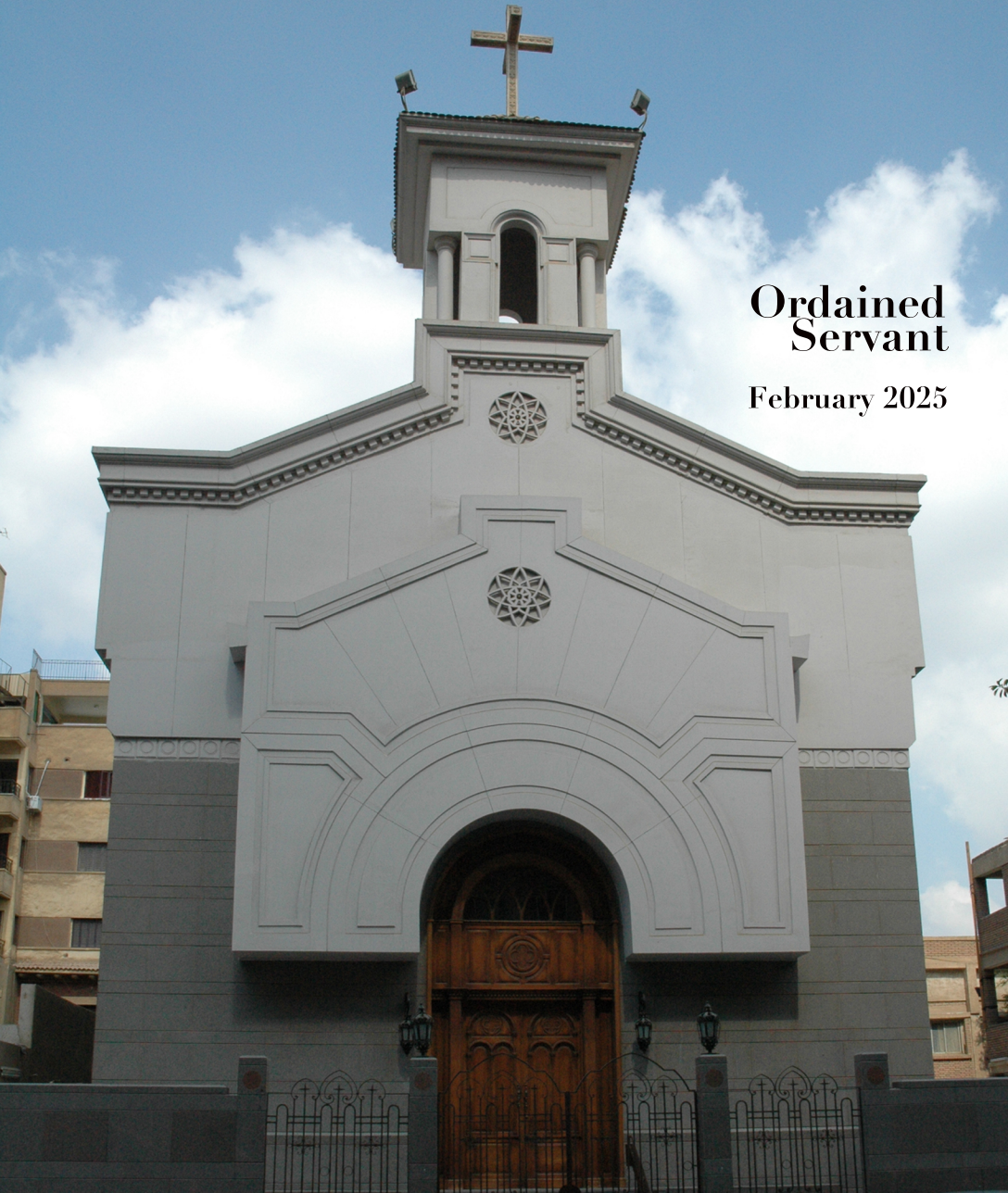


Baptists and Church Membership

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From the Editor

The admission of those with Baptist convictions to church membership has always been a topic of discussion and disagreement in our churches. I have received two articles that express two different positions on the question that I think fairly represent the range of opinion on this topic in our denomination. Neither author has seen the article of the other, and so this is not a point-counterpoint discussion. Two pastors take different points of view: Glenn Jerrell, “Unbaptized Covenant Children?” and David Noe, “How Wide are the Gates?” The content of these articles should help sessions to make wise decisions on this topic.

Danny Olinger continues the series “Jesus, Stab Me in the Heart! Flannery O’Connor at 100” with an analysis of the story “The Life You Save May Be Your Own.” Each month he will be reflecting on a sample of O’Connor’s short stories (I recommend *O’Connor: Collected Works*, The Library of America, 1988). This twelve page story epitomizes the pathos of her prose. The absence of sentimentality is refreshing and was a stick in the eye to many of her literary contemporaries. The explanatory power of the historic fall and redemption in Christ formed the theological framework for her brilliant fiction.

Nathan Strom reviews *The Baptist Church Covenant: Its History and Meaning* by Marshall Davis. This book is largely a discussion of church covenants, which I am quite familiar with here in New Hampshire, having been raised in a congregational church and supplied the pulpit in one for several years. It is always useful to seek to understand those with whom we disagree. I have recently been reminded of the fact that many Baptists near me come from the Magisterial Reformation not the Anabaptist Radical Reformation. Those who adhere to confessions like the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith come from that orthodox tradition.

Harrison Perkins reviews *Christ Crucified: A Theology of Galatians* by Thomas R. Schreiner. Despite the book diverging from Reformed theology at several points, Perkins recommends it as “a helpful overview of the theology of Galatians. It will surely help many get an introductory understanding of this great New Testament letter.”

Our poem this month is the poem I composed for my Christmas card this year: “Taxed.” For anyone interested, I would be happy to send a PDF of the card. In 2022 I published *Yuletide: Poems and Artwork*. I chose my favorites from over fifty years of making my own cards.

The cover picture is of the Heliopolis Evangelical Presbyterian Church, a church in Egypt that is part of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt Synod of the Nile. The Synod of the Nile was founded in 1854 by American Presbyterian missionaries, graduates of Princeton Theological Seminary. I lectured in Egypt to leaders of the Philip Ministry in 2009. Dr. Abd el Masih Istafanous was in charge. He received his doctorate from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1963. The Phillip Ministry was a small Reformed group within the largely liberal Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt Synod of the Nile. I preached in this church on September 13, 2009. The church continues to be Reformed.

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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- “Baptism and Church Membership: A Plea for Confessional Fidelity.” (Bryan D. Holstrom) 20 (2011): 47–51.

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

Servant Truth

Unbaptized Covenant Children?

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?

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.

Glenn D. Jerrell *is a retired minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church residing in Knoxville, Tennessee.*

Servant Truth

How Wide are the Gates?

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:

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.”

David C. Noe *is the pastor of Reformation Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He was formerly professor of classics at Calvin University.*

ServantLiterature

The Life You Save May Be Your Own

by Danny Olinger

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

Flannery O'Connor's neighbors around Milledgeville, Georgia, knew that she was a writer of some renown, even if they did not always understand the point of her stories. But when the Schlitz Playhouse on March 1, 1957, presented "The Life You Save" as a story by Flannery O'Connor on CBS-TV, O'Connor enjoyed a brief moment of local celebrity. She told Maryat Lee,

For the last ten days I have been sustaining congratulations on "my" television play. Old ladies all over town have told me they thought it was the sweetest play they ever saw. One old lady said it really made her think! I didn't ask her what. Children now point to me on the street. The city fathers think that I have arrived finally. Most think it is a great improvement on the original but forbear to say so openly.¹

The Schlitz Playhouse of Stars production featured an all-star cast with Gene Kelly, Agnes Moorhead, and Janice Rule. It was promoted as Flannery O'Connor's "backwards love story." Kelly described the story and his role, "It's a kind of hillbilly thing in which I play a guy who befriends a deaf-mute girl in the hills of Kentucky."²

The show opened with pictures of Kelly, Moorhead, and Rule appearing respectively with words superimposed over their images. Kelly's picture appeared with the lettering, "this is Tom Triplett—he and his toolbox can fix anything—just about." Moorhead's character was next with these words, "this is Ma Crater—a lot needs fixing around her place, but a son-in-law would make it perfect—pretty near." Rule's picture followed with these words, "this is Lucynell Crater—she can't hear or speak and is yearning for love—how do you fix that?"³

In O'Connor's story, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Mr. Tom T. Shiftlet is a one-armed tramp with a toolbox that can fix anything, but he is also a man disillusioned by what he has experienced. In his travels he is looking for innocence and desiring freedom. Young Lucynell Crater is mute and deaf in both the story and the play, but in

¹ Maryat Lee, "Flannery, 1957," *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 5 (Autumn 1976), 51.

² Flannery O'Connor to "A", December 28, 1956, *Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), 191.

³ The show can be viewed on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ku6JwCcft0>. The television production changed the name of the protagonist. In O'Connor's story, he is named "Mr. Shiftlet." In the television show, he is named "Mr. Triplett."

O'Connor's original she is not a slim attractive blond looking for the love of a man. She is a large girl nearly thirty years old who falls on the floor from hanging her head between her knees in trying to spy Mr. Shiftlet through the triangle in her hair. The one character in the story and the play that remains the same is the mother, Lucynell Crater, who in both accounts is ravenous to find a son-in-law for her daughter.

O'Connor was upset with the changes to the story. She sarcastically told Betty Hester in advance, "I think it's channel 5 and people tell me you can't get it very good here, so I hope you will absolutely be in front of your set this time at the correct hour, as I must have some representative there to give Kelly a good leer every now and then for me."⁴ After viewing it she said, "I don't recognize the television version. Gene Kelly played Mr. Shiftlet, and for the idiot daughter they got some young actress who had just been voted one of the ten most beautiful women in the world." She then added mockingly that the show producers changed the ending "just a bit" by having Mr. Shiftlet suddenly get a conscience and come back for the girl.⁵

In O'Connor's story, Mr. Shiftlet is enamored with Mrs. Crater's broken-down car. The mother preys upon his lust for the car by promising to give it to him if he were to marry her daughter. He agrees, but immediately after the marriage driving away with young Lucynell he feels dissatisfied and depressed. He stops at a diner so that they can get something to eat, but Lucynell falls asleep inside. Mr. Shiftlet leaves her there sleeping and takes off in the car. He then picks up a boy by the road, whom he intuitively is running away from home. Mr. Shiftlet tells him a story about his mother, but throughout juxtaposes details about Lucynell. The boy declares Mr. Shiftlet as fraudulent, curses him, and jumps out of the car. Mr. Shiftlet then continues driving in a storm to his destination in Mobile, Alabama.

In the Schlitz Playhouse version, however, this pivotal moment is changed so that in hearing Triplett's words the boy becomes remorseful in running away and gets out of the car tearfully. Triplett then returns to the diner and finds Lucynell being accosted for not paying for the pastries she had eaten. He rescues her and proclaims, "I'm her husband. Everything is going to be alright, Lucynell." The show ends with the smiling newlyweds driving off together.

O'Connor later used the episode as an illustration of the conflict that existed between what she was trying to achieve and how others, like her aunt and the television scriptwriter who changed her story, wanted something different.

I have an aunt who thinks that nothing happens in a story unless somebody gets married or shot at the end of it. I wrote a story about a tramp who marries an old woman's idiot daughter in order to acquire the old woman's automobile. After the marriage, he takes the daughter off on a wedding trip in the automobile and abandons her in an eating place and drives on himself. Now that is a complete story. There is nothing more relating to the mystery of that man's personality that could be shown through that particular dramatization. But I've never been able to convince my aunt that it's a complete story. She wants to know what happened to the idiot daughter after that. Not long ago that story was adapted for a television play, and the adapter,

⁴ O'Connor to "A," December 28, 1956, *Habit of Being*, 191.

⁵ "Off the Cuff," *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Rosemary M. Magee (University of Mississippi Press, 1987), 8.

knowing his business, had the tramp have a change of heart and go back and pick up the idiot daughter and the two of them ride away, grinning madly. My aunt believes that the story is complete at last, but I have other sentiments about it—which are not suitable for public utterance.⁶

Mr. Shiftlet, Mrs. Lucynell Crater, and Lucynell Crater

The story opens with a one-armed tramp, Mr. Shiftlet, walking towards an old woman and her daughter sitting on a porch. The older woman, Mrs. Lucynell Crater, is shading her eyes from the piercing sunset, but the daughter, also named Lucynell, deaf and vision impaired, jumped up and down stomping her feet. The man tips his hat to the daughter, as if she were not in the least afflicted, and swung his hat all the way off for the old woman. The old woman said, “good evening,” but the tramp only turned his back and faced the sunset, swinging “both his whole and his short arm up slowly so that they indicated an expanse of sky and his figure formed a crooked cross.”⁷ The older woman “watched him with her arms folded across her chest as if she were the owner of the sun, and the daughter watched, her head thrust forward and her fat helpless hands hanging at the wrists.” The man says, “Lady . . . I’d give a fortune to live where I could see me a sun do that every evening.” “Does it every evening,” she replies.⁸

Mr. Shiftlet sees a rusted automobile in a shed and asks if they drive. The older woman responds that the car quit running fifteen years ago when her husband died. “Nothing is like it used to be, lady,” the man said. “The world is almost rotten.” “That’s right,” the old woman said. “You from around here?” “Name Tom T. Shiftlet,” he murmured, looking at the tires. She replies, “What you doing around here, Mr. Shiftlet?”⁹ In answering her question, he tells her that surgeons can operate on the human heart, but they do not know any more about the heart, the mysteries of life, than you or me. As Mr. Shiftlet kept talking, Mrs. Crater sat rocking and wondering if he could put a new roof on the garden house.

She then inquires if he is married or single. Mr. Shiftlet answers, “where would you find an innocent woman today? I wouldn’t have any of this trash I could just pick up.”¹⁰ Young Lucynell at that point fell on the ground trying to look between her knees and began to whimper. Mr. Shiftlet helps her up and asks the old woman if the girl is hers. The mother responds positively and declares that she wouldn’t give her daughter up for anything in the world, not even a casket of jewels. As he listens, Mr. Shiftlet’s eye in the darkness focuses on the glittering part of the car bumper.

Mr. Shiftlet then declares that there is nothing on the farm that he couldn’t fix, that he was a man and had “a moral intelligence.” Mrs. Crater was not impressed with the phrase, but she tells him that he could hang around and work for food and sleep in the car. “Why listen, lady,” he said with a grin of delight, “the monks of old slept in their coffins!” She responds, “They wasn’t as advanced as we are.”¹¹

⁶ Flannery O’Connor, “Writing Short Stories,” in *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970), 94–95.

⁷ Flannery O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* (Noonday, 1995), 146.

⁸ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 146.

⁹ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 146–47.

¹⁰ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 149.

¹¹ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 149.

In this opening, O'Connor has presented the essence of each character. Mrs. Crater is a materialist who believes that reality is nothing more than what it appears to be. She has no regard for the sun, much less anything spiritual and transcendent. Her kingdom treasure in Matthew 13:45-fashion is her daughter.¹² Mr. Shiftlet appears as a weary searcher looking for a place of innocence and the means for freedom in a world almost rotten.¹³ Casting a figure of a crooked cross, claiming to be a carpenter, seeing beyond the material universe, there is a suggestion that he is a savior.¹⁴ In between the two is Lucynell, who reflects transcendence in appearance and innocence in behavior. Her pink-gold hair the color of the sun, her eyes the blue of heaven.

Mr. Shiftlet and the Automobile

Mr. Shiftlet proves immediately that he has the ability to save the farm from decay. He also brings new life to Lucynell, teaching her to say her first word, "bird." Mrs. Crater, watching from a distance, is secretly pleased. She requests that Mr. Shiftlet teach Lucynell to say another word, teach her to say "sugarpie." He already knew what was on the old woman's mind, and so the next day he began to tinker with the broken down car. He believed that the car, a 1928 or 1929 Ford, was a real gem because, unlike modern mass production, someone had taken a personal interest in it.

Taking a personal interest in the Ford in order to bring it to life, Mr. Shiftlet informs the old woman that it needs a new fan belt to run. After she gives him the money for the part, he casually asks how old Lucynell is. "Fifteen, sixteen, the old woman said. The girl was nearly thirty but because of her innocence it was impossible to guess."¹⁵

When the car starts, Lucynell accompanies it, the deaf speaking, with her alleluia chorus of "Burrddtt! Bddirrdttt!"¹⁶ Mr. Shiftlet, sitting erect and triumphant in the driver's seat, "had an expression of serious modesty on his face as if he had just raised the dead." Once the old woman sees that Mr. Shiftlet has what he wants, she tells him that Saturday "you and her and me" can drive into town to get married.¹⁷

Mr. Shiftlet objects to the timing since he has no money for a proper honeymoon, but the old woman replies that Lucynell does not even know what a hotel is. The old woman tells him that he would be getting a permanent home with a deep well and the most innocent girl in the world. She then adds, "You don't need no money. Lemme tell you something: there ain't a place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man." "The ugly words settled in Mr. Shiftlet's head like a group of buzzards in the top of a tree."¹⁸

He takes his time, and then he tells her that man is divided in two parts, the body, which like a house does not go anywhere, and the spirit, which like an automobile is always on the move. Mrs. Crater, however, knows what bait to use to catch him. She tells

¹² Carter W. Martin, *The True Country* (Vanderbilt University, 1994), 87.

¹³ John F. Desmond, "The Shifting of Mr. Shiftlet: Flannery O'Connor's 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own,'" *Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 1 (Winter 1974-75), 56.

¹⁴ Rebecca Sharp, "Flannery O'Connor and Poe's 'Angel of the Odd,'" *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 7 (Autumn 1978), 120.

¹⁵ O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 151.

¹⁶ John R. May, *The Pruning Word* (Notre Dame, 1976), 68.

¹⁷ O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 151.

¹⁸ O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 152.

him that she'll pay so that he can have the car painted by Saturday. "In the darkness, Mr. Shiftlet's smile stretched like a weary snake waking up by a fire."¹⁹

Mr. Shiftlet and Lucynell

Up to this point, Mr. Shiftlet has been evenly divided in his view of nature and spirit and the moral choices before him. Now he begins in serpent-like fashion to treasure the car and his freedom above all else. Lucynell might be innocent, but he believes that her mother's actions are a total denial of his spirit.²⁰

After the marriage as they come out of the courthouse, Mr. Shiftlet looks morose and bitter, as if he has been insulted while someone held him. When he laments that the marriage did not satisfy him none, the old woman sharply replies that it satisfied the law. Mr. Shiftlet spits and then replies that it is the law that does not satisfy him.

The mother does not want to let go of her girl, but Mr. Shiftlet eases the car forward so that she has to move her hands. Driving as fast as possible to make it to Mobile by nightfall, he occasionally looks at Lucynell picking the cherries off her hat and throwing them out the window. Depressed in spite of the car, Mr. Shiftlet stops at a diner to eat. Before the food comes, Lucynell is asleep and snoring on the counter. Mr. Shiftlet pays and tells the boy behind the counter to give her the food when she wakes up. The boy looks at her and then stares at Mr. Shiftlet and declares, "she looks an angel of Gawd." Shiftlet came to the farm looking for innocence, and Lucynell is the embodiment of innocence. It is his opportunity to die to the almost rotten world and care for another, but he values his freedom more than her. "'Hitchhiker,' Mr. Shiftlet explained. 'I can't wait. I got to make Tuscaloosa.'"²¹

On the road, Mr. Shiftlet is more depressed than ever. He no longer perceives the transcendent as he should, and O'Connor has the sun descend in a reddening ball over the car to dramatize divine displeasure.²² He stops to pick up a boy and starts talking sentimentally about the value of mothers, but in doing so he transfers the diner clerk's phrase about Lucynell to his mother in what amounts to a confession,

"My mother was an angel of Gawd," Mr. Shiftlet said in a very strained voice. "He took her from heaven and giver to me and I left her." His eyes were instantly clouded over with a mist of tears. The car was barely moving.

¹⁹ O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 152. Desmond equates Mr. Shiftlet's turn with Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown. "[Shiftlet's] shift, and this is a central point of the story, is precisely that which Young Goodman Brown undergoes at the end of Hawthorne's tale: once his abstract belief in innocence has been pulverized, he reverts to the opposite hardened extreme of viewing all the world as corrupt, an inversion of his sentimental belief in innocence." Desmond, "Shifting of Mr. Shiftlet," 57.

²⁰ Desmond argues that "behind O'Connor's analysis of this malaise, illuminating it, is the fact of Christ's Incarnation and Redemption as the perfect analogue of spirit interpenetrating and redeeming material categories." Desmond, "Shifting of Mr. Shiftlet," 57.

²¹ O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 155.

²² Stuart Burns, "Torn by the Lord's Eye: Flannery O'Connor's Use of Sun Imagery," *Twentieth Century Literature*, no. 3 (Oct. 1967), 156.

The boy turned angrily in the seat. “You go to the devil!” he cried. “My old woman is a flea bag and yours is a stinking pole cat!” and with that he flung the door open and jumped out with his suitcase into a ditch.²³

The boy’s words ring true as Mr. Shiftlet hears his judgment *ex ore infantibus*: “You go to the devil!”²⁴ Mr. Shiftlet is the bridegroom who abandons his bride and absconds with that which he ultimately prizes, the car. However, the car is just a car. There is no lasting transformation found with it despite his attempts to make it into a medium of grace.²⁵ The car doesn’t bring meaning to his life; it does not enable him to escape the feeling of “the rottenness of the world that is about to engulf him.”²⁶ A cloud, the same color as the boy’s hat, shaped like a turnip covered the sun, and another cloud, worse looking, crouched behind the car. Mr. Shiftlet beat his breast and cried out to the Lord, but his self-pitying prayer that the “slime” be removed from the earth only results in God’s derisive laughter of judgment, “the guffawing peal of thunder.”²⁷

“Personal Interest” and “The World is Almost Rotten”

O’Connor’s working title in writing the story was “Personal Interest.” When she submitted the manuscript to John Crowe Ransom’s *Kenyon Review*, she entitled it “The World is Almost Rotten.”²⁸ O’Connor’s friend Robert Fitzgerald, however, shared with her shortly thereafter that while he was driving on vacation, he had noticed a billboard with the slogan “The Life You Save May Be Your Own.”

The three titles together are revealing of O’Connor’s intention with the story. Mr. Shiftlet’s potential redemption, his seeking to find innocence in a world that was almost rotten, is the concern of the tale. Her first title, “Personal Interest,” put the focus on the choice that Mr. Shiftlet has before him. Her second title, “The World is Almost Rotten,” testified to the reality of original sin in a fallen creation. The third title, “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” combined the crucial elements of the first two titles, but added an eschatological cast.

The fascination of O’Connor’s aunt with what happened to Lucynell after she is left at the diner speaks to the power of the real situation that the story reflected. But O’Connor presents Lucynell throughout as angelic. In O’Connor’s judgment, Lucynell is a baptized innocent who is not in need of redemption. The prime literary concern is in bringing Mr. Shiftlet to the point where he is confronted with an action of grace.

In her correspondence with John Hawkes, O’Connor left no doubt about how Mr. Shiftlet was to be considered. She told Hawkes that Mr. Shiftlet is “of the Devil.”²⁹ Mr.

²³ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 155. O’Connor revised the original publication in the *Kenyon Review* and added the sentence “The car was barely moving” when the story appeared in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*.

²⁴ May, *Pruning Word*, 33. In correspondence with John Hawkes, O’Connor declared that Mr. Shiftlet is of the devil. Flannery O’Connor to John Hawkes, December 26, 1959, *Habit of Being*, 367.

²⁵ John F. Desmond, *Risen Sons* (Univ. of Georgia, 1987), 48.

²⁶ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 156.

²⁷ When an English textbook altered “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” by omitting the final paragraph, O’Connor wrote Elizabeth McKee to inform Harcourt Brace of her protest. She said, “I suppose there is nothing that can be done about it now but I certainly don’t like the idea of my story being in a textbook and the last paragraph omitted.” Flannery O’Connor to Elizabeth McKee, October 28, 1960, *Habit of Being*, 415.

²⁸ Flannery O’Connor to Elizabeth McKee, October 15, 1952, *Habit of Being*, 44.

²⁹ Flannery O’Connor to John Hawkes, December 26, 1959, *Habit of Being*, 367.

Shiftlet might not literally be a murderer like The Misfit in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” but he shares The Misfit’s demonic nihilism in a willingness to destroy others in seeking to satisfy his own self-interest.

Mr. Shiftlet seeks freedom, not freedom from slavery to sin, but freedom as autonomous self-construction, the essential American heresy.³⁰ But Mr. Shiftlet’s sentimentality concerning his earthly treasure, the car, does not lead to joy and freedom but rather slavery to self and depression. O’Connor wrote,

We lost our innocence in the Fall, and our return to it is through the Redemption which was brought about by Christ’s death and by our slow participation in it. Sentimentality is a skipping of this process in its concrete reality and its early arrival at a mock state of innocence, which strongly suggests its opposite.³¹

For O’Connor, when a culture turns its back on original sin and the reality of living before Almighty God, as Europe had done in World War II, and America was doing post-World War II, sentimentality becomes diabolical.³² The questions raised at the end of the story as Mr. Shiftlet flees are questions that must be answered by the modern individual who treasures personal freedom and possessions over God and others. Where are you going? What have you become?³³

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³⁰ Email correspondence, Ralph C. Wood to Danny Olinger, January 2, 2025.

³¹ Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 148.

³² Brian Regan argues that O’Connor attacked the American literature “tradition that grew from Emerson because it denies Original Sin and thus the need for Redemption, which to her were basic facts about the universe. She also saw that, in reality, an Adamic man would not in fact keep his innocence long, but would instead become diabolical, like Mr. Shiftlet.” Brian Abel Ragen, *A Wreck on the Road to Damascus* (Loyola University, 1989), 199.

³³ Doug Davis, “Shiftlet’s Choice: O’Connor’s Fordist Love Story,” in *Flannery O’Connor in the Age of Terrorism*, eds. Avis Hewitt and Robert Donahoo (Univ. of Tennessee, 2010), 171.

ServantReading

The Baptist Church Covenant: Its History and Meaning *by Marshall Davis*

by Nathan P. Strom

The Baptist Church Covenant: Its History and Meaning, by Marshall Davis. Self-published, Kindle Direct, 2017, 137 pages, \$8.24, 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 eye-ball 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 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 One 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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ServantReading

Christ Crucified: A Theology of Galatians, *by* *Thomas R. Schreiner*

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 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 longstanding 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 criticism 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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ServantPoetry

G. E. Reynolds (1949–)

Taxed

They journeyed to Bethlehem
To be taxed,
And taxed they were
In substandard quarters,
Royal seed
In a seedy place.

Who would there
Expect good tidings
Of great joy
From an angel, no less,
And to flyover shepherds
Grinding out the night shift.

A chorus of the heavenly singers
Pointing to the birth,
Glory to God in a feed trough
Contrary to every expectation
Of how Paradise
Should come to sinners.