure between men of different creeds. Rather, he will strive always to stand in the great central current of the church's life that has come down to us through Augustine and Calvin to the Standards of the Reformed faith.⁶

Once the PCA/OPC was formed in 1936, competing interests began to test the unity of the church. Three primary areas of theological disagreement surfaced: eschatology, Christian liberty, and church polity.⁷ Marsden argues convincingly that none of these issues alone was sufficient to cause the division of 1937.⁸ He also suggests that the competing view that the division was caused by political and personal differences, while containing an element of truth, fails to account adequately for the split.⁹

Marsden suggests: "The two traditions do not represent two incompatible theological traditions. Rather, they represent two approaches to the same tradition." He explains:

Each side had a vision of what the new church should be like. The minority saw a Bible-believing church witnessing to the world both in the preaching of the Word

and the "separated life." The majority saw an orthodox church whose witness would reflect an informed study of the scriptural principles of the church and its work. The two visions are not incompatible. But at a time when the differences, rather than the similarities are emphasized it becomes difficult for one to sympathize with the emphases of the other.¹⁰

My concern is with a rising influence of a fundamentalistic emphasis in the courts of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church—so why look at our history? First, it reminds us that this trend may not be as new as we might think. Examining our past may help us avoid repeating problems. Second, looking at our history may help us realize that our options today may be more nuanced than we think.

A Cautionary Note

The words *fundamentalist* and *fundamentalism* can be emotionally loaded terms, easily weaponized. They can be used to label someone who holds a view slightly to the right of one's own, while the terms *progressive*, *liberal*, or *woke* are applied to those whose views are slightly to the left. When that happens, the labels have become a substitute for thoughtful consideration. The potential for misuse, however, does not mean that the words have ceased to have meaning. The goal in this essay is to use them honestly as tools, not as weapons.

The Old Fundamentalism

Carl McIntire, leader of the group that left in 1937, exemplifies the old fundamentalism in this description by Marsden:

While the majority of the newly formed denomination, including the closest associates of J. Gresham Machen at Westminster Seminary, took clearly conservative (or Old School) positions on the divisive issues, the minority led by McIntire took positions not only more

5 Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Bibliographic Memoir* (Eerdmans, 1955), 337–38.

6 J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity in Conflict," in *Selected Shorter Writings* (P&R Publishing, 2004), 551.

7 Marsden, "Perspective on the Division of 1937," 321.

8 Marsden, "Perspective on the Division of 1937," 321.

9 Marsden, "Perspective on the Division of 1937," 322.

10 Marsden, "Perspective on the Division of 1937," 323.

typically fundamentalistic but also remarkably similar to those taken by the New School a century earlier. The specific programs for which McIntire and his associates fought were (1) tolerance of a doctrine (dispensational pre-millennialism) which the majority in the church considered incompatible with the *Westminster Confession of Faith*; (2) continuation of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions, rather than forming an official denominational missions board; and (3) adoption by the general assembly of a statement that total abstinence from all that may intoxicate is “the only true principle of temperance” — precisely the statement first adopted by the New School general assembly of 1840. These programs, together with McIntire’s claim to represent “American Presbyterianism” (a former New School term), his avid (anti-Communist) patriotism, his zeal for revivalism and legalistic reforms, his emphasis on interdenominational cooperation, and his lack of concern for strict Presbyterian polity all suggest a continuation of distinctly New School traditions within the fundamentalistic wing of Presbyterianism.¹¹

That kind of fundamentalism might seem to have vanished from the OPC. No one is arguing for dispensationalism, and although most officers hold to some form of amillennialism, there are some historic premillennialists and postmillennialists among us. The church seems committed to working through its denominational committees. Few officers would advocate for total abstinence.

Advocacy of total abstinence came in response to an awareness of the sin of drunkenness and the harmful consequences of the abuse of alcohol. But the remedy went beyond Scripture. The atheism of communism threatened the US and the world, but McIntire’s fight against it pulled the church away

from its primary focus, towards a political agenda.

McIntire and company’s support for dispensational premillennialism was likely an unbalanced reaction to the view of theological liberals that human progress was introducing a golden age. Our culture seems persuaded of pessimism regarding the future.

In 1936 the idea that one could simply select his or her own gender was unthinkable. Less than a century later, the church faces significant challenges as it serves her Lord in an apostate culture. Today, one’s feelings override creational considerations as one chooses who (insert the appropriate pronoun) wants to be. While abortion was not unknown in the first third of the twentieth century, even unbelievers generally regarded it as evil. Today it is legal in many jurisdictions and celebrated in some circles. The propaganda of “death with dignity” cuts short human life at the other end of the age spectrum. Even the church needs the reminder that “we do not have to participate in our culture’s sacraments of death.”¹²

The New Fundamentalism

The challenges facing the church in the early twenty-first century have not become simpler. The Reformed church does not always avoid the temptations of fundamentalism. In the OPC a Reformed patriarchal fundamentalism has emerged in the battle against unbelief. In examining the history of our church we have the advantage of perspective, a historical distance that is obviously absent from looking at current trends. What follows is somewhat anecdotal, but we dare not wait decades for perspective if some of our actions in church courts show less than helpful trends.

Who Sets Our Moral Compass?

When the church allows her mission to be determined by the world instead of the Word of God, she engages in fatal compromise. That is the route of theological liberalism, which remains a

11 George M. Marsden, “The New School Heritage and Presbyterian Fundamentalism,” in *Pressing Toward the Mark*, 179.

12 Peter Kreeft, in a lecture at George Fox University, 17 February 2017.

constant threat. But equally destructive of the mission of the church is allowing herself to be guided simply by opposing whatever momentary fads and ungodly practices happen to prevail. When the world co-opts the church into adopting its agenda, theological liberalism and the social gospel are the result. In reaction, the Bible-believing church can move in the direction of taking the opposite tack from the world's. But that can mean that, no less than a drift into liberalism, the church is setting her course not by turning first to Scripture, but rather by what she sees as the opposite of the direction of the world. In that case, it is still the compass of the world, rather than that of the Word, which determines the direction of the church.

The reaction to the term *abuse* illustrates this problem. The author of this article would be considered by some to be an abuser simply because he is a male of Caucasian descent. Similarly, all females and people of color might be considered victims. The church must oppose such nonsense, pointing instead to the Word, which commands us to speak the truth while also warning against the sin of oppression. But when the church is so afraid of the term *abuse* that it minimizes acts of oppression that occur within the church and Christian families, it is moving in a fundamentalistic direction. If the default reaction to an allegation of sinful oppressive behavior is to dismiss the report as “feminism” or “the OPC me-too movement,” the church is in real danger of failing to act with the justice which the Lord requires.

That opposition to the term *abuse* was illustrated during the 88th (2022) General Assembly. A presbytery had overtured the Assembly to form a committee to “collect, study, and develop resources on topics related to the many forms of abuse that manifest themselves in the church (sexual, domestic, ecclesiastical, verbal, emotional, psychological, etc.)” and to help “equip officers, sessions, and presbyteries to recognize and respond to allegations and instances of abuse in ways that honor Jesus Christ.” The advisory committee to which the overture was assigned recommended the adoption of the overture, but a minority

strongly opposed doing so, partly on the grounds of the misuse of the term by the world. Although the Assembly did set up a committee, its mandate was amended to remove reference to abuse. The committee was to “collect, study, and develop resources to equip the officers of the church to protect her members from sexual predators and domestic violence.”¹³ A portion of the church seems reluctant to recognize that abuse can be multi-faceted and can occur within the church and her families.

Patriarchy

North American culture tends to deny or at least undermine parental authority in the home as well as ecclesiastical and governmental authority. Christians, recognizing that it is ultimately God who has established authority in the home, in the church, and in government, need to oppose such false teaching. The correction, however, must be biblically focused and balanced, not simply reactionary. I am concerned to find some, even in Reformed circles, embracing the term *patriarchy*.

Perhaps support for patriarchy arises because it is an in-your-face reaction to unbiblical egalitarianism. One might question whether that approach actually serves to persuade people to adopt a more biblical view, or is its impact primarily one of leaving the so-called patriarch feeling that he has made a statement for the record? The baggage that accompanies the term makes it less than useful in our culture. Concerns about the term are more basic, however. The Scriptures, while calling on fathers to be godly leaders in their homes, do not summon us to emulate the patriarchs. Yes, Peter uses the term to describe David, and Hebrews attaches it to Abraham. But when Stephen uses the term twice in his sermon in Acts 7, it refers to Joseph's siblings selling him as a slave.

I fear that much of the support for patriarchy grows out of a less than faithful following of Scripture. Aristotle had a profound influence, not

13 *Minutes* of the 88th General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Article 152.

only on Greek philosophy but also on thinking in the centuries that followed. He explicitly claimed that, based on nature, males are naturally superior to females: “Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind.”¹⁴

Aristotle’s view of women infiltrated the theology of the early church (just as Plato’s dualism tended to make some identify evil with the physical and material—arguably influencing the total abstinence movement in fundamentalist circles even among those who never read Plato). The early church, with its biblical basis, often treated women much better than pagan Romans did. Yet sometimes women were seen as inferior and a source of temptation. One can trace similar sentiments through theologians of the Reformation and post-Reformation periods.

Puritan pastor William Gouge wrote of the God-given responsibilities of various members of the household. He structures duties of wives in terms of being subordinate and inferior, arguing not only that this is God’s command, but also echoing language similar to Aristotle’s:

Nature has placed an eminency in the male over the female: so as where they are linked together in one yoke, it is given by nature that he should govern, she obey. This did the heathen by light of nature observe.¹⁵

He adds of wives, “Their very opinion, affection, speech, action, and all that concerns the husband, must savor of subjection.”¹⁶ It is not surprising that Gouge is cited by some advocates of patriarchy in support of their view that women are inferior. Yet, a careful reading shows that he is no friend of men who would use their position in an oppressive manner:

¹⁴ *Politics*, Book 1, Part V. See also Book 1, Part XII and Book 7, Part III for similar statements.

¹⁵ William Gouge, *Of Domestic Duties*, Kindle Edition, loc. 4611.

¹⁶ Gouge, *Of Domestic Duties*, 4590.

Husbands are most of all bound to love: and bound to love their wives most of all. Thus this affection of love is a distinct duty in itself, peculiarly appertaining to a husband: and also a common condition which must be annexed to every other duty of a husband, to season and sweeten the same. His look, his speech, his carriage, and all his actions, wherein he has to do with his wife, must be seasoned with love.¹⁷

Thankfully, the church sometimes displays a blessed inconsistency. We need to be cautious about labeling others “good guys” or “bad guys.”

In some circles a search for biblical support for submission of wives to husbands led to the false teaching of the eternal subordination of the Son. A member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Rachel Green Miller,¹⁸ among others, took a lead in opposing that error. In recent years I have read postings by young ministers arguing that women are ontologically inferior to men. Where that kind of theology exists, it is not surprising if women are treated as less than men.

In contrast, the creation account in Genesis 1 emphasizes that God created mankind male and female, both in his image. Dominion, rather than being a masculine concept, is given to both men and women. One of our secondary standards, the Confession of Faith 4.2, reflects that Scriptural balance:

After God had made all other creatures, he created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after his own image; having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfill it: and yet under a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will, which was subject unto change. Beside this law written in their hearts, they received a command, not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; which while they kept, they were

¹⁷ Gouge, *Of Domestic Duties*, 6031.

¹⁸ Rachel Green Miller, *Beyond Authority and Submission: Women and Men in Marriage, Church, and Society* (P&R, 2019).

happy in their communion with God, and had dominion over the creatures.

A Way Forward?

In 1937 the distrust between the fundamentalists and the rest of the church was strong enough that the church divided. Nearly ninety years later, can the Orthodox Presbyterian Church remain united? Both sides may be tempted to dismiss the other, but can we do so in the face of the apostolic admonition, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (1 Cor. 12:21)? Take seriously our Lord’s high priestly prayer for the unity of his body, the church. Marsden’s observation on the 1937 division, included in a quote above, is worth reflection: “At a time when the differences, rather than the similarities are emphasized it becomes difficult for one to sympathize with the emphases of the other.”¹⁹

Christ’s call that we be one summons us to humility that truly listens to one another, to hear concerns rather than quickly dismissing them. It requires the grace to accept criticism, which, even if not fully accurate, may contain an element of truth.

Ordained Servant is intended to serve officers in the church. When we are tempted to be defensive of our own authority, perhaps we need to remember that underlying special office in the church is the general office of believer. R. B. Kuiper’s *The Glorious Body of Christ* contains an excellent chapter on “The Universal Office”:

There are in the church three offices. They represent Christ, the Head of the church as prophet, as priest and as king. Now each church member holds not merely one or even two of these offices, but all three. Every single church member is at once a prophet, a priest and a king. That surely spells glory.²⁰

After providing Scriptural support for his position and expressing concern that the universal office is not being exercised adequately, he concludes, “In every age every living member of the body of Christ is undeniably a partaker of Christ’s anointing and hence a prophet, a priest and a king.”²¹

The Form of Government of the OPC recognizes the importance of the general office of believer:

The power which Christ has committed to his church is not vested in the special officers alone, but in the whole body. All believers are endued with the Spirit and called of Christ to join in the worship, edification, and witness of the church which grows as the body of Christ fitly framed and knit together through that which every joint supplies, according to the working in due measure of each part.²²

Most important is a willingness to do the hard work of studying the Scriptures together as we seek to be faithful to our Lord. I am not aware of any ordained officer in the OPC who would deny that the Scriptures are our final authority. Yet an incident following a recent General Assembly left me wondering if we are willing to invest in the effort to really study the Word together.

A session, while supporting ordination to special office of qualified males, had taken a position (though had not implemented it) that allowed a woman to lead in studies and groups which included both women and men *outside of worship services*. A member of the church raised a complaint. The position of the session is one on which significant differences exist within the OPC, as is evidenced by the fact that the session denied the complaint and the presbytery involved denied the complainant’s appeal. The General Assembly, however, sustained the appeal. Several factors likely contributed to that decision, including a

21 Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, 131.

22 The Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 3.1, “The Nature and Exercise of Church Power,” in *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church).

19 Marsden, “Perspective on the Division of 1937,” 323.

20 R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 126.

short time for debate due to a crowded docket. But the significant argument in favor of sustaining the complaint, the argument that prevailed, was that the practice was a compromise with feminism. The sustaining of the complaint drew a strongly worded protest, concerned about narrowing the church beyond Scriptural requirements.

Shortly after the Assembly, one of the fathers in the church who had not been present at the Assembly asked me about that action. This minister had contributed substantially to the exegetical work in study reports to the General Assembly, including “Women in Office” (1988) and “Unordained Persons in Worship” (1991).²³ My friend asked whether the Assembly’s sustaining the appeal of the complaint meant that it had rejected the exegesis in those papers. My painful response was, “No, the Assembly did not reject your exegesis—it did not even consider it.” Had the Assembly rejected what I consider solid exegesis of Scripture, it would have been bad. But what was worse, it never bothered to deal seriously with exegesis as it made its decision. We were being guided by opposition to what was perceived as worldly feminism, rather than asking first, “What does Scripture say?”

The concerns about what I perceive as a tendency towards patriarchal fundamentalism are serious. Yet, given our common commitment to our Lord and to his Word, we must strive together to reflect the balance of Scripture in what we say and do. Are we willing to proclaim the Word fearlessly, despite the opposition of the world? (Reminders from our more fundamentalistic brothers and sisters may be helpful here.) Are we willing to submit all our thinking and speaking to that Word instead of simply reacting to the world? (The fundamentalists among us may need to listen carefully at this point.) May the Lord give us humility, grace, and wisdom! ©

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²³ https://opc.org/ga_reports.html. Those reports were produced as the OPC was dealing with churches that were moving in the direction of women’s ordination. In my view, while always subject to further review and study, they contain excellent exegetical work and present a balanced view.

Servant Exchange

About Machen and New Fundamentalism

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* November 2025¹

by Peter C. Van Doodewaard

I read with some interest John Mahaffy's recent article in *Ordained Servant* entitled "The Church's [Not So] New Fundamentalism,"² especially as I recalled the events of the Eighty-Eighth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC, 2022) and my own public writing on the topic of patriarchy. In this article Mahaffy articulates his concern with a growing "new fundamentalism" in the OPC, marked by an apparent toleration of abuse, fondness for the term *patriarch*, and ignorance of OPC history. I do not think I see things in quite the same way, and I am writing to explain why.

About Fundamentalism

In the OPC, to bestow the moniker *fundamentalist* is a reliable shortcut to identify someone out of line with our history.³ Mahaffy

raises Machen's concerns with the term and warns against the dispensational fundamentalism of Carl McIntire. In this Mahaffy and I wholeheartedly agree; I too would echo Machen when he stated,

When a man has come into sympathetic contact with [the] noble tradition of the Reformed faith . . . he will always strive to stand in the great central current of the church's life that has come down to us through Augustine and Calvin and the Standards of the Reformed faith.⁴

Fundamentalism fails this standard. Perhaps a personal note might be helpful here. I grew up in the Reformed tradition, and my family has stood in this tradition (by the grace of God) for centuries. In my childhood I walked out of church through a cloud of tobacco smoke and our pantry was occupied by a wide variety of adult beverages. I was raised on the Heidelberg Catechism, memorized the Compendium, and listened to fine (amillennial) sermons on the Belgic Confession. I have never been a fundamentalist.

But perhaps I need to consider that I might be a *new fundamentalist*, which appears to be a creature that holds to historic Reformed orthodoxy in the tradition of Augustine, Calvin, and the Reformed symbols *but also* voices concerns about progressive modernism and its subtle influence on the church under the guise of caring for abuse victims, its embarrassment over the biblical word *patriarch*, and its aim to unsettle the basic Christian conviction that the life and worship of the church and her families ought to reflect the creation order as interpreted by Scripture.

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1213.

2 John W. Mahaffy, "The Church's [Not So New] Fundamentalism" *Ordained Servant Online*, June-July 2025, https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1191.

3 This is somewhat ironic as the OPC was born out of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy and on the Fundamentalist side. As Mahaffy noted, it was Machen who both disliked the term "fundamentalist" but also stated, "I have little time to be attacking my brethren who stand with me in defense of the Word of God. I must continue to support an unpopular cause." Perhaps we need to use the term fundamentalist more carefully. It was not originally legalistic dispensationalism, but an honest but imperfect attempt to state that there is something

fundamental at the core of Christianity pertaining to the supernatural character of the person and work of Jesus Christ that must be maintained to maintain that Christianity. In this narrow sense, I am a fundamentalist, together with Machen and Warfield and the fathers of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. In the sense of "adding to Scripture," I stand against fundamentalism, unreservedly.

4 J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Eerdmans, 2009), as quoted in Mahaffy, "The Church's [Not So New] Fundamentalism."

About the Abuse Overture, and the Toleration of Abuse

Mahaffy and I have different evaluations of the abuse discussions of the Eighty-Eighth General Assembly. The precipitating overture was obviously controversial; it referred to “many forms of abuse that manifest themselves in the church,” and it described these as “sexual, domestic, ecclesiastical, verbal, emotional, psychological, etc.”⁵ Such language could be used to label any confrontational communication “abusive,” moving the definition of abuse from an objective violation of God’s law to the subjective experience of the complainant. This move will destroy due process and thus biblical justice.

The attached grounds did not help, stating that the “misuse of power of various kinds” was “commonly termed ‘abuse’.”⁶ This loose definition permits the neo-Marxist idea that abuse is fundamentally an imbalance of power.⁷ Marxism, of note, was regularly opposed by the patriarchs of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.⁸ Jesus Christ has all authority, and he uses it to punish evil and protect his people. The church ought not be ashamed of righteous power differentials (Presbyterian officers take vows to defend the categories of inferiors and superiors), *and* the church must exercise power wisely and graciously.

But back to the pertinent events at the Assembly, which Mahaffy describes as follows:

5 Minutes of the Eighty-Eighth General Assembly, 56.

6 Minutes of the Eighty-Eighth General Assembly, 56.

7 The broadening of the fundamental cause of proletariat suffering from the unequal distribution of capital (classical Marxism) to the unequal possession of power or privilege is characteristic of neo-Marxism.

8 The early fathers of the OPC dealt plainly with the evil nature of ungodly political ideologies; the *Presbyterian Guardian* contains numerous anti-Communist articles from authors, including Edward Rian, John P. Clelland, Richard Gaffin Sr., and Ned Stonehouse. Our fathers embraced the spirituality of the church and recognized communism as an ideology contrary to the Scriptures. The same fathers plainly said the same about Nazism. We presently are seeing a rising generation embrace, in troubling numbers, neo-Marxism and neo-fascism. Plain teaching is needed, with warnings, against both evils.

The advisory committee to which the overture was assigned recommended the adoption of the overture, but a minority strongly opposed doing so, partly on the grounds of the misuse of the term by the world. Although the Assembly did set up a committee, its mandate was amended to remove reference to abuse. The committee was to “collect, study, and develop resources to equip the officers of the church to protect her members from sexual predators and domestic violence.”⁹

The language of a “minority strongly opposed [to] doing so” obscures the fact that the Eighty-Eighth Assembly (the majority) did not much like the overture and instead adopted a substitute motion that did not include the word “abuse.”¹⁰ My own concern, at least, had nothing at all to do with “the misuse of the term by the world” but the use of the term in the overture, in and by the church. But—something yet needs to be examined. Mahaffy, based on these events, holds a suspicion: “A portion of the church seems reluctant to recognize that abuse can be multi-faceted and can occur within the church and her families.”¹¹ I cannot think of a single pastor or elder in the OPC who cannot recognize “that abuse can be multi-faceted and can occur within the church and her families.” Why entertain this conclusion about those who argued *in favor* of a motion which aimed to protect the members of the church from sexual predators and domestic violence?

The Use of the Word Patriarch(y)

While Mahaffy does not cite my *Reformation21* article entitled “In Defense of Patriarchy,”¹²

9 Mahaffy, “The Church’s [Not So New] Fundamentalism.”

10 And if Assembly anecdotes are permissible, after the voting was complete, one ruling elder told me that the overture sounded like something from his corporate HR department, and another ruling elder (who I met for the first time after the debate) sent me a bottle of fine Napa Valley wine, which I later much enjoyed with some friends. I remain very happy with all these results.

11 Mahaffy, “The Church’s [Not So New] Fundamentalism.”

12 Peter Van Doodewaard, “In Defense of Patriarchy,” *Reformation21*, February 5, 2024, <https://www.reformation21.org/blog/in-defense-of-patriarchy>.

he does appear to interact with it. He begins by stating he is “concerned to find some, even in Reformed circles, embracing the term patriarchy.” I clearly have done this, and I think I might be the only OPC minister to have written an article defending patriarchy, and Mahaffy’s piece is about patriarchal fundamentalism *in the OPC*.

In this article I described the Holy Spirit’s regular, repeated, positive, and exemplary use of the word *patriarch*: “First, the Bible honors fathers. God instituted fatherhood when he made Adam (first), then Eve, then marriage and then gave the command to be fruitful and multiply. Paul honored Israel’s patriarchs.”¹³

A key passage follows:

Peter preached about the patriarch David, and Stephen said the p-word, twice, just before going to heaven as a martyr. The writer to the Hebrews thought Abraham a fine patriarch.¹⁴

Compare the indented paragraph above with Mahaffy:

Peter uses the term to describe David, and Hebrews attaches it to Abraham. But when Stephen uses the term twice in his sermon in Acts 7, it refers to Joseph’s siblings selling him as a slave.¹⁵

Mahaffy continues: “I fear that much of the support for patriarchy grows out of a less than faithful following of Scripture.”¹⁶

This is a weighty charge. And if this was not intended to be such a charge, confusion might have been avoided by citing new fundamentalists

in our church who “embrace the term patriarchy,” followed by compelling analysis that demonstrates a “less than faithful following of Scripture.” The method utilized so far seems shaky.

Ignorance of OPC History

We move on to consider Mahaffy’s conversation with an anonymous “father in the church”¹⁷ (a patriarch?) concerning the Eighty-Eighth Assembly’s ignorance of OPC study reports entitled “Women in Church Office”¹⁸ and “Unordained Persons in the Regular Worship Services of the Church.”¹⁹ Mahaffy writes that the “Assembly did not reject [the exegesis in the above papers]—it did not even consider it.”²⁰ This begs a question: Did the actions of our more recent General Assemblies deviate from earlier patterns and convictions?

The report “Women in Church Office” was received by the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly (1988). Advisory Committee 9 expressed concern with the report, noting that it “did not give clear expression to the historic interpretation” of 1 Corinthians 11, 14, and 1 Timothy 2.²¹ The same report, however, did contain commendably straightforward language concerning the roles of men and women in church and home:

Women . . . need to repent, where necessary, of the unbiblical desire to usurp authority in the church or the home. Men also need to repent, where necessary, of a failure to encourage women in the use of their gifts, and of making their womanhood more of a yoke than a privilege.

The church under the leadership of its officers needs to be thankful for the faithful women

13 Van Doodewaard, “In Defense of Patriarchy.”

14 Van Doodewaard, “In Defense of Patriarchy.”

15 Mahaffy, “The Church’s [Not So New] Fundamentalism.” I do not understand the slavery reference, unless it is intended to show that the term patriarch can be used to describe people without power and so no longer means “ruling father.” I would note that Joseph was, in this-world terms, perhaps the most powerful ruling father of all the Old Testament patriarchs, ruling Egypt, providing bread for the world, and saving Israel. In this he is a fitting picture of the fatherly rule of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Is. 9:6).

16 Mahaffy, “The Church’s [Not So New] Fundamentalism.”

17 Mahaffy, “The Church’s [Not So New] Fundamentalism.”

18 *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly*, 310–73.

19 *Minutes of the Fifty-Seventh General Assembly*, 304; *Minutes of the Fifty-Eighth General Assembly*, 264–328.

20 Mahaffy, “The Church’s [Not So New] Fundamentalism.”

21 *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly*, Article 158. The *Minutes* do not contain a record of any explanation for the committee recommendation that contained this language of concern.

who serve the church in a rich variety of ways at present. We need to protect our women from being overwhelmed or seduced by the lie of secular feminism which promises liberation for disobedience to God's authority structure and demeans the high calling of Christian women as wives and mothers. We need to instruct them as to their dignity as women in Christ (Gal. 3:28) and treat them accordingly.²²

The Fifty-Fifth Assembly distributed this language to the whole church and then denied a related recommendation to consider opening the office of deacon to women in the church.²³

The Fifty-Eighth Assembly (1991) considered the "Report of the Committee on Unordained Persons in the Regular Worship Services of the Church."²⁴ This report presented three views, including that of the committee's majority, which admitted that "we are well aware that our advocating a measure of individual involvement by unordained persons in public worship is *an innovation*."²⁵ The proposed innovation would result in men and women leading in public worship. When the motion to send this report to the Committee on Revisions to the Directory for Worship was presented to the Assembly, "it was determined to postpone action on the motion indefinitely."²⁶ By postponing indefinitely, the Fifty-Eighth Assembly declined to support the suggested innovations or even the committee's original mandate to forward the report to a committee

of the Assembly tasked with revising the directory for worship.²⁷

It is of note that the revised Directory for Worship restricts the leading of worship to pastors (men), "men who have been licensed," and ruling elders (men), and notes that "exceptions may be made for other men," and states "no other should take such leadership in overseeing or conducting public worship."²⁸ From this I would conclude that later assemblies also considered the "solid exegesis" in the above report not very durable.²⁹

One last historical note is pertinent to the Ninetieth Assembly's (2024) sustaining a complaint against a session's practice of inviting women to teach men in Sunday School classes: The Fifty-Seventh Assembly (1990) sustained a similar complaint from a church member against a session for permitting women to teach men in home Bible studies. The Assembly then went the extra mile to add an explanation for this decision:

The teaching of the Scriptures in 1 Timothy 2:11–15 clearly prohibits women from a role which involves the authoritative teaching of men. The policy complained against allows a woman to assume such a role and therefore the complaint should be sustained.³⁰

The same Assembly commended "the Biblical principle of male headship."³¹ Finally, the Fifty-Ninth Assembly (1992) declared attempts to reconsider the same complaint out of order, affirming the action of the Fifty-Seventh Assembly to be the settled adjudication of the church.³²

Simply put, our Assemblies have a long history of dealing with questions of gender and worship and the related patterns of patriarchy evident in nature as interpreted by Scripture (and so rightly

22 *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly*, 352. The report at this point seems more overtly patriarchal than my defense of patriarchy.

23 *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly*, Article 164.

24 *Minutes of the Fifty-Eighth General Assembly*, 264–328. This committee was originally named the "Committee to Study the Involvement of Men and Women in Places of Leadership in Worship Services" (*Minutes of the Fifty-Sixth General Assembly*, Article 181) and was formed by the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly in response to a complaint against Bethel OPC in Wheaton, Illinois, for permitting women to lead in worship services; the Fifty-Fifth Assembly sustained the complaint (*Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly*, Articles 143 and 152).

25 *Minutes of the Fifty-Eighth General Assembly*, 279. Italics added.

26 *Minutes of the Fifty-Eighth General Assembly*, Article 120.

27 *Minutes of the Fifty-Seventh General Assembly*, 304.

28 *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 131–32.

29 Mahaffy, "The Church's [Not So New] Fundamentalism."

30 *Minutes of the Fifty-Seventh General Assembly*, Article 134.

31 *Minutes of the Fifty-Seventh General Assembly*, Article 124; *Minutes of the 57th General Assembly*, Article 134.

32 *Minutes of the Fifty-Ninth General Assembly*, Articles 13–14.

embedded in the life and worship of the church). These have regularly and reliably decided in favor of historic convictions and patterns that echo earlier generations, even going beyond bare judgments to explicitly affirm historic biblical interpretation and prevent the propagation of innovations.

This brief review seems to indicate that by Mahaffy's definition of "new fundamentalism" our General Assemblies have been overtly "new fundamentalist" on these topics for at least the last four decades; perhaps "new fundamentalism" is alike to historic Reformed theology and practice.

Conclusion

This brings me to a deeper concern. History bears witness that political pressures have regularly pulled Reformed denominations to the side of progressivism, and that reliably under the banner of *resisting fundamentalism*. Because of this, I would much prefer engagement with ideas and their consequences over labelling exercises. Debates over gender roles in Christ's church are critical to the life and future of the church, as these involve profound theological considerations, not the least of which are the perspicuity and authority of both Scripture and the "light of nature."³³

There is a profound irony here for the OPC: We've come a long way only to decry traditional Reformed interpretations of 1 Corinthians 11, 14 and 1 Timothy 2 as "new fundamentalism" in *Ordained Servant*, especially when we recall that a signal moment in our formation was the sermon Harry Emerson Fosdick preached entitled "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" After he preached, it was Machen who stood firm, embraced an admittedly ill-fitting mantle of "fundamentalist" and simply said, "Yes, we shall." And so here we are.

33 Westminster Confession of Faith 1.1. General and special revelation are authoritative (cf. Ps. 19:1–4, 1 Cor. 11:14). The folly of our culture lies both in the rejection of the Word (Calvin's "spectacles") and also the creation order viewed through the spectacles of the Word (cf. Rom. 1:26–27, note Paul's use of the phrase "natural use").

Like Machen, I would not choose to be known as a fundamentalist. By Mahaffy's definition, however, I think Machen and I might be *new fundamentalists*. And after reading more of our history, it is now clearer to me that the happy future of the church I so love and enjoy has always depended on "new fundamentalists" getting very important old things right.³⁴ I, for one, am in favor of celebrating this fine OPC tradition, together.

And in this, indeed, "may the Lord give us humility, grace, and wisdom."³⁵ ©

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34 Again, Mahaffy's article fails to prove that the "new fundamentalists" are fundamentalists at all. It is far more likely that such in the OPC simply represent the Reformed tradition on questions of gender and the life of the church, which in turn are rooted, not in fundamentalism, but historic Reformed interpretations of Genesis 1 and 2.

35 Mahaffy, "The Church's [Not So New] Fundamentalism."

Do We Have a Problem? Patriarchal Fundamen- talism and Abuse

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by John W. Mahaffy

I am grateful for Peter Van Doodewaard's continued interaction on important topics that impact the life of our church.² And I rejoice that he, as I expected, whole-heartedly echoes Machen's endorsement of the "noble tradition of the Reformed faith." Yet, even though the two of us have engaged in some email discussion, crucial differences in perspective remain. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church faces issues, I believe, which new fundamentalism finds itself inadequate to address properly. These are matters with which our church needs to continue to wrestle. She faces a danger of drifting into an unbiblical progressivism on one side and of being enticed into political activism on the other—both of which would take her eyes off her Lord and the work he has given her to do as the church. In what follows, I use identifying names as infrequently as possible, seeking to walk in the steps of one of the better traditions of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, that of having vigorous discussion of vital issues while focusing on the ideas rather than personalities.

Patriarchy: Is It Biblical?

Peter Van Doodewaard's "About Machen and New Fundamentalism" describes "the Holy Spirit's regular, repeated, positive and exemplary use of the word *patriarch*." The New Testament uses the word only four times. Is that enough to be "regular" and "repeated"? The term is used positively in Acts 2:29 and in Hebrews 7:4. But

Stephen's use (twice) in Acts 7:8–9 describes the patriarchs jealously selling their brother as a slave, hardly either positive or exemplary. Stephen's point is that the patriarchs, like the other forefathers mentioned in his message, rebelled against God, persecuting the righteous, just as his audience had betrayed and murdered the Righteous One. The New Testament does not summon us to emulate the patriarchs. Rather, it calls us to trust our covenantally faithful God who comes to us in Jesus Christ, and then to walk in his ways. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments teach husbands to love their wives and fathers to nurture their children in the fear of the Lord, but do not tell them that they have to become patriarchs to do so.

The article "In Defense of Patriarchy" states, "*Patriarchy* simply means *father-rule*."³ The Arndt and Gingrich lexicon, however, translates the Greek word as "father of a nation, patriarch." The focus in the New Testament usage is on ancestry, those with whom God made his covenant promises, rather than on rule. I have no problem using the word *patriarch* in the way that Scripture does. Recently I preached on Genesis 28. The gist of the message was not to point to the patriarch (with his head on a stone at the bottom of the ladder) as an example, but rather to focus on the One at the top of the ladder, making promises of salvation to his people (see John 1:51).

Peter Van Doodewaard's "In Defense of Patriarchy" pictures a home in which biblical fatherhood is "strong, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in mercy and forgiveness, and holy." The patriarchy I have encountered in my denomination is less benign. "About Machen and New Fundamentalism" suggests that I should have cited examples of new fundamentalists in our church who embrace patriarchy and show a less than faithful following of Scripture.

To the degree that I had individuals in mind as I wrote about patriarchy, I was thinking, not

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1214.

2 Peter C. Van Doodewaard, "About Machen and New Fundamentalism," *Ordained Servant Online* (November 2025).

3 Peter C. Van Doodewaard, "In Defense of Patriarchy," *Reformation21*, February 5, 2024, <https://www.reformation21.org/blog/in-defense-of-patriarchy>.

of my respondent, but of a couple of younger ministers in our church, both of whom identified as patriarchal, and their respective presbyteries. Both made demeaning comments about a female member of the church. In posts online, both described women as ontologically inferior to men. One posted on social media using violent language (which he later said was joking and unclear) towards women and engaged in cursing on one occasion. One is still a minister in good standing. I could go into more detail about the arrest of the other and his eventual removal from the ministry, but this is not the appropriate forum for that.

I expect that the author of “In Defense of Patriarchy” would condemn some of the above and describe it as “not-patriarchy.”⁴ Nevertheless, I still believe that my church has a problem with patriarchy. The issue is not only the positions taken by two young ministers but also the oversight (or lack thereof) by the presbyteries that ordained them.

Abuse: What My Net Doesn’t Catch Isn’t Fish

Given the examples above, as well as other situations which cannot be discussed now, I fail to share my respondent’s confidence: “I can’t think of a single pastor or elder in the OPC who cannot recognize ‘that abuse can be multi-faceted and can occur within the church and her families.’”⁵ His article expressed the fear that the overture to the Eighty-Eighth General Assembly “permits the neo-Marxist idea that abuse is fundamentally an imbalance of power.” Obviously, it would be difficult to quantify, but I suspect that in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church the set of neo-Marxists defining abuse as an imbalance of power is most likely considerably smaller than the set of men, and some women, who engage in oppressive (to use the biblical term) or abusive conduct towards others in the family or church.

⁴ Van Doodewaard, “In Defense of Patriarchy.”

⁵ “About Machen and New Fundamentalism.”

The expressed concern about “imbalance of power” is worth further discussion. Ground 1 of Overture 2 to the Assembly spoke of “misuse of power of various kinds.”⁶ The Scriptures do not oppose an imbalance of power, but our God roundly condemns the misuse (or abuse) of power. He is the God who defends the widows and orphans. Writings about abuse in our circles tend to take pains to define abuse in biblical language, not simply to adopt what may be seen as politically correct. To identify concern about the misuse of power with a neo-Marxist idea that abuse is an imbalance of power, strikes me as a scare tactic that failed to take the overture on its own terms.

Those who modified the mandate of the committee were opposing, not a committee report on abuse that they thought was contaminated by neo-Marxism, but a request to set up a committee to study abuse and equip officers of the church. The *potential* of the concept of abuse being corrupted was enough to eliminate the term from the mandate. The minority of Advisory Committee 4 warned against adopting the overture, in part because, “Not all actions referred to as abuse are actually sin” (Art. 146). This modification was a preemptive action which, I believe, seriously weakened the church’s response to a serious problem.

Old fundamentalism guarded the law by such things as requiring abstinence in order to avoid drunkenness. For the non-fundamentalists, giving up a glass of wine at dinner for the sake of peace with a weaker brother may have been a small price to pay. When neo-fundamentalism makes it more difficult to recognize and report abuse, the price is not simply a glass of wine, but possibly the safety and well-being of sisters and brothers. We need to think seriously about that cost.

The request to the Assembly was to form a committee to “collect, study, and develop resources on topics related to the many forms of abuse that manifest themselves in the church (sexual, domestic, ecclesiastical, verbal, emotional,

⁶ *Minutes of the Eighty-Eighth General Assembly*, 56.

psychological, etc.).” The mandate adopted instead by the Assembly was to “collect, study, and develop resources to equip the officers of the church to protect her members from sexual predators and domestic violence.”⁷ While we clearly want to protect against sexual predators and domestic violence, notice what the changed mandate leaves out. No longer are we looking to help officers recognize and protect against ecclesiastical, verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse. Serious oppression can take place, both in families and in the church, in ways that fall short of domestic violence. There are large areas of sinful harm that fall outside of sexual predation and domestic violence. I am thinking of a spouse verbally demeaning and threatening his or her partner. I am thinking of a husband failing to provide essential basics for his wife and children while he spends his money on his own sinful habits. I am thinking of a father using dehumanizing language towards his children. The list could go on. Also eliminated by the revised mandate was the phrase, “in the church.” That phrase would have alerted us to the fact that oppressive conduct can be found in the church as well as in families—but the phrase was removed. If we remove substantial forms of abuse from what we are looking for, we are far less likely to recognize them or to be receptive, as officers serving the flock, to receive reports of harm and to protect effectively those entrusted to our care. We do well to remember that, as Michael Kruger points out, “Not everything is abuse.”⁸ We need to evaluate what we hear. But we also need to be careful not to minimize or avoid recognizing the sins of oppression. We do have a problem in dealing with abuse, in my observation.

⁷ *Minutes of the Eighty-Eighth General Assembly*, Article 152.

⁸ Michael J. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church* (Zondervan Reflective, 2022), 35–39. For an excellent review of the book see *New Horizons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (May 2023): 20, (https://opc.org/new_horizons/NH2023/NH2023May.pdf).

Fundamentalism: Narrower Than Scripture

Old fundamentalism was narrower than Scripture in the use of beverage alcohol, among other areas. In opposing the very real sin of drunkenness, it advocated total abstinence. Likewise, the newer fundamentalism can be narrower than Scripture in its treatment of women. The Ninetieth General Assembly decided a case against allowing a woman to lead in studies and groups which included both women and men *outside of worship services*. The case did not involve ordination of women to special office nor their leading in worship. The same Assembly spent considerable time debating whether the office of Statistician, which for many years had been filled by a man who did not hold ordained office, could be held by a female member of the OPC, before deciding that ordinarily it ought to be held by an ordained officer. At times we seem to be so determined to be diametrically opposed to humanistic feminism that we make “womanhood more of a yoke than a privilege.”⁹

“About Machen and New Fundamentalism” notes that Advisory Committee 9 of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly expressed concern with the report on “Women in Church Office.” The advisory committee stated, “The report in its interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36, and 1 Timothy 2:8–15 does not give clear expression to the historic interpretation, that Paul is saying that women, as women, should be ‘silent’ in worship in the assembly of God’s people.” Perhaps one reason that the Assembly rejected the language of the advisory committee is that the study committee report gave careful, exegetical attention to the “silence” of women in church services.¹⁰ The need for us to be cautious about assuming that Paul’s comment about silence is support for whatever happens to be our own

⁹ “Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office,” https://www.opc.org/GA/women_in_office.html.

¹⁰ *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth (1988) General Assembly*, Articles 158 and 160.

notion of what that means is illustrated by an incident a pastor friend of mine recalled. He was in a group in which several pastors affirmed that the women were silent in the churches they served. My friend quietly suggested (and I am paraphrasing): “In the church I serve, we like it when the women join in confessing the Apostles’ Creed. [pause] We encourage them to participate in the responsive reading. [pause] And we like it when they sing the hymns!”

Perhaps a source of our problem in this area rises out of starting our discussions of men and women in marriage and in the church with the issue of authority, rather than beginning, as Scripture does, with them both being created as image of God. “In Defense of Patriarchy” emphasizes father *rule*. We need to beware, not only of a Marxist mentality, but also of a lingering influence of Aristotle’s view that women are inferior to men. God has ordained real authority in the state, in the church, and in the home. Scripture teaches that, and the church must maintain it. But it is easy to forget that godly authority is exercised in service, as our Lord reminds us in Mark 10:45. He says that the seeking of authority is pagan, something that the Gentiles seek.

Direction: Are We Keeping the Word of God Central?

The concluding section of “About Machen and New Fundamentalism” expresses a deep concern: “History bears witness that political pressures have regularly pulled Reformed denominations to the side of progressivism, and that reliably under the banner of *resisting fundamentalism*” (emphasis original). I share that concern. But I am also concerned that the church faces pressures to pull it into a (so-called) conservative political activism on the right. Error in either direction threatens to take our eyes off the Savior and his kingdom. There can be a social gospel of the right as well as of the left. We must resist both.

I continue to hope that all of us in the church set our course, not first of all by asking what the world is doing and then reacting, but by making

sure that our direction is grounded in and guided by the Word. All Scripture is profitable, and it speaks to all of life. I am confident that my respondent shares that conviction.

“About Machen and New Fundamentalism” refers to Fosdick’s 1922 sermon “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” and suggests that Machen embraced an admittedly ill-fitting mantle of “fundamentalist” and simply said, “Yes, we shall.” (I take this as the author’s summary of Machen’s position, not claiming an actual quote of Machen.) Machen actually responded, I believe, not by promoting some kind of fundamentalism, though he was certainly willing to work with fundamentalists in opposing liberalism, but by publishing in 1923 his *Christianity and Liberalism*. It is not fundamentalism, old or new, that best counters theological liberalism, Marxism, political activism of the left or right, or abusive conduct, but rather the full-orbed, confessional Reformed faith, continuing to subject itself to Scripture. Both Van Doodewaard and I are thankful to have been reared in that faith, and our church needs to continue in that path. ©

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Servant Work

Unbaptized Covenant Children?

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by Glenn D. Jerrell

As sessions shepherd their flocks, they are faced with issues which require wisdom in a myriad of situations. Congregations ought to pray for sessions as they navigate these shepherding challenges. This article addresses a single issue which was dealt with at our recent General Assembly.

Specific Backstory of This Article

At the Ninetieth General Assembly (GA) the issue of whether it is within a session's powers to make a rule excluding Baptist parents with unbaptized children from membership in a congregation was considered. The same session would admit into membership a Baptist couple with no children. The reason the session denies membership is not the lack of belief in infant baptism but the refusal to submit their children for baptism. On a narrow 63–61 vote, the Assembly agreed, apparently not necessarily with the session's reason for denying Baptists membership, but with it being within the powers of a session to make this rule. This observer respectfully submits that GA decided the issue incorrectly, in a way that will damage our church practice and theology. One possible contributor to the decision may have been limited consideration time.

The total time for consideration of this issue

was only seventy-five minutes, including the GA's fifteen minutes of floor debate. It is, in this visitor's observation, the pressure of time that short-circuited the hearing of one another and curtailed a debate which impacts both our practice and theology. In light of the closeness of the vote and the limitations in debate, this article seeks to assist the church by continuing the discussion, elaborating briefly on the concerns of this observer. Fifteen minutes did not give the 124 voting commissioners much time to speak; a number were seeking the floor when debate ended, even though a motion to extend the time of debate was defeated.

Forgotten Unbaptized Covenant Children

Children of believers are children of the covenant, even if they remain unbaptized. Our Sunday bulletins occasionally request prayer for mothers pregnant with covenant children or announce the birth of a covenant child. These announcements are part and parcel of the communion of saints and are occasions of celebration of covenant life among God's covenant people.

My wife and I have lost two grandchildren at birth, before they could be presented for baptism by their Presbyterian parents. We rejoice in the comfort of God's covenantal faithfulness to the babies, their parents, siblings, and ourselves. We believe that Daniel Mark and Haley Renee Jerrell, as covenant babies, are under the eternal shepherding care of the Savior. They are holy in the Lord (cf. 1 Cor. 7:14).

The OPC's first baptismal vow for the parents on the occasion of an infant baptism has two parts: sin and covenant of grace. The second part of the vow includes the teaching that children of believing parents are covenant children even before their baptism. This truth is important. Listen to yourself as you read and answer this vow:

Do you acknowledge that although our children are conceived and born in sin and therefore are subject to condemnation, they are holy in Christ by virtue of the covenant of grace, and as children of the covenant are to be baptized?

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1165.

The doctrine of the covenant is biblical—it is true, whether or not our Baptist brothers and sisters yet realize it. By keeping a Baptist couple out of the church, we subtly focus on “the promise is for you . . .” rather than furthering the biblical point, “. . . the promise is for you and yours.” Is keeping a Baptist couple with unbaptized kids out of the church not a failure to acknowledge not only credible professions of faith by the parents but also keeping covenant children further from the church? Is it not a better fix in keeping with our theology to be predisposed towards receiving the couple with a credible profession of faith (in spite of their covenant children being unbaptized) because we confess the first baptismal vow’s theology, and embrace these children as what they indeed are—unbaptized covenant children? By keeping covenant children at arm’s length and distant from both pastoral care and the church’s ministry of Word and prayer, are we not in some measure robbing these youth of their status as children of the covenant? While the parents fail to see them as we do, are we being consistent with covenant theology? Should not we acknowledge them as holy in Christ and receive their parents?

The Bible says children of believing parents are holy in the Lord (1 Cor. 7:14). The holiness spoken of here is not some generalized view of holiness, not some nebulous idea of suspension between heaven and hell, not even common grace. No, it is a reference to the children of believing parents being covenant children. Notice there is no reference to baptism in this passage, although it does provide grounds for infant baptism. What a glorious benefit of God to believing parents! Your children are joined in covenant holiness with them—the promise is for you and yours—and we want our Baptist brothers and sisters to recognize that!

A Great Sin

Yes, it is a great sin to condemn or neglect baptism, as our Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 28.5 points out faithfully. At the same time, the main thought of WCF 28.5 is that “grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed

unto it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it; or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.”

While the main thought of this section fends off baptismal regeneration, it wisely reminds us that the sign and seal of the covenant is not to be ignored. It is not necessary to conclude that Baptist parents today are condemning or neglecting the godly training of their children. While they interpret certain Scriptures differently, and we believe erroneously, yet in a wonderful way, many Baptists today are inconsistent with their views as they rear their children, discipling them with the means of grace. Many Baptists today, particularly Calvinistic Baptists, breathe a very different attitude than the Anabaptists of the time of the Reformation. Some Baptist parents are better at raising children covenantally than some Presbyterian parents with baptized children. They teach their offspring the Word and pray with them. They bring the children to church week by week. They teach them to sing “Jesus Loves Me.” Their sin in failing to understand properly one part of the means of grace neither eliminates the means of grace nor the covenant of grace. A session should always remember and keep their practice in line with the fact that yet unbaptized covenant children are covenant children whether the believing parents recognize that or not. While only believing parents may present their children for baptism, a session should not automatically, by a fixed rule, move the children further from the communion of saints by not allowing the believing parents to be members. The church is the context for sanctification of faith and life!

OPC Changes in Membership Since 1966

Our ecumenical understanding and commitments have brought some refinements in our view of membership in a church world quite different from the days of the Reformation. All interchurch relationships are not equal when it comes to faith and life. The rise of NAPARC specifically called for recognizing churches of like faith and practice. In view of this, the 1983 revisions to the Book of Discipline included a new and additional

category of membership transfer. OPC members transferring from one OPC to another without qualification (cf. Book of Discipline (BD) II.B.2.a) is different from transfers from churches of like faith and practice to the OPC (cf. BD II.B.2.a with b). When people come to us seeking membership from churches other than OPC and those of like faith and practice, they come to us under the third category of reaffirmation of faith (cf. BD II.B.2.c). Under reaffirmation we receive church members from different denominations, i.e. Assemblies of God, Southern Baptist, etc. These changes spell out membership issues not in view in the 1966 GA report on receiving Baptists. The 1983 revisions on receiving members more clearly articulated the terms on which sessions receive and dismiss members.

In 1983 a definition for a credible profession of faith was added to the BD II.B.2.b.c and d as follows:

The session . . . shall . . . assure itself so far as possible that he [the candidate for membership] possesses the knowledge requisite for active faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, relies for salvation on the work of Christ alone, is trusting Christ for salvation, and is determined by the grace of God to lead a Christian life.

The DPW 4.A.3 includes,

In order for the session to assure itself so far as possible that the candidate makes a credible profession, it shall examine him to ascertain that he possesses the doctrinal knowledge requisite for saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, relies on the merits of Christ alone, and is determined by the grace of God to lead a Christian life.”

Because it is a constitutional provision, sessions are not free to modify the definition.

Our membership vows are to be understood in terms of a credible profession of faith, not vice versa. As the late missionary and pastor Francis Mahaffy once said, “We tend to require too much prior to a public profession of faith, and too little afterwards.”

A Fracture in Our Practice of Unity

The transfer of members between OP churches is most certainly a highly and faithfully recognized practice in our constitution and among us. We have within the OPC a strong sense of one Lord, one faith, one baptism. We see ourselves as covenantally bound together. Our unity in the faith is highly cherished, and it creates an equilibrium of confidence and trust from session to session, congregation to congregation. A tough question that presents a danger, even a fracture, to our unity revolves around the issue of receiving church members with unbaptized covenant children. The question is as follows: When a family with yet unbaptized children who are members of one OP congregation seek transfer to another OP, and that congregation’s session has a rule that families with unbaptized children may not be received, what happens to that family? Will they be received or will they be compelled to seek a non-OP church? Will the receiving session honor that letter of transfer? Can they uphold the decision of the other session by receiving this family? The receiving session is now faced with the question of challenging the decision and wisdom of another session. Complicating matters and to be consistent, what if the receiving session thinks it must follow its own adopted rule and reject this transfer of members? And then we ask, is the rejection 1) of an OP session’s letter of transfer, 2) of a couple with a credible profession of faith, 3) who have unbaptized covenant children, too high a price to pay to preserve this local session’s adopted and fixed rule? Has an addition been made to our Reformed distinctives, creating a new barrier within the OPC between one congregation and its sister congregations?

The Dividing Line

The fourth way of receiving members into the church is by confession of faith (cf. BD II.B.2.d). This category is used for people who have come to faith and do not come to us from another church because they are coming to the church from the world. A credible profession of faith is the standard

that spells out the terms of recognizing the new Christian's eligibility for baptism and placement of their names upon the roll of the church as communicant members.

It is crucial to maintain the distinction between the church and the world. The keys of the kingdom signify the power of inclusion in and exclusion from the church. Our membership vows do not exist to promulgate denominational distinctives but to guard the grand barrier, the dividing line between the church and the world.

The session is under confessional obligation to see that each family that comes to them are included among the people of God in the church visible, in a local congregation, always remembering: "... the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" (WCF 25.2). Turning a couple away from the church, leaving a couple outside the church, is dramatically damaging. Is it not essentially abandoning them to the world and leaving them to the reign of sin and Satan? Is not keeping the parents out also keeping the unbaptized children further from covenant blessing? Do not forget "the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation."

Reasons for Denying Baptists Membership

If a Baptist couple applying for membership in an OPC congregation is unteachable, unwilling to continue to search the Scriptures on the topic of the sacraments, or if they are causing dissension in the church when the sacrament is administered, the session is on good grounds in not receiving such a couple into membership. But the issue is not only their incorrect view of baptism—it is their attitude towards the body of Christ and its unity and peace. But such decisions are best made on a case by case basis, not because of a seemingly inflexible rule determined in advance. The General Assembly in the past has properly respected the right of sessions to exercise godly wisdom in such matters.

Wrapping It Up

The heart of the issue is our treatment of covenant children before their baptism. Covenant children, including unbaptized covenant children, should not be hindered in coming unto the Lord in his church. They should be loved, nurtured, and fully embraced. They should be taught to sing, pray, and hear the Word read and preached in churches that do not consider them as heathen. It should thrill us when Baptist parents want to raise their unbaptized children in a covenantally biblical church.

A wider ranging observation comes from the late Rev. Roger Gibbons, who came to the Reformed faith from a Baptist background. I recall conversations in which he would remind presbyters of how difficult it is for Baptists who become persuaded of the covenant—immersion and adult-only baptism have been so deeply ingrained in them that emotional attachments can linger. It is a stark reminder that we who believe in the reformed teaching of the covenant may have come by those views over years of study.

Discussions on the covenant are a significant part of our own OPC history, given the writings of Geerhardus Vos, Edward Young, John Murray, Norman Shepherd, Meredith G. Kline, and Richard Gaffin, Jr. We continue to grow. It is humbling to be reminded of a comment attributed to Charles Hodge to the effect that the doctrine of the covenants is the unfinished business of the Reformation. We should not expect a Baptist couple with unbaptized children to resolve fully these continuing discussions before being received into an OP congregation, nor should they be unduly pressured after they are received while they continue to grow. What we should do is to include them in our journey of studying the Word of God. Some have said "the covenant is more caught than taught." Part of it is living in a church that appreciates this covenantal journey by way of the cross. ©

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How Wide Are the Gates?

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by David C. Noe

A question that many sessions in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) face is whether they should admit to membership those who refuse to offer their children for covenant baptism. The word “refuse” here is chosen deliberately, because our Confessions—in keeping with Scripture—recognize that this is an obligation of Christian parents, not an option. Nevertheless, sessions answer this question in different ways, largely because our Thirty-third General Assembly (1966) declared that “the admission to membership of those who cannot in good conscience present their children for baptism is a matter for judgment by sessions.” Unlike some of our sister churches that require lay subscription to our confessions, the OPC does not. Therefore, different standards have been applied in different circumstances and, quite naturally, a number of different arguments are adduced to defend sessions’ judgments.

In this article I would like to examine one slogan that I have heard in multiple contexts and argue that it conceals a very unhelpful misunderstanding about the nature of the church. This is the slogan that “the gates of the church should be as wide as the gates of heaven.” I believe it is fair, and most accurate, to call this a slogan because it does not reference Scripture or some other extra-biblical authority like the confessions or church fathers. Still, like all slogans, it arguably contains the elements of a logical proof that have not been carefully elucidated (this would reduce the slogan’s pithiness). Interpreting it charitably, however, the argument would seem to proceed like this:

1. We do not believe that baptism is a prerequisite for salvation any more than circumcision was, since Abraham was accounted righteous before receiving the covenant sign.
2. We are to judge as saved whoever, applying for membership in an OPC, makes a credible profession of faith, and charitably to believe that this person therefore will receive entrance into heaven.
3. Because we are compelled to judge that this person will receive entrance into heaven, it is therefore wrong to deny this person entrance into fellowship within the OPC—even if they refuse to present their covenant child for reception of the sign, disobeying the Scriptures and our doctrinal standards.

It is difficult for me to imagine a different or more charitable interpretation of this slogan than what has just been given, but I would be glad to receive such from a reader. The major and minor premises in this argument are true and therefore unobjectionable, even though we could draw out somewhat the implications they contain. For example, in the first premise, although we hold that baptism is not a prerequisite for salvation, by this we mean water baptism. A baptism of the Holy Spirit, the application of Christ’s merits by the Spirit’s sanctifying work—we do hold this to be necessary for salvation. It is the inward reality which the outward sign signifies and seals. And as for the second premise, we would want to clarify a little more carefully what a “credible profession” means. In particular, we would want to be careful not to exclude from the definition of “credible” the presence of a sincere desire to obey God’s Word. This is the content of our fifth membership vow.

But the question now arises: Is the argument that the slogan apparently contains sound? It is so only if three conditions are met: (1) the conclusion follows from the premises; (2) the premises are true; (3) the conclusion is true. If the first condition is met, then it is a valid argument, whether or not the premises are true. An example of this kind of argument is as follows:

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1166.

All purple donkeys read *The Wall Street Journal*.
John is a purple donkey.

Therefore, John reads *The Wall Street Journal*.

This is a valid argument because the conclusion really follows from the premises, even though neither the premises nor the conclusion is true.

Another kind of argument is one that can have both true premises and a true conclusion but be invalid if the conclusion does not follow logically from those premises. Here is another argument to illustrate this type:

Some parrots can speak like human beings.
Penguins do not live at the North Pole.
Therefore, Flamingos are pink.

Both of the premises are true, and the conclusion is as well, but there is no necessary, logical relationship between the three propositions, and therefore the argument is not sound because it is invalid. The fact that both the premises and the conclusion deal with exotic birds may lead us to be deceived about the relationship between them, but that is merely a distraction to sound thinking. As I will seek to demonstrate, the argument supposedly contained in the slogan “the gates of the church should be as wide as the gates of heaven” fails because the conclusion is false and does not follow from the premises. Therefore, the argument is both invalid and unsound.

First then, why is the argument invalid? The reason is very simple, as it has to do with a subtle and overlooked equivocation of terms, specifically when it comes to the concept of “church.” When someone applies for membership in the OPC, they are asking to be received into one instance of the visible church. Our confessions are very clear that there is a real distinction between the visible and invisible churches (WCF 25, WLC 61ff). Not everyone within the visible church is *ipso facto* a member of the invisible church. In fact, as the hymn writer says, echoing many passages of Scripture (e.g., 1 Cor. 10.5), there are “false sons in her pale.” When we as officers admit someone to membership in the visible church, we charitably take on faith, because love believes all things (1

Cor. 13), that he is also a member of the invisible church. Such a person continues in the visible church without undue scrutiny and suspicion of disbelief. This person may through unrepentant sin disprove the validity of his membership in any given visible church and then be removed from that visible church by excommunication. But he is not obligated to demonstrate that he truly belongs.

On the other hand, because God has not given us infallible knowledge as to who is elect (a prerequisite for membership in the invisible church), we emphatically are making no definitive judgment on that question. If we thought we knew that, we could never exercise the discipline of excommunication without consigning that person infallibly to eternal punishment. But this is precisely the error of Rome—to conflate the visible and invisible churches, overstepping the authority of the Holy Spirit as revealed in his Word.

It seems obvious to me that the term “the gates of heaven” is meant to refer to the invisible church. Certainly all and only those who belong to the invisible church will reside within those gates and not in the outer darkness. Yet while we believe that everyone who is a member of the invisible church is obligated to become a member of some instance of the visible church, we nowhere claim that such a person must be a member of the OPC, much less belong to any given congregation, in order to be a member of the invisible church. In charity we understand that individuals from many other confessions can belong to her, and some persons no doubt do, whether Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, etc. But this is very plainly a separate question from who should be admitted into an OPC, because in that question we are dealing only with membership in the visible, not the invisible, church.

In other words, the first premise is dealing with the question of who may belong to the invisible church. We charitably accept, unless there is unrepentant sin, that someone who claims faith in Christ belongs to that invisible church. But the second premise is dealing with who may belong to a specific instance of the visible church, namely, a given OPC congregation. As these two

churches are not the same, the equivocation of terms invalidates the conclusion.

So, what is our obligation as officers in the OPC? I believe it is not in any sense to guard heaven's gates (the error of Roman ecclesiology, and a denial of John 10:16), but only the gates of the particular congregation where we serve. Therefore, when we say that anyone with a credible profession of faith may join our congregation, we are not making an infallible judgment about his membership in the invisible church. Instead, we are making a provisional judgment about his suitability for membership in our instance of the visible church and taking the rest on charity. Even when someone is removed from membership in the visible church, we understand that this judgment is provisional and fallible (WCF 31.3), that the Lord knows who are his, and that he will square all accounts at the last day. To act as though we have a good sense of the width of heaven's gates is therefore dangerous presumption and neglecting our real duty to guard those particular gates to which we have been assigned. To repeat, the error in the slogan about the gates of heaven is the use of the concept of church in different senses in the premises than in the conclusion. The first and second premises are referring to the invisible church. The conclusion references the visible church, and thus we have a clear case of equivocation: the use of the same concept (church) with different meanings because of important qualifications.

Perhaps a look at some biblical examples will bring greater clarity. Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, even before he received the covenant sign. Before Abraham became a member of the visible church of the old covenant he was saved, and so presumably were Rahab, Ruth, Naaman, and many others. In each instance these saints of old, to the extent that they were able, sought membership in the visible church, which even then included many false sons (1 Cor. 10), and submitted to her ordinances. But none of these individuals, at the time, should normally have been admitted into the visible church—which has a different, temporal, fallible

jurisdiction and whose gates are guarded differently—without submitting to the imposition of the covenant sign and the general ordinances, and presenting their children for the same. Abraham even circumcised Ishmael after learning he was not the child of promise, so that Ishmael could have the benefits of membership in the visible church (Gen. 17:23). This was quite apart from what Abraham may have known, or feared, about Ishmael's election or reprobation. This is because a credible profession on Abraham's part included a desire to obey, and circumcision was an ordinance, a command, like baptism. It was not a preference or option for parents of covenant children.

There is another implication of the equivocation between visible and invisible churches contained in this slogan. It is perhaps easier for us as church officers to believe that we are guarding the gates of heaven, as presumptions usually are easier than reality. But if those who do not present their children for baptism are admitted in part by appealing to this fallacious slogan, the real-world consequences fall first on the children of believing parents who, like Moses' children before Zipporah's intervention (Exodus 4), are denied the very real blessing of the covenant sign and all its attendant privileges. And there is a general devaluing of membership in the visible church among other members, as well as of their own baptism.

Guarding the gates of the visible church, the actual responsibility of officers in the OPC, is by contrast usually difficult and sometimes unpleasant. It requires us not merely to believe that a profession is credible, i.e., well-phrased and not doctrinally aberrant. It also requires us to address the question of whether there is some obvious, unrepentant sin that would tend to weaken or even nullify a credible profession (remember we are not speaking here about membership in the invisible church, i.e., whether a person is saved). Despising the ordinance of baptism, whether one's own or that of one's child, clearly falls into this category as our Standards plainly teach (WCF 28.5, WLC 151.1–2). This is because Christ's command is not a matter of preference or conscience. Perhaps we

should employ a substitute slogan: “enter by the narrow gate.” ☺

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Servant History

John Cameron at 400

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by Michael J. Lynch

The year of our Lord 2025 marks the 400th anniversary of the death of the oft-maligned but rarely read Scottish theologian John Cameron. Among modern Reformed theologians, Cameron—the so-called father of Amyraldianism or Saumur theology—has often played an ignominious role in early modern Reformed orthodoxy. Indeed, Herman Bavinck is representative in portraying Cameron’s theology as paving the way towards “deism and rationalism.”² Cameron’s most well-known English biographer characterized Cameron as having “very much of a turn to innovations in doctrine, and seemed to have an inclination to depart from the received truths in the Protestant Churches, and to differ from the sound divines in his time.”³ Regardless of whether one sees Cameron as a blight or a light upon the development of Reformed orthodoxy, the French historian François Laplanche is undoubtedly right to claim that “every history of French Protestant theology in the seventeenth century should begin with a systematic study of his work.”⁴

Born in Glasgow in 1579/1580, Cameron attended the University of Glasgow around the age of fifteen. His exceptional abilities, particularly with Greek, earned him a teaching position at the University in Greek.⁵ Soon, however, he made his way to France (Bordeaux), where he was given a position at the Collège de Bergerac to teach Latin and Greek, both of which he spoke extemporaneously. His scholastic ability soon caught the eye of the Duke of Bouillon, and he was appointed Professor of Philosophy at the Collège de Sedan. A couple years later, in 1604, the Scotsman made his way back to Bordeaux, where the Reformed church offered to finance Cameron’s further theological education in exchange for his promise to minister there upon completion. Cameron accepted this arrangement and went to study in Paris, Geneva, and Heidelberg. In 1608, at the end of his four years of education, he returned to Bordeaux to fulfill his commitment, pastoring there for the next decade. Amusingly, he was known to be an unusually long-winded preacher, often preaching two-hour sermons!

Cameron’s first significant public theological controversy arose during this Bordeaux period, concerning his denial of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ (IAOC).⁶ In 1612, amid the debate raging among European Reformed Protestants over the IAOC, the French Reformed held a national synod in order to provide a gloss favoring the IAOC on the eighteenth article of the French Confession (1559), which all ministers

and Jacques Le Brun (Éditions de l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2002), 131–42, 131. Cited by Albert Gootjes, “John Cameron (ca. 1579–1625) and the French Universalist Tradition,” in *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches: From Henri IV to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes* (Reformation Heritage, 2014), 169–96, 169.

5 The following biographical sketch follows the aforementioned Wodrow biography.

6 Wodrow (*Collection*, 2:107) tantalizingly suggests that Cameron picked this position up while in Heidelberg. This would hardly be surprising given that the denial of IAOC was the position of many renowned Heidelbergians, including Zachary Ursinus, Caspar Olevianus, and David Pareus. Cf. Gert van den Brink, “Obedience, Punishment, and Merit: The Heidelberg Catechism on the Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 18.4 (2024): 279–301.

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1205.

2 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Baker, 2003–2008), 1:186–87, 4:71.

3 Robert Wodrow, *Collection Upon the Lives of the Reformers and Most Eminent Ministers of the Church of Scotland*, 3 vols. (Glasgow, 1834–48), 2:81.

4 François Laplanche, “Antiquité et vérité dans la controverse de Cameron,” in *Conflits politiques, controverses religieuses: Essais d’histoire européenne aux 16^e-18^e siècles*, eds. Ouzi Elyada

and ministerial candidates (*proposans*) would be required to sign. Cameron, along with many other French ministers, refused to sign the gloss. A subsequent French Synod in 1614 essentially doubled down on this requirement. Cameron continued to refuse to sign, but his former classmate at Glasgow and fellow French minister Andre Rivet (who affirmed the IAOC) convinced the Synod not to censure Cameron, with the latter promising not to teach or write on the subject.

Soon, however, Cameron would have to face a much more powerful faction, the Roman Catholic French political machine, which eventually forced him out of Bordeaux. He found his way to Saumur, where the prestigious Protestant Academy sought him to replace Franciscus Gomarus. At the Academy of Saumur, Cameron served as a professor of theology until 1621. In this relatively brief period, he became the theological father of the Saumurians, working alongside Louis Cappel and teaching Moïse Amyraut and Josué de la Place—all of whom would form, as Albert Gootjes notes, “a ‘triumvirate’ which educated French pastors for more than thirty years and shaped them in the Cameronian theological tradition.”⁷ In 1620, nearing the end of his tenure at the Academy, Cameron unintentionally ignited another intra-Reformed controversy, regarding the nature of spiritual regeneration upon the soul. Daniel Tilenus, once Reformed but by then Arminian, requested a conference with Cameron to discuss “the grace of God and the powers of free choice in the business of our (effectual) calling.”⁸ In the ensuing debate, Cameron predictably defended the standard Calvinistic approach to why some are graciously saved and others are not, while Tilenus defended the Arminian position. The controversy arose not from Cameron’s basic position but from his willingness to concede certain points to Tilenus, particularly regarding the

nature of regeneration itself. Cameron argued that because the human will always and necessarily follow the last judgment of the practical intellect (in accordance with the prevailing faculty psychology), spiritual regeneration works not directly upon the will but only upon the intellect. Seeing that “the will depends upon the intellect, with the renovation of the intellect, it [i.e., the renovation of the intellect] produces the renovation of the will.”⁹ Hence, God’s action of regeneration “does not attach itself only to the human intellect, but reaches (*pertingit*) to the will itself,” yet mediately, as the intellect serves as the instrument by which that action of regenerating the will takes place.¹⁰

Cameron’s apparent denial of God’s immediate regeneration of the will in conversion prompted the theology professors at Leiden to write to Cameron:

We cannot approve of the fact that you seem, throughout your whole writing [against Tilenus], to either allow or require no other change in the will besides that moral one which arises from an object being presented [to the intellect] and from the judgment of reason about choosing, rejecting, or preferring it, without any immediate influence of God upon the will itself, especially in supernatural matters.¹¹

Though this debate may appear academic and labyrinthine, both positions were motivated by pastoral concerns. Cameron, for his part, wished to avoid any position which supposed that God’s work, by the Spirit, upon the soul in conversion was somehow irrational or dependent upon immediate revelation—think charismatic enthusiasm. The Leiden theologians, for their part, were concerned that Cameron was downplaying the supernatural aspect of the Spirit’s action upon the soul

7 Gootjes, “John Cameron (ca. 1579–1625) and the French Universalist Tradition,” in *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches*, 173.

8 John Cameron, “Lectori Salutem,” in *Amica Collatio de Gratiae et Voluntatis Humanae Concursu in Vocatione & Wuibusdam Annexis . . .* (Leiden, 1622).

9 Cameron, *Τὰ Σωζόμενα Sive Opera* (Geneva, 1658), 720, Thesis IX.

10 Cameron, *Opera*, 720, Thesis X.

11 “Epistola Facultatis Theologicae Academiae Leydensis ad Cameronem” in Cameron, *Opera*, 709.

during conversion by locating the Spirit's work as primarily a work upon the intellect through provision of right teaching (i.e., the preaching of the Word)—think rationalism. At a deeper level, however, this controversy was driven by anthropological differences regarding faculty psychology and the ostensible ambiguity over precisely how God's grace works with and upon the intellect and will more generally.¹² This correspondence between Cameron and the Leiden professors occurred amid further political turmoil in France which forced Cameron to return to the British Isles. King James I immediately appointed him professor of divinity at the University of Glasgow, but after less than a year he returned to France, in 1623, only to be denied a teaching post by King Louis XIII's court. The following year, the king permitted him to take up a position at the University of Montauban, but Cameron died the following year, in 1625, trying to break up an anti-royalist mob.

Ironically, Cameron is most well known in modern Reformed churches not for any of these public controversies in which he was embroiled during his lifetime, but for his doctrine of “universal grace,” or hypothetical universalism. Although Cameron clearly bequeathed his hypothetical universalism to the later Amyraldians, his views on the extent of the atonement “were, with very few exceptions, simply not known to anybody” while he was alive.¹³ This changed when, in 1628, Louis Cappel published private letters Cameron wrote to him during 1610–12. In these letters, within the context of adjudicating the relationship between divine justice and the atoning work of Christ, Cameron explained the universality of Christ's satisfaction, how he interpreted various Scripture passages (such as 1 Tim. 2:4 and

John 3:16), and how he understood the so-called Lombardian formula (Christ died for all sufficiently; Christ died for the elect alone effectually).¹⁴ With the publication of Amyraut's *Brief traité de la predestination*, it became apparent that many of Cameron's best students had absorbed this doctrine of universal grace—a doctrine Cameron had presumably been teaching privately to them. Moreover, while Cameron's teaching on the universality of Christ's death, broadly speaking, was not considered outside the bounds of Reformed orthodoxy (even by those who strongly disagreed¹⁵), given the other positions his students began to teach—positions which one does not find Cameron clearly defending—the posthumous Cameron would inevitably be caught in the crossfire of Amyraldian controversies.¹⁶

Evaluating Cameron's legacy is a difficult business. On the one hand, Cameron was clearly very learned and beloved by his students. The French Protestants repeatedly elected him to debate Arminians and Roman Catholics. Some of his students, especially those connected with the Academy of Saumur, became not only avid defenders of his legacy but also bulwarks for the Protestant faith as religious minorities in Roman Catholic France.¹⁷ Indeed, by the 1650s in France, Cameron's teaching on universal grace had become widely accepted among French Reformed Protestants through Paris ministers and his disciples at Saumur.¹⁸ Even the Genevan Company

12 For an overview of how Cameron's position is both embraced and modified among the later Saumur theologians, see esp. Albert Gootjes, *Claude Pajon (1626–1685) and the Academy of Saumur: The First Controversy over Grace* (Brill, 2014).

13 Albert Gootjes, “The Theologian's Private Cabinet: The Development and Early Reception of John Cameron's Universalism,” in *The Doctrine of Election in Reformed Perspective: Historical and Theological Investigations of the Synod of Dordt 1618–1619*, ed. Frank van der Pol (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 137–64, 153.

14 John Cameron, *Praelectionum* ..., 3 vols. (Saumur, 1626–28), 3:571–88. Republished in Cameron, *Opera*, 530–35.

15 Andre Rivet, *Disputationes Tredecim, De Justa & Gratiiosa Dei Dispensatione, circa Salutem Generis Humani in Opera Theologica*, 3 vols. (Rotterdam, 1651–60), II:1167–68 (Disp. VI, Theses 9 and 10).

16 I make a similar point when trying to distinguish Amyraldianism from English Hypothetical Universalism: “Amyraldianism and English Hypothetical Universalism: What's the Difference?” *Modern Reformation* (2022): <https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/articles/amyraldianism-and-english-hypothetical-universalism-whats-the-difference>.

17 Cf. Louis Cappel, Moïse Amyraut, and Josué de la Place, *Syntagma Thesium Theologicarum in Academia Salmuriensi* ..., 2 vols. (Saumur, 1665).

18 Gootjes, “John Cameron (ca. 1579–1625) and the French Universalist Tradition,” in *The Theology of the French Reformed*

of Pastors (admittedly with some misgivings related to Cameron's aforementioned controversial theological positions) permitted the famous Genevan printer Jacques Chouet to first publish Cameron's one-volume *Opera* in 1642! Cameron's influence, via the Saumur theologians, extended into England. For example, Robert Baillie, one of the five Scottish commissioners at the Westminster Assembly, complained that "Unhappilie Amiraute's Questions are brought in on our Assemblée. Many more loves these fancies here than I did expect."¹⁹ Stephen Charnock, in his magnum opus *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, cites Amyraut more than any other author.

On the other hand, some of Cameron's teachings were undeniably ambiguous, quirky, and prone to heterodox interpretations. For example, the famous English hypothetical universalist and delegate to Dordt, John Davenant, had concerns about the Cameronian position on universal grace as described to him secondhand.²⁰ Davenant observed that the language of "universal grace" troubled many orthodox theologians because what modern theologians call "common grace" should rather be assigned to God's common philanthropy toward mankind, not the grace of Christ. Additionally, the Augustinians (Augustine, Prosper, and Fulgentius) held as a dictum that the grace of Christ is not universal.²¹ Even Cameron's own students recognized some deficiencies in Cameron's theologizing about the order of the divine decrees. Moreover, his disciples could not agree on how he understood divine grace working relative to the intellect and will during conversion.²² The Arminian Simon Episcopius

may have been correct in claiming that "according to Cameron's hypothesis, the objective revelation of the divine will alone is sufficient to convert a person, without any other internal grace which is impressed immediately on either his mind or will."²³ This interpretation was consistent with the Saumurian Claude Pajon's sympathetic interpretation of Cameron, and it does sound Pelagian insofar as the only grace necessary for man's conversion would be the outward administration of gospel preaching.

To some, Cameron stands as a cautionary tale of theological ambiguity, if not heterodoxy; to others, he represents a creative, if uneven, attempt to reconcile fidelity to the Reformed tradition with the intellectual battles of his day. However, it should be noted that throughout his turbulent career, he was a faithful Reformed minister and professor without any significant moral failings. The Huguenots appreciated Cameron's ministry even when some Genevans and Dutch Reformed expressed misgivings. It is important to remember that early modern Reformed theology was not monolith but continued to develop as new sciences and philosophies entered European thought. Perhaps the best tribute on this anniversary is to read him afresh (after learning some Latin!), not only through the lens of Amyraldianism or his later critics, but as a pastor-theologian who sought to confess the gospel of Christ faithfully in his own age. ©

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Churches, 189.

19 Robert Baillie's letter to Mr. William Spang, October 24, 1645, in *The Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie*, ed. David Laing, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1841), II:324.

20 See John Davenant, "Davenant's Response to the French Reformed Churches about the Will of God towards Human Sinners," in *On the Death of Christ & Other Atonement Writings*, ed. Michael J. Lynch (Davenant Press: 2024), 347–55.

21 Davenant, "Davenant's Response to the French Reformed Churches," in *On the Death of Christ*, 351–52.

22 Cf. Gootjes, *Claude Pajon (1626–1685) and the Academy of Saumur*, 133–67.

23 Cameron, *Opera*, 724.

Servant Technology

Thoughts on Artificial Intelligence

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by William Edgar

This is not the place to rehearse the long history of discussions between “science” and the Christian faith.² So we will focus on the rather recent phenomenon of AI (Artificial Intelligence). As with some of the previous issues I have examined, there is often a good deal of heat along with any light. But there is increasing attention addressed to this phenomenon, and it is pregnant with cries and whispers.

To begin with, it will help to define AI. It may surprise us to learn that the first occurrence of this term dates back to 1955. Professor John McCarthy defined it simply as “The science and engineering of making intelligent machines.”³ In its earlier phases AI was applied to ordinary imitative skills, such as to teach the machine to play chess. We may remember how in 1997 a machine named “Deep Blue” beat the Grand Master Gary Kasparov.

That was *weak* AI, or the ability to duplicate certain skills. Think of Apple’s Siri or Amazon’s Alexa, which will articulate facts and figures, such as historical battles or football scores, upon request. In more recent times, *strong* AI has developed this ability to imitate verging on the superiority of the machine over the human brain. Technically, we can say that ASI (Artificial Special Intelligence) is moving toward AGI (Artificial General Intelligence), which claims that a machine can have intelligence equal to that of humans. This could include consciousness, the ability to learn and make plans.

It must be stated in the strongest terms that the goals of strong AI (AGI) are nowhere near being achieved. Researchers are certainly trying to realize these goals. Some even aspire to creating a machine that surpasses human intelligence. So far, this is the stuff of science fiction. Think of the computer HAL in *A Space Odyssey*, who was able to exercise power over its creators.

Many developments have occurred and surely many more are to come. For example, ChatGPT is a human-like dialogue feature. Thus, you can ask the machine almost anything, and it will answer you. A variant is Snapchat, an app which allows you to send a picture, or “snap,” and even create an illustrated story. You can program Snapchat to destroy the picture after use, so no one may “steal” it. Another related phenomenon is Dall-E (and Dall-E2), which is a system that can create various images (and art) from a description in “natural” language.⁴

One of the fastest growing industries today is robotics. The use of robots has wide application, from medicine to surveillance to finding landmines. Often, the use of robots accomplishes tasks not easily possible for human beings.

Some experts estimate that AI-generated content on the internet in a few years’ time, as ChatGPT, Dall-E, and similar programs, will spill torrents of verbiage and images into online spaces.⁵

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1198.

2 There is a considerable body of literature on the intersection of religion and faith. Predictably, some of it is skeptical. One thinks of the work of Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Harper Collins, Mariner Books, 2006). A much larger body of literature sees the two as if not compatible, quite congenial. Such are Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (Free Press, 2007), and John Lennox, *Can Science Explain Everything?* (The Good Book Company, 2019).

3 See <https://hai.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/2020-09/AI-Definitions-HAI.pdf>.

4 See <https://openai.com/dall-e-2>.

5 See <https://futurism.com/the-byte/experts-90-online-content-ai-generated>.

Space prohibits an extensive history and demographic analysis of AI.⁶ The giant service organization Digital Aptech lists four crucial capabilities.

(1) **Machine learning.** This feature takes large amounts of statistics and data and “digests” them in ways that help solve certain problems and reach certain conclusions. The reason for the label “learning” is that the machine uses algorithms, a procedure to solve mathematical problems in a way that can be stored and repeated. So-called *clustering algorithms* are used to make profiles of customers. The frequently encountered phrase, “customers who bought such-and-such will also enjoy such-and-such,” is accomplished through clustering algorithms.

(2) **Neural network.** This is a network of interconnected units, similar to the human brain’s neurons. Information is received and spread among the units. Examples of neural network would be the drones used in disaster relief, or war, and the GPS system of guidance in cars.

(3) **Deep learning.** Simply larger and more complex versions of neural networking. Examples of this would be speech recognition and image recognition.

(4) **Computer vision.** This applies the above to the computer. It can identify events by situating them in local images. Some of the visuals we see in the news are made possible through computer vision. It is used for self-driving vehicles.

Should We Worry?

Predictably, there are cheerleaders and naysayers, and most often a combination of both.

Cheerleaders point to the advantages of AI. They range from the ability to conduct research efficiently, to automating repetitive tasks, to faster decision-making. There are numerous educational

benefits. One that caught my attention is the use of virtual reality to teach people about certain social issues. For example, a number of museums are using holograms to allow visitors to have imaginary “conversations” with victims of racism, antisemitism, and adversaries.

At White Plains High School, holograms and other tools are being used to instruct the students about hatred and crimes.⁷ Teachers claim this is a better tool than textbooks for introducing them to the sad reality of the Holocaust, which some of them either ignore or deny. Virtual Reality can be used to dissuade people of prejudice against black athletes or Muslim airplane passengers.⁸

Naysayers abound. A surprising early worrier is Joseph Weizenbaum, one of the pioneers of Chatbot.⁹ After an outburst of approval for his work, Weizenbaum began to worry that the machine could supersede the “whole person,” that is, the human being in all its grandeur. He created a program affectionately named ELIZA, after Eliza Doolittle, the character in George B. Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, a cockney who developed such skills as a “lady” that she could fool any detractor. As an amateur psychologist, Weizenbaum also worried that the computer could become a sort-of father figure, encouraging “patients” toward Freudian transference.

Many critics simply worry that AI will lead to the loss of freedom. This could take the form of the invasion of privacy. Worse, it could manipulate people’s views by controlling data for nefarious purposes. Users could circumvent due process and orchestrate desired results, much as in the older propaganda of Nazi Germany.

For what it’s worth, Americans are divided in their views of AI. Take, for example, the use of facial recognition in crime solving. According to Pew, more people are concerned than excited

6 A lively but brief history of AI can be found here, <https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2017/history-artificial-intelligence/>. The groups Center for the Governance of AI, Future of Humanity Institute, and University of Oxford provided in 2019 an accessible demographic study of AI users, fans, and detractors. See <https://governanceai.github.io/US-Public-Opinion-Report-Jan-2019/executive-summary.html>.

7 See <https://www.timesofisrael.com/back-to-school-exhibits-custom-tailored-for-us-pupils-make-the-holocaust-a-local-issue/>.

8 See <https://www.axios.com/2023/05/15/new-vr-role-playing-insight-racism>.

9 See <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/jul/25/joseph-weizenbaum-inventor-eliza-chatbot-turned-against-artificial-intelligence-ai>.

about it. Many, some 45 percent, are ambivalent.¹⁰

The formidable dominance AI could exhibit is a potential for the loss of freedom. The Future of Life Institute has raised important questions. “Should we automate away all the jobs, including the fulfilling ones? Should we develop non-human minds that might eventually outnumber, outsmart . . . and replace us? Should we risk loss of control of our civilization?”¹¹

The Institute recommends a sane response to these potential threats. It recommends strong policies which control AI, without stifling its usefulness. It also recommends education: seminars, websites, information sessions, and the like. Such measures will help contribute to its mission, which is *steering transformative technology toward benefiting life and away from large-scale risks*.

A Wise Approach

But is this enough? Christians will need to draw on biblical wisdom to achieve a balance between legitimate caution and a proactive involvement.

There is already a considerable, often thoughtful, body of literature reflecting a biblical view of technology.¹² AI may appear to be new, but it is simply a very advanced form of what we already have. It helps to revisit the classic trilogy of Creation-Fall-Redemption. God commanded our first parents to replenish and subdue the earth (Gen. 1:26–31). This is sometimes known as the

cultural mandate. That ordinance still holds, despite the cancer of sin that entered our world. One of the tools God has given us to accomplish this task is technology.

Definitions of technology are often vague or even circular. Consider this definition from *Dictionary.com*:

[Technology is] the branch of knowledge that deals with the creation and use of technical means and their interrelation with life, society, and the environment, drawing upon such subjects as industrial arts, engineering, applied science, and pure science.

What are “technical means”? Merriam-Webster defines them this way: “having special and usually practical knowledge especially of a mechanical or scientific subject.”

The words “mechanical” and, even, “scientific” are so nebulous as to evade any useful precision. It helps to look at the big picture. Jacques Ellul, who spent his life studying the subject, says this from the “Note to the Reader” in *The Technological Society*: “Technique is the totality of methods, rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity.”¹³ The expression “absolute efficiency” is somewhat pejorative. Yet efficiency is certainly a principal ingredient in technology as it has developed.

Thus, it is right to use the *tēkne*, or “craft knowledge,” for the purposes of advancing human flourishing. It is an important component of the cultural mandate. But the ideal of efficiency is a double-edged sword. At the same time, the fall into sin has affected every part of creation, including the cultural mandate. Thus, every tool, including technology, has been compromised.

Not surprisingly, the wise biblical answer to our question is to embrace the advantages of AI and avoid the pitfalls. Derek Schuurman, a professor at Calvin University, provides some

10 See <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/03/17/how-americans-think-about-artificial-intelligence>.

11 See “How to Worry Wisely about Artificial Intelligence” in *The Economist*, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/04/20/how-to-worry-wisely-about-artificial-intelligence?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=google&ppcampaig_nID=17210591673&ppcadID=&utm_campaign=a.22brand_pmax&utm_content=conversion.direct-response.anonymous&gclid=EAlaIQobChMImsLc5O_tgAMVDK_ICh2oLwm6EAAAYASAAEgKLqPD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds.

12 Egbert Schuurman, *Technology and the Future: A Philosophical Challenge* (Cántaro, 2009); Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (Vintage, 1964); Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Baker, 2017). Gregory Edward Reynolds, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Preaching in the Electronic Age* (Wipf & Stock, 2021).

13 Ellul, *The Technological Society*, xxv.

helpful guidelines. He says three things.¹⁴ First, we should avoid two typical pitfalls: too much optimism or undue pessimism. Optimists see AI as a solution to most significant problems in life. Only Christ can do that. But pessimists will have nothing to do with AI, which is a shame, given some of its benefits. Used properly, features such as ChatGPT can help with research of all kinds.

Second, Schuurman tells us we should be focusing on the *ontological* issues, rather than on what AI can *do*. We neglect the great answers to our deepest questions about attempts to substitute AI for our endeavors at our peril. They are found in Genesis 1–2 and related texts. The ontological issue of the constitution of human beings as image-bearers of God cannot be overstressed. Comments on Genesis 1:26–31 abound.¹⁵ The verses are the foundation for our understanding of human beings in their integrity and uniqueness. Though, of course, transhumanism and AI are not mentioned, by implication a critical approach to them is present.

As we saw, the tools for replenishing the earth, in the cultural mandate, include technology. Technology derives from the call of God. This in turn is rooted in the capabilities we are constituted with as creatures made after God's image. Genesis 1:26–27 contain an implicit critique of both the belittling of humans (as in the Babylonian myths which make them slaves of the gods) and the aggrandizing of them (all depends on the blessing and commands of God).

Third, Schuurman asks that we develop proper norms for the responsible uses of AI. One of the most apropos accounts in the Bible aiming at our issue is Genesis 11:1–9, “The Tower of Babel.” Using the gift of technology, mankind overstepped its bounds and sought to magnify its name above God's: “Let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth”

(v. 4). Their sin was not in assigning a name for themselves, but in seeking one that effectively replaced both the name of God, and the name he had given them. Fear of being dispersed is an aberrant way to challenge the cultural mandate.

The well-known ensuing story contains both a judgment and a benediction. The judgment is the confusion of languages as well as the forcible incompleteness of the tower. The benediction is the preservation of mankind from the ruin that would have followed from the heedless construction. These stories certainly contain norms for the use of AI, albeit implicit ones.

This biblical wisdom is reflected in the declaration of the European Parliament.¹⁶ It is a full statement, but at the heart it is striving to keep the balance between “supporting innovation and protecting citizens’ rights.”

Not surprisingly, the Gospel Coalition has many entries on AI. One of the most helpful is titled “How Not to Be Scared of AI,” an interview with Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra and Joel Jacob. Their safe, but sane conclusion: “As Christians, we don’t want to run in fear—after all, God is sovereign over robots too. But neither do we want to be reckless or careless in how we approach it.”¹⁷ They cite Proverbs 14:16, “One who is wise is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is reckless and careless.”

As in every ethical decision, a careful testing is still needed for the relatively new field of AI. Hebrews 5:14 is pertinent here: “But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.” These words tell us that spiritual maturity is attained by “constant practice” (in Greek, διὰ τὴν ἔξιν τὰ αἰσθητήρια γεγυμνασμένα). The word γεγυμνασμένα (from γυμνάζω *gymnazo*), translated “training,” resembles the English word *gymnasium*. Thus, ethical

14 See <https://christianscholars.com/chatgpt-and-the-rise-of-ai/>.

15 I am usually uncomfortable citing my own work, but the relevant pages in *Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture* (InterVarsity Academic, 2016), 161–62, contain my study and lists many germane analyses of these crucial words.

16 See <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230505IPR84904/ai-act-a-step-closer-to-the-first-rules-on-artificial-intelligence>.

17 See <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/potential-problems-ai/>.

maturity can only be obtained in the “gymnasium of life.”

This principle should apply to decisions about AI. There are, of course, absolute principles. But in general they cannot be verified without trial-and-error. For example, how to decide about algorithms? They must be tested. Contexts must be taken into account. Advantages, disadvantages, benefits, manipulation—all of these should go into making decisions about their opportunity.

Cries and Whispers

Considering AI’s relationship to apologetics, it is incumbent on us to discern those places where AI claims the denial of God’s sovereignty, and those indices of aspirations which point to divine revelation. Wanting to be God, as did the builders of the Tower of Babel, is clearly illicit. It is a sign confirming Romans 1:18, the desire to suppress the truth by unrighteousness. Yet at the same time, AI represents a quest for understanding, a quest for a means of human flourishing, following the cultural mandate. ©

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Going Peopleless Underestimates the Unique Superiority of Human Intelligence

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by **Gregory E. Reynolds**

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in
information?

The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.
—T. S. Eliot²

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully
made. Wonderful are your works; my soul
knows it very well.
—Psalm 139:14

Your hands have made and fashioned me;
give me understanding that I may learn your
commandments.
—Psalm 119:73

As you do not know the way the spirit comes to
the bones in the womb of a woman with child,
so you do not know the work of God who
makes everything.
—Ecclesiastes 11:5

Introduction

Last year was the twenty-fifth anniversary of
a very popular movie that I never saw when
it came out in 1999—*The Matrix*.³ So, recently

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1175; https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1179; https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1221.

2 T. S. Eliot, “Choruses from the ‘Rock’ I,” in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. 1963), 147.

3 For those who have not seen *The Matrix* see the summaries at IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/>

I decided that, given frequent references to the movie in literature and in discussions of AI, it was significant enough to watch, which I did in June 2024. I realized that I took the famous red pill in 1990 when I began to study Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman and the discipline that they initiated—media ecology. In *The Matrix* the red pill enabled a person to experience reality by escaping the matrix, which was an illusory, deceptive reality created by an evil cyber-intelligence. The red pill of media ecology revealed to me the electric matrix into which I was born—the electronic environment. It is an eye-opening experience.⁴ Like Plato and his allegory of the cave, it became my mission to get the cave dwellers out into the light of day to understand the pervasive and subtle influences of the electronic environment on human life and culture. McLuhan referred to the cave dwellers as “technological idiots.” The term “idiot” is only apparently uncharitable. The original Greek word (ἰδιώτης, *idiōtēs*, 1 Cor. 14:24 “unlearned,” 2 Cor. 11:6 “untrained in speech”) indicated ignorance of a particular language and thus its culture. The point is that, as a culture, we are largely ignorant of what we are doing with media, or more precisely, what the media are doing to us. That too was McLuhan’s point—technological ignorance—something that needs to be overcome.⁵

Zion, in *The Matrix*, is the place of refuge from the deceptive matrix to which some humans escape after the machines enslave the rest of humanity and harvest their bioelectric power. Zion is the place of exile, an underground refuge, for free humans. This reminds me of the church; we are pilgrims in exile awaiting the return of our Savior, the ultimate escape from the matrix of this

present evil age. In Christ’s church we become fully human as we are transformed, imitating the Second Adam, extricated from the killing grasp of the matrix of this world. In the broader sense, the world has been a matrix ever since Adam fell. The world, the flesh, and the devil form the complex of this present age. Our Savior “gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age” (Gal. 1:4).

I believe that STEM and the humanities should have a symbiotic relationship. That relationship has been altered by the Enlightenment which privileges empirical science as the only true way of knowing. A critical analysis of the electronic environment along with all the inventions (extensions) of man must be imbedded in the humanities, which includes Christian theology, along with technological understanding. I intend to bring the discipline of media ecology (ME) to bear on a critical analysis of artificial intelligence (AI). Artificial intelligence is the capacity of computers to exhibit or simulate human intelligent behavior, especially by applying machine learning techniques to large collections of data.⁶ I will expand on this below.

ME was conceived in the intellectual environment of the liberal arts, reflected in the Judeo-Christian sensibilities of its founders, such as Marshall McLuhan (Roman Catholic), Neil Postman (liberal Jew), Jacques Ellul (Neo-Orthodox Protestant), and Walter Ong (Jesuit). I am enlisting Christian anthropology and the biblical idea of idolatry as a critical tool to bear on my consideration of this modern (not actually new) technology. AI is inextricably connected with the entire digital revolution. But the most important questions about it are not technical but anthropological.

The very name “artificial intelligence” reduces human intelligence to something like information retrieval and organization. Commercial answering services regularly greet customers with, “I am

plotssummary/?ref_=tt_str_y_pl. Better still, watch the movie.

4 As I was matriculating in the Doctor of Ministry program in 1990 at Westminster Seminary in California I took a course by Joel Nederhood, “Effective Preaching in a Media Age,” which introduced me to the discipline of media ecology pioneered by scholars like Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman. Postman’s 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* popularized media ecology. It was eye-opening.

5 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw-Hill, 1964), 18.

6 See *Oxford English Dictionary* under “artificial intelligence” (revised December 2023).

your virtual assistant. I can understand complete sentences.” That is, until I ask the question that did not appear in the website FAQs; then suddenly it sends me off to a human agent. But there is no “I” behind these words; this is actually a lie creating an illusion of a computer program being human.

Recently my wife and I were on a ski trip in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. We stayed at the Woodstock Inn and Brewery for three nights. As winter would usually have it, a large snowstorm was predicted for our day to travel to Bridgeton, Maine, to ski with family. Google maps had recommended traveling over the Kancamagus Highway, a route that was closed in winter until 1968. There was time to take that route in the morning to avoid the storm. I knew a slightly longer route that was well traveled at all times of year and did not run as high as the Kancamagus Pass (2,855 feet). It only rises to 1,900 feet. I figured that if we could travel ahead of the storm, the Kancamagus Highway would be fine. When I asked a local, she advised me not to ever take the Kank in the winter due to severe frost heaves, which make for a miserable drive. Google had never driven that road in winter and usually only chooses the fastest route—efficiency is one of technology’s chief gods. This also reminded me of the reality of human intelligence functioning in an embodied existence.

My argument in this article is that human intelligence (HI) can never be replaced by computer systems for three reasons. 1) Computer data and their algorithms are created by human intelligence. 2) Human intelligence is embodied intelligence that requires physical presence in the world of ideas, matter, and people. 3) Human intelligence involves consciousness, cognition, and conscience, none of which can be reduced to material or digital realities. Humans are creatures of God before they are intelligent thinkers. This creatureliness involves more than reasoning power.

Artificial Intelligence: A Brief History

Discussion of AI has broken like a tidal wave over all media outlets as if it were something new. But it was conceived almost seventy-five years ago with Alan Turing’s now famous paper “Computing

Machinery and Intelligence.”⁷ Computers at the time needed a great deal of development in order to attempt to answer Turing’s question about computing, “Can machines think?”⁸ Turing anticipated the development of computing in the direction of simulating human intelligence, but he simply posited a test to compare the two.⁹ Large amounts of computer memory, especially, needed to be developed. Five years later the first computer program was invented to mimic the problem solving skill of a human; *Logic Theorist* was created by Allen Newell, Cliff Shaw, and Herbert Simon. A year later in 1956 a historic conference attempted to inspire a collaborative effort among top researchers to develop AI. The Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence resulted in a scientific consensus that AI would be achievable. This was where the term “artificial intelligence” was coined. The conference was the catalyst for the next two decades of AI research.¹⁰

Computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum (1923–2008), inventor of the first interactive computer program (early AI), ELIZA (named after the *Pygmalion* character), was surprised to see “the enormously exaggerated attributions an even well-educated audience is capable of making, even strives to make, to a technology it does not understand.”¹¹ In 1970 cognitive and computer scientist Marvin Minsky (1927–2016) told *Life* magazine that in less than a decade there would be a machine that equaled the intelligence of an average person.¹² Such was the optimism of the

7 A. M. Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” *Mind* 49 (1950): 433–60.

8 Turing is especially known for his “Turing Test,” which tested a machine’s (computer’s) ability to simulate human intelligence, answering his question, “Can machines think?” see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turing_test.

9 I owe this and other clarifications to my friend Gregory Tarsa, software engineering manager.

10 Rockwell Anyoha, “A History of Artificial Intelligence,” accessed April 11, 2023. <https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2017/history-artificial-intelligence/>.

11 Joseph Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgment to Calculation* (W. H. Freeman, 1976), 7.

12 Anyoha, “A History of Artificial Intelligence.”

philosophical materialist, who also overestimated the progress of computer technology.

In the 1980s the concept of “deep learning” was promoted by John Hopfield and David Rumelhart developing “techniques which allowed computers to learn using experience.”¹³ In 1997 reigning grand master chess champion Gary Kasparov was defeated by IBM’s *Deep Blue* computer program. In the same year Dragon Systems developed speech recognition software. Finally, computer memory, which according to Moore’s Law doubles each year, along with the availability of huge amounts of data from various sources, allowed for great advancement in the field of AI.¹⁴ The author Rockwell Anyoha in his 2017 “History of Artificial Intelligence,” accurately predicted that “AI language is looking like the next big thing. In fact, it’s already underway.”¹⁵ On November 30, 2022, the first commercially available AI, OpenAI’s ChatGPT, became available, and the conversation about its benefits and liabilities began.

In the spring of 2023, technology columnist for *The Wall Street Journal* Christopher Mims observed,

What’s unique about this moment is that new systems like text-generating AIs, such as ChatGPT . . . are the first consumer applications of AI. . . . What characterizes this time is that computers—rather than humans—are now building the models that machines use to accomplish a task.¹⁶

In 2024 Cal Newport, assistant professor of computer science at Georgetown University, observed, “If 2023 was the year when we learned that language models could do more than simply mix

and match existing text, then this year might be when we learn that the power of linguistic A.I. is nonetheless still limited.”¹⁷ In the summer of 2024, researcher Dean Ball observed a new stage in AI development,

Today’s language models operate in a broadly similar way, except that they predict the next word rather than the next character. (Actually, they predict a sub-word linguistic unit called a “token,” but “word” suffices for our purposes.) The basic theory behind scaling language models further—and spending hundreds of millions, even billions, of dollars to do so—was that, with more data and larger neural networks [neuron-like adjustable connections between computational units], models would learn increasingly sophisticated heuristics and patterns that mirror human intelligence.¹⁸

Before ChatGPT, most language models truly were next-word predictors. To prompt those models, one needed to give them a starting sentence and ask them to finish it: “Once upon a time, a brave hero . . .” These earlier models could be fine-tuned to make them more conversational, but they had a tendency to exhibit toxic behavior or gradually veer off into mirroring the tone of a Reddit commenter rather than a helpful AI assistant. What made ChatGPT a breakthrough consumer technology was a new step in the model’s training process: reinforcement learning from human feedback (RLHF).¹⁹

The recent surge in AI development has led to much speculation about the dystopian and utopian

13 Anyoha, “A History of Artificial Intelligence.”

14 Anyoha, “A History of Artificial Intelligence.”

15 Anyoha, “A History of Artificial Intelligence.”

16 Christopher Mims, “The Secret History of AI, and a Hint at What’s Next,” *The Wall Street Journal* (April 22, 2023) <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-secret-history-of-ai-and-a-hint-at-whats-next-428905de>.

17 Cal Newport, “Can an A.I. Make Plans?” *The New Yorker* (March 15, 2024), <https://www.newyorker.com/science/annals-of-artificial-intelligence/can-an-ai-make-plans>.

18 Dean W. Ball, “The Era of Predictive AI Is Almost Over —,” *The New Atlantis* (summer 2024): 28. The definition of neural networks in brackets is from Arlie Coles, “Demystifying AI,” *The American Mind* (June 19, 2023), <https://americanmind.org/features/the-exterior-darkness/demystifying-ai/>.

19 Ball, “The Era of Predictive AI Is Almost Over —,” 30.

possibilities of AI. Both make the materialist mistake of underestimating human intelligence.²⁰

What Is Artificial Intelligence?

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a general category referring to the larger field of computerized simulation of human intelligence. Artificial general intelligence (AGI) aims at, but has not yet achieved, human-level general intelligence and possibly beyond, including reasoning, thinking abstractly, learning from experience, and adapting to unfamiliar situations, much like a human. Artificial special intelligence (ASI) is narrow AI applied to specific tasks like dimming headlights before oncoming cars or Siri and Alexa.

Generative Artificial Intelligence (Generative AI) is the form of AI we are especially concerned with, since it presently exists and through research and development is continually improving. It “refers to a category of AI models designed to create new content, such as text, images, audio, video, and more. Unlike traditional AI models that primarily analyze or classify data, generative AI can produce original outputs based on the patterns it has learned from training data.” It “mimics human creativity.”²¹

The GPT in ChatGPT stands for Generative Pre-Trained Transformer, which is a commercial type of Generative AI. It is a word pattern recognition machine that is capable of “learning” from human input. Associate director of the Data Science Program and an assistant teaching professor at Mississippi State University Jonathan Barlow defines it this way: “Generative AI is a

species of AI designed to produce new content indistinguishable from human output.”²²

Large language models (LLM) are the “intelligence” behind AI programs. They are focused on text generation and power a wide range of applications, including chatbots and virtual assistants, ChatGPT, Google Bard, or other conversational agents. They can generate articles, stories, code, or even poetry.

When thinking about poetry, Nikolas Prassas defines LLMs, large language models, as “essentially machines for choosing combinations of words.” He summarizes physicist and creator of the Mathematica Computing system, Stephen Wolfram,

These models are designed to solve one simple problem: predicting what the next word in a sentence is. They do this by breaking down sub-semantic units known as tokens. The tokens are converted into vectors, which give us an array of numbers, which in turn can be used to estimate the probabilities associated with each word as the machine moves along its sentence. Through judicious use of engineering voodoo, the system is then directed to find what Wolfram calls “the rational continuation” of the sentence. The system thus generates meaningful text by simply asking over and over what the next “expected word” is. And thus Peter Lax’s dictum is shown once more to be right: “If you can reduce a mathematical problem to a problem in linear algebra, you can most likely solve it.”²³

So mathematical magic is behind ChatGPT. Cal Newport describes the process of ChatGPT,

None of this jargon is needed, however, to grasp the basics of what’s happening inside systems like ChatGPT. A user types a

20 Cf. Andrea Vacchiano, “Artificial Intelligence ‘Godfather’ on AI Possibly Wiping Out Humanity: ‘It’s Not Inconceivable,’” *Fox News* (March 25, 2023), <https://www.foxnews.com/tech/artificial-intelligence-godfather-ai-possibly-wiping-humanity-not-inconceivable>; Sam Schechner and Deepa Seetharaman, “Tech Leaders Are Divided on AI’s Threat to Humanity,” *The Wall Street Journal* (Sept. 5, 2023), <https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/how-worried-should-we-be-about-ai-threat-to-humanity-even-tech-leaders-cant-agree-46c664b6>; Marc Andreessen, “AI Will Save the World,” *The Free Press* (July 13, 2023), <https://www.thefp.com/p/why-ai-will-save-the-world>.

21 Accessed ChatGPT February 28, 2025, asking for definitions of “artificial intelligence, artificial general intelligence, generative artificial intelligence, and artificial special intelligence.”

22 Jonathan Barlow, “Artificial Intelligence: Towards a Christian Perspective,” *By Faith* (May 29, 2024), <https://byfaithonline.com/artificial-intelligence-towards-a-christian-perspective/>.

23 Nikolas Prassas, “Large Language Poetry,” *First Things* (March 2025): 9.

prompt into a chat interface; this prompt is transformed into a big collection of numbers, which are then multiplied against the billions of numerical values that define the program's constituent neural networks, creating a cascade of frenetic math directed toward the humble goal of predicting useful words to output next. The result of these efforts might very well be jaw-dropping in its nuance and accuracy, but behind the scenes its generation lacks majesty. The system's brilliance turns out to be the result less of a ghost in the machine than of the relentless churning of endless multiplications.²⁴

Is ChatGPT truly Intelligent? No, it is based on human intelligence. Humans create and gather the data used by AI; and even more importantly, tremendous human intelligence is required for programming of large language models (LLM). But intelligence is far more than any LLM or computer program. I have a quarrel with the label "artificial intelligence." Machine learning? That's half right, but learning is rooted in intelligence, so no, it is a very sophisticated computer program, but not intelligent. That is something uniquely human, especially when we remember that our intelligence is embodied. So, as I have said above, artificial general intelligence does not exist, and most developers understand that the work they are doing on generative AI is focused largely on specific applications. Transhumanists and others who believe that artificial general intelligence is achievable are in a different category. Former CEO of Google and executive chairman of its successor Alphabet, Eric Schmidt, opines, "A key marker of the shift to AGI will be AI's ability to produce knowledge based on its own findings, not merely retrieval and recombination of human-generated information." Schmidt goes on to hint that AGI may be possible to achieve, but he admits the limitations of AI when he says that

24 Cal Newport, "What Kind of Mind Does ChatGPT Have?" *The New Yorker* (April 23, 2023), <https://www.newyorker.com/science/annals-of-artificial-intelligence/what-kind-of-mind-does-chatgpt-have?>

two areas are ripe for advancement, mathematics and programming, but "Unlike biology and other fields that require real-world experimentation, these disciplines are largely self-contained." He concludes, "Superintelligent systems will face inherent constraints. . . . Just as human cognition is bounded by physical and biological limits, AI will remain subject to the limits of the physical world."²⁵ These limits are precisely what differentiates human from artificial intelligence.

Weizenbaum was shocked over the response to his primitive AI program ELIZA because it was based on the idea of a psychiatrist who believed that therapy is simply a matter of decision-making based on information processing. This was reminiscent for Weizenbaum of physical chemist and philosopher of science Michael Polanyi's discovery that many modern scientists and educators believed in a "mechanical conception of man."²⁶ This is the only explanation for people thinking of ELIZA as human.

Christians need to be engaged in the name game. The ways in which we describe and name things are means of understanding and control.

Yale computer scientist David Gelernter recently observed,

The biggest challenge AI faces today is to understand the human mind. The mind is capable of maneuvers that no AI system I know of has ever achieved. Future AI must learn to understand real human speech and writing (Watson made a strong start), which requires a thorough understanding of humor, irony, metaphor and many other twists on speaking and writing. Most important, AI must learn to understand emotion and emotion's central role in human thought.

Some thinkers hold that software will never actually understand anything, because it will never be conscious. They're right. Conscious-

25 Eric Schmidt, "AI Could Usher in a New Renaissance," *The Wall Street Journal* (March 1, 2025): A15.

26 Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason*, 1, 6.

ness is a product of certain organic systems, not of electronic circuits. But software can act as if it understands—and that’s what matters in practice.

In time, AI will be able to chat with the lonely and sick around the clock. Will it replace humans who care? Of course not. But it will be better than nothing. Many of us will come to rely on AI-based digital assistants, small devices that murmur schedule notes or parking tips in our ears, patch in phone calls, read us emails and otherwise act like superhuman secretaries. Our understanding of the mind will be the basis of software models that will be widely (sometimes dangerously) used to predict a person’s future behavior.²⁷

Recently I experimented with the latest free version of ChatGPT, asking the question: “In which Wit Stillman movie is Ecclesiastes mentioned?” It responded with “*Metropolitan*.” After rewatching it I responded that it was not in that movie, although there was a philosophical discussion with references that might sound similar to Ecclesiastes. Then the bot responded, “You’re correct—there is no explicit reference to Ecclesiastes in *Metropolitan*. I misspoke . . .” I then queried about the same content’s presence in the film *Barcelona*. In that film Ted Boynton reads the Bible and finds Proverbs and Ecclesiastes most helpful in dealing with romantic matters. My correction helped ChatGPT to answer my first question correctly in the future should anyone else make the same inquiry, but it is still simply adding information, not truly learning, which is a distinctly human activity. All the vast information available to it (not “I”) was first humanly produced. It is also deceptive to perpetrate the idea that a chatbot is a person, using words related to human intelligence, even though its producers know it is not. The voice recognition used by my TV tells me that it is “thinking” and “listening”

27 David Gelernter, “Artificial Intelligence Wasn’t Born Yesterday” *The Wall Street Journal* (Sept. 19, 2024): A15.

when I make a query. It is not; it is simply a very convenient and complex program retrieval system based on word recognition and probability theory. If Weizenbaum’s primitive ELIZA seduced people into making this mistake, so much more do highly sophisticated programs promulgate what we might call the ELIZA syndrome today.

AI does not have a mind. Cal Newport concludes that despite the apparently startling “intelligence” of ChatGPT, its well-crafted prose is not the product of a mind. His *New Yorker* article “What Kind of Mind Does ChatGPT Have?” makes this crystal clear. He makes an important distinction: “It doesn’t create, it imitates.”²⁸ Here, besides chatbots not being embodied beings, they lack the invisible aspects of human intelligence: consciousness, cognition, and conscience, what we might call the trinity of human intelligence—the three Cs of human intelligence, what makes it superior to AI.

Furthermore, scientists like Michael Polanyi have pointed out the importance of imagination in scientific research, which is similar in poetry as well as science. Michael Polanyi’s student, Nobel Prize winner Dudley Herschbach,²⁹ assigns poems to be written by students doing frontier science. In other words, exploration is not about getting something right but about exploring by seeking what is new. As Albert Einstein famously observed,

Imagination is more important than knowledge. For while knowledge defines all we currently know and understand, imagination points to all we might yet discover and create. I rarely think in words at all. A thought comes, and I may try to express it in words afterwards.³⁰

28 Newport, “What Kind of Mind Does ChatGPT Have?”

29 Dudley Robert Herschbach is an American chemist at Harvard University. He won the 1986 Nobel Prize in chemistry jointly with Yuan T. Lee and John C. Polanyi “for their contributions concerning the dynamics of chemical elementary processes.” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dudley_R._Herschbach.

30 Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 7, 9.

I do not believe that this mysterious human process of exploration can ever be achieved by AI because it involves the invisible trinity of human intelligence.

The Literary Limits of Artificial Intelligence

ChatGPT is capable of doggerel, a simple rearrangement of information, but is never going to be a T. S. Eliot or a Robert Frost. As literary scholar Nikolas Prassas observes, “To date, I have yet to see ChatGPT ‘generate’ any masterpieces, only doggerel of truly awesome inanity.” What poets do is the opposite of the process by which ChatGPT operates. Also, poetry “differs from other ways of using language.”³¹ Philosopher and author Simone Weil’s (1909–43) complex criteria for poetic composition require human perception and sensibilities, condition and values, and embodied lives that no AI system can ever duplicate.³²

The essayist Joseph Epstein, who formerly taught a course in Advanced Prose Composition, reflects, “I feel fortunate in retiring from teaching when I did, in 2002, just before the current technotyranny set in.” He used to have students identify fifteen cultural figures or events, such as “the 1913 Armory Show, Reynaldo Hahn, the Spanish Civil War and Robert Graves.”³³ Few students, even before smart phones, could identify these. The electronic distraction and its tendency to move our thinking over thin surfaces was already at work. With cell phones they would now simply google the answers, but their knowledge would be superficial at best. Epstein quotes the author John Warner, whose book *More than Words* he was reviewing, “No, we do not and may never fully understand the mechanisms of the full range of our cognition, but this doesn’t stop us from recognizing that human thought is distinct from algorithm-produced syntax.”³⁴ Epstein observes,

A composition rendered by AI is certain to be grammatically and otherwise formally correct, lacking only in originality and an interesting point of view. Machines, Mr. Warner holds, cannot teach writing. “Only humans can read. Only humans can write. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”³⁵

Epstein concludes with an epigrammatic statement: “In learning how to write well, nothing can replace thoughtful reading, careful practice and an interesting point of view. Anything else is artificial all right, but a good deal less than intelligent.”³⁶ Ever the punster, Epstein happily sounds like a Luddite: “ChatGPT and other bots are ubiquitous, giving a whole new meaning to botulism.”³⁷

What Is Human Intelligence?

Human intelligence (HI) is essentially embodied intelligence and thus distances itself qualitatively from AI. Many proponents of AI treat human intelligence as an inferior version of computer intelligence. They seriously underestimate the giant distance between the two. Princeton philosopher Alexander Englert articulates this well:

Regarding the incompleteness theorem’s philosophical implications, Gödel thought the results presented an either/or dilemma (articulated in the Gibbs Lecture of 1951). Either one accepts that the “human mind (even within the realm of pure mathematics) infinitely surpasses the powers of any finite machine,” from which it follows that the human mind is irreducible to the brain, which “to all appearances is a finite machine with a finite number of parts, namely, the neurons and their connections.” Or one assumes that there are certain mathematical problems of the sort employed in his theorems, which

31 Prassas, “Large Language Poetry,” 9.

32 Prassas, “Large Language Poetry,” 10.

33 Joseph Epstein, “Teaching Writing in an AI Age,” *The Wall Street Journal* (Feb. 22, 2025): C7.

34 Epstein, “Teaching Writing in an AI Age,” C7.

35 Epstein, “Teaching Writing in an AI Age,” C9.

36 Epstein, “Teaching Writing in an AI Age,” C9.

37 Epstein, “Teaching Writing in an AI Age,” C7.

are “absolutely unsolvable.” If this were the case, it would arguably “disprove the view that mathematics is only our own creation.” Consequently, mathematical objects would possess an objective reality all its own, independent of the world of physical facts “which we cannot create or change, but only perceive and describe.” This is referred to as Platonism about the reality of mathematical truths. Much to the materialist’s chagrin, therefore, both implications of the dilemma are “very decidedly opposed to materialistic philosophy.” Worse yet for the materialist, Gödel notes that the disjuncts are not exclusive. It could be that both implications are true simultaneously.³⁸

Mathematician and philosopher Kurt Gödel (1906–78) stood against the majority of the mathematicians and scientists of his day, who tended to be materialists. This is where biblical anthropology can help us. It will put AI in its place and help us discern the benefits and liabilities of this powerful technology. Human intelligence (HI) involves the whole person, the highly complex embodied being that we are. I asked ChatGPT, “Do you have a soul?” It responded, “No I don’t have a soul. I’m just a program to process language and information. I can talk about souls, philosophy, or anything else on your mind.”³⁹

Joseph Weizenbaum reflects on the mechanistic pressures of our highly technologized society in 1950:

Of course, the introduction of computers into our already highly technological society has . . . merely reinforced and amplified those antecedent pressures that have driven man to an ever more rationalistic view of his society and an even more mechanistic image of himself.⁴⁰

AI is at once amusing and alarming. Ken Meyers of Mars Hill Audio, at the second annual Granite Seminar in 2006 on biotechnology, was asked, “Will scientists be able to duplicate human beings?” I shall never forget his answer, “No, but they will do a lot of damage trying.” As philosopher Thomas Nagel demonstrated in his 2011 book *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*, materialist evolutionary science cannot adequately account for human consciousness, cognition, or conscience (value). Computers process data but they do not have a spirit; they only imitate one aspect of human intelligence. Using linguistic probability enables computers to seem like they have human intelligence, but there is no human person there. They are mere material digital realities—humans are much, much more. As Nagel pointed out, the materialist, in his case Darwinians, are unable to account for the invisible aspects of human intelligence: consciousness or self-awareness, cognition or reasoning ability, and conscience or the knowledge of right and wrong. This along with the embodied nature of human intelligence puts AI in its place—and it does have an important place, but not as a replacement for human beings.

I would like to propose a reversal of the Cartesian rationalist axiom, “I think, therefore, I am,” *cogito ergo sum*, with, “I am, therefore, I think,” *ego igitur cogito*. By reversing the philosophical realms of ontology and epistemology, the conception of the human moves from the radically subjective to the objectivity of the created realm (being) in which the Creator rather than the creature takes precedence. I am a mysterious mixture of body and soul, a created, embodied, finite being, made in God’s image, *imago Dei*. The proper understanding of artificial intelligence (AI) requires a Christian theology, especially an anthropology rooted in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Pioneer media ecologist and Roman Catholic Marshall McLuhan observed:

38 Alexander T. Englert, “We’ll Meet Again,” *Aeon* (January 2, 2024), accessed January 6, 2024, <https://aeon.co/essays/kurt-godel-his-mother-and-the-argument-for-life-after-death>.

39 Accessed February 22, 2025.

40 Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason*, 11.

After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media. Whether the extension of consciousness, so long sought by advertisers for specific products, will be “a good thing” is a question that admits of a wide solution. There is little possibility of answering such questions about the extensions of man without considering all of them together. Any extension, whether of skin, hand, or foot, affects the whole psychic and social complex. . . . The need to understand the effects of the extensions of man becomes more urgent by the hour.⁴¹

In my 2001 book, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Preaching in the Electronic Age*,⁴² I provide several quotes revealing McLuhan’s anthropology: “And no matter how many walls have fallen the citadel of individual consciousness has not fallen nor is it likely to fall. For it is not accessible to the mass media.”⁴³ “Christianity definitely supports the idea of a private, independent metaphysical substance of the self . . .”⁴⁴ Sounding like Jacques Ellul, he

asserts: “There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is willingness to contemplate what is happening.”⁴⁵

Marshall McLuhan’s Christianity caused him to hold to an irreducible soul within man characterized by the *imago Dei*, which is not subject to perception, but has the power to interpret and even withstand the percepts of experience, especially the mass media. “At the speed of light all the physical factors disappear. Naturally churches tend to become extremely spiritualized places. The theology of discarnate man, I should think, is going to be extremely transcendental and gnostic. It’s not going to have much place for the human being as an incarnate spirit.”⁴⁶

As we saw above, consciousness, cognition, and conscience—the trinity of human intelligence (CCC)—cannot be accounted for in materialist philosophical terms, which makes up a large part of STEM academia. Cal Newport says this about the uniqueness of human consciousness:

The idea that programs like ChatGPT might represent a recognizable form of intelligence is further undermined by the details of their architecture. Consciousness depends on a brain’s ability to maintain a constantly updated conception of itself as a distinct entity interacting with a model of the external world. The layers of neural networks that make up systems like ChatGPT, however, are static: once they’re trained, they never change.⁴⁷

He alludes to an equal but opposite error of the materialist philosophy—he asserts that cybergnosticism is a philosophical nightmare disavowing the reality of our embodied existence. The goal of transcending our humanity ignores the

41 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 3–4.

42 Gregory Edward Reynolds, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Preaching in the Electronic Age* (Wipf & Stock, 2001), 169.

43 Marshall McLuhan, *Counterblast* (Rapp & Whiting, 1969), 135.

44 Hubert Hoskins, “Electric Consciousness and the Church,” in *Marshall McLuhan: The Man and His Message*, eds. George

Sanderson and Frank Macdonald (Fulcrum, 1989), 165.

45 Marshall McLuhan, “McLuhan Probes,” in *Marshall McLuhan: The Man and His Message*, eds. Sanderson and Macdonald (Fulcrum, 1989), 219.

46 Marshall McLuhan, *The Review of Books and Religion*, vol. 3, #9, Mid-June 1974 (Belmont, Vermont).

47 Newport, “What Kind of Mind Does ChatGPT Have?”

imperfection of our humanity embedded in the historic fall of Adam. It ignores the realization of human potential in the good news of the biblical account of the Lamb of God, the Logos, in whom all things consist and in whom salvation from sin, death, and hell is found. The original sin that both left and right seek to conquer cannot be thwarted by human effort. Ours is ultimately a moral problem that places each of us at the center of what needs fixing. Our problem is not embodiment, our physical natures, but our fallen condition, overcome only through God incarnate.

Another utopian technological problem can be seen in transhumanism. It apotheosizes the possibilities of technological transcendence of human beings. In chapter 5 of Jacob Shatzer's 2019 book *Transhumanism and the Image of God: Today's Technology and the Future of Christian Discipleship*, AI is explored as an aspect of transhumanism. This is a portion of my summary of that chapter in my 2020 review:

This technological development is distinct from the biological and seeks to alter and replicate human thought. . . . Breathtaking is the existence of the Christian Transhumanist Association, which claims “the intentional use of technology, coupled with following Christ, will empower us to become more human.” Christian transhumanists, like Jeanine Thweatt-Bates, tend toward open theism and process theologies, which see God as developing. Shatzer wisely responds, “We must resist liturgies of control, not because God is open and risky but because God is in control and we are not.”

The belief that software minds can be created by mindfiles, a digitized database of one's life, in order to create a mind clone, involves a serious misunderstanding and underestimation of human intelligence. But such is fallen man's quest for immortality apart from the Christ of Scripture. Shatzer's critique focuses on the danger of reducing human intelligence to digital technology. Transhumanism “and its views on artificial intelligence are built on material-

ist approaches on what it means to be human.” AGI assumes materialism and is thus doomed not only to failure but to causing much damage. To ignore the invisible or spiritual aspect of human intelligence guarantees that human intelligence can never be duplicated by AGI. Furthermore, depending on artificial intelligence, like Paro the robot companion for the elderly, and Siri, will tend to disengage us from real human interaction.⁴⁸

The Wonder of Human Nature

My son during his early years in college once challenged me to distinguish between being present virtually and face-to-face. I responded that because something is difficult to exhaustively define does not mean it is not real. The human person is like that, “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). However, there is much that we can say to describe the uniqueness of human beings. Weizenbaum observes that modern man has “an utterly irrational confidence in the calculability of reality.”⁴⁹

Scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi's (1891–1976) concept of “tacit knowledge” was the knowledge that people have that cannot easily be put into words. It is intuitive, like the knowledge of riding a bicycle. Interestingly, that example involves embodied existence as well as invisible sensibilities mediated by physical nature. In skiing and other sports, we refer to that as muscle memory; but it involves the whole person, something impossible for computers or even robots. Scientific knowing is not the only way of knowing. It is empirical (assuming physical reality and human observation) and hypothetical, always subject to alteration. The personal touch is something that can never be replicated by AI, a computer, or a robot—they have no soul. No computer or robot can hug a grieving person.

Going peopleless is a very dangerous trend

⁴⁸ Gregory E. Reynolds, “Imago Hominus: Our Brave New World,” *Ordained Servant* 29 (2020): 150–154, https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=846.

⁴⁹ Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason*, 14.

in the modern West. We regularly see proposals that advise going peopleless. The common ones replace the cashier with self-service check out. We recently went to a new fast-food store where there was only a manager, but everything was done through electronic ordering. More extreme proposals have asked if mothers can be replaced by robots or doctors by bots. The face-to-face presence of human beings is irreplaceable. We underestimate the importance of the simple human encounters with people at the bank and store.

Thomas Fuchs, the Karl Jaspers Professor of Philosophy and Psychiatry at Heidelberg University in Germany, calls for a “new, embodied humanism.”⁵⁰ The subtitle of his article is “Why Modern Man Yearns to Be Replaced, Fantasizes of Being the One to Do It, and How We Can Stay Human Instead.” He offers three principles to realize “How We Can Stay Human Instead.”

The first is, “You Are Not a Computer.” Stop thinking of yourself in mechanistic terms. Unlike artificial systems, we have relevance, meaning, significance, and self-awareness. “Artificial intelligence is not superior to us at all, because its performance is limited to narrowly defined tasks. . . . So there is no reason for Promethean shame or feelings of inferiority in view of our machines.”⁵¹ As Christians we counter the mechanistic anthropology with our being made in God’s image and in our new identity in Christ.

Second is, “The Bodily Presence of Others.” “We learn empathy only in bodily contact with others. . . . Only with the sense of touch do we literally enter into *contact* with the world and with others.” The touchless society of the COVID-19 shutdowns was disastrous, exacerbating the already serious epidemic of loneliness. Virtual presence is an illusion.⁵²

50 Thomas Fuchs, “Narcissistic Depressive Technoscience: Why Modern Man Yearns to Be Replaced, Fantasizes of Being the One to Do It, and How We Can Stay Human Instead,” *The New Atlantis* (Spring 2024): 88.

51 Fuchs, “Narcissistic Depressive Technoscience,” 90.

52 Fuchs, “Narcissistic Depressive Technoscience,” 91–2.

Finally is “Life Among the Living.” This involves our embeddedness in the larger life of the world of humans. Conviviality must be our condition. “Bodily presence and communication do not only consist in the exchange of information, as in the digital world, but in alert listening with the visible expression of attention, expectation, or confirmation.”⁵³ The Christian chiefly realizes these last two principles in the church of the living God.

“Face” is used 382 times in the *English Standard Version*. In the Bible, the face is most often referred to as a synecdoche representing the most intimate level of personal presence. The face is a revelation of the person, a window to the human soul. “Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man’s wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed” (Eccl. 8:1). The absence of face-to-face presence may cause grief similar to death. This is evident in the departure of Paul from the Ephesian elders, “being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship” (Acts 20:38). Were the apostle John alive today, I imagine him writing 2 John 12 in this way, “Though I have much to communicate to you, I would rather not use email or my smart phone. Instead, I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete.”⁵⁴

The goal of redemptive history involves Christ’s and our personal presence. The consummate reality for the Christian will be seeing the face of Jesus Christ in resurrection glory. The transfiguration foreshadowed the coming glory reflected in the face of Jesus: “And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light” (Matt. 17:2). Paul looks forward to the final glory, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully,

53 Fuchs, “Narcissistic Depressive Technoscience,” 93–4.

54 Gregory E. Reynolds, “The Importance of Personal Presence in Ministry and Life,” *Ordained Servant* 21 (2012): 20–26.

even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). John reflects the same hope: “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads” (Rev. 22:4). There is no better antidote to the electronic dispersion of our day than the counter-environment of the church created by the Word of the good and great shepherd.

Not Just Tools: What Must Christians Do to Navigate AI?

Jacques Ellul, who spent his life studying the subject of technology, gives this helpful definition from the “Note to the Reader” in *The Technological Society*: “Technique is the totality of methods, rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity.”⁵⁵ The phrase “absolute efficiency” is intentionally pejorative. Efficiency is one of the principal gods in the pantheon of modern technology. Ellul goes on to say, “We are conditioned by something new: technological civilization.” Fatalism regarding technology is not inevitable unless each person

abdicates his responsibilities with regard to values. . . . Awareness of the dangers and divine intervention offer the only hope for mankind. . . . At stake is our very life, . . . each of us, in his own life, must seek ways of resisting and transcending technological determinants. . . . We must look at it dialectically, and say that man is indeed determined, but that it is open to him to overcome necessity, and that this *act* is freedom. . . . In the modern world, the most dangerous form of determinism is the technological phenomenon. It is not a question of getting rid of it, but, by an act of freedom, of transcending it.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (emphasis in original) (Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), xxv; first published in French in 1954 as *La Technique: L'enjeu du siècle*, “the stake of the century.”

⁵⁶ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, xxviii–xxxiii.

In sum, we must resist the new god of “efficiency” along with the instrumental materialist assumptions of modernity which began with Enlightenment genius Francis Bacon (1561–1626). The more we worship these twin gods, the more our humanity is eroded and threatened.

So many commentators, Christians and others, refer to LLMs (large language models) as just tools. Media ecology forces us to ask, “But is that all they are?” No, they are extensions of man altering our relationships and our social spaces, and in different ways changing our ways of seeing the world, our perceptions. “The ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.”⁵⁷ Joshua Meyrowitz points to the sociological “situationist” paradigm of Erving Goffman: “The situational analysis offered here describes how electronic media affects social behavior—not through the power of their messages but by reorganizing social settings in which people interact and by weakening the once strong relationship between physical place and social place.”⁵⁸

Just as human language understanding requires context, so all media are imbedded in the context of human culture. The data used by AI is ultimately embedded in human thinking and living, not computers. How does AI change us in the case of LLMs? The modern world makes idols out of technology. This is precisely what Psalms 115 and 135 address. “Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them” (Ps. 115:8; Ps. 135:18). Why do we do this? Because we seek solutions to life’s problems without the true and living God. This is the would-be independence of autonomous man invoked in Eden by our father Adam.

Various Assessments

Within the past few years, we have seen a wide range of opinions about the value of AI. They appear within the spectrum of dystopian and

⁵⁷ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 8.

⁵⁸ Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (Oxford University Press, 1985), ix.

utopian. Given our fallen situation, the nature of humans, and the fact that the world in which we live is God's, he is in sovereign control of history, including the creations of man and their use. It is remarkable that the most ardent dystopian voices have come from some of the creators of AI. They remind me of a verse a techy friend sent me: "So Joshua burned Ai and made it forever a heap of ruins, as it is to this day" (Josh. 8:28).

The utopian cheerleaders have been as ardent as the naysayers. They range from the general category of those who believe that technology can solve every human problem to the narrower group of transhumanists who believe that technology can transcend human nature in its present state. At least the latter acknowledges the imperfection of humanity. But they deny the historic fall of Adam and have a soulless materialistic view of human nature. A faulty anthropology is the main problem with both the dystopian and utopian assessments. C. S. Lewis understood this problem as evidenced by his famous critique of the English educational system in *The Abolition of Man* (1947). His Christian doctrine of man reflected the centrality of biblical ethics as universal attributes to human nature.

One of the texts in question, *The Green Book* (a book promoting relativism),

and its kind is to produce what may be called Men without Chests. It is an outrage that they should be commonly spoken of as Intellectuals. This gives them the chance to say that he who attacks them attacks Intelligence. It is not so. . . . You can hardly open a periodical without coming across the statement that what our civilization needs is more 'drive', or dynamism, or self-sacrifice, or 'creativity'. In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.⁵⁹

Lewis enjoined followers of Christ to live as people with chests, hearts filled with God's truth.

Are There Benefits, Liabilities, and Limits to Artificial Intelligence?

Independent consultant and adjunct professor of Engineering at George Mason University, Thomas Fowler, concludes his article exploring the lack of self-consciousness in AI systems:

Newer computer systems will tackle more complicated but still well-defined tasks, which will likewise displace some types of workers. AI is suited to tasks that can be narrowly defined and implemented algorithmically. Tasks that require spontaneous decision-making in uncertain environments—in other words, most tasks—are very ill suited to it.⁶⁰

I was intending to look at four areas in which distinguishing between the benefits and liabilities is important: education, healthcare, finance, and intellectual property. There is too much to be said to cover these in this article. To the extent that the human element and personal presence is diminished in each of these areas, it constitutes serious liabilities. That being said, well-defined tasks may be considerably aided by limited and well-crafted ASI (artificial special intelligence) databases. In this way they can enhance human experience. But I will briefly consider education, especially creative writing.

In the discipline of creative writing there is a tendency for AI to create major problems like plagiarism, which diminishes human thoughtfulness and creativity. In the most recent Fall 2025 bulletin of Phillips Exeter Academy, Tim Horvath, an instructor in English, made a very important and telling experiment with his students. The course "What Artifice; Whose Intelligence? AI through a Literary Lens" challenged students to determine which one of three stories was written by a human being. Sam Altman, CEO of Open AI, boasted that they had created a new model that was good

59 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (Macmillan, 1957), 16.

60 Thomas Fowler, "AI Doesn't Know What It's Doing," *First Things* (April 2025): 35–36.

at creative writing. The story from the Altman AI used the amazing phrase “a democracy of ghosts.” It was discovered that this phrase came from Vladimir Nabokov’s 1957 novel *Pnin*. While this proves one of the great weaknesses of AI, giving the illusion of human creativity, it also undermines the initiative for human actual creativity. The students responded to the difficulty they had discerning the purely humanly written story: “If AI can write like this, we’re doomed.” The instructor concluded, “The algorithms and I are no strangers. And yet, as we hurtle into the Brave New World, I wonder if the most underrated technology is the brake. . . . When it comes to writing and making art, we’re talking about the *making of meaning itself*.”⁶¹ AI can discern words, but it can neither perceive nor create meaning.

Cybergnosticism

In chapter 1, “Idolatry as a Critical Paradigm,” of my 2001 book *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures* I deal briefly with a cyberspace version of Gnosticism in a section titled “The Gnostic Tendency: An Escape with a Twist.”⁶²

Gnosticism (with a capital “G”) of the second century represents a specific kind of philosophical religion with specific concepts that perverted historic Christianity. *Webster’s New World Dictionary and Thesaurus* gives a succinct definition:

an occult salvational system, heterodox and syncretistic, stressing gnosis as essential, viewing matter as evil, and variously combining ideas derived especially from mythology, ancient Greek philosophy, ancient religions, and, eventually, from Christianity.⁶³

What I shall call the gnostic impulse is the more general tendency characterized by the immanentism of post-Kantian thought. In his

idolatrous propensity, post-Kantian man seeks transcendence by creating a mental pseudo-transcendence. The quest to escape reality as well as the quest to redeem it by the imposition of a utopian scheme are both the outworking of the gnostic impulse. While the results of the escapist version, such as the Heaven’s Gate cult, may be troubling, it is the latter expression which affects us more pervasively. The self-anointed seek to impose schemes like Marxism on the benighted masses. The quest for perfection through a plan other than the historical plan of salvation revealed by God in his Word is the tendency of Gnosticism. This is a quest to overcome the finite limits of creatures in space-time history. Never was a technology more suitable to such aspirations than cyberspace.

The electronic revolution displays a strong tendency toward what Os Guinness calls “Cybergnosticism.”⁶⁴ McLuhan feared that the great tendency of the global village would be “discarnate man. . . . The discarnate TV user, with a strong bias toward fantasy, dispenses with the real world . . .”⁶⁵ In *Understanding Media* McLuhan observes:

Language as the technology of human extension, whose powers of division and separation we know so well, may have been the “Tower of Babel” by which men sought to scale the highest heavens. Today computers hold out the promise of a means of instant translation of any code or language into any other code or language. The computer, in short, promises by technology a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity.⁶⁶

There are recent examples within mainline Protestantism, as well as in the general culture, of the resurgence of ancient Gnosticism, with the “re-imagining” of God in the form of a woman

61 Tim Horvath, “Artificial Intelligence,” *The Exeter Bulletin* (Fall 2025): 16–17.

62 Gregory Edward Reynolds, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures*, 56–58.

63 Reynolds, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures*, 56.

64 Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don’t Think and What to Do about It* (Baker, 1994), 129.

65 Marshall McLuhan, “A Last Look at the Tube,” in *Marshall McLuhan: The Man and His Message*, ed. George Sanderson and Frank Macdonald (Fulcrum, 1989) 197.

66 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw-Hill, 1964), 80.

and the popularity of the writings of Elaine Pagels's *The Gnostic Gospels*.⁶⁷ I do not think it is accidental that The First Church in Cyberspace, founded in 1994 and still on the internet, is an invention of the Presbyterian Church in the USA, in which much of this re-imagining is going on. Pagel's latest book *Miracles and Wonders: The Historical Mystery of Jesus*⁶⁸ will be reviewed in *Ordained Servant* in January 2026 by Shane Lems. The title of his review tells it all: "No Miracles, No Wonder: Review of a Recent Rationalist Critique of the New Testament."

Conclusion

The quest for AGI (artificial general intelligence) is a dangerous chimera, as we have seen. But the waste of money and talent is secondary to the reductionist anthropology that it assumes. The real usefulness of AI is in specific applications of ASI. Perhaps after the AGI superintelligence hype proves less than advertised, a renewed appreciation for HI (human intelligence) will emerge. Why do computer scientists wish to supersede human intelligence? Because they sense that we are imperfect. Excellent point—we are. But how can the imperfect create the perfect? AGI seeks the impossible whereas ASI deals with real world problems.

Well designed, focused applications (ASI) with carefully curated large language data seem to be the best way for AI to benefit humanity. But the hubris animating the quest to duplicate and then supersede human intelligence will live on until the day of judgment.

When using AI, we should remember that the data all came from imperfect human intelligence (HI); AI is, in a highly complex way, remixing data from large sources. Once we think that AI has a soul or is a person, we have been seduced by a dangerous illusion. This, as we have seen, has been a problem since the early history of AI. It is mimicking human speech. Weizenbaum

was shocked to observe how people became emotionally attached to his ELIZA program over sixty years ago.⁶⁹

We must also remember that some of this information is copyrighted; so intellectual property is being stolen if the thoughts and quotes are not in the category of fair use. Hopefully this problem will be sorted out over time.

The novelist David Foster Wallace, who committed suicide in 2008, told *Rolling Stone* during his book tour for his landmark novel *Infinite Jest*:

As the Internet grows, and as our ability to be linked up [grows] . . . at a certain point, we're gonna have to build some machinery, inside our *guts*, to help us deal with this. Because the technology is just gonna get better and better and better and better. And it's gonna get easier and easier, and more and more convenient, and more and more pleasurable, to be alone with images on a screen, given to us by people who do not love us but want our money. Which is all right. In low doses, right? But if that's the basic main staple of your diet, you're gonna die. In a meaningful way, you're going to die.⁷⁰

Wallace said that *Infinite Jest* was essentially about loneliness. Loneliness is an epidemic created by our technologies. The greatest problem with AI and the entire electronic environment is its tendency to dehumanize, to remove human presence from our culture, our lives. It will never completely succeed but will continue to do great damage.

Meanwhile, we can enjoy the benefits of limited AI.

These practices of hope depend on the recognition that although textual technologies are not neutral, neither are they determinative. As Neil Postman reminds us, "no medium is

67 Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (Vintage, 1989).

68 Elaine Pagels, *Miracles and Wonders: The Historical Mystery of Jesus* (Doubleday, 2025).

69 Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason*, 6–7.

70 <http://eriklundegaard.com/item/in-1996-david-foster-wallace-already-knew-the-dangers-of-the-internet>.

excessively dangerous if its users understand what the dangers are. . . . This is an instance in which the asking of the questions is sufficient. To ask is to break the spell.” Asking these questions breaks the aura of inevitability that surrounds powerful new technologies and enables us to maintain “an epistemological and psychic distance from any technology, so that it always appears somewhat strange, never inevitable, never natural.”⁷¹

A peopleless world is no world at all. Christians must be alert to ways that our inventions are a liability to our humanity as God’s image-bearers and employ the ways in which they may enhance it. ☺

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⁷¹ Jeffrey Bilbro, *Words for Conviviality: Media Technologies and Practices of Hope* (Baylor University Press, 2024), 228. Quoted from Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), 161, and *Technopoly* (1985), 185.

Servant Literature

Jesus, Stab Me in the Heart! Flannery O'Connor at 100

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
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by Danny Olinger

"Mrs. Greenleaf!" She shrieked, "what's happened?"

Mrs. Greenleaf raised her head. Her face was a patchwork of dirt and tears and her small eyes, the color of two field peas, were red-rimmed and swollen, but her expression was as composed as a bulldog's. She swayed back and forth on her hands and knees and groaned, "Jesus, Jesus."

Mrs. May winced. She thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom. She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true. "What is the matter with you?" she asked sharply.

"You broken my healing," Mrs. Greenleaf said, waving her aside. "I can't talk to you until I finish."

Mrs. May stood, bent forward, her mouth open and her stick raised off the ground as if she were not sure what she wanted to strike with it.

"Oh Jesus, stab me in the heart!" Mrs. Greenleaf shrieked. "Jesus, stab me in the heart!" and she fell back flat in the dirt, a huge human mound, her legs and arms spread out as if she were trying to wrap them around the earth.

Mrs. May felt as furious and helpless as if she had been insulted by a child. "Jesus," she said, drawing herself back, "would be ashamed of you. He would tell you to get up from there this instant and go wash your children's clothes!" and she turned and walked off as fast as she could.²

March 25, 2025, marks the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Flannery O'Connor, the great twentieth-century fiction writer. When she died from lupus at the age of thirty-nine on August 3, 1964, her literary genius was widely heralded. In an unprecedented ten-year period, she had been the first-prize winner of the O. Henry Award for best short story for "Greenleaf" (1957), "Everything That Rises Must Converge" (1963), and "Revelation" (1965), and the second-place winner for "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (1954) and "A Circle in the Fire" (1955). Her 1953 short story that did not win an O. Henry Award, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," is perhaps the most well-known short story in American history. *The Complete Stories*, a collection of her published and unpublished short stories, won the 1972 National Book Award for fiction, the first time that the award had been given posthumously.

Still, if anything, O'Connor's fame and influence has only risen in the decades since her death. In 2002, R. Neil Scott's magisterial 1,061-paged (3 lbs, 5 oz) *Flannery O'Connor: An Annotated Reference Guide to Criticism* summarized—by my count—seventy-five books, 290 doctoral dissertations, and 1,695 articles, chapters, and essays on O'Connor and her fiction.³ The appearance of hundreds of post-2002 articles and reviews on O'Connor on JSTOR.org alone, much less numerous new books and a 2023 Ethan Hawke-directed O'Connor biographical motion

2 Flannery O'Connor, "Greenleaf," in Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (Noonday, 1995), 316–17.

3 R. Neil Scott, *Flannery O'Connor: An Annotated Reference Guide to Criticism* (Timberlane Books, 2002). Scott also listed author and title information for 521 master's theses, 537 representative reviews, six motion pictures and videos based on her works, and 24 reviews of the 1979 John Huston-directed film of *Wise Blood*.

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1162.

picture, *Wildcat*, testifies that interest in O'Connor has not waned.

This is even more fascinating in light of the fact that O'Connor is arguably the first distinguished writer of fiction in American history whose work is Christian in form and substance. In making this claim about O'Connor, Ralph Wood notes that Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, Melville, Poe, Hawthorne, Twain, James, Frost, and Faulkner were heterodox at best, atheist or even nihilist at worst.⁴ According to Wood, O'Connor's imagination was shaped by the scandalous claims of the gospel. That is, she was convinced that God had uniquely and definitely identified himself and his will for the world in Jesus and the church.

O'Connor made clear that this was her intention in writing. She declared,

Let me make no bones about it: I write from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. Nothing is more repulsive to me than the idea of myself setting up a little universe of my own choosing and propounding a little immoralistic message. I write with a solid belief in *all* the Christian dogmas.⁵

But, contrary to literary expectation with such a stated goal, she did not make her protagonists attractive as she pressed these claims. Her protagonists are the poor, broken in mind and body, rarely happy, and those who possess, at best, a distorted sense of spiritual purpose. They also commit terrible acts—they murder, steal, deceive, and display racist attitudes—that do not give the

reader a great assurance of joy in this life.⁶ When she informed Sally and Robert Fitzgerald that she was dedicating her volume of short stories, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, to them, she said, "Nine stories about original sin, with my compliments."⁷

Robert Drake believes this acknowledgment of the reality of sin is what elevates O'Connor's stories. "In her own way, she does seem to have man's number—and the world's. People *are* often as she says; and they *do* often express themselves, in violent words and actions, as she represents them, and not just in darkest Georgia."⁸

And yet, O'Connor does not look down upon the undeserving lot of murderers and racists, the twisted and neurotic, the guilt-ridden and God-haunted that comprise the heart of her stories. Rather, she makes them serve as the spiritual catalysts of the conflict in each narrative. *The Color Purple* author, Alice Walker, comments,

It has puzzled some of her readers and annoyed the Catholic church that in her stories not only does good not triumph, it is usually not present. Seldom are there choices, and God never intervenes to help anyone win. To O'Connor, in fact, Jesus was God, and he won only by losing.⁹

But if O'Connor annoyed the Catholic church as Walker posits, Michael Bruner argues that "O'Connor's God was mainline liberal

4 In pointing out O'Connor's pioneering as an American writer who was Christian in a substantive sense, Wood adds that "T.S. Eliot doesn't count, since he became Christian after becoming a British citizen." Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Church Made Visible* (Baylor University Press, 2024), 7.

5 Flannery O'Connor to Shirley Abbott, March 17, 1956, *Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), 147. In "The Fiction Writer and His Country," O'Connor made a similar declaration. She said, "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that 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." Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1969), 32.

6 William Goyen in the *New York Times Book Review* (May 18, 1952) described O'Connor's *Wise Blood* as a tale of unending vengeance in which the characters were so strange that they did not seem to belong to the human race. Richard Bernard in *Commonweal* (October 1960) states that the characters in *The Violent Bear It Away* and the world that they live in occupy the last outposts of unregenerate Protestantism.

7 Flannery O'Connor to Sally Fitzgerald, Dec. 26, 1954, *Habit of Being*, 74. Joyce Carol Oates maintains that original sin is O'Connor's constant theme, and therefore O'Connor "does not—cannot—believe in the random innocence of naturalism, which states that all men are innocent and the victims of inner or outer accidents." Joyce Carol Oates, *New Heaven, New Earth* (Vanguard, 1974), 172.

8 Robert Drake, *Flannery O'Connor, A Critical Essay* (Eerdmans, 1966), 43.

9 Alice Walker, "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (Amistad, 1983), 55.

Christianity's worst nightmare, a God you could not control, one who was neither respectable nor tame."¹⁰ That which marks theological liberalism, the goodness of man and the moral uplift of Jesus, is shattered in her stories.

O'Connor stated that her stories concerned "specifically Christ and the Incarnation, the fact that there has been a unique intervention in history. It is not a matter in these stories of Do Unto Others. That can be found in any ethical culture series. It is the fact of the Word made flesh." O'Connor then provided a specific example of her authorial intent, "As the Misfit said, 'He thrown everything off balance and it's nothing for you to do but follow Him or find some meanness.' This is the fulcrum that lifts my particular stories."¹¹

Although O'Connor believed that salvation is of the Lord, she was acutely aware of the difficulty of revealing the mystery of redemption in Christ in fiction. She maintained that "fiction is the concrete expression of mystery—mystery that is lived," but "it's almost impossible to write about supernatural Grace in fiction."¹² She also believed that she wrote "for an audience who doesn't know what grace is and don't recognize it when they see it."¹³

O'Connor's methodological solution was part literary and part theological. She took to heart Henry James's dictum that the morality of a piece of fiction depends on the *felt life* it contains.¹⁴ O'Connor argued that by showing the concrete—not by saying but showing life as it is—the writer is able to make the action described reveal as much of the mystery of life as possible.¹⁵ In this respect,

she praised James's ability to balance the elements of realism (manners) and romance (mystery).¹⁶

The theological turn that enabled her to broaden James's conception of manners and mystery was her adopting an enlarged view of the medieval church practice of the anagogical interpretation of Scripture.¹⁷ According to O'Connor, medieval theologians found three kinds of meaning in the literal level of Scripture, "one they called allegorical, in which one fact pointed to another; one they called tropological, or moral, which had to do with what should be done; and one they called anagogical, which had to do with the Divine life and our participation in it."¹⁸

Thus, in composing her stories, O'Connor looked for a single image "that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye but believed in by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everyone sees."¹⁹ When Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* arrives in the city of Taulkinham, the sky functions as a description of the visible things that reflect the divine character of creation, that there is a God that created all things visible and invisible. "The black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that looked like scaffolding and depth on depth behind it were thousands of stars that seemed to

10 Michael M. Bruner, *A Subversive Gospel* (IVP, 2017), 76.

11 Flannery O'Connor to Cecil Dawkins, June 19, 1957, *The Habit of Being*, 227.

12 Flannery O'Connor to Eileen Hall, March 10, 1956, *Habit of Being*, 144.

13 Flannery O'Connor to "A," April 4, 1958, *Habit of Being*, 275.

14 Flannery O'Connor to "A," Sept. 15, 1955, *Habit of Being*, 103.

15 Robert Fitzgerald, "The Countryside and the True Country," in *Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Harold Bloom (Chelsea House,

1986), 20.

16 O'Connor told Betty Hester that she feared being asked in public what she had read and been influenced by. If asked, she said that she intended "to look dark and mutter, 'Henry James Henry James'—which would be the verist lie." Adding that such a statement would be the "verist lie" is perhaps a clever nod to another of O'Connor's literary influences, Dostoevsky, who said, "We consider the verist lies as truth and demand the same lies from others." O'Connor further told Hester, "I've read almost all of Henry James—from a sense of High Duty and because when I read James I feel something is happening to me, in slow motion but happening nonetheless." Flannery O'Connor to "A," Aug. 28, 1955, *Habit of Being*, 98–99.

17 In the Greek, ἀναγωγή (*anagōgē*) conveyed an elevated sense, a revelation of mystery. Horton Davies, "Anagogical Signals in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," *Thought*, vol. 55, no. 219 (December 1980), 428.

18 Flannery O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners*, 72.

19 Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mystery and Manners*, 42.

be moving very slowly as if they were about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete.” However, in Taulkinham, “No one was paying any attention to the sky. The stores in Taulkinham stayed open on Thursday nights so that people could have an extra opportunity to see what was for sale.”²⁰

But it is not just the people of Taulkinham who are oblivious to the sky. Hazel is also. After his car is fixed, he tests it by driving it down the road under the sky that “was just a little lighter blue than his suit, clear and even, with only one cloud in it, a large blinding white one with curls and a beard.” The imagery suggests the glory-cloud in the Exodus, but Hazel’s gaze is elsewhere. In his Church Without Christ, “nobody with a good car needs to be justified.” But after the car will not start, a stranger “whose liquid slate-blue eyes duplicate the sky” appears, listens without comment to Hazel’s gospel, helps him restart the Essex with a push, and gives him some gas, only to refuse payment for his help or gas. The car running again, Hazel drives on, but “the blinding white cloud had turned into a bird with long thin wings,”²¹ and like the truck the unnamed man was driving, “was disappearing in the opposite direction.”

O’Connor also brought her anagogical vision to bear in an action of grace, in her words, “a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make.”²² This action of God’s grace in the midst of life lived, and the moment of awareness for those that the grace touches, is what counted for O’Connor in every story. She said, “It seems to me that all good stories are about conversion, about a character’s changing,” and what changes a character is “the

action of grace.”²³ The grace manifests itself violently, often subversively, in her characters who are without hope and without God. Among the conversions and indications of potential conversion, narcissistic O. E. Parker (“Parker’s Back”) crashes a tractor into a tree, comes to an end of himself, endures suffering, and is tearfully grateful. Mrs. May (“Greenleaf”), a works-righteousness advocate, is pursued by a tormented lover, a bull, who stabs her in the heart, and she sees the light of another realm. Asbury (“The Enduring Chill”), a lazy, ignorant, and conceited young man who believes he is dying, has his eyes opened to the terrifying descent of the Holy Ghost.²⁴

In *The Violent Bear It Away*, Tarwater is faced with the life-defining choice of following the rationalistic, non-believing path of his uncle Rayber or the violent faith-driven path of his great-uncle, Old Tarwater. Tarwater

clenched his fist. He stood like one condemned, waiting at the spot of execution. Then the revelation came, silent, implacable, direct as a bullet. He did not look into the eyes of any fiery beast or see a burning bush. He only knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared in him.²⁵

This revelation brought Tarwater to see that his only hope was in “trudging into the distance in the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus.” For O’Connor, following after Jesus is a subversive act.

²⁰ Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, in *Collected Works* (The Library of America, 1988), 19.

²¹ In Matthew 3:16, Mark 1:10, and Luke 3:22 the dove descending on Jesus is a sign of the Holy Spirit.

²² Flannery O’Connor, “On Her Own Work,” in *Mystery and Manners*, 111.

²³ Flannery O’Connor to “A,” Aug. 28, 1955, *Habit of Being*, 275.

²⁴ O’Connor also wrote stories in which the protagonist is seemingly condemned, although ambiguity exists. Mr. Shiftlet (“The Life You Save May Be Your Own”) values his freedom so much that he would rather go to the devil than stay with his wife of one day, the innocent and angelic Lucynell. Greedy Mr. Fortune (“A View of the Woods”), after killing his granddaughter in a rage because she identifies herself with her father, finds that the machinery of modern progress is not able to impart life. But Mr. Fortune’s last glance is one where he sees his vanquished mirror-image in the person of his granddaughter.

²⁵ O’Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*, in *Collected Works*, 388.

Aesthetically, it is a bleeding act; morally, it is a stinking act; and intellectually, it is a mad act.²⁶

Readers recoil at how Tarwater can be seen as following Jesus when he subsequently drowns Bishop. O'Connor's plea to them is that they concentrate on the meaning of actions and not just count the dead bodies in her stories.²⁷ The murderous Misfit in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" in this sense served as O'Connor's surrogate when he utters, "She would have been a good woman, if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." O'Connor remarked that the action of grace occurred just earlier when "the Grandmother recognizes the Misfit as one of her own children and reaches out to touch him. It's the moment of grace for her anyway—a silly old woman—but it leads him to shoot her. This moment of grace excites the devil to frenzy."²⁸

Harold Bloom reacted to O'Connor's contention concerning the Misfit. Bloom writes, "Secular critic as I am, I need to murmur: 'Surely that does make goodness a touch too strenuous?'"²⁹ For Bloom, O'Connor's greatness is diminished by her commitment to the spiritual. He says, "Her pious admirers to the contrary, O'Connor would have bequeathed us even stronger novels and stories, of the eminence of Faulkner's, if she had been able to restrain her spiritual tendentiousness."³⁰ It is safe to say that O'Connor would not have cared what

Bloom thought. She had no interest in hedging on her Christian commitment as an author. In Robert Fitzgerald's words, O'Connor's "talent is Pauline in abiding not the lukewarm."³¹

Her realism, when read today with its unfiltered use of the racist language that she heard living in the South, and at times used herself, is as uncomfortable now to read as it was during the racially sensitive times in which she lived. In 1955 she authored an account of a racist, Mr. Head, and his grandson, Nelson. The story detailed their prejudices and their condescending treatment of blacks in a visit to Atlanta. For the title, "The Artificial Nigger," she picked the object central to the action of grace in the story, Mr. Head and Nelson coming upon a broken Negro statue, which Mr. Head sees and shouts, "An artificial nigger!" O'Connor commented to Betty Hester that "there is nothing that screams out the tragedy of the South like what my uncle calls 'nigger statuary.'"³² O'Connor made clear her intention to Ben Griffith: "What I had in mind to suggest with the artificial nigger was the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all."³³ Rightly or wrongly, O'Connor believed that if she had sanitized the title, the goal of the story, the power of the death of Jesus to turn racist intention into antiracist redemption, would have been lost.³⁴

26 Bruner, *A Subversive Gospel*, 9.

27 O'Connor, *Habit of Being*, 275. John Desmond, *Risen Sons: Flannery O'Connor's Vision of History* (University of Georgia, 1987), 118.

28 Flannery O'Connor to Andrew Lytle, Feb. 4, 1960, *Good Things Out of Nazareth*, ed. Benjamin B. Alexander (Convergent, 2019), 95.

29 Harold Bloom, "Introduction," in *Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Harold Bloom (Chelsea House, 1986), 3.

30 Bloom, "Introduction," 8. For different perspectives: John Millis maintains that "while no one's salvation depends on getting Faulkner right, we read Flannery O'Connor knowing that the stakes are ultimate." See, Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Eerdmans, 2005), 160; Joyce Carol Oates states that O'Connor's "death in the summer of 1964 marked not simply the end of a career of a powerful descendent of Faulkner whose individual achievements are at times superior to his, but the end of the career of one of the greatest religious writers of modern times." Oates, *New Heaven, New Earth*, 145.

31 Fitzgerald, "Countryside," 26.

32 O'Connor to "A," Sept. 6, 1955, in *Habit of Being*, 100.

33 O'Connor to Ben Griffith, May 4, 1955, in *Habit of Being*, 78. When John Crowe Ransom, editor of the *Kenyon Review*, mildly inquired about O'Connor changing the title, O'Connor replied if the title would embarrass the magazine that he could of course change it. However, she personally didn't think it should be called anything but "The Artificial Nigger." If he did change it, she asked that he call it "The Good Guide." Flannery O'Connor to John Crowe Ransom, January 12, 1955, *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 23 (1994–95), 181–82. O'Connor's suggestion to Ransom mirrors her use of the adjective "Good" in the titles of her stories, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and "Good Country People." In keeping with the overarching theme of original sin, Mr. Head is not a "good" guide for Nelson despite Mr. Head's opinion of himself; the Misfit is not a "good" man despite the Grandmother's declaration; Manley Pointer is not "good" country people despite Mrs. Hopewell and Hulga's evaluations.

34 Wood, *Christ-Haunted South*, 144. Alice Walker lived for a year as a teenager near the O'Connor farm in Milledgeville, Georgia. In "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor," Walker argues that "essential" O'Connor is

In multiple stories O'Connor lamented those who sought social reform (Shepherd in "The Lamé Shall Enter First," Asbury in "The Enduring Chill") but ignored the reality and consequences of sin. Original sin, especially its power, infected not just the racially sinful but also the racially righteous (Julian in "Everything That Rises Must Converge"). Thus, she grew impatient with those who believed that integration was the magic cure to all the problems in the South.³⁵ For O'Connor, sin is ultimately the problem, and the only cure for sin is the cross of Jesus Christ.

A practicing Roman Catholic, O'Connor nevertheless sparsely presented Catholicism in her fiction. This is not to state that her Catholicism did not inform her fiction. She looked to the teachings of Thomas Aquinas and Augustine of Hippo as foundational for her art, and she relied upon doctrine as a helpful aid in preserving mystery.³⁶ But the case can be made that despite her Thomistic philosophical underpinnings, the essential cast of her fiction when read is more Augustinian than Thomistic. In her stories, she incessantly places limits on one's ability to reason to God and focuses on faith as the gift of God.³⁷

"not about race at all, which is why it is so refreshing, coming, as it does out of a *racial* culture. If it can be said to be 'about' anything, then it is 'about' prophets and prophecy, 'about' revelation, and 'about' the impact of supernatural grace on human beings who don't have a chance of spiritual growth without it" (53). After Loyola of Maryland University removed O'Connor's name from one of its dormitories in 2020, Walker was the first name appearing on the July 31, 2020, "Letter in Protest of the Cancelling of Flannery O'Connor," which was signed by over one hundred English scholars and religious leaders. Walker said, "We must honor Flannery for growing. Hide nothing of what she was, and use that to teach." The "Letter in Protest" acknowledges that "O'Connor may—and does—make some racially insensitive statements in her private correspondence. There is no excusing this. But in her stories her better angels rules. She holds herself—all of her racist white characters—and all white people—up for judgment."

35 Wood, *Christ-Haunted South*, 110.

36 O'Connor stated, "I have heard it said that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to the writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth. Actually, it forces the storyteller to observe. It is not a set of rules which fixes what he sees in the world. It affects his writing primarily by guaranteeing his respect for mystery." O'Connor, "Fiction Writer," 31.

37 Attesting that the Augustinian emphasis of O'Connor trumps her Thomistic emphasis, Frederick Asals writes, "Reconciliation

One of O'Connor's major laments against Protestantism, however, was what she saw around her in the South, its individualism and neglect of the church. In *Wise Blood*, when Hazel Motes introduces himself to Mrs. Flood as a minister of the Church Without Christ, she asks whether that church was Protestant or Catholic. Hazel replies that it is Protestant. In a letter O'Connor said, "Let me assure you that no one but a Catholic could have written *Wise Blood* even though it is a book about a kind of Protestant saint. It reduces Protestantism to the twin ultimate absurdities of The Church Without Christ or the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ, which no pious Protestant would do."³⁸

Living in the South and seeking to reflect the churchgoers of that region, O'Connor's most important religious characters are almost always Protestant. Negatively, she scorned Protestants who substituted sentimentality for recognition of sin, the necessity of Christ's death to atone, and the coming judgment. Sentimentality, which O'Connor defined as "giving to any creature more love than God gives it,"³⁹ marks particularly the Christianity of O'Connor's widows: Mrs. Cope ("A Circle in the Fire"), Mrs. May ("Greenleaf"), the grandmother ("A Good Man Is Hard to Find"), Mrs. Fox ("The Enduring Chill"), Thomas's

and synthesis, the congruity of faith and human reason, the harmonious hierarchy of the faculties—the great accommodations of Thomistic thought seem curiously irrelevant to the central experience of O'Connor's fiction; whereas Augustine's disposition of the major contraries—grace and sin, spirit and flesh, God and self, the heavenly city and the earthly—immediately evokes the tensions and dualities of her work. Frederick Asals, *Flannery O'Connor, The Imagination of Extremity* (University of Georgia, 1982), 200. Also see Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man* (University Press, 2015), 208.

38 Flannery O'Connor to Ben Griffith, Mar. 3, 1954, *Habit of Being*, 69. O'Connor added concerning *Wise Blood*, "And of course no unbeliever or agnostic could have written it because it is entirely Redemption-centered in thought."

39 Kathleen Feeley, *Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock* (University of Rutgers, 1972), 33. Feeley adds that O'Connor despised sentimentality because O'Connor believed it was "an attempted short cut to the grace of Redemption which overlooks its price" (33).

mother (“The Comforts of Home”), and Julian’s mother (“Everything that Rises Must Converge”).

O’Connor’s preoccupation with Southern Protestants, however, was not always negative. She declared, “I am more and more impressed with the amount of Catholicism that fundamentalist Protestantism have been able to retain. Theologically our differences with them are on the nature of the Church, not on the nature of God or our obligations to Him.”⁴⁰ In “The River,” the fundamentalist preacher Bevel Summers is portrayed as one whose faith and purpose centers wholly on Jesus Christ.

If many hold O’Connor in esteem because of the skill by which she dramatized Christian themes in a realistic manner, others enjoy reading her for her humor. O’Connor knew that her rendering of reality with all its horrors that come from the fall into sin, a very unpopular theme, had to be made bearable, and comedy was one way that she accomplished this.⁴¹ Ralph Wood, the preeminent O’Connor critic of the last half-century, heard O’Connor speak at the college he attended, East Texas State. Those gathered, Wood recalls, laughed raucously at O’Connor’s recalling an old lady who had written to her complaining that O’Connor’s stories had left a bad taste in her mouth. O’Connor replied to the lady that she was not supposed to eat them. But the impact upon Wood was even stronger. He confesses that it was the turning point in his academic and religious life, for “I saw in her work the integration of two worlds that I had theretofore thought to be

not only separate but opposed, even divorced: uproarious comedy and profound Christianity.”⁴²

That O’Connor’s wit and humor appeared in stories that were lined with suffering and hardship reflected the wit and perspective that she maintained in her battle with lupus, an autoimmune disorder in which the body attacks not only tissues, joints, and organs, but also the central nervous system. Despite a daily injection of corticosteroid ACTH, O’Connor constantly contracted high fevers, infections, the inability of her jaw to function, the thinning of her hair, the fattening of her face, and the failure of her joints, hipbone, and skeletal muscles.⁴³ She confessed to Betty Hester, “I have never been anywhere but sick. In a sense, sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it’s always a place where there’s no company.” She then added, “Sickness before death is a very appropriate thing and I think those who don’t have it miss one of God’s mercies.”⁴⁴ The proper measuring of the temporal and the eternal that shined through O’Connor’s life and continues with her fiction led Alice Walker to proclaim of O’Connor, “After her great stories of sin, damnation, prophecy, and revelation, the stories one reads casually in the average magazine seem to be about love and roast beef.”⁴⁵

The lasting appeal of O’Connor’s fiction is the unparalleled way that she wrote about man’s fall and dishonor. Thomas Merton stated that, when thinking of O’Connor as a writer, “I don’t think of Hemingway, or Katherine Anne Porter, or Satre, but rather of someone like Sophocles . . . I write her name with honor, for all the truth and all the craft with which she shows man’s fall and dishonor.”⁴⁶ But O’Connor’s value is also in the way that every story is an encounter with Jesus. Robert Drake asserts that Jesus is the principal

40 Carter Martin judged from an overall assessment of O’Connor’s work that she “writes from an orthodox Christian point of view but grinds no theological ax, unless the basic Christian truth of man’s fall from grace and his redemption through Christ’s sacrifice be so construed.” Carter Martin, *The True Country* (Vanderbilt, 1969), 21.

41 Frederick Asals comments that any thesis about the religious dimensions of O’Connor’s fiction cannot contain adequately “the incorrigible sense of comedy that animates and burnishes her creations everywhere . . . It overflows the borders, leaps beyond the ironic tones and satiric perceptions that may be ascribed to the prophetic stance, beyond even the caricaturing that accompanies the pressures of the ascetic action, to maintain a life of its own.” Asals, *Imagination of Extremity*, 233.

42 Wood, *Christ-Haunted South*, ix.

43 Angela Alaimo O’Donnell, *Radical Ambivalence* (Fordham University Press, 2020), 99–100.

44 O’Connor to “A,” June 28, 1956, in *Habit of Being*, 163.

45 Walker, “Beyond the Peacock,” 57.

46 O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, back jacket cover.

character “in all of Miss O’Connor’s fiction, whether offstage or, in the words and actions of her characters, very much on. And their encounter with Him is the one story that she keeps telling over and over again.”⁴⁷ This theme, and its multiple subthemes, comprises the major burden of O’Connor’s stories. It is seen in the lostness of her characters—Julian “walked along, saturated in depression, as if in the midst of his martyrdom he had lost his faith,” in “Everything That Rises Must Converge.” It is witnessed in her character’s truth-telling about God and this creation—Harper before helping to set the woods afire around Mrs. Cope’s farm declares, “Gawd owns them woods and her too,” in “A Circle in the Fire.” It is observed in her character’s secular mindset and opposition to Jesus—Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* defiantly proclaiming that in his Church Without Christ, “I’m going to preach there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgment because there wasn’t the first two. Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar.”⁴⁸ It is declared in her character’s pleas to Jesus to save—Mrs. Greenleaf face down in the dirt begging, “Jesus, stab me in the heart!”⁴⁹ in “Greenleaf.”

Confrontation with Jesus, the news of another world hid to her characters’ senses but as real as the world they experience here and now, define her stories. O’Connor’s gift was being able to communicate this without abandoning her belief that she was first and foremost a writer. “The novel,” she stated, “is an art form and when you use it for anything other than art, you pervert it.” She then added,

I didn’t make this up. I got it from St. Thomas (via Maritain) who allows that art is wholly concerned with the good of that which is made; it has no utilitarian end. If you do manage to use it successfully for social, religious,

or other purposes, it is because you made it art first.⁵⁰

And yet, she also believed that there exists a more vital world than this fallen one and that in writing she sought “to make the reader feel, in his bones if nowhere else, that something is going on here that counts. Distortion in this case is an instrument; exaggeration has a purpose, and the whole structure of the story or novel has been made what it is because of belief.”⁵¹

Fiction is not Scripture, but reading and re-reading her stories has caused me to awake and to gaze at trees—to stand amazed in the morning light at the splendor of God’s creation, and to confess silently his goodness, wisdom, and power, knowing that I am without excuse before him. It has caused me to ponder whether, in the pilgrimage that is this life, I am like the children reading comic books or the mother sleeping in the car when all around the trees are full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkle. And it has also caused me to be thankful that stalking me in this life is Jesus, the only One that ever raised the dead. ©

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50 Flannery O’Connor to Father J. H. McCown, May 9, 1956, in *Habit of Being*, 157. On O’Connor’s methodology and its implications, Ralph Wood elaborates, “She abominated the notion of the novelist as evangelist. Evangelism is what preachers should do, but what true artists do not. She totally embraced St. Thomas’s claim that art is a virtue of practical, not the moral intellect. The artist does not seek to improve the reader’s life, though this may be the salutary effect of her art. First and last, the artist seeks ‘the good of the thing made.’ Never does she set out to render an idea (not even the highest and the holiest) into fictional form. She wants, instead, to master her craft—plot, character, point of view, scene, atmosphere, etc. ‘Sink the theme’ was the motto she learned at the University of Iowa Creative Writing Workshop. In so far as a work has a ‘thesis’ at all, it must emerge silently, even if powerfully, from the work itself—never because the writer has imposed it by literary force. Thus she was willing to risk the mangling of her work by her readers. So be it.” Email correspondence, Ralph C. Wood to Danny Olinger, August 19, 2024.

51 Flannery O’Connor, “Novelist and Believer,” *Mystery and Manners*, 162.

47 Drake, *Flannery O’Connor, A Critical Essay*, 17.

48 O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, in *Collected Works*, 59.

49 O’Connor, “Greenleaf,” in *Collected Works*, 506.

Good Country People: Flannery O'Connor at 100

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by Danny Olinger

In Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People," Hulga Hopewell, a thirty-two-year-old PhD in philosophy who lives with her mother, believes that there is no God. She further believes that Christianity is a social convention that steers people into psychological slavery. When a traveling Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, arrives at the Hopewell farm, Hulga grasps the opportunity to convert Manley from belief in Christ to the reality of nothingness. In trying to seduce Manley and gain him to her side, Hulga feigns affection. Manley persuades Hulga to express her love for him. After she does, he turns out to be an absolute nihilist who finds delight in meanness to others, particularly robbing them of what they treasure in life.

O'Connor's focus on making characters nihilists, not just Hulga and Manley in "Good Country People" but also the Misfit in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," was due to what she was observing in society. She said, "If you live today you breathe in nihilism. In or out of the Church, it's the gas you breathe." She also maintained that without the "Church to fight it with or to tell me the necessity of fighting it, I would be the stinkingest logical positivist you ever saw right now."² The fight, as O'Connor saw it, was a fight about the meaning of life, whether it was found in the coming of Jesus Christ or not.

The clever twist that O'Connor employed in "Good Country People" is to make it a comic variation of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." In the latter story, the grandmother, who considers herself a "good" Christian, utilizes conventional platitudes in "good" cultural fashion. In the former story, Hulga, who considers herself a "good" nihilist, rejects all conventional platitudes in "good" nihilistic fashion.³ The result is that the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is exposed as not being a "good" Christian, and Hulga in "Good Country People" is exposed as not being a "good" nihilist.

Mrs. Freeman, Mrs. Hopewell, and Joy-Hulga

The story opens with Mrs. Freeman at the Hopewell home as she is every morning. Her black eyes never swerve when she hears anyone else talk, for she has already made her mind up on any matter, like a heavy truck going down the road. No one could convince her to admit that she is wrong on any point.

Mrs. Hopewell originally hesitated to hire Mr. Freeman as a farmhand years earlier because she was advised that Mrs. Freeman is the nosiest woman ever to walk the earth. Mrs. Hopewell, however, believes that she knows how to handle Mrs. Freeman. She includes her in everything. Mrs. Hopewell "had no bad qualities of her own but she was able to use other people's in such a constructive way that she never felt the lack."⁴

Mrs. Hopewell expresses her outlook on life in her favorite sayings, "nothing is perfect," "that is life!" and the most important, "well, other people have opinions too."⁵ She would make these statements in a tone of gentle insistence, as if no one else holds them. Her grown daughter, Joy, however, would just stare at her after the pronouncements with a look of outrage.

3 Dorothy Tuck McFarland, *Flannery O'Connor* (Frederick Unger, 1976), 35.

4 Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (Noonday Press, 1995), 272.

5 O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 273.

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1198.

2 Flannery O'Connor to "A," January 13, 1956, *Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), 97.

When Joy was ten years old, she suffered a hunting accident that resulted in the loss of her leg below the knee. The accident left her not only with a wooden leg, but also embittered. Upon becoming an adult, she legally changed her name to Hulga. “She saw it as the name of her highest creative act. One of her major triumphs was that her mother had not been able to turn her dust into Joy, but the greater one was that she had been able to turn it herself into Hulga.”⁶

Her mother would not use the name and continued to call her Joy, to which her daughter responded in a mechanical way. Mrs. Freeman, however, called her Hulga with relish, which only irritated the girl. “It was as if Mrs. Freeman’s beady steel-pointed eyes had penetrated far enough behind her face to reach some secret fact.”⁷

Hulga moved to Europe, enrolled in graduate school, and earned a PhD in philosophy. Receiving a medical diagnosis that she had not more than a decade to live, she returned to her mother’s home. On the farm her main activities were reading all day and exhibiting her distaste for nice young men. “She looked at young men *as if* she could smell their stupidity.”⁸

In complete opposition to her mother’s attachment to surface renderings through her sentimental expressions, Hulga turns to philosophical declaration to get past the surface of things to nothingness. This led to explosions of rage on Hulga’s part, in which Mrs. Hopewell had no idea why her daughter had responded the way that she did. Once at the dinner table while they were eating a meal, she had told her that a smile never hurt anyone. The daughter, her face purple and her mouth half full, stood up and said, “Woman! Do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are *not*? God!” She had cried, sinking

down again and staring at her plate, “Malebranche was right: we are not our own light. We are not our own light!”⁹

One day Mrs. Hopewell started reading a philosophy book that Joy-Hulga had left open. It spoke of science wishing to know nothing of nothing; such “after all is the strictly scientific approach to Nothing.” Mrs. Hopewell shut the book quickly and rushed out of the room as if she were having a chill.¹⁰

Manley Pointer

Into this mother-daughter clash arrives a traveling Bible salesman, Manley Pointer. Talking to Mrs. Hopewell at the front door, he observes that there is no family Bible in the Hopewell parlor. Mrs. Hopewell, who could not say that her daughter is an atheist who would not let her keep a Bible there, tells him falsely that she keeps it by her bedside, when in truth it was hidden away in the attic. Manley persists that the Bible ought to be in the parlor, but Mrs. Hopewell is just as adamant that she does not want to buy one. He then blurts out that he is just a simple country boy. His declaration pleases Mrs. Hopewell, who cries out that good country people are the salt of the earth and invites him to stay for dinner.

At the dinner table, Joy-Hulga pretends not to hear anything that Manley says, but when Manley departs the house, the two talk as they walk to the end of the road. The subject of the talk is a picnic together the next day. That night, Joy-Hulga dreams of different ways to seduce him. Her aim is

9 O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 276.

10 Ralph Wood writes, “Mrs. Hopewell is no philosopher, but she senses that she has encountered something sinister. What she does not know, of course, is that she has encountered a passage from [Martin] Heidegger’s 1929 inaugural lecture at the University of Freiburg, entitled, “What is Metaphysics?” There, as elsewhere, Heidegger argues that the whole of Western thought and life has constituted a sustained exercise in nihilism, that is, a negation of this present world for the sake of an alleged superworld.” In Heidegger’s own words, “the supersensible world, especially the world of the Christian God, had lost its effective force in history.” Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Eerdmans, 2005), 202–203.

6 O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 275. Kathleen Feeley comments, “God summoned his prophets: Hulga summoned herself to new life. Her renaming is a cosmic perversion of God’s practice, a self-call to a life of sterile intellectualism.” Kathleen Feeley, *Flannery O’Connor: Voice of the Peacock* (Rutgers, 1972), 25.

7 O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 275.

8 O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 276.

to deprive him of his Christian faith and gain him as a convert to the reality of nothingness.

Devoid of any perfume, she smears Vapex on the collar of the dirty white shirt that she decides to wear and heads down the road without any food at ten o'clock. When Manley appears, she notices that he is carrying his valise, and she questions why he brought his Bibles. He takes her elbow, smiles as if he could not stop, and tells her that you can never tell when you will need the Word of God. Manley swings the valise as if it is as heavy as the day before and puts his other hand on the small of her back. He then asks her softly where her wooden leg joins on. She turns an ugly red and glares at him. He tells her that he did not mean her any harm, that he is only curious because he finds her so brave. "I guess God takes care of you." "No," she said, looking forward and walking fast. "I don't even believe in God." At this he stopped and whistled. "'No!' he exclaimed as if he were too astonished to say anything else."¹¹

When they reach the edge of the woods, he kisses her, and having never been kissed before, she is pleased to discover that it is an unexceptional experience. As they walk up a sunlit hillside, he suddenly asks her, "Then you ain't saved?" The girl smiles. It is the first time she smiles at him. "In my economy," she said, "I'm saved and you are damned but I told you I didn't believe in God."¹²

They find a hayloft, and a wide sheath of sunlight, filled with dust particles, slants over her, so that it appears to her, looking through and out the barn, that there are two pink-speckled hillsides against a dark ridge of woods. The sky is cloudless and cold blue as the boy removes her glasses, puts them in his pocket, and begins to kiss her again. He begs her for a declaration of love. She tells him that love is not a word that she uses, because as someone who sees through to nothing, she has no illusions. Frowning, he demands that she tell

him that she loves him. She pulls him closer to her and declares that it is just as well that he does not understand the reality. "We are all damned," she said, "but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation."¹³

He whines, "But do you love me or don'tcher?" He kisses her until she says, "Yes, yes." He then whispers in her ear to show him where the wooden leg joins on. Her face drains of color, as she is as sensitive about her wooden leg as a peacock is about his tail. No one ever touched it but her, as "she took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away."¹⁴ She refuses, and he replies that he knew she is playing him for a sucker. She cries out, "Oh no no!" and reveals that it joins only at the knee, but she questions why he wants to know. He gives her a penetrating look and tells her it is what makes her different.

In hearing these words, "she felt as if her heart had stopped and left her mind to pump her blood. She decided that for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence."¹⁵ Here is her secular savior. "When after a minute, she said in a hoarse high voice, 'All right,' it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously in his."¹⁶

She believes that perhaps this might develop into a lover's routine between the two, his taking the leg off and then putting it back on her every morning. But when Manley opens his suitcase, it does not contain Bibles, but whiskey, playing cards, and condoms. Stunned, she murmurs in disbelief, "Aren't you just good country people?" He curls his lip sinisterly at her and replies that he was, but "it ain't held me back none. I'm as good as you any day of the week."¹⁷

11 O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 285.

12 O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 286.

13 O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 288.

14 O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 288.

15 O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 289.

16 O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 289.

17 O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 290.

She screams at him, “Give me my leg!” and lunges for it, but he pushes her down. He then reminds her that she said that she didn’t believe in nothing.

“What’s the matter with you all of a sudden?” he asked, frowning as he screwed the top of the flask and put it quickly back inside the Bible. “You just a while ago said you didn’t believe in nothing. I thought you were some girl!” Her face was almost purple. “You’re a Christian!” she hissed. “You’re a fine Christian! You’re just like them all—say one thing and do another. You’re a perfect Christian . . .” The boy’s mouth was set angrily. “I hope you don’t believe that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which way is up and I wasn’t born yesterday and I know where I’m going!”¹⁸

As he departs down the ladder with her wooden leg in his suitcase, he tells her that he uses a different name everywhere he goes, and then adds sharply, “I’ll tell you another thing, Hulga,” using the name as if he didn’t think much of it, “you ain’t so smart. I have been believing in nothing since I was born!”¹⁹

As Manley departs from the barn and heads across the field, he appears to Hulga, sans her spectacles, to be walking on water: “When she turned her churning face toward the opening, she saw his blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake.”²⁰ Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman, who were in the back pasture digging up onions, see Manley leaving. “Mrs. Freeman’s gaze drove forward and just touched him before he

disappeared under the hill. Then she returned her attention to the evil-smelling onion shoot she was lifting from the ground and declares, ‘Some can’t be that simple’ as the Bible salesman appeared to be. She then adds, ‘I know I never could.’”²¹

Manley and Mrs. Freeman

O’Connor’s closing paragraph puts the finishing touch to her clues throughout the story that Manley and Mrs. Freeman are spiritually aligned.²² Mrs. Hopewell identifies both as “good country people,”²³ and Mrs. Freeman says of Manley that “some people are more alike than others.”²⁴ Both Mrs. Freeman and Manley are gripped with Joy-Hulga’s wooden leg. Both Mrs. Freeman and Manley exalt in the suffering of others, as “Mrs. Freeman had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children. Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable.”²⁵ Both Joy-Hulga and Mrs. Hopewell misjudge their relationships with Manley and Mrs. Freeman, respectively. Joy-Hulga considers herself intellectually superior to the naïve Bible salesman, believes she has him under her control and can mold him. Mrs. Hopewell considers herself superior to Mrs. Freeman and believes she has Mrs. Freeman under her control.²⁶

O’Connor further hints at the similarity of Mrs. Freeman and Manley in a comparison of their eyes when interacting with Hulga and under-

21 O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 291.

22 Frederick Asals, *The Imagination of Extremity* (University of Georgia, 1982), 106–107.

23 O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 273, 282.

24 O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 282.

25 O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 275.

26 Robert Coles writes that O’Connor “knows how quickly her readers will dismiss Mrs. Hopewell, and take an instinctive interest in the dour, shrewdly observant Mrs. Freeman—who may well be the person meant to exemplify a certain kind of intellectuality: coldly attentive to all that is wrong in the world; pessimistic, if not sour and crabbed; willing, always, to feast off the failures, the disasters, the accidents, and tragedies of the world. Mrs. Freeman will be taken in by no one. Mrs. Hopewell and her daughter are, in different respects, Mrs. Freeman’s prey. The salesman is a brief version of the longer-lasting Mrs. Freeman: the darkness of the world, ever present.” Robert Coles, *Flannery O’Connor’s South* (Louisiana State University, 1980), 139–40.

18 O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 290.

19 O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 290.

20 O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 291. Wood argues that Manley’s stealing Hulga’s wooden leg is O’Connor’s action of grace for what he has also taken is Hulga’s false faith. The possibility exists that Hulga, her vision altered, might embrace that which she has rejected and make her way back to her true name, Joy. Ralph Wood, “God May Strike You Thisaway: Flannery O’Connor and Simone Weil on Affliction and Joy,” *Flannery O’Connor in the Age of Terrorism*, eds. Avis Hewitt and Robert Donahoo (University of Tennessee Press, 2010), 51.

standing Hulga's identity. Mrs. Freeman's "beady steel-pointed eyes"²⁷ penetrate far enough behind her face to reach some secret fact. With greater intensity, Manley's eyes, "like two steel spikes,"²⁸ would glance behind him in the hayloft to see where the leg stood.

O'Connor's Commentary

O'Connor admitted that the average reader is amused in "Good Country People" to read about an academic having her wooden leg stolen by a Bible salesman whom she has tried to seduce. But, without ceasing to appeal to the average reader's pleasure at reading about anyone's wooden leg being stolen, O'Connor's goal was to make the story reveal as much of the mystery of life as possible. In her judgment, she is able to accomplish this because as the story goes on, she shows how the wooden leg continues to accumulate meaning. O'Connor explained,

Early in the story, we're presented with the fact that the Ph.D. is spiritually as well as physically crippled. She believes in nothing but her own belief in nothing, and we perceive that there is a wooden part of her soul that corresponds to her wooden leg. Now of course this is never stated. The fiction writer states as little as possible. The reader makes this connection from things he is shown. He may not even know that he makes the connection, but the connection is there nevertheless and it has its effect on him. As the story goes on, the wooden leg continues to accumulate meaning. The reader learns how the girl feels about her leg, how her mother feels about it, and how the country woman on the place feels about it; and finally, by the time that the Bible salesman comes along, the leg has accumulated so much meaning that it is, as the saying goes, loaded. And when the Bible salesman steals it, the reader realizes that he

has revealed her deeper affliction to her for the first time.²⁹

When O'Connor's friend Betty Hester commented that she believed that the story's denouement revealed the flowering of Hulga's need to worship, that Hulga never had any faith, nor had ever loved anyone, O'Connor disagreed fiercely. She replied that Hulga "is full of contempt for the Bible salesman until she finds he is full of contempt for her. Nothing 'comes to flower' here except her realization in the end that she ain't too smart." Regarding Hulga's faith, "it is not said that she has never had any faith but it is implied that her fine education has got rid of it for her, that purity has been overridden by pride of intellect through her education."³⁰

Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate

O'Connor took great delight in the fact that Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate both loved "Good Country People." On March 1, 1955, she told them, "I do appreciate both your letters and I am glad to have my opinion on that story confirmed. I really thought all the time it was the best thing I had done."³¹

O'Connor told Gordon and Tate that immediately after she had received their feedback that she wrote her publisher Robert Giroux about including the story in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. Giroux had the collection ready to send to the printer, but O'Connor pleaded,

I have just written a story called "Good Country People" that Allen and Caroline both say is the best that I have written and should be in this collection. I told them I thought it was too late, but anyhow I am writing now to ask if it

27 O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 275.

28 O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 289.

29 Flannery O'Connor, "Writing Short Stories," in *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 99.

30 Flannery O'Connor to "A," August 24, 1956, *Habit of Being*, 170.

31 Flannery O'Connor to Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate, March 1, 1955, *Good Things Out of Nazareth*, 90.

is. It is really a story that would set the whole collection on its feet.³²

Tate's letter in particular stuck with O'Connor. He told O'Connor that he admired the story greatly. "It is without exception the most terrible and powerful story of Maimed Souls I have ever read. This kind of soul is obviously your subject, in whatever situation you may embody it; and this new fiction is a landmark in your treatment of it."³³ O'Connor agreed with Tate that the story was about a maimed soul, but she added that "just by the grace of God" she had escaped being Hulga.³⁴ ⑤

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32 Flannery O'Connor to Robert Giroux, February 26, 1955, *Habit of Being*, 75. Giroux not only agreed with O'Connor's assessment after reading the story and told her that he would make every effort to get it included, but suggested to O'Connor that she include a closing paragraph returning to Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman that might improve it. Flannery O'Connor to Robert Giroux, March 7, 1955, *Habit of Being*, 75.

33 Allen Tate to Flannery O'Connor, February 22, 1955, *Good Things Out of Nazareth*, ed. Benjamin Alexander (Convergent, 2019), 86. In Gordon's article, "An American Girl," written after O'Connor's death, Gordon declares that "Good Country People" is a story that to Gordon "nearly reached perfection." Caroline Gordon, "An American Girl," in *The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor*, eds. Melvin Friedman and Lewis Lawson (Fordham, 1966), 128.

34 O'Connor to Gordon and Tate, March 1, 1955, *Good Things Out of Nazareth*, 90.

Why Pastors Should Read the Greco-Roman Classics

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by **David C. Noe**

In this brief essay I would like to present an argument that pastors should read and study the Greco-Roman Classics. This will serve as a defense of the practice and hopefully provide motivation toward such reading. Before getting to the really important items, however, I must seek to address at the very beginning objections and complaints that I expect some readers may harbor. I have formed these as questions:

1. Are you saying that I cannot be a good pastor or preacher without understanding, for example, the differences between Plato and Aristotle on the nature of the soul, the difference between Demosthenes's periodic style and the thin style of Lysias, or without knowing more obscure things like that in the Titanomachy (battle of the gods and giants) Zeus called on the ultimate bullpen, three creatures of one hundred speedball hands each, called the Hecatonchires?
No.
2. Are you saying that I have to be an expert in the Greco-Roman Classics, that I have to be able to read Greek and Latin (*nedum* Hebrew) like Theodore Beza or Philip Melancthon did—while folding bulletins, so to speak—in order to serve my congregation well, and by grace fulfill my call before God?
Again, no.
3. Are you saying that I should right now drop

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1212.

everything else that I am doing, discontinue all consumption of contemporary literature and pop-culture in order to subsist on a diet of primarily or exclusively classical literature?

A third time, no.

4. Are you saying that studying classical literature will make me more intelligent, a morally better or more virtuous person, and that on such a basis I can then become a better pastor to my congregation and thus by grace better fulfill my call before God? And are you then slyly insinuating that you yourself are just such a person because, though an ignoramus by sixteenth-century standards, you may be a little further ahead in this field than some other pastors?

Numbers 4a and 4b: no, no.

5. Are you saying that there is one ideal form and content of instruction in preparation for gospel ministry, and that you believe you have discovered it, and are prescribing it in this essay for all men who hold or desire the office of minister of Word and sacrament?

Here comes five! No. But our *Form of Government* in Ch. XXI does specifically endorse “proficiency in the liberal arts.”

6. Are you aware that many of the men considered the best pastors and preachers, both within the pages of Scripture (Amos, Mark) and outside them (Bunyan, Newton), were men of little or no education, and certainly were not experts nor, so far as we know, desired to be such in the niceties of Homeric weaponry (what’s a greave?), Athenian democracy (*bouleuterion*), Latin meter (trochaic septenarius), etc.?

Yes, I am aware.

7. So are you saying that the light of nature, as well as the history of the human race, and the particularities of the time and circumstances of Christ’s advent, as well as the history of both Eastern and Western churches, and particularly the history of the Protestant

Reformation in its so-called Calvinist branches, as well as the example of our theological forebears in places like Heidelberg, Geneva, Edinburgh, and Cambridge, strongly tend toward the privileging of the reading of the Greco-Roman Classics as a very good preparation for and support to gospel ministry, and that while such a conclusion was merely assumed in previous generations, if we want to emulate the successes of our theological forebears, we must commit ourselves as much as possible, *ceteris paribus*, to emulating their system of education in preparation for ministry?

Long question, Isocrates. But, yes, that is what I am saying.

It is quite likely that one could raise numerous other complaints and objections, and that I will not be able to anticipate all of them, no matter how carefully I have studied Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric*, and how well I know that the discovery of arguments requires imagination and the effort to put oneself into the sandals of the listener. But I have learned from Cicero and Quintilian about the need for a sound *refutatio*, anticipating the rejoinders of the hostile or irritable, and framing the debate on one’s own terms as much as possible.

Now that those preliminaries are out of the way, I would like to proceed to develop my argument along three different lines. The first line of argument is purely a historical one, and the jumping off point is Romans 2:14–15. Here Paul says,

When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bear witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.

I claim that reading of the Greco-Roman Classics can help pastors in their ministry by deeply and thoroughly acquainting them with the circumstances of Christ’s advent. Given the time in which

we live, an age of much strife and contention, when everything is politicized, it is important to understand the crux of this claim. When Paul in verse 14 describes the Gentiles, he says that they do not have the Mosaic law. Nevertheless, they do φύσει (*physei*), by nature, what the law requires. So they naturally know that adultery is wrong, that murder is wrong, that they should take care of their children, and so forth. And Paul says moreover that they do what the law requires. So it is a safe conclusion that although they do not understand the moral basis for these imperatives in the same way that someone with the Mosaic law does, they know nevertheless that they ought to avoid certain wrongs and seek certain rights. We must ask ourselves, however, what sorts of examples Paul had in mind when he mentions the Gentiles who naturally do what the law requires. The notion of a common human inheritance, expressed by the Roman poet Terence, for example,² means that it will be impossible to find a culture that is completely lacking in sound moral teaching of the sort enshrined, primarily, in the second table of the law.

But it is of course decidedly unnatural to hold that Paul had in mind Confucianism, the tenets of Buddhism, the ethical system of the Aztecs, the Iroquois, the Inuit, etc., as he knew nothing of these nations. No, undoubtedly Paul had in mind the inheritance of Greco-Roman literature. Given his quotation of the comic poet Menander (1 Cor. 15:33), as well as the philosophers Aratus (Acts 17:28) and Epimenedes (Titus 1:12), this is what we would call an open and shut case. Paul knew enough, for example, about Stoic and Epicurean philosophers to tweak his contemporaries representing those schools in Acts 17, and he likely knew enough about Plato to understand just how shocking to the Platonic mindset was the notion of a body sown corruptible being raised incorruptible (1 Cor. 15). Space does not allow a full demonstration of the fact that Homer's epics simply were

2 Homo sum, humani nihil a me alieunum puto. *Heauton Timorumenos*, 77. "I am man, I consider nothing human alien to me."

Greek education, but one can consult E. R. Dodd's *The Ancient Concept of Progress*³ to see just how Homer was the Bible for Greeks.

The point is simple: The authors of the New Testament, and Paul especially, lived and moved in a culture that was shaped by Greco-Roman influences—the literatures that animated men's minds—more than by anything else. Therefore, no matter how interesting and useful is the study of other cultures and nations, philosophical systems and programs of ethics, the Christian generally will always have a strongly vested interest in understanding the world into which Christ was born. There is nothing prejudicial or bigoted about such a conclusion, and turning away from the study of the Greek and Roman Classics, as many are doing, would have disastrous consequences for the Christian community at large. God seems to have gone to great lengths to provide us with a considerable amount of extrabiblical material—the works of Josephus, Herodotus, Plato, Philo, Seneca, Suetonius, *ad infinitum*—that is eminently useful for understanding his divine oracles. It was his decision, not ours, for Christ to be born in a Judean province of the Roman Empire, where he undoubtedly learned to speak Greek, a province that had been subjugated to Macedonian rule some 300 years prior and gone through a vigorous but failed program of Hellenization under the Seleucids. It was God's decision, not ours, that Augustus was minting coins engraved with *F. Divi Iulii* (son of the god Julius) at precisely the time our Savior with his pottery-smashing iron scepter was born in the most abject humility in Bethlehem.

But it is not just the world of the New Testament and the circumstances of the composition and meaning of the Gospels, letters, etc., that start to cloud up opaquely if the Christian community neglects the Greco-Roman Classics. It is also a good portion of the Old Testament as well. The books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and part

3 E. R. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress and Other Essays on Greek Literature and Belief* (Oxford University Press, 1973), 142.

of Isaiah are much more difficult to understand without the Greek historians like Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus. (But maybe Ambrose overdid it a little when he expounded Plato in Milan during sermons on Genesis? Or maybe not, as Platonism was the “worldview” of all educated persons at the time. How else to understand the cosmos?)

Christians should not feel embarrassed about their study and privileging of the Greco-Roman Classics, in the first place, as a tool for understanding God’s inspired Word. If in God’s providence, Christ had been born in another time and place (the Himalayas, Indonesia, New Mexico), we would feel a corresponding and natural affection for and devotion to the stories and culture of that setting. It is therefore not quite right to call Christian attachment to the Greco-Roman Classics a historical accident. Rather, we should realize that this is forever a part of God’s providence. And it is also very important to note that simply because, all other things being equal, one believes it is more important for a Christian to read the literature of one culture, this does not in any way entail the approval, much less adoption, of all the ideas and moral lessons of that culture, nor neglect of or contempt for other literatures and histories.

But someone at this point may object that the argument only claims the need for a general knowledge of the Greco-Roman world to exist within the broader Christian community. Why can that not be done by experts, and why should a Christian minister devote any of his time to such a study? Is that good stewardship? I will acknowledge there is some weight to this objection, so far as it goes. In the same way that the Christian minister does not need to be an expert in music—though some persons in the Christian community must be—in order for him to use music properly and well as a minister of Word and sacrament, so it is quite reasonable to think that it is fine for him to rely upon experts in Greco-Roman literature for the insights that he needs to understand and expound God’s Word.

But although the objection has some weight, it is of limited value. I take it that no one would deny

that the Christian minister, as he has opportunity, should seek to grow in his knowledge of and ability with music, as he helps lead the congregation in worship. But the case for the particular literature I am advocating is even stronger, as its connection to the explanation of the sacred Word is closer. And in my experience, at least, I have not found Christian ministers generally devoted to gaining a deeper understanding of the Scriptures by reading about the context into which Christ was born and where he lived and worked, suffered, died and rose again. Instead—and this is my experience, which may not be universal—I have found that there is a general tendency to read the Scriptures in isolation. Our strong and proper belief in their divine inspiration can sometimes eclipse our appreciation for the very human circumstances of their composition, rendering us incurious. Why does Mark, for example, structure all his sentences so simply? In fact, some of his sentences, as I read them, are so simple that it is impossible to imagine a less complicated way to express these ideas in Greek (e.g., Mark 1:16b: ἦσαν γὰρ ἁλιεῖς, *ēsan gar halieis*, “they were fishermen”). One cannot appreciate this truth if one has not read more broadly in Greek literature of the time. And there is a very sound theological reason for Mark’s stylistic choices, quite apart from the probable historical one that Mark was a man of lower education who was relying upon the memories of another rather uneducated man, the apostle Peter. (And if someone at this point believes it sounds arrogant or disrespectful to describe Mark and Peter as uneducated, I would ask whether the questioner is unknowingly equating formal education with moral development. In other words, only if one thinks knowledge is a virtue, or that knowledge only comes from formal education, can ignorance or lack of formal education be a vice. But I do not hold those views.) The sound theological reason that Mark wrote his gospel, in some places, in the simplest Greek imaginable is so that it may be heard, understood, and read by the simplest people imaginable, who have just as much a “right unto, and interest in the Scriptures” (WCF 1.8) as the most educated person.

To summarize this line of argument is as follows: It is impossible for the Christian community as a whole, the church, to have a sound and accurate understanding of God's Word, or at least one as deeply as we ought to and often do desire, without having a good knowledge of the circumstances of its composition, specifically Christ's advent and earthly ministry. If no one in the Christian community has this knowledge, we are all deeply impoverished. It is right and proper that Christian ministers, whose faithfulness in ministry requires first and foremost a salubrious explanation of God's Word, to lead the way in this project as much as they are able. If the reader can at this point feel his hackles getting up, he is encouraged to go back and read the series of objections and brief answers at the beginning of the essay.

The first argument in favor of ministers of the gospel reading the Greco-Roman Classics was an easier one to make, based as it was on a simple historical fact: Christ was born in a province of the Roman Empire where the *lingua franca* was Greek and where God had been, in some ways that will probably always remain mysterious to us, preparing his people, and indeed the whole world, to receive the revelation of his divine Son. But before moving to the second argument, one more example of the inextricability of Greco-Roman culture and the Christian faith is in order. It seems we can behold God's providence quite clearly in the system of Roman roads that had been developing for a couple hundred years before Paul began walking all over creation to preach the gospel. Indeed, by 50 A.D. it was possible to walk and sail from Palestine to northern Spain, and perhaps up toward the English Channel, with fair confidence that you would not be mugged or wrongly imprisoned. This, as well as the common Greek language, explains in human terms the incredibly rapid spread of the Christian faith.

The second argument in favor of Christian ministers studying Classics centers around the diagnostic value of ancient literature. Put plainly, the Greco-Roman authors, poets, philosophers, and historians seem to have been uniquely capable of diagnosing the problem with the human condi-

tion. They did not easily confuse circumstances with character but, as in the case of Aristotle, typically identified one's character as the sum of one's actions (*Nichomachean Ethics* II.1). This, in addition to the beauty and cogency with which they described their insights and conclusions, largely accounts for their enduring nature. They seem to have known with a penetrating honesty that human nature is unbelievably elevated in aspiration and ability. It is a microcosm of the universe in its grandeur. At the same time, human nature is abysmally base in its selfishness and rapacity. A few pointed examples will suffice. The poet Ovid (43 B.C.–18 A.D.) famously puts the following Pauline words into the mouth of the murderous witch Medea, who soon kills her own children: “*video meliora proboque deteriora sequor*” (The better things I see, approve, the worse I yet pursue).⁴ Homer, the source of all Western culture, famously sets forth the broken human condition as the first word in the first work of Western literature: wrath (μῆνιν, *mēnin*). It is human wrath, during the ninth year of a war of aggression, of course, occasioned by an adulterous quarrel over a stolen woman or vengeance (motives are not as clear as we would like), that arose when the gods inspired Paris to steal another man's wife. Heraclitus had taught the Greeks about the fragility and beauty of human experience, that war “was the father of all things,” as it gave birth to poetry, beauty, deeds of bravery, and also much sorrow.⁵ It was the most unnatural time, when fathers bury their sons. Greek authors had the uncanny ability to hold in their minds strongly conflicting, yet deeply honest, evaluations of the human condition. Indeed, the only utopian literature of the Greek time of which I am aware, Plato's *Republic*, may never have been intended as a program for implementation, but rather as a parable of the human soul, disordered and in need of medicine. Or as Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones has put it, “The early Greeks were capable of their unique achievements largely because they could bear, as

⁴ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 7.20–21.

⁵ Heraclitus *Fragment* 53, DK B53.

their religion shows, very much more reality than most human beings.”⁶

But someone may object: “If true, isn’t this diagnostic facility and precision of Greco-Roman literature simply a trait of any good literature? So why do I need to read these particular individuals? Won’t Tolkien, Lewis, O’Brian do?” Again, this objection is coherent. However, one must remember two qualifiers: 1) Western literature itself enjoys a privileged position in the reading of the Christian minister (see the historical claims of the first argument); 2) All Western literature that follows Greco-Roman authors is highly dependent upon and derivative of them. Cases with self-evident classical themes and characters from authors like Dante, Milton, and Swift are obvious and need no comment. But even Dostoevsky’s five great novels, for example, that so brilliantly elucidate the contrast between human aspiration and deprivation, require for their full and proper appreciation an understanding that, for example, the sympathetic femme fatale, Sonya Marmeladova in *Crime and Punishment*, is drawn after Sophocles’s heroines like Antigone. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is inconceivable without Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*. Dickens does not exist without the Plautine comedy. There are no speeches of Winston Churchill—no Allied victory?—without Cicero, etc. Examples of this type can be enumerated ad nauseam.

The third argument, though there may be more, concerns the entertainment value this literature provides. It should be enough to stop there. That is, the literature of the Greeks and Romans—more so in poets and orators than historians, perhaps—has survived so long because it is so endlessly interesting. Time has a sifting effect on the efforts of human artistry, and, in some wonderful providence of God, it is often the best literature that survives. This is not an argument that older is better—though advocates of stability and order, true conservatives, should be susceptible to such. Instead, it is an argument that works of human

production that have survived the ravages of the ages deserve a second and even third look. The agonistic nature of literature corresponds directly to the finitude of men and the limitations and selfishness of his attention. Only the truly remarkable will continue to be valued, unearthed, and enjoyed repeatedly. In the case of Homer, men have known from the beginning that his accomplishment represents the singular phenomenon of a genre’s simultaneous invention and perfection. Indeed, contemporary classicist Barry Powell argues that the Greek script may well have been invented for the express purpose of recording Homer’s poems.⁷

Christian ministers would need to be remarkably antagonistic to the judgment of the ages—quite progressive, actually—to disregard the wealth of interesting material preserved in the Greco-Roman Classics. But, as Americans are a very practical people (the most Cartesian, De Tocqueville claims, though they have seldom read Descartes), we may extend the argument beyond the supreme entertainment value alone and add this: Great literature fires the imagination and strengthens its faculties, shaping the mind for enhanced purposes. The following are some examples: Virgil’s genius for description: Neptune stuck his calm head above the waves and surveyed the watery chaos (*Aeneid* I); Seneca’s unrivaled pithiness: *Non exiguum temporis habemus, sed multum perdimus* (“We’re not short on time but wastrels of it,” *De Brevitate Vitae*); Aristophanes’s biting wit in his play *The Frogs*: tragedians Euripides and Aeschylus weigh their verses on a scale in the underworld to see who was the “weightier” poet; Plato’s extraordinary dexterity with a chain of argument: “Is holiness loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because they love it?” (*Euthyphro* 10a). These examples and innumerable more demonstrate something of the strength of God’s most powerful creation, the human mind. By training one’s imagination and reasoning on the literary examples of masters, we become more capable of expressing and representing the many shades and

6 Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (University of California Press, 1971), 164.

7 Barry Powell, *Writing and the Origins of Greek Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

nuances of the human experience. This is a point that has been understood, of course, from the very beginning of the church's life, and made famous by the insights of men like Basil of Caesarea (*Address to Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature*)⁸ and Augustine of Hippo (*City of God*, passim). At the same time, we learn with Solomon of the vanity of vanities: Everything worthwhile has previously been expressed and then forgotten, only to be treated as novel once more. Again, Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones shares a salutary quote:

One of the best reasons for studying the past is to protect oneself against that insularity in time which restricts the uneducated and those who write to please them. The ordinary man feels superior to the men of past ages, whose technology was inferior to what he is used to and whose ethical and political beliefs were not those which he has been taught to consider as the only right ones.⁹

Before concluding, I would like to return to the beginning of this short essay and voice another possible objection. It was not put first because some examples, snippets really, of classical literature needed to be given before this one would seem plausible. This objection originates from a dynamic that I have noticed in these sorts of discussions, at least among some readers and thinkers who consider themselves very conservative (for lack of a better term). It could be termed aesthetic subjectivism. Confessional Christians rightly reject the argument that moral disputes cannot be adjudicated simply because people disagree, or because some hold that everyone's opinion is equally valid. But they do not extend this proper resolve on moral and ethical claims to aesthetic evaluations. Instead, when it comes to evaluating different works of literature, paintings, music, and really any production of human ability and artistry, we are remarkably prepared to accept the notion that everyone's conclusions, even if mutually exclusive,

are equally valid. But it is at present impossible for me to see how this notion can be rendered consistent with Paul's injunction in Philippians 4:8 to think on "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise." If Paul's command here is restricted to questions of morality only, then there is no problem. But if, as is usually the case, it is extended to all manner of human activity—and this seems like a natural way to think of what he says in the letter's context—then inevitably we are required to make more than a minimalist evaluation of the relative merits of different aesthetic choices and products. It is not persuasive that Paul simply means we are to think on things that do not contain profanity, obscenity, do not incite to vice, etc. How would the categories of excellence, purity, etc., fit this mold? Rather, Paul's instructions seem to assume gradations in quality and an obligation to make such determinations, and these are, at least in part, aesthetic, and not subjective. So, some literature is better than others. It is my contention that literature of the Greco-Roman Classics, for the reasons enumerated above, is better than other kinds of literature (this argument entails that there are also best and worst categories of literature, but I am not arguing as to those). Therefore, Christian ministers, all other things being equal, should devote some time to the study of Greco-Roman literature. ©

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8 *Saint Basil on the Value of Greek Literature*, edited by N. G. Wilson (Duckworth & Co., 1975).

9 Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, 156.

+ Servant Reading

Book Reviews

Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention—And How to Think Deeply Again *by Johann Hari*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
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by Shane Lems

*Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention—
and How to Think Deeply Again*, by Johann Hari.
Crown, 2022, 368 pages, \$30.00.

Most Americans find it difficult to focus exclusively on one thing for more than a few minutes. In fact, some readers of this review will perhaps find it difficult to finish without their attention being pulled elsewhere. What is the problem? Why are our attention spans so short? Why are we not able to focus for long periods of time? Researcher and journalist Johann Hari asks and answers these questions in his book *Stolen Focus*. Hari wrote this book because he, too, was struggling with a very short attention span. This book chronicles Hari's research and gives some remedies along the way.

Stolen Focus has fourteen chapters—twelve of which give specific reasons why so many people are unable to focus. I am not going to list them all, because I do not want to give too many spoilers. However, a few examples are worth sharing. For one example, in chapter three Hari argues that the rise of physical and mental exhaustion has caused our attention spans to shrink. Because people do not sleep or rest enough, their minds and bodies suffer. The result is that they are unable to focus well for long periods of time. Little rest means little focus.

In Chapter 5, Hari gives personal and scientific examples of how a lack of mind-wandering causes our attention spans to diminish. Hari notes that letting our minds wander and daydream is beneficial for overall mental health and the ability to focus. When sounds and screens are not overstimulating our minds, we have time to mentally reflect, make connections in the world, and think ahead. This is true in my own experience. I have written many parts of my sermons when I run, walk, or hike without earbuds. Give your mind undistracted time to wander!

Chapters 6 and 7 give another reason why it is difficult to focus: the rise of technology that tracks and manipulates users. In these chapters Hari summarizes various studies that show how most tech companies have a two-fold goal: to grab our attention and to make money. Those two are related, Hari writes. The longer our phones engage us, the more tech companies profit off us from ads and selling information about us they have mined from us. Big tech purposely designs phones and apps to distract us. The longer they keep us looking at the screen, the larger their profits grow. Our attention means their money.

One interesting aspect of *Stolen Focus* is Hari's own experience. At one point he realized his attention span was so pathetic that he decided to undergo a digital detox: no smartphone or internet for two months. He weaves his story throughout the first chapter. If you have never heard of a digital detox, Hari's story might fascinate you. A few years back I had a similar journey that

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1163.

included me ditching my iPhone for a flip phone that I am still using today. Fewer screens means fewer distractions.

Readers of *Ordained Servant* should note that *Stolen Focus* is not a Christian book. I did not agree with everything in it. Some parts of it are less helpful than others. At the same time, overall, I found it incredibly valuable. Much information in this book is very applicable to all Christians because we certainly need the ability to focus when reading and meditating on God’s Word, hearing it preached, and praying to him. And for those in Christian ministry, it is also extremely important to be able to study Scripture for long periods of time without constantly being distracted. If you are frustrated with your lack of ability to focus, I would very much recommend this book. *Stolen Focus* will help you understand the causes of your inability to focus and give you some ways to improve it. Your attention span is extremely important. Do not let it disappear! ☺

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The Baptist Church Covenant: Its History and Meaning

by *Marshall Davis*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* February 2025¹

by **Nathan P. Strom**

The Baptist Church Covenant: Its History and Meaning, by Marshall Davis. Self-published, Kindle Direct, 2017, 137 pages, \$9.99, paper.

We have a saying in the upper Midwest: “There is more than one way to skin a cat.” Do not worry, your favorite Felix is safe. The saying is a holdover from the North American fur boom of previous centuries. Today, most men have never owned a skinning knife, but the phrase persists because it contains timeless wisdom. A different way of doing things is not always a threat—sometimes it is an opportunity to improve your craft.

Marshall Davis’s *The Baptist Church Covenant* aims at a greater understanding of congregational life. Readers, general officers and special officers alike, will be encouraged in their commitment to one another. In short, the book is a Baptist pastor’s attempt to “renew a sense of commitment to the local church” (14). One could engage in eyeball gymnastics over the gentle nod to congregational rule. Still—once your iris has returned where it belongs—do not miss the opportunity to learn.

The Baptist (mistaken) commitment to congregationalism causes them to leverage the general office of believers in church life (see Form of Government 30.1). Presbyterian commitment to elder rule (locally and extra-locally) leads us to emphasize the special office. It is precisely where

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1168.

we differ that there is an opportunity to enrich one another.

Dr. Davis introduces the Baptist church covenant anecdotally, historically, and theologically. Reformed or Presbyterian readers will find Chapter 1 a helpful visitor's guide (15–26). The practice of church covenants is modeled after Nehemiah's reform efforts (cf. Neh. 9) and the covenant renewal ceremonies of the Old Testament (18). One is reminded of the Scottish Solemn League and Covenant at this point.

There were various church covenants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Practice converged in 1853 with the publication of the Baptist Church Manual (containing the New Hampshire Confession and John Newton Brown's version of a covenant). Brown's church covenant—still in print today—forms the basis of most contemporary church covenants. The remainder of the book is a commentary on Brown's covenant.

Orthodox Presbyterians may choke on a few things in the book—congregationalism, credobaptism, independency, and non-covenantal notions of church membership. Playfully—some Presbyterians may find the section on teetotalling the most difficult to swallow (81–84). But should we really be surprised that Baptists are, well, Baptist?

Like other Presbyterians, we have a Book of Church Order. It is our “church covenant.” As a church planter, I love the membership vow in our Directory for Public Worship (DPW). The fifth vow begins, “Do you promise to participate faithfully in this church's worship and service . . . ?” Baptists skin that cat with a church covenant—elaborating on faithful participation in detail. Look over their shoulders. Read this book. You may gain a renewed commitment to your local church and the people who constitute it, the people to whom you made promises when you became a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (See DPW 4.B.2). ©

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Christ Crucified: A Theology of Galatians by Thomas R. Schreiner

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
February 2025¹

by Harrison N. Perkins

Christ Crucified: A Theology of Galatians, by Thomas R. Schreiner. New Testament Theology, Crossway, 2024, xi + 158 pages, \$24.99, paper.

Thomas Schreiner is one of the more prolific New Testament scholars today and adds to his corpus this summary outline of the theology of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Schreiner has already written a commentary on Galatians for the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series, and those more detailed exegetical labors come to harvest in this readable, accessible, and helpful volume. This work would be a great book to consider at the outset of preaching or teaching through Galatians to get a sense of big issues and the whole letter.

Debates have raged in New Testament studies for a few decades now about the issues at stake in Galatians. The New Perspective on Paul, whose leading figures have included James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright, in many ways took its lead from innovative interpretations concerning the conflict within the Galatian churches, focusing both on what was disputed and on Paul's solution. By contrast, Schreiner articulates the traditional understanding of the problem in Galatia as a form of legalism that endangered the doctrine of justification by faith alone by requiring circumcision as an act of law keeping that was required to be justified. In this respect, Schreiner's first two chapters are some of the most helpful summary material for getting to grips with the problem in

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1169.

the church and with the point of the long narrative in the first two chapters of Galatians. Having preached through Galatians—and having found Schreiner’s commentary likely the most helpful among those that I consulted—the discussion in this book is arguably the clearest, briefest treatment of these issues available.

Schreiner also helps us navigate some newer debates in Pauline scholarship concerning whether Paul was an eschatological or an apocalyptic thinker. Scholars who argue that Paul used an eschatological framework contend that Paul saw Christ and his gospel as the fulfillment of long-standing divine promises, namely those given in the Old Testament Scriptures. Those who defend the newer idea that Paul reasoned apocalyptically suggest that he understood Christ and the gospel as an abrupt, sudden interruption of history. Schreiner argues that this debate rests upon a false dichotomy, explaining instead that Paul saw both eschatological fulfillment of redemptive history and a sudden intrusion of divine work as involved in Christ’s coming and mediatorial work. Readers of *Ordained Servant* will rightly gravitate toward the eschatological perspective. Still, Schreiner helps us to process newer scholarship as offering insights that can supplement that basic perspective.

The rest of the book focuses mostly on aspects of Paul’s explanation of salvation in Galatians. Schreiner defends the traditional Protestant view that the Galatian error involved legalistic tendencies to require some kind of work—namely, circumcision—as a condition of law keeping for justification. He works through how Paul refuted that error with a proper view of faith as the sole instrument of justification, which is a totally forensic (i.e., legal rather than transformative) reality. Some of the more contentious aspects of Schreiner’s previous work on justification is largely absent in this book, most especially his argument for final justification at the last day according to works. A few brief comments suggest that he still holds that view, but arguments for it do not appear here. Instead, focus is on justification by faith in Christ as a present reality that is bound into salvation.

There are a few points, mostly concerning passing comments in this book, that I would raise in hopes that Schreiner might clarify his position in future work. The first is the claim that “before the coming of Jesus, faith wasn’t directed particularly to him since he had not yet been revealed to the world.” (66) Admittedly, Schreiner is interpreting the language of Galatians 3:23–25, which causes pause in being critical. I am not sure that this statement is precisely calibrated though. In Galatians 3:8–9, Paul says that Abraham heard the gospel—presumably the same that comes to us. Paul’s appeal to Abraham in Romans 4 as the example of how we are justified would seem to require that faith had the same object for him and us if we are justified in the same way. These premises would explain why New Testament authors state Christ’s presence in the types, shadows, and events of the Old Testament (1 Cor. 10:1–6; Jude 5). Schreiner may have been using imprecise language. We should be clear, however, that justifying faith has always had Christ the mediator as its object.

Second, Schreiner defends justification by faith alone against the Galatian error by saying, “To insist on circumcision for salvation, then, is to turn the clock back in redemptive history” (88). Again, this instance might be another case of imprecise or unguarded language. The problem is that if Schreiner meant what the formulation suggests, it means that circumcision was a requirement for salvation in a previous era of redemptive history. The burden of Paul’s argument in Galatians 3–4, however, is that keeping the law could never have been a condition for receiving the promise because the promise came to Abraham before the law was given through Moses. So, the Galatian error was wrong in principle because circumcision was *never* a condition for believers to be justified. My assumption, given Schreiner’s familiarity with these passages and his intent to defend justification by faith alone, is that this claim is merely a less carefully framed point.

Finally, Schreiner’s discussion of circumcision as he outlines these issues clearly sits within his own Baptist framework. This point is less a criti-

cism than an observation, made in hopes to clarify how the argument on this topic would fit more clearly in the Presbyterian system. When Schreiner explains that “the cross and circumcision represent two different pathways into the people of God” (47), he has understood the nature of that sign differently than Reformed theology would see it as an Old Testament sacrament. The truth that Schreiner rightly defends here is that Christ’s work is an entirely different way *to be justified* than how the *false teachers* had *erroneously* understood justification. Schreiner is right to make his point in this regard. Still, the more precise issue was that those false teachers saw circumcision as a condition for justification, rather than merely the sign of belonging to the covenant community. For sure, we should reject any sacrament as a condition for our right standing with God. We should still insist on a right understanding that circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament are not contrary to Christ’s work when seen as a seal of entry into the covenant rather than as a work that earns God’s favor. Schreiner occasionally phrases points as if he presumes that the Galatian error had correctly understood how circumcision functioned in the Old Testament. Although likely another instance of imprecise phrasing, we should be aware that Galatians (and Romans 4) suggests that they had misunderstood the biblical teaching on this matter. Paul was correcting a misunderstanding of what the law meant in the Old Testament and how that transitioned into the new covenant. Justification was always by faith alone.

These questions aside, which truly are latching onto details, this book is a helpful overview of the theology of Galatians. It will surely help many get an introductory understanding of this great New Testament letter. ☺

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The Great De-Churching: Who’s Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?

by *Jim Davis and Michael Graham*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* March 2025¹

by **John R. Muether**

The Great De-Churching: Who’s Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back? by Jim Davis and Michael Graham. Zondervan, 2023, xxiv, 242 pages, \$29.99.

Jim Davis is a pastor and Michael Graham a member of a Reformed Baptist congregation outside Orlando. Together they offer their analysis of the profound “dechurched of America” that has taken place over the past twenty-five years. The number is staggering (forty million by their reckoning). Their extensive research indicates that this is happening in all denominations, but the reasons are quite varied. This book is their effort to help churches reverse this trend, with evangelicals as their primary readership.

They divide the dechurched into five groups, and the first half of the book profiles each of them. Among the first four groups are “cultural Christians,” the least theologically orthodox, who account for 52 percent of the total dechurched. Cultural Christians leave for reasons that include inconvenience and not finding their friends attending. Then there are the dechurched mainstream

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1172.

evangelicals, whose orthodoxy often exceeds the still-churched mainstream evangelicals, but they have relocated or fallen into bad habits (perhaps COVID-induced), or otherwise “casually” dechurched. Thirdly, “evangelicals” include growing numbers whom the church has disappointed, offended, hurt, or even abused. The fourth group is BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of color), many of whom struggle to fit in or belong to their congregation.

The fifth category are outliers: the dechurched among the mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics. Ought we to be surprised or even disappointed that corrupt churches are in decline? And if they were never in a true church, ought we really to consider them “dechurched”? A similar question can be raised with the exodus of cultural Christians. The low orthodoxy scores of this group raise the question of whether they were ever meaningfully churched. When the numbers of these two categories are combined, the crisis of a “great dechurched” may be less than the alarms of this book warrant.

An additional cause for skepticism is the low baseline for defining “churched.” “For the purposes of our study,” they write, “we defined a dechurched person as someone who used to go at least once per month” (xxii). It stretches credulity to imagine that a monthly church attender is “churched” or a “religious adherent” in any meaningful way. The better way to describe anyone who answers the call to worship less than 25 percent of the time (except the providentially hindered) is *unchurched*.

Still, the book has its value, and the last section on “Lessons for the Church” is worth reading. Just as the wise preacher applies the word in different ways for different kinds of hearers in the congregation, so ministers and elders should study the different reasons for leaving the church. Particularly helpful are the “key awarenesses” that comprise relational wisdom and maturity (133–45). The authors rightly challenge the church today to be both confessional and missional (chapter 13), in the proper senses of those frequently misunderstood terms.

This reviewer wonders whether dechurched might apply also to matters the authors do not address. Over the course of the last half century, the nearly universal practice of Sunday evening service has done an astonishing disappearing act in almost all quarters of American Protestantism. Might reducing the preached Word in half, itself constitute functional dechurched? Are departing souls already in a state of spiritual malnourishment? Do we create an offramp for the dechurched when we turn the Lord’s Day into an hour?

The authors lament the missed generational “handoff” in churches (the focus of Chapter 10). However, more should be said about the pastoral care for the children and youth in the church. Consider the rise of “children’s church” in evangelical circles, where covenant children are excused from at least part (and sometimes all) of the worship service generally until third grade and increasingly as late as middle school. Are we guilty of dechurched our children? After all, are not parents to nurture children by their example of singing, praying, and attentively hearing the Word of God?

While teens may be attending worship, often their main church social network is the youth program, often outsourced to a youth “specialist.” James K. A. Smith has rightly described the ensuing youth detachment from the life of the church as “excarnational”²: they have been figuratively disembodied or dechurched. It is a great indictment of the practice of youth ministry when the authors note that both the mainstream evangelical and mainline Protestant dechurched had high rates of youth group involvement in their church past (pages 60 and 105). The result has been what sociologist Christian Smith called moralistic therapeutic deism: an astonishing inarticulateness of the faith in which they were raised. To be fair, the authors issue a call for more systematic discipleship, and they even commend catechesis. But greater thought must be given to the environment where this can effectively take place.

2 James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Brazos, 2016), 146.

Chapter 14 encourages readers to “embrace exile.” Here there are helpful observations on the character of post-Christian America. However, there is also a misunderstanding of the biblical teaching on exile. One of the authors trivializes matters when he describes his exile as leaving a pastorate in the Deep South where he enjoyed the benefits of “free golf and discounted luxury items” to take a call to a church in the “largely dechurched context of Orlando” (216). Whatever the toll to his golf game, he is not describing the biblical call to exile. The authors further assert that American Christians have not “lived in exile for the past few hundred years,” because they enjoyed “comfort and power in society as Christians” (218). Biblically, exile does not refer to being marginalized in an unfamiliar culture or even a negative world. Exile describes the redemptive-historical location of the church seeking a better country and living by faith in the promises yet unseen. This is the state of the church in all times and places, and it will continue until the return of our Lord. It calls for patient endurance through suffering, which is Paul’s constant prayer for the churches he was shepherding. In this book, the language of suffering yields to the frequent call for “human flourishing.” While we are called to seek the welfare of the city to which we are called in exile, talk of flourishing presents a peculiarly upper-middle-class Western picture of the Christian life.

A little over fifty years ago—at the start of the dechurching trends this book analyzes—sociologist Dean M. Kelley wrote *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*. Commissioned by the National Council of Churches to study the decline of mainline churches (already in freefall), Kelley presented a counterintuitive thesis: Conservative churches’ strict demands for the belief and the behavior of its members were precisely their keys for growth. By minimizing the duties of discipleship, liberal churches began their rapid decline, as their messaging became indistinct from the wisdom of the world. Kelley’s thesis generated howls of protest and plenty of ridicule, but it has yet to be refuted. However, the high expectations for church membership that Kelley described are

absent from this book. Perhaps the great dechurching today owes itself to evangelicals’ embracing of the mainline recipe for failure. ☹

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The Hobbit Encyclopedia

by Damien Bador, Coralie Potot, Vivien Stocker, and Dominique Vigot

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* March 2025¹

by Charles Malcolm Wingard

The Hobbit Encyclopedia, by Damien Bador, Coralie Potot, Vivien Stocker, and Dominique Vigot. Translated by Alayne Pullen and Matthew Clarke. Frances Lincoln, 2023, 336 pages, \$18.69.

Quite a few books that were lost on me as a young reader have come to be cherished, read, and reread through the years. In my case, I can point to the novels of Austen and Eliot, which made for dreary reading earlier in life but have long since become treasured literary companions.

Within the last several years, Tolkien has joined their ranks. Our introduction did not go well. I completed *The Hobbit* in high school only under the threat of a failing grade. I reread it again

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1173.

not too many years later with little interest. Fairies, elves, and wizards were never my thing, not even as a child. Several attempts to get through the first installment of *The Lord of the Rings* ended in failure. The world of fantasy was of no interest to me.

This has now changed. While reading a major biography on C.S. Lewis several years ago, I became interested in the history of the Inklings, which led to a growing interest in Tolkien, the man and author. His Catholic faith, imagination, and far-reaching influence led me to revisit *The Hobbit* and then to move swiftly through *The Lord of the Rings*.

If I had had *The Hobbit Encyclopedia*, my earlier encounters with Tolkien might have fared far better.

The comprehensive and beautifully illustrated encyclopedia assists readers to grasp the scope of the world Tolkien created. The volume is arranged under these headings:

- Characters
- Peoples and creatures
- Languages and writing systems
- Objects and constructions

Encyclopedias, by nature, do not lend themselves to summary. I will share several highlights.

In addition to Bilbo Baggins, Gandalf, Gollum, Smaug, and others, some figures are introduced, like Legolas and Galadriel, who will make their first appearance later in *The Lord of the Rings*. The authors note that Tolkien's Catholic faith, cultivated by his mother as a child, led him to find inspiration for Galadriel's character in the Virgin Mary (46).

It comes as no surprise that the Khuzdul language was based on Semitic languages (160). After all, Tolkien was one of the Old Testament translators for the Jerusalem Bible, providing the translation of the prophet Jonah.

Tolkien's neologism "eucatastrophe" is illustrated and explained. Just when Bilbo Baggins is overwhelmed by dread of the massing Goblins at the battle at the Gate, the Eagles come and bring deliverance. The authors comment:

A eucatastrophe is therefore neither a pleasant interlude nor a final triumph. It is a specific moment, as emotionally powerful as the irruption of a catastrophe, in the sense that a eucatastrophe "pierces you with a joy that brings tears," as Tolkien indicated in one of his letters. Whereas catastrophe engulfs us in sadness and anxiety, eucatastrophe overwhelms us with joy and hope. This is exactly what Bilbo felt when he saw the "dark shapes small yet majestic against the distant glow." (283)

I recall reading somewhere that William F. Buckley Jr. quipped after reading *Moby Dick* for the first time later in life: "To think I might have died without having read it." I can say that about *The Lord of the Rings*. I am grateful for friends and books that made me give it another shot. And as I (hopefully) return to it and *The Hobbit* in the coming years, *The Hobbit Encyclopedia* will be an invaluable resource in navigating the history, geography, and characters of Middle Earth. ©

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Pastoral Visitation: For the Care of Souls

by Tyler C. Arnold

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
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by D. Scott Meadows

Pastoral Visitation: For the Care of Souls, by Tyler C. Arnold. Lexham, 2022, 199 pages, \$19.99.

That faithful pastors visit their people and care for their souls in private, as well as in their public ministries of the Word and sacraments, is the deep conviction of this author. Helping pastors fulfill that calling well is this book's primary thrust.

The Lutheran orientation of the author and series, *Lexham Ministry Guides*, did not diminish but added value and interest for this Reformed minister. I found nearly everything either agreeable or plausible. Whatever our distinctives, caring pastors visiting and counseling in private homes have so much in common.

Hardcover and handbook-sized at 4.25 by 7 inches, its 199 pages are a quick and pleasant read, inviting the occasional rereading and referencing as we devote ourselves to pastoral visitation. Brief introductory materials (a series preface, a pre-visit prayer, and a preface for this particular book) are followed by seven chapters divided into two parts, concluding with an appendix, annotated bibliography, list of works cited, and endnotes.

The two major parts are Pastoral Foundations (Chapters 1–3) and Pastoral Resources (Chapters 4–7). Chapter 1, “God’s Visitation: Jesus at the Center,” establishes the pastoral visitation ministry as God’s grace continuing to bless his people by Jesus’s ministry perpetuated through his ministers. We are his imitators and instruments in shepherding souls. What a profound motivation!

Chapter 2, “The Pastor’s Visitation: God’s Work as Identity,” reminds us that pastors are undershepherds and overseers, both having implications for serving the church by visitation. In this we imitate the apostles, who visited homes to proclaim the gospel, counsel, and encourage. Historical anecdotes and the author’s personal experiences illustrate the topics addressed. The author candidly admits challenges familiar to all faithful pastors and offers suggestions for meeting them.

Chapter 3, “God’s Story in Our Story: Using Liturgy and Listening,” relates touching examples of pastoral visits, using prayers, songs, and communion from the liturgy of the gathered church, familiar to devout shut-ins named Carol and Georgia. This became a regular practice for their pastoral care, along with time spent in sympathetic listening to them. It is easy to see how comforting to them and how useful to the minister such experiences are.

Part 2, “Pastoral Resources,” begins with Chapter 4, “Preparing for Pastoral Visitation: Things to Consider.” The anticipated list is well-organized. Preparation requires creating a plan to include things like a visitation list, initial contact, asking to visit, and preparing to make the visit. Sensible suggestions abound. Counsel about making the visit entails praying in the driveway, making your intentions clear, listening, and concluding with prayer and blessing. These are fleshed out in helpful ways.

Chapter 5, “Doing Pastoral Visitation: Making It Work,” blends traditional methods of communication with some particular to our technological age, including voicemails, emails, letters, notes, and social media. These made some ministry possible during the COVID-19 pandemic and still have some usefulness. Face-to-face contact is preferred and may be possible in other settings than private homes, but virtual visits are better than nothing. This chapter concludes with a challenge and counsel about training lay visitors, elders, and deacons, so that others share with a pastor in this good work, and no one is neglected.

Chapter 6, “Pastoral Visitation: Five Situations,” gently guides a pastor to do well in assisting

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1183.

the suffering and dying, those anxious before surgery, the lonely and isolated, the spiritually lost, and those experiencing life after a tragedy, like grief and shame. Each situation includes a section called “So, What Can Pastors Do?” including general suggestions and specific Scripture texts and hymns.

Chapter 7, “Word of Encouragement,” preaches the striking truth that, in effect, we visit Jesus (Matt. 25:36, 39, 40). Also, Jesus accompanies us in this holy labor. These are heavenly truths to remember in a good work that is sometimes daunting and difficult.

Mr. Arnold’s book breathes the very pastoral spirit it urges. This is a lovely and helpful treatment that has my warm commendation. ©

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Grace: A Model for Grieving, a Five-Step Guide for Healing after Loss

by Kay Towns

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* May 2025¹

by Gordon H. Cook Jr.

Grace: A Model for Grieving, a Five-Step Guide for Healing after Loss, by Kay Towns. Hatherleigh, 2024, 160 pages, \$18.00, paper.

How do we provide comfort and counsel for those who are stuck in an unrelenting experience of complicated grief? It is easy to tell them they need to move on. But it may be very difficult for them to do so without significant pastoral support and guidance. Dr. Towns offers hope for those stuck in grief, and healing in the form of developing a “new normal” (88).

Dr. Kay Towns is a Doctor of Professional Counseling (Mississippi College) and a licensed professional counselor. She also received a Master of Theological Studies from Southern Methodist University and a Master in Counseling from Huston Graduate School of Theology. She is an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. Her passion for the subject of grieving and the development of the “GRACE Grief Model” comes out of her own personal experience of intense loss (104–106).

Towns brings together Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), narrative therapy (NT), and a modified version of Park’s Meaning Making Model into a unified “GRACE Grief Model” intended to provide counseling, support, and healing for those

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1187.

experiencing loss. Her model is particularly unique in its integration of CBT into grief counseling.

Towns has provided this model for us in two volumes. The book gives the content of her model and its defense, along with material directed at both the counselor and the person who is grieving. The workbook (sold separately) includes much of the content of her book, with additional exercises and examples which are very helpful in clarifying the model directed toward the person who is grieving.

As OPC pastors and elders, we are of course attracted to the concept of grace suggested in the title for her model. She employs the word here primarily as an acronym, G-R-A-C-E, not with particular theological intent. Nevertheless, her approach certainly emphasizes grace and is delivered with a non-judgmental compassion, which befits such a sensitive topic.

Towns's five step model is summarized in this way (16, 18 [workbook]):

- G – Grief is redefined as good.
- R – Re-story the loss narrative.
- A – Adopt new healthy ways to grieve.
- C – Connect with self and others.
- E – Engage in a new normal within a livable pattern of grief work.

While the principles Towns puts forth are applicable to normal grief of all kinds, her model is more directed toward patients suffering with prolonged or complicated grief.² Likewise, the extensive workbook would be best suited to those experiencing prolonged grief or those who desire to explore their personal experiences of grief more deeply.

Both volumes include an overview of grief, each of the five steps of her GRACE Grief Model, and a summary chapter urging those grieving to move on in their journey through grief into a new normal. Regretfully, the book jumps back and forth between academic defense, suggestions for counselors, and material intended for a grieving

person. It is often difficult to determine which audience is in view. The workbook is far more focused on the person who is grieving, and thus, for many of us, it is the more useful volume.

A thorough evaluation of Towns's book would require a Reformed critique of each of the three therapeutic approaches. A Reformed critique of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy would be worthwhile for the pages of *Ordained Servant*, given the wide-spread use of CBT in psychiatric and behavioral health settings today. Narrative therapy, combined with narrative reconstruction, assists the grieving person in re-writing the stories that they use to describe themselves and their place within the world around them, in order to reflect on their grief more positively and hopefully (19–21). Meaning making, as a therapeutic technique, is used to assist people in examining their personal world and life view, their values, beliefs, and practices, and to integrate this into their journey of grief (21–22). A critique of each of these approaches to mental health lies beyond the scope of this review. It is worthwhile noting Towns's efforts to integrate spirituality and religion into each of these three therapeutic approaches, particularly CBT, which is often undertaken by therapists who have little awareness of or interest in their client's faith or religious practices.

On a practical level, Towns's book and workbook have many insightful passages which I found helpful. These are accompanied by concrete examples, particularly in the workbook. The workbook also provides probing questions which press the reader to reflect on grieving. However, this is offset by the almost complete lack of interaction with Scripture or theology.³ In her discussions of religion, Towns tends to include Christianity alongside Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, approaching each relativistically and often superficially, primarily focused on their respective

2 Dr. Towns's distinctions regarding the types of grief are found on pages 7–11 of the book and pages 2–5 of the workbook.

3 Dr. Towns makes only two specific references to the Bible: Jeremiah 66:9 (we may note that Jeremiah only has 52 chapters, I believe her reference is intended to be Isaiah 66:9.) and Psalm 34:18. Neither is exegeted nor applied to the context of her model.

beliefs and practices in relationship to grieving. Still, her own theological perspective and Christian faith and compassion shows through at various points.

I cannot recommend the book for use in OPC churches. Its lack of interaction with Scripture and its extreme relativistic inclusiveness would not be appropriate within our solidly Christian and Reformed tradition. But I can say to pastors and elders that it is worth considering many of the grief related issues raised therein. I would recommend the workbook to OPC pastors and counselors. Despite its near total lack of biblical references, it offers extremely helpful exercises for counseling persons experiencing prolonged or complicated grief. I believe that the workbook, used in conjunction with solid biblically based counseling, could help some people stuck in grief begin to move forward toward healing. ©

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Union with the Resurrected Christ: Eschatological New Creation and New Testament Biblical Theology

by G. K. Beale

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* May 2025¹

by David J. Koenig

Union with the Resurrected Christ: Eschatological New Creation and New Testament Biblical Theology, by G. K. Beale. Baker Academic, 2023, xviii + 558 pages, \$49.99.

The work of G. K. Beale needs no introduction. I would venture to say that his is a name that is prominent on many of the bookshelves of readers of *Ordained Servant*. I certainly have been helped immensely by his detailed and prolific work, especially in the field of New Testament biblical theology and biblical interpretation. His latest book, *Union with the Resurrected Christ* (URC), continues the work that he began with his *A New Testament Biblical Theology* (NTBT),² an important work in its own right. Beale describes in the preface to URC that this book is a follow-up to *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, and as such, there is a significant amount of overlap in material. This book is also a development of the first book, with a special eye on the believer's union with the resurrected Christ. It should be stated right at the outset that this book stands on its own; there is a significant amount of new material and a signifi-

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1188.

² G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology* (Baker Academic, 2011).

cantly narrower focus to justify it. It is also a hefty book: readers of Beale are already familiar with his prose style which, while dense, does reward detailed and careful reading, and this book is no exception.

The book is divided into two parts. After an introduction setting out the purpose of the book, he begins in part one laying out the theme of the “inaugurated end-time resurrection and new creational kingdom” and its use as a framework for biblical theology. The first chapter consists of a summary of Beale’s formulation of the biblical storyline in his *NTBT*. Beale mentions that this review is crucial because it sets up the theological framework for the remainder of the present work (21). What follows is a review that sets out the storyline through the corpus of Scripture, which will be familiar to readers of *NTBT*. In chapter 2 Beale turns to the subject matter of the present work and opens the chapter by stating that the core of the storyline presented in Chapter 2 is Jesus’s resurrection as the new creational kingdom (64). What this is precisely needs a little bit of explanation. In the preface, Beale critiques the usual approach to union with Christ in biblical theology, concentrating on the “in Christ” phrase in Paul and looking at it too generally (xvi). Beale is making the more specific argument that being “in Christ” deals centrally with union with the resurrected Christ as a beginning of the eschatological new creational kingdom. And again, he demonstrates this by proceeding through the corpus of Scripture. One of the things that opened my eyes as I was reading through this chapter is the prevalence of the resurrection theme, even in the Old Testament. Often, I have had the mistaken impression that resurrection in the Old Testament begins and ends with Daniel 12. However, Beale corrects this by showing how the hope of resurrection is prevalent in the Old Testament, especially in the Prophets.

I found these initial two chapters to be the more difficult part of the book. I found myself reading and rereading sections constantly to get the full gist of what he was saying. It was at this point that I thought it might be best to return to the *NTBT* for a longer explanation, and this did

help. Beale’s prose is dense to be sure, but I found I struggled more in this first section than in the second section.

The remainder and majority of the book is taken up by Beale’s exposition of “the reality and benefits of fulfillment in Christ’s life, death, and especially resurrection as the beginning of the eschatological new-creational kingdom.” In the introduction, Beale states “the relationship between Christ’s resurrection and believer’s union with him in His resurrection can be depicted as a diamond: the diamond represents Christ’s resurrection as the beginning of the end time kingdom and new creation” (2). The different aspects of what Christ’s resurrection means are visually represented as a diamond with nineteen facets, and these facets are explicated in the remaining chapters. This part of the book feels more like a reference book; there is not too much development of the relationship among the facets. Each chapter is a fascinating study of these aspects of the resurrection and is done with characteristic exegetical detail. It is in these chapters that Beale works out what the resurrection of Christ fulfills from Christ’s side and what it means for believers in union with Christ.

There is not much to dislike about this book, and I would highly recommend it. For the most part the book stands on its own, however, I found it helpful to review *A New Testament Biblical Theology* at several points. One can also detect hints of Beale’s earlier work, especially on the temple.³ I anticipate returning to the book periodically as a reference book for the aspects of the resurrection, partly because it will be helpful to review these things over and over again, and partly because reading the chapter is a bit like drinking from a firehose, thus making it difficult to retain all the details.

Beale seems quite a bit stronger in dealing with what the resurrection means for Christ than in his applications to believers. He is to be commended for making it clear that these things do

3 G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission* (InterVarsity, 2004).

apply to believers and the various ways that they do. I simply found some of his application sections a little less clear. His explanations of passages showing what the resurrection means for Christ are remarkable in both clarity and the level of detail. As usual, I find that Beale's exegesis is both correct and stimulates my own thinking.

It has been noted in other reviews of this book⁴ that Beale's strength is in dealing with the *historia salutis*, and when dealing with the *ordo salutis* he struggles a bit. I think that this criticism is valid. I have often found the approach of biblical theologians is one that can often be jarring to those who have been reared on our seminaries' and denomination's emphasis on *ordo salutis*. I say this in the hopes that we can all work toward the balanced approach that we all affirm, a rapprochement that can only serve to strengthen our theology. ©

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The Bible: A Global History

by Bruce Gordon

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* May 2025¹

by Darryl G. Hart

The Bible: A Global History, by Bruce Gordon. Basic, 2024, 515 pages, \$35.00.

If Reformed Protestants are candid, they have to admit—off the record, of course—that the Bible is an odd way to run a religion. Sure, a book that is the Word of God easily surpasses a church with a universal bishop (Roman Catholicism) or prophets (Islam and Mormonism) who claim new revelations. The Bible's challenge, however, is that it comes in a seemingly unmanageable form. It has sixty-six separate books, written over roughly 1,700 years. Even more challenging is the mix of genres—narratives, poetry, epistles—which avoid the sort of manual-like or constitutional precision that come with other authoritative texts. Add to the Bible's variety the historical reality that it emerged in civilizations that lacked the codex or a printing press, publishing technologies that make the consistency of modern versions of the Bible possible. Even the Westminster Confession acknowledges that variety of human fingerprints on the Word of God:

Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, . . . to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased. (WCF 1.1)

⁴ See especially Harrison Perkins, Heidelberg, August 17, 2023.

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1189.

Bruce Gordon's global history of the Bible is less concerned with the diversity of writings and human authors in Scripture than it is with the Christians devoted to the book and responsible for its publication and distribution. Because the business of publishing and the record-keeping surrounding modern books did not begin until the fifteenth century, Gordon's history necessarily covers an amazing period before Gutenberg's moveable type and printing press. The main drivers of this story are, again, a diverse lot of human beings, everyone from monks to monarchs. Gordon himself describes his book as not so much a history of editions, translations, or interpretations of the Bible but one "of ongoing human effort to hear God" (7). By expanding his subject beyond scrolls, codices, bindings, illustrations, translators, and interpreters, Gordon's book spills into the murky terrains of religious experience.

As kaleidoscopic as this approach to the Bible's history sometimes renders Gordon's book, because the subject is the scriptural canon, *The Bible* can never stray from the physical attributes of Scripture—its words, pages, authors, editors, and interpreters. One major factor in the Bible's history is the intervention of emperors and kings in its production and acceptance. Although historians debate whether the oldest surviving codices, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, were among the Bibles that Constantine requested for his churches in Constantinople, the emperor's instructions to Eusebius of Caesarea in 331 did put an imperial stamp on the importance of physical copies of Scripture (at least for church use). Roughly five centuries later, the production of the Bible took another dramatic step with the publication of the Tours Bibles. This was the work of the Northumbrian scholar Alcuin, who presented the Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne, with a copy of the Tours version. The emperor himself wanted to recover the glories of Rome and believed a version that relied on Jerome's Latin translation would assist that cause. James I (of England) was no emperor, but his King James Version (1611) not only displaced the popular use of the Geneva Bible in his realm but also became "best known" for its literary aspects, which

in turn "had a profound impact on the English language" (217, 218).

Even as rulers' interventions had a grand influence on the history of the Bible, the work of ordinary people was equally important. In the medieval world, the labors of scribes and artists turned the pages of Scripture into beautiful spaces that invited readers to peruse the Bible, even while craftsmen adorned covers with gold and jewels that rendered an object to be revered and even coveted. The Book of Kells is a notable example, with a text in black, yellow, red, and purple ink, accompanied by "spectacular illuminations" (89). Its "remarkable" originality stems from the marriage of imagery from the Greek East, the Italian West, and Celtic sources (90). At the other end of the production spectrum was Johannes Gutenberg's 1453 Bible, the first to use moveable type. The printer's purpose was to produce the text of Scripture more economically. But that did not stop those who bought his unbound pages from supplying their own illustrations and appropriately designed bindings and covers.

Among the most important efforts beyond emperors and kings in the Bible's reception were translators. If Scripture were ever to be accessible to people outside the eastern Mediterranean world, it needed scholars who knew both the Bible's original languages and those of indigenous peoples—from Europe's barbarian tribes to natives in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Translation is an ever-present aspect of Gordon's history, but the most arresting period was the rise of Bible missions. Between 1804 and 1817, Europeans and Americans formed organizations to print and distribute Bibles in western languages—Danish, Finnish, German, Hungarian, Russian, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, and English (both British and American)—to augment the new endeavor of Protestant foreign missions (309). Unlike older works of evangelizing native peoples as part of colonial settlements, this phase of foreign missions aimed to reach natives directly. The linguistic work involved, from teaching western language to local people and then translating the Bible into indigenous tongues, has underscored the centrality of

linguistic and interpretive work in the spread of Christianity.

When Gordon examines the Bible's influence beyond church work or missions, his narrative strains. Chapters on "Science and Reason" and "The American Bible" provide an opportunity to remark upon the use of Scripture by important figures in the Scientific Revolution, for instance, Isaac Newton and Thomas Hobbes. The latter immersed himself in Scripture, disputed most interpretations of it, and believed the book should be firmly under the sovereign magistrate's control. Hobbes's rejection of the Bible's major premise—that God revealed himself through human authors—is one of the few discordant notes in a pleasing melody that features people who believed and spread the Bible's message. His chapter on the "American Bible" also sounds off-key, at least when it comes to discussion of novels such as *Moby Dick* and *Ben-Hur* or even the Book of Mormon. These are instances that fall more under "the Bible and . . ." rather than revealing directly religious or devotional endeavors. At the same time, these asides add color and intrigue to a very big book.

Even when the author seems to get side-tracked, the reader will learn about the remarkable variety of hands—and more—that yielded the Bible's contemporary status as one of the most popular books ever published. Gordon drew an almost impossible assignment in writing a global history of the Bible. Who among us can even conceive of where to start and how to proceed? Even if Gordon sometimes falters, his execution overall is clever, thoughtful, and endlessly fascinating. This is a book that deserves to be used not simply for the delight of reading but also as a reference for tracing how the Bible came from Moses on Mt. Sinai to an app on our cell phones. ©

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The Nature of the Church

by John Brown of Wamphray

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
June-July 2025¹

by Ryan M. McGraw

The Nature of the Church, by John Brown of Wamphray. Grange, 2024, 111 pages, \$17.99.

How we define the church determines whether we need the church, and, if so, how we then live in the church. For a long time Western Christianity has become individualized, promoting a take-it-or-leave-it attitude toward the church. On top of this, people regularly leave churches that no longer suit their perceived needs, or when they differ from officers or members on minor points. This translation of John Brown of Wamphray (1610–79) on *The Nature of the Church* gives readers a concise introduction to another way, if not a window into another world. In contrast to the low views of the church prevalent today, Brown stressed its catholic nature, enveloping all disciples of Christ in every age as the Spirit calls the elect to glory in and through the church. While dense and fast-paced, this book both gives readers a primer on wrestling with key biblical distinctions about the church as well as a glimpse of early modern Reformed conceptions of the church in one of its most formative periods.

This book is part of a large-scale work stretching over seven hundred pages (23, *Libri Duo Contra Wolzogium et Velthusium*, 1670). Highlighting this material via English translation extracts a large section on the nature of the church, aimed primarily at those wanting to separate unjustly from existing branches of the church visible. The thirty-two theses included largely move from the catholicity,

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1194.

or universality of the church, to its visible and invisible aspects, into the terms and conditions of admitting church members, then the marks of the church, with final application to issues related to schism, excommunication, separation, and measures for reforming the church. Along the way, Brown observed that while some of “our men” (36), or Reformed theologians, appeared to make the invisible church the true church, no one ever doubted the necessity of the visible church, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic (37–38). In other words, denigrating the visible church in favor of its invisible aspects separates what God has joined. Additionally, assigning external and internal aspects to the church’s attributes and characteristics was pivotal to Brown’s case, as it was to mainstream Reformed thinking. This included distinctions between an external profession of faith and internal saving faith, between external and internal union with Christ, external relative holiness and internal holiness (43), and even going so far as asserting an external “regeneration” through baptism that differed from the Spirit’s saving power in the heart (63). Such couplets are helpful today since many tend to spiritualize or internalize the church’s “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” attributes (Nicene Creed).

As one might expect, given Brown’s attention to separatists, who sought to establish a pure church of regenerate people only, he devoted much attention to schism as well. Quoting William Ames, Brown defined schism as “a tearing, dislocating, or dissolving that union that ought to be observed among Christians” (88). He added that schism can be either “in the church or from the church. Or, either particular or total.” In three points of application, he noted that it is always lawful to separate from unlawful worship, or from a “church corrupted in fundamentals,” though not “for defects of lesser importance” (89–91). Such thought-provoking content with heavy pastoral implications appears consistently throughout the book, bringing Brown’s material to bear pointedly on issues similar to ones the church faces today.

Several useful features stand out in Brown’s work. First, he is clear and pointed, and he

gets to his point quickly. Second, he envelopes Scripture references and direct quotations into his text, enabling readers food for thought and prayerful reflection. Third, he cites a wide range of Reformed authors, some familiar today and some less so, including Calvin, Beza, Rutherford, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Zanchius, Polanus, Lucas Trelcaltius, Jr., the Leiden Synopsis, William Bucanus, and, especially, William Ames. This helps modern readers better grasp general trends in Reformed ecclesiology at the time. Fourth, his book is tightly logical, leading readers through a step-by-step building process from the catholicity of the church to its locality. It also includes important questions about the marks, ordinances, ministry, and membership of the church along the way. While potentially overwhelming to readers new to the topic, he covers a lot of ground in a short space, directing readers to Scripture and historical sources in a coherent manner.

This will not be the only book Christians need to dig deep into Reformed and Presbyterian ecclesiology, but it is a concise and good one. Readers wanting a deeper historical understanding of the church along similar lines should consult books like Francis Turretin’s (1623–87) *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* or, slightly more up-to-date, James Bannerman’s (1807–67) *Church of Christ*. Older voices have a way of challenging modern assumptions, leading us to re-ask questions from a fresh perspective. *The Nature of the Church* serves these purposes well. ☺

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Depression: Finding Christ in the Darkness

by Ed Welch

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
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by John W. Mallin

Depression: Finding Christ in the Darkness, by Ed Welch, P&R, 2024, 85 pages, \$9.99, paper.

Edward T. Welch has previously written on depression in *Depression: A Stubborn Darkness—Light for the Path* (New Growth, 2004) and in *Depression: Looking Up from the Stubborn Darkness* (New Growth, 2011), which is a slightly revised edition of the first book. Now he has written an entry for the P&R series *31-Day Devotionals for Life*. “Darkness” is a consistent way of describing depression in all three books. The first two titles highlight the stubbornness of depression, which the title of the third book omits, but which the content of the book certainly recognizes. The title of the second book hints at the notion that depression impacts our perspective and our perception, and that what we see matters (the gospel-centered application and counsel which is the point driven home in all three books), while the title of the third book stresses that the object of traveling the path or looking up is to find Christ, who is the light in the darkness. The book under review is less detailed, but more pointed and obviously structured and written for devotional use.

In an introductory essay, series editor Deepak Reju writes, “Often, as you read these devotionals, you’ll see the word *you* because Ed speaks directly to you, the reader” (“How to Nourish Your Soul,” 7). Following the introduction are a welcome (9–10), thirty-one days of devotionals (11–80), a conclusion (81–82), notes (83–84), and resources

(85). Days are grouped into sections or subtopics (each subtopic has an introductory page). The sections are Days 1–2, “Darkness Intrudes” (11–16); Days 3–19, “Spiritual Realities” (17–52); Days 20–27, “Accomplices” (53–70); and Days 28–31, “Hope” (71–80).

Each two-page day begins with a brief passage of Scripture (one to four verses), continues with applicatory comments on the passage, follows with one or two questions or suggestions for further reflection, and ends with an action item.

Action items are frequently calls to pray about something concrete and specific: for example, referring to the day’s reading, “Pray about what you heard. Bring your questions to God” (14). They are sometimes suggestions to read passages of Scripture: for example, “Read a psalm that contains *why* questions, such as Psalms 10, 22, 44, 88.” Notice that it turns in a hopeful direction. Then “speak your own version of the psalm to Jesus” (50). Often, they are calls to engage with someone who might help. For example, “Ask for help with your plan. Include your reasons for living. Write it down” (20).

The devotionals are addressed to the depressed reader, but they are about Christ, centered on Christ. The book is not so much about depression as it is about Jesus. It is the gospel addressed to depressed people.

Major theological points are put in profoundly accessible language without forsaking precision. The language is economical, but not sparse or inadequate for the task. It is efficient and effective.

The book has a conversational tone, inviting the reader to dialog with God—reading and meditating on Scripture and praying—while opening the heart’s thoughts to the Lord who hears and cares. Helpful, thought-provoking questions are frequently addressed to the reader.

Welch describes his depressed reader’s thoughts. If the reader is not depressed, they hear the thoughts of depression and listen to Welch knowledgeably and sympathetically give counsel to a deeply depressed person.

Welch recognizes that depression is hard and not subject to easy fixes. And it makes everything

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1195.

difficult. There is no presumption that his reader will be able (or want) to do what is good for him or her. Baby steps. For example, he counsels, “Take a small step. Pray, ‘Help, Jesus,’ or, if you can, ‘Help, my Jesus’” (22) and, “Depression is a time to speak. Any words, however, will not come easily” (23).

Welch does not underestimate the difficulty of dealing with depression. He does not overestimate the reliability of people who might want to help. But he asserts as a sure and certain hope the power and faithful truthfulness of Scripture, the enabling power and faithfulness of the Holy Spirit, and the power, faithfulness, and loving goodness of Jesus, who “comes to serve you,” “enters into your suffering and darkness,” and “stands against death, sin, and Satan so that they no longer have power over you” (29–30).

Depression is stubborn. Really, only God can lift it. But what does God use to do so? He uses ordinary means: his Word and sacraments, prayer, and fellowship, which means other people. Welch sets God’s Word before the reader and applies it with wisdom gained in long experience, directing the reader in prayer, encouraging the reader to fellowship, and always pointing the reader to Christ.

This little book is a real help to the depressed person and a great resource for those who minister to them. I highly recommend it! ☺

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What It Means to Be Protestant: The Case for an Always Reforming Church

by *Gavin Ortlund*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* August–September 2025¹

by **Ryan M. McGraw**

What It Means to Be Protestant: The Case for an Always-Reforming Church, by Gavin Ortlund, Zondervan, 2024, xxiii + 262 pages, \$22.99, paper.

I ncreasing numbers of Protestants are becoming disillusioned with their tradition, or perceived lack of tradition. In uncertain times, in which people recognize how powerfully cultural traditions influence beliefs, threatening the concept of truth itself, the apparently fractured landscape of Protestantism makes many nervous. Can Protestant principles counterbalance such pervasive instability? For many people, Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy are attractive alternatives, cutting the Gordian knot of uncertainty by offering some form of supposedly infallible tradition. Complicating matters—though apologists for Rome and the East abound, via YouTube and other online venues, Protestants have not kept pace, leaving church members and leaders without adequate resources to encourage them to stay the course (xi). Moreover, many people grow weary of Protestant caricatures of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, resulting in a magnetic pull toward what appears to be rich traditions over against apparently impoverished ones.

What it Means to be Protestant reminds readers that, in many cases, what people are rejecting is

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1202.

not historic Protestantism, but a hollowed-out form of it detached from its historically core convictions. Ortlund's book offers a winsome, non-combative apology for Protestantism that seeks simultaneously to listen to and learn from Western and Eastern traditions and to promote Protestant convictions. While losing some of its force by not viewing Protestantism within definable confessional boundaries, this book is a well-executed and much needed resource for churches facing a growing exodus of members either to Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy.

Sola scriptura and *sola fidei* are guiding principles in Ortlund's defense of Protestantism (xviii, 3). While the other three *solas* are vital, these two illustrate best why Protestantism renews the gospel in the church, restores a biblical view of Scripture's authority, and removes "historical accretions" to the biblical tradition (xx). Filtering his material through these lenses, he organizes his chapters under three headings: Protestantism and Catholicity, Authority, and History. Chapters 1 through 4 argue ultimately that Protestantism alone affirms a broad biblical catholicity, in which the church exists "within multiple institutions" (22), offering "the most promising pathways by which to cultivate and pursue catholicity" (37). Promoting a "mere Christianity" in the vein of C. S. Lewis (xx), he shows how Protestant principles (following Philip Schaff) allow believers to see the good in pre-Reformation and other traditions (5–7), to acknowledge its own eccentricities and errors (7–10), to promote continual reformation according to Scripture (10–11), and to treat *sola fidei* as the "what" of the Reformation and *sola scriptura* as the "how" (11–14). Faith alone is thus the object of reform and Scripture alone the method, making the former like "a precious jewel" and the latter "the safe that protects it" (11). Though not yet moving directly toward *sola scriptura*, Chapter 3 indicates that differing principles of authority undergirded widespread Roman Catholic persecution of Protestants, and that Protestants and other traditions mean different things by faith and repentance. Within Chapter 4, Ortlund defends what he means by justification through faith alone

in Christ alone (60–64), illustrating well what is at stake in losing Protestant principles.

Chapters 5 through 8 (Part 2) tackle *sola scriptura* more directly, showing what the doctrine means and does not mean and giving two case studies via the papacy and apostolic succession. Treating the papacy illustrates that while Ortlund has both Roman Catholicism and Eastern orthodoxy in view as dialogue partners, the weight of his arguments often lean more heavily towards Roman Catholicism. Readers wanting a robust engagement with the Eastern church will find loads of good material here but will likely need to supplement their studies elsewhere to some extent. However, his robust appeal both to Scripture and the church fathers in Chapters 5 and 6 encompass problems both with East and West, setting the stage well for his treatment of apostolic succession in Chapter 8. Both Eastern Orthodox and Protestants agree that the Papacy rests on shaky biblical and historical foundations, and that demanding recognition of the papacy "hinders progress towards a true unity—which must be centered on Christ himself" (116).

Consisting of three final chapters, followed by a brief conclusion, Part 3 offers Ortlund's most forceful and persuasive critique of both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox views of a magisterial tradition. He opens this section with the famous statement of Roman Catholic John Henry Newman, who wrote, "To be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant" (135). However, by examining Protestant views of Christian tradition, Ortlund shows well why "retrieval" theology was embedded within historic Protestantism, creating twin concerns of being both biblically and historically grounded. Though he does not use the phrase, post-Reformation Protestants liked to assert that church tradition was ministerial and declarative rather than magisterial and legislative. What modern Protestants, let alone Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, often fail to recognize is that traditional Christian teaching, especially the creedal tradition, held authority in Protestant churches, though as a teacher rather than as a tyrant (101). To add my own illustration, one goes

to math class, not because the teacher serves as an infallible answer key, but because, presumably, the teacher knows more than the student and can teach him or her how to do math. Denying the infallibility of the church does not mean that the Holy Spirit does not guide tradition through the Word; it means that even the best teachers can make mistakes in calculation and that Word and Spirit serve as the corrective.

Ortlund's two case studies on the assumption of Mary and the veneration of icons (Chapters 10 and 11) prove devastating, both to Rome and to the East. Ortlund shows clearly the ignorance of the early church about Mary's alleged bodily assumption into heaven and that venerating icons marked a complete 180 from the church fathers, rather than a doctrinal refinement. He thus justifies his revision of Newman's assertion when he says, "Honestly, to be truly in history, is before anything else, to cease making simplistic appeals to history" (158). By the close of the book, Ortlund makes a compelling case that it is actually Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy who stand on shaky ground in relation to faith, Scripture, and history.

Ortlund's engagements with Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy are well-informed, fair, and charitable. To invert the order of Schaff's four points, he argues well that Protestantism is viable (both biblically and historically), and that though Protestantism is flexible due to its built-in mechanisms of self-reform (sometimes resulting in eccentric diversity), Protestants can maintain the catholicity of the church (more broadly and effectively than the other two traditions can), locating it wherever the true Trinitarian and incarnational gospel is proclaimed. Though lacking a clear stance in any historical Protestant confessional tradition weakens his case a bit, this book is precisely the remedy that many modern Protestants need and are looking for, considering the growing attraction towards Roman Catholic and Eastern alternatives. ©

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Finding Jesus in the Storm: The Spiritual Lives of Christians with Mental Health Challenges

by *John Swinton*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* October 2025¹

by **Shane Lems**

Finding Jesus in the Storm: The Spiritual Lives of Christians with Mental Health Challenges, by John Swinton. Eerdmans, 2020, 245 pages, \$27.99, paper.

In recent years, mental health has become an extremely popular topic. It is, of course, a very important one. No one wants to be mentally unhealthy. We all want mental well-being, psychological stability, and clear thinking. At the same time, since we live in a fallen world, we know that people face serious and severe mental health issues. Mental health difficulties affect all sorts of people—Christians, non-Christians, men, women, younger people, older folks, and people of all different ethnicities. If you have struggled with mental health challenges or know someone who does,

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1208.

you know how dreadful they can be. It is nothing to joke about or take lightly. Sadly, Christians do not always respond to mental health challenges with wisdom and love. Sadly, sometimes mental health issues are even stigmatized in some Christian circles.

Thankfully, there are helpful resources for Christians struggling with mental health issues or supporting people with such issues. One of the best resources on this topic I have read is *Finding Jesus in the Storm (FJS)* by John Swinton. Swinton spent over fifteen years as a nurse in a mental health clinic before obtaining a PhD in theology from Aberdeen University. He has spent much of his adult life ministering to people with mental health challenges and has also written various helpful Christian books and articles on topics such as dementia, disability, medication, dying, and other similar topics. In *FJS* Swinton looks into depression, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder. More specifically, this book is about Christians who suffer from those mental health challenges. What is it like to follow Jesus while seriously depressed? How can a bipolar Christian serve Christ faithfully? How does schizophrenia affect a Christian's walk with the Lord? Swinton masterfully tackles those types of questions in *FJS*.

This book has five main parts. The first part is "The Art of Description." This section is where Swinton talks about the various labels people use for mental health challenges. Sometimes descriptions such as "bipolar disorder" or "schizophrenia" are very unhelpful. All too often, Swinton argues, these descriptions are "thin." For example, if you have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a thin description means you are stigmatized, labeled, dehumanized, and misunderstood. Although descriptions are not bad in themselves, we need to have "thick" descriptions. That is, we need to understand that labels in and of themselves do not tell us all we need to know about the person and his or her mental challenge. There are many aspects and layers to mental health issues that defy a brief definition. I appreciate how Swinton interacted with the *DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders)* in this section.

He did explain how the *DSM* can be helpful, but it is not a be-all-end-all resource for mental health issues. "If we assume that it [the *DSM*] is adequate for understanding, then we have a problem" (41). Someone may have a mental health challenge and label, but that challenge and label should not define the person.

"Redescribing Diagnosis" is the title of the second section of *FJS*. It is a short section that gives more information about labels and descriptions for mental challenges. It also gives a short story about someone with bipolar disorder who struggled with the label. The story is helpful for readers to understand what it is like to be labeled with a mental health term. It is a very difficult reality for some Christians!

The third part of *FJS* covers the topic of depression. This is an excellent overview of what depression is like. Depression is not merely sadness. It is "antifeeling." Depression is not a simple thing. It has layers and various aspects. It is not just "the blues." We cannot talk about depression as if it is a one-dimensional thing. It includes biological issues, social issues, spiritual issues, and other issues. And sometimes they are all mixed together. In this section of the book, Swinton also discusses the psalms of lament, joy, the silence of God, medication, and Christian meditation.

Swinton's insights into medication are especially valuable. He has a balanced and nuanced approach. It's not just "throw medicine at depression." But it is also not a biblicistic response: "Your depression is because of sin. Medication is just a band-aid." Swinton wisely says that if medication "aids in the process of communing with God and the enjoyment of God, it may be functioning faithfully" (107). That is the "chief end of medication" (107).

Schizophrenia is the topic of the fourth section of *FJS*. This is an especially important chapter because Swinton explains what psychosis is like, including when a person hears voices. This part of the book was very informative for me. Typically, we may react poorly when we hear someone say they hear voices when they are in a difficult mental state. It is hard for most people to understand what

it is like to hear voices. But hearing different stories about this and learning from Swinton's insights have given me some important things to think about when it comes to schizophrenia. If you know someone with schizophrenia, this part of *FJS* will be a valuable resource for you in understanding it from a Christian perspective. And yes, sometimes solid Christians struggle with psychosis and schizophrenia. Swinton understands this and discusses it with a pastoral emphasis.

The fifth part of *Finding Jesus in the Storm* is all about what it is like to live with bipolar disorder. Swinton specifically explains the suffering involved in bipolar disorder. It is a "strange kind of loneliness," as the title of Chapter 8 suggests. Swinton does an excellent job in his discussion of the spirituality of bipolar disorder—the highs and lows, the shame and regret, the distress and disruption of life involved in it. There is also a level-headed examination of spiritual warfare and the demonic realm in this section of the book.

The conclusion of *FJS* is called "Redescribing Healing." It is a short section, but it is helpful. Swinton talks about relational healing, theological healing, cultural healing, liturgical healing, and other aspects of healing mental health challenges. I was happy to see a list of websites and resources for people to learn more about various mental health challenges. In fact, I have been listening to a helpful podcast from a website Swinton recommended.

All in all, I believe *Finding Jesus in the Storm* is one of the best Christian books on mental challenges such as bipolar disorder, depression, and schizophrenia. Swinton wonderfully weaves in stories of Christians he knows who face these challenges and helps the reader understand what it is like to live with such difficult challenges. I learned so much about mental health from *FJS*. It has helped me understand mental health challenges more than anything else I have read. This book has helped in my sermon application, counseling, and thinking about discipleship. I believe this would be a good book for pastors and elders to utilize in their local shepherding situations. It will keep them from stigmatizing or mistreating those with mental

health challenges, and at the same time give them a deeper understanding of common mental health issues.

I also enjoyed Swinton's pastoral tone throughout the book; it was a tone of love and understanding. Certainly, individual Christians and Christian churches need more love and understanding when ministering to those with mental health challenges. And for you Christians who live with serious mental health challenges, know that other Christians are facing the same challenges. Also, know that other Christians do care! Be patient with other believers as we try to walk with you following Jesus together. And best of all, *Jesus himself* will walk with you through the deep, dark shadows of each and every mental health challenge you may face. And one day, when you are enjoying Christ's healing presence in glory, each and every mental health challenge you have had will be forever gone. Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly! ☺

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Ancient Wisdom for the Care of Souls: Learning the Art of Pastoral Ministry from the Church Fathers

by Coleman M. Ford
and Shawn J. Wilhite

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
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by Ryan M. McGraw

Ancient Wisdom for the Care of Souls: Learning the Art of Pastoral Ministry from the Church Fathers, by Coleman M. Ford and Shawn J. Wilhite. Crossway, 2024, 234 pages, \$14.99, paper.

The Holy Spirit breathed out Scripture, resulting in a divinely inspired, authoritative, sufficient text (2 Tim. 3:15–17). Yet the same Spirit works through the church, gifting her teachers to serve as Christ’s gifts, steering the church away from false doctrine, and driving her towards unity and maturity in Christ (Eph. 4:11–16). On principle, then, this means both that Scripture alone has magisterial authority, teaching us what we must believe and do, and that the church has ministerial authority, teaching us what others have seen God requiring us to believe and do. This makes the early church fathers our fathers in the faith, who are at once both faithful and fallible. Recognizing these facts, Ford and Wilhite offer samples of early church styles of pastoral ministry, mostly drawn from the fourth and fifth centuries, Origen, Irenaeus, and Gregory the Great excepted (Chapters 4–5, 9), to retrieve spiritual wisdom for Christian ministry today (10–15). Though sometimes letting

their own reflections on ministry eclipse their treatments of the selected fathers, this easy-to-read book will push modern pastors toward fruitful spiritual virtue, theological depth, and faithful labor in caring both for their own souls and those of others.

The book’s ten chapters are arranged under virtue, theology, and ministry. Every chapter is devoted to a single church father, opening with a quotation from the figure treated as well as a key Scripture passage related to the topic. The arrangement of individual chapters is thematic and progressive rather than chronological. Thus, the four chapters in Part 1 illustrate humility, spirituality, sacramental piety, and scholarly skill via Basil of Caesarea (329–379), Gregory of Nyssa (336–394), Ambrose of Milan (340–397), and Origen of Alexandria (d. 254), respectively. Origen excepted, all these theologians were pro-Nicene, and two of them wrote before and after the final edition of the “Nicene Creed” framed at Constantinople in 381. Part 2 turns the clock back to Irenaeus of Lyons (130–202), demonstrating his seismic influence on biblical interpretation (Chapter 5). Returning to the fourth century, the remaining three chapters in this section focus on Athanasius of Alexandria’s (297–373) Christological bent, Augustine of Hippo’s (354–430) deep theological reflection, and Gregory of Nazianzus’s (329–390) Trinitarian doxological tone. Most of the above material directs readers to character and characteristics of pastors, leaving pastoral work to two chapters in part three. The net effect is giving the salutary impression that who pastors are and how they live their lives in communion with God is more important than how impressive their ministerial labors and activities are, which is a vital point in promoting vitality and vibrancy in ministry today. Regarding ministerial labor, Chapter 10 uses Gregory the Great (540–604) to press pastors to slow down to devote time to the contemplation of God, and Chapter 10 appeals to John Chrysostom (347–407) as a model for searching applicatory preaching. Like any good book on historical subjects, this one will likely leave readers with a voracious appetite to read some of the classic Christian texts mentioned here.

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1209.

Though dedicated ostensibly to pastors and pastoral ministry, it is actually hard to classify this book. In many respects, readers could conceive of it as a hermeneutics text, and not merely a piece of pastoral theology. Heavily reflecting both the church fathers' fusion of sound doctrine and sound living, the authors recognize that interpreting (and teaching) Scripture is an intellectual-spiritual exercise. Illustrating the point, and perhaps surprising readers, they note that Athanasius's *Life of Anthony* was "his most influential work" (127). Yet the chief aim of this biography was to demonstrate both that false doctrine and false living, and sound doctrine and solid living, always go in pairs. Rather than mere sets of rules, pre-modern hermeneutics began with God and God's action, both in the Bible and in the Bible's readers. Hermeneutics and theology were thus Spirit and character driven rather than method driven. Alternatively, one could class this work as a modern pastoral theology drawing from church fathers, instead of a study of the fathers on pastoral theology. By infusing so much modern pastoral counsel and so many examples into their chapters, the authors sometimes risk eclipsing the fathers they highlight. Most pointedly, the chapter on Origen (Chapter 4) dedicates more space to the need for learned pastors (73–85) than it does to Origen himself (85–94). Though less pronounced, Chapter 7 on Augustine gives too much attention to John Webster's *Domain of the Word*² before allowing Augustine to speak with his own weighty and profound voice (138–141). Though reflective and soul-nourishing, the authors risk blurring lines between historical voices and modern ideas. One could say that the book is an exercise in spiritual hermeneutics as it comes to bear on pastoral ministry, extracting lessons primarily from the fourth century, developing a spirituality of pastoral ministry rather than a mere skill-based model.

Ancient Wisdom for the Care of Souls is an easy entry point for contemporary pastors who find

² John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (T&T Clark, 2012).

reading the church fathers like visiting a strange country. Though the fathers are not on par with Scripture, they often help us see scriptural emphases, especially related to Trinitarian piety, that get lost in our modern theological and cultural climate. This book is a helpful blend of hermeneutical and teaching principles, ancient counsel, and pastoral examples that will benefit anyone interested either in serving the church or learning from the past, and hopefully both. ©

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A House Divided: Technology, Worship, & Healing the Church after COVID

by *Benjamin D. Giffone*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
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by **T. David Gordon**

A House Divided: Technology, Worship, & Healing the Church after COVID, by Benjamin D. Giffone. The Libertarian Christian Institute, 2025, 240 pages, \$19.99, paper.

In the early weeks of the COVID epidemic, many of us predicted that the press would groan in a few years under the weight of manuscripts

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1216.

explaining and interpreting the various public institutions that suffered (some fatally) from either the disease or its cure. The prediction has proven true, and some interpretations of the event are profoundly helpful. Dr. Giffone's assessment will likely be among the most helpful interpretations, especially because of its intentional discussion of the event's divisive harm to the church. Giffone is peculiarly capable of addressing the matter: he is an ordained minister in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, a missionary, and an instructor in theological institutions here and abroad (primarily South Asia and Eastern Europe). In addition to his evident academic ability, he is known for his irenic temperament, a trait not always exhibited by others who assess the COVID difficulty in over-confident or strident terms.

Giffone defines his work as "An Interdisciplinary Public Theology," explaining that his "aim with this book is to convince the reader that epistemology, theology of worship, communication technology, and the COVID crisis are actually interrelated—and if you care about one, you should care about all of them" (3). His "premise, though, is that the church was *already* 'A House Divided' prior to the pandemic, through uncritical adoption of technology into worship and the life of the church, and through uncritical adoption of scientific ways of knowing" (3–4). Epistemologically, Giffone describes three ways of knowing (especially in the modern West)—knowing through ritual, through Scripture, and through empiricism, asserting that "ritual ways of knowing are *undervalued* by both Christians and non-Christians in modernity, and that scientific ways of knowing are *overvalued*" (6, emphasis his).

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 (Chapters 2–9) addresses "Technologizing of Worship Before and During COVID: Epistemology, Eschatology, and Presence;" Part 2 (Chapters 10–15) contains "A Plea for COVID Truth and Reconciliation in Christian Communities;" and Part 3 (Chapters 16–18) articulates Giffone's recommendations for "Healing, Repentance, Resilience." The book is remarkably accessible, especially when one considers that "epistemology,

eschatology, and presence" can be difficult or divisive in their own rights. The introductory chapter is helpfully illustrated and lucid and achieves its introductory purpose admirably. At just over two hundred pages, this rich volume amply rewards its readers for their effort.

While much of the conversation about COVID has focused on public institutions such as political institutions or the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), Giffone's book, while addressing those matters thoroughly and dispassionately, focuses upon liturgical realities before, during, and after COVID. This makes the book especially important and helpful for church officers who found ourselves somewhat flat-footed when COVID arrived. I myself recall taking no courses on "pastoring during a pandemic" when I was in seminary, and I taught no such courses in my fourteen years of instructing at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, or in over two decades teaching at Grove City College.

Giffone has profound interest in and knowledge of the discipline of Media Ecology and is motivated throughout to make a compelling theological case "for Embodied Worship and Knowledge through Ritual" (24 ff.). Our Reformed doctrines of incarnation and sacrament compel us to take seriously how we embody (or disembody) our liturgical practices. While Giffone is irenic in tone, and while he demonstrates real sympathy with the plight of church officers during the pandemic lockdowns and restrictions, he quietly, competently, and thoroughly makes the case that Christian assemblies are Christian assemblies, *gatherings* of those who corporately celebrate the resurrection every Sunday. Watching a gathering is not gathering; observing an assembly is not assembling; and observing communion is not communing. *A House Divided* thus denotes two things: that there were "divided" opinions about how to address the COVID crisis, and that we also came to accept non-gathering as normal, and are now, in some cases, physically divided or separated from one another. I recommend that church sessions in the NAPARC communions read and discuss this book together so that all are on the same page, as it

were, as they consider the challenges that COVID thrust upon us.

For the final eighteen years of my teaching career, each fall I taught an introductory course on Media Ecology, so I particularly welcome Dr. Giffone's recognition that differing media always shape not only the *message*, but also the *messengers* and the *recipients* of the message. Having written several books myself, I wish I had written this one. I commend it heartily to all churchmen. ©

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Zeal without Burnout: Seven Keys to a Lifelong Ministry of Sustainable Sacrifice

by Christopher Ash

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by Ronald E. Pearce

Zeal without Burnout: Seven Keys to a Lifelong Ministry of Sustainable Sacrifice, by Christopher Ash. The Good Book Co., 2016, 112 pages, \$12.99.

It is urgent that the subject of burnout in pastoral ministry be addressed. Ash writes,

Some 1,500 people leave pastoral ministry *each month* due to burnout, conflict, or moral

failure. . . . Almost *half of pastors and their wives* say they have experienced depression or burnout to the extent that they needed to take a leave of absence from ministry. (16)

This is not a comprehensive book on the subject of burnout. It is a short book of 123 pages which can be read in about two hours. Ash acknowledges that his book “is very far from being a comprehensive or expert treatment of the subject [of burnout]” (14). He writes as an older man, who himself has been to the edge of burnout, to advise and warn others. “None of us thinks we are on the path to burnout until we are nearly burnt out” (19). He wants to warn those who think it would never happen to them. His desire is to see pastors run a “marathon of ministry, not a short, energetic sprint” (20).

The book is very readable, and each chapter closes with another person's story of burnout. The reader feels like they are hearing a friend's wise and seasoned counsel.

Mr. Ash devotes two chapters to clarify correct thinking about pastoral ministry in order to prevent burnout. The chapter “Sacrifice Is Not the Same as Burnout” tries to balance on the one hand that the pastoral call is costly and to be wholehearted service and hard work, yet service for Christ is not the calling to “self-harm” to damage one's life and strength. The chapter “We Are Creatures of Dust” reminds us that our health and strength are temporary, and at any time God can take them away. “All we have to offer God is the fragile, temporary, moral, frail life that he has first given to us” (55).

The heart of the book are his seven keys to prevent burnout. These seem to be common sense and things that pastors would know. But although they are not new thoughts to many, they are good reminders to have in one's life. His seven keys are as follows:

1. We need sleep, and God does not.
2. We need Sabbath rests, and God does not.
It is important to keep a weekly day off to rest, even with the reality that crises and emergencies invade the day off.
3. We need friends, and God does not.

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1217.

“We are not created to be autonomous, go-it-alone, god-like pastors” (68). We need to work harder to be intentional at building good friendships.

4. We need inward renewal, and God does not. We need to do things that keep one’s “emotional, physical, intellectual, relational batteries topped up” (76). “If we do not give space for renewal, there will soon be nothing left of us to give” (77).
5. A warning: beware of the celebrity status. If one works for praise, respect, high regard, and the applause of people, then he is susceptible to becoming burnt out.
6. An encouragement: the results are the Lord’s. “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:7).
7. A delight: rejoice in grace, not gifts. One is to find joy not ultimately in the work, one’s gifts, or in success, then one will always be under pressure. Rather, we are to find our joy in God’s grace.

Mr. Ash told us that this was not a comprehensive book on burnout, but I wish there were more content. The final, brief chapter written by Dr. Midgley—defining burnout?—could have been expanded and become the framework for the book. I wished additional topics could have been more fully explored, such as, “How to Prevent Burnout” and “How to Get Out of Burnout If in It.” I did not think it was necessary to conclude each chapter with a personal story. I felt the book could have benefitted from less personal stories and instead included more content.

Is the book worth reading? Yes. Did Mr. Ash accomplish his goal, to advise and warn others of burnout? Yes, and I think he does it in a very humble and kind way. We join with him in his desire to see pastors run a “marathon of ministry, not a short, energetic sprint.” ☺

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Figuring Resurrection: Joseph as a Death and Resurrection Figure in the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism

by Jeffrey Pulse

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by Andrew J. Miller

Figuring Resurrection: Joseph as a Death and Resurrection Figure in the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism, by Jeffrey Pulse. Lexham, 2021, ix + 309 pages, \$29.95, paper.

Today’s biblical studies academic guild largely downplays the presence of resurrection hope in the Hebrew Bible (OT), considering it a later development in Israel’s history. Jeffrey Pulse’s *Figuring Resurrection: Joseph as a Death and Resurrection Figure in the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism* challenges this consensus by arguing that Genesis 37–50 in its final form contains various “dying and rising” motifs, such that “Joseph may properly be understood as a death-and-resurrection figure. Such a view carries with it the implication that scholars might need to change their focus somewhat, not only with regard to Joseph, but also with respect to understanding Hebrew thinking on the afterlife more generally” (279–80). Pulse, professor of exegetical theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, goes so far as to state that “Israel always had a basic understanding of the afterlife and a sense of the resurrection of the dead, which the attentive reader of the Joseph narratives could discern” (259, cf. 7).

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1226.

This assumes a strong unity in the text with a consistent theological message (3, 5, 61). Professor of Comparative Literature at Cornell University, C. M. Carmichael, once observed that source critics are “like alchemists who attempt to make gold out of disparate elements without suspecting that they stand beside a gold mine.”² Pulse sees a gold mine in these texts and argues, “Biblical motifs (themes) provide evidence of a unified theology present within each page of the text” (51). Pulse’s perspective is not completely novel; he utilizes aspects of Jon Levenson’s *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (Yale University Press, 1995). Levenson suggested that “the story of Joseph in Genesis 37–50 is not only the longest and most intricate exemplar of the narrative of the death and resurrection of the beloved son, but also the most explicit” (*Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 65).

The layout of *Figuring Resurrection* may lead readers to love it or hate it; the book has three main chapters, Chapters 3–5, wherein each Pulse covers the same biblical material from different angles. Chapter 3, “The Masoretic Text of the Joseph Narratives,” is lengthy (pages 65–146) and goes through each chapter of Genesis 38–50 sequentially. This chapter provides an overview of each chapter, touching on motifs that link them together. Chapter 4, “Joseph and His Character: Perceived Problems and Difficulties,” goes through the same material from a moral standpoint, evaluating the mixed and flawed heroics of these chapters. In Chapter 5, Pulse particularly draws attention to twelve manifestations of a “death-and-resurrection motif” in the fourteen chapters under examination (164–5). He examines each in turn, arguing that “they intersect with and build on one another” (165).

While I do not find this layout the most helpful, it sets the work apart from a commentary, and the author’s engagement with the text propels the book forward. Pulse makes a compelling case

for textual unity throughout his analysis of the Joseph chapters. Genesis 37, for example, figures death and resurrection through Joseph being literally thrown into a pit and then brought up again (78). This chapter also features the OT’s first use of the word *sheol* (79, שְׁאוֹל). Despite Genesis 38’s seeming change of subject, Pulse points out various similarities between Judah and Joseph, even suggesting that “the Joseph narratives appear to be the tale of two brothers” (81, 83). Citing Levenson’s observation in *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (Yale University Press, 2006), that a barren womb having a child is like a tomb being opened, Pulse sees Tamar’s pregnancy as fitting that pattern (173).

Among the unifying motifs present in these chapters is the garment motif, which harkens back to Gen. 3:7, and the provision of a garment (Gen. 3:21) requiring “the shedding of blood” (53). Garments link Genesis 37 to 38, for “in Genesis 37, Joseph’s garment was used to deceive his father, and now a garment is used to deceive one of the deceivers” (86; see Gen. 38:14). Further, a garment is used by Potiphar’s wife to “reinforce her lie” in Genesis 39 (92). Pulse also highlights the irony of deception throughout these chapters of “Israel being tricked time and time again—by his sons and now by Joseph—when one considers the deeds of his younger years” (109). *Figuring Resurrection* fits well in Lexham’s Studies in Scripture and Biblical Theology series, as Pulse provides a miniature biblical theology of the clothing motif throughout Scripture (53–56; 192–4).

The Joseph narratives are unique, even in Genesis, through the literary device of “doubling,” repetition (e.g., of dreams) (144). Here “Joseph is portrayed as a death-and-resurrection figure,” for “the life of Joseph, with all its ups and downs, is an account interwoven with example after example of death and resurrection” (144–5). Of course, this does not mean Joseph is a flawless character; he is portrayed as a spy bringing a bad report to his father (148; see Gen. 37:2). This will be echoed as he calls them spies in Egypt (149; see Gen. 42:9, 14, 16, 30–31, 34). Pulse explains, “Jacob

2 C. M. Carmichael, *The Sacrificial Laws of Leviticus and the Joseph Story* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 7.

is guilty of playing favorites and spoiling his son Joseph, and the result appears to be an arrogant attitude on the part of Joseph” (150). Further, Pulse follows Harvard professor James Kugel,³ at least so far as to leave open the question about Joseph’s motives in going back to Potiphar’s house in Gen. 39:11 (154–5). Pulse also follows Targum Pseudo Jonathan and asserts that Joseph’s words to the cupbearer in 40:14 display self-reliance, “an attempt to orchestrate his own release from prison” (156, 183). Then there is Joseph’s assimilation into Egyptian life, including his marriage to “the daughter of a pagan priest,” Egyptian name, and references to a “cup of divination,” all of which may have led to his father’s arm crossing blessing in Genesis 48 (157–8, 102–103; see Gen. 41:45, 44:4–5, 15; 48:14). Genesis is not equivocal about deception’s dire consequences, Joseph tests and tests his brothers, even making them swear to bring his bones to Canaan: “There is no climate of trust in this family” (161). Yet, I would note, Joseph’s character has improved by the end of the narrative to the point where—as will later be echoed in Daniel, another figure associated with resurrection hope—he can be called “a man in whom is the spirit of God” (see 100).

The weight of Pulse’s argument falls on Chapter 5, wherein he notes twelve resurrection motifs:

separation and reunion . . . three-day/three-stage separation and restoration . . . the barren womb and the opening of the womb . . . being cast into a pit/Sheol and being raised up/ lifted up . . . going down to Egypt and up to Canaan/the promised land . . . slavery and freedom . . . thrown into prison and released from prison, famine and deliverance (drought and rain/dew) . . . seeds/planting and growth/ fertility/fruitfulness . . . going down into the water/being drowned and being brought up out of the water/new life . . . exile and return from exile [and] . . . stripped and clothed (garment motif). (165)

Readers may find some of these more compelling than others, and at times I felt the argument could be improved by more “showing the work.” The treatment of each motif is uneven, perhaps following the density of presence in the biblical text, with, for example, the “going down into the water” section only straddling two pages. But *Figuring Resurrection*’s argument is cumulative, and together these motifs lend significant weight to Pulse’s claim that “Joseph was chosen to portray the early Hebrew understanding of the afterlife” without explicit statements of resurrection hope (195).

Though they feel like appendices, *Figuring Resurrection* concludes with five more chapters that address the text of the Septuagint, Targum Onkelos, and how the Joseph stories were later used and interpreted. Kugel noted the revived popularity of Joseph’s story during the Second Temple Period (254–5), and Pulse argues that “Joseph became a focal point for renewed theological reflection on the theme of new life springing forth out of the old; of a glorious revival of things that had seemed to be finished, dead beyond recall” (260).

Although *Figuring Resurrection* has its weaknesses, such as an overreliance on Levenson’s work and more than a few underdeveloped points, I recommend this work as a helpful exegetical and biblical-theological study of Gen. 38–50. Pulse has furthered the conversation about resurrection motifs in the Joseph narratives, argued for the unity of the text, and bolstered arguments for resurrection themes in Genesis. However, I suspect more thorough argumentation will be needed to make scholars rethink their stance on ancient resurrection hope. ©

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³ James Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (Harvard University Press, 1994).

Servant Reading

Review Articles

Classic Tri-covenantal Reformed Theology

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
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by T. David Gordon

Reformed Covenant Theology: A Systematic Introduction, by Harrison Perkins. Lexham, 2024, xxvii + 491 pages, \$44.99.

General Traits of Perkins's Presentation

Patient and energetic readers of *Reformed Covenant Theology* will be rewarded for both their patience and their effort. I almost sensed that I had returned for a crash course that covered three years in seminary. This almost-500-page book would likely have been nearly twice the length had anyone else written it. However, this is not to say the book is easy; it will richly reward those who give it the effort and time it deserves, but the casual reader should probably just watch television and leave this gem for others. The book is well-titled, because it is devoted to the distinctively “Reformed” covenant theology, while also frequently demonstrating the roots of the same in the early church, in Irenaeus and Augustine (et al.). Perkins has a thorough working relationship with important theologians and, perhaps especially,

with the historic Reformed confessional literature, which he cites pertinently and judiciously throughout the volume. The ease with which he transitions from discussing Scripture passages, theologians, or confessional literature is so seamless that some readers may not even realize that he is doing it.

The volume is very strong in interacting with alternative views, both within Reformed covenant theology and without. Perkins appears equally comfortable with the early church (Irenaeus and Augustine), the medieval church (Anselm and Aquinas), the Reformational theologians (Calvin, Witsius, Turretin, Perkins, Bavinck, and Vos), and living contemporaries. The coverage is remarkably thorough and engaging, and the critical reasoning is acute. The book is full of rich biblical theology and precise exegesis, as Perkins explains important New Testament texts in light of the Old Testament texts they develop.

Pastoral application and illustration through the entire book will make the book more accessible than it might have otherwise been. Even so, this work is not for those unable or unwilling to exert significant intellectual effort.

Perkins functions within a classic tri-covenantal approach to covenant theology and even locates his section on the covenant of redemption (about which Westminster was silent, though not ignorant) between the parts on The Covenant of Works and The Covenant of Grace. This section (his “Part Two: The Covenant of Redemption”) is remarkably and refreshingly Trinitarian and gives due justice to the Holy Spirit’s role in the matter:

More specifically, three triads of A’s structure the particular functions that the Father, Son, and Spirit fulfill to bring about the elect’s redemption: (1) the Father *arranges* redemption by *appointing* the Son as mediator and *assigning* the elect to him; (2) the Son *accomplishes* redemption by *accepting* his Father’s will and *attaining* righteousness for the elect; and (3) the Spirit *applies* redemption by *accompanying* the Son in his earthly mission and *administering* Christ’s benefits to his elect. (132, *emphases his*)

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1161.

Perkins here astutely positions his discussion of the covenant of redemption between the covenants of works and grace, respectively, so that he can observe that the covenant of redemption is a covenant of works for Christ and a covenant of grace for us. His discussion of the covenant of redemption is not only lengthier than some discussions, but it is also profoundly trinitarian and includes all three persons of the Godhead, especially in Chapter VI, “The Father, Son, and Spirit in the Fulfillment of Salvation.”

Through the whole book Perkins emphasizes that creation itself was oriented to our future blessedness, though such could only be attained through a federal head, a point that distinguishes Reformed covenant theology from Lutheran covenant theology:

God created us to be oriented by nature toward our supernatural end in the world to come. Had Adam completed his task in the covenant of works, he would have victoriously entered the new creation. Since Adam failed, Christ brings his people into that eschatological communion. . . . The legal character of the covenant of works again reminds us of God’s immense love and kindness for Adam and the whole human race. God not only gave Adam the gift of existing in the divine image but also offered him the potential to intensify the communion that he had with God by covenant. (63, 74–5)

Chapter VII (“The Last Adam and His People”) affirms all the important tenets of federal theology in the two-Adam framework. Perkins here prefers “satisfaction” to “atonement,” because it is the preferred language of our standards (“satisfaction” language appears fifteen times in the Westminster standards; “atoning” language not once), and because it emphasizes what is often called “active” and “passive” obedience by using the two-fold debt of both obedience (called by early Reformed theologians “principal debt”) and not disobeying (called by early Reformed theologians “a penalty debt”). Christ paid both, via his active and passive obedience. This distinction

highlights that Christ’s work as the second Adam was as much about his covenant-fulfilling obedience as it was about his curse-bearing death. . . . These debts are far from impersonal, despite their association with financial transactions, but are fundamentally relational. We were meant to express our full love for God in our creaturely and covenantal relationship with him by fully keeping his law (John 14:15; 15:14) but defaulted on our relational debts. We failed to satisfy those payments of relational love which we should have happily and joyfully rendered to God for his goodness in making us and in further offering us even greater blessings simply for doing what we were supposed to do. (175)

Throughout, Perkins appears to adopt and embrace the language of the 2016 Orthodox Presbyterian Church study report,² which attempted to resolve a half-century of debates about relating the Abrahamic to the Sinai covenant: “The covenant of grace is one in substance but diversely administered” (353). This permits Perkins to display the unity of the covenant of grace while freeing him to notice how profoundly diversely the one covenant of grace is administered:

God’s promises to Abraham and to David were the reason for all of God’s mercies concerning heavenly and earthly blessings—but that the Mosaic covenant provided the rationale for their judgment. This underemphasized development within the Old Testament narrative clarifies the Mosaic covenant as resembling the covenant of works for the nation.

Although God’s promise appears unconditional for David, its fulfillment seems conditional for his heirs. (357)

Perhaps this sort of language, and the OPC committee’s distinguishing of *substance* and *administration*, becomes the language we will use in the future. Note that Section II of the first chapter of

² “Report of the Committee to Study Republication,” <https://opc.org/GA/republication.html>.

that study paper was entitled “Covenant of Grace: Substance and Administration,” and the first sentence in that section began,

When it comes to the covenant of grace, John Ball’s famous statement summarizes the overall principle well: “For manner of administration this covenant is divers, as it pleased God in sundry manners to dispense it: but for substance, it is one, the last, unchangeable and everlasting.”

Note also Perkins’s irenic comment: “Still, these matters of interpreting Mosaic typology are very specific and even niche, rendering overly vitriolic disagreement about parsing these delicate issues inappropriate when our varying interpretations fall within the confessional boundaries” (351).

Affirming the unity of the covenant of grace appears to free Perkins to appreciate, and feel the full weight of, the diversity of administration within that one substance. He affirms throughout that the Abrahamic and Davidic administrations are much more promissory and that the Mosaic administration of the one covenant of grace is much more legal:

Every time God mentions his covenant with David, he appealed to it to explain why he was *delaying judgment or doing good to his people*. . . . Alternatively, biblical authors appealed to the Mosaic covenant always to explain *judgment*. In stark contrast to the Davidic covenant, God never mentioned Moses as the reason for withholding punishment. . . . The appeals to the various covenants throughout the ongoing biblical narrative confirm that God’s promises to Abraham and David were continual reasons for hope, but the Mosaic administration required obedience to maintain the people’s earthly blessing. In every era, the people were saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, but each administration contributed its own set of types or promises that applied Christ and his work before he came. Those administrations, however, cannot be mixed as if they all perform the same exact

function since Scripture appeals to them for different purposes as they drive history toward Christ. (359–62, emphasis his)

Unsurprisingly, then, Perkins states, “The new covenant as an administration of the covenant of grace *radically differs* from, specifically, the Mosaic administration” (369, emphasis mine).

“A Covenantal Ethic” (sub-section of XVI, The Shape of Covenantal Life with God) interested me, because I have pursued (and taught about) a biblical theology of ethics for years and this April published a book that summarizes my results: *Choose Better: Five Biblical Models of Ethics*.³ Perkins’s discussion was particularly encouraging to me, because he attempts there to augment the “divine command theory” (ethics based on God’s revealed Word) with prayer: “prayer should be the chief factor of our Christian life” (417), and a kind of virtue ethics: “virtue ethics suggests that the image of God entails that we are made for certain ends, namely, to reflect the holy God’s good character” (421). He also says, “The commandments are not exhaustive legislation but encapsulate wisdom principles to be further applied” (426). In *Choose Better* I refer to a “law model,” a “communion model,” a “wisdom model,” and an “imitation model” to convey similar thought.

Perkins’s book is aptly titled *Reformed Covenant Theology*, because it follows and explicates the mainstream of historical Reformed discussions of covenant theology. My rare difference is merely where I have the same difference with the Westminster standards themselves: both Perkins and Westminster drive “law” back into the garden, whereas Paul used (unqualified) νόμος (*nomos*) to designate a reality that was not only post-Eden, but also post-Abraham. Paul said, “Sin was in the world before the law” (Rom. 5:13), and he located “law” 430 years after the Abrahamic covenant (Gal. 3:17). “Law,” for Paul, was not a universal and timeless reality; it was a particular and temporary reality. If our standards (and Perkins) referred

3 T. David Gordon, *Choose Better: Five Biblical Models of Ethics* (P&R, 2024).

to “God’s will,” “God’s moral purpose/s,” “a probation,” or other such expressions, they could probably affirm what they wish (i.e., the covenant of works, which was itself an aspect of the covenant of redemption) without using a Pauline term in an un-Pauline way. For Paul, “the giving of the law” was one of Israel’s several distinctive realities (“They are Israelites, and to them belong . . . the giving of the law,” Rom. 9:4–5); and even Moses wrote sixty-two chapters (all of Genesis and the first twelve of Exodus) before he ever mentioned torah. Paul followed Moses and Jesus in regarding “law” as distinctly Mosaic. Jesus asked, “Did not Moses [not Adam nor Abraham nor God] give you the law?” (John 7:19, NKJV). The apostle John said, “The law was given through Moses” (John 1:17, NKJV). For those who do not have my scruples (and even those who do), they will find Perkins’s Chapter II, “The Covenant with Adam and Its Law,” to be one of the most nuanced, and most thoroughly informed, discussions about the matter, and I only scruple to his drafting Paul’s “law” into the Eden conversation. For those who share my scruples, they will cringe with me at casual comments such as these, about Romans 5:17-19: “Paul contrasts the first and the last Adam’s work by highlighting how Adam trespassed God’s law . . .” (143). Yet earlier in verse 13, Paul had expressly said, “sin was in the world before the law.” Our tradition unfortunately uses “law” to mean something like “God’s moral design,” “God’s moral will,” or “God’s moral purpose,” though, for Paul, νόμος (*nomos*) was not only post-Eden, but it was also 430 years post-Abraham.

If I had to recommend a single volume to introduce someone to Reformed covenant theology, this would be it. It not only employs clearer English than Witsius’s *The Economy of the Covenants* (1677 original in Latin), but it also engages ancient, medieval, and contemporary theologians more thoroughly than Witsius did, and it demonstrates remarkable fluency and competence in the several important disciplines of systematic theology, biblical theology, and exegetical theology. Throughout, Perkins distinguishes both the areas of agreement within our tradition and the

occasional areas of disagreement, without getting lost in the thickets on the one hand or overlooking them on the other hand. It is rare to encounter such judicious reasoning about such a broad range of knowledge. ©

Structure of Harrison Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*

I. Meeting God in the Covenants

PART ONE: THE COVENANT OF WORKS

II. The Covenant with Adam and Its Law

III. The Covenant’s Legal Character and Reward

IV. Applying the Covenant of Works

PART TWO: THE COVENANT OF REDEMPTION

V. The Trinity and Their Covenant

VI. The Father, Son, and Spirit in the Fulfillment of Salvation

VII. The Last Adam and His People

PART THREE: THE SUBSTANCE OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE

VIII. The Unity of the Covenant of Grace in Christ.

IX. The Unity of the Covenant of Grace in the Benefits of Christ

X. The Time of Tension

PART FOUR: THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE

XI. God’s Multifaceted Plan of Salvation

XII. From Adam to Moses

XIII. The Mosaic Covenant

XIV. From Moses to Christ

PART FIVE: LIVING IN GOD’S COVENANT OF GRACE

XV. The Covenant Community

XVI. The Shape of Covenantal Life with God

XVII. Theses on Covenant Theology

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Poetry: The Music of Particularity

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
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by Gregory E. Reynolds

On Czesław Miłosz, by Eva Hoffman (Princeton University Press, 2023).

My initial encounter with Polish poet Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004) was through an interview about his poetry on Mars Hill Audio in 2004. Ken Myers interviewed Roger Lundin. Miłosz was quoted to say that when he arrived at the University of Paris from his native city of Šeteniai (now Vilnius) in Lithuania, formerly part of Poland, that many students showed disdain for their homelands. He engages this experience in his 1981 poem “Bypassing Rue Descartes”:

Ashamed to remember the customs of our
homes,
About which nobody here should ever be told:
...
I had left the cloudy provinces behind,
I entered the universal, dazzled and desiring.²

He deplored this attitude, especially as one who felt he was an exile from Europe because he came from “the other (Eastern) Europe,” considered inferior by the rest of Europe. I became a fan. The local is where we live and is the soil for the best poetry, but much of modernity works against thick local connections. In his autobiographical novel *The Issa Valley*, he reminds us, “Until recently everything a man needed was manufactured at home” (8). In the poem Miłosz also satirizes the “universal” as at the root of the beautiful utopianism of Marxism and National Socialism which led to the extermination of millions.

He lived most of his childhood in Czarist Russia. In 1918 Poland regained its independent nationhood, and Lithuania declared independence from the new country. His native city, the capital of Lithuania, consisted of a rich cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity including Lithuanian, Jewish, Polish, and Belorussian citizens. His family was considered Polish minor nobility. As a young man he wrestled with the teachings of Polish Catholicism, deploring “organized religion.” His intellectual curiosity, honesty, and sensitivity led him to lament the cruelty he witnessed in the world. At university he was the only one to defend his fellow Jewish students from anti-Semitism (12–13).

During my first pastorate as a church planter in New Rochelle, New York, I was bi-vocational, working part-time for a Jewish engineer, Gustav Getter and Associates. One of the engineers was a Polish Jew who was born in Auschwitz near the end of World War II. She was excruciatingly thin due to her near starvation diet in the camp. Then to my astonishment I discovered that the author of the book under review, Eva Hoffman, is also a Polish Jew who was born in Auschwitz.

Unlike the solipsistic stream of consciousness of so much contemporary poetry, Miłosz deals with the large and difficult questions of life in concrete lyrical language. This was no doubt borne of the anguish he suffered throughout his early life until he fled Nazism and then Communism. His early training at school in Vilnius

in Latin classics and translation instilled in him a basic but crucial lesson that “what one says changes, depending upon how one says it,” and also the hard-earned conviction, conveyed by a demanding teacher, that “perfection is worth the effort . . . in other words, he showed us how to respect literature as the fruit of arduous labor.” (15)

He resisted the idea that literature was the “outpouring of some creative genius” (15). His approach to poetry as craftsmanship is beautifully expressed when he says, “The peasant is honest because his energy is transformed into bread. The

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1176.

2 Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001* (Penguin, 2001), 393–94.

artisan is honest because he makes over wood, hide, or metal.” Hoffman adds, “The energy of labor is what converts stone into cathedrals, plants into food, steel into bridges, perceptions into understanding—and words into poetry” (15–16).

After a brief flirtation with Marxism, Miłosz turned from politics to poetry. He always needed a larger framework for perception and understanding, what Hoffman calls “a metaphysics of particularity” (19). Poetry for Miłosz meant exploring the foundations of life in the particularities of one’s life situation. He was no fan of generalization. This yielded what Hoffman calls “the music of thought” (19). During the war Miłosz recounts in *Native Realm* (1059)³ an incident that provides clear insight into his idea of poetry. Lying in a field that was being bombarded by airplanes with bombs whistling by, “I riveted my eyes on a stone and two blades of grass in front of me. . . . I suddenly understood the value of matter: that stone and those two blades of grass formed a whole kingdom, an infinity of forms, shades, textures, lights.” For Miłosz, meaning inheres in the concrete particularities of existence (30). In high school my English teacher commented on an essay of mine, observing that it was too general and needed to be more specific. I never forgot that criticism; it forms part of my attraction to Miłosz.

Religiously, he had an affinity for Judaism, perhaps because their religion was not associated with a national identity like Polish Catholicism. He learned Hebrew in order to translate the Old Testament (20). Having visited Warsaw after the German retreat left it in utter devastation, he wrote in his 1945 poem “In Warsaw,” “It’s madness to live without joy.”⁴ In his essay “If Only This Could Be Said,” Miłosz points to the veracity of the Gospels and their account of Jesus’s resurrection,

Scientific-technological civilization has no place for death . . . I must ask if I believe that

the four Gospels tell the truth. My answer to this is: “Yes.” So I believe in an absurdity, that Jesus rose from the dead? Just answer without any of those evasions and artful tricks employed by theologians: “Yes or no?” I answer: “Yes,” and by that response I nullify death’s omnipotence. . . . So what remains is the covenant, the Word in which man trusts. Who however will inherit life? Those who are predestined to do so. . . . I am with all those people who have proclaimed their distrust of Nature (it’s contaminated) and relied solely on the boundless freedom of the divine act, of Grace.⁵

His love of the particularity of the created order, especially our embodied existence, cultivated a deep attraction to the resurrection of Jesus.

During Miłosz’s year of study in Paris in 1935 he encountered the suffering of displaced migrant Poles. In 1936 he wrote a poem, “Ballad of Levallois,” about their “barracks for the unemployed, Levallois-Perret,” later published in Polish in *Rescue (Ocalenie)* in 1945.

O God, have mercy on Levallois,
Look under these chestnut trees poisoned with
smoke,
Give a moment of joy to the weak and the
drunk,
O God, have mercy on Levallois.

“We were sensitive to the smell of misery and brutality” (27). Between the Nazi occupation and their persecution of Jews, three million Poles lost their lives. Miłosz lived most of the terrible years in Warsaw, but he eventually made his way to Lviv, Ukraine (29–30). He made his way back to occupied Warsaw to be near his future wife Janka. There he found freedom, despite the Nazi presence, to read and write to his heart’s content because the Nazis did not adhere to a rigorous

³ Czesław Miłosz, *Rodzinną Europą (Native Realm)* (Instytut Literacki, 1959).

⁴ Czesław Miłosz, *Poet in the New World: Poems 1946–1953* (HarperCollins, 2025), x, 4.

⁵ Czesław Miłosz, “If Only This Could Be Said,” *Cross Currents*, excerpted from *Begin Where I Am: Selected Essays*, eds. Bogdana Carpenter and Madeline G. Levine (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2001), 64–6.

ideology like the Communists. Intellectually they were a zero.⁶

He learned English by reading the works of T. S. Eliot and translating Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. The influence of Eliot can be seen in poems like the poetic series *The World* (1943) and the poem "Faith" (34–5). Hoffman sees echoes of Eliot's *Four Quartets*. I see a powerful resemblance to *The Wasteland* in Miłosz's "Two Men in Rome": "And there's the dancing girl. / *Ta tada tada . . .*"⁷ Perhaps Eliot more than any other English-speaking poet helped Miłosz achieve "deeper layers" in his poetry (34). Hoffman considers that the two best poems written by Miłosz during this period were "Campo dei Fiori" and "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto" (36).

"Campo dei Fiori" is the result of Miłosz witnessing a failed uprising in the Warsaw ghetto in which many lost their lives, while outside the ghetto walls people were enjoying a beautiful spring evening, indifferent to the tragedy (37). He laments, "that day I thought only / of the loneliness of the dying."⁸

"A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto" is a more severe and perhaps more profound feat of metaphoric thought, imagining an underworld of the dead" (38). Miłosz's empathy for the persecuted Jew also reveals his interaction with the Bible and his action in helping Jews in Warsaw escape the Nazis in coordination with the British foreign intelligence MI5. Also compelling is Hoffman's memories of her parents living through the Holocaust in a tiny village in the Polish part of Ukraine (41). No wonder she connects with Miłosz's poetry of memory and witness. Miłosz also had to deal with survivor guilt as reflected poignantly in his 1944 poem "Café" written in Warsaw. "The waiter whirls with his tray / and they look at me with a burst of laughter / for I still don't know what it is to die at the hand of man, / they

know—they know it well." A man of deep emotion, Miłosz avoided entering into the deep emotion connected with his country's tragic past and present. His poem "In Warsaw" (1945) expresses it well: "My pen is lighter / than a hummingbird's feather. This burden / is too much for it to bear" (48–9). The only survivors of the devastation of the war were two important words, "Only two salvaged words: / Truth and justice." These he would pursue for a lifetime beyond mere politics.

He chafed under the Communism in postwar Poland, but he sought and accepted the post of cultural attaché at the Polish embassy in Washington, DC. The "DP" on his license plate, which stood for "Diplomatic Personnel," he insisted was for "displaced person" (53). American "aggressive individualism" and lack of a sense of history did not make a good first impression. This would change in 1960 with his professorial appointment to the University of California in Berkeley.

Under suspicion due to his lack of Communist party membership and his poetry, Miłosz was recalled by the Polish government from Washington, DC, to Warsaw in 1950. This often meant imprisonment or death. He was in a state of deep despair, when a friend, Natalia Modzelewska, whose husband was Minister of Foreign Affairs, arranged for Miłosz to be sent back to Paris. Once there he slipped out of the Polish embassy and hid at the offices of his émigré publisher, *Kultura*, for three and a half months.⁹ He remained in Paris even though he deplored western Europe's capitulation to National Socialism as well as Eastern Europe's succumbing to Communism. Through it all he never relinquished his vocation as a poet.

You who have wronged a simple man . . .

Do not feel safe. The poet remembers.

You can kill one, but another is born.

The words are written down, the deed, the date. (60)¹⁰

6 Adam Kirsch, "Czesław Miłosz's Battle for Truth," *The New Yorker* (May 22, 2017), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/29/czeslaw-milosz-battle-for-truth>.

7 Miłosz, *Poet in the New World*, 13.

8 Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001*, 34.

9 Kirsch, "Czesław Miłosz's Battle for Truth."

10 Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001*, 103.

Throughout it all, during these years of anguish, he developed his poetic skills with great intensity and assiduity.

In France he found few sympathizers among the intelligentsia except Albert Camus. The rest were under the thrall of Communism (63). In 1953 he published a brilliant analysis of totalitarianism in *The Captive Mind*.¹¹ With Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn he shared the belief that susceptibility to Communism lay in the lack of religion. Christianity gives human life morality and meaning. Dialectical materialism is a substitute god, Diamat (68–9).¹²

In 1960 Miłosz came to America to assume his new position as professor of Slavic Languages and Literature at University of California in Berkeley. “Miłosz could combine genuine gratitude to America with a deep critique of some of its cultural features.”

California is a “mecca for seekers of mystical unity, for consciousness-expanding drugs, ecstatic sects, publications devoted to Hinduism and Zen Buddhism, for prophets preaching wisdom from Tibetan monks.”—tendencies that make it, in his view, “the capital of everything that is turning against Western man’s fondness for intellectual precision.”

His poem “To Raja Rao” embodies this critique (102–105). In his essay “The Agony of the West,” he wrote that the catastrophism and utopianism of the hippie was a way for sensitive people to deal with “the horrors accompanying technological progress” (109–10). Whitman and Thoreau represented nostalgia in contrast with the revolutionary impetus of Marxism (111). The Berkely rebellions, unlike the European resistances during World War II, “were almost entirely costless: no gulag, no Lubyanka prison, no Siberian exile” (115). Miłosz concluded that middle-class Americans

spend their lives working, often in dull and meaningless jobs, and this does not allow them to “break through their habits of mind.” There is also the nefarious influence of television and roadside ads, “which become richer in brutality, and more moronic the further one goes from the big cities.” And no bookstores anywhere in sight, no time (or urge) to read. (122)

More positively, he felt that “auto trips about America result in admiration for man and compassion” (125). Hoffman concludes:

For all his gratitude to America and his admiration for the United States, he didn’t find it a comfortable country to live in, and a lingering sense of estrangement—creatively so fruitful and personally so difficult—never entirely left him. (127)

This is why in 1993 he returned to Poland and lived out his days in Kraków.

On the other hand, Miłosz admired the local color of village life and the diligence of the American worker, especially the farmer. He deeply appreciated the patriotism and the democratic freedoms which allowed people to advance. He understood Europe to be the past and America to be the future (135).

Despite his melancholic proclivities, he also had a robust capacity for pleasure, which is especially evident in his late poetry (139). This may be clearly witnessed in his short poem written in Berkeley in 1971, “Gift”¹³:

A day so happy.
Fog lifted early, I worked in the garden.
Hummingbirds were stopping over honeysuckle flowers.
There was no thing on earth I wanted to possess.
I knew no one worth my envying him.
Whatever evil I had suffered I forgot.
To think that once I was the same man did

11 *Zniewolony umysł The Captive Mind* (Instytut Literacki, 1953).

12 Diamat is a name for Marxist philosophy defining the relationship between knowledge and the material world.

13 Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001*, 277.

Not embarrass me.

In my body I felt no pain.

When straightening up, I saw the blue sea and
sails. (138)

In his long poem “A Treatise on Poetry” Miłosz provides “a kind of aesthetic manifesto” in the first section, “Preface” (82).¹⁴ He begins almost predictably,

First, plain speech in the mother tongue.
Hearing it you should be able to see,
As if in a flash of summer lightning,
Apple trees, a river, the bend in a road.¹⁵

The particulars of place in speech, nature, and artifacts Miłosz “wanted—needed—to assert that his native realm, his small corner of the world, mattered; that it contained interesting personalities and great writers; that—however obscure its history—it was part of the civilized world” (144).

The range of Miłosz’s interests, and thus the subjects of his poetry, is enormous: from the Museum of Modern Art in Berkeley to the Bible, from Gregory of Nyssa to Pascal, and on and on. The Greek goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, was an inspiration to many exiles, since what they could recall might never otherwise be remembered (149). Miłosz wanted us to remember and to be remembered.

In 1980 he received the Nobel Prize; the hitherto unknown poet seemed to be associated with the Polish movement known as Solidarity. He was thus afforded the pleasure of a trip to Poland, where he met Lech Walesa, the leader of Solidarity, and Pope John Paul II. “Eventually, the words from his poem ‘You Who Wronged’ were inscribed on the memorial to the fallen shipyard workers in Gdańsk, where the Solidarity movement started and heroically continued against great odds.” *“You who have harmed simple man, mocking him with your laughter, you kill him, someone else will*

be born, and your deeds and words will be written down.” “His books were officially published in Poland for the first time since 1951” (154–55).

Miłosz saw himself as a voice crying in the wilderness. His poetic endeavor was “a quest for reality, or *esse*—a serious and ethical task. . . . He thought of himself not as an inspired individual ‘artist’ but as a voice representing an underestimated literary tradition and emerging from the insufficiently understood Other Europe” (157–58).

While most of Miłosz’s poetry is translated from Polish, it translates well because most is not rhyming in the original. This gives the translator more linguistic latitude. Also, many poems are translated by Miłosz himself, so much less is lost in translation.

In 1991 Lithuania had broken away from the Soviet Union, and Miłosz visited the country of his birth for the first time in seven decades. His essay “Happiness” commemorates the event (174). But his second wife, who was much younger than him, died of cancer in 2002 (188). He lost his first wife in 1986. So sorrow overshadowed much of his life. But conventional Catholicism appears more prominently in his later poems (201). After his poem “Heaven” Miłosz has a commentary. The poem has a passage from the Catholic catechism explaining heaven as the abode of the Father. He refers to the “biblical allegory of original sin” resulting in human death. But the creativity of mankind paradoxically comes from his rebellion. This is the riddle of Christian theology.¹⁶ After his death in 2004 he received an elaborate funeral in Kraków (204).

Czesław Miłosz’s religious commitment has been a matter of controversy. John Wilson referred to Miłosz as “a decidedly unorthodox Roman Catholic, one who expressed ecstatic praise and perennial doubt, eschatological hope and a questioning wonderment.”¹⁷ This is a fair conclu-

14 Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems*, 109. “A Treatise on Poetry” is not an easy read, but it is deeply rewarding for the effort. It reminds me so much of Eliot.

15 Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems*, 109.

16 Czesław Miłosz, *Selected and Last Poems 1931–2004* (HarperCollins, 2006), 298–300.

17 John Wilson, “The Miłosz Year: Longing for the Restoration of All Things,” *Books and Culture* (December 29, 2010), <https://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2011/janfeb/miloszyear.html>.

sion based on what we know. Miłosz’s 1974 poem, “Bells in Winter,” the last poem of the series *From the Rising of the Sun*,¹⁸ confesses:

Yet I belong to those who believe in *apokatastasis*.

That word promises reversed movement,
Not the one that was set in *katastasis*,
And appears in Acts 3, 21.

It means: restoration. So believed St. Gregory of Nyssa,
Johannes Scotus Erigena, Ruysbroeck, and
William Blake.

In his wrestlings Miłosz surely plumbed the depths.

The book has no chapter divisions but is divided into sections of various lengths by a square printer’s device. It also lacks an index.

I must confess to my readers that I have felt out of my depth, as I have often felt after years of reading Eliot, with Miłosz. Their classical training, native brilliance, and intense devotion to poetry are simply dazzling. But I remain content to be dazzled. I highly recommend this biography and the poetry of Czesław Miłosz.

Recommended Reading

Andrzej Franaszek, *Miłosz: A Biography* (Belknap, 2017)

Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001* (Penguin, 2001)

Czesław Miłosz, *Selected and Last Poems 1931–2004* (HarperCollins, 2006)

Czesław Miłosz, *Poet in the New World: Poems 1946–1953* (HarperCollins, 2025)

Czesław Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Harvard University press, 1983) ©

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18 Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems*, 326–31. This excerpt is on page 328.

Interpreting and Understanding the Psalms

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
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by Bryan D. Estelle

Reading the Psalms as Scripture, by James Hamilton Jr. and Matthew Damico. Lexham, 142 pages, \$14.99.

Many things factor into a proper interpretation of Scripture, or any book for that matter. Determining the genre of a book is vital to a right interpretation of its message. Alister Fowler, for example, in his significant book on genre writes,

Of all the literary codes . . . , I have no hesitation in proposing genre as the most important, not least because it incorporates and organizes many others . . . there is no doubt that genre primarily has to do with communication. It is an instrument not of classification or prescription, but of meaning.²

I have no doubt that the above statement is true; however, genre identification of this small, newly published book on the Psalms is difficult to pin down. Is it classified as an introduction to the Psalter? Is it an exposition of select Psalms, something like a commentary? I would classify it as a book of hermeneutics; more precisely, I would suggest that the authors posture themselves to write a hermeneutics on reading the Psalter.

The book is relatively short, and it is written in easily accessible prose. It is not cluttered with footnotes as so often happens in an academic tome. Nevertheless, the authors have set out to address several weighty and significant introductory and hermeneutical issues. In Chapter 1 they address the issue of reading the Psalter as a book, by which

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1181.

2 Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Harvard University, 1982), 22.

they mean a coherently delivered message that resembles a masterpiece. As is well-known, they acknowledge that the Psalter is divided into five books, with the first four concluding with doxologies that have many common elements embedded within them (Ps. 41:13; 72:18–19; 89:52; 106:48). They acknowledge that the Psalter included a protracted editorial process, that may have concluded with someone like Ezra being responsible for the Psalter’s final form (11). They note that a new author is introduced at the beginning of each book, and they highlight some of the themes in the Psalter and conclude that the canonical form of the psalter indicates intentional arrangement. At this point they also show sensitivity to dictional links which connect individual psalms, claiming that there is a deliberate building up and development within the flow of the psalter. Their thesis can be caught in the following:

The Psalter is not a random collection of disconnected poems but a strategically arranged set of carefully curated pieces that use and reuse common terminology, have clear signposts at the collection’s turning points, and evidence discernable flows of thought. (20)

Next, they take up the well-worn claim that Psalms 1 and 2 were meant to introduce the psalter. They note the emphasis on Torah meditation in Psalm 1 and the accent falling upon the theme of the king in Psalm 2. Even so, I wish they had demonstrated more awareness to the Jewish practice of asking the following extremely significant question regarding Psalms 1 and 2 “framing” the Psalter: What is the surest path to communion with God? Psalm 1, which is not a prayer, would say that pious study leads to communion with God. Psalm 2, which does fit with most Psalms, would say that acts of corporate worship and praise of the king would be the surest path to God. So, which is it? According to Jewish tradition, the editors of the psalter never fully resolved this tension, since piety in the Jewish mindset indicates that it is both study and prayer that bring one close to God.

Chapter 2 takes up the topic of the superscriptions in the Psalter. In this chapter they take up

two critical questions: 1) “how should the superscriptions be regarded” (27) and 2) “how should the superscriptions guide our interpretations of the Psalms?” (27). Regarding the first point the authors consider the superscriptions as inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore canonical. Although I do not recall them using the language of “inerrant,” I am inclined to think that they would hold this position as well. However, such a claim is not without difficulties. Certain Psalms and their associated titles and superscriptions present great difficulties in accepting them at face value and esteeming them to be on a par with Scripture itself. Psalm 30 with its title is a case in point. Rather, I would suggest the posture posed by E. J. Young years ago to be more soberminded:

In defending the essential trustworthiness of the titles, I do not mean to suggest that as they stand they are above investigation or criticism. But a cautious and reverent criticism, it seems to me, will be unable to dismiss them in their entirety as valueless witnesses of authorship.³

This leads to their second point, “how should the superscriptions guide our interpretation?” Since the authors esteem the titles and superscriptions so highly, they maintain that the patterning of the superscriptions reveals literary structuring devices. This holds, in their view, for both smaller units and larger ones that cut across Books 1–5 of the Psalter as well. Although I appreciate their sensitivity to the role of new exodus themes here, much of their observation of large patterns in this section of the book, especially given their emphasis on chiasmic patterns, seems speculative without much evidence marshalled to support their observations.

Chapter 3 notes the importance of careful attention to individual psalms, especially the mechanisms of Hebrew prosody. They begin with some eloquent comments on the importance of poetry for communicating in compressed, evocative imagery, which is meant to deepen the impact

³ E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1965), 302 [footnote 3].

of the message being conveyed. Nevertheless, they are stuck in the “traditional” approach to Hebrew poetry which is committed to Robert Lowth’s paradigm, which understands parallelism as the essence of Hebrew poetry. Although it is true that parallelism is an important literary trope in Hebrew poetry, many Psalms commentators today do not understand the complexity of parallelism or are blind to other features of Hebrew poetry that mark when one is in the ambit of poetry vis-à-vis prose (e.g., verb gapping, loosening of prose syntactic constraints). Since the linguistic turn in studies of Hebrew poetry in the last several decades, huge advances have been made in understanding the workings of Hebrew poetry and how it functions. However, the authors of this book limit their discussion to parallelisms and acrostic forms, which are present in the Psalms, but by no means exhaust the dynamics of Hebrew poetry found therein.

Chapter 4 engages the reader on the topic of reading the Psalter as a whole, like a book. We can call this a “canonical approach,” since it is attempting what many studies have done in recent years: not myopically merely reading isolated individual Psalms but paying attention to contiguous Psalms in our interpretation and the flow of a narrative in the whole Psalter that may influence the individual parts. This is the kind of approach that was begun by Brevard Childs (Barthian) and continued by more conservative scholars like O. Palmer Robertson.⁴ The authors suggest that slow, prayerful pondering of reading the whole Psalter will lead one into the same insights of interconnectedness that they have observed. Indeed, “walking into the Psalter,” they say, is “not unlike the experience of walking into a great cathedral” (65), a metaphor originally invoked by D. Kidner years ago. Although I appreciate their attempts to read the Psalter as a coherent whole, I was left unsatisfied that the patterns they identify can be supported by the sparse evidence they cite.

Chapter 5 maintains that attention should be

given to citations and allusions in the Psalter to earlier Scripture. They emphasize this over and against the constant tendency to find the backdrop for Psalms in ancient Near Eastern parallels. This is welcome, and one can appreciate their allusion competence especially, for example, in noticing the recurring exodus motif in the Psalms.

Chapter 6 delves into the topic of interpreting the Psalter messianically. The authors set out to instruct the reader in the school of typology. The authors enjoin paying attention to pronoun usage, which is often the gateway to a legitimate messianic interpretation (84ff). They briefly touch upon the sensitive topic of imprecations in the Psalms (89ff). Next, the authors segue into a discussion of Psalms as interpreted by later Old Testament authors and New Testament authors in Chapters 8 and 9. Thankfully, in an age when C. Hays and Pete Enns have emphasized “christotelic” hermeneutics (each in their own manner), Hamilton and Damico land their feet on the stable ground of apostolic hermeneutics. That is to say that we have an obligation to read the Psalms as the New Testament authors read and interpreted them, since they are inspired Apostles.

Finally, Hamilton and Damico make an outstanding appeal in Chapter 9 for why Christians should return to and practice customarily singing Psalms in worship to the Triune God. This will lead the Christian into celebrating the deeds and character of God, repeating the sweet promises of God, and internalizing the Psalms, which will necessarily lead to changing and transforming us. The final short section of this book ends with “Seven Theses on How to Read the Psalms” (127–30), which accurately summarizes and recounts the highpoints of their argument.

I began this review by saying that its genre was hard to pin down. It is written in clear and accessible prose; indeed, the authors and publishers are to be commended for producing a simple, clear, and attractively published book. There is only one typographical error I found on page 128, where “the” should be “they.” I think that the book is worth reading for the person who has an interest in reading the Psalter as a coherent whole. Several

⁴ See, e.g., O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering Their Structure and Theology* (P&R, 2015).

significant introductory and hermeneutical issues are discussed. I have tried to register where I demur from the authors' positions and hope that I have introduced the reader of this review to some of the complex but fascinating interpretive issues found in today's discussions surrounding what is arguably the most influential Old Testament book on the theology of the church since the Reformation. ©

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Things about Abortion I Never Knew

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by **Stephen A. Migotsky**

Evangelicals and Abortion: Historical, Theological, Practical Perspectives, by J. Cameron Fraser. Wipf & Stock, 220 pages, \$37.00, hardcover, \$23.00, paper.

Dr. Fraser was born in Zimbabwe and grew up in Scotland. He is a graduate of Edinburgh University, Westminster Theological Seminary (MDiv.), and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (D. Min.). He was ordained as a minister of the Word in the Presbyterian Church of America in 1985 and installed in the Christian Reformed Church in 1995, served in Canada, and is now retired. He was the last editor of the *Presbyterian Guardian* (1978–80). As the subtitle suggests, the

book has three perspectives on abortion—historical, theological, and practical. As such, it is as thorough a perspective on abortion of which I am aware.

As a historian, a Reformed pastor, and someone who has been personally involved in the “pro-life” movement, Fraser has the heart, mind, and experience which deserve profound respect. He has dug deeply and comprehensively into the history of abortion, the biblical truths related to abortion, and the experiences of both “pro-life” and “pro-choice” politics on US culture. His footnotes and bibliography are extensive and valuable to anyone desiring to study the topics further.

The book is divided into three parts. The first is a historical understanding of evangelicals and abortion. He introduces the topic by describing a conversation with a pastor who did not know “that Evangelical Christians had not always believed that human life began at conception” and that “the Evangelical position on abortion that we might like to think is an obvious reading of Scripture is less than fifty years old as of this time of writing” and that some evangelicals still believe “the biblical view is that life begins at birth” (1). According to Fraser, evangelicals in general did not believe that life begins at conception until “the Shaeffer-Koop film series and book, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*” (1). Fraser describes how he and his wife Margaret got involved in pro-life movements (Christian Action Council and Christians for Life) in the early 1980s. Some pro-life groups were aimed at changing legislation to be more just, and others emphasized mercy and love as responses to abortion. In the pro-life movement he observes that the political (justice) wing and those more concerned for the pregnant women (mercy) are sometimes at odds. The public in general has come to believe that “pro-lifers” are concerned only about the unborn and politics (3). This first part provides a brief history and definition of evangelicalism and a historical survey of approaches to abortion from early church history to today.

Part 2 is primarily theological—on why evangelicals should be pro-life, by reviewing

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1182.

Exodus 21:22–25, the imago Dei, and implication for human life as created in the image of God. He believes the OPC “Report of the Committee to Study the Matter of Abortion” in 1971 was “particularly significant in regard to the interpretation of Exod [sic] 21:22–25,” and “it argues persuasively for a different interpretation of the Exodus passage *than what was common at the time*” (73, emphasis mine). The common evangelical view at the time was that life begins at birth. Fraser presents the exegesis of Exodus 21:22–25 in the OPC report, which demonstrated that the child in view is “not the product of a miscarriage, but . . . to the contrary . . . the child is born alive, but ahead of the anticipated time” (75). Old Testament scholars Gleason Archer and Meredith Kline also contributed to exegetical support for this correct view of life beginning before the birth of the child (76). Fraser’s presentation of the biblical exegetical reasoning used in the OPC report and other scholarly articles are a powerful refutation of the position that life begins at birth rather than conception.

Part 2 also includes a chapter on the imago Dei in human beings. The subject is considered by Fraser in the context of the Supreme Court of Alabama ruling that in vitro fertilization embryos are “considered to be children under state law, citing the image of God as the basis of that law” (80). Is being a member of the human race alone what determines the value and sanctity of life? Fraser writes that some (falsely) argue that species membership alone is not morally relevant (83). The discussion of who determines worth and moral value is extremely important. Fraser quotes the late Scottish theologian T. F. Torrance’s *The Soul and Person of the Unborn Child* favorably: “It is extremely important, in family and medical care, to give attention to the fact that the embryonic child, male or female, is . . . an incipient person” (92). Fraser addresses the question of what an embryo is if it is not attached to the mother, not viable, or when human eggs are fertilized out of the mother. There are also issues related to contraception practices. These involve, for example, the “morning-after pill,” which prevents the progress of pregnancy. This may include the prevention

of implantation, which kills the early embryo (98). The ethics of embryo research and stem cell research is also discussed with extensive quotes from David VanDrunen’s book *Bioethics and the Christian Life*.² The potential use of stem cells to cure diseases has resulted in harvesting them from embryos. But the current biological facts are that embryonic stem cells are somewhat dangerous to use to treat diseases, and the umbilical cord is a better, safer, and plentiful source of medically useful stem cells (100). Recent research has taken cells from mice and mature humans and reverted them to an earlier embryonic state, which provides another source for stem cells (100). Stem cell research is now possible with no need to “destroy any embryos” (100).

Fraser also addresses the use and non-use of fetal human cells to develop vaccines. There have been vaccines developed from tissue from fetuses aborted in the 1970s and 1985 and applied to some COVID-19 vaccines, but not the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines. The ethical issues of benefitting from an already aborted fetus are difficult ones. Recent Christian medical organizations are “calling researchers to develop ethical COVID-19 vaccines free of abortive cells in any stage of development” (105).

Part 3 gives a perspective on how US society views the evangelical “pro-life” position. Fraser examines “why pro-life arguments do not always resonate with society at large as we might expect and hope for” (167). He examines the slogan “adoption, not abortion” and finds it has not been at all useful in persuading women or the culture at large to adopt it. He reviews “the backlash to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*,” the appropriate response of some Christian ministries to its overturning, and why “legislative solutions alone are not the answer” (113). This may be Fraser’s most valuable contribution to how to make lasting and Christlike changes regarding abortion in the U.S. In summary, he quotes Rod Dreher favorably who “urges Christians to accept that ‘the culture

2 David VanDrunen, *Bioethics and the Christian Life: A Guide to Making Difficult Decisions* (Crossway, 2009).

war as we knew it is over. The so-called value voters—social and religious conservatives—have been defeated and are being swept to the political margins” (120).

Pro-choice advocates have begun to redefine words and phrases to turn pro-life people into the real killers because they always neglect the babies after they’re born. . . . We even hear open claims in the media today by proabortion activists that they are the true pro-lifers! After all, they tell us, it is pro-life to favor a woman’s right to bodily autonomy, pro-life want to see women not shackled down by having to raise a child instead of pursuing an education and career, pro-life to prevent children with Down’s [sic] Syndrome from being born and having to face life with such a disability (132–33).

He points out that there is also new media attention to abortion abolitionists who reject “incremental steps toward outlawing abortion and reserve strong criticism for those who accept anything other than a federal ban equipped with criminal penalties for all involved,” including pregnant women and doctors (139). David French is quoted as writing, “Abortion can only truly end when American culture changes, not just its law” (141). There are other international examples given of how the culture in other countries is far from being pro-life.

Given the US culture, Fraser writes favorably about Care Net. Care Net is an expansive network advocating for 1,200 independent, affiliated pregnancy centers across North America, as well as operating Pregnancy Decision Line to reach women and men at their point of need. Care Networks to end abortion, not primarily through political action but by building a culture where women and men receive all the support they need to welcome their children and create their own success stories (147).

I found no weaknesses in this book. It is comprehensive, thoughtful, biblical, and pastoral.

Conclusion

It would be a rare pastor or Christian who would not benefit from reading this book. Apparently, there are still evangelicals who believe that life begins at birth. Reading this book, the OPC “Report of the Committee to Study the Matter of Abortion,” and Dr. Kline’s article, which can be found at <https://meredithkline.com/klines-works/articles-and-essays/lex-talionis-and-the-human-fetus/>, will give a pastor the exegetical and pastoral help needed for a biblical case that life does not begin at birth and that much good can be done through Christlike compassion to women and men facing a pregnancy.

Several videos were referenced by Fraser that this reviewer found informative after watching them. Historically, the most influential were *How Should We Then Live?* and, especially, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* Two additional videos, *The Silent Scream* and *Eclipse of Reason*, describe details of an abortion procedure and show abortions being performed. Both have a former abortionist describing the procedures. All these videos are available and should be useful for an evangelical understanding of abortion. ©

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“Consider This: What You See Is Not All You Get”

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by William Edgar

Believe: Why Everyone Should Be Religious, by
Ross Douthat. Zondervan, 2025, xiii + 216 pages,
\$29.99.

For years I have tried to imagine one of my family members sitting next to me in church. My family is populated by marvelous people, most of whom do not profess any kind of faith. My imagination tells me the person would not be hostile. He would simply wonder what planet we came from! The songs in our church are cutting edge (!) soft rock from the 1970s. The sermon would be a foreign language: so true but making sense only to the tribe. And the smiling faces would show we are nice people, but essentially aliens. Put simply, the Christian faith expressed in my church, and many others, is irrelevant. I do not mean to say our churches do not do much good, for they do.

To his credit, Ross Douthat recognizes that we are not only populated by the “nones.” There are still well-informed skeptics who need to be answered. Yet such skeptics used to command a greater hearing. As Douthat and others have correctly remarked, the once-popular atheism of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and the like is in the rearview mirror. Those holding to this type of atheism are not the main audience, however.

Thus, Douthat has written a book which is meant to address, among others, the *nones*—that is, people with no particular religious commitments, be they Christian views or other. There is

some debate as to whether this demographic group is growing or holding steady. There is no debate about the pews in our churches being emptied. A book with apologetics that addresses such people is most welcome.

The way we used to evaluate sermons in a homiletics class when I was an active professor is that we began with the positive features, and then moved on to the problems, as I see them. The first positive is not so much about the book but about the *New York Times* being disposed to hire this unashamed Roman Catholic Christian as a regular columnist. He is not the only believer on those pages. Evangelicals David French, Peter Wehner, and Esau McCaulley are also regular contributors. David Brooks, who considers himself a Christian, has been writing for the *Times* since 2003. Such inclusions would be unremarkable except that the general editorial policy of this paper, as well as the readers polled, is *liberal*. The word is loaded, as it can mean many things: a nineteenth-century political doctrine, a brand of theology, or, as for the *Times* readership, views that are left of center. To many Americans, this kind of liberalism means abandoning traditional values. If that is so, it is a good thing there are voices that challenge that view.

The book itself has many virtues. One of them is that it was written! While, as you will see, I take issue with much of Douthat’s methodology, it requires boldness to proclaim so unabashedly the essence of one’s Christian faith to a hostile world. To boot, his writing style is enviably lucid. Few people possess the gift of digesting complex ideas and explaining them to laypersons. Douthat has it. The result is that we are being addressed by a master communicator. Consequently, as it is, we are left in no doubt about what Douthat believes we all need: It is some version, preferably his own, of Christian belief.

Yet another virtue is how well-informed the author is about issues in the orbit of science. He is well-versed in the history of science, refuting, for example, the worn-out view that Copernicus and Darwin put the Bible in its place. Quite the opposite, he argues; if one reads both science

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1193.

and the Scriptures fairly, Christian faith emerges victorious, not threatened. He does acknowledge that full-fledged Darwinism gives pause. But no valid view has put the Bible to rest. Douthat bravely marshals the Big Bang theory as evidence for a Creator God's origination of all things. Impressively, he culls from modern mind science, especially from Erik Hoel, the contemporary neuroscientist whose work on human consciousness points beyond pure biology to something like a soul. Drawing on specialists such as Stephen Barr, he contends for the "anthropic" principle, the idea that only a very few universes, perhaps only ours, could have produced observers such as we humans.

Douthat makes wise remarks on anything claiming to duplicate, or even surpass, the human mind. He has a section on Artificial Intelligence (AI). Here the author brings to the surface practitioners of this increasingly widespread tool who are confronted with evidence that there is something like a mysterious consciousness that cannot be duplicated, no matter how sophisticated the experts may be.

The bulk of Douthat's arguments in the first section of the book sets forth the unlikelihood of a world, and a humanity, devoid of transcendent qualities. This he does by giving us many examples of the insistent presence of the inexplicable. He admits not everyone who stumbles here will necessarily persevere step-by-step toward a robust belief. Some get halfway there but fall short. He mentions the popular Jordan Peterson, who comes close to the mark. The term *agnostic* comes to mind. Though the label sounds humble and properly tentative, in fact, most agnostics are sure they cannot believe. Thomas Huxley is said to have coined the term, by which he meant being "hopelessly ignorant" about matters of which metaphysicians and other "dogmatists" are sure, including the existence of God. Douthat cites these folks to support his argument that pure materialism cannot work.

Douthat is on a crusade—not to convert people *per se*, but to needle them. There is here an avalanche of indicators showing that secularism is not to be trusted. They include scientists,

as we have mentioned, but also celebrities who have stumbled on the big questions and near-death experiences, and even those open to UFOs. Is he saying we need to revisit a noumenal sphere? Douthat resists the popular argument that we need to reenchanted the world or throw in a dose of mystery. In a section titled "Romanticizing the Numinous" he disavows any discovery of the supernatural that is able to be refuted. Instead, he wants people to be confronted with irrefutable evidence for the supernatural.

However, as the Scots would say, there's the rub. If the modern materialist can no longer safely inhabit his secular worldview, how do we get him from his doubts about atheism to certainty about the Christian faith? To put it in the terms of the Van Tilian method, Douthat is intent on showing the "impossibility of the contrary," but then he is hesitant to affirm that this is because the "contrary" is true. He is hesitant to proclaim the Christian answer with "thus saith the Lord." It may sound disingenuous to say he is "hesitant" because in the last chapter, which he calls "A Case Study: Why I Am a Christian," he courageously explains the gospel and why he believes it. He explains it, but does he preach it? His tactic appears winsome. Without saying "you must believe," he says, "consider this." Am I being too harsh? Is it not enough just to be glad the *New York Times* wants a contributor such as Douthat?

We have here the quintessential Roman Catholic approach to apologetics. There are two levels for faith: the one reason can handle, and the other needing revelation. Although in a very different universe, Thomas Aquinas proceeded in the same way: first, prove the existence of God without revelation, then jump to what can only be understood by faith (the Trinity, the atonement, etc.). But it is not clear on what authority he arrives at the certainty of the gospel. I do not wish to disparage the many valuable ways in which both Thomas and Douthat have shattered atheism. In various interviews I have watched, Douthat is aware of a generation arising that "knew not Joseph," and he means to address it. As I suggested, today in the West people are often not thoughtfully opposed

to this or that view, but they literally do not know anything about the Christian faith. Many of them assume, because it is in the air they breathe, that religion has been discredited. Or worse, that it may be dangerous. And many Christians can only respond, “Sorry, but this is what I believe.” Douthat engages in conversation with anyone who ignores religion.

But he does not show the necessary link between doubting materialism and affirming the Christian position. He starts with dismantling unbelief, followed up by appealing to “religion,” and then setting forth the option of Christian faith. To put it technically, he is banking on natural theology rather than the authority of Scripture. Again, to put it in Van Til’s terms, he is engaging in “blockhouse methodology”—that is, getting someone partly there by reason and then all the way there by faith.

Some reviewers have compared Douthat to Blaise Pascal. The seventeenth-century apologist (and scientist) wanted to propose unbelievers engage in a “wager” or a risk in opposition to the false comfort of their indifference and their resistance to the big questions through distractive entertainment. But Pascal was much more prone to declare the Christian faith to be true, no wiggle room, full stop.

Is this a fatal weakness of the book? I am unwilling to relegate it to the trash heap. There is so much great stuff here, much of it useful to dismantle simplistic materialism. I have used many similar probing arguments myself. And his invitation to consider the Catholic faith is sincere, even compelling. I do not want to sound patronizing here. How many of us wish we had the kind of platform he does? Still, how much more powerful the book could have been had he been more forceful. ☺

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“A Treatise on True Theology”

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*
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by **D. Scott Meadows**

A Treatise on True Theology with the Life of Franciscus Junius, translated by David C. Noe, introduced by Willem J. Van Asselt, foreword by Richard A. Muller, Reformation Heritage Books, 2014, lii + 247 pages, \$25.00.

Franciscus Junius’s *De theologia vera* (*On True Theology*), a landmark in early Protestant and Reformed scholastic theology, is now available in English through Reformation Heritage Books. This edition includes introductory materials and Junius’s autobiography, edited and prefaced by modern scholars. This review article summarizes the work’s contents and provides seven compelling reasons to recommend it.

Introductory Materials

In the foreword, Muller briefly introduces Junius and his work, *On True Theology*. He underscores its significance in Protestant and Reformed scholastic theology, commending Noe’s Latin translation and Van Asselt’s insightful introduction. Van Asselt’s substantial introduction provides a biographical sketch of Junius and the historical context, genre, and purpose of *On True Theology*. His analytical summary explores the nature of theology, defining true theology as wisdom, and distinguishing between archetypal and ectypal theology, the latter encompassing three forms: in Christ, in the beatified, and in the Christian pilgrim. Van Asselt also traces Junius’s enduring influence on Lutheran and Reformed dogmatics, evident in modern titans like Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and Louis Berkhof. In the trans-

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1200.

lator's preface, Noe clearly outlines his translation methodology, offering valuable insight into his approach.

Life of Junius

Paulus Merula (1558–1607) published Junius's autobiography with his permission, adding a preface. Initially, Merula aimed to chronicle the late sixteenth-century persecutions of Protestants by the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands and Spain. Upon discovering Junius's autobiography, he found it not only illuminated these events but also offered an inspiring narrative to foster virtuous thought and conduct among the oppressed.

Franciscus Junius the Elder, born in 1545 in Bourges, France, hailed from a family of minor nobility. His grandfather William and father Denys served royal and military interests with distinction, though Denys faced severe persecution by Franciscans, enduring temporary exile before being exonerated and regaining his property. Junius, one of Denys's nine children, was a sickly newborn, baptized urgently due to fears of his imminent death. Poor health persisted, fostering a shy demeanor, yet he displayed intellectual promise from age five under his father's tutelage. His humility complemented his remarkable ability to absorb knowledge. After grammar school, he received private tutoring and, by age thirteen, pursued self-directed studies. Denys instilled a deep commitment to civic virtues, particularly justice, leading Junius to focus on law and discipline his studies for maximum achievement. Upon leaving home, however, he experienced urban temptations and spiritual ambivalence.

In 1561, Lyons marked a spiritual turning point for Junius. During a heartfelt conversation, his father discerned signs of skepticism and gently urged him toward Christian faith. Prompted thus, Junius studied the New Testament and embraced a lifelong commitment to Christ. At seventeen, he moved to Geneva, where he spent four years studying languages and theology, with Beza's *Confession* and Calvin's *Institutes* as primary texts. Despite numerous trials, this period fostered profound spiritual growth.

Denys, Junius's father, was murdered by Roman Catholic rioters incensed by his legal actions against them. Junius's mother pursued justice, securing some compensation, but Junius, prioritizing safety, remained in Geneva. Called by French-speaking ministers, he moved to Antwerp, Belgium, to serve in a Protestant church, where he faced repeated threats as a persecuted Protestant. He then served a three-year interim ministry in Bruges and Damme, enduring similar dangers. Amid social and political upheaval, Junius strove to preach and teach faithfully. Later, he spent two years in Limburg, Netherlands, and ministered to an armed congregation that courageously repelled a cavalry unit sent to arrest him.

In his final decade, Franciscus Junius served at the University of Leiden, Netherlands, dedicating himself to translating the Old Testament. Married four times, he remained devoted to each wife until her death. Only half of his children survived childhood. In 1602, when he was fifty-seven, his fourth wife died of the plague. Two weeks later, Junius also succumbed to the disease, passing peacefully with steadfast faith and affection, being cherished by many. Franciscus Gomarus delivered his funeral sermon, a fitting tribute to this eminent Christian scholar and advocate of true theology.

A Treatise on True Theology

Junius organized *A Treatise on True Theology* into thirty-nine theses, summarized below. Chapter divisions, ignored here, are less important.

True theology, defined as discourse on divine matters, exists (1, 2). It is distinct from false theology which, whether developed or undeveloped, reflects human opinion and is filled with error (3, 4). True theology is wisdom concerning divine realities (5). It designates archetypal theology (God's uncreated, infinite wisdom, incomprehensible to creatures) and ectypal theology (our finite "wisdom," used equivocally) (6, 7). God forms ectypal theology from archetypal for his glory and to communicate His grace (8).

Ectypal theology consists of God's communicable wisdom, though not fully conveyed to creatures (9). It is partially revealed through union,

vision, or revelation, according to creatures' capacities (10). The ectypal theology of union belongs to Christ's human nature through the incarnation, while archetypal theology remains with respect to his divine nature (11). The ectypal theology of vision belongs to the angels and saints in heaven and, though not equal to the theology of union in Christ, is still of a very exalted nature for mere creatures (12).

The ectypal theology of revelation in its fullest form belongs to Christian pilgrims on earth, is a grace from the Holy Spirit, and increases throughout life (13). This true and ectypal theology of revelation comes in two modes: by nature (natural theology) and by grace (supernatural theology). Even unbelievers possess some true knowledge of God through natural revelation. God grants some unbelievers in this world further revelation through Holy Scripture (14).

Natural theology proceeds from known principles, by the light of human understanding and in proportion to human reason (15). Yet it remains veiled and incomplete, requiring supernatural theology for salvation. The spiritual and moral conclusions drawn from nature alone are mixed with many errors, leading to idolatry and immorality, even among the more thoughtful pagans (16).

Adam originally possessed this natural theology, which required development by reasoning and completion by grace. Even for Adam before the Fall, supernatural wisdom was impossible apart from supernatural revelation (17). After the Fall, natural theology in us became thoroughly compromised, mere broken fragments of our depraved nature. A sinner's nature is comparable to the ruins of a once-great house (18). Natural theology is incomplete and cannot bring anything to completion. It is impossible for anyone to be saved without supernatural theology (19).

Fallen man needs supernatural theology, which is above all a communication of God's grace (20). Supernatural theology reveals much that could never be known by human reason or natural revelation alone (especially the doctrines of the Trinity and the gospel). It is never irrational but only suprarational (21). This ectypal theology

is either absolute (in relation to God, who communicates it) or relative (in relation to our limited ability to receive it). It is important to remember the absoluteness of objective ectypal theology, lest we regard it entirely as relative with respect to our subjective reception of it (22).

Supernatural theology has been entrusted to God's servants through the Word spoken in Christ, sealed in both the Old and New Testaments through prophets, apostles, and evangelists, in fitting measure for the present age. It promotes the glory of God and the good of the elect. Though limited, it is without error and absolutely trustworthy. Nothing we need to know is missing; nothing it contains is imperfect (23).

The material cause of supernatural theology (like the marble of a statue) is divine matters concerning God and all things in relation to him, especially the nature of reality in relation to God, God's work in creatures, and the law of God assigned to them (24).

The formal cause of supernatural theology (like the human form of a statue) is divine truth, either considered as a whole or in its parts, as these parts are understood in relation to one another (25). This truth is holy, just, and perfect, so that we may be rightly guided toward holiness in ourselves, justice toward others, and perfection in all things. It is good in itself because truth reflects God, who is goodness itself, and it necessarily bears good fruit in us, the very end for which God made us (26). This theology is one, eternal, and immutable. A true man may change, but never the truth. A theologian may change, but never true theology, not in its pure form (27).

The efficient cause of supernatural theology (who or what fashions the statue) is partly principal (like the sculptor himself) and partly instrumental (like the chisel and hammer) (28). The principal cause is the Triune God, the sole Author and perfect Creator of this wisdom in his servants. God is the absolute efficient cause in all things, even when he employs subordinate causes (29). The instrumental cause is the enunciative discourse of God, spoken both spiritually (without the use of a physical body, as in dreams and visions) and

corporeally (by means of the body, through Christ and the inspired writings of his servants) (30).

The final cause of supernatural theology (like the purpose of a statue honoring a hero) is, first, distant and exalted: namely, God himself; and second, subordinate to this: humans in relation to God, especially the elect (31). The highest end of theology is the glory of God, for theology both manifests his glory and confirms that glory in those who rightly use it. This is a particular instance of *solī Deo gloria* (32). The secondary end of theology is the present and future good of the elect, which God will certainly accomplish as his eternal purpose (33).

Our relative theology, theology within the subject, is the same divine wisdom, though altered in accordance with our limited reason; we who possess it are therefore called theologians. Nature has made us imperfect, such that we cannot receive the perfect in a perfect manner. We are like vessels of varied capacities, each with more or less poured into it (34).

The method of this theology within us cannot be precisely defined, for it varies from person to person and differs widely among all who possess it. We differ by nature, and we differ according to the grace given us. These variations also change throughout the years of our lives. A multitude of factors affects our capacity for true theology (35). The method varies in each person because of the differing proportions of the twofold principle: nature (which must decrease) and grace (which must increase). The natural man is being diminished and wasting away; the inner man, upon whom grace acts, is being renewed day by day. All pilgrims are being transformed into the same image, from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord (36).

True theology varies among individuals because nature is diminished and grace increased to differing degrees, yet no man fully comprehends every aspect of our theology's form. This is so self-evident that it scarcely requires elaboration (37).

The prophets and apostles perceived the whole and complete form of this theology, though not perfectly within themselves; by the unique

power of the Holy Spirit, they faithfully handed down the entire theology they received, even though their personal understanding of it was not exhaustive. They were mere men, limited in intellect and still affected by sin, yet God made his pure truth known through them (38).

The form of our theology is indeed one in itself, but among us it exists in manifold expressions and shall remain so until we attain the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, becoming together a mature man and reaching the measure of the stature of the church, which is the fullness of Christ (39).

Recommendation

Consider seven reasons why Junius's magnum opus remains highly recommended for readers today.

First, his zeal for the glory of God. Romans 11:36 serves as a touchstone of truth and righteousness: "For of him, and through him, and to him, *are* all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen," (KJV). A theology that is centered on God, one that fosters reverence, awe, praise, and thanksgiving toward the true and living God, is authentic and praiseworthy theology. This spirit pervades Junius's work and reflects his overarching theological perspective.

Second, his commitment to rational theology. One distinguishing mark of the Protestant scholastic theologians, among whom Junius rightly stands alongside figures like Turretin, Polanus, and Van Mastricht, is their dedication not only to exegetical and biblical theology but also to articulating biblical truth in a consistent, non-contradictory manner. They aimed to express doctrine in rational, that is, reasonable and coherent, propositions. This scholastic tradition was the soil from which the great seventeenth-century confessions grew (e.g., the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Savoy Declaration, and the Second London Confession). Those who subscribe to such confessions should understand and appreciate the theological milieu in which they were forged. These were high days in historical theology, when the faith was boldly and thoroughly proclaimed and rigor-

ously defended against challenges from Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, Socinianism, and other complex systems. In contrast, the so-called Enlightenment fostered skepticism and irrationality, both being enemies of true theology. We should not cling to contradictions and excuse them with appeals to “mystery” or “incomprehensibility,” nor should we question the possibility of true theology or capitulate to the prevailing relativism that speaks of “my truth” and “your truth.”

Third, Junius’s respect for sound and orthodox theology. Junius was deeply grounded in what Paul calls the “pattern of sound words,” which had been expressed through many centuries of church history before him. He did not regard theology as a novelty of the Reformation era but honored what he had received from the early church fathers and even the better insights of medieval theologians. The Protestant Reformation was not the invention of new doctrine but the recovery, reformation, and advancement of historic Christian truth. This attitude is entirely consistent with the Reformational principle of *sola scriptura*, rightly understood. It was not a rejection of all tradition but the placement of Scripture above all other ecclesiastical and doctrinal authorities. The Reformers did not dismiss the best creeds and teachings of the past but received them as subordinate, though valuable, authorities under Scripture. Unlike the biblicism of some today, Junius’s approach was both faithful and historically rooted.

Fourth, his judicious and eclectic use of philosophical terms and concepts, insofar as he judged them useful for expressing biblical truth. The relationship between theology and philosophy has long been contested, from Tertullian’s famous question, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” to Aquinas’s warm embrace of Aristotelianism. Junius clearly leans closer to the latter. Classical Christian orthodoxy has long made careful use of extra-biblical philosophical concepts and language to express profound scriptural truths, especially in doctrines such as the Trinity and the incarnation. Terms like essence, subsistences, and natures are not found verbatim in Scripture, yet they are vital to the church’s faithful articulation of revealed

truth. Junius models a balanced and disciplined philosophical engagement in the service of theology.

Fifth, his emphasis on the absoluteness and perfection of true theology in itself. In an age shaped by relativism and skepticism, even among otherwise faithful theologians, we face a subtle pressure to speak with undue caution or hesitancy about theological truth. The modern mind often views confident assertion with suspicion. Yet Junius, with refreshing clarity and conviction, reminds us that true theology in itself is absolute, perfect, and not dependent on our limited perception of it. His work helps counter the infernal postures of modern doubt and affirms the enduring reality of divine truth.

Sixth, his recognition that true theology, as possessed by us, is varied and limited. Observing the wide range of theological expressions among Christians and denominations, many are tempted to conclude that truth itself is elusive or unattainable. This leads some to theological agnosticism: “With so much disagreement, how can anyone claim certainty? Isn’t it arrogant to say we know the truth?” Junius offers a thoughtful, if partial, explanation for such concerns, pointing to factors like human fallibility, the influence of traditions, and the presence of false teachers. Yet none of these negate the reality of true theology or the fact that some, by God’s grace, do indeed possess and faithfully teach it. Disagreement does not disprove the truth; it only suggests our need for discernment and desire to know the way of God more perfectly.

Seventh, his encouragement, implicit in all these insights, for humility and aspiration as theologians. On one hand, recognizing our limitations and the vastness of the true, ectypal theology that exists for our apprehension rightly leads to profound humility, even among the most learned and devout theologians, and even in the most refined and reformed churches (the true identity of which, in the fullest sense, remains known only to God). Yet, on the other hand, we must not lose heart. True theology is ours by the grace of God, and growth in that grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ is our portion in the gospel. We

have every reason to be hopeful that the Lord will bless us with an ever-deepening grasp of his truth, consistent with our spiritual union and growing communion with him. “Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the LORD” (Hos. 6:3, KJV). “Then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Cor. 13:12, KJV). ☉

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“Trust” in Atonement? A Critical Appraisal

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by **Daniel Y. M. Tan**

Trust in Atonement: God, Creation, and Reconciliation, by Teresa Morgan (Eerdmans, 2024), 279 pages, \$39.99.

In *Trust in Atonement*,² Teresa Morgan articulates a “trust model” of the atonement centered upon the restoration of *trust* between God and humanity. Building on her previous work, which contended that the New Testament’s language of πίστις (and its cognates) should be understood primarily in the relational sense of “trust” or “trustworthiness,”³

Morgan argues that Jesus Christ shows himself to be trusting and trustworthy toward both God and humanity; this double relationship of trust enables Jesus to mediate between humanity and God and to bring humanity back to trust in God.

Morgan’s atonement theory is comprehensive and wide-ranging, and it lies far beyond the scope of this article to engage with all her proposals.⁴ Instead, writing from a Reformed perspective, I shall focus on her implicit rejection of penal substitutionary atonement, and her alternative explanation for Jesus’s suffering and death on the cross. This article is in two parts. First, I outline the two main planks of Morgan’s “trust model” of atonement: that (a) the Scriptures present a complex picture of wrongdoing and suffering, which (b) requires the restoration of trust between God and man. Thereafter, I offer a critical appraisal from a Reformed perspective.

Morgan’s “Trust Model” of Atonement

A Complex Picture of Wrongdoing and Suffering

Morgan’s starting point is that the Scriptures present a complex picture of wrongdoing and suffering, which existing atonement theories do not account for in a satisfactory manner. For Morgan, wrongdoing⁵ is not simply “wilful sin,” but includes “collective and inherited sin, different kinds of foolishness, and even bad moral luck.”⁶ Wrongdoing is also “closely entwined” with suffering, in that one can lead to the other, and both wrongdoing and suffering can alienate people from God. In her view, existing models of atonement are unable to account for this complex picture of wrongdoing-

ed (Oxford University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192859587.001.0001>. I engage briefly with these works below.

4 For example, I will not be able to address Morgan’s reliance on insights from the fields of psychology, philosophy, conflict-resolution, and the rehabilitation of offenders (especially Ch. 2), or the implications of her atonement theory for the restoration of trust between God and the non-human parts of creation, and between humans and other humans (Chs. 4 and 5, respectively).

5 Throughout this work, Morgan seems to prefer the term “wrongdoing” to “sin.” This perhaps serves to downplay the notion or concept of “sin.”

6 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 29.

1 https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1201.

2 Teresa Morgan, *Trust in Atonement: God, Creation, and Reconciliation*, 1st ed. (Eerdmans, 2024). Morgan is the McDonald Agape Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Yale Divinity School.

3 As opposed to “faith” or “belief.” For Morgan, πίστις is relational and community-shaping, and less concerned with propositional beliefs: Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Teresa Morgan, *The New Testament and the Theology of Trust: ‘This Rich Trust’*, 1st

ing and suffering—traditional models of atonement (including penal substitution) focus on the restoration of sinners, while liberation theology tends to focus on the liberation of the suffering and oppressed, but none of the existing models account for how Jesus Christ saves from *both* suffering *and* wrongdoing.⁷

Instead, according to Morgan, this complex picture can be traced ultimately to *failures of trust*: “trusting in the wrong people or places, or not at all.”⁸ So, beginning with the Old Testament, Morgan recasts the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the garden as a breach of trust. When God commands Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he “seems to trust . . . the man and woman to do as God tells them, perhaps as part of their stewardship.”⁹ The serpent then undermines the woman’s trust and encourages her to trust him instead (Gen. 3:5). “In this light, the actions of the woman and man look less like wilful disobedience than a naïve or foolish response to the undermining of their trust.”¹⁰ A further failure of trust ensues when the man blames the woman for his actions (Gen. 3:12). “What follows is not only disobedience to God and punishment but further trust, failures of trust, and renewals of trust between God and humanity that characterize the whole of human history.”¹¹

Morgan argues that the NT also presents a similarly complex picture.¹² Turning to the gospels,

she contends that although the evangelists were “focused on the importance of repentance,” they have “little to say explicitly about whether wrongdoing is universal, collective, or inherited, or whether or not it is wilful.”¹³ Indeed, the “most important aspect” of Jesus’s ministry was not about the relief of suffering or wrongdoing, “but the (re)new(ed) relationship with God that it makes possible.”¹⁴ Because she develops her atonement theory primarily from Romans, Morgan devotes some attention to wrongdoing and suffering in this letter.¹⁵ According to her exegesis of Romans 1, Gentiles are “wrongdoers by inheritance, who do not actively do wrong themselves,” or “are stuck in their wrongdoing despite themselves.”¹⁶ The language of being “given over” (παράδωμι, 1:24, 26, 28) suggests that wrongdoing can be unintentional or accidental or even imposed as a penalty.¹⁷ She conjectures in light of Genesis 3–4 “the possibility that the gentiles turned from God because they felt rejected by God, though Paul does not say so.”¹⁸ As for the Jews, they are guilty of *apistia*, a “lack of trust or faithfulness toward God,”¹⁹ which, according to Morgan’s reading of Romans 9–11, is less about willful sin than about being misguided, since they have a genuine “zeal for God” (10:2) and seek to strive for the law of righteousness (9:31).²⁰ Morgan also muses as to whether the Jews’ failure to trust God stems from a “loss of confidence in God at a time of political upheavals and increasing oppression.”²¹ Ultimately, for Morgan,

7 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 2–7, 29, 82.

8 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 29.

9 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 39.

10 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 40.

11 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 40. At pages 40–43, Morgan considers several other Old Testament texts, including the Cain and Abel narrative (Gen 4), the flood (Gen 6–9), Jephthah (Judges 11:29–39), and the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. She further suggests that human actions that appear to be willful wrongdoings and betrayals of trust “from one perspective” are, “from another, reactions to the perception that God has not trusted those involved. This perception brings suffering in the form of doubt, and suffering leads the sufferers to do as much damage to the relationship as wilful wrongdoing might have done” (41).

12 Prior to her discussion of the New Testament, Morgan considers the variety of Messianic traditions inherited by Christians in the New Testament, which she summarizes as follows: “Christians inherit broadly four models of what a savior may do.

He may save his people from suffering caused by others, from their own wrongdoings, from the painful consequences of their wrongdoing, or some mixture of all three” (45).

13 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 50.

14 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 59 (parentheses in original).

15 Morgan argues that the same complex picture of wrongdoing and suffering seen in the gospels is also present in the New Testament epistles. She considers a few epistles besides Romans in *Trust in Atonement*, 59–63.

16 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 72.

17 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 73.

18 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 72 (fn. 89).

19 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 73.

20 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 74.

21 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 74 (fn. 92).

the notion of “sin” as rebellion or disobedience against God is too simplistic; the point is that human beings, both Jew and Gentile, fall out of trust with God and put trust in the wrong places through wrongdoing or suffering, which are both complex and everywhere interlinked.²²

The Restoration of Trust Between God and Humanity through a “Double Bond” of Trust

For Morgan, since all suffering and wrongdoing can be traced to failures of trust, the atonement is about the restoration of trust between God and humanity. Specifically, this restoration of trust is affected through a “double bond” of trust—the trust between God and Jesus Christ, together with the trust which God and Christ seek to establish between Christ and human beings.

Morgan’s argument depends on her exegesis of a few key texts, chief of which is Romans 3:21–26.²³ Morgan reads 3:21–22 as Paul’s proclamation that the gracious righteousness of God has been revealed apart from the law διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, which she renders as “the faithfulness and trustworthiness of Jesus Christ both to God, as God’s Son, and toward humanity, as its saviour.”²⁴ In 3:25, God puts forward Christ to die, but Christ’s voluntary obedience to God is the expression of his faithfulness toward a God who is trustworthy, and his trust in God’s new initiative for humanity. In Morgan’s words, then:

The righteousness of God, says Paul (3:21–26), has been revealed through Christ’s trust and faithfulness toward God as trustworthy and toward humanity as capable of responding to him with trust for all who trust . . . God put Jesus Christ forward as a supplicatory offering—probably a term inherited by Paul—to

reveal God’s righteousness so that the person who puts their trust in Christ may be righteoused. The relationship of trust between God and Christ allows Jesus to let himself be put forward, and the trust both God and Christ—implicitly but necessarily—put in humanity to respond is justified when human beings do put their trust in Christ and are righteoused.²⁵

Morgan thus speaks of a “double bond of trust” between (a) God and Christ on the one hand, and (b) between Christ and humanity on the other. The trust between God and Christ enables Christ to be faithful even to death and offers a vehicle for divine grace; the trust between Christ and human beings enables the latter to trust Christ, and for Christ to trust them to respond to him and through him to God’s grace. For Morgan, understanding *pistis* as doubly reciprocal fits with Paul’s understanding of the role of Christ in reconciliation as a mediator.²⁶

Why do human beings trust Christ? Because he is a *model* of what it means to live in trust with God—even when he is betrayed and crucified, “he refuses to be drawn into the vicious circle of failed trust, where loss of trust leads to suffering and harm, and suffering all too often leads to harming others and further suffering.”²⁷ But more than a model, he creates a “*firebreak*” to the spread of evil and pain, breaking the cycle of failed trust and showing humanity what is attainable in terms of relationships of trust with God and fellow humans.²⁸ Jesus’s actions as a model and a firebreak further demonstrate the “*therapeutic trust*” that God places in human beings. Morgan adopts this concept from moral philosophy, and it refers to the trust that one places in another in a relationship where there may be no extant trust, but which

22 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 39, 81.

23 Morgan relies secondarily on Gal. 2:15–20 (διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, 2:16) and Phil. 3:7–11 (διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ, 3:9): *Trust in Atonement*, 123–24. Limitations of space preclude the consideration of those texts, but it suffices to say that her exegesis of those texts is dependent on her conclusions reached on Rom 3:21–26.

24 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 120. In support of this reading, she cites her earlier work in *Roman Faith*, 31, 53, 263 fn. 7, 273.

25 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 122 (footnotes omitted).

26 Morgan acknowledges that Paul does not use the language of mediation, but that some of his followers did, including the author of Hebrews: *Trust in Atonement*, 125–26.

27 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 127.

28 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 127–28.

initiates a trust relationship that may develop through time.²⁹ So God places “therapeutic trust” in humanity when he entrusts Jesus Christ to the world, trusting them to respond to Christ, knowing that some will fail, and that probably everyone will fail up to a point, but knowing that humanity is capable of responding eventually.

A Reformed Critique

Writing from a Reformed perspective, I appreciated two aspects of Morgan’s “trust model” of atonement. First, in emphasizing the restoration of trust between God and man, the “trust model” rightly appreciates the importance of *reconciliation* in atonement.³⁰ Historically, the Reformed tradition has understood reconciliation to be an important category in which to understand the nature of Christ’s atoning work, in reliance on texts where the language of reconciliation appears (καταλλάσσω, καταλλαγή, e.g. Rom. 5:8–11; 2 Cor. 5:18–21).³¹ Second, the “trust model” emphasizes the role of Christ as *mediator* in reconciling God and humanity, which the Reformed have also historically emphasized,³² especially against the Roman Catholic doctrine of the saints and Mary.

This said, Morgan’s “trust model” of atonement is problematic on biblical and theological grounds. Even assuming her exegesis is right, her

model (a) does not provide a satisfactory explanation for Christ’s suffering and death, and (b) leads to a distorted view of God’s agency. Ultimately, though, I contend that (c) it relies on shaky exegetical foundations. Each of these three points are elaborated upon in turn.

Why Did Jesus Have to Die?

First, the “trust model” fails to adequately account for Christ’s suffering and death. Although Morgan acknowledges the centrality of the cross to Christian understandings of the atonement,³³ her model—ironically—struggles to explain the cross. Indeed, Morgan candidly concedes that it is not normally necessary for mediators or conciliators to die to do their work.³⁴ Nevertheless, she tries to explain Jesus’s suffering and death in three ways. First, Jesus had to die in order to show God’s unbreakable commitment to humanity, and his death reveals “humanity to itself as infinitely precious to God and capable for responding to God.”³⁵ Second, Jesus had to suffer and die “because he cannot be other than he is,” viz., “the person who has always been trusting and trustworthy toward God and toward humanity and whose work is to restore trust between humanity and God.”³⁶ Third, Jesus’s death has an exemplary aspect, to show his followers how to die “metaphorically” to “the power of wrongdoing, suffering, the flesh, and death and to enter new life under the authority of Christ.”³⁷

None of these explanations are satisfactory. The first and third fail to account for Jesus’s death in the same way that, respectively, contemporary

29 Morgan gives the example developed by the philosopher Karen Jones, in which parents go away for the weekend, trusting their teenaged children not to hold a party and make a mess of the house. While the parents may suspect that they will do just that, they hope that by trusting their children, they will demonstrate that trust is an important aspect of adult life and something their children should take seriously. Even if they do not prove trustworthy on this occasion, the hope is that next time they may respond a bit better, until, eventually, they become trustworthy adults. See further, *Trust in Atonement*, 15, 128.

30 See also her discussion of “at-one-ment,” with which she opens the book: *Trust in Atonement*, 1–2.

31 E.g. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans, 2015), 29–39. Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 8.5 puts it this way: “The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience, and sacrifice of himself . . . purchased, *not only reconciliation*, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven . . .” (emphasis added).

32 E.g. Belgic Confession 26, WCF 8 (*Of Christ the Mediator*), John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas McNeill, The Library of Christian Classics (Westminster John Knox, 1960), 2.12.1–2. cf 1 Tim 2:5.

33 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 223.

34 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 135. In my view, this proves fatal for her theory.

35 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 134. “The cross opens up a space of trust in which humanity can meet God even in the extreme of human political, social, and religious chaos as well as cruelty, injustice, and suffering.”

36 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 135.

37 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 137. Morgan is vague on this point, but she acknowledges the powerful “imagistic” language of dying with Christ, being buried with him, and living a new life with him, as central to people’s response to Christ and what must follow for their relationship with God to be restored: 138–39.

“moral influence” and “exemplary” theories of the atonement have failed.³⁸ Could Jesus not have performed a heroic and sacrificial act less than the cruel and humiliating death of crucifixion, if all that was intended was to display God’s “commitment to humanity” or to be a “metaphorical” example? And if crucifixion was unnecessary, if it was gratuitous, then God was displaying his cruelty rather than his love. As for the second, this is a tautologous argument—according to Morgan, Jesus had to die *by definition*, assuming her “trust model” is correct, which is by no means the case (see below).

Morgan’s failure to explain Jesus’s suffering and death stems in large part from her downplaying of the concept of “sin,” preferring instead to speak of a complex picture of suffering and wrongdoing predicated upon failures of trust between God and humanity (as discussed above).³⁹ If there is no sin that requires the expiation of guilt or the propitiation of wrath, then there is no requirement for a “sacrificial” death.⁴⁰ It is “of first importance . . . that Christ died *for our sins* in accordance the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3, emphasis added; on which see further below).

Divine and Human Agency

Second, Morgan’s “trust model” distorts the biblical view of God’s agency. Central to Morgan’s model is the notion of “therapeutic trust,” whereby God takes a *risk* on humanity by entrusting Jesus Christ to the world, inviting humanity to respond to him with trust, “with all the overtones of risk-taking and hope which that implies.”⁴¹ So, either

God does not know how humanity will respond (which undermines his knowledge and power), or he knows exactly how humanity will respond (which undermines “therapeutic trust”). Amongst other things, this leads to a competitive view of divine and human agency, whereby one is committed either to a libertarian free will or a thoroughgoing determinism in a sort of zero-sum game. This fails to do justice to how the Scriptures generally, and Paul specifically, speak of divine and human agency as compatible.⁴²

Exegetical Issues

Finally, there are exegetical issues with Morgan’s “trust model.” As noted above, Morgan depends heavily on her exegesis of Romans 3:21–26, particularly διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ in 3:22, which she renders as “the faithfulness and trustworthiness of Jesus Christ both to God, as God’s Son, and toward humanity, as its saviour.” Morgan’s suggestion is novel⁴³ and rests upon her earlier work on πίστις as “trust” (noted above in the introduction). While the Reformed have long held “trust” to be an important component of “faith,”⁴⁴ that πίστις language *only* ever means “trust” (as opposed to “believe”) in every case is doubtful.⁴⁵ Moreover, Morgan’s rendering of

model has implications for one’s understanding of God but considers this beyond the scope of her book: *Trust in Atonement*, 28n91.

42 This point was made independently by Susan Eastman and Simon Gathercole at a panel discussing *Trust in Atonement* during the meeting of the *Society of Biblical Literature* in November 2024. Cf WCF 3.1.

43 Nijay K. Gupta, Erin M. Heim, and Scot McKnight, eds., *The State of Pauline Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, 1st ed. (Baker Academic, 2024), 146–47. Commentators are divided over whether the expression is to be taken as a subjective or objective genitive, e.g., Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 2018), 189–94.

44 See e.g., Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger (P&R Publishing, 1992), vol 2, 561.

45 See Francis Watson, “Roman Faith and Christian Faith,” *New Testament Studies* 64, no. 2 (April 2018): 243–47, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688517000388>; Bradley J. Bitner, “The Shape of Πίστις in 1 Corinthians: How Faith Receives, Boasts, and Discerns,” *Reformed Theological Review* 82, no. 3 (1 December 2023), <https://doi.org/10.53521/a369>.

38 See e.g., Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 1996), 386–88; Michael S. Horton, *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology*, 1st ed. (Westminster John Knox, 2005), 178–207.

39 Therefore, although Morgan suggests that her “trust model” is compatible with penal substitutionary atonement (*Trust in Atonement*, 143), this must severely be doubted. See also her series of rhetorical questions in *Trust in Atonement*, 3.

40 Morgan considers that Jesus’s sacrifice “bears multiple possible meanings,” which need not have connotations of guilt: *Trust in Atonement*, 48–50. Cf Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 20–29.

41 Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 127 (cf. 22). She acknowledges that she is using anthropomorphic language, and that her trust

διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is overly complicated — could Paul’s readers have been expected to understand from this prepositional phrase the four-dimensional relationship of (a) God’s trust in Christ, (b) Christ’s trust in God, (c) God and Christ’s trust in humanity, and (d) humanity’s (and Paul’s) trust in God and Christ?⁴⁶ This seems implausible.

Morgan’s “trust model” also fails to account for all the New Testament data. The gospels feature little in her analysis.⁴⁷ One would have expected at least a treatment of the cry of dereliction (Matt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34), which cuts to the heart of Christ’s trust in God.⁴⁸ Even if one were to grant that her model is derived from Paul, Morgan gives no detailed consideration to 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, which is crucial for Paul’s understanding of the atonement;⁴⁹ indeed, it is of “first importance” to Paul that “Christ died *for our sins* in accordance to the Scriptures,” (emphasis added). Another surprising omission is 2 Corinthians 5:18–21, a text which speaks directly of God reconciling us to himself through Christ (5:18). Significantly, this text does not use πίστις to speak of this reconciling work, and further it speaks of this reconciliation as being effected by God not counting humanity’s *transgressions* against them (μὴ λογιζόμενος αὐτοῖς τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν, 5:19), which suggests that something more than Christ’s “trust” and “trustworthiness” is at play in the atonement.⁵⁰

46 This is a point made by Simon Gathercole at a panel discussing *Trust in Atonement* during the meeting of the *Society of Biblical Literature* in November 2024.

47 As N. T. Wright has previously said, “It is astonishing to see the extent to which the four Gospels have been marginalized in discussions of atonement.” Simon J. Gathercole, Robert B. Stewart, and N. T. Wright, *What Did the Cross Accomplish? A Conversation about the Atonement* (Westminster John Knox, 2021), 23.

48 On the point of Christ’s faith see Turretin’s careful treatment: Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 2, (P&R, 1994), 348.

49 Simon J. Gathercole, *Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul*, *Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology* (Baker Academic, 2015), Ch. 2.

50 I would further argue that these sins are imputed to Christ on the basis of 2 Corinthians 5:21, but this is not necessary for present purposes.

That these two texts are neglected is perhaps unsurprising, given that her model downplays the concept of sin.

Conclusion

Through her earlier work, Teresa Morgan has helped many to see the importance of “trust” to the meaning of πίστις in the New Testament. However, her “trust model” of atonement, while commendable in some respects, is problematic on biblical and theological grounds, as I have sought to show in this (limited) article. Amongst other things, it seems implausible for πίστις to freight all that she intends in her “trust model”; and one wonders if the tail of her theological conclusions is wagging the dog of her exegesis. Perhaps this should also lead to a reassessment of her earlier conclusions that πίστις must mean relational “trust” to the exclusion of propositional “belief” in every instance.

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Redefining Good and Evil

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by **Andrew S. Wilson**

To Change All Worlds: Critical Theory from Marx to Marcuse, by Carl R. Trueman. B&H Academic, 2024, xi + 240 pages, \$34.99.

Over the past decade or so, ideas that used to be the near-exclusive province of left-wing professors and campus groups have spilled over into mainstream society through things like Black Lives Matter, the 1619 Project, DEI initiatives, and Pride month. At the root of all of this is critical theory, which sees Western civilization (especially its American embodiment) as so morally compromised that it needs to be completely dismantled. In the words of Brian Lozenski, a Minnesota education professor and appointee of Governor Tim Walz,

The United States as constructed is irreversibly racist. So if the nation-state as constructed is irreversibly racist, then it must be done with. It must be overthrown. . . . You can't be a critical race theorist and be pro-U.S. It is a[n] anti-state theory that says the United States needs to be deconstructed, period.²

One of the features of this kind of thinking is that it produces an entirely different conception of morality. As Daniel Mahoney explains, this is an ideological project that says that “whatever promotes world-transforming revolution is necessary and good, and whatever stands in its way is, by definition, retrograde and evil.” Mahoney also

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1207.

² Cited in “Walz Education Appointee Calls for the Overthrow of the U.S.,” Stanley Kurtz, *National Review Online*, September 25, 2024, <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/walz-education-appointee-calls-for-the-overthrow-of-the-u-s/>.

notes that such “ideological fanaticism is the inevitable consequence of a nihilistic denial of an order of things, of a natural moral order available to human beings through reason and experience.”³ In other words, when man rejects God’s moral order, he usurps God’s place and creates his own system of morality. One would hope that all Christians would reject ideas rooted in something so radical that it redefines the categories of good and evil. Unfortunately, this has not been the case.

In *To Change All Worlds*, Carl Trueman provides the helpful service of tracing the historical development of critical theory by explaining the teachings of the figures who were instrumental to its formation. In his introduction, Trueman notes that an understanding of critical theory is important not merely due to its political significance, but also because of how it relates to the modern world’s dwindling ability “to define what it means to be a human person” (2). While critical theory is eager to dismantle, it rejects “the very idea of human nature as something stable across time and cultures and that carries with it significant moral implications for how we live.” This makes it unable “to articulate a clear vision of what the future of human society should look like” (5). As noted above, for those in the thrall of critical theory, good and evil do not correlate with any objective moral standard or end, but with one’s stance toward the way society is fundamentally ordered. Society is so irredeemably corrupt that it needs to be laid waste and rebuilt from scratch into an amorphous “better place.” Those on board with this program are good, even when they support things that would traditionally be seen as evil, such as rioting and looting. Those against the program are evil, even when they support things that would traditionally be seen as good, such as preventing men from entering women’s restrooms or participating in female athletic competitions.

Trueman explains from the outset that his book is neither polemical nor constructive, but descriptive. That is, his “main purpose is to explain

the basic elements of early critical theory—in historical context” (4–5). He begins with G. F. W. Hegel and Karl Marx, moves on to later Marxists Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács, focuses on figures from the Frankfurt School, and then considers later proponents of critical theory. One thread that runs throughout the book is the effort of these thinkers to break down “the illusory absolutism of the established ‘natural’ ways of thinking and acting” (28) and to show that reality is not objective but is a construct shaped by ideas. Truth claims are dismissed as the manipulative efforts of those with an interest in maintaining the status quo. As Trueman explains, for critical theorists,

approaches that seem to be objective, commonsensical, or simply stating the obvious are in fact means by which the latent interests of the dominant group within society are asserted and protected. . . . [Critical theorists] believe that the concepts with which society operates—such things as justice, equality, fairness, legality, and the like—are all products of a particular form of society rather than transcendent categories of universal application. (85, 108–9)

This is why proponents of critical theory do not see any need to engage opposing arguments. Anyone who appeals to reason is simply demonstrating his captivity to the false constructs erected by society. One popular example of this is Robin DiAngelo’s book *White Fragility*, in which she contends that when white people object to her allegation that all whites are racist, they are only confirming their racism.

Another area explored by Trueman is how critical theorists have responded to the way the modern world has assigned supreme authority to science, a move based on the (scientifically unprovable) assumption “that the whole of reality can be encompassed and exhaustively understood by the scientific method of measurement and calculation” (127). Frankfurt School members Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer critiqued this as serving the interests of bourgeois capitalism because it objectively reduces people into things.

³ Daniel J. Mahoney, *The Persistence of the Ideological Lie: The Totalitarian Impulse Then and Now* (Encounter, 2025), 32, 120.

They also noted that when reality is reduced to that which can be measured and calculated, there is no basis for the morality upon which bourgeois culture depends. While Immanuel Kant sought to address this through his categorical imperative, this is “an ethic predicated on treating the others as subjects, as free individuals of unique value, to be treated not as means to an end but as ends in themselves.” Adorno and Horkheimer astutely pointed out that such an ethic “runs afoul of a view of the world that turns the other into an object of study and analysis” (131). In spite of this insight, the fundamental problem remains with Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis: “The failure to have any normative notion of human nature” leaves us “with nothing more than the pious hope that an unalienated humanity will emerge from the historical process, though we have no way of knowing in advance of that moment what such might look like” (143). This is why the Christian response to critical theory needs to focus on the fact that human nature is more than a social construct, and that the church, with its announcement of the grace of God in Christ, “is the place where alienation is overcome” (143).

Critical theory also relates to much of what is being said in our day about matters of sex and gender. Because Freud played a key role in shaping contemporary thinking on this, Trueman spends many pages summarizing his thought and the ways it influenced others. Especially of note is the claim that sexual desire is the essence of a person’s identity. Those who embrace this idea see society’s sexual codes as repressive because they prevent “people from being who they would desire themselves to be” (149). This is why proponents of critical theory call for the destruction of the institution of monogamous marriage and the traditional family, an effort that has made significant headway in the world in which we live today. Yet once again, the rejection of the natural moral order has wreaked havoc, emptying sex of any intrinsic meaning. This leads Trueman to contend that “perhaps human beings do have a nature, an essence, and perhaps the careful regulation of sexual behavior in a manner that reflects and

reinforces natural dependencies and obligations is essential to human freedom” (180).

One profitable insight from critical theory has to do with the way popular culture and mass forms of communication are used “in the manufacture of social conformity and political passivity” (183). Even though this originated as part of a critique of bourgeois capitalism, it is something to which Christians should pay careful attention in a screen-dominated age. Image-based forms of communication operate on us in a different manner than word-based forms. Because the viewer is largely passive in his engagement with image-based media, he is also rendered highly suggestible. As philosopher Colin McGinn explains, “What we see on the screen is intended to engage our emotions directly. This is the sensory manipulation of emotion. . . . The kind of seeing we experience in the cinema is *emotional seeing*—the seeing *of* emotions *with* emotions.”⁴ If we want to avoid being manipulated, we need to be aware of the way today’s cultural products can subtly shape how we understand the world.

The reason why every society bears the taint of evil is due to the universal sinfulness of man. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn famously observed,

If only it were so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart? . . . It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.⁵

Due to its embrace of such notions, “the West has a capacity for self-criticism and self-correction that sets it apart from other present and past civiliza-

⁴ Colin McGinn, *The Power of Movies: How Screen and Mind Interact* (Pantheon, 2005), 104–5. Italics original.

⁵ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–56: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, abridged ed. (Vintage, 2018), 75, 312.

tions. . . . The highest virtues of the West do not stem from self-satisfaction but from an aspiration to meet an objective standard of natural right.”⁶ This stands in sharp contrast to critical theory, whose rejection of the notion of a natural moral order does not result in the destruction of its advocates’ innate moral impulse, but in its inversion. No longer having any basis for a sense of moral restraint, those inspired by critical theory regard as righteous *anything* that is done to destroy the hopelessly corrupt status quo. As Michael Polanyi explains, this is a mindset in which the “moral needs of man, which are denied expression in terms of human ideals, are injected into a system of naked power, to which they impart the force of blind moral passion.”⁷ This should be reason enough to reject critical theory. ©

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⁶ Luke Foster, “For the Glory of France,” *Claremont Review of Books*, Spring 2025, 56.

⁷ Cited in Mahoney, 123.

Order in the Offices from a Two-office Perspective

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by Brad Isbell

Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers, 2nd edition, Mark R. Brown, general editor. Reformed Forum, 2024, xiii + 278 pages, \$34.99.

An old military saw asserts that generals and politicians always prepare to fight the *last* war, meaning not the final conflict, but the *previous* one. Like churches, armies have traditions, doctrine, and—above all—a defined order. Critical to order are the officers, ranks, roles, and hierarchies of authority. Of course, a church is like an army but is also very different from any earthly military force, being a spiritual body, both visible and invisible, at once voluntary and involuntary, and having a Warrior-King leader who is mysteriously both absent and present. Some ancient armies consisted of little more than the older boys and men of a tribe armed with sticks, blades, and stones, and the tribe itself was essentially a large family. Modern armies are national bureaucracies staffed by professionals, albeit professionals with weapons of terrifying power, accuracy, and cost.

Military forces have changed dramatically. The church, having existed since the time of the first family, ought to have changed but little, especially since Christ’s ascension, when he gave gifts to men, followed so soon by the coming of the Holy Spirit in covenantal fullness and more slowly by the inspired New Testament witness. The King’s gifts to the church and the Spirit-enabled understanding of the biblical witness should produce a stable, recognizable, agreed order in the Church. We confess, after all, that the “whole counsel of

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1224.

God concerning all things necessary for . . . faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (Westminster Confession of Faith, WCF, 1.6). All “things necessary for . . . faith and life” must include our doctrine of the church. Because God has spoken to us even about his church and her order, it is no surprise that *Order in the Offices* has been so valued by the officers of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church for the last three decades and why the new edition has been greeted so warmly. OPC people love their church and this work, edited by Mark R. Brown. It is beautifully bound and printed, and it seeks to bolster and explain some of the most important aspects of the church’s ministry and organization.

Of the fifteen chapters in the work, only one is new. *Order in the Offices* will succeed at confirming convinced holders of the three-office view, but because of the dismissive view which some of the chapters have of the two-office position, and because of certain anachronisms in the authors’ catalog of opponents from *previous wars*, it will fail to convince principled holders of the two-office position. (Full disclosure: as a ruling elder since 2009 in the Presbyterian Church in America, serving with a teaching elder who is arguably the foremost living authority on Southern Presbyterian ecclesiology and history, I may hold the two-office view as firmly and advisedly as most current OPC ministers hold the three-office view.)

The book will dispel any impression that the issue of the number and nature of the offices is a minor one between the OPC and the PCA; it is decidedly not “two ways of describing the same thing,” at least for thoughtful and principled holders of the two positions, of which, we trust, there are many. To slightly modify one of J. Gresham Machen’s famous lines, *the really important things are the things about which men will controvert!*²

2 J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1923), 1–2. “In the sphere of religion, as in other spheres, the things about which men are agreed are apt to be the things that are least worth holding; the really important things are the things about which men will fight.”

And this controversy may be argued on biblical, historical, and practical grounds.

We learn right off the bat that the disagreement is biblical: “The precise exegetical question here is, what is the nature of the office to which Paul refers in 1 Timothy 3:1? Once this question is settled, all else falls into place” (21). The three-office interpretation usually admits that *episkopos* (ἐπίσκοπος, bishop/overseer)—which only in this passage clearly refers to a perpetual New Testament office—is more or less interchangeable with *presbyteros* (πρεσβυτερος, elder) elsewhere. The qualifications, for whatever office this may be, are followed immediately by qualifications for the altogether separate office of deacon. A simple PCA ruling elder, armed only with a Greek lexicon and concordance, has to ask where the qualifications for ruling elders are in this passage and whether “apt to teach” applies only to preachers. Indeed, in the first chapter of Titus, *episkopos* (overseer) is used interchangeably with *presbyteros* (elder), so a simple ruling elder asks if there are any biblical qualifications for him at all in either passage. The answer given is that the overseer (pastor/minister) “in his one office . . . includes all the lower offices, the qualifications for him are also those that apply to the lower office (elders who rule)—except for any qualification that belongs exclusively to his office” (29). The argument is more about context than about words, and I would not downplay the importance of context. The nuanced arguments are capably and carefully made in several of the book’s chapters, but they remain complex and sometimes fly in the face of a plain reading. Those ordained to the “lower office” may have to take the arguments on faith!

Of course, two-office advocates are loath to speak of a “lower office” even as they hold to the high, essential, indispensable role of that “super-added” class of elders who “especially . . . labor in preaching and teaching.” Three-office advocates may deny that 1 Timothy 5:17 depicts one office of elder with two classes, but the argument is not to be dismissed out of hand. It is reasonable, but does it hold up historically?

Just as the many chapters chosen for *Order in the Offices* make careful scriptural arguments for three offices, so do they make an impressive and accurate case for its historical pedigree, though the case might have been made even stronger. Many wrongly assume that the “Southern” two-office scheme formally, constitutionally obtained in the old Southern church before the 1973 formation of the PCA, yet it did not. Two-office was merely an argued-for, controverted issue³ until 1980, when a 1979 Book of Church Order amendment was ratified—the fact of the Southern two-office church is even more recent than is widely known!⁴

But the relatively recent character of the enshrined two-office view only rules it out if we adopt a view of ecclesiology that we would never countenance regarding doctrine, namely, that more light and greater development in understanding of biblical doctrine is impossible. The chapters of this work often appeal to Calvin and Hodge—two men who would never assert that the doctrine of church government had been finally settled, least of all by them. A long list of doctrines, including union with Christ and covenant theology, could be cited to demonstrate that Presbyterians *do* change, and they do so out of concern for being faithful to the Scriptures.

Having an inconveniently recent relation to significant changes may make us uncomfortable but should not cause us to dismiss such changes out of hand. Nor should every development bring new complexity or even addition. Two-office Presbyterianism is blessedly simple and dear to many who hold it. For this reason, the scant, harsh, and disputable mention of the PCA in the book’s

3 The view was strenuously promoted without success by J. Henley Thornwell and R. L. Dabney in the nineteenth century. Iain Murray deals with much of this history in Chapter 8.

4 Since 1980, PCA BCO 7–2 has read as follows: “The ordinary and perpetual classes of office in the Church are elders and deacons. Within the class of elder are the two orders of teaching elders and ruling elders. The elders jointly have the government and spiritual oversight of the Church, including teaching. Only those elders who are specially gifted, called and trained by God to preach may serve as teaching elders. The office of deacon is not one of rule, but rather of service both to the physical and spiritual needs of the people. In accord with Scripture, these offices are open to men only.”

bibliography is disappointing: “The PCA’s Form of Government was later amended to reflect two-office views. However, much of the PCA’s polity remains three-office in principle and practice. The result is an unstable and ambiguous mixture of systems” (266).

History seeks to acquaint us with the practicalities and experiences of churchmen in earlier ages. Applying these to the present time is necessarily speculative, but considering history and practicalities bolsters the argument for two-office Presbyterianism, in my view, first with regard to declension in Presbyterian denominations. It may be that my following statement and questions will not be appreciated, but there are several assertions in *Order in the Offices* that are, if anything, more speculative, more a matter of opinion, and more insupportable.⁵

History suggests that ruling elders were not held in high esteem in the Northern church by the early twentieth century, Woodrow Wilson and Robert E. Speer notwithstanding. Could this have been because they were held to be bearers of a “lower office”? Might ruling elders have done more to arrest the decline of the PCUSA if their office had been construed as more than mere jurists? It is reasonable to ask what might have been if more of the PCUSA’s ruling elders had been like those who requested J. Gresham Machen’s late 1921 address in Wayne, Pennsylvania, which ultimately became *Christianity and Liberalism*. Were disengaged ruling elders responsible (at least in part) for the small number of churches willing to join Machen’s exodus in 1936? Of course, we will never know, but this we can know: Ruling elders were critically important to the formation of the PCA in 1973, a generation or two after the OPC

5 Witness “the two-office view falls prey to this (egalitarian) instinct by obliterating the distinction between ruler and pastor” (213); and “a further irony lies in the fact that where the two-office view prevails, the plurality of elders in a congregation tends to diminish the importance and therefore quality of the teaching office. . . . The logic of the two-office position is bound ultimately to do away with any distinction between the pastor and the ruling elder” (214). Note well, the only place to find two-office view today is the PCA, so there can be little doubt which pastors are in view.

was formed. Machen's work and the OPC's faithfulness certainly aided the founders of the PCA, and it may be that the Southern church's generally higher regard for ruling elders contributed to the PCA's initial success, with larger numbers, more churches, and greater energy than the OPC could muster. Former PCA stated clerk Roy Taylor has contended that the PCA is the only denomination started primarily through the work of ruling elders.⁶ And I would contend that the PCA's recent course corrections, like her early successes, were due in no small measure to ruling elder involvement.

Maybe the OPC inherited a slighter regard for ruling elders from their wayward mother church, maybe not. Times were hard, and the OPC's founders were fighting a life-and-death battle for the supernatural faith, not the finer points of ecclesiology. Machen, so far as we know, spoke little of office, though female deacons and ruling elders were present in some PCUSA churches by 1936. Even so, the OPC deserves tremendous credit for establishing a church order with only male officers. If they had not done so, it might have been much more difficult for the PCA to do so thirty-seven years later.

Finally, there is the question of anachronism. Some of *Order in the Offices*'s arguments are with movements or tendencies that no longer exist (at least in the OPC), though there are some contemporary parallels elsewhere. The invectives against egalitarianism and chaotic worship leadership likely had the New Life movement in view. Most of those churches had departed for the PCA before this work's first edition was published, though maybe not before some of these chapters were written. The book's opening chapter suggests that the very function of the ministers of the Word was under attack—that a “new consensus opinion, forming across denominational lines . . . questions

whether” the minister's work, historically understood, was even necessary (11). It seems likely that this was an overstatement. Many in the PCA, then and now, adhere to the regulative principle and highly value the ministry of the Word. Today, many PCA churches that worship and order themselves much like OPC churches self-identify as “Ordinary Means of Grace” churches. Granted, the existence of such a term implies that there is still considerable diversity and disagreement about worship within the PCA.⁷ The first chapter seems to connect the degradation of worship and the ministry of the Word to two-office tendencies, which may just be shorthand for the PCA or for the kinds of churches then departing the OPC for the PCA. But did churches have ruling elders clamoring to preach, administer sacraments, and run worship in those days? That seems unlikely and is certainly not the case today.

Later chapters connect (with, in this reviewer's opinion, little evidence) the two-office position with egalitarianism. To be sure, there are currently PCA churches with egalitarian tendencies, and these tendencies are apparent in office⁸ and in worship. Again, ruling elders are not running roughshod over worship. PCA churches often have unordained members leading nearly every part of worship, including the call to worship, Scripture readings, confessions, and prayers—pretty much everything, in rare cases, except the sermon and benediction. It is the ruling elders who are marginalized in the interest of diversity and “representation up front.” Something is going on, but it's not about ruling elders stepping out of their lanes. Pastors at such churches (often church plants without local sessions or only recently particularized) lead the way in this innovation. The PCA's preference for rapid growth and creativity, in this writer's opinion, is better at building crowds than

6 A notable PCA academic has often said that “Thornwell lost the battle but won the war”—the war in question being his respectful conflict over ecclesiology with Charles Hodge. Thornwell's views on office, as mentioned above, did not become the law of any church until almost 120 years after his death.

7 It should be noted that the recently concluded Fifty-Second PCA General Assembly voted to form a study committee to consider giving more constitutional force to the PCA's mostly non-binding directory for worship.

8 Some PCA churches have female quasi-officers or decline to ordain male deacons so that an unauthorized, unordained unisex “diaconate” or “mercy team” can be maintained.

developing principled Presbyterian ruling elders. The fault does not lie with the number of offices, but with the convictions of the officers.

With appreciation for this book's passionate concern to protect the ministry of the Word, let me close with a few words of hearty agreement with the OPC's worship directory:

When the session deems it fitting, ruling elders may lead the congregation in prayer, read the Scriptures to the congregation, lead unison or antiphonal readings of Scripture by the congregation, lead congregational singing, or, on occasion, exhort the congregation as part of public worship. They may not, however, pronounce the salutation or the benediction or administer the sacraments.

This is a surprising find in the OPC directory, given the way *Order in the Offices* often portrays the two-office view as injurious to the prerogatives and position of the pastor. The PCA does not have such an explicit endorsement on ruling elder worship leadership! I would argue for the regular, limited involvement of ruling elders in public worship, including all elements up to the sermon text reading when a visiting minister or licentiate is present. In normal circumstances, it seems appropriate for ruling elders to lead the call to worship, offer a prayer, or other portions, such as a confession of faith or sin. There are several benefits of regular ruling elder involvement, including increased confidence in ruling elders' competency to teach and lead, increased ruling elder "buy-in" and understanding of the liturgy, and preparation for those instances when a ruling elder must step in to lead worship. Church members need to see that ruling elders are more than judicial officials or functionaries. Ruling elders are pastors/shepherds in some important senses. Seeing them assist in the church's most important weekly work can only strengthen their hands in the work of counseling, visitation, and teaching members in other settings. Order is necessary, but so is the confidence of the sheep that the entire session is leading their local churches, which Christ so greatly loves and for whom he so abundantly provides. It may be, in

God's mercy, that two-office and three-office Presbyterians can learn and benefit from each other. ©

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Historic Presbyterian Polity

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by **Archibald A. Allison**

Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers, 2nd edition, Mark R. Brown, general editor. Reformed Forum, 2024, xiii + 278 pages, \$34.99.

The coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in human flesh is one of the monumental events in God's great plan of redemption. We confess in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 7.6:

Under the gospel, when Christ the substance was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper: which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the new testament.

These changes under the gospel have led to different views and disagreement in the church

¹ https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1225.

regarding the types and shadows of the Old Testament, the administration of the sacraments, the right form and proper exercise of church government, as well as the offices in the church.

The early church learned that the Old Testament special offices of prophet, priest, king, and Levite were replaced in the New Testament with the extraordinary and temporary special offices of apostle and prophet followed by the ordinary and perpetual special offices of minister, ruling elder, and deacon.

These ordinary and perpetual special offices in the church became confused in the first few centuries of the Christian church as the church government hierarchy developed in the Roman Catholic Church. The early church recognized a difference between the minister and ruling elder, but by the late second century, with the rise of the diocesan bishop, the supremacy of the bishop was established. By the middle of the third century, presbyter had come to mean the parish priest, who was under the diocesan bishop, and the deacon was a first step in attaining priestly office. For example, Athanasius was a deacon and assistant to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria during the First Council of Nicaea from May to August 325, and three years later he succeeded Alexander as Bishop of Alexandria.

John Calvin, John Knox, and other Reformers sought to reform the government of the church from the errors of Rome. The Reformers argued for parity of office between the parish priest and the diocesan bishop, rejecting the distinction between higher and lower clergy. They recovered the biblical office of ruling elder, or church governor, and argued for parity of rule between the minister and the ruling elder.

They were also zealous to maintain a high view of the biblical office of minister of Word and sacrament. It was particularly the preached Word that the Spirit of God used to reform the church. The Reformers taught that the Spirit of God makes the reading, “but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves and drawing them unto Christ;

of conforming them to his image and subduing them to his will” (WLC 155).

The view that the minister and ruling elder hold the same office is an innovation that arose in Scotland and America in the nineteenth century and continues in the church today, confounding the titles, qualifications, and duties of the minister and the ruling elder and blurring the distinctions between the offices.

With the encouragement of Charles Denison, Mark Brown published the paperback *Order in the Offices* himself in 1993, a collection of historical and contemporary essays defending the view of special office in the church, a view recovered in the Reformation and followed in the reformed churches. Although no Christian publisher in 1993 was willing to publish the book, within a few years, several thousand copies of the book in three printings were completely sold out. Thirty years later, Reformed Forum has published a beautiful hardbound second edition of the book with a few additions, including a forward by Danny Olinger, a preface to the second edition by Mark Brown, and a new essay by Alan Strange.

All fifteen essays in this anthology seek to set forth historic Presbyterian polity, in which there is the sacred office of those whom the king and head of the church calls to give their lives to preaching his Word as heralds of the gospel, proclaiming the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ. The minister is not an elder who teaches, but a preacher who also governs and usually pastors a congregation.

The Westminster Confession of Faith clearly speaks of this holy office of the minister:

Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Jesus Christ. (WCF 15.1)

There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the gospel; that is to say, baptism, and the Supper of the Lord: neither of which may be dispensed by any, but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained. (WCF 27.4)

We confess concerning the Lord's Supper:

The Lord Jesus hath, in this ordinance, appointed his ministers to declare his word of institution to the people; to pray, and bless the elements of bread and wine, and thereby to set them apart from a common to a holy use; and to take and break the bread, to take the cup, and (they communicating also themselves) to give both to the communicants. (WCF 29.3)

In the Larger Catechism we confess:

Christ is exalted in his sitting at the right hand of God, . . . and doth gather and defend his church, and subdue their enemies; furnisheth his ministers and people with gifts and graces, and maketh intercession for them. (WLC 54)

Christ hath appointed the ministers of his Word, in the administration of this sacrament of the Lord's Supper, to set apart the bread and wine from common use, by the word of institution, thanksgiving, and prayer; to take and break the bread, and to give both the bread and the wine to the communicants. (WLC 169)

The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper agree, in that the author of both is God; the spiritual part of both is Christ and his benefits; both are seals of the same covenant, are to be dispensed by ministers of the gospel, and by none other; and to be continued in the church of Christ until his second coming. (WLC 176)

Historic Presbyterian polity also underlies Larger Catechism 155–160. A few examples are the following:

Q. 156. Is the Word of God to be read by all?

A. Although all are not to be permitted to read the Word publicly to the congregation, yet all sorts of people are bound to read it apart by themselves, and with their families: to which end, the Holy Scriptures are to be translated out of the original into vulgar languages.

Q. 158. By whom is the Word of God to be preached?

A. The Word of God is to be preached only by such as are sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to that office.

Q. 159. How is the Word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto?

A. They that are called to labor in the ministry of the Word, are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.

In historic Presbyterian polity there is also the special office of ruling elder, or church governor, which the essays in this anthology also discuss. The office of ruling elder is a valuable office in the church, next in order to the ministry of the Word and sacraments. Historic Presbyterian polity preserves this office of government in the church. When the office of ruling elder is confounded with the office of minister, it is always the ruling elder who loses his office. In this case every elder must be a sort of minister, apt to teach and even preach.

The Westminster divines set forth the special offices in historic Presbyterian polity so clearly in *The Form of Presbyterian Church-Government*, which agrees with the *Church Order of Dort* (1618):

Of the Officers of the Church

The officers which Christ hath appointed for the edification of his church, and the perfecting of the saints, are, some extraordinary, as apostles, evangelists, and prophets, which are ceased.

Others ordinary and perpetual, as pastors, teachers, and other church-governors, and deacons.

Pastors

The pastor is an ordinary and perpetual officer in the church, prophesying of the time of the gospel.

First, it belongs to his office,

To pray for and with his flock, as the mouth of the people unto God, Acts vi. 2, 3, 4, and xx. 36, where preaching and prayer are joined as several parts of the same office. The office of the elder (that is, the pastor) is to pray for the sick, even in private, to which a blessing is especially promised; much more therefore ought he to perform this in the publick execution of his office, as a part thereof.

To read the Scriptures publickly; for the proof of which,

1. That the priests and Levites in the Jewish church were trusted with the publick reading of the word is proved.

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

Which propositions prove, that therefore (the duty being of a moral nature) it followeth by just consequence, that the publick reading of the scriptures belongeth to the pastor's office.

To feed the flock, by preaching of the word, according to which he is to teach, convince, reprove, exhort, and comfort.

To catechise, which is a plain laying down the first principles of the oracles of God, or of the doctrine of Christ, and is a part of preaching.

To dispense other divine mysteries.

To administer the sacraments.

To bless the people from God, Numb. vi. 23, 24, 25, 26. Compared with Rev. i. 4, 5, (where the same blessings, and persons from whom they come, are expressly mentioned),

Isa. lxvi. 21, where, under the names of Priests and Levites to be continued under the gospel, are meant evangelical pastors, who therefore are by office to bless the people.

To take care of the poor.

And he hath also a ruling power over the flock as a pastor.

Teacher or Doctor

The scripture doth hold out the name and title of teacher, as well as of the pastor.

Who is also a minister of the word, as well as the pastor, hath power of administration of the sacraments.

The Lord having given different gifts, and divers exercises according to these gifts, in the ministry of the word; though these different gifts may meet in, and accordingly be exercised by, one and the same minister; yet, where be several ministers in the same congregation, they may be designed to several employments, according to the different gifts in which each of them doth most excel. And he that doth more excel in exposition of scripture, in teaching sound doctrine, and in convincing gainsayers, than he doth in application, and is accordingly employed therein, may be called a teacher, or doctor, (the places alleged by the notation of the word do prove the proposition). Nevertheless, where is but one minister in a particular congregation, he is to perform, as far as he is able, the whole work of the ministry.

A teacher, or doctor, is of most excellent use in schools and universities; as of old in the schools of the prophets, and at Jerusalem, where Gamaliel and others taught as doctors.

Other Church-Governors

As there were in the Jewish church elders of the people joined with the priests and Levites in the government of the church; so Christ, who hath instituted government, and governors ecclesiastical in the church, hath furnished some in his church, beside the ministers of the word, with gifts for government,

and with commission to execute the same when called thereunto, who are to join with the minister in the government of the church. Which officers reformed churches commonly call Elders.

The Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church sets forth the special office of ruling elder in chapter 10.1:

Christ who has instituted government in his church has furnished some men, beside the ministers of the Word, with gifts for government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereto. Such officers, chosen by the people from among their number, are to join with the ministers in the government of the church, and are properly called ruling elders.

Order in the Offices begins with an essay on the New Testament warrant for the minister of the Word, followed by three essays on church governors or ruling elders. The general editor, Mark Brown, contributed an important essay on the forgotten Thomas Smyth (1808–1873), pastor at Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, until his death at age sixty-five, which discusses his two key principles of polity. The first key principle is that the biblical presbyter is a minister of the Word, not a ruling elder or church governor. The second key principle is the necessity of distinguishing between the offices of minister and ruling elder for the sake of peace and order in the church.

After chapter 6, excerpts from Smyth's *Ecclesiastical Catechism of the Presbyterian Church* (1843), "Ecclesiastical Catechism: Officers of the Church," there is an essay on Calvin's view of the distinction between minister and ruling elder, followed by eight more essays, a valuable annotated bibliography of books on church government and officers, and two indexes.

This anthology has two practical goals. The first is to help young men in our churches understand and consider the distinctive calling, training, and functions of the holy office of the gospel

ministry. The second is to assist local church leaders and members in developing a clear understanding of the functions and distinctives of the biblical officers in our Presbyterian heritage.

Every man aspiring to the highest and greatest and most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called, preaching God's Word in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, should study this important subject. The essays in *Order in the Offices* provide sound biblical exegesis and a right understanding of historical theology and are an excellent place to begin. ©

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EDITORIAL POLICIES

1. *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.
2. *Ordained Servant* publishes articles inculcating biblical Presbyterianism in accord with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and helpful articles occasionally from collateral Reformed traditions; however, views expressed by the writers do not necessarily represent the position of *Ordained Servant* or of the Church.
3. *Ordained Servant* occasionally publishes articles on issues on which differing positions are taken by officers in good standing in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. *Ordained Servant* does not intend to take a partisan stance, but welcomes articles from various viewpoints in harmony with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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