Ordained Servant

AI

August–September 2025

Ordained Servant Online

A Journal for Church Officers

E-ISSN 1931-7115

CURRENT ISSUE: More on AI

August–September 2025

From the Editor

I once vowed to follow Plato's idea in *The Republic* that rulers should be at least fifty years old, following through on it by waiting until that age to do substantial writing. I did write many reviews and a few articles before that age, but the bulk of my writing came after that age. My first book was published at age fifty-two, and I became editor of *Ordained Servant* at age fifty-six. Now twenty years later, I have decided to offer short essays like "Seeing Red" (*OS Online* May 2024) for my Servant Thoughts. "'Me and Her' Must Go" is this month's offering. It is especially important that church officers cultivate good manners in thought, word, and deed—God's people are watching and listening.

I must come across half a dozen new articles on Artificial Intelligence (AI) daily, so I thought Bill Edgar's reflections worthy of our consideration in this quickly developing technological environment with his "Thoughts on Artificial Intelligence." Then I will conclude my three-part series "Going Peopleless" with some practical implications of AI in the October issue.

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 "Good Country People." 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] This short story is my favorite so far, perhaps because I was a philosophy major and can say that by the grace of God I did not become a nihilist.

Daniel Tan reviews a new book by Teresa Morgan on the essential element of trust in Paul's theology of the atonement. Tan reminds us of the centrality of the substitutionary aspect of the atonement in Paul, which is neglected by Morgan, who focuses on the relational dimensions of trust between God and humanity, while minimizing sin. This is also a good reminder of the importance of the forensic character of the atonement, a perennial emphasis in Reformed theology and preaching, and one that must be preserved and preached.

D. Scott Meadows, Servant Classics, reviews *A Treatise on True Theology with the*

---

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

Life of Franciscus Junius. Meadows provides a full summary of this foundational post-Reformation work of prolegomena, explaining the nature and origin of true theology. Both the summary and Junius's work are masterful.

Ryan M. McGraw reviews *What It Means to Be Protestant: The Case for an Always Reforming Church*, by Gavin Ortlund. "*What it Means to be Protestant* reminds readers that, in many cases, what people are rejecting is not historic Protestantism, but a hollowed-out form of it detached from its historically core convictions." Darryl Hart has also sounded a similar note in *Still Protesting: Why the Reformation Still Matters* (Reformation Heritage, 2018); and *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (Bowman & Littlefield, 2002).

Our poem this month is the powerful John Donne (1572–1631) "Holy Sonnet #4." As a man who knew he was a sinner, but then as a Christian and a clergyman he cries out in the face of death, "Oh my black soul!" His anguish and fear are only alleviated by bathing in the blood of Christ.

Our cover is a photo taken in Chelmsford Massachusetts through a stained-glass window focusing on old technology in contrast with AI.

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

CONTENTS

- Ryan M. McGraw, review of *What It Means to Be Protestant: The Case for an Always Reforming Church*, by Gavin Ortlund

ServantPoetry

- John Donne (1572–1631), "Holy Sonnet #4, Oh My Black Soul!"

FROM THE ARCHIVES "ATONEMENT, PROTESTANT, CONFESSION"

http://opc.org/OS/pdf/Subject_Index_Vol_1-33.pdf

- "Unlimited Atonement." (G. I. Williamson) 4:3 (Jul. 1995): 71–72.
- "Courageous Protestantism? Some Reflections on David Wells's Analysis of the Contemporary Church." (Carl Trueman) 18 (2009): 114–21.
- "David Wells's Response to Carl Trueman's Review of His Five Books." (David F. Wells) 18 (2009): 121–22.
- "On Being a Confessional Church." (Gregory E. Reynolds) 13:1 (Jan. 2004): 11–13.

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.

ServantThoughts

“Me and Her” Must Go

by Gregory E. Reynolds

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

The way we dressed and dined at table became obvious places to begin reform. I have become a quiet reformer against what I call the cult of informality. Since correcting people is itself bad manners, unless the people are your children, leading by example is best. I soon recognized that many customary forms of dining and dress were rooted in seeking to make others comfortable in various social spaces. Even placing others first in saying “she and I” rather than “me and her” are grammatically correct because they place others first. This is supremely a Christian instinct. Waiting to eat before others are served enforces a humility that is distinctly Christian, but there is also a remnant of that instinct in God’s image-bearers. Dressing appropriately for each occasion in life shows respect for the occasion and for others. The forms of life make life meaningful in the garden and in the church. While these forms may change with time, making the proper distinctions does not.

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

Generally then, good manners ease everyday relations when there is a way of doing things that everyone observes. It makes relationships congenial. Social conventions make

social interactions smooth and amicable. What a lovely way of living as opposed to the awkwardness of having no rules for social engagement.

If "me and her" must go, let me suggest a hold on the ad infinitum "thank you." "You're welcome" has mysteriously disappeared. When someone thanks you, receive the gift with cheer and welcome. What is the responding "thank you" thanking the thanked for? This could lead to an infinite regress. It makes no sense to thank the thanker for thanking you. "You're welcome" says I am happy to give you what you are thanking me for, and I would do it again.

It has been heartening, after years of teaching my children good manners and correct speech, to see them doing the same with their children. Do not give up. The late Clifton Fadiman felt that the world of "cultivation he had worked so hard to master—Western literary canon, smoked salmon on toast points—had slipped from his fingers and been replaced by vulgarity and ugliness."[1] But instead of being disheartened by the decline in good manners, we can treat others with respect and care. "Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed" (Rom. 13:7). "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12:10).

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

[1] Anne Fadiman, *The Wine Lover's Daughter: A Memoir* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 124.

ServantTechnology

Thoughts on Artificial Intelligence

by William Edgar

This is not the place to rehearse the long history of discussions between "science" and the Christian faith.[1] So we will focus on the rather recent phenomenon of AI (Artificial Intelligence). As with some of the previous issues I have examined, there is often a good deal of heat along with any light. But there is increasing attention addressed to this phenomenon, and it is pregnant with cries and whispers.

To begin with, it will help to define AI. It may surprise us to learn that the first occurrence of this term dates back to 1955. Professor John McCarthy defined it simply as "The science and engineering of making intelligent machines."[2] In its earlier phases AI was applied to ordinary imitative skills, such as teach the machine to play chess. We may remember how in 1997 a machine named "Deep Blue" beat the Grand Master Gary Kasparov.

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

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

Many developments have occurred and surely many more are to come. For example, ChatGPT is a human-like dialogue feature. Thus, you can ask the machine almost anything, and it will answer you. A variant is Snapchat, an app which allows you to send a picture, or "snap," and even create an illustrated story. You can program Snapchat to destroy the picture after use, so no one may "steal" it. Another, related phenomenon is Dall-E (and Dall-E2), which is a system that can create various images (and art) from a description in "natural" language.[3]

---

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

[2] See https://hai.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/2020-09/AI-Definitions-HAI.pdf.

[3] See https://openai.com/dall-e-2.

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

Some experts estimate that AI-generated content on the internet in a few years' time, as ChatGPT, Dall-E, and similar programs, will spill torrents of verbiage and images into online spaces.[4]

Space prohibits an extensive history and demographic analysis of AI.[5] The giant service organization Digital Aptech lists four crucial capabilities.

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

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

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

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

Should We Worry?

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

Cheerleaders point to the advantages of AI. They range from the ability to conduct research efficiently, to automating repetitive tasks, to faster decision-making. There are numerous educational benefits. One that caught my attention is the use of virtual reality to teach people about certain social issues. For example, a number of museums are using holograms to allow visitors to have imaginary "conversations" with victims of racism, antisemitism, and adversaries.

---

[4] See https://futurism.com/the-byte/experts-90-online-content-ai-generated.

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

At White Plains High School, holograms and other tools are being used to instruct the students about hatred and crimes.[6] Teachers claim this is a better tool than textbooks for introducing them to the sad reality of the Holocaust, which some of them either ignore or deny. Virtual Reality can be used to dissuade people of prejudice against black athletes or Muslim airplane passengers.[7]

Naysayers abound. A surprising early worrier is Joseph Weizenbaum, one of the pioneers of Chatbot.[8] After an outburst of approval for his work, Weizenbaum began to worry that the machine could supersede the "whole person," that is, the human being in all its grandeur. He created a program affectionately named Eliza, after Eliza Doolittle, the character in George B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*, a cockney who developed such skills as a "lady" that she could fool any detractor. As an amateur psychologist, Weizenbaum also worried that the computer could become a sort-of father figure, encouraging "patients" toward Freudian transference.

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

For what it's worth, Americans are divided in their views of AI. Take, for example, the use of facial recognition in crime solving. According to Pew, more people are concerned than excited about it. Many, some 45 percent, are ambivalent.[9]

The formidable dominance AI could exhibit is a potential for the loss of freedom. The Future of Life Institute has raised important questions. "Should we automate away all the jobs, including the fulfilling ones? Should we develop non-human minds that might eventually outnumber, outsmart . . . and replace us? Should we risk loss of control of our civilization?"[10]

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

A Wise Approach

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

---

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

[7] See https://www.axios.com/2023/05/15/new-vr-role-playing-insight-racism.

[8] See https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/jul/25/joseph-weizenbaum-inventor-eliza-chatbot-turned-against-artificial-intelligence-ai.

[9] See https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/03/17/how-americans-think-about-artificial-intelligence.

[10] See "How to Worry Wisely about Artificial Intelligence" in *The Economist*, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/04/20/how-to-worry-wisely-about-artificial-intelligence?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=google&ppccampaignID=17210591673&ppcadID=&utm_campaign=a.22brand_pmax&utm_content=conversion.direct-response.anonymous&gclid=EAIaIQobChMImsLc5O_tgAMVDK_ICh2oLwm6EAAYASAAEgKLqPD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds.

There is already a considerable, often thoughtful, body of literature reflecting a biblical view of technology.[11] AI may appear to be new, but it is simply a very advanced form of what we already have. It helps to revisit the classic trilogy of Creation-Fall-Redemption. God commanded our first parents to replenish and subdue the earth (Gen. 1:26–31). This is sometimes known as the cultural mandate. That ordinance still holds, despite the cancer of sin that entered our world. One of the tools God has given us to accomplish this task is technology.

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

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

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

The words "mechanical" and, even, "scientific" are so nebulous as to evade any useful precision. It helps to look at the big picture. Jacques Ellul, who spent his life studying the subject, says this from the "Note to the Reader" in *The Technological Society*: "Technique is the totality of methods, rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity."[12] The expression "absolute efficiency" is somewhat pejorative. Yet efficiency is certainly a principal ingredient in technology as it has developed.

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

Not surprisingly, the wise biblical answer to our question is to embrace the advantages of AI and avoid the pitfalls. Derek Schuurman, a professor at Calvin University, provides some helpful guidelines. He says three things.[13] First, we should avoid two typical pitfalls: too much optimism or undue pessimism. Optimists see AI as a solution to most significant problems in life. Only Christ can do that. But pessimists will have nothing to do with AI, which is a shame, given some of its benefits. Used properly, features such as ChatGPT can help with research of all kinds.

Second, Schuurman tells us we should be focusing on the *ontological* issues, rather than on what AI can *do*. We neglect the great answers to our deepest questions about attempts to substitute AI for our endeavors at our peril. They are found in Genesis 1–2 and related texts. The ontological issue of the constitution of human beings as image-

---

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

[12] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, xxv.

[13] See https://christianscholars.com/chatgpt-and-the-rise-of-ai/.

bearers of God cannot be overstressed. Comments on Genesis 1:26–31 abound.[14] The verses are the foundation for our understanding of human beings in their integrity and uniqueness. Though, of course, transhumanism and AI are not mentioned, by implication a critical approach to them is present.

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

Third, Schuurman asks that we develop proper norms for the responsible uses of AI. One of the most apropos accounts in the Bible aiming at our issue is Genesis 11:1–9, "The Tower of Babel." Using the gift of technology, mankind overstepped its bounds and sought to magnify its name above God's: "Let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth" (v. 4). Their sin was not in assigning a name for themselves, but in seeking one that effectively replaced both the name of God, and the name he had given them. Fear of being dispersed is an aberrant way to challenge the cultural mandate.

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

This biblical wisdom is reflected in the declaration of the European Parliament.[15] It is a full statement, but at the heart it is striving to keep the balance between "supporting innovation and protecting citizens' rights."

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

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

---

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

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

[16] See https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/potential-problems-ai/.

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

Cries and Whispers

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

William Edgar *is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and emeritus professor of apologetics and ethics at Westminster Theological Seminary, Glenside, Pennsylvania.*

ServantLiterature

Good Country People

by Danny Olinger

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

In Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People," Hulga Hopewell, a thirty-two-year-old PhD in philosophy who lives with her mother, believes that there is no God. She further believes that Christianity is a social convention that steers people into psychological slavery. When a traveling Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, arrives at the Hopewell farm, Hulga grasps the opportunity to convert Manley from belief in Christ to the reality of nothingness. In trying to seduce Manley and gain him to her side, Hulga feigns affection. Manley persuades Hulga to express her love for him. After she does, he turns out to be an absolute nihilist who finds delight in meanness to others, particularly robbing them of what they treasure in life.

O'Connor's focus on making characters nihilists, not just Hulga and Manley in "Good Country People," but also The Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," was due to what she was observing in society. She said, "If you live today you breathe in nihilism. In or out of the Church, it's the gas you breathe." She also maintained that without the "Church to fight it with or to tell me the necessity of fighting it, I would be the stinkingest logical positivist you ever saw right now."[1] The fight, as O'Connor saw it, was a fight about the meaning of life, whether it was found in the coming of Jesus Christ or not.

The clever twist that O'Connor employed in "Good Country People" is to make it a comic variation of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." In the latter story, the grandmother, who considers herself a "good" Christian, utilizes conventional platitudes in "good" cultural fashion. In the former story, Hulga, who considers herself a "good" nihilist, rejects all conventional platitudes in "good" nihilistic fashion.[2] The result is that the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is exposed as not being a "good" Christian, and Hulga in "Good Country People" is exposed as not being a "good" nihilist.

Mrs. Freeman, Mrs. Hopewell, and Joy-Hulga

The story opens with Mrs. Freeman at the Hopewell home as she is every morning. Her black eyes never swerve when she hears anyone else talk, for she has already made

---

[1] Flannery O'Connor to "A", January 13, 1956, *Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), 97.

[2] Dorothy Tuck McFarland, *Flannery O'Connor* (Frederick Unger, 1976), 35.

her mind up on any matter, like a heavy truck going down the road. No one could convince her to admit that she is wrong on any point.

Mrs. Hopewell originally hesitated to hire Mr. Freeman as a farmhand years earlier because she was advised that Mrs. Freeman is the nosiest woman ever to walk the earth. Mrs. Hopewell, however, believes that she knows how to handle Mrs. Freeman. She includes her in everything. Mrs. Hopewell "had no bad qualities of her own but she was able to use other people's in such a constructive way that she never felt the lack."[3]

Mrs. Hopewell expresses her outlook on life in her favorite sayings, "nothing is perfect," "that is life!," and the most important, "well, other people have opinions too."[4] She would make these statements in a tone of gentle insistence, as if no one else holds them. Her grown daughter, Joy, however, would just stare at her after the pronouncements with a look of outrage.

When Joy was ten years old, she suffered a hunting accident that resulted in the loss of her leg below the knee. The accident left her not only with a wooden leg, but also embittered. Upon becoming an adult, she legally changed her name to Hulga. "She saw it as the name of her highest creative act. One of her major triumphs was that her mother had not been able to turn her dust into Joy, but the greater one was that she had been able to turn it herself into Hulga."[5]

Her mother would not use the name and continued to call her Joy, to which her daughter responded in a mechanical way. Mrs. Freeman, however, called her Hulga with relish, which only irritated the girl. "It was as if Mrs. Freeman's beady steel-pointed eyes had penetrated far enough behind her face to reach some secret fact."[6]

Hulga moved to Europe, enrolled in graduate school, and earned a Ph.D. in philosophy. Receiving a medical diagnosis that she had not more than a decade to live, she returned to her mother's home. On the farm her main activities were reading all day and exhibiting her distaste for nice young men. "She looked at young men *as if* she could smell their stupidity."[7]

In complete opposition to her mother's attachment to surface renderings through her sentimental expressions, Hulga turns to philosophical declaration to get past the surface of things to nothingness. This led to explosions of rage on Hulga's part, in which Mrs. Hopewell had no idea why her daughter had responded the way that she did. Once at the dinner table while they were eating a meal, she had told her that a smile never hurt anyone. The daughter, her face purple and her mouth half full, stood up and said, "Woman! Do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are *not*? God!" She had cried, sinking down again and staring at her plate, "Malebranche was right: we are not our own light. We are not our own light!"[8]

One day Mrs. Hopewell started reading a philosophy book that Joy-Hulga had left open. It spoke of science wishing to know nothing of nothing, such "after all is the

---

[3] Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (Noonday Press, 1995), 272.

[4] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 273.

[5] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 275. Kathleen Feeley comments, "God summoned his prophets: Hulga summoned herself to new life. Her renaming is a cosmic perversion of God's practice, a self-call to a life of sterile intellectualism." Kathleen Feeley, *Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock* (Rutgers, 1972), 25.

[6] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 275.

[7] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 276.

[8] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 276.

strictly scientific approach to Nothing." Mrs. Hopewell shut the book quickly and rushed out of the room as if she were having a chill.[9]

Manley Pointer

Into this mother-daughter clash arrives a travelling Bible salesman, Manley Pointer. Talking to Mrs. Hopewell at the front door, he observes that there is no family Bible in the Hopewell parlor. Mrs. Hopewell, who could not say that her daughter is an atheist who would not let her keep a Bible there, tells him falsely that she keeps it by her bedside, when in truth it was hidden away in the attic. Manley persists that the Bible ought to be in the parlor, but Mrs. Hopewell is just as adamant that she does not want to buy one. He then blurts out that he is just a simple country boy. His declaration pleases Mrs. Hopewell, who cries out that good country people are the salt of the earth and invites him to stay for dinner.

At the dinner table, Joy-Hulga pretends not to hear anything that Manley says, but when Manley departs the house, the two talk as they walk to the end of the road. The subject of the talk is a picnic together the next day. That night, Joy-Hulga dreams of different ways to seduce him. Her aim is to deprive him of his Christian faith and gain him as a convert to the reality of nothingness.

Devoid of any perfume, she smears Vapex on the collar of the dirty white shirt that she decides to wear and heads down the road without any food at ten o'clock. When Manley appears, she notices that he is carrying his valise, and she questions why he brought his Bibles. He takes her elbow, smiles as if he could not stop, and tells her that you can never tell when you will need the Word of God. Manley swings the valise as if it is as heavy as the day before and puts his other hand on the small of her back. He then asks her softly where her wooden leg joins on. She turns an ugly red and glares at him. He tells her that he did not mean her any harm, that he is only curious because he finds her so brave. "I guess God takes care of you." "No," she said, looking forward and walking fast. "I don't even believe in God." At this he stopped and whistled. "'No!' he exclaimed as if he were too astonished to say anything else."[10]

When they reach the edge of the woods, he kisses her, and having never been kissed before, she is pleased to discover that it is an unexceptional experience. As they walk up a sunlit hillside, he suddenly asks her, "Then you ain't saved?" The girl smiles. It is the first time she smiles at him. "In my economy," she said, "I'm saved and you are damned but I told you I didn't believe in God."[11]

They find a hayloft, and a wide sheath of sunlight, filled with dust particles, slants over her, so that it appears to her, looking through and out the barn, that there are two

---

[9] Ralph Wood writes, "Mrs. Hopewell is no philosopher, but she senses that she has encountered something sinister. What she does not know, of course, is that she has encountered a passage from [Martin] Heidegger's 1929 inaugural lecture at the University of Freiburg, entitled, "What is Metaphysics?" There, as elsewhere, Heidegger argues that the whole of Western thought and life has constituted a sustained exercise in nihilism, that is, a negation of this present world for the sake of an alleged superworld." In Heidegger's own words, "the supersensible world, especially the world of the Christian God, had lost its effective force in history." Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Eerdmans, 2005), 202–203.

[10] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 285.

[11] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 286.

pink-speckled hillsides against a dark ridge of woods. The sky is cloudless and cold blue as the boy removes her glasses, puts them in his pocket, and begins to kiss her again. He begs her for a declaration of love. She tells him that love is not a word that she uses, because as someone who sees through to nothing, she has no illusions. Frowning, he demands that she tell him that she loves him. She pulls him closer to her and declares that it is just as well that he does not understand the reality. "We are all damned," she said, "but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation."[12]

He whines, "But do you love me or don'tcher?" He kisses her until she says, "Yes, yes." He then whispers in her ear to show him where the wooden leg joins on. Her face drains of color, as she is as sensitive about her wooden leg as a peacock is about his tail. No one ever touched it but her, as "she took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away."[13] She refuses, and he replies that he knew she is playing him for a sucker. She cries out, "Oh no no!" and reveals that it joins only at the knee, but she questions why he wants to know. He gives her a penetrating look and tells her it is what makes her different.

In hearing these words, "she felt as if her heart had stopped and left her mind to pump her blood. She decided that for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence."[14] Here is her secular savior. "When after a minute, she said in a hoarse high voice, 'All right,' it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously in his."[15]

She believes that perhaps this might develop into a lover's routine between the two, his taking the leg off and then putting it back on her every morning. But when Manley opens his suitcase, it does not contain Bibles, but whiskey, playing cards, and condoms. Stunned, she murmurs in disbelief, "Aren't you just good country people?" He curls his lip sinisterly at her and replies that he was, but "it ain't held me back none. I'm as good as you any day of the week."[16]

She screams at him, "Give me my leg!" and lunges for it, but he pushes her down. He then reminds her that she said that she didn't believe in nothing.

> "What's the matter with you all of a sudden?" he asked, frowning as he screwed the top of the flask and put it quickly back inside the Bible. "You just a while ago said you didn't believe in nothing. I thought you were some girl!" Her face was almost purple. "You're a Christian!" she hissed. "You're a fine Christian! You're just like them all—say one thing and do another. You're a perfect Christian . . . " The boy's mouth was set angrily. "I hope you don't believe that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which way is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going!"[17]

As he departs down the ladder with her wooden leg in his suitcase, he tells her that he uses a different name everywhere he goes, and then adds sharply, "'I'll tell you another

---

[12] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 288.
[13] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 288.
[14] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 289.
[15] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 289.
[16] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 290.
[17] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 290.

thing, Hulga,' using the name as if he didn't think much of it, 'you ain't so smart. I have been believing in nothing since I was born!'"[18]

As Manley departs from the barn and heads across the field, he appears to Hulga, sans her spectacles, to be walking on water: "When she turned her churning face toward the opening, she saw his blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake."[19] Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman, who were in the back pasture digging up onions, see Manley leaving. "Mrs. Freeman's gaze drove forward and just touched him before he disappeared under the hill. Then she returned her attention to the evil-smelling onion shoot she was lifting from the ground and declares, 'Some can't be that simple' as the Bible salesman appeared to be. She then adds, 'I know I never could.'"[20]

Manley and Mrs. Freeman

O'Connor's closing paragraph puts the finishing touch to her clues throughout the story that Manley and Mrs. Freeman are spiritually aligned.[21] Mrs. Hopewell identifies both as "good country people,"[22] and Mrs. Freeman says of Manley that "some people are more alike than others."[23] Both Mrs. Freeman and Manley are gripped with Joy-Hulga's wooden leg. Both Mrs. Freeman and Manley exalt in the suffering of others, as "Mrs. Freeman had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children. Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable."[24] Both Joy-Hulga and Mrs. Hopewell misjudge their relationships with Manley and Mrs. Freeman, respectively. Joy-Hulga considers herself intellectually superior to the naïve Bible salesman, believes she has him under her control and can mold him. Mrs. Hopewell considers herself superior to Mrs. Freeman and believes she has Mrs. Freeman under her control.[25]

O'Connor further hints at the similarity of Mrs. Freeman and Manley in a comparison of their eyes when interacting with Hulga and understanding Hulga's identity. Mrs.

---

[18] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 290.

[19] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 291. Wood argues that Manley's stealing Hulga's wooden leg is O'Connor's action of grace for what he has also taken is Hulga's false faith. The possibility exists that Hulga, her vision altered, might embrace that which she has rejected and make her way back to her true name, Joy. Ralph Wood, "God May Strike You Thisaway: Flannery O'Connor and Simone Weil on Affliction and Joy," *Flannery O'Connor in the Age of Terrorism*, eds. Avis Hewitt and Robert Donahoo (University of Tennessee Press, 2010), 51.

[20] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 291.

[21] Frederick Asals, *The Imagination of Extremity* (University of Georgia, 1982), 106–107.

[22] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 273, 282.

[23] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 282.

[24] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 275.

[25] Robert Coles writes that O'Connor "knows how quickly her readers will dismiss Mrs. Hopewell, and take an instinctive interest in the dour, shrewdly observant Mrs. Freeman—who may well be the person meant to exemplify a certain kind of intellectuality: coldly attentive to all that is wrong in the world; pessimistic, if not sour and crabbed; willing, always, to feast off the failures, the disasters, the accidents, and tragedies of the world. Mrs. Freeman will be taken in by no one. Mrs. Hopewell and her daughter are, in different respects, Mrs. Freeman's prey. The salesmen is a brief version of the longer-lasting Mrs. Freeman: the darkness of the world, ever present." Robert Coles, *Flannery O'Connor's South* (Louisiana State University, 1980), 139–40.

Freeman's "beady steel-pointed eyes"[26] penetrate far enough behind her face to reach some secret fact. With greater intensity, Manley's eyes, "like two steel spikes,"[27] would glance behind him in the hayloft to see where the leg stood.

O'Connor's Commentary

O'Connor admitted that the average reader is amused in "Good Country People" to read about an academic having her wooden leg stolen by a Bible salesmen whom she has tried to seduce. But, without ceasing to appeal to the average reader's pleasure at reading about anyone's wooden leg being stolen, O'Connor's goal was to make the story reveal as much of the mystery of life as possible. In her judgment, she is able to accomplish this because as the story goes on, she shows how the wooden leg continues to accumulate meaning. O'Connor explained,

> Early in the story, we're presented with the fact that the Ph.D. is spiritually as well as physically crippled. She believes in nothing but her own belief in nothing, and we perceive that there is a wooden part of her soul that corresponds to her wooden leg. Now of course this is never stated. The fiction writer states as little as possible. The reader makes this connection from things he is shown. He may not even know that he makes the connection, but the connection is there nevertheless and it has its effect on him. As the story goes on, the wooden leg continues to accumulate meaning. The reader learns how the girl feels about her leg, how her mother feels about it, and how the country woman on the place feels about it; and finally, by the time that the Bible salesman comes along, the leg has accumulated so much meaning that it is, as the saying goes, loaded. And when the Bible salesman steals it, the reader realizes that he has revealed her deeper affliction to her for the first time.[28]

When O'Connor's friend Betty Hester commented that she believed that the story's denouement revealed the flowering of Hulga's need to worship, that Hulga never had any faith, nor had ever loved anyone, O'Connor disagreed fiercely. She replied that Hulga "is full of contempt for the Bible salesman until she finds he is full of contempt for her. Nothing 'comes to flower' here except her realization in the end that she ain't too smart." Regarding Hulga's faith, "it is not said that she has never had any faith but it is implied that her fine education has got rid of it for her, that purity has been overridden by pride of intellect through her education."[29]

Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate

O'Connor took great delight in the fact that Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate both loved "Good Country People." On March 1, 1955, she told them, "I do appreciate both

---

[26] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 275.
[27] O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 289.
[28] Flannery O'Connor, "Writing Short Stories," in *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 99.
[29] Flannery O'Connor to "A," August 24, 1956, *Habit of Being*, 170.

your letters and I am glad to have my opinion on that story confirmed. I really thought all the time it was the best thing I had done."[30]

O'Connor told Gordon and Tate that immediately after she had received their feedback that she wrote her publisher Robert Giroux about including the story in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. Giroux had the collection ready to send to the printer, but O'Connor pleaded,

> I have just written a story called "Good Country People" that Allen and Caroline both say is the best that I have written and should be in this collection. I told them I thought it was too late, but anyhow I am writing now to ask if it is. It is really a story that would set the whole collection on its feet.[31]

Tate's letter in particular stuck with O'Connor. He told O'Connor that he admired the story greatly. "It is without exception the most terrible and powerful story of Maimed Souls I have ever read. This kind of soul is obviously your subject, in whatever situation you may embody it; and this new fiction is a landmark in your treatment of it."[32] O'Connor agreed with Tate that the story was about a maimed soul, but she added that "just by the grace of God" she had escaped being Hulga.[33]

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

---

[30] Flannery O'Connor to Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate, March 1, 1955, *Good Things Out of Nazareth*, 90.

[31] Flannery O'Connor to Robert Giroux, February 26, 1955, *Habit of Being*, 75. Giroux not only agreed with O'Connor's assessment after reading the story and told her that he would make every effort to get it included, but suggested to O'Connor that she include a closing paragraph returning to Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman that might improve it. Flannery O'Connor to Robert Giroux, March 7, 1955, *Habit of Being*, 75.

[32] Allen Tate to Flannery O'Connor, February 22, 1955, *Good Things Out of Nazareth*, ed. Benjamin Alexander (Convergent, 2019), 86. In Gordon's article, "An American Girl," written after O'Connor's death, Gordon declares that "Good Country People" is a story that to Gordon "nearly reached perfection." Caroline Gordon, "An American Girl," in *The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor*, eds. Melvin Friedman and Lewis Lawson (Fordham, 1966), 128.

[33] O'Connor to Gordon and Tate, March 1, 1955, *Good Things Out of Nazareth*, 90.

ServantReading

“A Treatise on True Theology”

Servant Classics

---

by D. Scott Meadows

A Treatise on True Theology with the Life of Franciscus Junius, translated by David C. Noe, Introduced by Willem J. Van Asselt, Foreword by Richard A. Muller, Reformation Heritage Books, 2014, lii + 247 pages, $25.00.

Franciscus Junius’s *De theologia vera (On True Theology)*, a landmark in early Protestant and Reformed scholastic theology, is now available in English through Reformation Heritage Books. This edition includes introductory materials and Junius’s autobiography, edited and prefaced by modern scholars. This review article summarizes the work’s contents and provides seven compelling reasons to recommend it.

Introductory Materials

In the foreword, Muller briefly introduces Junius and his work, *On True Theology*. He underscores its significance in Protestant and Reformed scholastic theology, commending Noe’s Latin translation and Van Asselt’s insightful introduction. Van Asselt’s substantial introduction provides a biographical sketch of Junius and the historical context, genre, and purpose of *On True Theology*. His analytical summary explores the nature of theology, defining true theology as wisdom, and distinguishing between archetypal and ectypal theology, the latter encompassing three forms: in Christ, in the beatified, and in the Christian pilgrim. Van Asselt also traces Junius’s enduring influence on Lutheran and Reformed dogmatics, evident in modern titans like Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and Louis Berkhof. In the translator’s preface, Noe clearly outlines his translation methodology, offering valuable insight into his approach.

Life of Junius

Paulus Merula (1558–1607) published Junius’s autobiography with his permission, adding a preface. Initially, Merula aimed to chronicle the late sixteenth-century persecutions of Protestants by the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands and Spain. Upon discovering Junius’s autobiography, he found it not only illuminated these events but also offered an inspiring narrative to foster virtuous thought and conduct among the oppressed.

Franciscus Junius the Elder, born in 1545 in Bourges, France, hailed from a family of minor nobility. His grandfather William and father Denys served royal and military interests with distinction, though Denys faced severe persecution by Franciscans, enduring temporary exile before being exonerated and regaining his property. Junius, one

of Denys's nine children, was a sickly newborn, baptized urgently due to fears of his imminent death. Poor health persisted, fostering a shy demeanor, yet he displayed intellectual promise from age five under his father's tutelage. His humility complemented his remarkable ability to absorb knowledge. After grammar school, he received private tutoring and, by age thirteen, pursued self-directed studies. Denys instilled a deep commitment to civic virtues, particularly justice, leading Junius to focus on law and discipline his studies for maximum achievement. Upon leaving home, however, he experienced urban temptations and spiritual ambivalence.

In 1561, Lyons marked a spiritual turning point for Junius. During a heartfelt conversation, his father discerned signs of skepticism and gently urged him toward Christian faith. Prompted thus, Junius studied the New Testament and embraced a lifelong commitment to Christ. At seventeen, he moved to Geneva, where he spent four years studying languages and theology, with Beza's *Confession* and Calvin's *Institutes* as primary texts. Despite numerous trials, this period fostered profound spiritual growth.

Denys, Junius's father, was murdered by Roman Catholic rioters incensed by his legal actions against them. Junius's mother pursued justice, securing some compensation, but Junius, prioritizing safety, remained in Geneva. Called by French-speaking ministers, he moved to Antwerp, Belgium, to serve in a Protestant church, where he faced repeated threats as a persecuted Protestant. He then served a three-year interim ministry in Bruges and Damme, enduring similar dangers. Amid social and political upheaval, Junius strove to preach and teach faithfully. Later, he spent two years in Limburg, Netherlands, and ministered to an armed congregation that courageously repelled a cavalry unit sent to arrest him.

In his final decade, Franciscus Junius served at the University of Leiden, Netherlands, dedicating himself to translating the Old Testament. Married four times, he remained devoted to each wife until her death. Only half of his children survived childhood. In 1602 when he was fifty-seven, his fourth wife died of the plague. Two weeks later, Junius also succumbed to the disease, passing peacefully with steadfast faith and affection, being cherished by many. Franciscus Gomarus delivered his funeral sermon, a fitting tribute to this eminent Christian scholar and advocate of true theology.

A Treatise on True Theology

Junius organized *A Treatise on True Theology* into thirty-nine theses, summarized below. Chapter divisions, ignored here, are less important.

True theology, defined as discourse on divine matters, exists (1, 2). It is distinct from false theology which, whether developed or undeveloped, reflects human opinion and is filled with error (3, 4). True theology is wisdom concerning divine realities (5). It designates archetypal theology (God's uncreated, infinite wisdom, incomprehensible to creatures) and ectypal theology (our finite "wisdom," used equivocally) (6, 7). God forms ectypal theology from archetypal for his glory and to communicate His grace (8).

Ectypal theology consists of God's communicable wisdom, though not fully conveyed to creatures (9). It is partially revealed through union, vision, or revelation, according to creatures' capacities (10). The ectypal theology of union belongs to Christ's human nature through the incarnation, while archetypal theology remains with respect to his divine nature (11). The ectypal theology of vision belongs to the angels and saints in

heaven and, though not equal to the theology of union in Christ, is still of a very exalted nature for mere creatures (12).

The ectypal theology of revelation in its fullest form belongs to Christian pilgrims on earth, is a grace from the Holy Spirit, and increases throughout life (13). This true and ectypal theology of revelation comes in two modes: by nature (natural theology) and by grace (supernatural theology). Even unbelievers possess some true knowledge of God through natural revelation. God grants some unbelievers in this world further revelation through Holy Scripture (14).

Natural theology proceeds from known principles, by the light of human understanding and in proportion to human reason (15). Yet it remains veiled and incomplete, requiring supernatural theology for salvation. The spiritual and moral conclusions drawn from nature alone are mixed with many errors, leading to idolatry and immorality, even among the more thoughtful pagans (16).

Adam originally possessed this natural theology, which required development by reasoning and completion by grace. Even for Adam before the Fall, supernatural wisdom was impossible apart from supernatural revelation (17). After the Fall, natural theology in us became thoroughly compromised, mere broken fragments of our depraved nature. A sinner's nature is comparable to the ruins of a once-great house (18). Natural theology is incomplete and cannot bring anything to completion. It is impossible for anyone to be saved without supernatural theology (19).

Fallen man needs supernatural theology, which is above all a communication of God's grace (20). Supernatural theology reveals much that could never be known by human reason or natural revelation alone (especially the doctrines of the Trinity and the gospel, D. Scott Meadows). It is never irrational but only suprarational (21). This ectypal theology is either absolute (in relation to God, who communicates it) or relative (in relation to our limited ability to receive it). It is important to remember the absoluteness of objective ectypal theology, lest we regard it entirely as relative with respect to our subjective reception of it (22).

Supernatural theology has been entrusted to God's servants through the Word spoken in Christ, sealed in both the Old and New Testaments through prophets, apostles, and evangelists, in fitting measure for the present age. It promotes the glory of God and the good of the elect. Though limited, it is without error and absolutely trustworthy. Nothing we need to know is missing; nothing it contains is imperfect (23).

The material cause of supernatural theology (like the marble of a statue) is divine matters concerning God and all things in relation to him, especially the nature of reality in relation to God, God's work in creatures, and the law of God assigned to them (24).

The formal cause of supernatural theology (like the human form of a statue) is divine truth, either considered as a whole or in its parts, as these parts are understood in relation to one another (25). This truth is holy, just, and perfect, so that we may be rightly guided toward holiness in ourselves, justice toward others, and perfection in all things. It is good in itself because truth reflects God, who is goodness itself, and it necessarily bears good fruit in us, the very end for which God made us (26). This theology is one, eternal, and immutable. A true man may change, but never the truth. A theologian may change, but never true theology, not in its pure form (27).

The efficient cause of supernatural theology (who or what fashions the statue) is partly principal (like the sculptor himself) and partly instrumental (like the chisel and

hammer) (28). The principal cause is the Triune God, the sole Author and perfect Creator of this wisdom in his servants. God is the absolute efficient cause in all things, even when he employs subordinate causes (29). The instrumental cause is the enunciative discourse of God, spoken both spiritually (without the use of a physical body, as in dreams and visions) and corporeally (by means of the body, through Christ and the inspired writings of his servants) (30).

The final cause of supernatural theology (like the purpose of a statue honoring a hero) is, first, distant and exalted: namely, God himself; and second, subordinate to this: humans in relation to God, especially the elect (31). The highest end of theology is the glory of God, for theology both manifests his glory and confirms that glory in those who rightly use it. This is a particular instance of *soli Deo gloria* (32). The secondary end of theology is the present and future good of the elect, which God will certainly accomplish as his eternal purpose (33).

Our relative theology, theology within the subject, is the same divine wisdom, though altered in accordance with our limited reason; we who possess it are therefore called theologians. Nature has made us imperfect, such that we cannot receive the perfect in a perfect manner. We are like vessels of varied capacities, each with more or less poured into it (34).

The method of this theology within us cannot be precisely defined, for it varies from person to person and differs widely among all who possess it. We differ by nature, and we differ according to the grace given us. These variations also change throughout the years of our lives. A multitude of factors affects our capacity for true theology (35). The method varies in each person because of the differing proportions of the twofold principle: nature (which must decrease) and grace (which must increase). The natural man is being diminished and wasting away; the inner man, upon whom grace acts, is being renewed day by day. All pilgrims are being transformed into the same image, from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord (36).

True theology varies among individuals because nature is diminished and grace increased to differing degrees, yet no man fully comprehends every aspect of our theology's form. This is so self-evident that it scarcely requires elaboration (37).

The prophets and apostles perceived the whole and complete form of this theology, though not perfectly within themselves; by the unique power of the Holy Spirit, they faithfully handed down the entire theology they received, even though their personal understanding of it was not exhaustive. They were mere men, limited in intellect and still affected by sin, yet God made his pure truth known through them (38).

The form of our theology is indeed one in itself, but among us it exists in manifold expressions and shall remain so until we attain the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, becoming together a mature man and reaching the measure of the stature of the church, which is the fullness of Christ (39).

Recommendation

Consider seven reasons why Junius's magnum opus remains highly recommended for readers today.

First, his zeal for the glory of God. Romans 11:36 serves as a touchstone of truth and righteousness: "For of him, and through him, and to him, *are* all things: to whom be glory

for ever. Amen," (KJV). A theology that is centered on God, one that fosters reverence, awe, praise, and thanksgiving toward the true and living God, is authentic and praiseworthy theology. This spirit pervades Junius's work and reflects his overarching theological perspective.

Second, his commitment to rational theology. One distinguishing mark of the Protestant scholastic theologians, among whom Junius rightly stands alongside figures like Turretin, Polanus, and Van Mastricht, is their dedication not only to exegetical and biblical theology but also to articulating biblical truth in a consistent, non-contradictory manner. They aimed to express doctrine in rational, that is, reasonable and coherent, propositions. This scholastic tradition was the soil from which the great seventeenth-century confessions grew (e.g., the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Savoy Declaration, and the Second London Confession). Those who subscribe to such confessions should understand and appreciate the theological milieu in which they were forged. These were high days in historical theology, when the faith was boldly and thoroughly proclaimed and rigorously defended against challenges from Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, Socinianism, and other complex systems. In contrast, the so-called Enlightenment fostered skepticism and irrationality, both being enemies of true theology. We should not cling to contradictions and excuse them with appeals to "mystery" or "incomprehensibility," nor should we question the possibility of true theology or capitulate to the prevailing relativism that speaks of "my truth" and "your truth."

Third, Junius's respect for sound and orthodox theology. Junius was deeply grounded in what Paul calls the "pattern of sound words," which had been expressed through many centuries of church history before him. He did not regard theology as a novelty of the Reformation era but honored what he had received from the early church fathers and even the better insights of medieval theologians. The Protestant Reformation was not the invention of new doctrine but the recovery, reformation, and advancement of historic Christian truth. This attitude is entirely consistent with the Reformational principle of *sola scriptura*, rightly understood. It was not a rejection of all tradition but the placement of Scripture above all other ecclesiastical and doctrinal authorities. The Reformers did not dismiss the best creeds and teachings of the past, but received them as subordinate, though valuable, authorities under Scripture. Unlike the biblicism of some today, Junius's approach was both faithful and historically rooted.

Fourth, his judicious and eclectic use of philosophical terms and concepts, insofar as he judged them useful for expressing biblical truth. The relationship between theology and philosophy has long been contested, from Tertullian's famous question, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" to Aquinas's warm embrace of Aristotelianism. Junius clearly leans closer to the latter. Classical Christian orthodoxy has long made careful use of extra-biblical philosophical concepts and language to express profound scriptural truths, especially in doctrines such as the Trinity and the incarnation. Terms like essence, subsistences, and natures are not found verbatim in Scripture, yet they are vital to the church's faithful articulation of revealed truth. Junius models a balanced and disciplined philosophical engagement in the service of theology.

Fifth, his emphasis on the absoluteness and perfection of true theology in itself. In an age shaped by relativism and skepticism, even among otherwise faithful theologians, we face a subtle pressure to speak with undue caution or hesitancy about theological truth.

The modern mind often views confident assertion with suspicion. Yet Junius, with refreshing clarity and conviction, reminds us that true theology in itself is absolute, perfect, and not dependent on our limited perception of it. His work helps counter the infernal postures of modern doubt and affirms the enduring reality of divine truth.

Sixth, his recognition that true theology, as possessed by us, is varied and limited. Observing the wide range of theological expressions among Christians and denominations, many are tempted to conclude that truth itself is elusive or unattainable. This leads some to theological agnosticism: "With so much disagreement, how can anyone claim certainty? Isn't it arrogant to say we know the truth?" Junius offers a thoughtful, if partial, explanation for such concerns, pointing to factors like human fallibility, the influence of traditions, and the presence of false teachers. Yet none of these negate the reality of true theology or the fact that some, by God's grace, do indeed possess and faithfully teach it. Disagreement does not disprove the truth; it only suggests our need for discernment and desire to know the way of God more perfectly.

Seventh, his encouragement, implicit in all these insights, for humility and aspiration as theologians. On one hand, recognizing our limitations and the vastness of the true, ectypal theology that exists for our apprehension rightly leads to profound humility, even among the most learned and devout theologians, and even in the most refined and reformed churches (the true identity of which, in the fullest sense, remains known only to God). Yet, on the other hand, we must not lose heart. True theology is ours by the grace of God, and growth in that grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ is our portion in the gospel. We have every reason to be hopeful that the Lord will bless us with an ever-deepening grasp of his truth, consistent with our spiritual union and growing communion with him. "Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the LORD" (Hos. 6:3, KJV). "Then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Cor. 13:12, KJV).

D. Scott Meadows *is a Reformed Baptist minister serving as the pastor of Calvary Baptist Church (Reformed), in Exeter, New Hampshire.*

ServantReading

"Trust" In Atonement? A Critical Appraisal

A Review Article

by Daniel Y. M. Tan

Trust in Atonement: God, Creation, and Reconciliation, by Teresa Morgan (Eerdmans, 2024), 279 pages, $39.99.

In *Trust in Atonement*,[1] Teresa Morgan articulates a "trust model" of the atonement centered upon the restoration of *trust* between God and humanity. Building on her previous work, which contended that the New Testament's language of πίστις (and its cognates) should be understood primarily in the relational sense of "trust" or "trustworthiness."[2] Morgan argues that Jesus Christ shows himself to be trusting and trustworthy toward both God and humanity; and this double relationship of trust enables Jesus to mediate between humanity and God and bring humanity back to trust in God.

Morgan's atonement theory is comprehensive and wide-ranging, and it lies far beyond the scope of this article to engage with all her proposals.[3] Instead, writing from a Reformed perspective, I shall focus on her implicit rejection of penal substitutionary atonement, and her alternative explanation for Jesus's suffering and death on the cross. This article is in two parts. First, I outline the two main planks of Morgan's "trust model" of atonement: that (a) the Scriptures present a complex picture of wrongdoing and suffering, which (b) requires the restoration of trust between God and man. Thereafter, I offer a critical appraisal from a Reformed perspective.

Morgan's "Trust Model" of Atonement

A Complex Picture of Wrongdoing and Suffering

Morgan's starting point is that the Scriptures present a complex picture of wrongdoing and suffering, which existing atonement theories do not account for in a

[1] Teresa Morgan, *Trust in Atonement: God, Creation, and Reconciliation*, 1st ed. (Eerdmans, 2024). Morgan is the McDonald Agape Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Yale Divinity School.

[2] As opposed to "faith" or "belief." For Morgan, πίστις is relational and community-shaping, and less concerned with propositional beliefs: Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Teresa Morgan, *The New Testament and the Theology of Trust: 'This Rich Trust'*, 1st ed (Oxford University Press, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192859587.001.0001. I engage briefly with these works below.

[3] For example, I will not be able to address Morgan's reliance on insights from the fields of psychology, philosophy, conflict-resolution, and the rehabilitation of offenders (especially ch. 2), or the implications of her atonement theory for the restoration of trust between God and the non-human parts of creation, and between humans and other humans (chs. 4 and 5, respectively).

satisfactory manner. For Morgan, *wrongdoing*[4] is not simply "wilful sin," but includes "collective and inherited sin, different kinds of foolishness, and even bad moral luck."[5] Wrongdoing is also "closely entwined" with *suffering*, in that one can lead to the other, and both wrongdoing and suffering can alienate people from God. In her view, existing models of atonement are unable to account for this complex picture of wrongdoing and suffering—traditional models of atonement (including penal substitution) focus on the restoration of sinners, while liberation theology tends to focus on the liberation of the suffering and oppressed, but none of the existing models account for how Jesus Christ saves from *both* suffering *and* wrongdoing.[6]

Instead, according to Morgan, this complex picture can be traced ultimately to *failures of trust*: "trusting in the wrong people or places, or not at all."[7] So, beginning with the Old Testament, Morgan recasts the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the garden as a breach of trust. When God commands Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he "seems to trust . . . the man and woman to do as God tells them, perhaps as part of their stewardship."[8] The serpent then undermines the woman's trust and encourages her to trust him instead (Gen. 3:5). "In this light, the actions of the woman and man look less like wilful disobedience than a naïve or foolish response to the undermining of their trust."[9] A further failure of trust ensues when the man blames the woman for his actions (Gen. 3:12). "What follows is not only disobedience to God and punishment but further trust, failures of trust, and renewals of trust between God and humanity that characterize the whole of human history."[10]

Morgan argues that the NT also presents a similarly complex picture.[11] Turning to the gospels, she contends that although the evangelists were "focused on the importance of repentance," they have "little to say explicitly about whether wrongdoing is universal, collective, or inherited, or whether or not it is wilful."[12] Indeed, the "most important aspect" of Jesus's ministry was not about the relief of suffering or wrongdoing, "but the (re)new(ed) relationship with God that it makes possible."[13] Because she develops her atonement theory primarily from Romans, Morgan devotes some attention to wrongdoing

---

[4] Throughout this work, Morgan seems to prefer the term "wrongdoing" to "sin". This perhaps serves to downplay the notion or concept of "sin".
[5] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 29.
[6] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 2–7, 29, 82.
[7] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 29.
[8] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 39.
[9] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 40.
[10] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 40. At pages 40–43, Morgan considers several other Old Testament texts, including the Cain and Abel narrative (Gen 4), the flood (Gen 6-9), Jephthah (Judges 11:29–39), and the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. She further suggests that human actions that appear to be wilful wrongdoings and betrayals of trust "from one perspective" are, "from another, reactions to the perception that God has not trusted those involved. This perception brings suffering in the form of doubt, and suffering leads the sufferers to do as much damage to the relationship as wilful wrongdoing might have done" (41).
[11] Prior to her discussion of the New Testament, Morgan considers the variety of Messianic traditions inherited by Christians in the New Testament, which she summarizes as follows: "Christians inherit broadly four models of what a savior may do. He may save his people from suffering caused by others, from their own wrongdoings, from the painful consequences of their wrongdoing, or some mixture of all three" (45).
[12] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 50.
[13] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 59 (parentheses in original).

and suffering in this letter.[14] According to her exegesis of Romans 1, Gentiles are "wrongdoers by inheritance, who do not actively do wrong themselves," or "are stuck in their wrongdoing despite themselves."[15] The language of being "given over" (παραδίδωμι, 1:24, 26, 28) suggests that wrongdoing can be unintentional or accidental or even imposed as a penalty.[16] She conjectures in light of Genesis 3–4 "the possibility that the gentiles turned from God because they felt rejected by God, though Paul does not say so."[17] As for the Jews, they are guilty of *apistia,* a "lack of trust or faithfulness toward God,"[18] which, according to Morgan's reading of Romans 9–11, is less about wilful sin than about being misguided, since they have a genuine "zeal for God" (10:2) and seek to strive for the law of righteousness (9:31).[19] Morgan also muses as to whether the Jews' failure to trust God stems from a "loss of confidence in God at a time of political upheavals and increasing oppression."[20] Ultimately, for Morgan, the notion of "sin" as rebellion or disobedience against God is too simplistic; the point is that human beings, both Jew and Gentile, fall out of trust with God and put trust in the wrong places through wrongdoing or suffering, which are both complex and everywhere interlinked.[21]

The Restoration of Trust Between God and Humanity through a "Double Bond" of Trust

For Morgan, since all suffering and wrongdoing can be traced to failures of trust, the atonement is about the restoration of trust between God and humanity. Specifically, this restoration of trust is affected through a "double bond" of trust—the trust between God and Jesus Christ, together with the trust which God and Christ seek to establish between Christ and human beings.

Morgan's argument depends on her exegesis of a few key texts, chief of which is Romans 3:21–26.[22] Morgan reads 3:21–22 as Paul's proclamation that the gracious righteousness of God has been revealed apart from the law διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, which she renders as "the faithfulness and trustworthiness of Jesus Christ both to God, as God's Son, and toward humanity, as its saviour."[23] In 3:25, God puts forward Christ to die, but Christ's voluntary obedience to God is the expression of his faithfulness toward a God who is trustworthy, and his trust in God's new initiative for humanity. In Morgan's words, then:

---

[14] Morgan argues that the same complex picture of wrongdoing and suffering seen in the gospels is also present in the New Testament epistles. She considers a few epistles besides Romans in *Trust in Atonement,* 59–63.
[15] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 72.
[16] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 73.
[17] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 72 (fn. 89).
[18] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 73.
[19] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 74.
[20] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 74 (fn. 92).
[21] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 39, 81.
[22] Morgan relies secondarily on Gal. 2:15–20 (διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, 2:16) and Phil. 3:7–11 (διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ, 3:9): *Trust in Atonement*, 123–24. Limitations of space preclude the consideration of those texts, but it suffices to say that her exegesis of those texts is dependent on her conclusions reached on Rom 3:21–26.
[23] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 120. In support of this reading, she cites her earlier work in *Roman Faith*, 31, 53, 263 fn. 7, 273.

> The righteousness of God, says Paul (3:21–26), has been revealed through Christ's trust and faithfulness toward God as trustworthy and toward humanity as capable of responding to him with trust for all who trust . . . God put Jesus Christ forward as a supplicatory offering—probably a term inherited by Paul—to reveal God's righteousness so that the person who puts their trust in Christ may be righteoused. The relationship of trust between God and Christ allows Jesus to let himself be put forward, and the trust both God and Christ—implicitly but necessarily—put in humanity to respond is justified when human beings do put their trust in Christ and are righteoused.[24]

Commented [LF1]: Does this (and below) mean made righteous?

Morgan thus speaks of a "double bond of trust" between (i) God and Christ on the one hand, and (ii) between Christ and humanity on the other. The trust between God and Christ enables Christ to be faithful even to death and offers a vehicle for divine grace; the trust between Christ and human beings enables the latter to trust Christ, and for Christ to trust them to respond to him and through him to God's grace. For Morgan, understanding *pistis* as doubly reciprocal fits with Paul's understanding of the role of Christ in reconciliation as a mediator.[25]

Why do human beings trust Christ? Because he is a *model* of what it means to live in trust with God—even when he is betrayed and crucified, "he refuses to be drawn into the vicious circle of failed trust, where loss of trust leads to suffering and harm, and suffering all too often leads to harming others and further suffering."[26] But more than a model, he creates a "*firebreak*" to the spread of evil and pain, breaking the cycle of failed trust and showing humanity what is attainable in terms of relationships of trust with God and fellow humans.[27] Jesus's actions as a model and a firebreak further demonstrate the "*therapeutic trust*" that God places in human beings. Morgan adopts this concept from moral philosophy, and it refers to the trust that one places in another in a relationship where there may be no extant trust, but which initiates a trust relationship that may develop through time.[28] So God places "therapeutic trust" in humanity when he entrusts Jesus Christ to the world, trusting them to respond to Christ, knowing that some will fail, and that probably everyone will fail up to a point, but knowing that humanity is capable of responding eventually.

A Reformed Critique

Writing from a Reformed perspective, I appreciated two aspects of Morgan's "trust model" of atonement. First, in emphasizing the restoration of trust between God and man,

---

[24] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 122 (footnotes omitted).
[25] Morgan acknowledges that Paul does not use the language of mediation, but that some of his followers did, including the author of Hebrews: *Trust in Atonement*, 125–26.
[26] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 127.
[27] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 127–28.
[28] Morgan gives the example developed by the philosopher Karen Jones, in which parents go away for the weekend, trusting their teenaged children not to hold a party and make a mess of the house. While the parents may suspect that they will do just that, they hope that by trusting their children, they will demonstrate that trust is an important aspect of adult life and something their children should take seriously. Even if they do not prove trustworthy on this occasion, the hope is that next time they may respond a bit better, until, eventually, they become trustworthy adults. See further, *Trust in Atonement*, 15, 128.

the "trust model" rightly appreciates the importance of *reconciliation* in atonement.[29] Historically, the Reformed tradition has understood reconciliation to be an important category in which to understand the nature of Christ's atoning work, in reliance on texts where the language of reconciliation appears (καταλλάσσω, καταλλαγή, e.g. Rom. 5:8–11; 2 Cor. 5:18–21).[30] Second, the "trust model" emphasises the role of Christ as *mediator* in reconciling God and humanity, which the Reformed have also historically emphasised,[31] especially against the Roman Catholic doctrine of the saints and Mary. This said, Morgan's "trust model" of atonement is problematic on biblical and theological grounds. Even assuming her exegesis is right, her model (a) does not provide a satisfactory explanation for Christ's suffering and death, and (b) leads to a distorted view of God's agency. Ultimately, though, I contend that (c) it relies on shaky exegetical foundations. Each of these three points are elaborated upon in turn.

Why Did Jesus Have to Die?

First, the "trust model" fails to adequately account for Christ's suffering and death. Although Morgan acknowledges the centrality of the cross to Christian understandings of the atonement,[32] her model—ironically—struggles to explain the cross. Indeed, Morgan candidly concedes that it is not normally necessary for mediators or conciliators to die to do their work.[33] Nevertheless, she tries to explain Jesus's suffering and death in three ways. (1) First, Jesus had to die in order to show God's unbreakable commitment to humanity, and his death reveals "humanity to itself as infinitely precious to God and capable for responding to God."[34] (2) Second, Jesus had to suffer and die "because he cannot be other than he is," *viz.*, "the person who has always been trusting and trustworthy toward God and toward humanity and whose work is to restore trust between humanity and God."[35] (3) Third, Jesus's death has an exemplary aspect, to show his followers how to die "metaphorically" to "the power of wrongdoing, suffering, the flesh, and death and to enter new life under the authority of Christ."[36]

None of these explanations are satisfactory. Numbers (1) and (3) fail to account for Jesus's death in the same way that, respectively, contemporary "moral influence" and

---

[29] See also her discussion of "at-one-ment", with which she opens the book: *Trust in Atonement*, 1–2.
[30] E.g. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans, 2015), 29–39. Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 8.5 puts it this way: "The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience, and sacrifice of himself . . . purchased, *not only reconciliation*, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven . . ." (emphasis added).
[31] E.g. Belgic Confession 26, WCF 8 (*Of Christ the Mediator*), John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas McNeill, The Library of Christian Classics (Westminster John Knox, 1960), 2.12.1–2. cf 1 Tim 2:5.
[32] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 223.
[33] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 135. In my view, this proves fatal for her theory.
[34] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 134. "The cross opens up a space of trust in which humanity can meet God even in the extreme of human political, social, and religious chaos as well as cruelty, injustice, and suffering."
[35] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 135.
[36] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 137. Morgan is vague on this point, but she acknowledges the powerful "imagistic" language of dying with Christ, being buried with him, and living a new life with him, as central to people's response to Christ and what must follow for their relationship with God to be restored: 138-9.

"exemplary" theories of the atonement have failed.[37] Could Jesus not have performed a heroic and sacrificial act less than the cruel and humiliating death of crucifixion, if all that was intended was to display God's "commitment to humanity" or to be a "metaphorical" example? And if crucifixion was unnecessary, if it was gratuitous, then God was displaying his cruelty rather than his love. As for (2), this is a tautologous argument—according to Morgan, Jesus had to die *by definition,* assuming her "trust model" is correct, which is by no means the case (see below).

Morgan's failure to explain Jesus's suffering and death stems in large part from her downplaying of the concept of "sin," preferring instead to speak of a complex picture of suffering and wrongdoing predicated upon failures of trust between God and humanity (as discussed above).[38] If there is no sin that requires the expiation of guilt or the propitiation of wrath, then there is no requirement for a "sacrificial" death.[39] It is "of first importance . . . that Christ died *for our sins* in accordance the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3, emphasis added; on which see further below).

Divine and Human Agency

Second, Morgan's "trust model" distorts the biblical view of God's agency. Central to Morgan's model is the notion of "therapeutic trust," whereby God takes a *risk* on humanity by entrusting Jesus Christ to the world, inviting humanity to respond to him with trust, "with all the overtones of risk-taking and hope which that implies."[40] So, either God does not know how humanity will respond (which undermines his knowledge and power), or he knows exactly how humanity will respond (which undermines "therapeutic trust"). Amongst other things, this leads to a competitive view of divine and human agency, whereby one is committed either to a libertarian free will or a thoroughgoing determinism in a sort of zero-sum game. This fails to do justice to how the Scriptures generally, and Paul specifically, speak of divine and human agency as compatible.[41]

Exegetical Issues

Finally, there are exegetical issues with Morgan's "trust model." As noted above, Morgan depends heavily on her exegesis of Romans 3:21–26, and particularly διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ in 3:22, which she renders as "the faithfulness and trustworthiness of Jesus Christ both to God, as God's Son, and toward humanity, as its

---

[37] See e.g., Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 1996), 386–88; Michael S. Horton, *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology*, 1st ed. (Westminster John Knox, 2005), 178–207.

[38] Therefore, although Morgan suggests that her "trust model" is compatible with penal substitutionary atonement (*Trust in Atonement*, 143), this must severely be doubted. See also her series of rhetorical questions in *Trust in Atonement*, 3.

[39] Morgan considers that Jesus's sacrifice "bears multiple possible meanings," which need not have connotations of guilt: *Trust in Atonement*, 48–50. Cf. Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 20–29.

[40] Morgan, *Trust in Atonement*, 127 (cf. 22). She acknowledges that she is using anthropomorphic language, and that her trust model has implications for one's understanding of God but considers this beyond the scope of her book: *Trust in Atonement*, 28n91.

[41] This point was made independently by Susan Eastman and Simon Gathercole at a panel discussing *Trust in Atonement* during the meeting of the *Society of Biblical Literature* in November 2024. Cf WCF 3.1.

saviour." Morgan's suggestion is novel,[42] and rests upon her earlier work on πίστις as "trust" (noted above in the introduction). While the Reformed have long held "trust" to be an important component of "faith,"[43] that πίστις language *only* ever means "trust" (as opposed to "believe") in every case is doubtful.[44] Moreover, Morgan's rendering of διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is overly complicated—could Paul's readers have been expected to understand from this prepositional phrase the four-dimensional relationship of (i) God's trust in Christ, (ii) Christ's trust in God, (iii) God and Christ's trust in humanity, and (iv) humanity's (and Paul's) trust in God and Christ?[45] This seems implausible.

Morgan's "trust model" also fails to account for all the New Testament data. The gospels feature little in her analysis.[46] One would have expected at least a treatment of the cry of dereliction (Matt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34), which cuts to the heart of Christ's trust in God.[47] Even if one were to grant that her model is derived from Paul, Morgan gives no detailed consideration to 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, which is crucial for Paul's understanding of the atonement;[48] indeed, it is of "first importance" to Paul that "Christ died *for our sins* in accordance to the Scriptures," (emphasis added). Another surprising omission is 2 Corinthians 5:18–21, a text which speaks directly of God reconciling us to himself through Christ (5:18). Significantly, this text does not use πίστις to speak of this reconciling work, and further it speaks of this reconciliation as being effected by God not counting humanity's *transgressions* against them (μὴ λογιζόμενος αὐτοῖς τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν, 5:19), which suggests that something more than Christ's "trust" and "trustworthiness" is at play in the atonement.[49] That these two texts are neglected is perhaps unsurprising, given that her model downplays the concept of sin.

Conclusion

Through her earlier work, Teresa Morgan has helped many to see the importance of "trust" to the meaning of πίστις in the New Testament. However, her "trust model" of

---

[42] Nijay K. Gupta, Erin M. Heim, and Scot McKnight, eds., *The State of Pauline Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, 1st ed. (Baker Academic, 2024), 146–47. Commentators are divided over whether the expression is to be taken as a subjective or objective genitive, e.g., Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 2018), 189–94.

[43] See e.g., Francis Turrettin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger (P&R Publishing, 1992), vol 2, 561.

[44] See Francis Watson, "Roman Faith and Christian Faith," *New Testament Studies* 64, no. 2 (April 2018): 243–47, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688517000388; Bradley J. Bitner, "The Shape of Πίστις in 1 Corinthians: How Faith Receives, Boasts, and Discerns," *Reformed Theological Review* 82, no. 3 (1 December 2023), https://doi.org/10.53521/a369.

[45] This is a point made by Simon Gathercole at a panel discussing *Trust in Atonement* during the meeting of the *Society of Biblical Literature* in November 2024.

[46] As N.T. Wright has previously said, "It is astonishing to see the extent to which the four Gospels have been marginalized in discussions of atonement." Simon J. Gathercole, Robert B. Stewart, and N. T. Wright, *What Did the Cross Accomplish? A Conversation about the Atonement* (Westminster John Knox, 2021), 23.

[47] On the point of Christ's faith see Turretin's careful treatment: Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 2, (P&R, 1994), 348.

[48] Simon J. Gathercole, *Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul*, Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology (Baker Academic, 2015), ch. 2.

[49] I would further argue that these sins are imputed to Christ on the basis of 2 Corinthians 5:21, but this is not necessary for present purposes.

atonement, while commendable in some respects, is problematic on biblical and theological grounds, as I have sought to show in this (limited) article. Amongst other things, it seems implausible for πίστις to freight all that she intends in her "trust model"; and one wonders if the tail of her theological conclusions is wagging the dog of her exegesis. Perhaps this should also lead to a reassessment of her earlier conclusions that πίστις must mean relational "trust" to the exclusion of propositional "belief" in every instance.

Bibliography

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. Rev ed. Eerdmans, 1996.

Bitner, Bradley J. "The Shape of Πίστις in 1 Corinthians: How Faith Receives, Boasts, and Discerns." *Reformed Theological Review* 82, no. 3 (1 December 2023). https://doi.org/10.53521/a369.

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John Thomas McNeill. The Library of Christian Classics. Westminster John Knox, 1960.

Gathercole, Simon J. *Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul*. Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology. Baker Academic, 2015.

Gathercole, Simon J., Robert B. Stewart, and N. T. Wright. *What Did the Cross Accomplish? A Conversation about the Atonement*. Westminster John Knox, 2021.

Gupta, Nijay K., Erin M. Heim, and Scot McKnight, eds. *The State of Pauline Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*. 1st ed. Baker Academic, 2024.

Horton, Michael S. *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology*. 1st ed. Westminster John Knox, 2005.

McFadden, Kevin W. "The Πίστις Χριστοῦ Debate and Its Recent Developments." *Reformed Theological Review* 82, no. 3 (1 December 2023). https://doi.org/10.53521/a373.

Morgan, Teresa. "Roman Faith and Christian Faith." *New Testament Studies* 64, no. 2 (April 2018): 255–61. https://doi.org/10.1017/S002868851700039X.

———. *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

———. *The New Testament and the Theology of Trust: 'This Rich Trust'*. 1st ed. Oxford University Press, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192859587.001.0001.

———. *Trust in Atonement: God, Creation, and Reconciliation*. 1st ed. Eerdmans, 2024.

Murray, John. *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. Eerdmans, 2015.

Schreiner, Thomas R. *Romans*. 2nd ed. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Baker Academic, 2018.

Seifrid, Mark A. "Roman Faith and Christian Faith." *New Testament Studies* 64, no. 2 (April 2018): 247–55. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688517000406.

Treier, Daniel J. *Lord Jesus Christ*. New Studies in Dogmatics. Zondervan, 2023.

Turrettin, Francis. *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. Edited by James T. Dennison. Translated by George Musgrave Giger. P&R Publishing, 1992.

Watson, Francis. "Roman Faith and Christian Faith." *New Testament Studies* 64, no. 2 (April 2018): 243–47. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688517000388.

Daniel Y.M. Tan *is a member of Harvest Orthodox Presbyterian Church in San Marcos, California, and a student at Westminster Seminary California.*

ServantReading

What It Means to Be Protestant: The Case for an Always Reforming Church, *by Gavin Ortlund*

by Ryan M. McGraw

What It Means to Be Protestant: The Case for an Always-Reforming Church, by Gavin Ortlund, Zondervan, 2024, xxiii + 262 pages, $22.99, paper.

Increasing numbers of Protestants are becoming disillusioned with their tradition, or perceived lack of tradition. In uncertain times, in which people recognize how powerfully cultural traditions influence beliefs, threatening the concept of truth itself, the apparently fractured landscape of Protestantism makes many nervous. Can Protestant principles counterbalance such pervasive instability? For many people, Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy are attractive alternatives, cutting the Gordian knot of uncertainty by offering some form of supposedly infallible tradition. Complicating matters—though apologists for Rome and the East abound, via YouTube and other online venues, Protestants have not kept pace, leaving church members and leaders without adequate resources to encourage them to stay the course (xi). Moreover, many people grow weary of Protestant caricatures of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, resulting in a magnetic pull toward what appears to be rich traditions over against apparently impoverished ones.

What it Means to be Protestant reminds readers that, in many cases, what people are rejecting is not historic Protestantism, but a hollowed-out form of it detached from its historically core convictions. Ortlund's book offers a winsome, non-combative apology for Protestantism that seeks simultaneously to listen to and learn from Western and Eastern traditions and to promote Protestant convictions. While losing some of its force by not viewing Protestantism within definable confessional boundaries, this book is a well-executed and much needed resource for churches facing a growing exodus of members either to Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy.

Sola scriptura and *sola fidei* are guiding principles in Ortlund's defense of Protestantism (xviii, 3). While the other three *solas* are vital, these two illustrate best why Protestantism renews the gospel in the church, restores a biblical view of Scripture's authority, and removes "historical accretions" to the biblical tradition (xx). Filtering his material through these lenses, he organizes his chapters under three headings: Protestantism and Catholicity, Authority, and History. Chapters one through four argue ultimately that Protestantism alone affirms a broad biblical catholicity, in which the church exists "within multiple institutions" (22), offering "the most promising pathways by which to cultivate and pursue catholicity" (37). Promoting a "mere Christianity" in the vein of C. S. Lewis (xx), he shows how Protestant principles (following Philip Schaff) allow believers to see the good in pre-Reformation and other traditions (5–7), to

acknowledge its own eccentricities and errors (7–10), to promote continual reformation according to Scripture (10–11), and to treat *sola fidei* as the "what" of the reformation and *sola scriptura* as the "how" (11–14). Faith alone is thus the object of reform and Scripture alone the method, making the former like "a precious jewel" and the latter "the safe that protects it" (11). Though not yet moving directly towards *sola scriptura*, chapter three indicates that differing principles of authority undergirded widespread Roman Catholic persecution of Protestants, and that Protestants and other traditions mean different things by faith and repentance. Within chapter four, Ortlund defends what he means by justification through faith alone in Christ alone (60–64), illustrating well what is at stake in losing Protestant principles.

Chapters five through eight (part two) tackle *sola scriptura* more directly, showing what the doctrine means and does not mean, and giving two case studies via the papacy and apostolic succession. Treating the papacy illustrates that while Ortlund has both Roman Catholicism and Eastern orthodoxy in view as dialogue partners, the weight of his arguments often lean more heavily towards Roman Catholicism. Readers wanting a robust engagement with the Eastern church will find loads of good material here, but will likely need to supplement their studies elsewhere to some extent. However, his robust appeal both to Scripture and the church fathers in chapters five and six encompass problems both with East and West, which sets the stage well for his treatment of apostolic succession in chapter eight. Both Eastern Orthodox and Protestants agree that the Papacy rests on shaky biblical and historical foundations, and that demanding recognition of the papacy "hinders progress towards a true unity—which must be centered on Christ himself" (116).

Consisting of three final chapters, followed by a brief conclusion, part three offers Ortlund's most forceful and persuasive critique of both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox views of a magisterial tradition. He opens this section with the famous statement of Roman Catholic John Henry Newman, who wrote, "To be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant" (135). However, by examining Protestant views of Christian tradition, Ortlund shows well why "retrieval" theology was embedded within historic Protestantism, creating twin concerns of being both biblically and historically grounded. Though he does not use the phrase, post-Reformation Protestants liked to assert that church tradition was ministerial and declarative rather than magisterial and legislative. What modern Protestants, let alone Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, often fail to recognize is that traditional Christian teaching, especially the creedal tradition, held authority in Protestant churches, though as a teacher rather than as a tyrant (101). To add my own illustration, one goes to math class, not because the teacher serves as an infallible answer key, but because, presumably, the teacher knows more than the student and can teach him or her how to do math. Denying the infallibility of the church does not mean that the Holy Spirit does not guide tradition through the Word; it means that even the best teachers can make mistakes in calculation and that Word and Spirit serve as the corrective.

Ortlund's two case studies on the assumption of Mary and the veneration of icons (chapters ten and eleven) prove devastating, both to Rome and to the East. Ortlund shows clearly the ignorance of the early church about Mary's alleged bodily assumption into heaven, and that venerating icons marked a complete one-eighty from the church fathers, rather than a doctrinal refinement. He thus justifies his revision of Newman's assertion

when he says, “Honestly, to be truly in history, is before anything else, to cease making simplistic appeals to history” (158). By the close of the book, Ortlund makes a compelling case that it is actually Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy who stand on shaky ground in relation to faith, Scripture, and history.

Ortlund’s engagements with Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy are well-informed, fair, and charitable. To invert the order of Schaff’s four points, he argues well that Protestantism is viable (both biblically and historically), and that though Protestantism is flexible due to its built-in mechanisms of self-reform (sometimes resulting in eccentric diversity), Protestants can maintain the catholicity of the church (more broadly and effectively than the other two traditions can), locating it wherever the true Trinitarian and incarnational gospel is proclaimed. Though lacking a clear stance in any historical Protestant confessional tradition weakens his case a bit, this book is precisely the remedy that many modern Protestants need and are looking for, considering the growing attraction towards Roman Catholic and Eastern alternatives.

Ryan M. McGraw *is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church serving as a professor of systematic theology at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Greenville, South Carolina.*

John Donne (1572–1631)

Holy Sonnet IV: Oh My Black Soul!

Oh my black soul! now art thou summoned
By sickness, death's herald, and champion;
Thou art like a pilgrim, which abroad hath done
Treason, and durst not turn to whence he is fled;
Or like a thief, which till death's doom be read,
Wisheth himself delivered from prison,
But damned and haled to execution,
Wisheth that still he might be imprisoned.
Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lack;
But who shall give thee that grace to begin?
Oh make thy self with holy mourning black,
And red with blushing, as thou art with sin;
Or wash thee in Christ's blood, which hath this might
That being red, it dyes red souls to white.