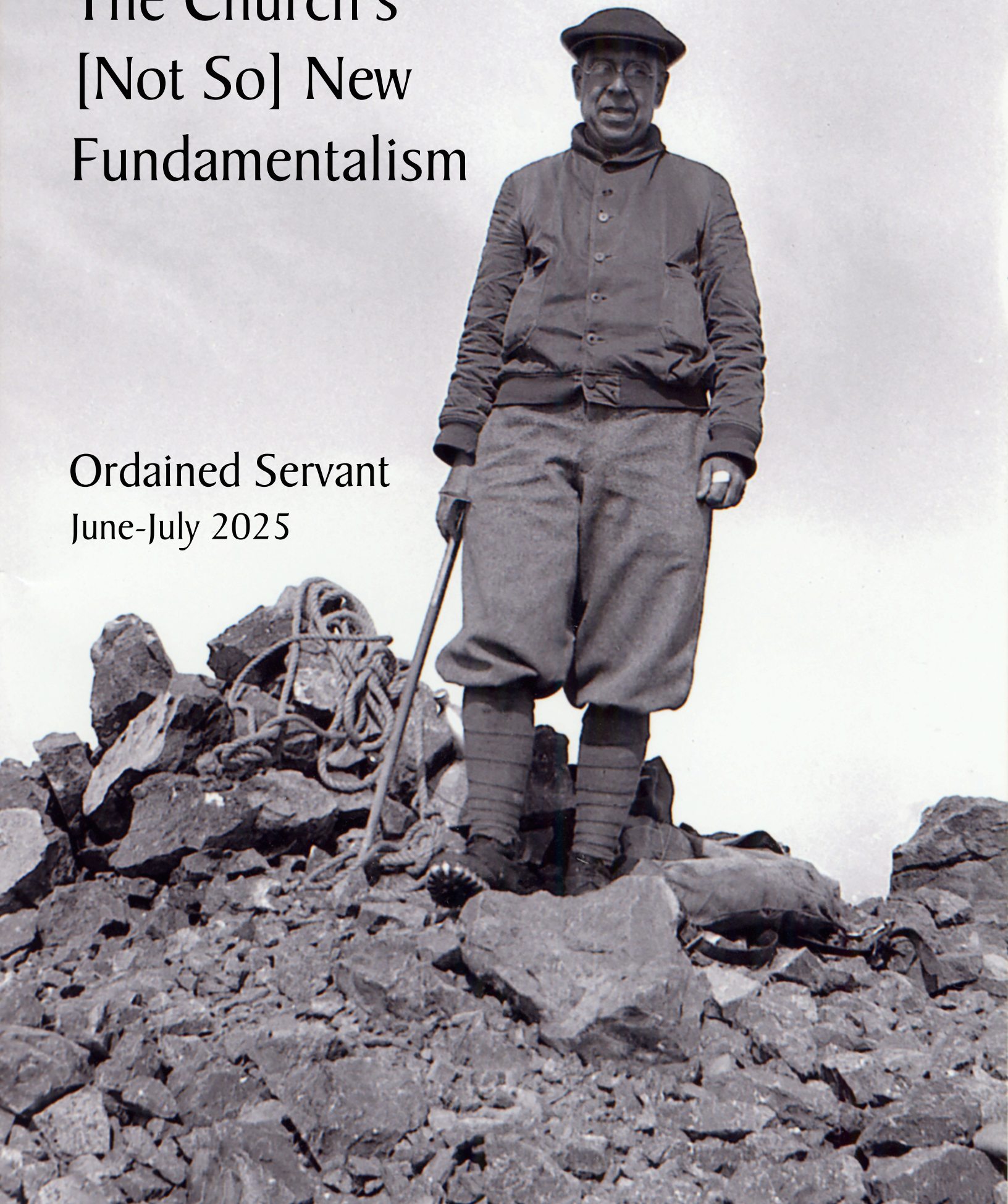


The Church's [Not So] New Fundamentalism

Ordained Servant
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From the Editor

Self-reflection is not only healthy for individuals but also for churches and denominations. John Mahaffy's "The Church's [Not So] New Fundamentalism" calls us to just such an ecclesiastical self-reflection. The very name of this periodical is reflected in Mahaffy's piece. Church officers along with every Christian in a position of authority are called to humble servanthood. This is a fruit of the Spirit of Jesus Christ (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control [see Gal. 5:22–23]), who works in us to overcome our natural tendency toward autonomy that dwells in each of us and thus spills over into marriages, churches, and denominations.

Danny Olinger continues the series "Jesus, Stab Me in the Heart! Flannery O'Connor at 100" with an analysis of the O'Connor short story "Greenleaf." Each month Olinger will be reflecting on a sample of O'Connor's short stories (I recommend *O'Connor: Collected Works*, The Library of America, 1988). O'Connor is unique among the greatest fiction writers of the twentieth century. "O'Connor's one overarching theme is Jesus Christ and the scandal of the Christian religion."¹

Part 3 of *Going Peopleless*, in which I explore the benefits and liabilities of AI, will appear in the August-September issue of *OS Online*.

William Edgar reviews *Believe: Why Everyone Should Be Religious* by Ross Douthat in his article titled, "Consider This: What You See Is Not All You Get." Despite Douthat's Roman Catholic approach to apologetics, his arguments against philosophical materialism are valuable. As a presuppositionalist Edgar argues for a more forceful presentation of the Christian faith, rather than what Van Till would call "blockhouse methodology," moving from reason to revelation. But Douthat is seeking to engage a generation that often knows nothing about Christianity. While some reviewers have compared Douthat to Blaise Pascal, Edgar asserts: "Pascal was much more prone to declare the Christian faith to be true, no wiggle room, full stop."

Ryan McGraw reviews *The Nature of the Church* by John Brown of Wamphray. Brown (1610–79) original wrote in Latin, so this is an English translation. Educated at the University of Edinburgh (graduating in 1630), he became a pastor in the parish of Wamphray. In 1662 he was ejected from his parish and then exiled to Holland. A noted post-Reformation theologian, his exposition of Reformed and Presbyterian ecclesiology

¹ Danny Olinger, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," *Ordained Servant Online* (March 2025), https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=1171.

is a compelling and concise antidote to the radical individualism of our culture.

John Mallin reviews *Depression: Finding Christ in the Darkness* by Ed Welch. *Depression* is a devotional version of Welch's extensive work on this topic. This Christocentric, practical devotion should be a great help to those who struggle in the darkness of depression.

Our poem is from a Christian poet, famous for his association with John Newton, William Cowper, who struggled mightily with depression and found his only relief from the darkness in Christ his Savior.

The cover is a picture of J. Gresham Machen on a mountain. I am not sure which one. He climbed the Matterhorn in the summer of 1932 in his early fifties. It was a remarkable feat at his age and without modern gear. He wrote a wonderful essay "Mountains and Why We Love Them." I have only skied around the Matterhorn on both the Italian and Swiss sides. The picture below was taken on the way down to Zermatt. I believe that the picture of Machen is on Mount Adams, which was his favorite climb in the White Mountains.



Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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- “Steering a Course between Fundamentalism and Transformationalism: J. Gresham Machen’s View of Christian Scholarship” (Dariusz M. Bryćko) 21 (2012): 91–101.

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

The Church's [Not So] New Fundamentalism

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.¹

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.² 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.³ 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

¹ 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, 1966), 301.

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

³ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 64.

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 the Word of God. I must continue to support an unpopular cause.⁴

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.⁵

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.⁶ Marsden argues convincingly that none of these issues alone was sufficient to cause the division of 1937.⁷ 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.⁸

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.⁹

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

⁴ Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Bibliographic Memoir* (Eerdmans, 1955), 337–38.

⁵ J. Gresham Machen, “Christianity in Conflict,” in *Selected Shorter Writings* (P&R Publishing, 2004), 551.

⁶ Marsden, “Perspective on the Division of 1937,” 321.

⁷ Marsden, “Perspective on the Division of 1937,” 321.

⁸ Marsden, “Perspective on the Division of 1937,” 322.

⁹ Marsden, “Perspective on the Division of 1937,” 323.

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 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.¹⁰

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

¹⁰ George M. Marsden, “The New School Heritage and Presbyterian Fundamentalism,” in *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1966), 179.

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."¹¹

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 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

¹¹ Peter Kreeft, in a lecture at George Fox University, 17 February 2017.

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.”¹² 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 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.”¹³

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

¹² *Minutes* of the 88th General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Article 152.

¹³ *Politics*, Book 1, Part V. See also Book 1, Part XII and Book 7, Part III for similar statements.

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.¹⁴

He adds of wives, "Their very opinion, affection, speech, action, and all that concerns the husband, must savor of subjection."¹⁵ 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:

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.¹⁶

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,¹⁷ 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

¹⁴ William Gouge, *Of Domestic Duties*, Kindle Edition, loc. 4611.

¹⁵ Gouge, *Of Domestic Duties*, 4590.

¹⁶ Gouge, *Of Domestic Duties*, 6031.

¹⁷ Rachel Green Miller, *Beyond Authority and Submission: Women and Men in Marriage, Church, and Society* (P&R, 2019).

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 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.”¹⁸

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.¹⁹

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.”²⁰

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

¹⁸ Miller, *Beyond Authority and Submission*, 323.

¹⁹ R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 126.

²⁰ Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, 131.

body of Christ fitly framed and knit together through that which every joint supplies, according to the working in due measure of each part.²¹

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 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).²² 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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²¹ 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).

²² 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.

ServantLiterature

Greenleaf

by Danny Olinger

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

Flannery O'Connor informed Betty Hester in mid-January 1956 that she was very happy to be writing a story in which she planned for a sixty-three-year-old heroine to be gored by a bull. O'Connor continued that she was not sure whether she would identify with the heroine or the bull, but that the risk involved was that which was making her happy.¹ Four days later, she told Hester that she had made the bull "the pleasantest character in this story."²

The story was "Greenleaf," which would win the 1957 first place in the O. Henry Prize Collection. Mrs. May, a widowed farm owner, wakes up in the middle of the night to find a scrub bull munching on the hedge under her window. Her mind races to whether she should get Mr. Greenleaf, the hired farmhand. This leads her to think about how Mr. Greenleaf was barely adequate for any job, but also the risk that if she heads out for the Greenleaf's place she might run into Mrs. Greenleaf, whom she always tries to avoid.

From this beginning, the story unfolds with a series of contrasts between Mrs. May and the Greenleafs that can be read on multiple levels. The story can be read as a straight forward tale that has comic and tragic elements as Mrs. May is undone by her two grown sons, Wesley and Scofield, who refuse to help her, by Mr. Greenleaf, who is desultory in his duty, and by the bull that will not go away. It can also be read as a story about the transition from the old South, represented by Mrs. May and her sons, to the new South, represented by the Greenleafs' sons, O. T. and E. T. It can also be read as pointing to the reality and significance of Jesus Christ in this life and the one to come.

That the story can be interpreted on multiple levels, combining as it does natural, cultural-economic, and mystical elements, speaks to O'Connor's methodology. She declared that in order to make a story work there needs to be an action or gesture that flows out of daily life but at the same time suggests both this world and eternity.³ Consequently, her gaze in writing extends beyond the surface level, beyond the moralistic level at which mainstream religion is content to remain, to the heavens, the realm of mystery and our participation in it, which is the concern of the prophets. For O'Connor, the novelist's duty is to see the ultimate meaning of near things in order to expose far things close up.

¹ Flannery O'Connor to "A," January 13, 1956, *Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), 129.

² Flannery O'Connor to "A," January 17, 1956, *Habit of Being*, 132.

³ Flannery O'Connor, "On Her Own Work," in *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970), 111.

In “Greenleaf,” Mrs. May views near things under her ownership, the product of her hard work. Her life centers on preserving her place, her lawn, her oats, her cows, and her herd. O’Connor contrasted Mrs. May’s perspective with “connected and sympathetic” characters, Mrs. Greenleaf, the sun, and the bull. O’Connor described to Hester with enthusiasm a point in the story where they converge. “Mrs. May sees the bull as the sun’s shadow cast at an oblique angle moving among the cows, and of course he’s a Greenleaf bull!”⁴

Setting and Characters

“Greenleaf” opens with a bull, silvered in the moonlight, standing under Mrs. May’s bedroom window that faced east, “his head raised as if he listened—like some patient god come down to woo her—for a stir inside the room.”⁵ Although the bull at first glance could be referencing Greek mythology and Zeus coming down to woo a mere mortal, O’Connor makes clear that the bull is symbolic of Christ.⁶ Hearing his chewing (Christ’s voice), Mrs. May awakes, opens the blind, and views the bull, a hedge-wreath across his horns.⁷

Mr. Greenleaf, she thinks, has left the gate open, and now the bull was eating everything that belonged to her, but, of course, not touching anything that belonged to the Greenleafs. Before she closes the blind she looks again and sees the bull staring at her “like an uncouth country suiter” with “the wreath slipped down to the base of his horns where it looked like a menacing prickly crown.”⁸

She squints at him fiercely and begins to think about how others have taken advantage of her. Shiftless people’s hogs rooted up her oats, their mules wallowed on her lawn, and now a scrub bull would breed her cows unless he is put out immediately. But she also realizes that Mr. Greenleaf is soundly sleeping in the tenant house and there is no way for her to get him to take care of the bull unless she gets dressed and drives there to wake him up. She also dreads the thought of what would undoubtedly be his response, “If *hit* was my boys they would never have allowed their maw to go after hired help in the middle of the night. They would have did it theirself.”⁹

The next morning Mrs. May tells Mr. Greenleaf about the bull and that she wants it penned up at once. Mr. Greenleaf responds that the bull had been on the farm three days. When he had tried to put the bull in the pen, the animal tore out and Mr. Greenleaf hadn’t seen him since.

Hearing this conversation are Mrs. May’s grown sons who live with her on the farm. Wesley, an intellectual, taught at a local college, and Scofield, a business type, sold insurance to black folk.¹⁰ Mrs. May’s dream is that they both would marry nice girls.

⁴ Flannery O’Connor to “A,” March 24, 1956, *Habit of Being*, 148.

⁵ Flannery O’Connor, *Complete Stories* (Noonday Press, 1995), 311.

⁶ Sally Fitzgerald, “Introduction,” *Three by Flannery O’Connor* (Penguin, 1983), xxv.

⁷ O’Connor implies that between the first and second coming of Christ, when he is not seen with the eye, that his presence is marked by his voice, “When the moon retreated and there was darkness, there was nothing to mark his place but the sound of steady chewing” (*Complete Stories*, 311).

⁸ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 312.

⁹ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 312.

¹⁰ One wonders if O’Connor’s naming of the intellectual son after the famous Methodist Wesley and the business son after fundamentalist Bible theologian Scofield, inspired Norman Maclean to write in his novella *A River Runs Through it*, “The Burns family ran a general store in a one store town and still

When she tells Scofield that if he sold decent insurance that a nice girl would marry him, he taunts her that he is going to wait until she dies to get married. He even added once, to Mrs. May's chagrin, that he would marry some nice lady like Mrs. Greenleaf.

Mrs. Greenleaf

The thought that one of her boys might marry someone even remotely like Mrs. Greenleaf was enough to make Mrs. May ill. Instead of Mrs. Greenleaf doing her duty, cleaning her house or washing her five daughters, she spends her time praying and participating in grotesque worship. Daily she cut out from the newspaper morbid stories of rape, torture of children, horrible accidents, and divorces of movie stars. She then would place the clippings on the ground, where she would gyrate over them crying out to Jesus for help.¹¹

Mr. Greenleaf had only been employed for a few months when Mrs. May found out that this was Mrs. Greenleaf's practice. The encounter came about because Mr. Greenleaf had used the wrong seeds in the grain drill. Mrs. May "was returning through a wooded path that separated two pastures, muttering to herself and hitting the ground methodically with a long stick she carried in case she saw a snake."¹² As Mrs. May rehearses what she is going to say to Mr. Greenleaf about his seeding mistake, she hears an agonized voice groaning, "Jesus, Jesus." She stops still, the sound "so piercing that she felt as if some violent unleashed force had broken out of the ground and was charging toward her." Her next thought is more reasonable, someone is probably hurt, although that immediately brings fear that she might be sued and lose everything since she has no insurance. She rushes forward and sees that it is Mrs. Greenleaf face down on the ground off the side of the road.

"Mrs. Greenleaf!" she shrilled, "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.¹³

managed to do badly. They were Methodist, a denomination my father always referred to as Baptists who could read."

¹¹ Jessica Hooten Wilson suggests a connection between O'Connor's having Mrs. Greenleaf pray over the news clippings and Ivan Karamazov's use of newspaper clippings in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. She writes, "Prostrate in the dirt before Christ, Mrs. Greenleaf submits to God whose ways she cannot fully understand. Unlike Ivan, who uses newspaper clippings of others' suffering to fuel his metaphysical rebellion, Mrs. Greenleaf grieves and prays over the afflicted." Jessica Hooten Wilson, *Giving the Devil His Due* (Cascade, 2017), 131.

¹² O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 316.

¹³ O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 316.

“You broken my healing,” Mrs. Greenleaf said, waving her aside. “I can’t talk to you until I finish.”¹⁴

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.¹⁵

Mrs. May’s carrying the stick is O’Connor’s gloss on Genesis 3:15. Mrs. May believes in salvation through her own efforts—at the judgment she will be able to confess that she bruised the head of the serpent through her tireless work on the farm. The implication of Mrs. May not being sure of what she wants to strike is that she considers Mrs. Greenleaf’s way of life a serpent-like threat. Mrs. Greenleaf’s only concern is Jesus and redemption in his name. Unlike Mrs. May, who trusts in the merit of her own works, Mrs. Greenleaf knows she cannot save herself. “‘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.”¹⁶

Mrs. Greenleaf’s total abandon to Jesus scandalizes Mrs. May. “‘Jesus,’ she said, ‘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 had turned and walked off as fast as she could.”¹⁷

O. T. and E. T. and Scofield and Wesley

Mrs. May works and works, and yet Mr. and Mrs. Greenleaf are the ones that have no worries, no responsibilities. They live like the lilies of the field, hardly aging at all.

As “scrub-human” as the Greenleafs are, it particularly goads Mrs. May that Mr. Greenleaf never fails to proclaim the superiority of his boys, O. T. and E. T. The Greenleaf boys had fought in World War II and married some nice French girls who did not know what type of people the Greenleafs were. Educated on the G.I. bill, O. T. and E. T. operate a prosperous farm on top of a treeless hill a couple miles from Mrs. May’s farm.

The thought of her boys without nice girls as wives, compared to the Greenleaf boys’ married bliss, leads Mrs. May to nag her sons. Wesley snarls in return, “Well, why don’t you do something practical, Woman? Why don’t you pray for me like Mrs. Greenleaf would?” “I don’t like to hear you boys make jokes about religion,” she had said. “If you would go to church, you would meet some nice girls.”¹⁸

Scofield then breaks the news to her that the bull belongs to O. T. and E. T.¹⁹

¹⁴ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 316.

¹⁵ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 316–317.

¹⁶ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 317. Hewitt observes that although O’Connor asserted that grace was central to her fiction, there are rare scenes of gracious living like Mrs. Greenleaf’s praying. Hewitt asserts that Mrs. Greenleaf’s prayer “might be taken as a mantra for O’Connor’s project. To O’Connor, the fiction writer does not work with the goal of ‘uplift,’ of demonstrating to a tired but eager populace how well they are doing, how ‘successful’ they are.” Avis Hewitt, “Introduction,” *Flannery O’Connor in the Age of Terrorism*, eds. Avis Hewitt and Robert Dunahoo (University of Tennessee, 2010), vii–viii.

¹⁷ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 317.

¹⁸ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 320.

¹⁹ S. Burns argues that the fact that the Greenleafs own the bull suggests that they possess the Spirit of Christ, as does Mrs. May’s contemptuous reference to them as “scrub-human.” Stuart Burns, “‘Torn by the

This sets Mrs. May into a rage. “Do you see that if I hadn’t kept my foot on his neck all these years, you boys might be milking cows every morning at four o’clock?” Wesley murmurs, “I wouldn’t milk a cow to save your soul from hell.” Teary-eyed, she replies, “I know you wouldn’t.”²⁰

She gets up from the table and looks out the window. She sees the cows grazing on the green pastures across the road, and behind them, fencing them in, a black wall of trees with a sharp, sawtooth edge that held an indifferent sky. The sight calms her momentarily, but then the sun, which was just a little brighter than the rest of the sky, moves over the grazing cows, and Mrs. May sees a darker shape that might have been the sun’s shadow cast at an angle moving among the herd. Angry at the sight of the bull mixed with her milk herd, Mrs. May marches over to Mr. Greenleaf. She informs him that she knows that the bull belongs to his boys and that she is going to drive over to O.T. and E. T.’s and tell them to come get him. In a half-hour, she sees the bull ambling down the road with Mr. Greenleaf behind him in procession. Mr. Greenleaf looks on the bull with approval, but Mrs. May mutters that surely it is a Greenleaf bull, the awfulest looking one she ever saw.

When Mrs. May turns in O.T. and E. T.’s driveway to tell them that their bull is on her farm, the sun beat down directly on their new white-roofed house. Their children approach, and Mrs. May feels as if she is on trial for her life, facing a jury of French-speaking Greenleafs. She decides to go down to the barn, and there she sees firsthand how advanced O. T. and E. T.’s mechanical milking parlor is, the white concrete filled with sunlight.²¹ She withdraws quickly, closes the door, and leans against it frowning. “The light outside was not so bright but she was conscious that the sun was directly on top of her head like a silver bullet ready to drop into her brain.”²²

Mrs. May writes a message about the bull for the Negro workhand to deliver to O. T. and E. T. He recognizes her as the policy man’s mother, but she says sharply, “I don’t know who your policy man is.”²³ The disintegration of the relationship between mother and her offspring continues when she returns home. Scofield chides her for becoming so upset about the bull and declares that with such a mamma it is a wonder that he turned out to be such a nice boy. Wesley barks that Scofield is not her boy, and adds to the torment by stating that neither is he. Mrs. May runs from the room, and the boys fight about who is at fault.

Mrs. May would have collapsed, but she hears a knock from the back door and finds Mr. Greenleaf looking through the screenwire. She tells him that his boys did not come for the bull and that tomorrow he would have to shoot him. Mr. Greenleaf answers—the sky above him crossed with thin red and purple bars, and behind them the sun moving

Lord’s Eye’: Flannery O’Connor’s Use of Sun Imagery,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 13, no. 3 (Oct. 1967), 161.

²⁰ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 321.

²¹ Kathleen Feeley maintains that the contrast between the Mays and the Greenleafs is that of the “old” (Mays) and “new” (Greenleafs) South. She writes, “Her (Mrs. May) visit illustrates what the opening section of the story has intimated: with hard work and government aid, the Greenleaf family—the ‘new South’—is rising economically, will rise socially, and will eventually displace the Mays, complacent middle-class Southerners.” See, Kathleen Feeley, *Flannery O’Connor: Voice of the Peacock* (Rutgers, 1972), 94.

²² O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 325.

²³ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 326.

down slowly as if it were descending a ladder—that tomorrow he would drive the bull home for her. She tells Mr. Greenleaf that would not do, because the next week the bull would be back.

She then adds in a mournful tone that she is surprised that O. T. and E. T. treat her this way in light of everything that she has done for them when they were growing up. “They wore *my* boys’ old clothes and played with *my* boys’ old toys and hunted with *my* boys’ old guns. They swam in *my* pond and shot *my* birds and fished in *my* stream.”²⁴ She looks at the disappearing sun, and then tells Mr. Greenleaf the real reason they did not come for the bull is that she is a woman. Quick as a snake striking, he replies that they knew that she had her two boys on the farm. The sun had disappeared behind the tree line as she looks at him to make sure that he understands her hurt.

The Bull

That night as Mrs. May dreams, she hears a sound like a large stone grinding a hole on the outside of her head. She was walking over beautiful rolling hills, planting her stick in front of every step. “She became aware after a time that the noise was the sun trying to burn through the tree line and she stopped to watch, safe in the knowledge that it could not, that it had to sink the way it always did outside of her property.”²⁵ But then the swollen red ball began to narrow until it looked like a bullet coming at her, at which point she awakens to hear the bull’s munching.

The next morning she orders Mr. Greenleaf to get his gun. Mr. Greenleaf, upset that she would ask him to shoot his sons’ bull, stomps and kicks until he throws himself into the car with a violent thud. They find the bull grazing peacefully among the herd. Mr. Greenleaf tries to sneak up on the bull, but the bull gallops off.

As Mr. Greenleaf searches for the bull, Mrs. May leans back against the hood of the car and closes her eyes. She believes that she has every right to be tired, as hard as she has worked.

Before any kind of judgment seat, she would be able to say: I’ve worked, I have not wallowed. At this very instant while she was recalling a lifetime of work, Mr. Greenleaf was loitering in the woods and Mrs. Greenleaf was probably flat on the ground, asleep over her holeful of clippings. The woman had gotten worse over the years and Mrs. May believed that now she was actually demented. “I’m afraid your wife has let religion warp her,” she said once tactfully to Mr. Greenleaf. “Everything in moderation, you know.”²⁶

Impatient for Mr. Greenleaf to draw the bull into the pasture where he can shoot him, she starts honking the horn. In freezing unbelief, she stares at the violent black streak coming at her as if she has no sense of distance. Before she could decide his intention, the bull buries his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover. One of his horns pierces her heart and the other curves around her side and holds her in an unbreakable grip. She is flipped upside down. Granted new vision, the entire scene in front of her changes. She

²⁴ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 328.

²⁵ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 329.

²⁶ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 332.

sees beyond the land that she worked so hard to maintain, “the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky—and she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable.”²⁷

She also sees Mr. Greenleaf running toward her with his gun raised, even though she is not looking in his direction. She sees him “approaching on the outside of some invisible circle, the tree line gaping behind him and nothing under his feet.” He shoots the bull dead, but Mrs. May did not hear the shots but felt the quake of the bull’s body as it sank, pulling her forward. As she dies in the bull’s embrace, she appears to whisper “some last discovery into the animal’s ear.”²⁸

Critical Commentary

Kathleen Feeley writes that two years before “Greenleaf” was published, O’Connor had taken special interest in Blasé Pascal’s statement that “to be mistaken in believing that the Christian religion is true is no great loss to anyone; but how dreadful to be mistaken in believing it to be false.” Feeley posits that it “may well be this mistake of which Pascal speaks is Mrs. May’s ‘last discovery.’”²⁹

Regarding Mrs. May’s salvation, Feeley maintains that the ending is ambiguous. She has the look of one who finds the light unbearable; she also whispers a “last discovery” that may indicate God’s final mercy.

Ralph Wood argues that O’Connor grants Mrs. May eschatological vision and salvation at the end. Mrs. May’s eyes are opened to the fact that woods and sky belong to the infinite God. The violent stab of death is a consummation that far surpasses a life lived in damning self-ownership.³⁰

Frederick Asals maintains that taken by itself, “Greenleaf” might well suggest the theological doctrine of the irresistibility of grace. He states that the story “is particularly notable in that it is the single O’Connor work, to my eye, in which the protagonist (and the bull’s victim), Mrs. May, seems to harbor no longing, however suppressed, for the divine.”³¹ It is the bull’s violent embrace that leads to the opening of Mrs. May’s eyes.

Michael Bruner places Mrs. May in that category of those characters in O’Connor’s stories in which one is hard pressed to see how they fit into the Roman Catholic view of salvation. Mrs. May does not “cooperate” with God, nor is she “prepared and disposed” by the action of her own will.³² The impaling of Mrs. May finds its origins in the inscrutable will of God.³³

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²⁷ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 333.

²⁸ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 334. M. Bruner writes that the “violence so often assumed to be evil in nature, like the impaling of Mrs. May . . . finds its origins in the inscrutable will of God.” Michael Bruner, *A Subversive Gospel* (IVP, 2017), 153.

²⁹ Feeley, *Voice of the Peacock*, 98.

³⁰ Ralph Wood, *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Eerdmans, 2005), 90.

³¹ Frederick Asals, *The Extremity of Imagination* (Univ. of Georgia, 1982), 223.

³² Michael B. Bruner, *A Subversive Gospel* (IVP, 2017), 105.

³³ Bruner, *A Subversive Gospel*, 153.

ServantReading

“Consider This: What You See Is Not All You Get”

A Review Article

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, 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, Ross 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 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, 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 reenchant 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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ServantReading

The Nature of the Church, *by John Brown of Wamphray*

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, 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, pointed, and 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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ServantReading

Depression: Finding Christ in the Darkness, *by Ed Welch*

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 travelling 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 (1–4 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 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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ServantPoetry

The Shining Light

From *Olney Hymns*, XXXII

William Cowper (1731–1800)

My former hopes are fled,
 My terror now begins;
I feel, alas! that I am dead
 In trespasses and sins.

Ah, whither shall I fly?
 I hear the thunder roar;
The Law proclaims Destruction nigh,
 And Vengeance at the door.

When I review my ways,
 I dread impending doom:
But sure a friendly whisper says,
 “Flee from the wrath to come.”

I see, or think I see,
 A glimmering from afar;
A beam of day, that shines for me,
 To save me from despair.

Forerunner of the sun,
 It marks the pilgrim's way;
I'll gaze upon it while I run,
 And watch the rising day.