

# NEW HORIZONS

— in the ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH —

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OCTOBER 2023

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## PRESBYTERIANS AND NONVERTS

100 YEARS AFTER

*CHRISTIANITY AND LIBERALISM*



DANNY E. OLINGER // 3

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## New Horizons

in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

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At their August meeting at the Orthodox Presbyterian  
 Church offices in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, the  
 members of the Committee on Ministerial Care met  
 with the general secretaries of the standing committees,  
 interacted with the OPC administrative staff, and  
 welcomed new member Richard Ellis (back row, second  
 from left). They also discussed insurance alternatives for  
 ministers (see page 16).



# PRESBYTERIANS AND NONVERTS: 100 YEARS AFTER *CHRISTIANITY AND LIBERALISM*



**DANNY E. OLINGER // People who once identified with a Christian religious tradition but now identify with none are the fastest growing group in America today. Sociologist Stephen Bullivant labels these individuals “nonverts” and argues in his book of the same title that these individuals have had a profound effect**

on the changing relationship of Christianity to American culture.<sup>1</sup> Christianity is no longer the default setting in America. Christianity is now in a minor key; nonverts set the tone, and their music is secular.

Surveys today place those who cite “no religion” as their personal religious preference as fifty-nine million people. Bullivant’s interest, however, is in trying to understand the forty-one million people who say that they were brought up in the church or belonged to the church but now are non-religious. One of his primary findings through extensive interviews and research is that nonverts are often antagonistic to what they perceive to be the injustices associated with the Christian tradition. Feeling that their parents and others in authority have harmed them, nonverts often adopt a neo-pagan (Wiccan) position in which they seek to do no harm to others. This fuels many nonverts’ passionate

support of LGBTQ positions.

Nonverts who are not filled with anger about what they perceive as societal harm done to them and others by Christianity often turn away from Christianity due to indifference. The “Flatline Protestant” chapter opens with the words, “I was Presbyterian.” Bullivant asks the twenty-two-year-old young man who made that declaration, “And now?” The young man responds, “I’m nonreligious at this point.” He explains further, “I’m not saying I won’t go back to being religious again. It’s just a little like an inconvenience for me to be a practicing Presbyterian” (74). Prior to this, the young man testifies, he was involved in all sorts of short-term mission trips to Peru, “providing humanitarian aid, all that stuff.” Now he doesn’t hate it; he just doesn’t have time for it. Bullivant observes that this young man’s transition from practicing Presbyterian to nonvert involved no great spiritual

crisis. “He just dropped it, as one might a gym membership, when he found other, more pressing things to be doing” (75).

Bullivant’s argumentation for the nonverts’ movement away from the church—that it is most likely a personal decision rooted in individual experience or preferences—is at odds with reporting that identifies scandals in the churches as the main reason people leave Christianity. Political identity and sexual choices, whether personal or by family members, carry the most weight. The scandals only confirm to nonverts that the decision to leave was a correct one.

Bullivant reports that over one million ex-Presbyterians now identify as a “none.” The loss of membership is so rapid in the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA), over seventy thousand members per year since 2009, that within a decade at its current decline it will be surpassed by the Presbyte-

rian Church in America (PCA) as the largest Presbyterian denomination in the United States. But Bullivant states that it is not just the PCUSA that is in a death spiral. The other six Protestant denominations (Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran, United Methodist, American Baptist, Congregational, and Disciples of Christ) that were labeled mainline—the moniker coming from the churches being on the path of the Pennsylvania Railroad that terminated in Philadelphia, site of the 1908 founding of the Federal Council of Churches—are also in a state of terminal downfall. In the early 1950s, over half of Americans (52 percent) belonged to one of the mainline churches. In 2018, only 12 percent were members, but, even more discouraging, if that were possible, only one-fourth of those who said they were members reported that they attend church on a weekly basis. In other words, a generation into the twenty-first century, only 3 percent of the population of the United States are active members of a mainline Protestant church.

### Losing Their Religion

What Bullivant makes clear is that the ex-mainline Protestants are not flocking to Bible-believing, confessional churches but rather are identifying themselves as non-religious. In addition to the one million ex-Presbyterians now checking the “nonreligious” box are seven and a half million ex-Baptists, two million ex-Methodists, two million ex-Lutherans, and one million ex-Episcopalians.

According to reviewer and political scientist Benjamin Mabry, what Bullivant does not examine is the philosophical correlation between these mainline Protestant churches and American secularism. Mabry writes,

The most significant weakness of the book is one it shares with much scholarship on this topic: It does not recognize that American secularism has a great deal in common with mainline Protestantism, that it constitutes a coherent, if yet unnamed, ideological perspective in itself. Seen

in this light, what looks like “nonversion” may actually be a very small step between two similar systems.<sup>2</sup>

Mabry observes that throughout Bullivant’s study, the nonverts interviewed return to the same handful of secular ideological arguments to illustrate their opposition to their former faiths.

Mabry then connects the dots in a way that Bullivant doesn’t. Mabry argues that the way in which mainline Protestant churches throughout the twentieth century increasingly de-emphasized the supernatural, soteriological, and eschatological teaching of the Bible led to the point where these teachings lost relevance or were abandoned altogether. What did not happen until the twenty-first century, however, is the utter collapse of Protestant identity. Many Protestants merely simplified their practice in getting rid of the unnecessary element of church attendance and supernaturalism. Mabry concludes, “If the primary reason to go to church was the civil rights activism, what exactly was the purpose of maintaining a priest and sanctuary?”

### Christianity and Liberalism

In *Christianity and Liberalism*, J. Gresham Machen anticipated the collapse of the Presbyterian Church. He stated plainly that the theological liberalism pervading the PCUSA was not Christianity and was going to give birth to something that is not Christianity. One hundred years later, the PCUSA has become a spiritual wasteland, its corporate identity virtually indistinguishable from the modern post-Protestant secular culture.

In Machen’s day, there were those in the PCUSA arguing that it must be a broadening church—namely, that if it didn’t compromise in regard to things proven contrary to scientific inquiry, like the virgin birth and resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the church was going to be ridiculed as ignorant and was going to lose its position in American culture. Machen replied that in moving away from the Bible in an effort to accommo-

date Christianity to culture, the church was rapidly losing her power. There would be nothing distinctive of Christianity but a sordid life of utilitarianism.

Worse still, Machen pointed out, the attack upon sound doctrine in the church had brought paganism into the church in the name of Christianity. In the Bible’s place was a secularism that sought to explain life, both individually and corporately, in terms of undirected natural forces. This shift meant that the living God, creator of heaven and earth, was no longer the one who defined truth by his revealed will in Scripture. The arbiter of truth now was the individual and how that individual perceived and interpreted reality.

Machen also lamented worship services where the preacher primarily gave advice about the society’s problems. For liberal preachers, this was judged acceptable as the supernaturalism of the Bible was considered symbolic, and thus Christianity was believed to deal primarily with morality, not redemption. For Machen, here rested the most fundamental difference between liberalism and Christianity—liberalism is in the imperative mood. It appeals to the will of man. Christianity begins with a triumphant indicative. It announces first a gracious act of God, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for sinners.

When Machen wrote *Christianity and Liberalism*, the reaction among leading moderates in the PCUSA was that, of course, Machen was right doctrinally, but he shouldn’t have stirred up trouble by cutting the liberals out of the church. Machen anticipated such a reaction in *Christianity and Liberalism*. He maintained that only God could answer such delicate personal questions as to whether one is a Christian or not. But one thing remained clear: liberalism is not Christianity. □

*The author is editor of New Horizons.*

### Notes

1. Stephen Bullivant, *Nonverts: The Making of Ex-Christian America* (New York: Oxford Press, 2022).
2. Benjamin Mabry, “Losing Their Religion,” *First Things*, August–September 2023.

# WHAT MACHEN LEARNED FROM THE CLASSICS



**D. G. HART //** Historians have struggled to make sense of J. Gresham Machen. The earliest interpretations of conservative opposition to liberalism (in the church) looked to region and economics. Conservative Protestants were supposed to be rural, economically backward, and poorly educated. That outlook might

have looked sensible to people who viewed conservative Protestantism through the lens of the Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee. But it made it very hard to understand Machen who was urban, wealthy—and especially well educated. He attended private schools in Baltimore before going to Johns Hopkins University where he majored in Classics. His mentor, Basil L. Gildersleeve, one of the most preeminent classicists of his day, was also an elder at the Machens' home congregation, Franklin Street Presbyterian Church. Machen stayed at Johns Hopkins to complete a master's degree in ancient Greek literature before he attended Princeton Seminary, where he found New Testament studies a congenial outlet for his academic instincts. Before teaching at Princeton, Machen also did a year of study in New Testament at German universities. All that schooling turned Machen into the man H. L. Mencken dubbed "Doctor Fundamentalis."

Machen's intellectual background also gave him a different critique from common fundamentalist objections to Protestant liberalism. Unlike the views

popularized in Bible conferences and Bible colleges, Machen avoided debates about human origins or the return of Christ. His book *Christianity and Liberalism* featured the vicarious atonement. This was for Machen a doctrine far more crucial to the gospel than debates about the beginning and end of human history. Liberal Protestants, as Machen argued, thought they could save Christianity by getting rid of its supernatural appearance. By so doing, the church could appeal to modern men and women who were accustomed to "following the science." Machen countered that sinners had no solution for human sinfulness before a holy God without the perfect life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Liberals might think that following Jesus's remarkably wise teachings was a good way to live virtuously. It was no match, though, for reconciling sinners with God. Only a divine supernatural intervention, through Jesus Christ, could save humankind. Liberal Protestantism's attempt to save Christianity by eliminating miracles was the reason Machen condemned modernism as a different religion. Liberalism did

not preserve Christianity. It substituted morality for the saving work of Christ.

## The Ancient World and Education

Of course, as a professor of NT and a Presbyterian minister, Machen was well equipped to see the danger of liberalism. At the same time, his training in Greek and Roman antiquity also heightened Machen's awareness of the distance between Christianity's antiquity and American Protestantism's modernity. The introduction to *Christianity and Liberalism*, perhaps one of the oddest parts of the book, gives away Machen's concerns as someone whose imagination was filled with the ancient world.

When he tried to appeal to readers outside the church, Machen looked for plausible analogies. He picked one from the sphere of education. Machen lamented a series of state laws passed during the Red Scare of the 1920s to bar teaching foreign languages in public and private schools before the eighth grade. Worries about a divided loyalty to the United States had prompted some of these laws. But Machen saw them

as an attack on teaching ancient languages: “no foreign language, apparently not even Latin or Greek, is to be studied until the child is too old to learn it well.” Machen worried that modern curricula were cutting Americans off from the great literature and history of the past.

It was not just the ancient authors whom Machen admired but also the “classics” of European literature. That is



J. Gresham Machen, 1929

why he made sure readers understood that his complaints about the “Un-Christian” nature of liberalism was not a reason to avoid all pagan literature. “Socrates was not a Christian,” he wrote, “neither was Goethe; yet we share to the full the respect with which their names are regarded.” These non-Christian writers towered “immeasurably above the common run of men.” If believers were in any way superior to non-Christians, the reasons owed solely to the “undeserved privilege” of God’s grace, which ought to make believers “humble rather than contemptuous” of great writers.

Machen’s emphasis on filling the minds of students with content, rather than training them in how to learn, dovetailed with his understanding of the importance of catechesis. Instead of exposing believers to the spiritual lives of saints, Machen underscored the significance of doctrine. “The most important thing of all,” Machen wrote, for turning the church away from its liberal drift,

was “a renewal of Christian education.” Just as students in American schools were being ruined by an emphasis on method, the churches were languishing under the illusion that “Christianity is a life and not also a doctrine.” As a result, ignorance of Christianity prevailed in both the church and more broadly in American society. The remedy was instruction in Christian doctrine, first in the home and then in whatever educational institutions churches could create. “Christian education is the chief business of the hour for every earnest Christian,” Machen wrote in the conclusion of *Christianity and Liberalism*.

### Marking the Influence of Paul

Machen’s writing about the Bible also showed, often without any fanfare, the benefit of reading and thinking about the Bible with the aid of a classical education. One example comes from Machen’s introduction to *The Origin of Paul’s Religion* (1921):

The importance of [Paul’s] achievement must be apparent to every historian, no matter how unsympathetic his attitude toward the content of Christianity may be. The modern European world, what may be called “western civilization,” is descended from the civilization of Greece and Rome. Our languages are either derived directly from the Latin, or at any rate connected with the same great family. Our literature and art are inspired by the great classical models. Our law and government have never been independent of the principles enunciated by the statesmen of Greece, and put into practice by the statesmen of Rome. Our philosophies are obliged to return ever anew to the questions which were put, if not answered, by Plato and Aristotle. (20)

Readers will have a hard time finding a more concise description of the importance of Greco-Roman civilization for the history of the West.

With that background in mind, Machen pointed out how odd and remarkable was Christianity’s rise within

an ancient world dominated by Greek philosophy and Roman politics.

How comes it that a thoroughly Semitic book like the Bible has been accorded a place in medieval and modern life to which the glories of Greek literature can never by any possibility aspire? How comes it that the words of that book have not only made political history—moved armies and built empires—but also have entered into the very fabric of men’s souls? (20)

The intrinsic merits of the Bible were alone insufficient to explain its importance within a culture dominated by Greek and Roman literature. Machen’s answer to the cultural riddle he described had to be the author of some of the most cherished passages of the NT. And yet, Machen was able to spot Paul’s significance largely because of his training as a classicist. As he put it, the reason for Christianity’s spread in the Gentile world (Greek and Roman) “must be sought in the inner life of a Jew of Tarsus.” Machen added, “in dealing with the apostle Paul we are dealing with one of the moving factors of the world’s history.”

Machen’s evaluation of the NT elevated this part of Scripture well above the common ways of regarding Paul that comes from VBS students making maps of the apostle’s missionary journeys or even from weighty debates about justification by faith alone. Of course, no one wants to minimize one of the most important doctrines associated with the Protestant Reformation, nor should anyone minimize attention to Paul’s work as an evangelist and church planter. Even so, because Machen looked at Scripture partly through the lens of a classical education, he saw what those Christians, not similarly educated, miss. Christianity became a force in world history through incredibly unlikely influences that included both the work of the Holy Spirit and the genius of the Apostle Paul. Machen saw Paul in the light of a classical education’s “big picture”—namely, the history of civilizations

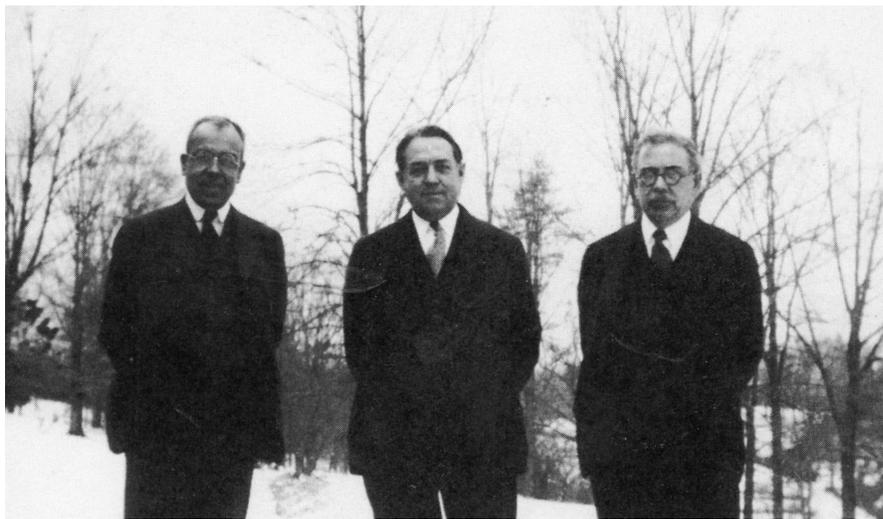
and the philosophical and political questions formulated by Greeks and Romans.

If modern people continue to pay homage to the Greco-Roman world—both when as tourists they visit Greece and Italy and in many of the public buildings (inspired by Greek and Roman architecture) in which contemporary national and local governments conduct their business—Machen was clearly on to something in describing Christianity as a world-shaping force in human history. Of course, Machen did more than that. He worshiped the God of the Bible, worked in seminary and church to educate Christians in the doctrines of the Reformed faith, and took an active interest in the well-being of the church. But thanks in part to his background in the classics, Machen also recognized Christianity's remarkable place in the history of the world.

### The Cross of Christ in Greco-Roman Context

One of the doctrines that Machen thought was essential to understanding Christianity was the vicarious atonement. This is why the chapter on salvation in *Christianity and Liberalism* was the longest and included a long defense of the significance of the cross. Contrary to those who called this doctrine “subtle,” Machen considered it simply what the NT taught. The real objection to the doctrine was not intellectual difficulty but human pride, a sense that modern men and women did not need something so primitive. But for Machen, without the reality that the doctrine described, Christians had no hope of salvation. “The atoning death of Christ, and that alone, has presented sinners as righteous in God's sight,” Machen declared. “The Lord Jesus has paid the full penalty of their sins, and clothed them with His perfect righteousness before the judgment seat of God.”

It might be a stretch, but Machen's critique of liberalism reflected his training as a classicist. The ancient world that he had studied as a student at Johns Hopkins was filled with sacrifices



*Machen (left) seven days before he died with his brother, Arthur (right), and Arthur's brother-in-law (middle)*

to gods, not to mention the Old Testament's own system of sacrifices. Tourists who visit the most historic sites in Greece, such as the Temple of Delphi, cannot help but notice the elaborate provisions for sacrificing bulls and goats to Apollo. Of course, Christ's sacrifice for sin was on a completely different order if only because this was a sacrifice of a god-man who died but also rose again before ascending into heaven. Even so, as different as the Christian atonement was from the sacrifices that filled Greek and Roman mythology, the ancients, unlike modern people, understood that human beings were inferior to divine beings and needed to satisfy those gods to obtain their blessing. From the perspective of a classicist, Christianity's reliance on the sacrifice of Christ was not bizarre or primitive. From the perspective of many modern Christians, however, the cross of Christ looked like an embarrassment.

The prominent German NT scholar, Rudolph Bultmann, once remarked that “We cannot use electric lights and radios and, in the event of illness, avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament.” That sentiment was one of the chief impulses behind re-fashioning Christianity for modern men and women. It generated interpre-

tations of Scripture that explained away God's direct and miraculous interventions into human history. It also spurred pastors and theologians to feature Jesus's ethics instead of theology.

J. Gresham Machen knew otherwise. Of course, part of the reason that he held on to the parts of Christianity that Bultmann found incredible was that Machen knew himself to be a sinner who needed the salvation revealed in Scripture. But he had reinforcement from his classical education. The ancient world of Greek and Roman authors was suffused with gods who intervened in human affairs and demanded acts of reverence. As unlikely as it may seem, the study of the Greco-Roman world immunized Machen from thinking that modern notions of society, education, or anthropology were more reliable than ancient authors on the purpose of human existence or the imperatives that attended divine worship. By inhabiting intellectually the ancient world, Machen was especially well equipped to doubt that advances in modern thought had replaced historic Christian convictions. He knew, thanks to the Bible, with help from the ancient world, that humans could never outgrow questions about their status before God. □

*The author is an OP elder and professor of history at Hillsdale College.*

# MACHEN AND MODERN MYTHOLOGY



CAMDEN M. BUCEY // This year marks a significant milestone in theological scholarship—the centennial of the publication of J. Gresham Machen’s seminal work, *Christianity and Liberalism*. Over the past century, this book has profoundly shaped discussions about the essence of Christian faith in relation to the modern world.

At the heart of Machen’s book is the affirmation that Christianity is not merely a way of life; it is a doctrine. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, assumed our nature and accomplished redemption for us in history. This makes the Christian message categorically distinct from all other narratives.

However, for classical liberalism, the Christian story is just one among many. In fact, the details of the story do not matter that much. What really matters for modern theologians are the ethical teachings the biblical story conveys. From those, we may seek to love our neighbor and strive for self-realization and a transcendent life.

To the liberal theological mind, Jesus Christ of the Bible is essentially no different from Neo in *The Matrix* or Simba in *The Lion King*. They are examples of the hero with a thousand faces, God in just another narrative mask. This idea, so deeply embedded in our society, has influenced many of the most successful films over the past half-century, their narrative structures directly attributable to the very perspectives that

Machen critically examined in *Christianity and Liberalism*.

## Contemporary Mythology

One of the most influential thinkers upon popular cinema is Joseph Campbell (1904–1987). Campbell’s work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, first published in 1949, has had a profound influence on how we understand and interpret myth and metaphor in contemporary culture. It introduces the concept of the “hero’s journey,” which Campbell argued is shared across cultures and epochs. In many ways, Campbell’s “monomyth” can be viewed as a secular distillation of the same liberal principles of thought that Machen addressed.

Campbell proposed that stories and myths throughout human history share a fundamental structure, which includes a “call to adventure,” “the crossing of the first threshold,” “the road of trials,” “the meeting with the goddess,” “atonement with the father,” and finally, “the return.” This is the pilgrimage to self-realization or self-transcendence, and eventually, enlightenment. Myths, then, are a

means by which humans explore and express the deepest truths about their existence.

George Lucas, creator of the *Star Wars* franchise, credits Campbell’s theory on myth as a significant influence on his storytelling, even utilizing the “hero’s journey” as the basis for the original *Star Wars* trilogy. Likewise, Disney admittedly used Campbell’s ideas in creating movies like *The Lion King*, *Aladdin*, *Finding Nemo*, and *Mulan*, that fit within the archetypal “hero’s journey.”

Countless people in industries beyond Hollywood recognize Campbell’s theory on myth as foundational to storytelling. But it is essential to note that behind Campbell’s impactful framework stood key influences of its own, most notably the German theologian Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920).

Bousset’s *Kyrios Christos* (1913) became a key text in the History of Religions movement that sought to understand Christianity in relation to the world’s other religions. He argued that the early Christian belief in Jesus as “Kyrios” or Lord was heavily influenced

by the Hellenistic religious context, rather than being derived mainly from Jewish messianic expectations and the teaching of the Old Testament. According to Bousset, the primitive Palestinian community understood Jesus as a prophet, and it was the Hellenistic community, especially influenced by Paul, that developed the high Christology of Jesus as the preexistent divine Lord. This view represents a Christology “from below” and suggests that the concept of Jesus’s divinity emerged over time under the influence of the surrounding culture, rather than coming “from above.”

### Machen’s Critique of Modernism’s Myth

J. Gresham Machen offered a substantial critique of Wilhelm Bousset’s *Kyrios Christos* and the so-called History of Religions School. While Machen recognized the importance of historical context in understanding the development of Christian theology, he took issue with the school’s tendency to explain away any semblance of divine revelation as merely the product of historical and cultural forces. He also challenged the materialist view of history. For Machen, history must be understood and studied with full awareness and acknowledgment of God’s supernatural activity and providence. In distinction from naturalism, the transcendent God acts within history to accomplish his plan and purpose for his people.

In *Christianity and Liberalism*, as well as in his earlier work *The Origin of Paul’s Religion*, Machen challenged the central thesis of Bousset, arguing for the divine origin and uniqueness of Christianity. He rejected the idea that Paul was the real founder of Christianity, as suggested by Bousset and others. Machen maintained that the essential elements of Paul’s religion—the conception of Jesus as Lord (*Kyrios*), his pre-existence, incarnation, atoning death, resurrection, and the expectation of his second coming—were not innovations but had their roots in Jesus’s teaching to the earliest Christian community. Jesus was the Son of God come in the flesh. God

had broken into human history in the most dramatic fashion—assuming a human nature to accomplish redemption. The origin of Christianity was not the thoughts of men; it was this supernatural intervention.

Machen was greatly indebted to his former professor and colleague at Princeton Seminary Geerhardus Vos, whose own book on the subject, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus*, was published in 1926, thanks to Machen’s efforts to introduce Vos to a broader audience. Vos was an advocate for a distinctly Reformed biblical theology, which he defined as the study of the history of special revelation. He argued in *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus* that Jesus’s messianic consciousness was not a later development as Bousset claimed but a fundamental aspect of his identity and mission. According to Vos, Bousset and others had neglected the divine origin and heavenly goal of Jesus’s ministry, the rich Old Testament background, and the Jewish apocalyptic context, which are critical to understanding the person of Christ and the beliefs of those who followed after him. Vos also critiqued the overemphasis Bousset put on Hellenistic influences, pointing out that the Semitic and Jewish thought world, shaped by the divinely inspired Scriptures, played a crucial role in shaping early Christological beliefs.

While both Machen and Vos acknowledged the need to understand Christianity within its historical context, they maintained Christianity’s singularity and supernatural origin. Vos and Machen critiqued the tendencies of Bousset and those who shared his views to reduce religious beliefs to mere products of cultural and historical influences, asserting instead the active role of divine revelation in shaping these beliefs. Undeniably, the transcendent God intervenes supernaturally in history to accomplish redemption—a belief that

stands in stark contrast to the tenets of modernism.

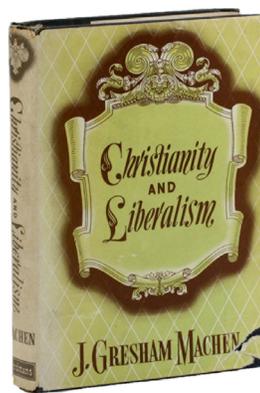
Bousset and the History of Religions School suggest that all religion essentially reduces to anthropology, a viewpoint that strips Christianity of its divine origin and roots it firmly in the human realm. Vos and Machen, however, fervently challenge this stance. They assert that such a reductionist view disregards the unique claims of Christianity, notably the divine self-revelation of Christ and the transformative power of God’s redemptive work in the world.

Given the adoption of modernist presuppositions by figures like Bousset and Campbell, and their ensuing influence on theology and contemporary culture, the critiques offered by Machen and Vos demonstrate a remarkable resonance today. This raises an intriguing question.

Why have these modernist theories enjoyed such a pervasive and enduring impact? Our creation in the image of God profoundly influences our affinity for certain narratives. In our quest for meaning and understanding, we are naturally drawn to stories that resonate with the divine imprint within us. Our inherent longing for transcendent meaning and significance explains why we find myths and their “hero’s journey” narrative captivating. These narratives appeal to us because they contain kernels of the truth, which have the power to speak to our deepest desires and fears, hopes and uncertainties.

The gospel is not simply another iteration in Campbell’s monomyth, nor is Christianity the product of human thought. The gospel stands in a category of its own, unique and utterly distinct. This is the thesis of Machen’s *Christianity and Liberalism*. Christianity is not merely a way of life; it is a doctrine—the truth that God has entered history and accomplished redemption. □

*The author is historian of the OPC.*



# REFLECTIONS ON A DECADE AS GENERAL SECRETARY

// JOHN S. SHAW



The author teaching at a church planter training conference

The Lord gave me the opportunity for more than ten years to serve as the general secretary for the OPC Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension. Over the last decade, I enjoyed working with more than one hundred church plants and church planters, seeing the evidence of God’s work in so many places. Here are several lessons the Lord taught me during this time—lessons about God, his church, and my place in his kingdom.

## What God Taught Me about Himself

*The Lord taught me about his perfect sovereignty, which is always good.* Many of us know the catechism answer: “God’s works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions” (Shorter Catechism Q. 11). We know the many Bible passages that stand behind that truth (e.g., Prov. 16:33; Matt. 10:30; Heb. 1:3). We love the hymns that give voice to the blessings of this truth. Even “behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face.” How wonderful also when the Lord gives us front row seats to this truth! Seeing the Lord bless



Harvest OPC in Winston-Salem, NC, a church plant that recently completed support

many young church plants during a pandemic provided an unobstructed view of God’s perfect sovereignty. Despite apparent obstacles, we experienced some of the strongest growth in OPC church planting of the past decade, including many conversions and baptisms.

The Lord also displayed his sovereign goodness by raising up laborers to serve our mission works. Jesus Christ called his disciples to lift up their eyes to see a ripe and plentiful harvest, and he called us to pray for more laborers. Have you been praying for laborers? The Lord loves to answer that prayer, and he is answering that prayer in the OPC. One of my greatest ministry privileges has been knowing and working alongside the gifted ministers the Lord keeps sending to mission works in our church. Each of these men, and their families, are precious gifts to Christ’s church. I have grown in faith and practice by serving with them. Praise the Lord for these gifts!

*The Lord taught me about his power to save.* The first chapter of 1 Corinthians describes the seeming contradiction of a powerful God working through weak and foolish means. The Christian church is weak: there are not many wise, not many powerful, not many of noble birth (v. 26). The Lord sends this weak church to preach a foolish message (v. 18). Yet this weak church, armed with a foolish message, proclaims a living Savior who is the power of God and the wisdom of God. The only response must be for us to imitate the Apostle Paul, knowing nothing before the world except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

When we plant new churches, we follow this instruction from our Lord. How do we respond when faced with the opposition of the kingdom of the devil and his followers? We gather for worship and share the gospel with friends and neighbors.

Christ has called the whole church to join together in worship and witness. When we do this, with prayerful expectation, the Lord saves sinners. He is doing this wonderful

work through the mission works of the OPC, and I have enjoyed seeing it. God is indeed powerful to save. We can see it and know it and participate in it.

## What God Taught Me about His Church

*The Lord taught me that he is present with his church.* “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). Jesus Christ made that promise to his disciples right before ascending into the heavens. While they might be tempted to worry that Jesus left them all alone in a dangerous world, he assures his people that they are never alone. And friends, he assures you that you are never alone. Jesus is with you always, by the indwelling presence of the Spirit and by your union with the risen Christ. You are even seated with him right now in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). It’s a mysterious truth, yet you can know with confidence it is true, because Jesus said it.

The Lord proves this truth in the growth and spiritual prosperity of his church in this present age of the harvest. There is only one explanation for a weak church with a foolish message growing in numbers. We have no power to change hearts and transform people. But Christ is with us, and he gathers lost sheep through us. Only he can do this!

*The Lord taught me that he always provides for his church.* One of the most remarkable promises Jesus gave to his church is this: “he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things *to the church*” (Eph. 1:22, emphasis added). The Creator and Sustainer of all things sovereignly directs all things to the benefit and blessing of his church, “which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (v. 23).

Whatever we needed for church planting—more laborers, more members, more conversions, more resources, new buildings—the Lord always provided, often beyond what we knew to ask or imagine. During the pandemic, when we wondered whether the finances and the buildings would be available for new works, the Lord regularly opened the door. When we struggled to find church planters to fill new positions, the Lord sent more. When we prayed for several years for new regional home missionaries, the Lord provided six new missionaries in eighteen months. And as a final reminder to me, we have two more new regional home missionaries beginning their labors during my last couple months of service.

## What God Taught Me about Myself

*Finally, the Lord taught me clearly this biblical truth: Christ’s power is made perfect in weakness.* Do you need to be convinced of the weakness of the church, the weakness of the OPC, your



*Heritage OPC in New Braunfels, Texas, worshipping in their new building just after particularization*

weakness, or my weakness? Remember what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1. Not many of you were wise, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. God chose what is foolish, weak, low, and despised. Does that discourage you?

I have learned and am learning, by the grace of God, to rejoice in my weakness. Not to rejoice in my sin or the sin of the church—sin should be mourned, confessed, and buried in true repentance. But weakness is a God-ordained reminder of the glorious strength of our Savior. Jesus says to us, “My power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). So we can respond with Paul, content in weakness, insult, hardship, persecution, and calamity. For when we are weak, then we are strong (v. 10).

I am so thankful for the almost eleven years the Lord has given me to serve this portion of his church in the work of planting new churches. Thank you for your prayers and support for the work of church planting in the OPC. The Lord is honoring your support as we participate in the expansion of his kingdom. Thank you, as well, for your kindness and prayers toward me. You are appreciated.

As I move on to new ministry service, here is what I am asking and thinking, which may also be an encouragement to you: Am I ready to offer to Jesus my heart, my soul, my strength, my all? Am I content to fill a little space, if Christ be glorified? What an encouragement to know that in our little spaces the Lord promises to work powerfully for his kingdom and glory! Through faithful worship and witness, strengthened by our union with the triune God, Jesus gathers the church from every corner of his world. May we be ready to give our all to him, no matter how small, in joyful expectation of how he might display his saving power through us.

*The author is outgoing general secretary of the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension.*

## Home Missions Today

For up-to-date news and prayer requests, receive our newsletter by subscribing at CHMCE.org or scanning this QR code.



# A JOYFUL MISSIONARY IN MONTEVIDEO

// MARK E. RICHLINE



“Do you have joy in your ministry?” I was asked this question during a recent conversation with a former missionary. I paused and then honestly responded, “My joy is really in knowing Jesus.”

Whether he knew it or not, his question was confronting my fears. I fear that as soon as I find joy in the ones I serve, I will lose it. Loss brings pain. When people with whom I have enjoyed fellowship suddenly leave the church, I suffer. When a brother, with whom I would pray and sing hymns, without warning decides to join a different congregation, grief comes.

## The Apostle Paul’s Joy

Yet this question helped me to realize that joy over people themselves is joy misplaced. True joy comes as we witness Jesus in the power of his Holy Spirit working in and through the ones we serve. This perspective is what gives a missionary joy, much like Paul’s in his relationship to the Philippian believers.

Writing under house arrest in Rome, chained to the prison guard, Paul exudes joy grounded in his relationship with Jesus Christ:

I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. . . . I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Phil. 3:8; 4:12–13)

Grounded in Christ, Paul’s joy expresses itself in his relationship to his Philippian family in Christ. Every time he remembers them, he prays with joy, “because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (1:5). Perhaps Paul could still see

Lydia sitting next to the river listening to his gospel preaching and putting her faith in Christ. Now feeling cold shackles on his wrists, he could have remembered singing with Silas in jail, the earthquake shaking them free, and the jailer crying out, “What must I do to be saved?” All these years later, their congregation had sent him gifts with Epaphroditus, one of their own who then stayed and cared for Paul. Their love for Christ expressed in their love for him moved Paul to consider them “my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown” (4:1).

## Joy in the Saints at Montevideo

How then do I find my joy in Jesus expressing himself through our Uruguayan brothers and sisters?

Those who take initiative to serve others excite me. Every Lord’s Day, husband and wife Darwin and Estefani run the soundboard and live stream our service. Jacque heads up our fellowship time, organizing our meal every third Sunday,



*The church’s newest family received into membership*

along with other special events. Our older children bring around plates filled with snacks while we enjoy each other's company. Another member welcomes needy visitors off the street and provides them with the food, drink, or clothing they seek. As people start to leave, others count the offering, wash the dishes, sweep the sanctuary, clean the bathrooms, retrieve our sidewalk signs, and close the roller blinds on the windows. Their love of service makes my heart smile.

Profound joy rises in me when I see our men committed to loving their wives and children. Not only do they work long hours in challenging environments as providers, but they lead their families in prayer, in Scripture, and in godly example. In our prayer meetings, they seek the Lord for biblical wisdom as they raise their children.

For years, two of these brothers have received nieces and nephews into their homes from their own broken families. Not surprisingly, these were the two recently nominated for the office of ruling elder. Interacting with them in their training, being edified by their teaching, and seeing them take greater personal responsibility for their church family delights my soul.



*The author baptizing Mateo*

our church members. Jacque's servant heart is just as huge. She loves our church's children as her own, teaching Scripture to and caring for our little ones while thoughtfully engaging our teenagers.

Over the years, Matías's love for the gospel has inspired me. When we worked together with a young unbelieving friend, I loved listening to him explain how peace with God is never found by keeping the law but only by trusting in the justifying work of Christ on our behalf. Recently, Matías and his wife, Natalia, started an "open church" meeting, where each Wednesday they open our church doors, invite the community to read along through a chapter of Romans and share

My joy flows from husband and wife Juan and Jacque's devotion to Jesus. These two have served Christ and his church most of their lives, despite chronic health struggles. Conceivably the Lord has used their physical suffering to make them more compassionate to their suffering family in Christ. Though limited by his lifelong battle with hemophilia, Juan's desire to edify God's people through Scripture knows no bounds, using the internet to encourage and disciple



*Juan (right) leading the church's online Westminster Shorter Catechism study*

their thoughts, and then close together in prayer. One Sunday before church, he excitedly described how he had been sharing the gospel with three of his coworkers, whose names I have now been remembering in prayer.

### Occasions for Celebration

With these major causes for joy come unforgettable joyous occasions:

- A young man whom many in the church have known for years has recently been demonstrating God's work of grace in his life.
- I have met with one of our members and prayed for her many times. Just last month I heard her pray for the first time, and it was beautiful. She talked with God so openly, like talking with a very close friend.
- After years of conversation, one of our founding families became convinced of household baptism. While I was baptizing seven-year-old Mateo as his parents desired, I was suddenly surrounded by the inquisitive eyes of all our church's little children who came up front to figure out what I was doing.
- A young married couple became Reformed in their faith but could find no like-minded congregation. They considered leaving Uruguay and moving to a well-known Reformed church in the Dominican Republic. Then God led them to our church, where they will soon commit to membership.

So, thank you, brother, for asking me, "Do you have joy in your ministry?" You have helped me to move away from my fear and to become a more joyful missionary, experiencing Jesus's transforming power in and through those whom I love and serve.

*The author is an Orthodox Presbyterian missionary in Montevideo, Uruguay.*

## CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

# OPC TIMOTHY CONFERENCE 2024



2023 Timothy Conference participants on the steps of Nassau Hall at Princeton University

The Subcommittee on Ministerial Training of the Committee on Christian Education plans to hold the next OPC Timothy Conference on February 7–10, 2024, in Oviedo, Florida. Confirmed speakers include pastors Chad Bond (Reformation OPC in Oviedo, Florida), Joel Fick (Redemption OPC in Gainesville, Florida), Reformed Theological professor John Muether, Westminster Seminary in California professor David VanDrunen, and CCE general secretary Danny Olinger. Reformation OPC in Oviedo is serving as the host church. Conference attendees will be introduced to a seminary environment and attend classes on the campus of Reformed Theological Seminary.

Mr. Bond will speak on the topic of the office of a minister, including its duties, responsibilities, and privileges. Mr. Fick's topic is call to the ministry, with a special emphasis upon what it means to be called and how one might know that he has been called. Mr. Muether's talk is on OPC history and pastoral ministry. Mr. VanDrunen will address the necessity and importance of a seminary education in preparation for ordained gospel ministry. Mr. Olinger will explain the process of becoming a minister in the OPC, from coming under care of a presbytery to being ordained and installed as a pastor.

### Applying for the Timothy Conference

Those eligible for the conference are young men between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one years old who are members of an OPC congregation and have been identified by their local session as having potential gifts for pastoral ministry. If there is a young man who has demonstrated godliness and giftedness, please consider approaching him about his willingness to attend. It is a wonderful way to meet others in the church, particularly those who are thinking about serving the Lord in some fashion. All expenses are paid by the Committee on Christian Education.

Applications for sessions to submit candidates can be found on OPC.org under "Christian Education." Completed applications can be sent to Danny Olinger (danny.olinger@opc.org). The application deadline is November 18, 2023. Please consider helping us to heed the Apostle Paul's words from 2 Timothy 2:2:

What you have heard from me . . . entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.

## WINTER MTIOPC COURSES AND SPEAKERS

The Ministerial Training Institute of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church is pleased to announce its Winter 2023–2024 courses: Homiletics, Reformed Evangelism, and Pastoral Theology.

Classes begin Wednesday, November 1, with online reading and writing assignments. The classes conclude with mandatory in-person Intensive Training sessions from January 23–25, 2024, at Redemption OPC in Gainesville, Florida. OPC ministers, ruling elders, men licensed to preach, and men under care of presbyteries have until October 20 to register. Travel scholarships are available for qualified applicants.

Douglas Clawson, general secretary of the Committee on Foreign Missions, and Dale Van Dyke, pastor of Harvest OPC in Wyoming, Michigan,



Dale Van Dyke



Douglas Clawson

are team-teaching the Homiletics course. Their goal is to help pastors fulfill their calling to preach Christ, from every passage, in a way that touches hearts and transforms lives. In addition to practical lectures, one-on-one mentoring is also part of the course.

John Shaw, general secretary of the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension, and Eric Watkins, pastor of Harvest OPC in Vista, California, are team-teaching the Reformed Evangelism course. They strive to show in the course how a high view of the local church and a commitment to biblical evangelism go hand in hand. The in-person sessions will include going out in teams and sharing the gospel with others in the Gainesville area.

Craig Troxel, professor of practical theology at Westminster Seminary in California, is teaching the Pastoral Theology course. The class covers the theological foundations, principles, and practices of pastoral ministry. Among the topics that will be discussed are the minister's call as servant, steward, and sufferer; his self-watch; and his duties of shepherding, leading, praying, and ministering the Word and sacraments. The ultimate purpose of the course is to deepen the understanding of pastoral care and encourage growth in the gifts and desire to "shepherd the flock of God that is among you" (1 Pet. 5:2).

Applications are available at OPC.org under Christian Education, then MTIOPC. Contact Judy Alexander, the MTIOPC coordinator, at alexander.1@opc.org if you have general questions about the classes.



John Shaw



Eric Watkins



Craig Troxel

## ● Out of the Mouth . . .

We listened to a very convicting sermon on vows. While discussing the sermon with our children, we asked them what a vow was. Our first grader confidently said that he knew all about it. Really? "Yeah, we learned about it in school. It's letters like a, e, i . . ."

—Hyojung Walker  
Yorktown, VA

Note: If you have an example of the humorous "wisdom" that can come from children, please send it to the editor.

## ON READING OLD BOOKS

"It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between." —C. S. Lewis

### COMMON GRACE AND THE GOSPEL (1972)

BY CORNELIUS VAN TIL

In the summer of 1995, I carefully studied Cornelius Van Til's volume *Common Grace*. Why? Because many of my colleagues in academia thought that I stressed the antithesis with non-Christian thought at the expense of common grace, i.e., the holistic understanding of biblical religion is antithetical to every holistic system of non-Christian thought. True, non-Christian systems share *particular/isolated* insights (*common grace*) with factual revelation (e.g., 2+2=4), but their holistic understanding of God, universe, and humanity is *antithetical* to orthodox Christianity.

Van Til, unlike Kuyper, Bavinck, Hoeksema, Hepp, Dooyeweerd, and Vollenhoven, formulated common grace uniquely in the context of Reformed federal theology, i.e., the first and second Adam. All humans are represented in the first Adam's *pre-redemptive state* with the *same* comprehension of natural and special revelation (inseparable; holistic). Also, in the *pre-redemptive state* there is a *difference* with all human beings concerning the divine foreordained decree of election—some are elect in Christ, and others are reprobate. After the *fall into sin*, all humans (elect/reprobate) share the *same* state of existence; they are by nature objects of God's wrath (rebel against natural/special revelation; covenant breakers). Furthermore, there is a *difference* that the reprobate does relative good in absolute evil, whereas the elect in Christ does relative evil in absolute good. Herein, Van Til stated that the believer has everything *metaphysically/psychologically* in common with the non-Christian (common grace is tied to the remnants of natural/special revelation in union with pre-fall Adam), while those in union with Christ's saving knowledge and righteousness have nothing *epistemologically/ethically* in common with the non-Christian (*antithesis*). In union with Adam's sin, humans suppress morally the knowledge (*antithesis*) they have *metaphysically/psychologically* (*common grace*) from the pre-redemptive state. Van Til's insight is genius; it enables deeper analysis of the starting point and structures of human systems.

—William D. Dennison

## ☆ Congratulations

The **First Catechism** has been recited by:

- **Margaret Simmons**, Resurrection Orthodox Presbyterian Church, State College, PA

# INSURANCE FOR MINISTERS

// BRYAN D. HOLSTRUM



In his infinite grace, God has blessed his church with men to serve as ministers of the Word and sacraments, in order that the saints will be built up and “attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph. 4:12–13). In turn, God has placed a responsibility upon congregations to adequately care for those engaged in pastoral ministry, and churches should be generous in their support of those who are called to such work. Paul states this obligation clearly in Galatians 6:6:

Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches.

Of course, individual congregations differ widely in their ability to pay. As a result, some pastoral benefit packages are not only modest in size but address only the basic categories of salary, housing allowance, vacation privileges, and perhaps some provision for health insurance. While it’s possible for a congregation to construct a package covering only these items that is otherwise sufficiently generous to meet the day-to-day needs of their pastor, such a package fails in one significant way: protecting the pastor and his family against the unexpected. The provision for health insurance is one critical component of such protection.

But two other areas of coverage that are less often found in standard packages—yet ought to be—are life insurance and disability insurance.

## Life Insurance

The purest (and least expensive) form of insurance protection is term life insurance. For a fixed annual dollar amount over the term of the policy (anywhere from ten to thirty years), life insurance pays the full face amount to the insured’s beneficiary in the event of his death. The death of a beloved pastor is hard enough on the congregation he has

served; just think about the impact that it has on his own family. Life insurance proceeds won’t ease the emotional pain that they experience, but it can help to prevent a financial disaster due to the permanent loss of his income.

Moreover, in most cases life insurance is a relatively inexpensive benefit, especially for younger men who are in good health. Nor should churches neglect this benefit for a man who is yet unmarried, since the earlier such coverage is obtained the lower the annual premiums are for the remainder of the chosen term.

## Disability Insurance

Insurance professionals will often point out that a person is more likely to become disabled during their working years than they are to die. Yet disability insurance is one of the most overlooked forms of protection. This coverage replaces a portion of the income that is lost when a person becomes unable to perform the duties of their job due to a physical impairment. While more complicated than life insurance, it too serves the basic function of protecting the pastor and his family from the potentially devastating financial consequences that unexpected events can bring.

Congregations can demonstrate their commitment to the welfare of a pastor and his family by providing both forms of protection as part of a comprehensive benefits package. Those that do so will benefit from a pastor who can focus on their needs, as he takes comfort in the knowledge that his own flock is obedient in “shar[ing] all good things” with him in love and appreciation for the work to which he as the pastor has been called.

*The author is a member of the Committee on Ministerial Care’s Volunteer Financial Planning Team and a ruling elder at Grace OPC in Elburn, Illinois.*

# OCTOBER



The Biggses (day 14)



The Emmetts (day 7)

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- 1** **BEN & MELANIE WESTERVELD**, Quebec, Canada. Pray for Ben facilitating pastor and elder training. / **MICAH & EILEEN BICKFORD**, Farmington, ME. Pray for the evangelistic efforts of Grace Reformed.
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- 2** **MARK & LORIE WHEAT**, Sugar Land, TX. Pray for Good Shepherd OPC as they welcome visitors. / Stated clerk **HANK BELFIELD** and accounts manager **CHARLENE TIPTON**.
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- 3** **MR. AND MRS. F.**, Asia. Pray for presbytery meetings where the callings of two or three licentiates will be issued. / Pray for general secretary **DANNY OLINGER** as the Committee on Christian Education meets.
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- 4** Home Missions associate general secretary **AL TRICARICO**. / **MR. AND MRS. M.**, Asia. Pray for outreach efforts to new international college students coming to the United States this semester.
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- 5** Pray for **CHRIS (MEGAN) HARTSHORN**, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of Southern California. / Pray for the **COMMITTEE ON DIACONAL MINISTRIES** as they meet.

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**6** Associate missionaries **CHRISTOPHER & CHLOE VERDICK**, Nakaale, Uganda. Pray for Pastor Julius's ordination exams. / Yearlong intern **BRENNEN (TIFFANY) WINTER** at Harvest OPC in Grand Rapids, MI.

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**7** **TRAVIS & BONNIE EMMETT**, Nakaale, Uganda. Pray for wisdom in travel decisions and for a safe pregnancy for Bonnie with their fourth child. / **JOHN & KATIE TERRELL**, Moline, MI. Pray that Living Hope OPC would be a light in a dark world.

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**8** Missionary associates **NATHAN & ELISABETH BLOECHL**, Mbale, Uganda. Pray for the growth of African church leaders studying at Knox School of Theology. / Yearlong intern **JOHN (ERIN) NYMANN** at Reformation Presbyterian in Virginia Beach, VA.

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**9** Pray for affiliated missionaries **JERRY & MARILYN FARNIK**, Czech Republic, as they work with men's and women's groups on discipleship and Christian life. / **DAN & STACY HALLEY**, Tampa, FL. Pray God would raise up officers at Bay Haven Presbyterian.

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**10** **CHARLES & CONNIE JACKSON**, Mbale, Uganda. Pray for ordained Ugandan leaders and growth in church plants in Mbale and Nakaale. / Pray for **A. J. (CHELSEA) MILLSAPS**, Maryville, TN, area evangelist, as he identifies new avenues for evangelism in Athens, TN.

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**11** Pray for **BRAD (CINNAMON) PEPP**, regional home missionary of the Miami Valley for the Presbytery of Ohio. / Pray that more OPC members will be blessed in serving with **DISASTER RESPONSE**.

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**12** **JOHN PAUL & CORINNE HOLLOWAY**, Manassas, VA. Pray for unity in the gospel at Acacia Reformed. / Yearlong intern **TYLER (JEANNA) FREIRE** at Redeemer OPC in Beavercreek, OH.

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**13** **CHRIS BYRD**, Westfield, NJ. Pray that Grace OPC would continue in evangelistic zeal. / Associate missionary **LEAH HOPP**, Nakaale, Uganda. Pray for Nakaale believers to grow in wisdom and love in their daily walks with the Lord.

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**14** **CHARLES (MARGARET) BIGGS**, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic. / Yearlong intern **ANDREW (NOEL) DAVIS** at Covenant Presbyterian in Marina, CA.

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**15** **MARK & JENI RICHLINE**, Montevideo, Uruguay. Pray for drought relief in Uruguay and adequate supplies of drinking water. / Pray that **THE RULING ELDER** podcast would bless listeners.

OCTOBER



The Garretts (day 29)

**21 BEN & HEATHER HOPP**, Haiti. Pray for their children Elijah (college freshman) and Esther (8th grade), as they continue the school year. / Pray for the staff of **NEW HORIZONS** and **ORDAINED SERVANT**.

**22** Pray for **LOCAL DEACONS** as they serve their churches in often unseen ways. / Assoc. missionaries **OCTAVIUS & MARIE DELFILS**, Haiti. Pray for peace and security for church members suffering under daily uncertainty and threat.

**23 NATE & ANNA STROM**, Sheboygan, WI. Pray for Breakwater Church as they welcome new members. / Pray for the trustees of **GREAT COMMISSION PUBLICATIONS** as they meet today.

**24** Affiliated missionaries **DR. MARK & LAURA AMBROSE**, Cambodia. Pray that the girls rescued from trafficking would come to trust in Jesus Christ. / Pray for follow-up to contacts made through this summer's **SHORT-TERM MISSIONS**.

**25** Affiliated missionaries **CRAIG & REE COULBOURNE** and **LINDA KARNER**, Japan. / **CARL & STACEY MILLER**, New Braunfels, TX. Praise the Lord for the many new covenant children at Heritage Presbyterian.

**26 HEERO & ANYA HACQUEBORD**, L'viv, Ukraine. Pray for wisdom in planning the church's small groups, preaching, and outreach. / Active duty military chaplains **DAVID (JENNA) DERIENZO**, US Army, and **JOHN (LINDA) CARTER**, US Navy.



David Wright (day 27)

**27 MATT & HYOUNG WALKER**, Yorktown, VA. Give thanks to God for the return of many visitors to Peninsula Reformed. / Yearlong intern **DAVID WRIGHT** at South Austin Presbyterian in Austin, TX.

**28 JAY & ANDREA BENNETT**, Neon, KY. Pray for continued growth at Neon Reformed. / Pray for **TONY & SIMONE CURTO**, Mobile Theological Mentoring Corps in Europe, working with the church in Austria/Switzerland.

**29 JOHNNY & BERRY SERAFINI**, Marion, NC. Praise God for bringing the Serafinis to Landis Presbyterian. / Yearlong intern **DAVID (HOPE) GARRETT** at the OPC at Franklin Square in Franklin Square, NY.

**30** Pray for the **ETHIOPIAN REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH** and for the persecuted church in **EAST AFRICA**. / **EZEKIEL YARASHUS** and **CHRISTOPHER DREW**, OPC.org website administrators.

**31** Pray for Foreign Missions general secretary **DOUGLAS CLAWSON** and administrative assistants **JOANNA GROVE** and **TIN LING LEE**. / Home Missions administrative assistant **ALLISON GROOT**.

**16 MARK & CELESTE JENKINS**, Placentia, CA. Pray for opportunities for Resurrection Presbyterian to speak with unbelievers. / Yearlong intern **JOE (MELODY) GEHRMANN** at Covenant OPC in Orland Park, IL.

**17** Pray for **RETIRED MISSIONARIES** Cal & Edie Cummings, Greet Rietkerk, Young & Mary Lou Son, and Brian & Dorothy Wingard. / **LACY (DEBBIE) ANDREWS**, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of the Southeast.

**18** Tentmaking missionary **TINA DEJONG**, Nakaale, Uganda. Pray for missionaries with pastoral experience for long-term service in Karamoja and Mbale. / Financial controller **MELISA MCGINNIS**.

**19 DAVID & ASHLEIGH SCHEXNAYDER**, Scottsdale, AZ. Pray for the new small group ministry of Providence OPC. / Yearlong intern **DAVID (JAZMINE) RIOS** at The Haven in Commack, NY.

**20** Home Missions general secretary **JOHN SHAW**. / **STEPHEN & CATALINA PAYSON**, Montevideo, Uruguay. Pray for a joint Reformation Conference held at Salvos por Gracia on October 20-22.

# NEWS, VIEWS & REVIEWS

## PICNIC FOR NEW ENGLAND CHURCHES

*Misbael Schiller*

Imagine standing among hundreds of Christians of all ages scattered about a shady pavilion on a beautiful summer day. Everywhere you turn, people are eating, laughing, playing, talking theology, reuniting, or meeting for the first time.

That was the scene on Saturday, July 8, when 350 people from seven Massachusetts and New Hampshire OPC congregations (and one Reformed Evangelical church) gathered for the first-ever New England area, multi-church picnic in Allenstown, New Hampshire. The idea was sparked by David Booth, pastor of Merrimack Valley Presbyterian in North Andover, Massachusetts, and the event was coordinated by church representatives. Pastor Tim Herndon of Providence OPC in Lebanon, New Hampshire, led a brief morning opening, which included prayer, two hymns sung a cappella, and reading Psalm 133. Then everyone enjoyed softball, volleyball, badminton, ultimate frisbee, swimming, or simply some much-needed in-person fellowship. It was truly a special day.

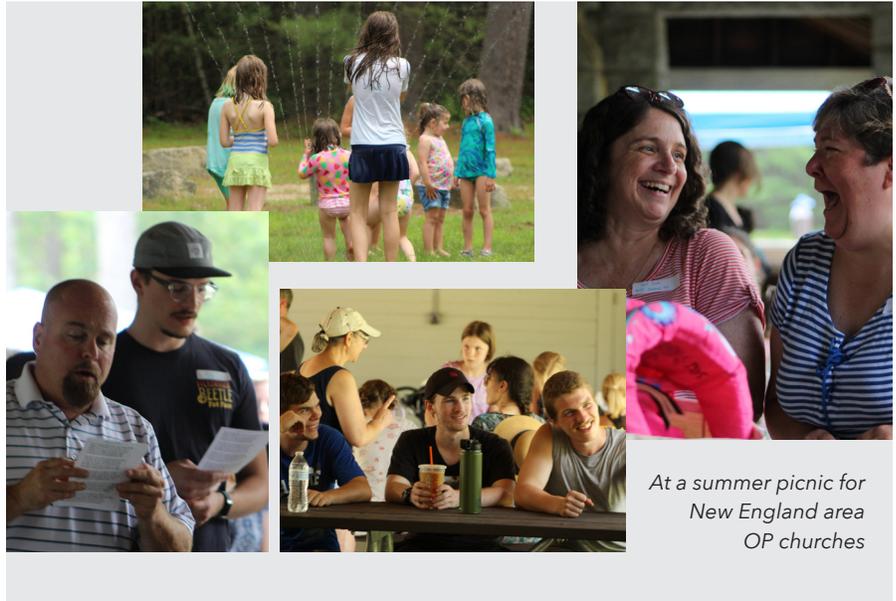
## IN MEMORIAM: ROBERT A. BERRY JR.

*David B. Carnes*

OP minister Robert A. Berry Jr. passed away on July 16 at the age of 70. Born in Rock Hill, South Carolina, he attended The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina, and Covenant Theological Seminary, graduating in 1981. He served two congregations in the PCA before serving as the organizing pastor of Sandy Springs Chapel in Maryville, Tennessee. In 2000, he was called to be the first pastor of Cov-



*Robert Berry*



*At a summer picnic for New England area OPC churches*

enant Reformed Presbyterian Church in Fort Pierce, Florida. He helped to lead Covenant Reformed into the OPC and served as their pastor until his retirement in 2017. Robert was a kind and compassionate pastor who left behind many strong friendships developed over his years in south Florida. He is survived by his wife of thirty-six years, Myra, and four of their five children.

## SILVA INSTALLED AT BOHEMIA, NY

On July 29, Adriano S. Silva was installed as pastor of The Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Bohemia, New York. William

Shishko preached, John W. Mallin gave the charge to the minister, and Benjamin W. Miller gave the charge to the congregation.

## UPDATE

### MINISTERS

- On June 2, the Presbytery of the Southeast dissolved the pastoral relationship between **Bennie A. Castle** and Grace OPC in Lynchburg, VA.
- On July 21, **Chad E. Bond** was installed



*At the July 29 installation of Adriano Silva (fifth from right)*

as pastor of Reformation OPC in Oviedo, FL.

- On July 28, **Joseph A. Keller** was installed as pastor of Covenant Presbyterian in Abilene, TX, on an interim basis.
- On July 29, **Adriano S. Silva** was installed as pastor of The Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Bohemia, NY.
- On August 11, **Jeremy R. Baker** was installed as pastor of New Covenant Community in Joliet, IL.

**MILESTONES**

- **Robert Allen Berry Jr.**, 70, died on July 16. He served as pastor of Sandy Springs OPC in Maryville, TN, and Covenant Reformed Presbyterian in Ft. Pierce, FL.

**LETTERS**

**DISCERNING REVIEWS**

Editor:

I was, to put it mildly, disheartened when I read the review for *The World As We Know It Is Falling Away*. How is it that our denomination's magazine has printed a positive review for a faith-based book written by a Roman Catholic? As an OP member, I would expect our magazine to be much more discerning when selecting literature to be recommended.

Krista Groot  
Newfield, NJ



At Jeremy Baker's August 11 installation: Marcus Mininger, Alan Strange, Bruce Hollister, Jeremy Baker, Mark Beach, Iain Wright

**THE ORIGIN OF MUSIC**

Editor:

"Music and Worship" (Aug.-Sept.) makes the valid and important point that God hasn't ordained a particular style of music, and, therefore, there is legitimate variation in worship music from one culture to another, and from one time period to another. However, Mr. Hammond's statements that "in the Bible . . . music has its origin with human beings" and that "music is a human creation" are problematic. Hopefully, what Pastor Hammond means is that *musical forms and expressions* originate with mankind, not music itself. Man creates out of something, not out of nothing.

Man's creations are secondary and relative. Jubal was the originator of musical instruments, not of music itself. Scripture teaches that "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above" (James 1:17). The angels are described as singing prior to the creation of man (Job 38:7), as well as on other occasions (Rev. 5:8-10). God himself is said to sing (Zeph. 3:17).

Fred Rice  
Culpeper, VA

Editor:

Thank you for "Music and Worship." Music is of huge importance—now and for eternity! We question the assertion that music has its origin with human beings. Genesis 4:21 may be the first reference to music in our canon, but surely there was music before there were man-made instruments! God refers to the morning stars singing together at creation (Job 38:4, 7). Did the birds begin to sing before the creation of man? Did the angels sing to the Lord before man uttered a word? Heavenly music may be different from earthly music, but isn't it still music?

Another concern is the emphasis that God has placed us in the twenty-first century, as though the church should make little use of pre-twenty-first-century music. We have been blessed theologically and musically with a heritage that spans centuries and connects us with the church from the beginning of time to eternity.

Chuck and Janet Powers  
Schenectady, NY



On May 21, New Covenant in Abingdon, MD, was received into the OPC from the PCA; Dave Barker (fourth from right) was received into the OPC as its pastor, and Nicholas Hathaway and Kurt Scharping (behind Barker) as its associate pastors.

## REVIEWS

***An Infinite Fountain of Light: Jonathan Edwards for the Twenty-First Century*, by George Marsden. IVP Academic, 2023. Hardcover, 176 pages, \$22.68 (Amazon). Reviewed by OP pastor Harrison Perkins.**

A major obstacle against being interested in history is seeing why it matters today. For good or for ill, we easily gravitate to what seems relevant and dismiss what seems impractical. George Marsden is a seasoned historian of American Christianity, having written extensively on the nature of American evangelicalism and *two* biographies of Jonathan Edwards, who has produced a new volume trying to overcome exactly that obstacle by reflecting on what value Jonathan Edwards has for the twenty-first century.

The book is first notable for its readability and accessibility. I made it through the whole volume almost entirely in one sitting. Although Edwards is a notoriously challenging theologian, Marsden avoids ever getting caught in the overcomplicated brambles of Edwards's thought, presenting a remarkably smooth commentary on certain aspects of his theology, along with some pointers about how they help us think about our world today.

The second thing to note is that this book would make an incredibly useful first foray into studying Edwards. I wish that I had this concise presentation of Edwards's life, ministry, and key aspects of his theology when I first tried to learn something about him. Sometimes too many details can leave us lost as we try to get a basic orientation of a major figure like Edwards. Marsden provides a nearly perfectly balanced big-picture overview of Edwards's life and accomplishments, tackling some of his most famous insights without pressing us into his more controversial ideas.

What can we learn from Edwards's thought? One of the more fascinating

aspects of Marsden's little book is the picture he paints of early American life, specifically its religious contours. Even as he describes eighteenth-century American Christianity, however, we see seeds of modern evangelicalism in America too. We might easily think that the personality-driven, megachurch phenomena happened somewhat accidentally in the development of American history. The early days of the American ministries of George Whitefield and John Wesley, however, demonstrate the "self-made man" persona, wherein the church's formal structures and policies were discarded, substituting attempts to gain popular attention for the ordinary means of grace.

The background to our modern American religious mindset might be clearest in Marsden's reflections on Edwards's views of the religious affections. Edwards's revivalist version of Calvinism necessitated a highly experiential conversion narrative to demonstrate someone's regeneration. This experience centered on intense emotions, which were key in proving the reality of faith. We see in Edwards the centrality of emotional experience that is so key in broader evangelicalism. We also see the root of the idea that faith must itself be affectional to be saving. The Presbyterian commitment to a credible profession of faith seems lightyears away. Although this reviewer may not follow Marsden about what ought to be, this book is invaluable in showing why our situation is what it is.

***Grace and Truth for Life: Charles H. Spurgeon's Devotionals from His 1865 Classic, Morning by Morning, Paraphrased, Updated, and Adapted for Following Jesus in the 21st Century*, by Larry E. Wilson. Independently published, 2023. Paperback, 376 pages, \$9.99. Reviewed by OP member Daniel Kunkle.**

Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892) was an English Reformed Baptist preacher, pastor, and writer, fondly known as the "Prince of Preachers." Spurgeon remains

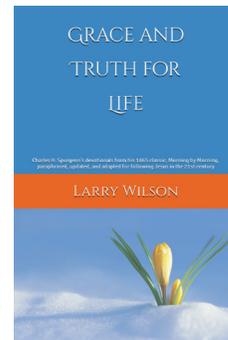
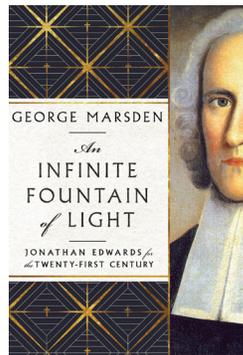
popular today, frequently quoted in sermons and Sunday school classes. Spurgeon wrote two very influential devotionals. One was *Evening by Evening* and the other *Morning by Morning or Daily Readings for the Family or the Closet*, published in 1865.

Larry Wilson is a retired OP pastor and church planter who just released *Grace and Truth for Life*, a "paraphrased, updated, and adapted" version of Spurgeon's *Morning by Morning*. Wilson states in his introduction that Spurgeon's "vocabulary and illustrations have become increasingly dated and unfamiliar," yet his "Bible-based pastoral wisdom and insight are very relevant" today. These convictions serve as rationale for Wilson's undertaking.

The first beneficial aspect of Wilson's work is the formatting of the text. In the original, Spurgeon's daily devotionals are often one long paragraph. Wilson breaks down each devotional into multiple paragraphs, facilitating the ability of the reader to distinguish Spurgeon's points. Wilson also regularly enumerates the points, which further aid the reader in following the argument of the text.

The second welcome aspect of this work is that Wilson provides biblical, historical, and theological context for the daily devotionals. He cites Scripture references for passages to which Spurgeon himself only alluded. Along the same line, Wilson provides names, titles, and authors of hymn verses that Spurgeon quotes without identifying the source. Wilson also identifies people and works for the contemporary reader that would have been familiar to Spurgeon's original audience. One example is identifying characters from *The Pilgrim's Progress* to which Spurgeon alludes. Wilson also defines theological terms like regeneration.

Examples of Wilson's updating and paraphrasing include changing "Faith is like a telegraphic wire" to "Faith is like



an internet connection”; “A Tartar . . . in Cheapside” to “a drifter . . . on Wall Street”; “psalm-singing professor” to “evangelical Christians”; and “passionate with servants” to “beside ourselves with those who try to help us.”

Wilson’s updating and paraphrasing remain mostly faithful to the original, and most readers would find them uncontroversial. A few paraphrases are jarring, however. Whereas Spurgeon addressed his readers as “Christian” or “Dear Reader,” Wilson often addresses his audience as “Christ-follower.” Wilson paraphrases “Mark the heathen devotees, what tortures they endure in the service of their idols!” as “Think as well of the devotees of Islam, how much they’ll give up to serve their idol!” It was also strange to find that Wilson changed the devotional for November 5 from a meditation on Isaiah 54:17 to one on Matthew 16:18. Comparing the two versions, one might understand why he chose to do so, but such changes go beyond the bounds of paraphrasing and updating.

Overall, however, I do recommend this work to both those unfamiliar with the original and to those who know the original or a later version of it.

***Daily Devotions with Herman Bavinck: Believing and Growing in Christian Faith*, by Donald K. McKim. P&R, 2023. Paperback, 232 pages, \$13.56 (Amazon). Reviewed by OP pastor Tyler C. Detrick.**

Imagine sharing your time of daily devotions with Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck. You sip your coffee and read aloud a passage from God’s Word, then Dr. Bavinck offers brief yet brilliant insights about God, man, Jesus Christ, and his church. After a minute of speaking, Bavinck bows his head and says, “we ought to praise God for these things. Let’s take a moment to pray.”

This thought-experiment offers a sense of what Donald K. McKim aims to achieve in *Daily Devotions with Herman Bavinck: Believing and Growing in*

*Christian Faith*. McKim’s book belongs to a unique genre which is best labeled *theological devotional*. In the author’s own words, this genre is designed to acquaint readers with “thoughts of major theologians by providing a discussion of a few sentences from their writings” (11). Over the course of eighty-four daily devotions, McKim produces some of the most striking quotations from Bavinck’s corpus and reflects upon what they mean and how we ought to live in light of this truth today. The topics considered move through the major headings of systematic theology and range from “the Divine Trinity” (35), “Christ’s Ascension” (97), and “New Life in Christ” (105) to “The Church” (163), “Mystical Union with Christ” (181), and “Good Works” (195). McKim’s reflections are doctrinally sound, and his applications are appropriate and practical. He begins each daily devotional with a passage from Scripture to anchor his discussion in the Word of God before he pivots to Bavinck’s contributions.

McKim also provides thoughtful instructions on how this kind of book can best be used, including advice for prayerful reflection and practical application (17). At the end of each daily discussion, he offers a reflection or prayer point which pushes the reader to act upon the knowledge gleaned from Bavinck. The two-part arrangement of this devotion, a balanced division between “Believing as a Christian” and “Living as a Christian,” further enforces McKim’s primary aim: He wants us to keep orthodoxy and orthopraxy together. He wants God’s truth to *change* us by driving us to prayerful praise.

Who will benefit most from this book? Bavinck-lovers hoping to read sizable sections from his *Reformed Dogmatics* will be disappointed to find only simple sentences selected from Bavinck’s corpus and woven into McKim’s reflections; a structured reading plan through Bavinck’s original sources would better suit such readers. However, *Daily Devotions with Herman Bavinck* will prove particu-

larly refreshing for those who need help with learning how to slow down from frantic searching in order to delight in the goodness of what God has revealed. Those who tend to approach theological inquiry as a cold and impersonal science will find McKim’s work a helpful guide in settling into a rhythm of rich doctrine combined with heartfelt devotion. McKim knows how to train Christians to read with devotional intent and in this way to bring his readers closer to the actual aim of all Bavinck’s writing: delighting in the God of the Bible.

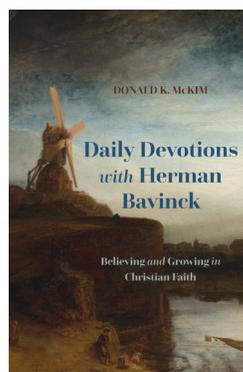
***The Gates of Hell: An Untold Story of Faith and Perseverance in the Early Soviet Union*, by Matthew Heise. Lexham, 2022. Hardcover, 520 pages, \$29.99 (Amazon). Reviewed by OP pastor Calvin R. Goligher.**

In 1917, more than 3.5 million Lutherans in Russia were preparing to celebrate the Reformation’s 400th anniversary. The Lutheran Church in Russia had large congregations, historic buildings, and venerable educational institutions. Within twenty-five years, all of this would be lost to revolution and persecution. The story of that tragedy is the subject of this book.

The Bolshevik Revolution was the first tumultuous episode of this long tragedy. After a brief reprieve, forced collectivization brought famine. Amid these hardships, Russian Lutherans were supported by an enormous mercy ministry, led by figures like the heroic American churchman Dr. John Morehead. The Soviets eventually shut down this ministry, even though the needs were only growing.

During this difficult time, a significant number of men were training for ministry at Leningrad Lutheran Seminary. This ministry too was soon closed in the face of relentless government opposition. The small band of graduates entered into the enormous task of caring for churches across Russia. The work only grew as more pastors retired, died, or made the difficult decision to emigrate.

When Hitler came to power in 1933, ethnically German Lutherans in Russia faced even greater hostility. Pastors suffered terribly at the hands of secret police. Newspapers slandered Christians as



“gangs of wreckers, diversionists, terrorists and spies which had been organized by the agents of foreign intelligence services with the assistance of the Orthodox, the Catholic, the Lutheran and the Mohamedan [sic] clergy” (366).

The government took church buildings and then “rented” them back to congregations. Church schools were subject to government regulation and staffing. Religious classes for youth were outlawed, so pastors organized informal “coffee evenings” and an unofficial network of Sunday school classes. Many of the Sunday school teachers ended up in a work camp. Some were executed.

Heise recounts some genuine blessings amid all this trouble. There were happy Christian marriages that held up under tragedy. Many youths from those Sunday school classes and coffee evenings boldly maintained their Christian faith. Ordinary Christians showed bravery in countless ways. If I had one complaint about the book, it is that the detail is sometimes overwhelming. The details are beautiful, though, to all who savor the memory of saints whose faithfulness and courage have so adorned the gospel.

It is not easy to draw lessons from this history. With hindsight, one can easily imagine how these Christians could have been better prepared or how they might have acted more decisively at certain points. But Heise shows that they were facing unprecedented financial, legal, and social pressures. Perhaps their greatest accomplishment was to simply persevere through profound exhaustion. The importance of worldwide diaconal ministry is another lesson worth contemplating.

The best lesson may come in the form of a powerful portrait of courage. Heroic ministers spent their “golden years” working and suffering. Young men counted the “cost” of seminary not in tuition, but in personal danger. The networks of Sunday school classes were bold expressions of hope for future renewal.

Eventually, there were glimpses of renewal. St. Peter’s Lutheran Church

reopened on Reformation Day 1992 in Leningrad (renamed St. Petersburg). One

woman present remembered the church from her childhood. In 1929, she had been part of the church’s last confirmation class. The pastor who confirmed her was later martyred. A whole generation had spent themselves in service to Christ, and now, some sixty years later, their spiritual children were seeing the first glimpses of God’s faithfulness to preserve the

church and to renew it at the appointed time.

***The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory*, by Abigail Favale. Ignatius, 2022. Paperback, 251 pages, \$17.95 (Amazon). Reviewed by OP pastor John A. Hartley.**

With Barbie at the box office and drag queens in the library, it seems to be the perfect year to clean the windows and see what the West hath wrought in its dismissal of nature and nature’s God. To this end, Abigail Favale has done the church a great service by writing *The Genesis of Gender*.

Her book absolutely sparkles with clarity. Rarely have I read a book where the author is so skilled at mapping and distilling complex ideological movements from their origins to implications. In each chapter, Favale gives the reader understanding, angular convictions, and not a little intellectual sanctification.

The first chapter, “Heretic,” navigates Favale’s personal and academic journey through several stages of feminism. Her honesty is endearing as she explains how feminism was once a “sin” students were eager to confess. Her too. Not being a feminist is

the transgressive move now (29). Favale has become the “heretic,” a scholar of women’s studies who embraces Christian orthodoxy and rejects several feminist dogmas.

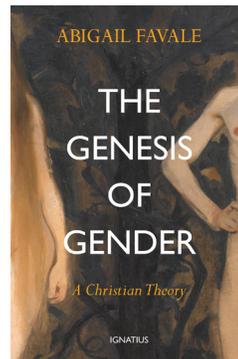
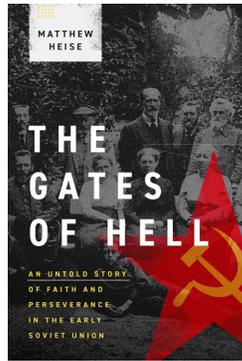
After laying a foundation from Genesis, Favale takes us on a fascinating tour of twentieth-century feminism. We travel through first-, second-, third-, and finally fourth-wave feminism, the most recent iteration in which we are expected to reject the idea that a “woman,” by definition, is a biological female. No more waves, we are in a “roiling ocean” now (60).

Thankfully, the book slows to explore some primary authors and influencers. Simone de Beauvoir is first, the French existentialist who insisted that I am not a human being by the mere fact that I exist (62). Humanness is an achievement, not something given. Favale lucidly notes that this “account of the human condition puts a woman necessarily at war with herself, with the given state of her embodiment” (65).

A second major figure for Favale is postmodern philosopher Judith Butler, who pushes the perspective that power dissimulates ontology. What we perceive to be real (ontology) is actually a fiction created and enforced by institutional power (74). Meaning, what we perceive to be gender is an illusion. We are all just performers yielding to those in power.

The true self is a blank slate.

Having laid these foundations, Favale is ready to bring things to the street. She



## Position Available

**Pastor:** Redeemer Reformed (RCUS) in Golden Valley, Minnesota, is looking for a full-time pastor to lead worship and preach weekly, visit and shepherd the flock, equip the congregation for evangelism, pray for the church body, and participate in ecclesiastical duties. For more information, email [searchcommittee@redeemerrcus.org](mailto:searchcommittee@redeemerrcus.org) or visit [www.redeemerrcus.org](http://www.redeemerrcus.org).

proceeds to show that feminism, under a rubric of promised liberation, has actually done far more to pathologize femaleness than liberate it. Now “true freedom can only be found in a socialist utopia that enables women to control their bodies with contraception and abortion” (91).

With what I regard as unflinching bravery for a scholar, Favale presses on to persuasively show that feminism declares a woman’s true freedom comes by making herself as much like men as possible. She then rounds out an already excellent book with first-rate chapters on sex (“not a spectrum but a stable binary”), gender (“to feel is not to be”), and artifice, a searching chapter that uncovers the painful truth behind what fuels the modern flight from womanhood: *hypersexualization*, the idea that women exist primarily for the pleasure of men.

It should be noted Favale is a member of the Catholic Church and professor at the University of Notre Dame. She reveals this early on. In fact, on several occasions noted Roman Catholic theologians supply her exegesis of Scripture. Most readers here will recognize these errors. For example, in her discussion of concupiscence, she states and dismisses the Protestant understanding of total depravity (49). This may explain why a direct and open discussion of sin is absent from the book. Of course, the estate of sin and misery is a major feature of the book—it looms weighty and large, but only implicitly.

Bottom line, *The Genesis of Gender* is an exceptional piece of work. Crisp, clear, convicting, and convincing. A good book to aid you in becoming a good neighbor in days that are evil.

***Do Not Be True to Yourself: Countercultural Advice for the Rest of Your Life*, by Kevin DeYoung. Crossway, 2023. Paperback, 80 pages, \$6.81 (Amazon). Reviewed by OP member Eddie Mercado.**

The celebratory commencement speeches in high schools and colleges often present us with a grand message: be true to yourself. Pastor-theologian Kevin DeYoung has noticed this trend. What he seeks to provide in *Do Not Be True to Yourself* is a gospel corrective. This book contains five reworked addresses intended to be read by young students. Given DeYoung’s chief aim, we must ask whether this book succeeds in what it set out to do. Can it adequately reach young believers with a response to the West’s gospel message of “be true to yourself”? I believe it can because of DeYoung’s content, contextualization, and conciseness.

Beginning with content, these chapters respond not with the opinions of another individual but with God’s Word. Whether appealing to Esau (ch. 1), Joshua’s ultimatum (ch. 2), or the blessed man of Psalm 1 (ch. 4), the Scriptures are presented as the standard for godly living as it is ultimately revealed in Christ. DeYoung’s addresses do not result in mere moralism, however. They are rooted in the work of Christ, as shown early on: “the great theologian of our age, Lady Gaga, was right: you were born that way. The good news of Jesus Christ is that you can be born again another way” (6).

In this book, DeYoung uses various

cultural texts as illustrations. One of his strengths as a communicator is his ability to contextualize. He *will* challenge the reader. For example, DeYoung reflects on God’s impassibility as he discusses our fickle hearts. But he also makes several references to Disney movies to show the shift our culture has made in promoting its gospel message. DeYoung’s effort to meet students “where they’re at” is to be commended and will keep readers engaged.

*Do Not Be True to Yourself* has one more feature that makes this compelling for students: its conciseness. This is a small paperback that can probably fit in your back pocket. The chapters are packed with biblical wisdom but short enough to be read during a fifteen-minute break. This makes the book a worthwhile resource in the age of YouTube Shorts and TikTok.

The focus on students does not prohibit others from reading with profit. An appendix includes recommended books to read (two written by fathers of the OPC). Chapter 3, on the importance of joining a local congregation, is also relevant for Christians of all ages. One of the effects of the pandemic is that “many Christians think they can have Jesus without the church” (24). But DeYoung helpfully reminds us that the body *must* be bound to its head, Jesus Christ. In fact, that’s the only way we *can* be true to ourselves. Coming back to the titular address, DeYoung declares the countercultural truth of the gospel of Christ: you can only be true to yourself “*if* the real you is dead to sin and alive in Christ Jesus” (8).

