

# Foreign Missions



Ordained Servant

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### **CURRENT ISSUE: FOREIGN MISSIONS**

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### *From the Editor*

We live in rancorous times which, unlike former times, cause us to experience the rancor almost ubiquitously and continuously. The ease with which messages may be sent through various media tend to undermine thoughtfulness and personal accountability. Sin has always caused societal toxicity, but the contemporary electronic environment has exacerbated this poisonous atmosphere. Church officers are not immune to this poison and are called not only to avoid it themselves but also to help their congregations to eschew it.

Because ministers are in the best position to model humility, compassion, and thoughtful communication, I have thought it prudent to cover this topic in an editorial that is slightly expanded from 2012 and was published in 2021, “A Little Exercise for Young Theologians Revisited.” Old theologians are always in need of renewing the exercise. Richard Gaffin’s submission of “Ordination and Installation Charge” reminded me of this editorial, based on Helmut Thielicke’s (1908–86) 1962 booklet entitled *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*.<sup>1</sup> Gaffin reminds us that essential to preaching the Word faithfully is a servant attitude. As Paul reminded Timothy, “The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness” (2 Tim. 2:24–25). Gentleness, patience, and kindness are an essential part of the whole counsel of God we are sworn to uphold.

“Mission Policies of the Historic Presbyterian and Reformed Churches” by Michael M. is purposely anonymous for security reasons. He traces the development of Presbyterian and Reformed missions, beginning with an examination of the missiology of Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676).

David VanDrunen’s review article, “The Law as Mosaic Covenant?” reviews T. David Gordon’s two books on Paul’s understanding of law: *Promise, Law, Faith: Covenant-Historical Reasoning in Galatians* and *Promise, Law, Faith in Romans: Covenant-Historical Reasoning Continued*. Gordon adds to the historical conversation by insisting that Paul uses *nomos* (νόμος) almost exclusively to refer to the Sinai covenant.

Stephen Pribble reviews a new Reformed Baptist book, *What Is New Covenant Theology: An Introduction* by A. Blake White. He demonstrates the flaws in this modified Dispensational theology, especially its biblicism.

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<sup>1</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, trans. Charles L. Taylor (Eerdmans, 1962).

Charles Wingard reviews a new addition to the fascinating Princeton University Press series of biographies of books, *Paradise Lost: A Biography* by Alan Jacobs.

Our poem to begin the new year, “Change Should Breed Change,” is by Scottish poet William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585–1649). This little-known poem caught my eye as I was looking for the word “new” in the index of the lovely Oxford University Press anthology, *The Oxford Book of Christian Verse*.<sup>2</sup> As the sun shines longer with each day after the winter solstice, we welcome the change. He subtly hints at eternal verities transcending earthly change.

The cover photo is of Mount Washington (6,288 ft.), taken by me from Camp Shiloh in Jefferson, New Hampshire.

Blessings in the Lamb,  
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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<sup>2</sup> *The Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, chosen and edited by Lord David Cecil (Oxford University Press, 1940), 115.

## **FROM THE ARCHIVES “FOREIGN MISSIONS”**

[http://opc.org/OS/pdf/Subject\\_Index\\_Vol\\_1-33.pdf](http://opc.org/OS/pdf/Subject_Index_Vol_1-33.pdf)

- “Baseball and the Supernatural.” (Gregory Edward Reynolds) 15 (2006): 28–30.
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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

## A Little Exercise for Young Theologians Revisited

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Gregory E. Reynolds

When I think back on my brashness as a young theologian, I shudder; and whenever that same brashness rears its ugly head today, I shudder still; but age and Christian experience have at least taught me to recognize this monster within.<sup>1</sup>

Very early in my Christian life, while still considering a call to the ministry, I came across a little booklet first published in 1962 by Eerdmans entitled *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*.<sup>2</sup> I recognized the author, Helmut Thielicke (1908–86), from my reading of his *Encounter with Spurgeon*<sup>3</sup> in Bible school in 1972. I have exercised myself with this sage booklet at least once a decade ever since, and never without profit, since the demon of pride is ever in need of being exorcised.

While avoiding the dangerous dichotomy of setting the Christian life over against doctrine, Thielicke does not confuse the two by eliding doctrine into life. One without the other is a sign of spiritual illness. Thus, he addresses his seminary students like a wise father:

You can see that the young theologian has by no means grown up to these doctrines in his own spiritual development, even if he understands intellectually rather well the logic of the system . . . There is a hiatus between the arena of the young theologian's actual spiritual growth and what he already knows intellectually about this arena.<sup>4</sup>

Thielicke goes on to liken early theological training to puberty, during which it is as unwise to unleash the novice on the church as a preacher, as it would be to let the young singer sing while his voice is changing.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, time spent in the lofty realms of truth makes the novice susceptible to the “psychology of the possessor,” in which love is sadly absent. “Truth seduces us very easily into a kind of joy of possession.”<sup>6</sup> “But love is the opposite of the will to possess. It is self-giving. It boasteth not itself, but humbleth itself.” But when “truth is a means to

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<sup>1</sup> This editorial originally appeared in digital form on OPC.org on February 2012. It appears in the 2012 printed annual: “A Little Exercise for Young Theologians” (Gregory Edward Reynolds) 21 (2012): 12–14. This version has some added material.

<sup>2</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, trans. Charles L. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Encounter with Spurgeon*, trans. John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 16.

personal triumph,”<sup>7</sup> the young theologian returns home with a keen sense of membership in an esoteric club, displaying his rarefied tools to the annoyance of all and the hurt of some. Thielicke observes, “Young theologians manifest certain trumped-up intellectual effects which actually amount to nothing.”<sup>8</sup>

The only cure for this malady, insists Thielicke, is an active faith that cultivates love, that is, living one’s faith out of love for God and those around us. Our theology must be worked out in the life of the church,

We must also take seriously the fact that the “subject” of theology, Jesus Christ, can only be regarded rightly if we are ready to meet Him on the plane where he is active, that is, within the Christian church.<sup>9</sup>

and it must be worked out in light of eternity,

A well-known theologian once said that dogmatics is a lofty and difficult art. That is so, in the first place, because of its purpose. It reflects upon the last things; it asks wherein lies the truth about our temporal and eternal destiny.<sup>10</sup>

and it must be worked out in spiritual battle,

Thus it is possible to become an eschatological romanticist . . . Such a person nevertheless has not comprehended a penny’s worth of what it means to live on the battlefield of the risen Lord, between the first and second coming, waiting and praying as a Christian.<sup>11</sup>

Thielicke knew the true exercise of a theologian’s faith in spiritual battle. In 1935 he was refused a post at Erlangen due to his commitment to the Confessing Church, which opposed National Socialism, and in which Dietrich Bonhoeffer was famously active. In 1936 he became professor of systematic theology at Heidelberg. But he was dismissed in 1940 after repeated interrogations by the Gestapo. He went on to pastor a church in Ravensburg, and in 1942 he began teaching in Stuttgart until the bombing in 1944, when he fled to Korntal. After the war ended, he began teaching at Tübingen, and finally in Hamburg, where he pastored the large congregation of St. Michaelis.

Finally, Thielicke warns the young theologian—older ones need this, too—to beware of reading Scripture only as a matter of exegetical endeavor rather than God’s “word to me.” He urges a “prayed dogmatics,”<sup>12</sup> in which theological thought breathes “only in the atmosphere of dialogue with God.”<sup>13</sup> “A person who pursues theological courses is spiritually sick unless he reads the Bible uncommonly often.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 17, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 11–12.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 29–30.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 40.

One aspect of human pride Thielicke does not confront in his little exercise is plagiarism. The temptation of preachers to copy the work of others in their preaching, while failing to give proper attribution, has always been a problem. The electronic availability of sermons, especially services that provide weekly sermons, has exacerbated the problem. As we have seen in recent years, our own Reformed pastors are not exempt from falling into the temptation.

In a culture where celebrity is accorded high esteem, the temptation to copy the work of well-known preachers is ever present. Congregations often cultivate the soil for this temptation by idolizing the famous Reformed conference speakers and communicating unrealistic expectations of the everyday pastor who normally must produce two sermons a week. It is pride, however, that succumbs to this enticement. While the local pastorate may be looked down upon, the humility of the cross must make us content with service in small pastures.

Of course, there is a gray area when it comes to sermon preparation. Most of us use commentaries and even sermon series in our development of sermons. Developing our own outlines from careful exegesis first, will help us to flee the seduction of plagiarism. When we make the ideas or many thoughts and even applications found in print our own, plagiarism is not engaged in. But copying someone else's outline or using verbatim sentences and phrases without acknowledging their sources is plagiarism.

While we will not agree with Thielicke's theology at every point, the gist of his message to young theological students is so pointed that there is nothing quite like it in English. Within our own tradition, Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield delivered an address at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1911 entitled "The Religious Life of Theological Students."<sup>15</sup> In the strongest possible terms, Warfield pleads for a godly and learned ministry: "But before and above being learned, a minister must be godly. Nothing could be more fatal, however, than to set these two things over against one another."<sup>16</sup> He sums this emphasis up nicely, "Put your heart into your studies."<sup>17</sup>

No exercise in the young theologian's or minister's life is better calculated to keep him humble than regular contact with God himself. Warfield cautions his students:

I am here today to warn you to take seriously your theological study, not merely as a duty, done for God's sake and therefore made divine, but as a religious exercise, itself charged with religious blessing to you; as fitted by its very nature to fill all your mind and heart and soul and life with divine thoughts and feelings and aspirations and achievements. You will never prosper in your religious life in the Theological Seminary until your work in the Theological Seminary becomes itself to you a religious exercise out of which you draw every day enlargement of heart, elevation of spirit, and adoring delight in your Maker and Savior.<sup>18</sup>

We are, after all, called to be warriors; but the kind of spiritual warrior that Scripture calls us to be is not the gladiator seeking personal victory and glory, but rather the soldier

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<sup>15</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 1:411–25.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 416.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 417.

of the cross who seeks to magnify the person of his Savior and Lord. J. Gresham Machen captured this spirit well in his sermon “Constraining Love.” Christian militancy should never be confused with sectarian belligerence, hubris, or meanness of spirit. But pride can also move us to shrink in cowardice from defending the truth of the gospel. Machen made this clear in his sermon to the second general assembly of our, then, new church. How many movements, he asked,

have begun bravely like this one, and then have been deceived by Satan . . . into belittling controversy, condoning sin and error, seeking favor from the world or from a worldly church, substituting a worldly urbanity for Christian love. May Christ’s love indeed constrain us that we may not thus fall!<sup>19</sup>

If Christianity teaches us nothing else, it must teach us the value of the cross—the chief expression of God’s constraining love for sinners. If we learn nothing else from the cross, we must learn humility—a humility that leads us to cling to the Savior who died to save us. As we minister, whether young or old, we must always remember that “we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor. 4:7); thus,

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive (Col. 3:12–13).

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<sup>19</sup> J. Gresham Machen, “Constraining Love,” in *God Transcendent and Other Sermons*, ed. Ned Bernard Stonehouse (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 141.



# Servant Missions

## Mission Policies of the Historic Presbyterian and Reformed Churches

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by Michael M.

In undertaking this topic I will start by examining the missiology of Gisbertus Voetius and then consider how his ideas were modified or expanded upon in the American Presbyterian tradition.

Gisbertus Voetius was an important Dutch Reformed theologian who lived from 1589 to 1676. Although most famous for his participation in the Synod of Dort held in 1618–1619, he is also important as the first Reformed theologian, probably first Protestant theologian, to articulate a comprehensive theology of missions. Amazingly, his missiology four centuries later is extremely relevant to Presbyterian and Reformed mission work today. As Francisca Ireland-Verwoerd points out, he asked and answered five questions about missions<sup>1</sup>:

1. *Who sends?* This he emphatically answered by saying it is God who sends, and in the post apostolic period, God sends through his true, visible church. In the context of Reformed missions, this means the sending should be through the assemblies of the church, such as sessions, presbyteries and synods, not parachurch organizations.

2. *To whom is one sent?* His answer is very broad: all those alienated from the church. All unbelievers regardless of where they live and what cultural background they have are the appropriate subjects for the mission work of the church. This is the implication of the great commission given by Jesus, that the gospel should go out to all nations.

3. *Why is one sent?* Ultimately, as is the case for everything we do, for the glory of God. Specifically, glorifying God by gathering together God's elect people from around the world into the true church of Christ. This includes evangelizing those ignorant of the gospel and those who have heard and rejected it. It includes gathering and reforming those who profess the Christian faith but do not have a connection with a faithful Bible preaching and practicing church. It includes the establishment of faithful churches wherever there are people who believe the gospel; establishing churches includes properly training and ordaining indigenous leadership to continue the work of the church

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<sup>1</sup> Francisca Ireland-Verwoerd, "Voetius, Gisbertus [Gijsbert Voet] (1589–1676)," BU, Boston University School of Theology, accessed August 21, 2025, [www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/t-u-v/voetius-gisbertus-gijsbert-voet-1589-1676/](http://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/t-u-v/voetius-gisbertus-gijsbert-voet-1589-1676/). See also J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (The Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), 6–7.

once the missionaries have departed. Voetius also included helping churches which were persecuted or financially impoverished.

4. *Who and what kind of people are sent?* Voetius emphasized first and foremost that the church should send well-trained ordained ministers as missionaries. They should not be seminary dropouts but among the best and brightest men that the church has to offer. In addition to theological studies, missionaries should study the local language and the culture and philosophy of the target people group, especially if the society in which they live is literate and has a high level of civilization.

But in addition to the ordained ministers, there need to be assistants and auxiliaries. Assistants would not necessarily need to be highly trained theologically but simply have basic skills for sharing the gospel and engaging in personal relationships with local people. However, these would not normally preach or administer the sacraments.

And finally there were the auxiliaries, doctors, and schoolteachers who would help support the missionaries and their families and who would extend assistance to local people who lack basic medical care and education.

5. *According to which method and in which way are people sent?* This is really two questions. The first is, how does a missionary get to the mission field and sustain himself and his family there? This he answers simply: by any means necessary which does not require the missionary to disobey Scripture. They may be spread abroad through persecution such as Paul when he was sent to Rome by Roman authorities. Or more intentionally traveling by commercial routes, sometimes having to take up other employment such as being a “tent maker,” as in Paul’s case, or being an employee of a trade company, serving in the army, or being a foreign ambassador.

The second question is, how do the missionaries develop relationships with local people in order to share the gospel with them? Public teaching and preaching of the Bible is of course primarily how the mission engages in its work. However, auxiliaries have an important job of making contact with local people and doing what we might call “pre-evangelism” through teaching in schools and providing medical assistance.

Although Reformed missiologists and missions agencies have expanded on Voetius’s work, the policies and methods of Presbyterian and Reformed mission work has not changed greatly since Voetius’s day, even though it would take about two-hundred years before Reformed and Presbyterian churches would begin to engage widely in foreign missions work beyond the areas where Europeans established colonies. Until the late eighteenth century, Protestant mission work was largely focused on reaching Europeans who were either unchurched or members of apostate churches like the Roman Catholic church. Non-Europeans were evangelized, but mostly in areas near where European colonists had established churches among their own people. The Dutch Reformed Church was quite vigorous in implementing some of Voetius’s ideas, especially in establishing schools throughout Dutch colonies. These schools had evangelistic objectives.

For example, by the 1660s, more than twenty thousand native students were enrolled in hundreds of Dutch Reformed Schools in places like Jakarta, Malaysia, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, India, South Africa, Brazil, New York, West Africa, and the Caribbean. In these

schools, the local people were not only taught to read but also learned the basics of the Christian faith. Many churches were established as a result of this.<sup>2</sup>

One of the troubles with this work was that it was closely associated with colonialism. So, when Dutch colonialism started to wane and other powers took over Dutch colonies, the churches which the Dutch had established either disappeared or were absorbed into other church traditions associated with new colonial powers.

Presbyterians were a little slower than the Dutch to begin foreign missions works but also took a similar kind of form. Scotland, the birthplace of Presbyterianism, never had a colonial system like that of the Netherlands or England. However, after the Scottish began to immigrate to America and Francis Makemie helped to establish the first Presbyterian churches in America in the early eighteenth-century, Presbyterians started to evangelize American Indians. The Presbytery of New York seems to have taken the lead in doing this work. Early examples of missionaries they commissioned were Azariah Horton in 1741 to work among the Indians of Long Island and David Brainerd in 1743 to work among the Algonquin Indians along the Delaware River.<sup>3</sup>

Efforts such as these continued for almost two centuries. However, it would not be until after the Reformed Baptist William Carey's work in India, which began in 1793, and the so-called "haystack prayer meeting" for foreign missions, which occurred in 1806 in New England among Congregationalists, that the PCUSA would begin sending missionaries to lands greatly separated from European colonies where organized Presbyterian churches already existed.

It is important to point out here that in 1801 the PCUSA entered into the Plan of Union with American Congregationalists. So, when the so-called "Haystack Revival" occurred among New England Congregationalists and resulted in the formation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1810, Presbyterians had a natural connection to this parachurch organization. Although it was initially formed by Congregationalists, Presbyterians and German Reformed churches soon started to support and send missionaries through this organization.

However, as can be imagined, this organization was not committed to Presbyterian polity, and at this time the Puritan Calvinism of New England Congregationalism was also becoming quite diluted. The board members of the American Board oversaw the work of its missionaries. The board took responsibility for selecting, training, and sending out ordained missionaries and sometimes even ordaining the missionaries themselves, but the board was not exclusively composed of ordained ministers and elders. Often they were simply prominent, sometimes wealthy, Congregationalists. While ministers would have conducted ordinations, they did so under the auspices of the board, not a local church, presbytery, or association of ministers.

At this time, the PCUSA was struggling internally between the more strictly Presbyterian and Calvinistic Old School and more theologically lax and even openly Arminian New School parties within the denomination. The New School was,

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<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Parker, "The Legacy of Calvinism in the Dutch Empire," Aeon Essays, accessed August 21, 2025, <https://aeon.co/essays/the-legacies-of-calvinism-in-the-dutch-empire>.

<sup>3</sup> For further details and documentation of the content of this paragraph and much of the remainder of this article, see Michael M., "A Brief History of Western Presbyterian and Reformed Mission to China," in *China's Reforming Churches: Mission, Polity, and Ministry in the Next Christendom*, ed. Bruce P. Baugus (Reformation Heritage Press, 2014), 27–57.

unsurprisingly, quite comfortable with the American Board. But just as unsurprisingly, there was significant discontent among Old School Presbyterians within the PCUSA about this organization. And so, in 1812, 1828, and 1831, overtures came to the general assembly requesting that the PCUSA would establish its own missions organization. These assemblies voted against doing so and encouraged Presbyterians interested in becoming foreign missionaries to do so by being sent out through the American Board.

This did not satisfy Old School Presbyterians, especially those in Western Pennsylvania. And so, the Synod of Pittsburgh of the PCUSA organized its own missions organization called the “Western Foreign Missions Society” in 1831, which had the goal of doing foreign missions in a particularly Reformed and Presbyterian manner. Those in this synod maintained hope that eventually the general assembly of the PCUSA would establish its own foreign missions agency. That eventually happened.

Tensions between the Old School and New School Presbyterians continued to grow until 1837 when the denomination split into two separate general assemblies. Once the Old School had its own general assembly, it immediately voted 108 to 29 to organize its own missions board with eighty members, forty ministers, and forty elders. It met for the first time on October 31, 1837.<sup>4</sup>

Besides deciding to absorb the missionaries from the Western Foreign Missions Society and take on its work, the board decided to choose China as its new main field. The reasons for choosing this field were (1) its giant population which was (2) almost completely without the knowledge of the true God, despite (3) the fact that this great nation had a common written language and (4) seemed to be “open and waiting for the gospel.” On December 6, 1837, only a little more than a month after the first meeting of the PCUSA missions board, the first missionaries under the newly organized board left for China. (Presumably, missionaries were being prepared for this field already under the auspices of the Western Foreign Missions Society.)

Although I am not aware of evidence that Voetius’s missiology directly influenced the policies of the board, it is hard not to see their similarity, because the policies which the nineteenth-century PCUSA board adopted were essentially in line with those promoted by Voetius two centuries earlier. In particular, that it was the responsibility of *the church* through her regularly organized assemblies, and not organizations outside the church, to send out foreign missionaries with the goal of establishing indigenous Reformed and Presbyterian churches on foreign lands. Maybe there was no direct influence of Voetius on the PCUSA at this time and this was just the logical outworking of their common commitment to the Reformed Faith and the principles of Presbyterian polity. But it is striking that Voetius also encouraged the use of medical and educational mission work alongside the preaching of the gospel. This work became a hallmark of the PCUSA missions, in contrast with many other missions organizations which did not choose to engage in such work, or engaged in it to only a small degree.

But that is not to say that the PCUSA agreed with Voetius at every point. For example, Voetius did not believe that the missionary sending church should establish native churches which were subject to the ecclesiastical assemblies of the missionary sending church. In the nineteenth century there were three different models used by

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<sup>4</sup> For more information regarding the contents of this and the following paragraph, see G. Thompson Brown, *Earthen Vessels and Transcendent Power: American Presbyterians in China, 1837–1953* (Orbis Books, 1997), 11–17.



Reformed churches for the relationship between the missionary-sending church and the native churches. These can be illustrated in their mission work in China.

The PCUSA determined to establish churches in foreign mission fields which were organically related to the sending church. In other words, PCUSA missionaries established PCUSA congregations in other countries, and indeed presbyteries and synods as well. These were all subject to the jurisdiction of the PCUSA general assembly held in America. Generally, the PCUSA sent at least three ordained ministers to serve in any particular mission station who would then immediately form a presbytery on the foreign mission field. Consequently, even before there were local churches with any Chinese converts there were PCUSA presbyteries in places like Shanghai, Ningbo, and Guangdong which were organized under the PCUSA synod of New York. (The PCUSA foreign missions board had their offices in New York City.) As Chinese converts were made, they actually became members of the PCUSA. As Chinese elders were ordained, they became members of the same sessions and presbyteries as the foreign missionaries and held equal authority with them. This meant that the newly established local churches were organized with the same confessional standards, book of church order, book of discipline, and directory for public worship as the PCUSA. Chinese translations of these documents were needed, therefore, in order for the Chinese ministers to fully participate in the life of the church on the same footing as the foreign missionaries.

The advantages of this method were that it provided doctrinal standards, church structure, and accountability from the beginning of the work on which to build. It put in place a scheme which made foreign missionaries equal counterparts to their native Chinese church leaders. The problem was that, given the distance and slow rate of communication and the occasional confusion over dates between the western solar calendar and the traditional Chinese lunar calendar, the organic union with the American church proved to be more of a hassle than a practical help. When matters from China particularly related to peculiarities in Chinese culture—such as how to handle the arranged marriages of believers with unbelievers, the practice of foot binding, whether other alcoholic beverages could be substituted for grape juice when grape juice was not available from local sources, and establishing presbytery boundaries—came before the America assemblies, these assemblies almost never knew how best to handle them and simply referred them back to the missionaries and the local church.

Another model was used by the Southern Presbyterian Church (PCUS) which was more in line with Voetius's view on the topic. Initially, they thought to follow the example of the PCUSA. However, they ultimately adopted somewhat of an opposite method. While missionaries would oversee the churches they established until native elders and pastors were ordained, these churches would never be a part of the PCUS. Once native sessions were established, the missionaries would relinquish all authority for oversight to their native counterparts.

Part of the reason for this was racism, because they felt it was inappropriate for a white man to be placed in position of equal authority with a member of an inferior race,<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See for example, M. H. Houston, personal letter "Presbytery of Hangzhou", *The Missionary*, vol. 7 (November 1874): 248–249 [39–41 in some editions], and James Bear, *The China Mission of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*. Vol. 2 (unpublished manuscript located at Union Theological Seminary, Richmond Virginia, n.d.), 229–31. In this letter, M. H. Houston, a Southern Presbyterian

but they also believed that it removed obstacles from the native church which made it difficult for her to unite with other churches in China which were established by Presbyterian missionaries of other denominations. It also encouraged the local church to develop her own leadership and take part in evangelism and missions herself from the earliest stages of the church. However, the method left the missionaries “coaching from the sidelines” and delayed any transfer of authority to native officers until entire sessions could be established.

The third method, which Voetius also likely would have approved, was developed by the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Presbyterian Church of England (PCE). In Amoy (Xiamen in modern Mandarin), both denominations had a mission station. Neither mission desired to propagate their particular denomination in China and felt that it was important that ministers from both denominations could work together on equal footing with the local church leaders in the same church assemblies. The result was the creation of the “Amoy plan.” It consisted of five points:

- (1) the native churches established in China would neither be under the general synod of the RCA or the general assembly of the PCE;
- (2) missionaries would retain their membership in and remain under the discipline of their home churches, but also have full voting rights in the assemblies of the native church;
- (3) the native assemblies would have the right to eject missionaries from their assemblies for improper behavior, though this would not be considered formal church discipline or necessarily require full disciplinary process;
- (4) only native men whose churches called them to serve with the promise of full financial support were eligible for ordination as pastors;
- (5) funds from America and England would be overseen and distributed by their respective missions, whereas funds collected locally would be overseen by the assemblies of the native church.<sup>6</sup>

This policy ultimately became quite favored of not only Reformed and Presbyterian missionaries in China but of other denominations as well. Although the name “Amoy Plan” is no longer well known among modern missionaries, the OPC, PCA, and other Reformed denominations follow similar policies today.

Another way in which the nineteenth-century PCUSA differed from Voetius was in regard to the focus of the church on the societal transformation of non-Christian lands. To be sure, both expected that as the gospel went forward into lands which had never heard the gospel the culture and society of that land would be impacted. But it seems that in Voetius’s missiology social transformation was just a byproduct of the main goal, which

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missionary, states that while the Chinese are “superior to the negroes,” they are still “an inferior race” to white people.

<sup>6</sup> Michael M., “A Brief History of Western Presbyterian and Reformed Mission to China,” 36.

was to gather God's elect from the nation and organize them into native Reformed churches.

To be sure, in the nineteenth century, PCUSA missions similarly emphasized ensuring that all efforts of the mission, including educational and medical work, were subservient to the main cause of gospel proclamation and the conversion of God's elect throughout the world. However, it seems that the postmillennialism of Old School American Presbyterianism had also had an impact on the goals of the nineteenth-century missionaries. For example, Calvin W. Mateer is quoted in his biography as having said, "I expect to die in heathen China, but I expect to rise in Christian China."<sup>7</sup> While we can appreciate his faith in the power of the gospel and the confidence which he had that his Savior would achieve His goals, one wonders if the hope of "Christianizing heathen nations" may have sidetracked the PCUSA mission.

At the end of the nineteenth century and certainly in the early twentieth century, the PCUSA China mission increasingly gave attention to developing the medical, educational, and even political efforts of the mission. It seemed these efforts were a common point of interest between the more conservative Old School missionaries and the newer liberal missionaries who came in great numbers after the year 1900. Both desired to impact the nation and culture of China for the glory of Christ's name, even if in the case of the liberal missionaries the conversion of God's elect and the establishment of orthodox Presbyterian and Reformed churches became less emphasized.

Ironically, many of those who led the atheist, communist revolution in China were educated in missionary schools and introduced to socialist ideas from the West.<sup>8</sup> This ultimately resulted in a nation which is overtly hostile to the church and regularly persecutes and imprisons Christian pastors.

In fact, this emphasis on social transformation proved not only a detriment to the PCUSA mission but also seems to have helped the PCUSA along its way to its radical corruption today. It cannot be denied that the educational and medical endeavors of the PCUSA mission provided many lasting benefits to China as well as other nations, but they required a great deal of funding. Much of that funding came from wealthy donors who tended to be rather liberal in their theological outlook.

In 1925, as a result of the concerted effort of men who faithfully contended for the gospel, such as J. Gresham Machen, the liberal party within the generally conservative PCUSA almost walked out of the general assembly and would then likely have left the denomination with many liberal congregations. However, this would have resulted in the loss of many wealthy donors upon which the many programs of the PCUSA, including foreign missions, depended. As it happened then, just before the liberal party of the denomination intended to express their determination to leave, the theologically moderate moderator of the general assembly that year called for a study committee to discuss what was causing disunity within the PCUSA. The next year the committee gave their report: Disunity was being caused by conservative theologians of Princeton Seminary, the most

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Webster Fisher, *Calvin Wilson Mateer Forty-Five Years a Missionary in Shantung, China: A Biography* (T. French Downie, 1911), 319.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Wang Chia-hsiang who directed the general political department of the Chinese Workers and Peasants Red Army in Kiangsi and headed the Academy for Military and Political Cadres in Yen-an was educated in a missionary school of the Episcopal mission. See Howard Borman, *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China [online]*, x-Borman, "Wang Jiaxiang," accessed August 21, 2025, <https://xboorman.enpchina.eu/biographie/wang-jiaxiang/>.

vocal of whom was J. Gresham Machen. This, in effect, led to the liberal faction within the PCUSA to remain within the denomination, and from that point on they increasingly controlled denominational boards, including the board of foreign missions.

Not surprisingly, the PCUSA increasingly sent out theologically liberal missionaries, including the notorious unbeliever Pearl Buck. In protest of this, in 1933 Machen did something rather un-Presbyterian in order to preserve orthodox presbyterian missions: He established the Independent Board for Presbyterian Missions and then refused to support the PCUSA denominational missions board. This is pointed out not so much to criticize Machen but only to focus on the irony that the Old School Presbyterians labored hard one hundred years earlier to establish a distinctly Reformed and Presbyterian missions board under the oversight of the general assembly of the PCUSA. Machen labored to establish an independent parachurch organization to do this same work.

However, this situation did not last long. His support for the Independent Board, his refusal to support the PCUSA foreign missions board, and his encouraging others to do the same resulted in him being deposed from the ministry. After being deposed, he left the PCUSA and helped form the OPC. By the end of 1937, the OPC had established her own Foreign Missions Committee which was directly accountable to the general assembly of the OPC. Four missionary couples who had been associated with the Independent Board left to serve under the auspices of the newly constituted OPC Foreign Missions Committee.

This represented a return to Old School Presbyterianism and, whether consciously or not, a return to the principles of missions outlined by Voetius. In fact, today, the policies of OPC foreign missions more closely resemble that of Voetius than nineteenth-century PCUSA foreign missions, in that the OPC has never sought to establish congregations of the OPC in other lands outside the US, nor has it maintained the social transformationalist tendencies of Old School postmillennialism.

Today, the OPC continues very much the same policies which it has had since its inception. The goal is the establishment of indigenous Presbyterian and Reformed churches in other lands through evangelism, church planting, leadership training, and diaconal assistance. Although educational and medical assistance are given through our missions committee, especially in Uganda, these efforts are subservient to the main goal of glorifying God through the gathering of God's elect into Christ's church through the proclamation of the gospel. While we continue to make use of "assistants and auxiliaries" as Voetius called them, or "missionary associates" as we call them, missionaries are primarily seminary trained, ordained men called especially to the task of gospel proclamation.

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# ServantReading

## The Law as Mosaic Covenant?

### A Review Article

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by David VanDrunen

*Promise, Law, Faith: Covenant-Historical Reasoning in Galatians*, by T. David Gordon. Hendrickson, 2019, xiv + 303 pages, \$39.95.

*Promise, Law, Faith in Romans: Covenant-Historical Reasoning Continued*, by T. David Gordon. Hendrickson, 2025, xii + 138 pages, \$39.95.

Paul's view of the law has been a major topic in biblical studies in recent decades, as debates surrounding the so-called New Perspective(s) on Paul (NPP) attest. Paul's view of the law is also relevant for recent controversies about justification in Reformed circles and our perennial discussions about the ongoing applicability of the Mosaic law. When one considers how frequently Paul uses the term "law" in Galatians and Romans, and how important these epistles are for Reformed theology, serious Reformed Christians cannot help but be interested in Paul-and-the-law debates.

T. David Gordon contributed to this topic with a 2019 book on the law in Galatians (henceforth, *Galatians*) and now with a 2025 sequel on the law in Romans (henceforth, *Romans*). Gordon, a retired PCA minister and former professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and Grove City College, argues that neither the NPP nor the standard Reformed interpretation satisfactorily interprets what Paul meant by "the law" and hence that both misunderstand important aspects of Paul's arguments in Galatians and Romans. While Gordon agrees with the doctrine of salvation Reformed theologians have taught from these epistles, he believes they have often misjudged the arguments of the epistles themselves.

Although Romans is much longer than Galatians, Gordon's *Galatians* is considerably longer than his *Romans*. *Galatians* also contains extensive interaction with Pauline scholarship, which *Romans* lacks. This reflects Gordon's purposes. The main attraction is *Galatians*, where he sets forth his main case with detail and rigor. *Romans* is secondary. Here Gordon seeks to confirm that Paul's use and interpretation of "the law" is the same as in Galatians and describes how to read Romans accordingly. Readers may be disappointed by the lack of engagement with contrary voices in *Romans*, but that is the decision the author has made.

In this review article, therefore, I first summarize Gordon's arguments about "the law" in Galatians and then, more briefly, his claims about Romans. I judge that in the big picture Gordon is correct—indeed, profoundly correct: Paul uses "the law" in the way Gordon claims, and this should shape our reading of Galatians and Romans. In the latter part of this article, however, I critically engage with some aspects of Gordon's

interpretation, particularly regarding the integration of traditional Reformed doctrines with Gordon's non-traditional interpretation of these epistles.

## Gordon on Galatians

Gordon's key claim is that when Paul uses "the law" (Greek: νόμος, *nomos*) without qualification, he refers to the *Mosaic* law. (Paul's appeal to "the law of Christ" in Galatians 6:2 is an example of a qualified use indicating that he means something other than the law of Moses.) More specifically, Paul consistently uses "the law" as a synecdoche for the Mosaic *covenant*. That is, because the giving of the law was the most prominent feature of the Mosaic covenant, Paul could use "the law" to describe that covenant as a whole. This key claim leads to a big-picture conclusion about Paul's argument in Galatians: His reasoning was *covenant-historical*. According to Gordon, Galatians treats redemptive history in terms of three distinct covenants: the Abrahamic, the Sinai, and new covenants, which Paul describes through the synecdoches of "promise," "law," and "faith," respectively. God made unconditional promises to Abraham, one of which was that all nations would be blessed through his seed, and Abraham received these promises by faith. Centuries later, God gave the law to Israel alone. This law promised blessing in the promised land if Israel obeyed and threatened judgments—ultimately exile—if Israel disobeyed. The purpose of the law was not to overturn the Abrahamic promises but, primarily, to keep Israel separate from the nations in order to keep alive memory of the Abrahamic promises and protect Abraham's descendants from intermarriage and idolatry. Finally, God sent Christ as the promised seed to provide salvation for all nations, in fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises. Unlike the Sinai covenant, the new covenant in Christ was for *all* peoples.

Gordon also draws the surprising conclusion that Paul argues *from* justification rather than *for* justification: Paul took the doctrine of justification by faith alone as common ground shared with his Galatian audience. Paul did not need to defend this doctrine but sought to show that the Galatians were living in ways inconsistent with it. That is, although the Galatian Christians knew that they were justified only by believing the Abrahamic promises fulfilled in Christ for Jew and Gentile alike, they insisted on observing the Mosaic law which demanded exclusion of Gentiles from the covenant community.

These are Gordon's main claims about Galatians. He compares his claims with the traditional Protestant belief that the Galatian church's main problem was legalism or works-righteousness, which also plagued contemporary Judaism. Thus, Protestants have typically thought that Paul's remedy was to convince the Galatians that justification was by faith alone, not by doing good works. To support this interpretation, then, the Reformed have taken "the law" in Galatians in several ways: in some texts as a reference to God's universal moral will, in other texts as a legalistic misuse of God's law, and sometimes as the Mosaic law. For Gordon, the Reformed are correct to believe that Paul affirms justification by faith in Christ alone but have misunderstood the problem Paul was trying to address in Galatians and thus also his solution to the problem.

Gordon also compares his interpretation to that of the NPP. For the NPP, the Galatian church's main problem was not works-righteousness. The problem instead concerned Jew-Gentile relations and the demand that all Christians adhere to requirements of the

Mosaic law that distinguished Jew from Gentile, such as circumcision. Gordon believes that the NPP basically gets this right. But he concludes that the NPP gets other important things wrong, such as what justification is and its identification of “righteousness” with covenant membership.

Gordon takes readers through the text of Galatians in chapters 3–6 to make his case in detail. Chapter 7 reflects on some broader implications of his conclusions. The volume concludes with three excurses, which take up almost a quarter of the book. Readers interested in recent Pauline-studies debates may find Excursus 2, regarding what “righteousness” means in Galatians, especially useful.

## **Gordon on Romans**

Gordon’s sequel argues that, despite many differences between the two epistles, Paul consistently used “law” (when unqualified) as a reference to the Sinai covenant in Romans, as he did in Galatians. Gordon seeks merely to show that Romans makes good sense when “law” is understood in this way.

Chapter 1 identifies five aspects of the Sinai covenant: commanding, condemning, atoning, prefiguring, and segregating (Jew from Gentile). When Paul speaks positively about the law, according to Gordon, it is ordinarily with respect to its commanding and atoning aspects, and when he speaks negatively about it, it is ordinarily with respect to its condemning and segregating aspects. Focusing on only one of these aspects makes it difficult to reconcile Paul’s positive and negative assessments.

The remaining five chapters take readers through Romans, giving attention only to sections of the epistle that use the term “law.” Romans 2 and 7 use “law” more often than any other chapter of Romans, so Gordon gives extended consideration to these texts. With respect to controverted issues in these passages, Gordon argues that 2:13 does not refer to an actual future justification based on doing the Mosaic law: “Will be justified” is “a logical/hypothetical future rather than a predictive future” (53). Those who claim otherwise make Paul’s view of the law incoherent, since elsewhere (Rom 3:20; Gal 2:16) Paul states that no one can or will be justified by works of the Mosaic law. Gordon also argues that 2:14–15 does not refer to intuitive knowledge of the natural law, although he affirms the idea of natural law. These verses, instead, simply refer to hypothetical Gentiles (whether Christian or not) who perform actions corresponding to what the Mosaic law prescribes and thus receive that law’s approval insofar as they do. Commenting on Romans 7:7–25, Gordon argues that Paul uses “I” not to describe his personal subjective experience (whether as converted or not) but to represent corporate Israel’s experience under the Mosaic law.

## **Assessment of Gordon’s Work**

Whatever one thinks of Gordon’s conclusions, readers will appreciate his clear and engaging writing style. Readers should also appreciate the spirit in which he writes. These are polemical books inasmuch as Gordon challenges well-entrenched interpretations of Galatians and Romans and knows that most of his readers will not be instinctively sympathetic. Yet he does not write in an angry or defensive way but mounts

a cheerful defense in the face of the odds stacked against him. Gordon comes across as the proverbial happy warrior.

With respect to the book's substance, I indicated above that I find his big-picture claim persuasive. Gordon makes his case that Paul ordinarily uses "law" to refer to the Mosaic law, and even to the Sinai covenant generally. There are places in Galatians and Romans where "law" undoubtedly refers to the Mosaic law. And Gordon correctly notes that in an organically unified, tightly interconnected argument (such as in Galatians and Romans), an author is unlikely to use a key word (such as "law") in alternating ways without clear indication that he does so. It is also implausible that Paul could have intended "under the law" and similar expressions to mean something like "under a legalistic misinterpretation/misuse of the law," as many Protestant interpreters have thought. Otherwise, Jesus himself would have been under a misinterpretation of the law (see Gal 4:4), which surely no one wishes to grant. One can question or disagree with particular points of Gordon's exegesis, as I do, and still agree that his case as a whole stands. Readers should know, however, that I have held this basic view for a long time, independently of Gordon, so I did not need to be convinced. I encourage readers to read Gordon and see what they think for themselves.

I do wish to engage Gordon on three issues that may also be of interest to readers. The first is a pressing one for readers who (like Gordon) subscribe to the Westminster Standards and wonder whether Gordon's views accord with them. Gordon himself occasionally calls attention to the potential problem, which, in simplified form, is that the Standards often treat the law ("moral law") as universally obligatory while Paul viewed the law as temporary and thus binding only for old-covenant Israel. In *Galatians*, Gordon hints at how he resolves this issue but does not really tie his thoughts together. This is a somewhat unsatisfying feature of the book, since confessional Protestants are an important part of Gordon's intended audience. He does, however, address the issue directly in a short but helpful appendix to his second chapter in *Romans*. He notes that the Standards use "law" in a variety of ways. Some of them, in fact, match Paul's: For example, "under the law" in Westminster Confession of Faith 7.5 means the Mosaic covenant. Gordon also says he affirms the idea behind the Standards' "moral law," although he prefers to call it "God's moral will," or the like. Gordon has concluded that he need take no exception to the Standards on this issue.

Second, Gordon's claim that Paul, in Galatians, argues *from* justification rather than *for* justification is very interesting, and one likely to strike most readers as highly implausible. Yet Gordon at least has a point. Paul does, for instance, speak of himself and his readers *knowing* that a person is justified by faith in Jesus Christ, not by works of the law (2:16). And when we think about it, why would this not be so? These were professing Christians, after all. How could recipients of the apostles' teaching *not* have heard and confessed that salvation is by faith in Christ alone? Yet while Gordon suggests that the doctrine of justification was not a problem in Galatia, I suspect the reality was more complicated. Even if the troublemakers in Galatia were not formally expositing a bad doctrine of justification, they were not simply living inconsistently with a good doctrine of justification. They had justification problems, as statements such as 5:4 indicate. I suspect Paul was reminding them of something they indeed *knew* but had in fact lost sight of. It is perhaps like someone appealing to Americans who disrespect others' free-speech rights: "We Americans *know* that everyone has a right to free expression!" Yes,



Americans know this at some level and may not formally deny it, and yet come to think and act in a very different way. It would be helpful, I think, to recognize Gordon's insight at this point, but to do so in a nuanced fashion.

Finally, on some occasions Paul speaks of *all* Christians as having been delivered from the law (unqualified). If we say, with Gordon, merely that this is the Mosaic law, it is difficult to understand how this makes sense, since Gentile Christians were never under the Mosaic law. Surely something more is going on. Consider this issue in Romans 6–7. In 6:14–15, Paul states that Christians are not under the law but under grace. This is in the midst of an explanation of the doctrine of salvation relevant for all believers. While it's technically true that Gentile Christians are not under the (Mosaic) law, it seems odd to explain their salvation in this way, since they were not under Moses even before they heard the gospel. The problem becomes more acute in 7:1–6. Paul addresses his readers as “brothers” (7:1, 4), obviously encompassing all his Christian readers and not Jews alone. And he states that all these Christians have died to the law and been released from it (7:4, 6). *Gentile* believers, therefore, have been delivered from *the law*. With Gordon, I believe there are good reasons to think Paul still has the Mosaic law in view, but if so, then Gentile Christians too have died to it. There must be *some* sense in which they were under Moses. For a solution, I would look back to 5:20, where Paul wrote that the (Mosaic) law entered in order to increase the trespass (of Adam). One purpose of the Mosaic law, this text indicates, was to show forth the plight of the entire human race fallen under Adam. Israel was a *microcosm*, an idea Gordon raises, albeit briefly, in *Galatians* (214–15). Thus, Gentile Christians could see, in Israel's sin and condemnation under Moses, their own judgment in Adam, and thus could also see, in the transition from old covenant to new covenant, a picture of the ultimately more important transition from being under Adam to being under Christ.

However readers put this and other issues of Pauline theology together, I believe they will find an open-minded and charitable reading of Gordon profitable. Gordon himself does not claim to have the final word on Galatians and Romans, but these books can certainly stimulate us to keep reading Paul better.

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# ServantReading

## New Covenant Theology

### A Review Article

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by Stephen A. Pribble

*What Is New Covenant Theology: An Introduction*, by A. Blake White. New Covenant Media, 2012, xiv + 60 pages, \$13.99.

New Covenant Theology (hereinafter NCT<sup>1</sup>) is a modified form of dispensationalism that distances itself from the excesses of pretribulation-rapture premillennialism while still denying paedobaptism. In the words of one proponent, NCT “[modifies] both traditional Covenant Theology and traditional Dispensational Theology in the areas of ecclesiology (Israel/Church) and ethics (law/grace).”<sup>2</sup> Author A. Blake White explains that NCT is “a developing system of theology.”<sup>3</sup> It selectively blends elements of covenant theology within a basically dispensationalist perspective. Despite its name, it is *not* a form of covenant theology.

NCT argues that the Bible does not teach something unless it is stated in a specific text of Scripture.<sup>4</sup> NCT cannot accept the idea of a covenant of grace because “the Bible never uses such a term” (5–6). To this the covenant theologian would reply that the *concept* is biblical, though the term itself is not explicitly stated in Scripture. NCT “*strives* to limit itself to using the language of the Bible” (6, emphasis added). The covenant theologian might ask: Why “*strives*”? If the Bible *must* use a specific term for a concept to have validity, then the exegete must consistently hold to that practice and never deviate from it. The doctrines of Scripture must be strictly limited to those which are expressed in the very words of Scripture—and no other! That “covenant of grace” is not a biblical term does not mean that the concept cannot be true, any more than “Trinity” not being a biblical term means that the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be true.

God chose to speak to man in ordinary—albeit heightened—human language. The Word was meant to be understood. The inspired, authoritative, and inerrant Word uses ordinary human words and literary forms. God enables man to think his thoughts after

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<sup>1</sup> Now apparently renamed “progressive covenantalism”; see <https://thoughtsinthelight.com/2025/06/02/a-god-who-gives-grace-a-refutation-of-progressive-covenantalism/> (accessed 8-15-25).

<sup>2</sup> Richard C. Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue* (Winepress Publishing, 2001), electronic edition, no page numbers.

<sup>3</sup> A. Blake White, *What Is New Covenant Theology: An Introduction* (New Covenant Media, 2012), 1.

<sup>4</sup> “The basic presuppositions of any system of theology must be established with specific texts of Scripture and not with theological terms.” John G. Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds: A Biblical Examination of the Presuppositions of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism* (New Covenant Media, 1998), ii.

him.<sup>5</sup> Studying the Bible as literature is a profitable undertaking. It is mistaken to claim that man cannot know a truth unless the Bible has a term for it.

God created man and gave him the task of naming all the creatures; God brought the creatures to Adam; Adam studied them and gave them appropriate names (Gen. 2:19–20). Significantly, God did not name the creatures; rather, he gave *man* the task of naming the creatures. Man in innocence did this appropriately; the work involved recognizing categories and relationships. Adam correctly recognized the differences between the beasts of the field, the fowl of the air, cattle, and the creeping things that creep upon the earth, and categorized them correctly. After the fall man retains the ability to categorize things based upon study and observation. There is a correspondence between “earthly things” and “heavenly things” (John 3:12). There is no reason to doubt that man, born again by grace, and seeking to know the mind of the Spirit, can use his God-given reasoning ability to categorize heavenly things. The Holy Scriptures, being inspired by God, have an internal consistency that enables such a task. They are like a perfect gemstone that dazzles with brilliance when viewed from any angle.

The underlying assumption of NCT and other forms of biblicism<sup>6</sup> is that it is illegitimate for man to observe patterns, categories, and relationships; to make observations and logical deductions; to define biblical ideas. NCT assumes that the Bible cannot be treated like other literature. Since the Bible does not use the term “covenant of grace,” there is no such thing as a covenant of grace. Since the Bible does not specifically divide God’s holy law into the categories moral, ceremonial, and judicial, such distinctions are illegitimate.

Literary analysis involves examining a text to understand its meaning by studying elements, including storyline, setting, characters, point of view, themes, symbolism, imagery, figures of speech, tone, style, and context, among others. What is the essence of the biblical storyline? Where does a particular incident fit into the storyline? Why does the narrator mention one thing and omit another, or stress one thing and not another? These are appropriate areas of inquiry.

The Bible was not given to private individuals to try to figure out its meaning on their own; it was given to the church. Jesus promised that his Holy Spirit would guide his disciples—his church—into all truth. Man must listen to the *church* (see Matt. 18:17). Christians are to read the Bible *with* the church. We must not disregard this clear command of our Lord.

Where has the church expressed its understanding of Holy Scripture? In its *creeds* and *confessions*. These documents are not inspired, and they are subject to revision as the church’s understanding of Holy Scripture is expressed more perfectly. The creeds and confessions of the whole church express the trinitarian faith of Holy Scripture. If a sect denies the church’s understanding of the Trinity, it is no part of Christ’s church, but a cult. By the same token, if a local church makes a particular understanding of the end times (such as a pre-tribulation rapture or literal 1,000-year earthly kingdom) part of its official teaching required to be believed by all members, it is requiring something that the whole

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<sup>5</sup> There are limits, for God is infinite, and man is finite. While man cannot know the infinite God *comprehensively*, the regenerate, taught by the Holy Spirit, can know God *truly* (John 3:3, 17:3).

<sup>6</sup> Strict adherence to the letter of the Bible, along with a refusal to hear the church (cf. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/biblicism>, accessed 8-15-25)

church has never required.<sup>7</sup> It is not reading the Bible *with* the church; it is not *hearing* the church in obedience to Christ. Dispensationalism must be rejected because its methodology has never been adopted by the church and is contrary to the historic teaching of the church.

According to White, “We believe the old covenant, as a whole, was temporary by divine design” (19). Note that adherents of NCT “believe” this. The appropriate response must be something like, “Chapter and verse, please!” No specific text of Holy Scripture teaches this; *why* should NCT believe this? White does not say. To believe such is inconsistent with NCT’s basic presupposition that all doctrine must be established with specific texts of Scripture.

Citing 2 Corinthians 3:5–11, White states: “Here, Paul has some strikingly negative things to say about the old covenant” (20). But the text he cites is not talking about the *whole* old covenant, but only the *Mosaic administration* of the old covenant (“the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone . . . the Israelites could not gaze at Moses’ face”). Covenant theology does not teach that the *whole* old covenant was done away with in Christ, but rather *part of the Mosaic law*. The Westminster Confession explains that the “ceremonial laws are now *abrogated*, under the new testament,” the “judicial laws . . . *expired* together with the State of Israel,” yet “the moral law doth forever bind all.”<sup>8</sup>

Citing Hebrews 8:6–13, White states: “It is clear that the new covenant will replace the old covenant” (22). What he means is that the new covenant replaces the old covenant *wholesale*; the old covenant has no further significance.<sup>9</sup> However, in the text cited, the contrast is not between the new covenant and the old covenant but between the new covenant and the *Mosaic* covenant (“on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt”). The *Mosaic administration* of the old covenant (specifically, the ceremonial law) passed away, *not the entire old covenant*. For if the entire old covenant passed away, then God’s solemn promise to Abraham, that he would be “a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee”—a promise that would extend to “a thousand generations” (Gen. 17:7 KJV; cf. Deut. 7:9, 1 Chron. 16:15, Ps. 105:8) and that is fulfilled in Christ (John 8:56, Rom. 4:3)—passed away as well. Since Hebrew men typically learned a trade and established themselves in business to be able to marry and support a (younger) wife, biblical generations were long—perhaps forty years;<sup>10</sup> thus, a thousand generations would translate into something like 35,000–40,000 *years*. But if the Abrahamic covenant was “an interim covenant, a parenthesis in redemptive history” (19) that passed away with the coming of Christ, then the promised thousand generations petered out after only two thousand years. What does that do to God’s reputation as one that “keepeth covenant” (Neh. 1:5 KJV)? White does not say.

White writes: “Another essential aspect of New Covenant Theology is its view that the old covenant law is a unit. It is a package deal” (25). Again, the covenant theologian would respond, “Chapter and verse, please!” Where does the Bible specifically state that

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<sup>7</sup> The church has legitimate executive and judicial authority, but *not* lawmaking authority. Its task is to teach the whole counsel of God: *everything* that is in the Bible and *nothing* that is *not* in the Bible.

<sup>8</sup> WCF 19.3–5, <https://opc.org/documents/CFLayout.pdf#page=85> ff. with Scripture proofs, emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> The old covenant ought not to be cited then (or preached from) at all, if his position is true.

<sup>10</sup> After Job’s troubles, he lived 140 years and saw four generations of descendants—each approximately thirty-five years (Job 42:16).

this should be an “essential” view? More to the point, why *adopt* this idea if NCT “strives to limit itself to using the language of the Bible” (6)—and Scripture nowhere states that? Amazingly, NCT “[agrees] that *some* verses *can* safely be classified as moral, ceremonial, or civil”—a telling concession!—yet NCT theologians “find it unhelpful, and more importantly, unbiblical, to do so” (25, emphasis White’s).<sup>11</sup> Though the Bible does not specifically classify various commandments as moral, ceremonial, or judicial,<sup>12</sup> why cannot the church, carefully studying the various biblical laws and seeking to “*rightly divide* the Word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15 KJV, emphasis added<sup>13</sup>), classify them according to generally accepted, recognized categories? The Bible was written in ordinary human language and was intended to speak to the minds and hearts of men. Saints are to approach it with renewed *minds* (Rom. 12:2), not just quote biblical verbiage without engaging it. Preaching (exposition and application of a biblical text in the preacher’s own words, not merely quoting the inspired words) is fundamentally different from the public reading of Scripture.<sup>14</sup>

Why should classifying biblical laws be “unhelpful” (25)? If classifying species is helpful in biology, why is not classifying biblical laws helpful in theology? Why does NCT bind men’s consciences to a non-biblical methodology (limiting the exegete to using only the very words of Scripture, and disqualifying the use of non-biblical terms)?

White states: “The New Testament clearly teaches that we are no longer bound to the Sabbath Commandment” (29). Does it? Where? Again, chapter and verse, please! White quotes Colossians 2:16–17 (ESV): “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” He fails to point out that “Sabbath” in the original Greek is actually plural (cf. NKJV: “let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or *sabbaths*,” emphasis added). He further cites Galatians 4:8–11, which speaks of observing “*days*<sup>15</sup> and months and seasons and years”—clearly references to the ceremonial sabbaths, *not* the weekly Sabbath.<sup>16</sup> White fails to prove that “the New Testament clearly teaches that we are no longer bound to the Sabbath Commandment;” he states it; he would like it to be true; but he does not prove it.<sup>17</sup> The NCT view of the Sabbath is antinomian, and appeals to fallen man’s desire to *not* be bound by the law of God.

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<sup>11</sup> White fails to explain how, according to his hermeneutic, one can “safely” make classifications that are “unbiblical” (25).

<sup>12</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith 19:4, [https://www.opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter\\_19](https://www.opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_19).

<sup>13</sup> Ὁρθοτομέω (*orthotomeō*), literally *cut straight*, thus *handle aright*. Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon (Logos Bible Software).

<sup>14</sup> Ezra read the book of the law before the assembled congregation; the Levites “gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading,” using their own (uninspired) words (Neh. 8:1–8, esp. v. 8, NKJV).

<sup>15</sup> Plural, not “the [Sabbath] *day*” (singular), emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Lev. 23 NKJV, which not only speaks of “a Sabbath” and “the Sabbath” (in reference to the weekly Sabbath) but also uses “Sabbath” or “Sabbaths” to refer to the feasts of firstfruits (v. 11), weeks (v. 15), trumpets (v. 24), and the day of atonement (v. 32), and also speaks of “the Sabbaths of the LORD” (plural, v. 38). Clearly this is the language the apostle Paul had in mind when he spoke of “Sabbaths” (plural) in Col. 2 and Gal. 4; in the New Testament there is a clear difference between “the Sabbath” (the weekly Sabbath) and “the Sabbaths” (the ceremonial Sabbaths). White fails to take this into account.

<sup>17</sup> Jesus’s declaration that he is Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:8, Mark 2:28, Luke 6:5) makes no sense if the Sabbath is abolished; Christ is not the Lord of a non-entity.

White claims that NCT “ratchets up the call for righteous living”<sup>18</sup> (30). Actually, it is Christ who does this, not NCT. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shows that it was *God’s intent all along* that the moral law must be obeyed from the heart, not just outwardly.

The author needs to *prove*—not just assume—that the New Testament believer is under Christ’s law alone. It is reading too much into the expression “subject to the law of Christ” (ἐννομος Χριστοῦ, *ennomos Christou*<sup>19</sup>) (31) to conclude that “we are not under the Mosaic law” (31). Christ emphatically stated: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law” (Matt. 5:17 KJV). His ethics are precisely those of the Old Testament moral law. He, the Lawgiver incarnate,<sup>20</sup> gave that law at the beginning, and it is perfect (Ps. 19:7); he is pleased with it; it needs no updating. It is “straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel” (Matt. 23:24) to think that the believer should refrain from lying only on the basis that the New Testament says, “*lie not one to another*” (Col. 3:9 KJV, emphasis added), rather than on the basis that the Old Testament says, “Ye shall not steal, neither deal falsely, *neither lie one to another*” (Lev. 19:11 KJV). God’s moral law has not changed; the ethical and moral requirements of both Old Testament and New Testaments are exactly the same.

White contends that “the new covenant community consists only of those who are indwelt by the Spirit. The church is to be a *believer’s church*” (43, emphasis White’s). Responding to this line of thinking, Gregg Strawbridge says: “If it can be proved that there are people under new covenant obligations (i.e., ‘in the covenant’) who become apostates, then the claim that only regenerate people are in the new covenant will be shown to be false.”<sup>21</sup> In support of this premise he cites Hebrews 10:29–31,

How much more severe punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, “vengeance is mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge His people.” It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (NASB)

He points out that

only ten verses before the above passage, the writer cites the preeminent new covenant passage (Jer. 31:33–34) [where] the writer argues that some individuals who have been ‘sanctified’ (*hagiazō*, ‘set apart’ or ‘consecrated’) in ‘His people’ (the visible people of God) may commit apostasy.<sup>22</sup>

He also cites Hebrews 10:39; 12:15–17; 6:4–6; 4:7, 11; 10:35; John 15:2, 6; Romans 11:13–21; and 1 Peter 4:17, then observes that “these statements are quite meaningless if

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<sup>18</sup> It is unclear if White sees the irony of stating that NCT “ratchets up the call for righteous living” immediately after arguing for an antinomian view of the Sabbath.

<sup>19</sup> “Under the law of Christ” or “subject to the law of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:21, NASB, ESV), William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 1957, 1975), 266.

<sup>20</sup> Gen. 49:10

<sup>21</sup> Gregg Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (P&R Publishing, 2003), 280.

<sup>22</sup> Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 281.

no one in the covenant can be broken off or judged.”<sup>23</sup> It is quite evident to all but Anabaptists that the visible church contains both wheat and tares (Matt. 13:30).

According to White, “It is not that Israel equals the church, as Covenant Theology teaches, but that Jesus is the climax and fulfillment of Israel and the church is the end-time Israel *because it is united to Jesus Christ, her covenant head*” (45, emphasis White’s).<sup>24</sup> White does not explain why he needs to coin the term “end-time Israel” when the Bible does not use that term. Were not Old Testament saints saved by the Christ who was to come (John 8:56, Rom. 4:3)? Were they not united to Christ, the covenant head? Is he asserting that Christ was *absent* during the Old Testament? Were the Old Testament saints saved apart from Christ? That is unthinkable! The apostle Peter courageously declared before a hostile Sanhedrin: “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12 KJV).

In summary, White inconsistently follows NCT’s stated hermeneutic (to “limit itself to using the language of the Bible” [6]), following it when it suits him, ignoring it at other times. He fails to prove that the old covenant was temporary; that the law is a unit and cannot be divided into the categories moral, ceremonial, and judicial; that Christians are not under the law of Moses but only under the law of Christ; that all members of the new covenant community have the Holy Spirit and cannot apostatize; and that the church is not the continuation of Old Testament Israel but the “eschatological Israel.”<sup>25</sup> NCT is not the historic teaching of the Christian church but an adaptation of nineteenth-century dispensationalism. It does not read the Bible as an organic whole; it does not acknowledge the essential unity of Scripture but regards the old covenant as obsolete and no longer applicable. It is not based on careful exegesis but on wishful thinking. It must be rejected.

As I was writing this review, I listened to a sermon by John Reisinger, a proponent of NCT and an endorser of White’s book. As he closed his sermon, Reisinger said: Israel did not inherit the blessings of the covenant because she never kept the covenant. Why do we inherit the blessings? Because One kept the covenant in our place. The glory of the new covenant is that God has given One in our place to live under the law and die under its awful curse, after he had fulfilled every one of its demands.

That is the gospel!—but it applies also to saints under the old covenant. If it does not, then God has two ways of salvation. But what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Rom. 4:3 KJV). Abraham was justified by faith “in the LORD” (יהוה YHWH, Gen. 15:6). This is precisely the same way that saints under the new covenant are saved: Our sins are laid upon our sinless substitute, the Lord Jesus—Yahweh incarnate—and his perfect righteousness is credited to us by faith. There is *one* way of salvation: *through Christ*. There is one church. That church has always included believers and their children. The New Testament nowhere teaches that the children of believers, which for two thousand years since the time of Abraham had

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<sup>23</sup> Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 282.

<sup>24</sup> White fails to cite where covenant theologians or the Reformed creeds teach that “Israel equals the church”; to make such an assertion without documentation is to bear false witness against Christian brethren, a violation of the Fifth Commandment.

<sup>25</sup> White needs to be reminded that “eschatological Israel” is not a biblical term, and thus an invalid category according to his hermeneutic.

been included in the covenant people, are now, under the new covenant, excluded. If the saved of Israel and the saved of the church are not the same body, then Christ has *two* peoples. That is latent dispensationalism. This was never the teaching of the church, but a novel doctrine introduced by John Nelson Darby in the 1830s and popularized by C. I. Scofield in his reference Bible, first published in 1909.<sup>26</sup>

As he closed his message, Reisinger said (to laughter!): “Every time those Jews whip those Arabs, I get out my Charles Larkins charts and go over them one more time.” That is very telling! That is where Reisinger’s heart really lies—with Christ-hating Jews; with the civil government of the modern nation-state of Israel. Reisinger is a closet dispensationalist. He does not think covenantally, sufficiently appreciating the overarching unity of Scripture, but dispensationally. At the outset I stated that NCT is a modified form of dispensationalism. Reisinger’s comments corroborate this.

How were Old Testament saints saved? By Christ! “Neither is there salvation in any other” (Acts 4:12)! Israel according to the flesh (Rom. 9:3) perished; Israel according to the election of grace (Rom. 11:15, cf. Heb. 11) was saved by grace, through faith in the Christ who *was to come*. At the present time, elect sinners who were given to the Son in eternity past, and regenerated by the Spirit in time, are saved by the Christ who *has* come; though they fall, they will not be utterly cast down, but will be restored, like the apostle Peter, by our merciful Savior. Not one of them will perish eternally; all will infallibly be brought to the court of heaven to worship the Lamb forever and ever. Christ will unfailingly “give eternal life to all whom you have given him” by the Father in eternity past (John 17:2).

There are not two ways of salvation. There are not two peoples of God, one that includes the children of believers and the other excluding them. God requires faith, a gift given by his sovereign Spirit. Salvation is all of grace. The unbelieving branches are broken off, and the branches that are wild by nature are grafted in. God is able to graft the believing natural branches back into his olive tree.<sup>27</sup> There is a single olive tree, including both Jew and Gentile: one church, saved eternally by Christ the Son, through the Spirit, to the glory of the Father. Amen.

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<sup>26</sup> C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1909, 1917, 1937, 1945).

<sup>27</sup> Rom. 11:17, 23–24.



# ServantReading

## Paradise Lost: A Biography *by Alan Jacobs*

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by Charles Malcolm Wingard

*Paradise Lost: A Biography*, by Alan Jacobs. Princeton University Press, 2025, 203 pages, \$24.95.

Nothing is easy about *Paradise Lost* (PL)—and especially not for contemporary readers.

First, the poem itself presents problems. Long gone are the days when it could be assumed that educated Americans had read—or at least dipped into—the epic poetry of Homer, Virgil, and Milton. *Paradise Lost* contains over ten thousand lines of blank verse and is full of references to Greek and Latin literature, cosmological speculations, an imaginative recasting of the first three chapters of Genesis, a tour of the unfolding biblical history of redemption, and no small amount of theological polemics. Content alone is enough to deter many readers. Still others make it to the finish line wondering if their perseverance was worth it. As Mark Twain wryly noted, *Paradise Lost* meets one definition of a classic: “Something that everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read” (126).

There are problems with the poem. There are also problems with the poet. At least in his own day, Milton found himself on “the wrong side of history.” His support of the parliamentary army, defense of regicide, and service in Cromwell’s government were all, by the Stuart restoration, lost causes.

If national tumult and civil war were not enough, life in the poet’s home was turbulent. His first wife left him, leading him to write a brief for divorce (she eventually returned). If historical accounts are reliable, three daughters found him to be a domestic tyrant.

Problems with poet and poem acknowledged, *Paradise Lost* remains a classic of English literature. And Alan Jacob’s *Paradise Lost: A Biography* provides ample motivation to take up and read or reread the great work. A volume in the Lives of Great Religious Books series, its purpose “is to provide a biography of the poem—that is, to narrate how it has lived over the centuries since its composition.” To make this project manageable in less than two hundred pages, Jacobs confines himself to three hotly contested areas in Milton studies: government, sexual politics, and theology proper (29–30). One need not proceed far in his whirlwind history of the poem’s interpretation before coming to agree with him that “almost every statement one might make about *Paradise Lost*, even the most apparently anodyne, may be debated.” (71)

Four towering figures of English literature and Milton studies in the century following the publication of *Paradise Lost* prove Jacob’s point. A contemporary, John Dryden, first conjectured that Satan is the epic’s hero, a recurring viewpoint in

subsequent generations (67). Joseph Addison could not disagree more, asserting that “it is certainly the Messiah who is the hero, both in the principal action and in the chief episodes” (70). Tory Samuel Johnson despised not only Milton’s republicanism but also his neglect of corporate, household, and personal hours of prayer. Whether monarch or prelate, “[Milton] hated all whom he was required to obey” (77–78). Among Milton’s admirers stood England’s great eighteenth-century evangelical poet, William Cowper. In a letter, he recounted his dream of meeting Milton and sharing with him “a long story of the manner in which it [*Paradise Lost*] affected me, when I first discovered it, being at that time a schoolboy” (84).

A later writer, William Blake of the Romantic Age, found both Milton’s theology and view of women offensive, leading him to assert famously, “Milton was of the Devil’s party without knowing it” (90). Percy Shelley relieved Milton of the charge of ignorance: The Satan he presents is morally superior to God. In his estimation, Milton becomes a key figure in “that fervid awakening of the public mind which shook to dust the oldest and most oppressive form of the Christian religion” (111).

During the Victorian era, many readers treated the poem with respect, recognizing it as a classic in the canon of English literature, but comparatively few felt the “need to reckon with it in specifically *religious* terms” (128–29).

The twentieth century produced its share of hostile critics. Virginia Woolf minced no words when she wrote: “There’s something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.” Therefore, it is no surprise when she asks in her diary, “Has any great poem ever let in so little light upon one’s own joys and sorrows?” (129–30) A professing Christian, T. S. Eliot, nevertheless, found Milton’s theology “in large part repellant” (134).

Among Milton’s twentieth-century defenders were Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis. The latter opined that “many of those who say they dislike Milton’s God only mean that they dislike God” (143). For Lewis, Milton’s God and the Christian God are “one in the same” (145). No doubt, Milton would have agreed with Lewis. As Jacobs comments, “Milton is passionately concerned to identify certain central beliefs of the Christian faith, to portray them dramatically, and to expose their significance for all of us who live in the aftermath of the Eden story. (That is, for all of us)” (xiv). One who has little sympathy for orthodox Christianity is unlikely to think appreciatively of the theology of *Paradise Lost*, so closely are the two intertwined.

Milton’s goal is theological, namely, to “justify the way of God to men” (*Paradise Lost* I, 26). Milton’s interest in the redemption of fallen man by Christ never wavers. At the outset, readers are confronted “with loss of Eden, till one greater man / Restore us, and regain the blissful seat” (PL I, 3–5). Fallen man’s hope rests in the Savior who will come in the flesh:

Proclaiming life to all who shall believe  
In his redemption, and that his obedience  
Imputed becomes theirs by faith, his merits  
To save them, not their own, though legal works. (PL XII, 407–409)

While Reformed Christians will find fault with various points of Milton’s theology, *Paradise Lost* remains an extraordinary endeavor to justify the ways of the God of the

Bible to men. The number who share the basic contours of Milton's theology have dwindled in the once Christian West, but elsewhere the faith thrives. Jacobs asks, "As Christianity's center of gravity migrates to the Global South, might we look forward to future readers of Milton's poem among Korean Presbyterians? Nigerian Anglicans? Brazilian Pentecostals? Who knows what future readers of this great epic might find in it?" (186–87).

And might one wish for a revival of interest in the west for the classic Christian works of English literature? After all, reformation of the church has been a recovery of important texts in the Christian tradition. If our reading of *Paradise Lost* leads to the closer study of Scripture and deeper theological reflection, it will prove more than a poem to be aesthetically admired, but a treasure from the mines of Christian history to be cherished by those who prize the truths of God's Word.

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# ServantPoetry

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## Change Should Breed Change

William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585–1649)

New doth the sun appear,  
The mountains' snows decay,  
Crowned with frail flowers forth comes the baby year.  
My soul, time posts away,  
And thou yet in that frost  
Which flower and fruit hath lost,  
As if all here immortal were, dost stay:  
For shame! Thy powers awake,  
Look to that heaven which never night makes black,  
And there, at that immortal sun's bright rays,  
Deck thee with flowers which fear not rage of days.