

The Classics for Pastors

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From the Editor

My brief editorial, “When Politics Is Not a Religion,” looks at the problem of the serious divisions in our nation over politics. I will give a short answer to the question, “Why do some disagree strongly on politics and yet have deep friendships, while others break off relationships?”

While the study of the Classics is declining in the academy, David Noe brings his considerable classical learning to bear in his article “Why Pastors Should Read the Greco-Roman Classics.” As a former professor of Classics and now a pastor, his wisdom is worth heeding. He offers fascinating and informative discussions of Greco-Roman culture on the *Ad Navseam* podcast, where “Classical gourmands everywhere can finally get their fill.” Noe teams up with Dr. Jeff Winkle for lively discussions. His Latin Per Diem YouTube channel provides a brief daily dose of Latin.

W.H. Auden’s famous English 135 syllabus for a University of Michigan course in 1941 titled “Fate and the Individual in European Literature” recommended Charles Norris Cochrane’s *Christianity and Classical Culture*¹ as part of the critical reading list. I was assigned that fabulous book at Covenant College in 1974 and am rereading it as part of my retirement remedial classics studies. Auden’s extensive syllabus is my reading list, because all my favorite poets, Auden included, were classically educated. The church should be a repository of classical and all learning as we enter a new intellectual and spiritual dark age. David Noe can help.

Fundamentalism, of course, has a historical reference in our church’s past, but more generally it indicates an attitude. Fundamentalism is a black and white way of thinking. And it has an answer for everything. There is only one way of believing and living. Everyone must conform. This is what I see in parts of the Reformed church. While the particulars will vary from place to place, the rigid attitude remains. “God, I thank you that I am not like other men” (Luke 18:11).

So, we have our first Servant Exchange in years. Peter Van Doodewaard is responding to John Mahaffy’s article “The Church’s [Not So] New Fundamentalism” (June-July), to which Mahaffy gets the last word. It has been heartening to me to see these two brothers in Christ have a civil discussion over an important issue, while treating each other with

¹ Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1944).

respect.

Danny Olinger continues the series “Jesus, Stab Me in the Heart! Flannery O’Connor at 100” with an analysis of the O’Connor novel *Wise Blood*, part 1. This was O’Connor’s first novel, published in 1952. Each month Olinger has been reflecting on a sample of O’Connor’s short stories, and now a novel. (I recommend *O’Connor: Collected Works*, The Library of America, 1988.) *Wise Blood*, part 2, will complete this series in December.

T. David Gordon reviews *A House Divided: Technology, Worship, & Healing the Church after COVID* by Benjamin D. Giffone. Giffone focuses on the liturgical challenges brought on by Covid and the government’s response. Gordon especially appreciates Giffone’s media savvy: “I particularly welcome Dr. Giffone’s recognition that differing media always shape not only the *message*, but also the *messengers* and the *recipients* of the message.”

Retired pastor Ronald Pearce reviews *Zeal without Burnout. Seven Keys to a Lifelong Ministry of Sustainable Sacrifice* by Christopher Ash. Pearce echoes the seriousness of the problem, applauds the solutions offered by Ash, but adds a few areas which still need to be addressed.

Our poem this month, “Canticle of the Creatures,” is by Francis of Assisi (ca. 1184–1226). Known as a nature lover, it is easy to forget that he understood who created the wonderful world he enjoyed and never ceased to give his Lord thanks for it.

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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

Servant Thoughts

When Politics Is Not a Religion

by Gregory E. Reynolds

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

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

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

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

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Servant Work

Why Pastors Should Read the Greco-Roman Classics

By David C. Noe

In this brief essay I would like to present an argument that pastors should read and study the Greco-Roman Classics. This will serve as a defense of the practice and hopefully provide motivation toward such reading. Before getting to the really important items, however, I must seek to address at the very beginning objections and complaints that I expect some readers may harbor. I have formed these as questions:

1. Are you saying that I cannot be a good pastor or preacher without understanding, for example, the differences between Plato and Aristotle on the nature of the soul, the difference between Demosthenes's periodic style and the thin style of Lysias, or without knowing more obscure things like that in the Titanomachy (battle of the gods and giants) Zeus called on the ultimate bullpen, three creatures of one hundred speedball hands each, called the Hecatonchires?
No.
2. Are you saying that I have to be an expert in the Greco-Roman Classics, that I have to be able to read Greek and Latin (*nedum* Hebrew) like Theodore Beza or Philip Melancthon did—while folding bulletins, so to speak—in order to serve my congregation well, and by grace fulfill my call before God?
Again, no.
3. Are you saying that I should right now drop everything else that I am doing, discontinue all consumption of contemporary literature and pop-culture in order to subsist on a diet of primarily or exclusively classical literature?
A third time, no.
4. Are you saying that studying classical literature will make me more intelligent, a morally better or more virtuous person, and that on such a basis I can then become a better pastor to my congregation and thus by grace better fulfill my call before God? And are you then slyly insinuating that you yourself are just such a person because, though an ignoramus by sixteenth-century standards, you may be a little further ahead in this field than some other pastors?
Numbers 4a and 4b: no, no.
5. Are you saying that there is one ideal form and content of instruction in preparation for gospel ministry, and that you believe you have discovered it, and are prescribing it

in this essay for all men who hold or desire the office of minister of Word and sacrament?

Here comes five! No. But our *Form of Government* in Ch. XXI does specifically endorse “proficiency in the liberal arts.”

6. Are you aware that many of the men considered the best pastors and preachers, both within the pages of Scripture (Amos, Mark) and outside them (Bunyan, Newton), were men of little or no education, and certainly were not experts nor, so far as we know, desired to be such in the niceties of Homeric weaponry (what’s a greave?), Athenian democracy (*bouleuterion*), Latin meter (trochaic septenarius), etc.? Yes, I am aware.
7. So are you saying that the light of nature, as well as the history of the human race, and the particularities of the time and circumstances of Christ’s advent, as well as the history of both Eastern and Western churches, and particularly the history of the Protestant Reformation in its so-called Calvinist branches, as well as the example of our theological forebears in places like Heidelberg, Geneva, Edinburgh, and Cambridge, strongly tend toward the privileging of the reading of the Greco-Roman Classics as a very good preparation for and support to gospel ministry, and that while such a conclusion was merely assumed in previous generations, if we want to emulate the successes of our theological forebears, we must commit ourselves as much as possible, *ceteris paribus*, to emulating their system of education in preparation for ministry?
Long question, Isocrates. But, yes, that is what I am saying.

It is quite likely that one could raise numerous other complaints and objections, and that I will not be able to anticipate all of them, no matter how carefully I have studied Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric*, and how well I know that the discovery of arguments requires imagination and the effort to put oneself into the sandals of the listener. But I have learned from Cicero and Quintilian about the need for a sound *refutatio*, anticipating the rejoinders of the hostile or irritable, and framing the debate on one’s own terms as much as possible.

Now that those preliminaries are out of the way, I would like to proceed to develop my argument along three different lines. The first line of argument is purely a historical one, and the jumping off point is Romans 2:14–15. Here Paul says,

When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bear witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.

I claim that reading of the Greco-Roman Classics can help pastors in their ministry by deeply and thoroughly acquainting them with the circumstances of Christ’s advent. Given the time in which we live, an age of much strife and contention, when everything is politicized, it is important to understand the crux of this claim. When Paul in verse 14 describes the Gentiles, he says that they do not have the Mosaic law. Nevertheless, they

do φύσει, (*physei*) by nature, what the law requires. So they naturally know that adultery is wrong, that murder is wrong, that they should take care of their children, and so forth. And Paul says moreover that they do what the law requires. So it is a safe conclusion that although they do not understand the moral basis for these imperatives in the same way that someone with the Mosaic law does, they know nevertheless that they ought to avoid certain wrongs and seek certain rights. We must ask ourselves, however, what sorts of examples Paul had in mind when he mentions the Gentiles who naturally do what the law requires. The notion of a common human inheritance, expressed by the Roman poet Terence, for example,¹ means that it will be impossible to find a culture that is completely lacking in sound moral teaching of the sort enshrined, primarily, in the second table of the law.

But it is of course decidedly unnatural to hold that Paul had in mind Confucianism, the tenets of Buddhism, the ethical system of the Aztecs, the Iroquois, the Inuit, etc., as he knew nothing of these nations. No, undoubtedly Paul had in mind the inheritance of Greco-Roman literature. Given his quotation of the comic poet Menander (1 Cor. 15:33), as well as the philosophers Aratus (Acts 17:28) and Epimenides (Titus 1:12), this is what we would call an open and shut case. Paul knew enough, for example, about Stoic and Epicurean philosophers to tweak his contemporaries representing those schools in Acts 17, and he likely knew enough about Plato to understand just how shocking to the Platonic mindset was the notion of a body sown corruptible being raised incorruptible (1 Cor. 15). Space does not allow a full demonstration of the fact that Homer's epics simply were Greek education, but one can consult E. R. Dodd's *The Ancient Concept of Progress*² to see just how Homer was the Bible for Greeks.

The point is simple: The authors of the New Testament, and Paul especially, lived and moved in a culture that was shaped by Greco-Roman influences—the literatures that animated men's minds—more than by anything else. Therefore, no matter how interesting and useful is the study of other cultures and nations, philosophical systems and programs of ethics, the Christian generally will always have a strongly vested interest in understanding the world into which Christ was born. There is nothing prejudicial or bigoted about such a conclusion, and turning away from the study of the Greek and Roman Classics, as many are doing, would have disastrous consequences for the Christian community at large. God seems to have gone to great lengths to provide us with a considerable amount of extrabiblical material—the works of Josephus, Herodotus, Plato, Philo, Seneca, Suetonius, *ad infinitum*—that is eminently useful for understanding his divine oracles. It was his decision, not ours, for Christ to be born in a Judean province of the Roman Empire, where he undoubtedly learned to speak Greek, a province that had been subjugated to Macedonian rule some 300 years prior and gone through a vigorous but failed program of Hellenization under the Seleucids. It was God's decision, not ours, that Augustus was minting coins engraved with *F. Divi Iulii* (son of the god Julius) at precisely the time our Savior with his pottery-smashing iron scepter was born in the most abject humility in Bethlehem.

¹ Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto. *Heauton Timorumenos*, 77. "I am man, I consider nothing human alien to me."

² E. R. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress and Other Essays on Greek Literature and Belief* (Oxford University Press, 1973), 142.

But it is not just the world of the New Testament and the circumstances of the composition and meaning of the Gospels, letters, etc., that start to cloud up opaquely if the Christian community neglects the Greco-Roman Classics. It is also a good portion of the Old Testament as well. The books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and part of Isaiah are much more difficult to understand without the Greek historians like Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus. (But maybe Ambrose overdid it a little when he expounded Plato in Milan during sermons on Genesis? Or maybe not, as Platonism was the “worldview” of all educated persons at the time. How else to understand the cosmos?)

Christians should not feel embarrassed about their study and privileging of the Greco-Roman Classics, in the first place, as a tool for understanding God’s inspired Word. If in God’s providence, Christ had been born in another time and place (the Himalayas, Indonesia, New Mexico), we would feel a corresponding and natural affection for and devotion to the stories and culture of that setting. It is therefore not quite right to call Christian attachment to the Greco-Roman Classics a historical accident. Rather, we should realize that this is forever a part of God’s providence. And it is also very important to note that simply because, all other things being equal, one believes it is more important for a Christian to read the literature of one culture, this does not in any way entail the approval, much less adoption, of all the ideas and moral lessons of that culture, nor neglect of or contempt for other literatures and histories.

But someone at this point may object that the argument only claims the need for a general knowledge of the Greco-Roman world to exist within the broader Christian community. Why can that not be done by experts, and why should a Christian minister devote any of his time to such a study? Is that good stewardship? I will acknowledge there is some weight to this objection, so far as it goes. In the same way that the Christian minister does not need to be an expert in music—though some persons in the Christian community must be—in order for him to use music properly and well as a minister of Word and sacrament, so it is quite reasonable to think that it is fine for him to rely upon experts in Greco-Roman literature for the insights that he needs to understand and expound God’s Word.

But although the objection has some weight, it is of limited value. I take it that no one would deny that the Christian minister, as he has opportunity, should seek to grow in his knowledge of and ability with music, as he helps lead the congregation in worship. But the case for the particular literature I am advocating is even stronger, as its connection to the explanation of the sacred Word is closer. And in my experience, at least, I have not found Christian ministers generally devoted to gaining a deeper understanding of the Scriptures by reading about the context into which Christ was born, where he lived and worked, suffered, died and rose again. Instead—and this is my experience, it may not be universal—I have found that there is a general tendency to read the Scriptures in isolation. Our strong and proper belief in their divine inspiration can sometimes eclipse our appreciation for the very human circumstances of their composition, rendering us incurious. Why does Mark, for example, structure all his sentences so simply? In fact, some of his sentences, as I read them, are so simple that it is impossible to imagine a less complicated way to express these ideas in Greek (e.g., Mark 1:16b: ἦσαν γὰρ ἀλιεῖς, *ēsan gar halieis*, “they were fishermen”). One cannot appreciate this truth if one has not read more broadly in Greek literature of the time. And there is a very sound theological reason for Mark’s stylistic choices, quite apart from the probable historical one that Mark was a

man of lower education who was relying upon the memories of another rather uneducated man, the apostle Peter. (And if someone at this point believes it sounds arrogant or disrespectful to describe Mark and Peter as uneducated, I would ask whether the questioner is unknowingly equating formal education with moral development. In other words, only if one thinks knowledge is a virtue, or that knowledge only comes from formal education, can ignorance or lack of formal education be a vice. But I do not hold those views.) The sound theological reason that Mark wrote his gospel, in some places, in the simplest Greek imaginable is so that it may be heard, understood, and read by the simplest people imaginable, who have just as much a “right unto, and interest in the Scriptures” (WCF 1.8) as the most educated person.

To summarize this line of argument is as follows: It is impossible for the Christian community as a whole, the church, to have a sound and accurate understanding of God’s Word, or at least one as deeply as we ought to and often do desire, without having a good knowledge of the circumstances of its composition, specifically Christ’s advent and earthly ministry. If no one in the Christian community has this knowledge, we are all deeply impoverished. It is right and proper that Christian ministers, whose faithfulness in ministry requires first and foremost a salubrious explanation of God’s Word, to lead the way in this project as much as they are able. If the reader can at this point feel his hackles getting up, he is encouraged to go back and read the series of objections and brief answers at the beginning of the essay.

The first argument in favor of ministers of the gospel reading the Greco-Roman Classics was an easier one to make, based as it was on a simple historical fact: Christ was born in a province of the Roman Empire where the *lingua franca* was Greek and where God had been, in some ways that will probably always remain mysterious to us, preparing his people, and indeed the whole world, to receive the revelation of his divine Son. But before moving to the second argument, one more example of the inextricability of Greco-Roman culture and the Christian faith is in order. It seems we can behold God’s providence quite clearly in the system of Roman roads that had been developing for a couple hundred years before Paul began walking all over creation to preach the gospel. Indeed, by 50 A.D. it was possible to walk and sail from Palestine to northern Spain, and perhaps up toward the English Channel, with fair confidence that you would not be mugged or wrongly imprisoned. This, as well as the common Greek language, explains in human terms the incredibly rapid spread of the Christian faith.

The second argument in favor of Christian ministers studying Classics centers around the diagnostic value of ancient literature. Put plainly, the Greco-Roman authors, poets, philosophers, and historians seem to have been uniquely capable of diagnosing the problem with the human condition. They did not easily confuse circumstances with character but, as in the case of Aristotle, typically identified one’s character as the sum of one’s actions (*Nicomachean Ethics* II.1). This, in addition to the beauty and cogency with which they described their insights and conclusions, largely accounts for their enduring nature. They seem to have known with a penetrating honesty that human nature is unbelievably elevated in aspiration and ability. It is a microcosm of the universe in its grandeur. At the same time, human nature is abysmally base in its selfishness and rapacity. A few pointed examples will suffice. The poet Ovid (43 B.C.–18 A.D.) famously puts the following Pauline words into the mouth of the murderous witch Medea, who soon kills her own children: “*video meliora proboque deteriora sequor*” (The better

things I see, approve, the worse I yet pursue).³ Homer, the source of all Western culture, famously sets forth the broken human condition as the first word in the first work of Western literature: wrath (μῆνιν, *mēnin*). It is human wrath, during the ninth year of a war of aggression, of course, occasioned by an adulterous quarrel over a stolen woman or vengeance (motives are not as clear as we would like), that arose when the gods inspired Paris to steal another man's wife. Heraclitus had taught the Greeks about the fragility and beauty of human experience, that war "was the father of all things," as it gave birth to poetry, beauty, deeds of bravery, and also much sorrow.⁴ It was the most unnatural time, when fathers bury their sons. Greek authors had the uncanny ability to hold in their minds strongly conflicting, yet deeply honest evaluations of the human condition. Indeed, the only utopian literature of the Greek time, of which I am aware, Plato's *Republic*, may never have been intended as a program for implementation, but rather as a parable of the human soul, disordered and in need of medicine. Or as Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones has put it, "The early Greeks were capable of their unique achievements largely because they could bear, as their religion shows, very much more reality than most human beings."⁵

But someone may object: "If true, isn't this diagnostic facility and precision of Greco-Roman literature simply a trait of any good literature? So why do I need to read these particular individuals? Won't Tolkien, Lewis, O'Brian do?" Again, this objection is coherent. However, one must remember two qualifiers: 1. Western literature itself enjoys a privileged position in the reading of the Christian minister (see the historical claims of the first argument); 2. All Western literature that follows Greco-Roman authors is highly dependent upon and derivative of them. Cases with self-evident classical themes and characters from authors like Dante, Milton, and Swift are obvious, and need no comment. But even Dostoyevsky's five great novels, for example, that so brilliantly elucidate the contrast between human aspiration and deprivation, require for their full and proper appreciation an understanding that, for example, the sympathetic femme fatale, Sonya Marmeladova in *Crime and Punishment*, is drawn after Sophocles's heroines like Antigone. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is inconceivable without Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*. Dickens does not exist without the Plautine comedy. There are no speeches of Winston Churchill—no Allied victory?—without Cicero, etc. Examples of this type can be enumerated ad nauseam.

The third argument, though there may be more, concerns the entertainment value this literature provides. It should be enough to stop there. That is, the literature of the Greeks and Romans—more so in poets and orators than historians, perhaps—has survived so long because it is so endlessly interesting. Time has a sifting effect on the efforts of human artistry, and, in some wonderful providence of God, it is often the best literature that survives. This is not an argument that older is better—though advocates of stability and order, true conservatives, should be susceptible to such. Instead, it is an argument that works of human production that have survived the ravages of the ages deserve a second and even third look. The agonistic nature of literature corresponds directly to the finitude of men and the limitations and selfishness of his attention. Only the truly remarkable will continue to be valued, unearthed, and enjoyed repeatedly. In the case of Homer, men have known from the beginning that his accomplishment represents the singular phenomenon

³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 7.20–21.

⁴ Heraclitus *Fragment* 53, DK B53.

⁵ Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (University of California Press, 1971), 164.

of a genre's simultaneous invention and perfection. Indeed, contemporary classicist Barry Powell argues that the Greek script may well have been invented for the express purpose of recording Homer's poems.⁶

Christian ministers would need to be remarkably antagonistic to the judgment of the ages, quite progressive, actually, to disregard the wealth of interesting material preserved in the Greco-Roman Classics. But, as Americans are a very practical people (the most Cartesian, De Tocqueville claims, though they have seldom read Descartes), we may extend the argument beyond the supreme entertainment value alone and add this: Great literature fires the imagination and strengthens its faculties, shaping the mind for enhanced purposes. The following are some examples: Vergil's genius for description: Neptune stuck his calm head above the waves and surveyed the watery chaos (*Aeneid* I); Seneca's unrivalled pithiness: *Non exiguum temporis habemus, sed multum perdimus* ("We're not short on time but wastrels of it," *De Brevitate Vitae*); Aristophanes's biting wit in his play *The Frogs*: tragedians Euripides and Aeschylus weigh their verses on a scale in the underworld to see who was the "weightier" poet; Plato's extraordinary dexterity with a chain of argument: "Is holiness loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because they love it?" (*Euthyphro* 10a). These examples and innumerable more demonstrate something of the strength of God's most powerful creation, the human mind. By training one's imagination and reasoning on the literary examples of masters, we become more capable of expressing and representing the many shades and nuances of the human experience. This is a point that has been understood, of course, from the very beginning of the church's life, and made famous by the insights of men like Basil of Caesarea (*Address to Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature*)⁷ and Augustine of Hippo (*City of God*, passim). At the same time, we learn with Solomon of the vanity of vanities: Everything worthwhile has previously been expressed and then forgotten, only to be treated as novel once more. Again, Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones shares a salutary quote:

One of the best reasons for studying the past is to protect oneself against that insularity in time which restricts the uneducated and those who write to please them. The ordinary man feels superior to the men of past ages, whose technology was inferior to what he is used to and whose ethical and political beliefs were not those which he has been taught to consider as the only right ones.⁸

Before concluding, I would like to return to the beginning of this short essay and voice another possible objection. It was not put first because some examples, snippets really, of classical literature needed to be given before this one would seem plausible. This objection originates from a dynamic that I have noticed in these sorts of discussions, at least among some readers and thinkers who consider themselves very conservative (for lack of a better term). It could be termed aesthetic subjectivism. Confessional Christians rightly reject the argument that moral disputes cannot be adjudicated simply because people disagree, or because some hold that everyone's opinion is equally valid. But they do not extend this proper resolve on moral and ethical claims to aesthetic evaluations. Instead, when it comes to evaluating different works of literature, paintings, music, and

⁶ Barry Powell, *Writing and the Origins of Greek Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁷ *Saint Basil on the Value of Greek Literature*, edited by N. G. Wilson (Duckworth & Co., 1975).

⁸ Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, 156.

really any production of human ability and artistry, we are remarkably prepared to accept the notion that everyone's conclusions, even if mutually exclusive, are equally valid. But it is at present impossible for me to see how this notion can be rendered consistent with Paul's injunction in Philippians 4:8 to think on "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise." If Paul's command here is restricted to questions of morality only, then there is no problem. But if, as is usually the case, it is extended to all manner of human activity—and this seems like a natural way to think of what he says in the letter's context—then inevitably we are required to make more than a minimalist evaluation of the relative merits of different aesthetic choices and products. It is not persuasive that Paul simply means we are to think on things that do not contain profanity, obscenity, do not incite to vice, etc. How would the categories of excellence, purity, etc., fit this mold? Rather, Paul's instructions seem to assume gradations in quality and an obligation to make such determinations, and these are, at least in part, aesthetic, and not subjective. So, some literature is better than others. It is my contention that literature of the Greco-Roman Classics, for the reasons enumerated above, is better than other kinds of literature (this argument entails that there are also best and worst categories of literature, but I am not arguing as to those). Therefore, Christian ministers, all other things being equal, should devote some time to the study of Greco-Roman literature.

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ServantExchange

About Machen and New Fundamentalism

Peter C. Van Doodewaard

I read with some interest John Mahaffy's recent article in *Ordained Servant* entitled "The Church's [Not So] New Fundamentalism,"¹ especially as I recalled the events of the Eighty-Eighth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC, 2022) and my own public writing on the topic of patriarchy. In this article Mahaffy articulates his concern with a growing "new fundamentalism" in the OPC, marked by an apparent toleration of abuse, fondness for the term *patriarch*, and ignorance of OPC history. I do not think I see things in quite the same way, and I am writing to explain why.

About Fundamentalism

In the OPC, to bestow the moniker *fundamentalist* is a reliable shortcut to identify someone out of line with our history.² Mahaffy raises Machen's concerns with the term and warns against the dispensational fundamentalism of Carl McIntire. In this Mahaffy and I wholeheartedly agree; I too would echo Machen when he stated,

When a man has come into sympathetic contact with [the] noble tradition of the Reformed faith . . . he will always strive to stand in the great central current of the church's life that has come down to us through Augustine and Calvin and the Standards of the Reformed faith.³

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

¹ John W. Mahaffy, "The Church's [Not So New] Fundamentalism" *Ordained Servant Online*, June-July 2025, https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1191.

² This is somewhat ironic as the OPC was born out of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy and on the Fundamentalist side. As Mahaffy noted, it was Machen who both disliked the term "fundamentalist" but also stated, "I have little time to be attacking my brethren who stand with me in defense of the Word of God. I must continue to support an unpopular cause." Perhaps we need to use the term fundamentalist more carefully. It was not originally legalistic dispensationalism, but an honest but imperfect attempt to state that there is something fundamental at the core of Christianity pertaining to the supernatural character of the person and work of Jesus Christ that must be maintained to maintain that Christianity. In this narrow sense, I am a fundamentalist, together with Machen and Warfield and the fathers of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. In the sense of "adding to Scripture," I stand against fundamentalism, unreservedly.

³ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Eerdmans, 2009), as quoted in Mahaffy, "The Church's [Not So New] Fundamentalism."

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

About the Abuse Overture, and the Toleration of Abuse

Mahaffy and I have different evaluations of the abuse discussions of the Eighty-Eighth General Assembly. The precipitating overture was obviously controversial; it referred to “many forms of abuse that manifest themselves in the church,” and it described these as “sexual, domestic, ecclesiastical, verbal, emotional, psychological, etc.”⁴ Such language could be used to label any confrontational communication “abusive,” moving the definition of abuse from an objective violation of God’s law to the subjective experience of the complainant. This move will destroy due process and thus biblical justice.

The attached grounds did not help, stating that the “misuse of power of various kinds” was “commonly termed ‘abuse’.”⁵ This loose definition permits the neo-Marxist idea that abuse is fundamentally an imbalance of power.⁶ Marxism, of note, was regularly opposed by the patriarchs of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.⁷ Jesus Christ has all authority, and he uses it to punish evil and protect his people. The church ought not be ashamed of righteous power differentials (Presbyterian officers take vows to defend the categories of inferiors and superiors), *and* the church must exercise power wisely and graciously.

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

The advisory committee to which the overture was assigned recommended the adoption of the overture, but a minority strongly opposed doing so, partly on the grounds of the misuse of the term by the world. Although the Assembly did set up a committee, its mandate was amended to remove reference to abuse. The committee was to “collect, study, and develop resources to equip the officers of the church to protect her members from sexual predators and domestic violence.”⁸

The language of a “minority strongly opposed [to] doing so” obscures the fact that the Eighty-Eighth Assembly (the majority) did not much like the overture and instead

⁴ *Minutes of the Eighty-Eighth General Assembly*, 56.

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

⁶ The broadening of the fundamental cause of proletariat suffering from the unequal distribution of capital (classical Marxism) to the unequal possession of power or privilege is characteristic of neo-Marxism.

⁷ The early fathers of the OPC dealt plainly with the evil nature of ungodly political ideologies; the *Presbyterian Guardian* contains numerous anti-Communist articles from authors, including Edward Rian, John P. Clelland, Richard Gaffin Sr., and Ned Stonehouse. Our fathers embraced the spirituality of the church *and* recognized communism as an ideology contrary to the Scriptures. The same fathers plainly said the same about Naziism. We presently are seeing a rising generation embrace, in troubling numbers, neo-Marxism and neo-fascism. Plain teaching is needed, with warnings, against both evils.

⁸ Mahaffy, “The Church’s [Not So New] Fundamentalism.”

adopted a substitute motion that did not include the word “abuse.”⁹ My own concern, at least, had nothing at all to do with “the misuse of the term by the world” but the use of the term in the overture, in and by the church. But—something yet needs to be examined. Mahaffy, based on these events, holds a suspicion: “A portion of the church seems reluctant to recognize that abuse can be multi-faceted and can occur within the church and her families.”¹⁰ I cannot think of a single pastor or elder in the OPC who cannot recognize “that abuse can be multi-faceted and can occur within the church and her families.” Why entertain this conclusion about those who argued *in favor* of a motion which aimed to protect the members of the church from sexual predators and domestic violence?

The Use of the Word Patriarch(y)

While Mahaffy does not cite my *Reformation21* article entitled “In Defense of Patriarchy,”¹¹ he does appear to interact with it. He begins by stating he is “concerned to find some, even in Reformed circles, embracing the term patriarchy.” I clearly have done this, and I think I might be the only OPC minister to have written an article defending patriarchy, and Mahaffy’s piece is about patriarchal fundamentalism *in the OPC*.

In this article I described the Holy Spirit’s regular, repeated, positive, and exemplary use of the word *patriarch*: “First, the Bible honors fathers. God instituted fatherhood when he made Adam (first), then Eve, then marriage and then gave the command to be fruitful and multiply. Paul honored Israel’s patriarchs.”¹²

A key passage follows:

Peter preached about the patriarch David, and Stephen said the p-word, twice, just before going to heaven as a martyr. The writer to the Hebrews thought Abraham a fine patriarch.¹³

Compare the indented paragraph above with Mahaffy:

Peter uses the term to describe David, and Hebrews attaches it to Abraham. But when Stephen uses the term twice in his sermon in Acts 7, it refers to Joseph’s siblings selling him as a slave.¹⁴

⁹ And if Assembly anecdotes are permissible, after the voting was complete, one ruling elder told me that the overture sounded like something from his corporate HR department, and another ruling elder (who I met for the first time after the debate) sent me a bottle of fine Napa Valley wine, which I later much enjoyed with some friends. I remain very happy with all these results.

¹⁰ Mahaffy, “The Church’s [Not So New] Fundamentalism.”

¹¹ Peter Van Doodewaard, “In Defense of Patriarchy,” *Reformation21*, February 5, 2024, <https://www.reformation21.org/blog/in-defense-of-patriarchy>.

¹² Van Doodewaard, “In Defense of Patriarchy.”

¹³ Van Doodewaard, “In Defense of Patriarchy.”

¹⁴ Mahaffy, “The Church’s [Not So New] Fundamentalism.” I do not understand the slavery reference, unless it is intended to show that the term patriarch can be used to describe people without power and so no longer means “ruling father.” I would note that Joseph was, in this-world terms, perhaps the most powerful ruling father of all the Old Testament patriarchs, ruling Egypt, providing bread for the world, and saving Israel. In this he is a fitting picture of the fatherly rule of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Is. 9:6).

Mahaffy continues: “I fear that much of the support for patriarchy grows out of a less than faithful following of Scripture.”¹⁵

This is a weighty charge. And if this was not intended to be such a charge, confusion might have been avoided by citing new fundamentalists in our church who “embrace the term patriarchy,” followed by compelling analysis that demonstrates a “less than faithful following of Scripture.” The method utilized so far seems shaky.

Ignorance of OPC History

We move on to consider Mahaffy’s conversation with an anonymous “father in the church”¹⁶ (a patriarch?) concerning the Eighty-Eighth Assembly’s ignorance of OPC study reports entitled “Women in Church Office”¹⁷ and “Unordained Persons in the Regular Worship Services of the Church.”¹⁸ Mahaffy writes that the “Assembly did not reject [the exegesis in the above papers]—it did not even consider it.”¹⁹ This begs a question: Did the actions of our more recent General Assemblies deviate from earlier patterns and convictions?

The report “Women in Church Office” was received by the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly (1988). Advisory Committee 9 expressed concern with the report, noting that it “did not give clear expression to the historic interpretation” of 1 Corinthians 11, 14, and 1 Timothy 2.²⁰ The same report, however, did contain commendably straightforward language concerning the roles of men and women in church and home:

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

The church under the leadership of its officers needs to be thankful for the faithful women who serve the church in a rich variety of ways at present. We need to protect our women from being overwhelmed or seduced by the lie of secular feminism which promises liberation for disobedience to God’s authority structure and demeans the high calling of Christian women as wives and mothers. We need to instruct them as to their dignity as women in Christ (Gal. 3:28) and treat them accordingly.²¹

The Fifty-Fifth Assembly distributed this language to the whole church and then denied a related recommendation to consider opening the office of deacon to women in the church.²²

¹⁵ Mahaffy, “The Church’s [Not So New] Fundamentalism.”

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

¹⁷ *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly*, 310–373.

¹⁸ *Minutes of the Fifty-Seventh General Assembly*, 304; *Minutes of the Fifty-Eighth General Assembly*, 264–328.

¹⁹ Mahaffy, “The Church’s [Not So New] Fundamentalism.”

²⁰ *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly*, Article 158. The *Minutes* do not contain a record of any explanation for the committee recommendation that contained this language of concern.

²¹ *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly*, 352. The report at this point seems more overtly patriarchal than my defense of patriarchy.

²² *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly*, Article 164.

The Fifty-Eighth Assembly (1991) considered the “Report of the Committee on Unordained Persons in the Regular Worship Services of the Church.”²³ This report presented three views, including that of the committee’s majority, which admitted that “we are well aware that our advocating a measure of individual involvement by unordained persons in public worship *is an innovation*.”²⁴ The proposed innovation would result in men and women leading in public worship. When the motion to send this report to the Committee on Revisions to the Directory for Worship was presented to the Assembly, “it was determined to postpone action on the motion indefinitely.”²⁵ By postponing indefinitely, the Fifty-Eighth Assembly declined to support the suggested innovations or even the committee’s original mandate to forward the report to a committee of the Assembly tasked with revising the directory for worship.²⁶

It is of note that the revised Directory for Worship restricts the leading of worship to pastors (men), “men who have been licensed,” and ruling elders (men), and notes that “exceptions may be made for other men,” and states “no other should take such leadership in overseeing or conducting public worship.”²⁷ From this I would conclude that later assemblies also considered the “solid exegesis” in the above report not very durable.²⁸

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

The teaching of the Scriptures in 1 Timothy 2:11–15 clearly prohibits women from a role which involves the authoritative teaching of men. The policy complained against allows a woman to assume such a role and therefore the complaint should be sustained.²⁹

The same Assembly commended “the Biblical principle of male headship.”³⁰ Finally, the Fifty-Ninth Assembly (1992) declared attempts to reconsider the same complaint out of order, affirming the action of the Fifty-Seventh Assembly to be the settled adjudication of the church.³¹

²³ *Minutes of the Fifty-Eighth General Assembly*, 264–328. This committee was originally named the “Committee to Study the Involvement of Men and Women in Places of Leadership in Worship Services” (*Minutes of the Fifty-Sixth General Assembly*, Article 181) and was formed by the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly in response to a complaint against Bethel OPC in Wheaton, Illinois, for permitting women to lead in worship services; the Fifty-Fifth Assembly sustained the complaint (*Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly*, Articles 143 and 152).

²⁴ *Minutes of the Fifty-Eighth General Assembly*, 279. Italics added.

²⁵ *Minutes of the Fifty-Eighth General Assembly*, Article 120.

²⁶ *Minutes of the Fifty-Seventh General Assembly*, 304.

²⁷ *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 131–32.

²⁸ Mahaffy, “The Church’s [Not So New] Fundamentalism.”

²⁹ *Minutes of the Fifty-Seventh General Assembly*, Article 134.

³⁰ *Minutes of the Fifty-Seventh General Assembly*, Article 124; *Minutes of the 57th General Assembly*, Article 134.

³¹ *Minutes of the Fifty-Ninth General Assembly*, Articles 13–14.

Simply put, our Assemblies have a long history of dealing with questions of gender and worship and the related patterns of patriarchy evident in nature as interpreted by Scripture (and so rightly embedded in the life and worship of the church). These have regularly and reliably decided in favor of historic convictions and patterns that echo earlier generations, even going beyond bare judgments to explicitly affirm historic biblical interpretation and prevent the propagation of innovations.

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

Conclusion

This brings me to a deeper concern. History bears witness that political pressures have regularly pulled Reformed denominations to the side of progressivism, and that reliably under the banner of *resisting fundamentalism*. Because of this, I would much prefer engagement with ideas and their consequences over labelling exercises. Debates over gender roles in Christ's church are critical to the life and future of the church, as these involve profound theological considerations, not the least of which are the perspicuity and authority of both Scripture and the "light of nature."³²

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

Like Machen, I would not choose to be known as a fundamentalist. By Mahaffy's definition, however, I think Machen and I might be *new fundamentalists*. And after reading more of our history, it is now clearer to me that the happy future of the church I so love and enjoy has always depended on "new fundamentalists" getting very important old things right.³³ I, for one, am in favor of celebrating this fine OPC tradition, together.

And in this, indeed, "may the Lord give us humility, grace, and wisdom."³⁴

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³² Westminster Confession of Faith 1.1. General and special revelation are authoritative (cf. Ps. 19:1–4, 1 Cor. 11:14). The folly of our culture lies both in the rejection of the Word (Calvin's "spectacles") and also the creation order viewed through the spectacles of the Word (cf. Rom. 1:26–27, note Paul's use of the phrase "natural use").

³³ Again, Mahaffy's article fails to prove that the "new fundamentalists" are fundamentalists at all. It is far more likely that such in the OPC simply represent the Reformed tradition on questions of gender and the life of the church, which in turn are rooted, not in fundamentalism, but historic Reformed interpretations of Genesis 1 and 2.

³⁴ Mahaffy, "The Church's [Not So New] Fundamentalism."

ServantExchange

Do We Have a Problem? Patriarchal Fundamentalism and Abuse

by John W. Mahaffy

I am grateful for Peter Van Doodewaard's continued interaction on important topics that impact the life of our church.¹ And I rejoice that he, as I expected, whole-heartedly echoes Machen's endorsement of the "noble tradition of the Reformed faith." Yet, even though the two of us have engaged in some email discussion, crucial differences in perspective remain. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church faces issues, I believe, which new fundamentalism finds itself inadequate to address properly. These are matters with which our church needs to continue to wrestle. She faces a danger of drifting into an unbiblical progressivism on one side and of being enticed into political activism on the other—both of which would take her eyes off her Lord and the work he has given her to do as the church. In what follows, I use identifying names as infrequently as possible, seeking to walk in the steps of one of the better traditions of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, that of having vigorous discussion of vital issues while focusing on the ideas rather than personalities.

Patriarchy: Is It Biblical?

Peter Van Doodewaard's "About Machen and New Fundamentalism" describes "the Holy Spirit's regular, repeated, positive and exemplary use of the word *patriarch*." The New Testament uses the word only four times. Is that enough to be "regular" and "repeated"? The term is used positively in Acts 2:29 and in Hebrews 7:4. But Stephen's use (twice) in Acts 7:8–9 describes the patriarchs jealously selling their brother as a slave, hardly either positive or exemplary. Stephen's point is that the patriarchs, like the other forefathers mentioned in his message, rebelled against God, persecuting the righteous, just as his audience had betrayed and murdered the Righteous One. The New Testament does not summon us to emulate the patriarchs. Rather, it calls us to trust our covenantally faithful God who comes to us in Jesus Christ, and then to walk in his ways. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments teach husbands to love their wives and fathers to nurture their children in the fear of the Lord, but do not tell them that they have to become patriarchs to do so.

The article "In Defense of Patriarchy" states, "*Patriarchy* simply means *father-rule*."² The Arndt and Gingrich lexicon, however, translates the Greek word as "father of a nation, patriarch." The focus in the New Testament usage is on ancestry, those with

¹ Peter C. Van Doodewaard, "About Machen and New Fundamentalism," *Ordained Servant Online* (November 2025).

² Peter C. Van Doodewaard, "In Defense of Patriarchy," *Reformation21*, February 5, 2024, <https://www.reformation21.org/blog/in-defense-of-patriarchy>.

whom God made his covenant promises, rather than on rule. I have no problem using the word *patriarch* in the way that Scripture does. Recently I preached on Genesis 28. The gist of the message was not to point to the patriarch (with his head on a stone at the bottom of the ladder) as an example, but rather to focus on the One at the top of the ladder, making promises of salvation to his people (see John 1:51).

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

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

I expect that the author of "In Defense of Patriarchy" would condemn some of the above and describe it as "not-patriarchy."³ Nevertheless, I still believe that my church has a problem with patriarchy. The issue is not only the positions taken by two young ministers but also the oversight (or lack thereof) by the presbyteries that ordained them.

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

Given the examples above, as well as other situations which cannot be discussed now, I fail to share my respondent's confidence: "I can't think of a single pastor or elder in the OPC who cannot recognize 'that abuse can be multi-faceted and can occur within the church and her families.'"⁴ His article expressed the fear that the overture to the Eighty-Eighth General Assembly "permits the neo-Marxist idea that abuse is fundamentally an imbalance of power." Obviously, it would be difficult to quantify, but I suspect that in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church the set of neo-Marxists defining abuse as an imbalance of power is most likely considerably smaller than the set of men, and some women, who engage in oppressive (to use the biblical term) or abusive conduct towards others in the family or church.

The expressed concern about "imbalance of power" is worth further discussion. Ground 1 of Overture 2 to the Assembly spoke of "misuse of power of various kinds."⁵ The Scriptures do not oppose an imbalance of power, but our God roundly condemns the misuse (or abuse) of power. He is the God who defends the widows and orphans. Writings about abuse in our circles tend to take pains to define abuse in biblical language,

³ Van Doodewaard, "In Defense of Patriarchy."

⁴ "About Machen and New Fundamentalism."

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

not simply to adopt what may be seen as politically correct. To identify concern about the misuse of power with a neo-Marxist idea that abuse is an imbalance of power, strikes me as a scare tactic that failed to take the overture on its own terms.

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

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

The request to the Assembly was to form a committee to “collect, study, and develop resources on topics related to the many forms of abuse that manifest themselves in the church (sexual, domestic, ecclesiastical, verbal, emotional, psychological, etc.).” The mandate adopted instead by the Assembly was to “collect, study, and develop resources to equip the officers of the church to protect her members from sexual predators and domestic violence.”⁶ While we clearly want to protect against sexual predators and domestic violence, notice what the changed mandate leaves out. No longer are we looking to help officers recognize and protect against ecclesiastical, verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse. Serious oppression can take place, both in families and in the church, in ways that fall short of domestic violence. There are large areas of sinful harm that fall outside of sexual predation and domestic violence. I am thinking of a spouse verbally demeaning and threatening his or her partner. I am thinking of a husband failing to provide essential basics for his wife and children while he spends his money on his own sinful habits. I am thinking of a father using dehumanizing language towards his children. The list could go on. Also eliminated by the revised mandate was the phrase, “in the church.” That phrase would have alerted us to the fact that oppressive conduct can be found in the church as well as in families—but the phrase was removed. If we remove substantial forms of abuse from what we are looking for, we are far less likely to recognize them or to be receptive, as officers serving the flock, to receive reports of harm and to protect effectively those entrusted to our care. We do well to remember that, as Michael Kruger points out, “Not everything is abuse.”⁷ We need to evaluate what we hear. But we also need to be careful not to minimize or avoid recognizing the sins of oppression. We do have a problem in dealing with abuse, in my observation.

⁶ *Minutes of the Eighty-Eighth General Assembly*, Article 152.

⁷ Michael J. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church* (Zondervan Reflective, 2022), 35–39. For an excellent review of the book see *New Horizons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (May 2023): 20, (https://opc.org/new_horizons/NH2023/NH2023May.pdf).

Fundamentalism: Narrower Than Scripture

Old fundamentalism was narrower than Scripture in the use of beverage alcohol, among other areas. In opposing the very real sin of drunkenness, it advocated total abstinence. Likewise, the newer fundamentalism can be narrower than Scripture in its treatment of women. The Ninetieth General Assembly decided a case against allowing a woman to lead in studies and groups which included both women and men *outside of worship services*. The case did not involve ordination of women to special office nor their leading in worship. The same Assembly spent considerable time debating whether the office of Statistician, which for many years had been filled by a man who did not hold ordained office, could be held by a female member of the OPC, before deciding that ordinarily it ought to be held by an ordained officer. At times we seem to be so determined to be diametrically opposed to humanistic feminism that we make “womanhood more of a yoke than a privilege.”⁸

“About Machen and New Fundamentalism” notes that Advisory Committee 9 of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly expressed concern with the report on “Women in Church Office.” The advisory committee stated, “The report in its interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36, and 1 Timothy 2:8–15 does not give clear expression to the historic interpretation, that Paul is saying that women, as women, should be ‘silent’ in worship in the assembly of God’s people.” Perhaps one reason that the Assembly rejected the language of the advisory committee is that the study committee report gave careful, exegetical attention to the “silence” of women in church services.⁹ The need for us to be cautious about assuming that Paul’s comment about silence is support for whatever happens to be our own notion of what that means is illustrated by an incident a pastor friend of mine recalled. He was in a group in which several pastors affirmed that the women were silent in the churches they served. My friend quietly suggested (and I am paraphrasing): “In the church I serve, we like it when the women join in confessing the Apostles’ Creed. [pause] We encourage them to participate in the responsive reading. [pause] And we like it when they sing the hymns!”

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

Direction: Are We Keeping the Word of God Central?

The concluding section of “About Machen and New Fundamentalism” expresses a deep concern: “History bears witness that political pressures have regularly pulled

⁸ “Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office,”

https://www.opc.org/GA/women_in_office.html.

⁹ *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth (1988) General Assembly*, Articles 158 and 160.

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

I continue to hope that all of us in the church set our course, not first of all by asking what the world is doing and then reacting, but by making sure that our direction is grounded in and guided by the Word. All Scripture is profitable, and it speaks to all of life. I am confident that my respondent shares that conviction.

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

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ServantLiterature

Wise Blood, Part One

by Danny Olinger

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

Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood* centers on Hazel Motes, an East Tennessean released from four years of army service who has things to do that he had never done before, namely, to show that he didn't need Jesus. O'Connor declared, "I launched a character, Hazel Motes, whose presiding passion was to rid himself of a conviction that Jesus had redeemed him."¹

In the opening sentence, Hazel is leaning forward: "Hazel Motes sat at a forward angle on the green plush train seat," symbolic of his attempt to flee Jesus. At the same time, O'Connor never presented Hazel living in a creation where God is absent: "The train was racing through treetops that fell away at intervals and showed the sun standing, very red, on the edge of the farthest woods."² In O'Connor's anagogical imagery, the sun functions as a visible manifestation of the living God. Standing as it does on the edge of the woods, it communicates that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. Hazel finds himself in the arena of God's judgment and his grace, even as he attempts to flee from God.

Sitting across from Haze³ on the train is Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock. Seeing the army duffle bag at his feet and desirous of polite conversation, she says, "I guess you're going home." He ignores her, but she notices that there is a price tag on his suit jacket. In drawing close to see the price, she finds herself squinting instead at his pecan shell-colored eyes set in deep sockets. O'Connor then added that "the outline of a skull under his skin was plain and insistent."⁴

Both the reference to his going home and the *memento mori* description of Hazel's skull is repeated by O'Connor at the book's conclusion. When the policemen carry Hazel into Mrs. Flood's house and place him on the bed, she declares, "Well, Mr. Motes . . . I see that you've come home!" She then starts talking to him, notices that his face was composed, grabs his hand and holds it to her heart. "The outline of a skull was plain under his skin and the deep burned eye sockets seemed to lead into the dark tunnel where he had disappeared."⁵

¹ Flannery O'Connor, "Novelist and Believer," in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970), 164.

² Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), 9.

³ Margaret Whitt, *Understanding Flannery O'Connor* (South Carolina Press, 1997), 17. "Throughout the book, 'Hazel' is most often referred to as 'Haze.' The shortened name is a reference to a glazed, impaired way of seeing."

⁴ O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 10.

⁵ O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 231.

An interviewer once asked O'Connor what she meant when she wrote that the creative action of the Christian life is to prepare his death in Christ, and how that belief relates to her fiction. O'Connor answered, "I'm a born Catholic and death has always been brother to my imagination. I can't imagine a story that doesn't properly end in it or in its foreshadowings."⁶

It is also fair to say that O'Connor could not imagine writing a story where Jesus Christ was not pivotal.⁷ The unique twist in *Wise Blood* is that Hazel, the protagonist, seeks to disabuse people of believing in Jesus. Two episodes on the train present Hazel's proselytizing efforts. When Mrs. Hitchcock asks Haze again if he was going home, he responds that he was not. Given the opening she had been looking for, Mrs. Hitchcock relates that she was going to see her sister's children, Roy, Bubber, and John Wesley. Hazel interrupts her.

"I reckon you think you been redeemed," he said.

Mrs. Hitchcock snatched at her collar.

"I reckon you think you been redeemed," he repeated.

She blushed. After a second she said yes, life was an inspiration and then she said she was hungry and asked him if he didn't want to go into the diner.⁸

The dining car was full, and the steward placed Haze with three young women who had finished eating and were smoking cigarettes. The woman across from him continually blew smoke in his direction, and Haze tells her that if she was redeemed, then he would not want to be. Another woman laughs, and Haze leans towards and says, "Do you think that I believe in Jesus? . . . Well I wouldn't even if He existed. Even if He was on this train." In a poisonous voice she responds, "Who said you had to?"⁹

After dinner, Haze, half-asleep lying in his curved-top berth, thinks about coffins. The first coffin he saw was that of his circuit preaching grandfather. When the grandfather was preaching from the hood of his Ford, the grandfather would point at Haze and shout that Jesus would die ten million deaths before he would let that sinful, unthinking boy lose his soul. Jesus would chase him over the waters of sin. "Jesus would have him in the end!"

Consequently, Hazel possessed the conviction that the way to avoid Jesus is to avoid sin. He knew by the time he was twelve that he was going to be a preacher. Later he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark

⁶ Rosemary M. Magee, ed. *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor* (University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 107.

⁷ Robert Drake, *Flannery O'Connor, A Critical Essay* (Eerdmans, 1966), 17. Robert Drake convincingly argues that Jesus Christ is really the principal character in all of O'Connor's fiction, whether offstage, or in the words or actions of her characters, very much onstage.

⁸ O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 14. Frederick Asals comments that "dialogues between characters are repeatedly at absurd cross-purposes, and Haze's ferocious anti-Christianity is greeted with the indifference usually reserved in the modern world for orthodoxy." Frederick Asals, *The Extremity of Imagination* (University of Georgia, 1982), 50.

⁹ O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 16.

where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown.¹⁰

He had wanted to stay at home in Eastrod with his two eyes open, but the army called him. The only things that Hazel took with him when he went into the army were a Bible and a pair of his mother's spectacles, his mother being consumed with faith like his grandfather. At boot camp when others wanted him to go to a brothel, he put on his mother's glasses and said he would not go with them for a million dollars and a feather bed to lie on. They told him that he did not have a soul. Hazel wanted to believe them, that he did not have a soul. He wanted to be converted to nothing instead of to evil.

Taulkinham

After Hazel arrives in the city of Taulkinham, he sees the name Leora Watts written over a toilet with the inscription that she has the friendliest bed in town. In the taxi, the driver questions why he is going there in that "she don't usually have no preachers for company." Haze declares that he ain't no preacher. The driver comments that he has a preacher's hat and a preacher's face, but then admits that preachers are just like everyone else. "It ain't anybody perfect on this green earth of God's, preachers nor nobody else. And you can tell people better how terrible sin is if you know from your own personal experience." Haze replies, "Listen . . . get this: I don't believe in anything."¹¹ When he leaves the cab and enters Mrs. Watts's place, he immediately tells her that he is no preacher. She responds that that's okay with her.

His second night in Taulkinham, Hazel walked down to see the store fronts. The sky and stars above signal that there is a God that created all things. The sky and stars also reveal that everyone's focus in Taulkinham is elsewhere than on God.

The black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that looked like scaffolding and depth on depth behind it were thousands of stars that all seemed to be moving very slowly as if they were about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete. No one was paying any attention to the sky. The stores in Taulkinham stayed open on Thursday nights so that people could have an extra opportunity to see what was for sale.¹²

Hazel walks under this black sky with "his neck thrust forward as if he were trying to smell something that was always being drawn away." He comes upon a peeler-salesman standing over an altar made out of cardboard boxes. The salesman put a brown potato in one side of an open machine and watched the potato come out white on the back side. He cries out, "You'll thank the day you ever stopped here . . . you'll never forget it." As the salesman makes his pitch, another man starts jiggling a tin cup in one hand and tapping a white cane in front of him with the other. He cries out, "Help a blind preacher. If you won't repent, give up a nickel." Behind him is a child handing out flyers with the words

¹⁰ O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 22.

¹¹ O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 32.

¹² O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 37.

“Jesus Calls You” on the cover. This irritates the man selling the peelers. He yells, “I got these people together, how you think you can horn in?”¹³

If the peeler represents commerce that has become sanctified, then the blind man represents religion that has become commercialized. Religiously, it is the worst of all worlds. On the one hand, what can be bought and sold is held sacred and proclaimed as life changing. On the other hand, Christ and his Word are commodified and exploited in a Tetzels-like manner for profit.¹⁴

A young man, Enoch Emery, and then the girl handing out the flyers, seek to buy a peeler, but neither has enough money. The blind man and the girl depart, but Hazel gives the peeler-man two dollars for a box and starts running down the street after the girl. Enoch follows Hazel following the girl. When Hazel catches up, the blind man puts his hands on Hazel’s face and proclaims that some preacher left his mark on Hazel and asks if he wants it taken off or if he wants a new one put on.

But the blind man’s attention suddenly shifts as he hears the scuffling of feet of his congregation, the departing moviegoers. Haze ducks behind a step so as not to be forced to hand out the Jesus tracts. The blind man, however, grabs Haze, tells him to repent of his sins, and to distribute the tracts. Haze jerks his arm away but in doing so only brings the blind man closer. “Listen,” Haze said, “I’m as clean as you are.” “Fornication and blasphemy and what else?” the blind man said. “They ain’t nothing but words,” Haze said. “If I was in sin I was in it before I ever committed any. There’s no change come in me.”¹⁵

The blind man mocks Haze, telling him that Jesus loves him, but Hazel declares that nothing matters but that Jesus does not exist. Haze then runs up the steps and starts sermonizing. “Every one of you people are clean and let me tell you why if you think it’s because of Jesus Christ Crucified you’re wrong. I don’t say he wasn’t crucified but I say it wasn’t for you.” He then proclaims his intention. “I going to preach a new church—the church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified.”¹⁶

The crowd departs, throwaway tracts littering the ground. Haze declares, “I don’t need Jesus. . . . What do I need with Jesus? I got Leora Watts.” The blind man laughs and tells Haze that his name is Asa Hawks, so that he knows who he is if he tries to follow him again.

Haze returns to Leora Watts. He takes off his clothes in the dark, which leads the narrator to recall when Haze was ten and his father took him to a carnival. Hazel’s father sent him to a tent where two monkeys danced while the father entered an exhibition that was more expensive than the others. Hazel secretly enters the tent where his father is and sees a woman in a casket who looked like a skinned animal, but then she grinned and moved.

Hazel’s guilt from the carnival is so overwhelming when he returns home that he attempts to hide from his mother’s sight behind a tree. She sees him, questions him about

¹³ O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 38–41.

¹⁴ Steve Pinkerton, “Profaning the American Religion: Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*,” *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 43, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 452.

¹⁵ O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 53.

¹⁶ O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 55.

what he had seen, hits him across his legs with a stick, and says, “Jesus died to redeem you.” Haze mutters, “I never ast him.”¹⁷

The Essex

Haze’s third morning in Taulkingham is a wet, dreary day, “the sky was like a piece of thin polished silver with a dark sour-looking sun in one corner of it.”¹⁸ He wakes with one thought in his mind, he needs to buy a car. Eventually, he finds a rat-colored Essex with large thin wheels, bulging headlights, a door tied with a rope, and a two-by-four in place of the missing back seat. As Haze drives the car out on the highway, the sky leaked over the patches of field, and Haze “had the feeling that everything he saw was a broken-off piece of some giant blank thing that he had forgotten happened to him.”¹⁹

Hazel falls behind a pick-up truck moving so slowly that it seemed as if it had stopped to read the prophecy written in white on a boulder: WOE TO THE BLASPHEMER AND WHOREMONGER! WILL HELL SWALLOW YOU UP? Hazel notices the two words in smaller letters at the bottom of the sign, “Jesus Saves,” and stops the car. A truck driver stops behind him, comes to his window, and asks why he is parked in the middle of the road. “There’s no person a whoremonger, who wasn’t something worse first. That’s not the sin, nor blasphemy. The sin came before them.”²⁰ The truck driver does not care. He just wants Hazel’s car off the road.

The Church Without Christ

After an episode with Enoch, Hazel returns to the movie theater and finds the blind preacher and his daughter waiting for the crowd to disperse. The lights around the marquee are so bright that the moon, moving overhead with a small procession of clouds behind it, looks pale and insignificant. Haze parks and climbs up on the nose of his car. He points to a boy watching him and asks to which church the boy belongs. The boy, in a falsetto to hide the truth, says, “Church of Christ.”

“Church of Christ!” Haze repeated. “Well, I preach the Church Without Christ. I’m member and preacher to that church where the blind don’t see and the lame don’t walk and what’s dead stays that way. Ask me about that church and I’ll tell you it’s the church that the blood of Jesus don’t foul with redemption.”

“He’s a preacher,” one of the women said. “Let’s go.”

“Listen, you people, I’m going to take the truth with me wherever I go,” Haze called.

“I’m going to preach there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgment because there wasn’t the first two. Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar.”²¹

¹⁷ O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 63.

¹⁸ O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 68.

¹⁹ O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 74. F. Asals observes that the “giant blank thing” that Haze has forgotten that has happened to him is presumably original sin. F. Asals, *Flannery O’Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (University of Georgia Press, 2007), 51–52.

²⁰ O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 76.

²¹ O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 105.

The next morning, Haze drives to the house he had spied the blind man and the girl entering the night before. He tells the woman at the door that he wants to rent a room. “What you do?” she asked. He said that he was a preacher. “Which church?” she asked. He said the Church Without Christ. “Protestant?” she asked suspiciously, “or something foreign?”²² Haze reassures her that it is Protestant.

After Haze pays the three dollar rent, he knocks on the blind man’s door. Haze informs the blind man and his daughter that he has started his own church, but Asa only complains that Haze cannot let him alone. “What kind of preacher are you?” Haze mumbles, “not to see if you can save my soul?”

The blind man has the girl show Haze a newspaper clipping that read that Asa Hawks, an evangelist of the Free Church of Christ, promised to blind himself to justify his belief that Jesus had saved him. “He did it with lime,” the child says, “and there was hundreds converted. Anybody that blinded himself for justification ought to be able to save you—or even somebody of his blood.” Haze murmurs, “Nobody with a good car needs to be justified.” Haze departs with the clipping, and Asa tells the girl to go get it back. She smirks and replies to Asa that he has another clipping, “EVANGELIST’S NERVE FAILS.”²³

After leaving Asa and girl, Haze drives his sputtering car immediately to the nearest garage. The mechanic tells Haze that the car can’t be fixed. Haze drives it to another garage where a man said that he could put the car in the best shape possible overnight because it was such a good car to start with.

The White Clouds

After Haze gets the car back the next day, he takes it out on the open road. Haze thinks he is alone in his car-temple, but he is not. He is in the presence of God, the sky above “just a little lighter blue than his suit, clear and even, with only one cloud in it, a large blinding white one with curls and a beard.”²⁴ It turns out, however, that he is not even alone in the car, as he discovers the girl hiding in the back seat. She tells him that her mother died giving birth to her on the Sabbath, which is why her name is Sabbath Lily. “Him and her wasn’t married,” she continues, “and that makes me a bastard, but I can’t help it.”²⁵ Haze is dumbfounded by the news about Asa, but Sabbath Lily rambles on that she’s adjusted to the modern world and asks him if he wants to neck. Since she is not entering the kingdom of heaven, she states that it does not matter what she does.

The blinding white cloud is moving away from them when Sabbath Lily suggests that Haze turn down the dirt road. The road gives them a telescoped view of the city, the white cloud now directly in front of them. Haze wants to know how her father came to believe in Jesus, but Sabbath Lily has other plans in mind. She wants him to sit under the trees with her. Haze continues to tell her about his Church Without Christ, but remembering that he left the Essex unlocked on the road, Haze hurries back to it. He finds the car dead and walks down the road, with Sabbath Lily following at a distance, to a gas station. He

²² O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 106.

²³ O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 113.

²⁴ Richard Giannone, *Flannery O’Connor and the Mystery of Love* (Fordham University Press, 1999), 24. O’Connor’s imagery suggests Moses and the glory cloud in Exodus 34.

²⁵ O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 118.

tells the one-armed man with slate-blue eyes there what has happened and the man drives them in a pick-up truck back to the Essex. Haze tells him about the Church Without Christ, but the man just looks under the hood. Haze asks him in an agitated voice, "It's a good car, isn't it?" The man says nothing but goes to work on the car. After he is finished, Haze and Sabbath Lily get in the car and the man pushes it to help get it started. After a few hundred yards, the Essex comes to life.

Haze triumphantly tells the man that "this car will get me anywhere I want to go." He then asks the man what he owes him. "Nothing," the man says, "not a thing." But Hazel persists about the gas for the car the man has given them. "Nothing," the man says with the same level look. "Not a thing." Haze said, "All right, I thank you," but he tells Sabbath Lily, "I don't need no favors from him."²⁶

When Haze comes to the end of the dirt road, the man in the truck pauses so that the two are side by side looking at each other. "I told you this car would get me anywhere I wanted to go," Haze says sourly. "Some things," the man says, " 'll get some folks somewheres," and he turns the truck up the highway. Haze drives on, but "the blinding white cloud had turned into a bird with long thin wings and was disappearing in the opposite direction."²⁷

Enoch

O'Connor returns the narrative at this point to Enoch, who embodies a prophecy to the folk of Taulkingham. Although Enoch knows "a whole heap" about Jesus, Enoch does not believe. Lonely, abandoned, and marginalized, he leaves it to his own wise blood to make sense of his life.²⁸ His religion is his daily rituals. Coming out of the movie theater, he sees Hazel preaching, standing on the nose of the rat-colored Essex. Enoch hears Hazel shouting: "If Jesus redeemed you, what difference would it make to you? You wouldn't do nothing about it?" Hazel continues, "What you need is something to take the place of Jesus, something that would speak plain. The Church Without Christ don't have a Jesus but it needs one! It needs a new jesus!"²⁹

Enoch knows how to get Hazel a new jesus, but his blood reminds him not to say anything because the last time he had been with Hazel, Hazel hit him with a rock. His blood suggests that he has to get the little man under glass and let it come as a surprise to Hazel.

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²⁶ O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 126.

²⁷ O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 127. The chapter opens with an allusion to the glory cloud in the Exodus and ends with an allusion to the descent of the Holy Spirit at the transfiguration of Jesus. Although God's glory seems to be fleeing Haze, it will appear again in his journey.

²⁸ Giannone writes that "as the meaning of Jesus cannot penetrate Enoch's mind, the townspeople will not let Jesus affect theirs. They run the risk of becoming Enoch." Giannone, *Mystery*, 19.

²⁹ O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 140.

ServantReading

A House Divided: Technology, Worship, & Healing the Church after COVID, by Benjamin D. Giffone

by T. David Gordon

A House Divided: Technology, Worship, & Healing the Church after COVID, by Benjamin D. Giffone. The Libertarian Christian Institute, 2025, 240 pages, \$19.99, paper.

In the early weeks of the COVID epidemic, many of us predicted that the press would groan in a few years under the weight of manuscripts explaining and interpreting the various public institutions that suffered (some fatally) from either the disease or its cure. The prediction has proven true, and some interpretations of the event are profoundly helpful. Dr. Giffone's assessment will likely be among the most helpful interpretations, especially because of its intentional discussion of the event's divisive harm to the church. Giffone is peculiarly capable of addressing the matter: he is an ordained minister in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, a missionary, and an instructor in theological institutions here and abroad (primarily South Asia and Eastern Europe). In addition to his evident academic ability, he is known for his irenic temperament, a trait not always exhibited by others who assess the COVID difficulty in over-confident or strident terms.

Giffone defines his work as "An Interdisciplinary Public Theology," explaining that his "aim with this book is to convince the reader that epistemology, theology of worship, communication technology, and the COVID crisis are actually interrelated—and if you care about one, you should care about all of them" (3). His "premise, though, is that the church was *already* 'A House Divided' prior to the pandemic, through uncritical adoption of technology into worship and the life of the church, and through uncritical adoption of scientific ways of knowing" (3–4). Epistemologically, Giffone describes three ways of knowing (especially in the modern West)—knowing through ritual, through Scripture, and through empiricism, asserting that "ritual ways of knowing are *undervalued* by both Christians and non-Christians in modernity, and that scientific ways of knowing are *overvalued*" (6, emphasis his).

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 (chapters 2–9) addresses "Technologizing of Worship Before and During COVID: Epistemology, Eschatology, and Presence;" part 2 (chapters 10–15) contains "A Plea for COVID Truth and Reconciliation in Christian Communities;" and part 3 (chapters 16–18) articulates Giffone's recommendations for "Healing, Repentance, Resilience." The book is remarkably accessible, especially when one considers that "epistemology, eschatology, and presence" can be difficult or divisive in their own rights. The introductory chapter is helpfully illustrated and lucid and

achieves its introductory purpose admirably. At just over two hundred pages, this rich volume amply rewards its readers for their effort.

While much of the conversation about COVID has focused on public institutions such as political institutions or the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), Giffone's book, while addressing those matters thoroughly and dispassionately, focuses upon liturgical realities both before, during, and after COVID. This makes the book especially important and helpful for church officers who found ourselves somewhat flat-footed when COVID arrived. I myself recall taking no courses on "pastoring during a pandemic" when I was in seminary, and I taught no such courses in my fourteen years of instructing at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, or in over two decades teaching at Grove City College.

Giffone has profound interest in and knowledge of the discipline of Media Ecology, and is motivated throughout to make a compelling theological case "for Embodied Worship and Knowledge through Ritual" (24 ff.). Our Reformed doctrines of incarnation and sacrament compel us to take seriously how we embody (or disembody) our liturgical practices. While Giffone is irenic in tone, and while he demonstrates real sympathy with the plight of church-officers during the pandemic lockdowns and restrictions, he quietly, competently, and thoroughly makes the case that Christian assemblies are Christian assemblies, *gatherings* of those who corporately celebrate the resurrection every Sunday. Watching a gathering is not gathering; observing an assembly is not assembling; and observing communion is not communing. *A House Divided* thus denotes two things: that there were "divided" opinions about how to address the COVID crisis, and that we also came to accept non-gathering as normal, and are now, in some cases, physically divided or separated from one another. I recommend that church sessions in the NAPARC communions read and discuss this book together, so that all are on the same page, as it were, as they consider the challenges that COVID thrust upon us.

For the final eighteen years of my teaching career, each fall I taught an introductory course on Media Ecology, so I particularly welcome Dr. Giffone's recognition that differing media always shape not only the *message*, but also the *messengers* and the *recipients* of the message. Having written several books myself, I wish I had written this one. I commend it heartily to all churchmen.

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ServantReading

Zeal without Burnout. Seven Keys to a Lifelong Ministry of Sustainable Sacrifice, *by Christopher Ash*

by Ronald E. Pearce

Zeal without Burnout. Seven Keys to a Lifelong Ministry of Sustainable Sacrifice, by Christopher Ash. The Good Book Co., 2016, 112 pages, \$12.99.

It is urgent that the subject of burnout in pastoral ministry be addressed. Ash writes, Some 1,500 people leave pastoral ministry *each month* due to burnout, conflict, or moral failure. . . . Almost *half of pastors and their wives* say they have experienced depression or burnout to the extent that they needed to take a leave of absence from ministry. (16)

This is not a comprehensive book on the subject of burnout. It is a short book of 123 pages which can be read in about two hours. Ash acknowledges that his book “is very far from being a comprehensive or expert treatment of the subject [of burnout]” (14). He writes as an older man, who himself has been to the edge of burnout, to advise and warn others. “None of us thinks we are on the path to burnout until we are nearly burnt out” (19). He wants to warn those who think it would never happen to them. His desire is to see pastors run a “marathon of ministry, not a short, energetic sprint” (20).

The book is very readable, and each chapter closes with another person’s story of burnout. The reader feels like they are hearing a friend’s wise and seasoned counsel.

Mr. Ash devotes two chapters to clarify correct thinking about pastoral ministry in order to prevent burnout. The chapter “Sacrifice Is Not the Same as Burnout” tries to balance on the one hand that the pastoral call is costly and to be wholehearted service and hard work, but yet, service for Christ is not the calling to “self-harm” to damage one’s life and strength. The chapter “We Are Creatures of Dust” reminds us that our health and strength are temporary and at any time God can take them away. “All we have to offer God is the fragile, temporary, moral, frail life that he has first given to us” (55).

The heart of the book are his seven keys to prevent burnout. These seem to be common sense and things that pastors would know. But although they are not new thoughts to many, they are good reminders to have in one’s life. His seven keys are as follows:

1. We need sleep and God does not.

2. We need Sabbath rests and God does not. It is important to keep a weekly day off to rest, even with the reality that crises and emergencies invade the day off.
3. We need friends and God does not. “We are not created to be autonomous, go-it-alone, god-like pastors” (68). We need to work harder to be intentional at building good friendships.
4. We need inward renewal and God does not. We need to do things that keep one’s “emotional, physical, intellectual, relational batteries topped up” (76). “If we do not give space for renewal, there will soon be nothing left of us to give” (77).
5. A warning: beware of the celebrity status. If one works for praise, respect, high regard, and the applause of people, then he is susceptible to becoming burnt out.
6. An encouragement: the results are the Lord’s. “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:7).
7. A delight: rejoice in grace, not gifts. One is to find joy not ultimately in the work, one’s gifts, or in success, then one will always be under pressure. Rather, we are to find our joy in God’s grace.

Mr. Ash told us that this was not a comprehensive book on burnout, but I wish there were more content. The final, brief chapter written by Dr. Midgley—defining burnout?—could have been expanded and become the framework for the book. I wished additional topics could have been more fully explored, such as, “How to Prevent Burnout” and “How to Get Out of Burnout If in It.” I did not think it was necessary to conclude each chapter with a personal story. I felt the book could have benefitted from less personal stories and instead included more content.

Is the book worth reading? Yes. Did Mr. Ash accomplish his goal, to advise and warn others of burnout? Yes, and I think he does it in a very humble and kind way. We join with him in his desire to see pastors run a “marathon of ministry, not a short, energetic sprint.”

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ServantPoetry

Francis of Assisi (ca. 1184–1226)

Canticle of the Creatures

Most High, all powerful, good Lord!
All praise is yours, all glory, all honor,
And all blessing.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that you have made,
And first my lord Brother Sun,
Who brings the day and the light you give to us through him.
How beautiful he is, how radiant in all his splendor!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Moon and Stars;
In the heavens you made them bright,
And precious, and fair.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
Whether serene stormy, all the weather's moods,
By which you nourish all that you have made.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Water,
So useful, lowly, precious, and pure.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
Through whom you brighten up the night,
How beautiful he is, how playful, full of power and strength.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Earth,
Who feeds and governs us, and who produces
Varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give him thanks.