

# Ordained Servant

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for  
Church  
Officers

Sugar Hill Meeting House in Sugar Hill, New Hampshire / photo: Gregory E. Reynolds

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# *Ordained Servant*

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## CONTENTS

5 From the Editor

### ServantThoughts

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#### EDITORIALS

- 6 “Ordained Servant, The Importance of the Office of Ruling Elder”
- 9 “Democracy and Denigration of Office”
- 20 “The Power of Poetry for Preaching and Enjoyment”
- 25 “A Little Exercise for Young Theologians Revisited”

### ServantTruth

- 29 “Women and General Office: From the Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office,” Minutes of the Fifty-fifth General Assembly (1988)
- 36 “A Summary Report of the Committee on Women in Ordained Office,” **Gregory E. Reynolds**
- 38 “Women Deacons? Focusing the Issue,” **Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.**
- 40 “Phoebe Was a Deacon, Other Women Should Be, Too,” **Robert B. Strimple**
- 43 “Phoebe Was a Deaconess, But She Was Not Ordained,” **Gregory E. Reynolds**
- 47 “Reflections on Race and Racism,” **David VanDrunen**

### ServantWord

- 55 “Poured Out Like a Drink Offering: An Ordination and Installation Charge,” **Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.**

---

### ServantChurch

- 59 “A Charge to the Congregation,” **John W. Mallin III**

---

### ServantLiving

- 64 “God’s Work in Our Adult Children’s Lives” **Gerald P. Malkus**

---

### ServantWork

- 68 “How to Select a Financial Advisor,” **Gregory S. DeJong**
- 70 “My Sabbatical: A Pastor’s Experience,” **Brett A. McNeill**
- 72 “Reflections from the Front Lines: Interviews with Tavares, Gidley, Winslow,” **Gregory E. Reynolds**
- 76 “Who Cares for Us When We Can No Longer Care for Ourselves?” **Gregory S. DeJong**

---

### ServantLiterature

- 81 “Your Personal Odyssey in Stereo,” **Mark A. Green**

---

### ServantReading

- 83 *Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims*, by Darby A. Strickland, **Joseph W. Smith III**
- 85 *A Chronicle of Grief: Finding Life after Traumatic Loss* by Melvin Lawrenz, **Gordon H. Cook Jr.**
- 86 *The Confession of Faith: A Critical Text and Introduction*, by John Bower, **Ryan M. McGraw**
- 88 *The Irony of Modern Catholic History: How the Church Rediscovered Itself & Challenged*

- the Modern World to Reform*, by George Weigel, **Darryl G. Hart**
- 91 *Natural Law and Human Rights: Toward a Recovery of Practical Reason*, by Pierre Manent, **David VanDrunen**
- 93 *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World*, by David VanDrunen, **Richard M. Gamble**
- 95 *7 Big Questions Your Life Depends On*, by William J. Edgar, **Charles M. Wingard**
- 96 *A Workman Not Ashamed: Essays in Honor of Albert N. Martin*, by David Charles and Rob Ventura, eds., **Ryan M. McGraw**
- 98 *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents*, by Rod Dreher, **Stephen C. Magee**
- 99 *Pastors and Their Critics: A Guide to Coping with Criticism in the Ministry*, by Joel R. Beeke and Nick Thompson, **Ryan M. McGraw**
- 100 *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey toward Racial Justice*, by Jemar Tisby, **Darryl G. Hart**
- 103 *The Great Tradition: Classic Readings on What it Means to be an Educated Human Being*, by Richard M. Gamble, **Mark W. Graham**
- 104 *The Good, The True, and the Beautiful: A Multidisciplinary Tribute to Dr. David K. Naugle*, **William Edgar**
- 107 *A Development, Not a Departure: The Lacunae in the Debate of the Doctrine of the Trinity and Gender Roles*, by Hongyi Yang, **Stuart R. Jones**
- 108 *Dual Citizens: Politics and American Evangelicals*, by Timothy Padgett, **Darryl G. Hart**
- 111 *Small Preaching: 25 Little Things You Can Do Now to Become a Better Preacher*, by Jonathan T. Pennington, **Charles M. Wingard**
- 112 *The Rise and Triumph of the Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*, by Carl Trueman, **T. David Gordon**
- Essays on Election, Republication, and the Covenants* by Cornelius P. Venema, **David A. Booth**
- 118 “Slavery and Covenanters,” review of *Founding Sins: How a Group of Antislavery Radicals Fought to Put Christ into the Constitution* by Joseph S. Moore, **Alan D. Strange**
- 122 “Give Me Shelter and Give Me Answers,” review of *To Think Christianly: A History of L’Abri, Regent College, and the Christian Study Center Movement* by Charles E. Cotherman, **Darryl G. Hart**
- 125 “The Importance of Biblical Anthropology,” review of *What It Means to Be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics* by O. Carter Snead, **William C. Davis**
- 130 “The Idea of Office,” review of *The Golden Key for Life and Leaders, The Idea of Office* by Kornelis Sietsma, **Gregory E. Reynolds**
- 133 “Medical Technology: An Blessing Not to Be Idolized,” review of *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians* by Gilbert Mielander, **William Davis**
- 135 “The Race Card in a Marked Deck,” review of *An Imaginary Racism: Islamophobia and Guilt*, by Pascal Bruckner, **Gregory E. Reynolds**
- 142 “Chrysostom on Preaching the Word,” review of *Preaching the Word with John Chrysostom* by Gerald Bray, **Joseph A. Tipton**
- 144 “Can We Fully Separate Ecclesiology and Polity?” review of *The Church: An Introduction* by Gregg R. Allison, **Ryan M. McGraw**
- 147 “Covenant Theology Today,” review of *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives*, **Bryan Estelle**
- 153 “Swain and Poythress on the Trinity,” review of *The Trinity: An Introduction*, by Scott R. Swain; and *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God*, by Vern S. Poythress, **Robert Letham**
- 158 “Exodus Old and New,” *Exodus Old and New: A Biblical Theology of Redemption* by L. Michael Morales, **Bryan Estelle**

## ServantReading

### REVIEW ARTICLES

- 115 “Exploring Recent Covenant Theology,” review of *Christ & Covenant Theology*:

# ✦ From the Editor

This is the sixteenth annual printed edition of *Ordained Servant*; we completed our thirtieth year of publication in 2021.

As I considered the various articles and reviews in this 2021 annual print edition, I was impressed once again by the quality of the thinking and writing of each author. The limits of our financial resources are amply made up for by the talents and commitment of our writers and editors. Each is committed to the church of the Lord Jesus Christ and his glory in it all.

The cover picture is of the Sugar Hill Meeting House in Sugar Hill, New Hampshire. The town itself was incorporated in 1965. Until then it was part of the town of Lisbon and the site of a popular resort, the Sunset Hill House. Katherine Peckett established the first resort-based ski school in the United States. The meeting house was built in 1830. It was clearly once a church, but it was very difficult to find any history. The building now houses musical performances and other community events and contains Bette Davis's grand piano. It is a sad testimony of the decline of historic Christianity in New England. Many such church buildings have been given over to secular use. Thankfully, Reformed churches have made a solid comeback in New England over the past half century. Our own denomination presently has six churches in New Hampshire, whereas prior to 1997 there were none. The power of the gospel of God's sovereign grace cannot be thwarted.

Once again, I would like to thank the Committee on Christian Education general secretary Danny Olinger, Alan Strange (Chairman of the Subcommittee on Resources for the Churches), and the Subcommittee on Serial Publications, Darryl Hart (chairman), Glen Clary, Stephen Tracey, and David Winslow for their continued support, encouragement, and counsel. I would also like to thank the many people who make the regular online edition possible: Ayrian Yasar, Linda Foh, Stephen Pribble, and the many fine writers without whom there would be no journal. Finally, I want to thank Ann Hart for her meticulous editorial work on the final document, and Judith Dinsmore for her excellent final proofing and formatting of this printed volume.



—Gregory Edward Reynolds  
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# ✦ Servant Thoughts

## Editorials

### Ordained Servants: The Importance of the Office of Ruling Elder

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* May 2021<sup>1</sup>

by Gregory E. Reynolds

A friend and colleague in the ministry recently told me that he resigns every Monday morning—mentally, that is. I believe this conveys both a true sense of the intensity and difficulty of our calling—that is the nature of the ministry itself—but especially the unique difficulty of the ministry in our times. Martin Luther said something like, “If anyone had told me about what the ministry was really like, ten wild horses could not have dragged me into it.” Paul reported that, “apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28). Some things never change. I was reminded near the beginning of my own ministry of this, when in the early 1980s a retired Reformed minister named John Piersma told Bill Shishko and me that he did not envy us entering the ministry in the late twentieth century, because, he maintained, there is little respect for the ministerial office in the modern world. I would add to this

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=890](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=890). This article first appeared in *Ordained Servant* 16 (2007): 9–11; *Ordained Servant Online* (Jan. 2007), [http://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=31](http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=31). It has been modified.

that alongside, and partly responsible for spawning this egalitarianism is the dramatic rearrangement of social space and consciousness by the electronic environment. This combination of influences has made our world an extraordinarily challenging place in which to minister. The presence of ruling elders in the church is God’s way of helping the minister and the congregation to deal wisely with the modern environment.

This is the world in which we, as servants of the risen Lord, have been ordained to serve. It is essentially the same sinful, confused, rebellious world in which Paul ministered. Above all, it is the world in which the risen Lord Jesus Christ is gathering his elect from among the nations to join him in inheriting the glorious kingdom over which our Lord is presently the monarch.

#### The Importance of the Eldership<sup>2</sup>

One of the great causes of the contemporary church’s weakness is its failure to understand, accept, and implement the biblical form of church government. An essential element of that form is found in the scriptural office of the ruling elder. While it has often been thought that the word “Presbyterian” in the name of a denomination or local church obscures the biblical witness of that church, it should be remembered that the word itself is preeminently biblical. “Presbyterian” comes from the Greek word πρεσβύτερος (*presbuteros*), which means “elder.” (In various forms πρεσβύτερος, *presbuteros*, occurs seventy times in the New Testament.) Since good ordering of the church was important to the New Testament church, we must take church government seriously. It is an important means of spiritual formation. To lament the low state of doctrine and morals in the church today, while simultaneously neglecting and, perhaps, even disdaining one of the chief

2 Based on the “Foreword” to *The Ruling Elder* by Samuel Miller. Dallas TX: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1987 (Reprint of 1832 edition) iii–vii. © Copyright 1987 by Gregory E. Reynolds. The text of this edition was taken from the second edition of Samuel Miller’s *An Essay, on Warrant, Nature and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder, in the Presbyterian Church* (New York: Jonathan Leavitt; Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1832).

means which God has appointed to correct these problems, is reprehensible and foolish.

Not only does Christ, as the head of the church, have the *right* to institute an office such as the ruling elder, but, as the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the flock, he has done so for the spiritual health and welfare of his people both now and forever (Heb. 13:17).

Why, then, has this good office been largely abandoned by the church in our day? I believe that there are two major reasons.

First, in battling the theological liberalism over the past century, orthodox Christians have minimized doctrinal differences and theological precision in favor of a broad coalition based on certain “fundamentals.” It, thus, becomes convenient to dismiss biblical doctrines which are not under attack as unimportant or even “divisive.” This reduction of the church’s confession of its beliefs has been aided and abetted by the anti-intellectualism of modern America, leading to an emphasis on emotion at the expense of clear thinking.

Pragmatism has never been a friend of careful thought, and the modern church often seems more interested in getting things done than in considering the biblical warrant or theological foundation for a given activity. Why waste precious time discussing church doctrine when souls are going to hell? Besides, assuming that evangelism is the central task of the church, rather than the careful oversight and feeding of the flock, doctrine might get the church off track. Hence, it has become accepted generally by religious leaders and laity alike that church government is not only secondary to but also outside the scope of biblical and pastoral concern.

Second, the minimizing of doctrine has combined with another unbiblical ingredient—radical individualism, which is the logical result of egalitarianism—to thwart the exercise of biblical church government. The spirit of the Enlightenment has blossomed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Each man is his own master, accountable to no one but himself. In the church this individualism translates to: “All I need

is my Bible and my God. Anything and anyone else are a threat to my freedom.” Pastors may preach, but they had better not meddle. The idea of a body of ruling elders overseeing and shepherding the flock of God has fallen on hard times.

It is incumbent on elders and ministers of the Word to identify this autonomous instinct for what it is: rebellion, not an inborn right. It is understandable perhaps that secular man in Western democracies should overreact to the spread of totalitarianism in our century. What is sad, though, is that Christians often fail to realize that both totalitarianism and individualistic egalitarianism are children of the same diabolical parent: autonomous freedom. To live in absolute independence from God has been the agenda of fallen man ever since his rebellion in Eden. This autonomous freedom is the essence of secularism. In fact, pure democracy and the resultant chaos of everyman rule have often paved the way for totalitarian control, as seen in the French Revolution. The “one-man show” syndrome in most Baptist churches offers a case in point. At its worst this instinct, fueled by modern technologies, levels all of reality to the horizontal—the human—eviscerating human experience of all transcendence.

The other side of this secular cycle is revolution against the dictator or ruling class. Strict Plymouth Brethrenism, in which there are no officers, along with the general disdain for official authority in the church at large are cases of this reaction. Resisting the concept of church membership and walking away from problems and conflicts are both symptomatic of this pernicious spirit.

Both the abuse of God-ordained authority and the failure to respect that authority are, of course, equally unbiblical. Only a biblical view of eldership will enable the church to avoid this Scylla of dictatorship and Charybdis of radical individualism. The church will steer a safe course in this and every area only if she consciously charts that course according to the inspired map and compass of Scripture.

Positively speaking, when delegated authority in the church is respected by the people and exer-



cised faithfully by the officers, it will bring glory to God and good to his flock (Eph. 4:11–16). In the church, unlike the world, authority is exercised in service, not to self, but to God and his people. The ruling elder is called to be an undershepherd of his self-sacrificing Lord (Acts 20:28). His regard is chiefly for the glory of his Lord and the welfare of his blood-bought flock.

In the present climate of the tyranny of cults, the impersonal manipulation of the mega-churches and mass-media ministries, the therapeutic individualism of the emergent church, and the general malaise of the average church's leadership, a return to biblical church government is desperately needed. The doctrine of the ruling elder must be a keystone in any reform.

Today, the church must remember her true identity. In returning to her biblical roots, she will do well to consult the men who have best guided her in the past. In the area of church government, Samuel Miller's *The Ruling Elder: On the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church*, should be among the first on the list. There are many other useful sources in our tradition.<sup>3</sup> Here are a few:

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<sup>3</sup> Presently, we need to reach back into our Presbyterian heritage. A good place to start is Samuel Miller's *The Ruling Elder*. It was originally published in 1831 and proved seminal to all subsequent debate on biblical eldership. Though Miller's work was an American first, he saw himself building on a rich tradition of teaching on church office. For example, Miller demonstrates that the essential idea of the office of ruling eldership is not a New Testament innovation but harkens back to Mosaic times. Neither is eldership the ecclesiastical invention of John Calvin. It was recognized by the earliest sixteenth-century reformers; and, in turn, they simply rediscovered and amplified what the ancient church had once known. It should also be pointed out that some of Miller's exegesis tends toward a two-office view. For example, he understands 1 Timothy 3 to apply to both elders and ministers, despite the fact that he along with most of his colleagues held a three-office position. As a man of his age, Miller was not entirely free of a few unbiblical customs then current. The most glaring example of this fault concerns his approval of the practice of allowing non-communicating, unbaptized tithers to vote in the election of elders. He believed this was a practical necessity, the abuse of which would be safeguarded by the jurisdiction of presbytery. Fortunately, due to the lack of salary, the election of ruling elders was not subject to the same corruption of patronage as was the salaried teaching eldership. The book, however, is remarkably free of this sort of anachronism.

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## Democracy and the Denigration of Office<sup>1</sup>

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* May 2021<sup>2</sup>

by Gregory E. Reynolds

Americans are not given to use the word *democracy* pejoratively. Hence, the title of this essay will be disturbing to some. In common usage, the word loosely describes a system of government in which the rights of citizens are protected and their voices are given a fair representation in public affairs. Careful students of history, however, will be quick to make certain cautionary distinctions in order to remind us that majoritarian democracy, such as that found in Periclean Athens, and constitutional republicanism, which we often loosely refer to as “democracy” today, are quite different in many important respects.

Our present American system is, in fact, a corruption of the government of our Founding Fathers. While most may naively think of the popular franchise as the essence of the democratic ideal, we do well to remember that the essence of this form was a system of carefully defined, limited, and distributed federal powers designed

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1 [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=398&issue\\_id=91](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=398&issue_id=91); [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=403&issue\\_id=92](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=403&issue_id=92). This essay is adapted from chap. 13 in Mark R. Brown, ed., *Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers* (Duncansville, PA: Classic Presbyterian Government Resources, 1993) 235–55.

2 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=889](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=889).

to keep civil order and foster individual and corporate responsibility at the state and local levels. Furthermore, it assumed the internal constraints of true Christianity, which are now rapidly disappearing in the Western world.<sup>3</sup>

It is not, however, the purpose of this essay to reflect on democracy as a political system in its relationship to church government. It is democracy as a popular ideal, as a major strand in the fabric of the American mind, as that ideal impinges on the idea of church office, that is the subject of this essay. President Woodrow Wilson encapsulated this American ideal in giving the rationale for our entrance into World War I with his slogan: “The world must be made safe for democracy.” This theme was reiterated in President George H. W. Bush’s preachments about a “new world order.”

The popular imagination, increasingly disconnected as it is from its Christian and Reformation past, tends to read “democracy” as a cultural catchword which conjures up a series of narcissistic notions such as: “I have rights; my opinion is as important as anyone’s; I am equal to others in every way; I have a right to education, peace, prosperity, healthcare, and recreation; I may believe and say what I like; and I may do what I like as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone.”

It is not my intention to denigrate the democracy embodied in the founding documents and institutions of our nation or to dismiss all present popular ideas about democracy. It must not be overlooked, however, that in its contemporary popular conception, the egalitarian instinct is destructive to the very institutions that have made our country great. But most importantly, the biblical idea of office has been denigrated in church and state by this idol of egalitarianism. As evangelical Anglican John Stott pointed out many decades ago: “There is much uncertainty in the modern Church about the nature and

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3 Claes G. Ryn, *The New Jacobinism, Can Democracy Survive?* (Washington: National Humanities Institute, 1991), esp. 19ff. Here is an excellent primer on the points made in my first two paragraphs.

functions of the professional Christian ministry.”<sup>4</sup> It is my contention that this uncertainty has been fostered in large part by a growing egalitarian mentality. Egalitarianism tends to equalize God with man and then man with man, and as a result, office of every kind is destroyed. Authority in all of its God-given forms is radically undermined. When it comes to the government of the church, we tamper with its God-given order at our own peril. Thus, I have chosen generally to use the word *egalitarian* to denote the negative, destructive aspect of the democratic mindset that I am concerned to expose.

My intention is to make a case for a view of church office which has been clearly articulated by Presbyterian and Reformed churches since the Reformation. The “three office” idea (minister, elder, and deacon), though substantially embodied in the standards of most American Presbyterian and Reformed bodies, has fallen on hard times in recent history. This is due in large part to the egalitarian ideal which pervades the American mind and its contemporary institutions. In order to correct this problem as it is manifested in the church, we need to appreciate the cultural forces which have undermined the proper biblical idea of church office. An example that reveals this mindset can be observed in the way in which ministers are often sought. The process is referred to as “candidating.” In many churches the resemblance of this process to contemporary political candidating is striking and tragic. The prevailing “two-office” view (elder and deacon, for some Presbyterians this means there are two functions of elder—teaching and ruling) is a concession to the egalitarian agenda, even if there is no intention to compromise biblical principle. In fact, it is especially where this compromise is unintended that it must be reckoned with. The traditional three-office idea, on the other hand, properly understood and practiced, will help to overcome

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Thomas, “The Pastoral Ministry,” in *Practical Theology and the Ministry of the Church, 1952–1984, Essays in Honor of Edmund P. Clowney*, ed. Harvey M. Conn (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991), 74.

all of the deleterious tendencies of the democratic spirit, while promoting the full range of pastoral ministry envisioned in the New Testament.

No doubt both two- and three-office proponents will find a large measure of agreement in assessing the threat which egalitarianism poses to the biblical view of office. Those who claim the two-office view among Presbyterians are usually functionally three-office.<sup>5</sup> They will also agree, in the main, on the function of church office. But beyond this it needs to be appreciated that the two-office view, especially in its pure form, is, wittingly or unwittingly, egalitarian in its conception and effect, and, therefore, tends to undermine the ministry of the church in our day.

### The Historical Roots of Egalitarianism

It should be recognized at the outset that the fundamental spiritual and moral principle of egalitarianism is not equality but autonomy. Put another way, the primary motivation of this democratic spirit is found in its assertion of equality or identification with God.

Thus, egalitarianism has its roots not in the Enlightenment, but in Eden. Adam’s assertion of autonomy in God’s world is the ultimate cause of the democratic mentality in its contemporary expression. The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century is the proximate historical source, which gave egalitarianism its present form.

The word *office* comes from the Latin *officium*, a work or service performed. Biblically, office is a position of specific duty assigned to a person by the Lord through his church. Each believer has a calling to general office. The minister is called to be a servant of the Lord as his spokesman, a minister of his Word. Paul needed to remind Timothy of his office. “Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership” (1 Tim. 4:13–14).

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<sup>5</sup> Larry E. Wilson “How Many Offices Are There? Practical Concerns” *Ordained Servant* (April 1992): 38.

The teaching office is God's gift to the church. It is also commanded. Sietsma asserts: "The essence of office depends on the divine mandate."<sup>6</sup>

Man, created as *imago dei*, was given the office of a servant of God. Under God, Adam was called to be a prophet, a priest, and a king—a vicegerent over God's creation. God's mandate was for his servant to cultivate all of the rich and varied potential of his creation to the eternal glory of God. In challenging the sovereign authority of God to define man's meaning and role in history, Adam forsook his office. He became the first egalitarian by declaring his equality with God in defining his own meaning and role in history. The modern manifestation of this problem should not surprise us. It is at the heart of fallen man's thinking and motivation in whatever form it may be historically expressed.

At the beginning of our history as a nation, this spirit was clearly present. It must be remembered that our nation was born in the twilight of the "age of reason." As a true child of the Enlightenment, Thomas Paine confidently declared "my own mind is my own church." Paine's *The Age of Reason* was a virulent attack on the integrity and authority of Scripture. Several of the Founding Fathers held similar deistic ideas, however more subtly they may have stated them. Autonomy was on the march.

As sociologist Robert Bellah points out in his brilliant analysis of individualism, there are "three central strands of our culture—biblical, republican, and modern individualist."<sup>7</sup> According to Bellah, the American quest for "success, freedom, and justice" comes to expression in each of these three strands throughout her history.<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Franklin was the quintessential individualist of the founding era. He was the heroic poor boy made good, who pulled himself up by his own bootstraps

and lived by the utilitarian interpretation of Christianity captured in his famous statement, "God helps those who help themselves." The moral maxims of *Poor Richard's Almanac*, such as, "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise," were rooted not in God and his Word, but in personal utility.<sup>9</sup> As with Thomas Jefferson, whose *Jefferson Bible* was an attempted reduction of Scripture to its purely ethical teachings, morality was loosed from its Christian moorings. Man was the measure as well as the master of reality and history. God and his Word became the servant of man.

Given this ascendant utilitarianism, it was not difficult for equality before the law, guaranteed by our constitution, to subtly become an equality of individual success. Enlightenment men like Franklin and Paine became exemplars of the American dream. Every man can succeed, given the opportunity and the will. With this shift toward a more anthropocentric view of life, the biblical idea of office began to disappear. Man lives for his own glory. He is no one's servant. He is a law unto himself.<sup>10</sup> The Enlightenment notion that governmental authority is derived from the people was a secular distortion of the covenantal idea, in which the people of God were called to respond to the sovereign initiative of their Lord. When authority is delegated by God, both government and people have mutual responsibilities. But God's law is king, not the king's or the people's law. As authority shifted to the people, the will of the majority became king, and God was simply invoked to bless the popular will (or the will of politicians, as we are reminded at every inauguration).

Though often billed as a reaction to the rationalism of the eighteenth century, nineteenth-century Romanticism was really its offspring, or at least its younger sibling. Men like Walt Whitman and Washington Irving despised the materialism of the Enlightenment-inspired Industrial Revolution. Autonomy, however, was as much at

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6 K. Sietsma, *The Idea of Office*, translated by Henry Vander Goot (Jordan Station, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1985), 24.

7 Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 28.

8 Ibid.

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9 Ibid., 32.

10 Sietsma, *The Idea of Office*, 40.

the heart of the romantic movement as it was of Enlightenment rationalism. Whitman’s “Song of Myself” says it all in the first line: “I celebrate myself.”<sup>11</sup> The romantic poet and the rationalist philosopher-statesman were singing different parts to the same tune. The transcendentalist essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson echoed this theme when he asserted: “Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string.”<sup>12</sup>

Romantic man thought himself able to plum deeper than the Newtonian geometric-mathematical portrait of reality. The mysterious, emotional, and irrational elements of man’s nature needed to be appreciated. The logic of the scientist-philosopher was to be replaced by the genius of the artist. The precincts of calculation were to be transcended. Form was to be superseded by life. The authentic individual had to pursue Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “desire of the moth for the star.”<sup>13</sup> With man’s reason having been set up as the final arbiter of reality and meaning, the romantic focused on the inner feelings, longings, and aspirations of the individual. In the nineteenth century, reason set out on a new voyage amidst the mysteries of life.<sup>14</sup>

It should not surprise us to see rationalistic science and romantic individualism appear together as brothers in the twentieth century. Squabble though they may, they are still kin. The internal combustion engine and the electronic impulse, consummate products of reason, have been harnessed to serve the individual in an unprecedented way. Timothy Leary, a leading proponent of the expansion of the individual consciousness via psychedelic drugs in the 1960s, applauded the new technology, called “virtual reality” (VR), commenting, “I hope it’s totally subversive and unacceptable to anyone in power.

11 Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 34.

12 *Ibid.*, 63.

13 Crane Brinton, “Romanticism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 7: 207.

14 Franklin L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought, Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1650–1950* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 283–301.

I am flat out enthusiastic that it is for the liberation and empowerment of the individual.”<sup>15</sup>

This reminds us of President Bill Clinton’s recent assertion that the purpose of government is “empowerment” of its citizenry. As new technologies propelled by egalitarianism reshape our institutions, the individual is rapidly replacing the authority of God, his Word, his church, and the idea of office. As spontaneity and informality express people’s devotion to the idol of egalitarianism,<sup>16</sup> individual authority and expression assert themselves with increasing boldness in the church. Many believe that in the absence of such self-assertion, the church as an institution lacks authenticity and is “morally hypocritical.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the sadly prevailing sentiment is “There’s nothing in it for me.” Increasingly, the conviction that the church exists to “meet my needs” is held by ministers and people alike as they use the church as a vehicle for their own success.

### The Effects of Egalitarianism on Church Office

The immediate precursor of the American War of Independence was the Great Awakening. Despite the spiritual good that it generated, it has proved to be a major influence in kindling the egalitarian impulse. Revivalists within the Presbyterian Church of that period were mostly a “force battering at the ecclesiastical structure.”<sup>18</sup> The Rev. John Thompson, an Old Side Presbyterian, opposed itinerancy by positing the federalist idea that ruling elders fairly represented the people.<sup>19</sup> But this idea stood against a tide of unrestrained leveling.

15 Glenn Emery, “Virtual Reality’s Radical Vision,” *Insight on the News* (May 6, 1991), 25.

16 Cf. Charles Dennison, “Report of the Committee on the Involvement of Unordained Persons in Worship Services,” *Minutes of the Fifty-eighth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (1991), 290.

17 Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 64.

18 Alan Heimart and Perry Miller, eds., *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), xxx.

19 *Ibid.*, 113–14.

One of the plainest popular manifestations of egalitarianism is anticlericalism together with its offspring, anti-intellectualism. Ever since the Reformation, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has been misinterpreted by the radical wing of that movement, the Anabaptists (referring to their rejection of infant baptism). During the Great Awakening, revivalist Herman Husband, glorying in his lack of learning, confirmed the anti-revivalists' worst suspicions by boasting, "My Capacity is not below them of the first and greatest Magnitude."<sup>20</sup> Some, according to anti-revivalists, even claimed to be "abler divines than either *Luther* or *Calvin*."<sup>21</sup> In claiming the right to question and judge all, the extreme revivalists denied the idea of special office altogether. A genuine experience of God's grace was, for them, the only prerequisite for preaching. James Davenport's "repentance" during the Awakening consisted of burning his books and his clerical garb. He encouraged the laity to assume ministerial authority.<sup>22</sup>

In a well-intended effort to assert the priesthood of all believers and genuine religious experience over against the rationalistic elitism of some of the New England clergy, revivalists, in many cases unwittingly, undermined the authority and integrity of biblical office, especially the teaching office. The tendency to find the source of spiritual authority in the individual rather than in God-ordained office was present in American Reformed churches from the earliest times. Men like Jonathan Edwards, along with his Calvinistic contemporaries and forefathers, carefully rejected the egalitarian impulse in the Great Awakening, without denying the authentic work of God's Spirit in that movement. Charles Dennison, late historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, summed it up cogently:

The new tone sounding from the Presbyterians harmonized well with the spirit in the new nation in which the democratic ideal

20 Ibid., 646.

21 Ibid., 150.

22 Ibid., 260.

blended with the rising evangelical movement. The evangelicals traced themselves straight back to the charismatic aspects of New Testament worship (Ilion T. Jones, *A Historical Approach to Evangelical Worship* [1954], 150). Their perspective had been promoted in part by the Great Awakening and more conspicuously by the triumphs of Methodism. . . . With most, there was a deliberate attempt to keep ministers and layman on the same plane (Jones, 155).<sup>23</sup>

In the nineteenth century, this tendency simply spread. No one exemplified it in Presbyterianism better than Charles Grandison Finney. He was a member of the New School party from his conversion in 1821 until 1836, when he became a Congregationalist. "Finney and his colleagues had drunk deeply of the new ideals of democracy and sought to devise new means to reach men like themselves."<sup>24</sup> Finney's "new measures" focused on the individual decision of seekers. Others gave more attention to the emotions.<sup>25</sup> New School author Albert Barnes, in opposing the doctrinal strictness of the Old School, had great zeal for "freedom of the spirit."<sup>26</sup> But the net result was the same: the individual was king.

Old School Presbyterian Thomas Smyth saw the dangers of the "democratic form" in congregational churches:

Experience, however, proved, as it still proved in Congregational churches, the inexpediency of such a course, its impotency and inefficiency on the one hand, and on the other hand its tendency to produce parties, schisms and disturbances, and even tumults and open ruptures in the church.<sup>27</sup>

23 Dennison, "Report of the Committee on the Involvement of Unordained Persons," 290.

24 Julius Melton, *Presbyterian Worship in America* (Richmond: John Knox, 1967), 47.

25 Ibid., 59.

26 Ibid., 62.

27 Thomas Smyth, *Complete Works of the Reverend Thomas Smyth, D.D.*, ed. J. William Flinn (Columbia, SC: R. L. Bryan, 1908), 4:18–19.

The egalitarian spirit, however, did not find Presbyterianism to be the happiest of hunting grounds, due to the latter's strong and clear view of the importance of special office. Through the office of ruling elder, the laity already played a prominent role in the government of the church. Furthermore, the priesthood of all believers was taken seriously and insured each member a vital part in the worship and edification of the church without giving quarter to egalitarianism.

Presently, however, the power of the democratic ideal in the American mind threatens to overwhelm all institutions which dare to stand in its way. In the church a distorted version of the priesthood of all believers has been reinforced by interpreting Ephesians 4:12 to refer to ministers of the Word equipping church members for ministry. T. David Gordon presents a convincing exegetical argument against this prevailing interpretation:

To sustain such a translation, three things must be proven: (1) that the three purpose clauses, so obviously parallel in their grammatical structure, have different implied subjects (thereby disrupting the parallel); (2) that *katartismos* is properly translated "equip" here; and (3) that *ergon diakonias* refers not to acts of service, in the general sense, but to the overall "Christian ministry."

If any one of these three is not proven, the entire argument unravels, for the "lay ministry" translation of this passage requires all three conclusions.<sup>28</sup>

Gordon concludes,

Further, insofar as these "gifted ones" are appointed for the edification of the body, it is detrimental to the health of the body to diminish or otherwise alter the role of the gifted ones. That is, it is a sin against all three components of Paul's metaphor, not merely against one, to diminish the role of

the gift. It diminishes the thanks that are properly due the Giver for his gracious provision. It diminishes the range and degree of edification that the body might otherwise experience. And it diminishes the honor that ought to be given to those we are commanded to honor doubly.<sup>29</sup>

In his recent impassioned and witty plea for America to return to the behavior and ideals of its WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) heritage, Richard Brookhiser unintentionally made a very important point about egalitarianism. In commenting on the power of WASP America to assimilate a wide variety of nationalities and viewpoints, Brookhiser noted:

It is one of the pleasant surprises of the Irish experience that Catholicism adapted so well. The reason is plain. The Catholic Church in America became Americanized—that is, WASPized. The Catholic Church arrived as the one true faith, outside which there was no salvation, and it became a denomination. It was still the one true faith, of course, but then so were all the others.<sup>30</sup>

Here is the power, not of the WASP, who is living off borrowed capital and about to declare bankruptcy anyway, but of egalitarianism aimed at religion. All religions are created equal. It is not a big step from that assertion to declare that because all church members are created equal, the idea of office is rubbish—or, worse, that, because it stands in the way of equality and self-fulfillment, it must be abolished altogether.

Where office formally exists in church and state, it is often used more for personal aggrandizement than for service to God or man. The celebrity has replaced the servant as a major mentor in our culture. Every man has the potential to be a star. If that fails, watching TV will provide vicarious stardom. In the church, this

29 Ibid., 78.

30 Richard Brookhiser, *The Way of the WASP* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 23.

28 "Equipping' Ministry in Ephesians 4?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37/1 (March 1994): 70.

translates into the mistaken notion that participation in worship requires a spotlight on the individual. So special music and “sharing times” proliferate. Why should the preacher own center stage? Thus, church office often degenerates into a stage for the display of one’s gifts, rather than a means of ministering God’s grace to God’s people. When it comes to opinions and ideas, many people feel that their thoughts have not been “heard” until they have been heeded. As Christopher Lasch rightly concludes, the value of self-restraint has been replaced by that of self-indulgence.<sup>31</sup> This is egalitarianism come into its own. Whether one worships in church or in the woods, the individual prevails.

While the view that diminishes the distinction between the pastor and the ruling elder, known as the two-office view, may not be the lineal descendent of egalitarian thinking, it is significant that it was first explicitly articulated in American Presbyterianism in the romantic nineteenth century. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that this view is predominant in our egalitarian present.

If egalitarianism is in the business of leveling distinctions, particularly where authority and office are involved, the two-office view falls prey to this instinct by obliterating the distinction between ruler and pastor. Its tendency is to bring down, not to elevate. At its worst, the preacher is thought merely to be paid to do full-time what the elder does for free. Thus, whatever distinction remains, it is not qualitative and official, but quantitative and practical. But then, ironically, this equalizing instinct brings down in order to elevate itself. In true *Animal Farm* fashion, “Some are more equal than others.” Pure egalitarianism always opens the door to pure dictatorship.

The defenders of the three-office view in the nineteenth century were quick to pick up on this irony in the two-office view. Charles Hodge

pointed out that as a consequence of the two-office view, “we are therefore shut up by this new doctrine to abolish the office of ruling elder; we are required to make them all preachers.”<sup>32</sup> The very people the two-office theory purports to help are deprived of the putative pastoral connection. Hodge continues:

This doctrine is, therefore, completely revolutionary. It deprives the people of all substantive power. The legislative, judicial, and executive power according to our system, is in Church courts, and if these courts are to be composed entirely of clergymen, and are close, self-perpetuating bodies, then we have, or we should have, as complete a clerical domination as the world has ever seen.<sup>33</sup>

As Edmund Clowney asserts, to limit rule to those with teaching gifts creates a distance between church officers and the church, and it denies the use of men who are gifted to rule.<sup>34</sup> So, while the three-office idea is often billed as clericalism or elitism, it turns out actually to be just the opposite.

A further irony lies in the fact that where the two-office view prevails, the plurality of elders in a congregation tends to diminish the importance and therefore the quality of the teaching office. This was not lost on one of Hodge’s mentors, Samuel Miller, whose classic work *The Ruling Elder* set the agenda for the nineteenth-century debate on the eldership. He lamented that the effect of the two-office view

would be to reduce the preparation and requirements for the ministry; to make choice of plain, illiterate men for this office; men of small intellectual and theological furniture; dependent on secular employments for subsistence; and, therefore, needing little or

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31 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978), 177.

32 Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1878), 269.

33 *Ibid.*, 129.

34 Edmund P. Clowney, “A Brief for Church Governors in Church Government” (unpublished paper, 1972), 17.



no support from the churches which they serve.<sup>35</sup>

The two-office idea, then, in its purest form, ends up denigrating both the teaching and the ruling offices. The biblical system requires both as separate offices in order to preserve the full range of ministry mandated in the Scriptures. In fact, most two-office proponents in Presbyterian churches do hold to a distinction between teaching and ruling elders, as species of one genus. This is often popularly referred to as the “two-and-a-half-office” view. But does this not really represent a transition from the three- to the two-office view? As Iain Murray noted of James Henley Thornwell and Robert Lewis Dabney in the nineteenth century, “When in writing on the call to the ministry they make plain that they are *not* discussing ruling elders—a position hardly consistent with their case” (i.e., for the two-office view).<sup>36</sup> The logic of the two-office position is bound ultimately to do away with any distinction between the pastor and the ruling elder.<sup>37</sup>

### The Restoration of Church Office

No doctrine can be properly restored to the church’s mind without careful definition. The three-office view is no exception. Distinctions made in the nineteenth-century debate are helpful in focusing the definition. In fact, it was the lack of proper distinctions that characterized the two-office theory for Hodge. The point at issue, he maintained, is

the nature of the office of the ruling elder.

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35 Samuel Miller, *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder, in the Presbyterian Church* (New York: Jonathan Leavitt; Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1831), 187.

36 Iain Murray, “Ruling Elders—A Sketch of a Controversy,” *The Banner of Truth Magazine*, no. 235 (April 1983): 9.

37 Instructive in this regard is the transition made by G. I. Williamson from a two- to three-office view. G. I. Williamson, “A Look at the Biblical Offices,” *Ordained Servant* (April 1992): 30–37; “The Two- and Three-Office Issue Reconsidered,” *Ordained Servant* (January 2003): 5–6. See also Mark R. Brown, “Why I Came to a Three-Office View,” *Ordained Servant* (January 1995): 17–19.

Is he a clergyman, a bishop? or is he a layman? Does he hold the same office with the minister or a different one? According to the new theory, the offices are identified. . . . This new theory makes all elders, bishops, pastors, teachers, and rulers. . . . It therefore destroys all official distinctions between them. It reduces the two to one order, class, or office.<sup>38</sup>

The focus of the question, from an exegetical perspective, is clearly stated by Iain Murray:

The question which arises is how this Presbyterian distinction between ‘ministers’ and ‘elders’ is to be justified from the New Testament. Upon what grounds should such a title as ‘pastor’ be restricted to one if the word in the New Testament is descriptive of all elders?<sup>39</sup>

If presbyter is used uniformly in the New Testament to refer to a single office, then the distinction between the ruling elder and the pastor cannot be maintained. But, as Clowney cautioned:

In 1 Timothy 5:17, those who engage in rule are distinguished from those who also labor in the word and doctrine. Again, the fact that both groups can be called *πρεσβύτεροι* by no means demonstrates that their office is identical.<sup>40</sup>

Hodge made a crucial exegetical point in recounting the essence of a debate he had with Thornwell:

This is the dilemma in which, as we understood, Dr. Thornwell endeavoured to place Dr. Hodge, when he asked him, on the floor of the Assembly, whether he admitted that the elder was a presbyter. Dr. Hodge rejoined by asking Dr. Thornwell whether he admitted

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38 Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1878), 128.

39 Iain Murray, “Ruling Elders—A Sketch of a Controversy,” *The Banner of Truth Magazine*, no. 235 (April 1983): 1.

40 Edmund P. Clowney, “A Brief for Church Governors in Church Government” (unpublished paper, 1972), 15.

that the apostles were deacons. He answered, No. But, says Dr. Hodge, Paul says he was a *διακονος*. O, says Dr. Thornwell, that was in the general sense of the word. Precisely so. If the answer is good in the one case, it is good in the other. If the apostles being deacons in the wide sense of the word, does not prove that they were officially deacons, then that elders were presbyters in the one sense, does not prove them to be presbyters in the other sense. We hold, with Calvin, that the official presbyters of the New Testament were bishops; for, as he says, “[For to all who carry out the ministry of the Word it (Scripture) accords the title of ‘bishops.’]” But of the ruling elders, he adds, “[Governors (I Cor. 12:28) were, I believe, elders chosen from the people, who were charged with the censure or morals and the exercise of discipline along with the bishops.]” *Institutio*, *Œc.* IV. 3. 8.<sup>41</sup>

Some defenders of the three-office view, such as Thomas Smyth, held that ruling elders were never referred to in the New Testament “under the term presbyter or elder, which always refers to the teacher or bishop solely.”<sup>42</sup> Like Calvin, he found his warrant for the office of governor or ruling elder in passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Romans 12:8. He understood passages such as 1 Timothy 3; 5:17; Titus 1; Acts 20 as referring only to ministers of the word. On the other end of the exegetical spectrum of three-office defenders, Samuel Miller understood the above passages to refer to both offices together. Miller, nonetheless, clearly held the three-office view.<sup>43</sup> In fact, Hodge declared himself to be in complete agreement with Miller as to the nature of the ruling office, only differing with him in the method of estab-

lishing its biblical warrant.<sup>44</sup> Exegetical uniformity is not required in order to base the view clearly on Scripture.

Hodge summed up the three-office position robustly:

This is the old, healthful, conservative doctrine of the Presbyterian Church. Ministers of the word are clergymen, having special training, vocation, and ordination; ruling elders are laymen, chosen from the people as their representatives, having, by divine warrant, equal authority in all Church courts with the ministers.<sup>45</sup>

Much study of this question needs to be carried out by Presbyterians. The integrity of the offices of both ruling elder and minister is at stake. And while we need to take seriously the warning of Thomas Smyth that our devotion does not “terminate on the outward form, order, ministry or ordinances of any church,”<sup>46</sup> we must not forget that the proper biblical form of office will best serve the Lord who ordained it. This is true of both offices.

The 1941 edition of the *Form of Government* of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church began the chapter “Of Ministers”: “The office of the minister is the first in the church, both for dignity and usefulness.” But this phrase was deleted from the chapter describing the office of minister in the 1978 revision, as an accommodation to the two-office view. The chapter title was also changed from “Of Ministers” to “Ministers or Teaching Elders.” Interestingly the sentence remains in the chapter on “Ordaining and Installing Ministers” (23.8, 14). However, its omission in the description of the ministerial office is unfortunate because ultimately the centrality of preaching is at stake. Calvin said it well: “God often commended the dignity of the ministry by all possible marks of approval in order that it might be held among

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41 Hodge, *Church Polity*, 130. (Battles’s English translation in the Library of Christian Classics is substituted for Hodge’s quotation of Calvin in Latin.)

42 Thomas Smyth, *Complete Works of the Reverend Thomas Smyth, D.D.*, ed. J. William Flinn (Columbia, S.C.: R. L. Bryan, 1908), 4:26.

43 Samuel Miller, *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder, in the Presbyterian Church* (New York: Jonathon Leavitt; Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1831), 28.

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44 Hodge, *Church Polity*, 129.

45 *Ibid.*, 130.

46 Smyth, *Works*, 4:26.

us in highest honor and esteem, even as the most excellent of all things.”<sup>47</sup> It is not the privilege of persons, but the dignity of God’s Word which is being upheld. Egalitarianism, lacking any real conception of office, tends to see all official distinctions as tools of oppression. A biblical servant, however, will see such a distinction as a tool of ministry and himself as an instrument of God’s grace.

The three-office doctrine also preserves the ruling function of the eldership. As both Hodge and Clowney pointed out, the two-office view creates a gap between the clergy and the people. As every faithful minister knows, the oversight of the flock is impossible to maintain alone. The three-office position allows ruling elders to focus on the application of what the minister teaches from God’s Word. The three-office position, rightly understood, alone preserves the true dignity and effectiveness of the ruling office.

Only a careful distinction of offices will ultimately preserve the proper functions of each. Historically, the two-office scheme leads to the disappearance of the ruling elder and the atrophy of lay leadership. In some circles, the teaching function has been demeaned, but this seems to be the case more where the “no-office” idea prevails, as in Brethrenism. When everyone is a minister, no one is. The egalitarian impulse, by its very nature, erodes the idea of office to the great harm of the church.

The benefits of the three-office view are manifold. First, the parity of rule protects the church from tyranny. The minister does not rule alone. There is a balance of power—a system of checks and balances. As Miller noted, the ruling elder has “an equal voice. The vote of the most humble and retiring Ruling Elder, is of the same avail as that of his minister.”<sup>48</sup> Sietsma observed, “It must be remembered that office is the only justification and the proper limitation of any human exercise

47 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, LCC, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.3.8:1055.

48 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 197.

of power and authority.”<sup>49</sup> The three-office view brings this idea into its own. Egalitarianism allows power to fall into the hands of the domineering and gives voice ultimately to the loudest mouth.

Second, the three-office doctrine provides leadership. The minister, as a scribe of the Word, is a leader among the rulers. He is normally the moderator of the session, a first among equals. A ship cannot sail without a captain. As Geoffrey Thomas pointed out:

Where plural elders are in existence, the principle of single leadership is necessary. Nowhere in the Scriptures do we find leadership exercised by a committee with one man acting as a kind of chairman, although that is the consequence of the concept of parity among plural elders in many cases today.<sup>50</sup>

In preventing ministers from lording it over the elders, the two-office view tends to leave a vacuum of leadership. Smyth declared, “Ministers are like the head from which proceeds the stimulus, guidance, and direction, which are essential to the vitality, the activity, the dignity, and the harmony of the system.”<sup>51</sup> Egalitarianism engenders lordship, not leadership.

Third, the three-office view allows the minister to focus on the ministry of the Word, unhindered by the multitude of concerns that only the group of elders can attend to with him. How many of the pulpits of our land suffer because of the inordinate demands made on a minister’s time? Jethro’s advice to Moses is as pertinent today as it was over three millennia ago: “What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone.” (Exod. 18:17–18). The apostles put

49 K. Sietsma, *The Idea of Office* (Jordan Station, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1985), 15.

50 Geoffrey Thomas, “The Pastoral Ministry,” in *Practical Theology and the Ministry of the Church, 1952–1984, Essays in Honor of Edmund P. Clowney*, ed. Harvey M Conn (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991), 78–79.

51 Smyth, *Works*, 4:28.

this principle into practice in the calling out of deacons in Acts 6. Egalitarianism leads not only to tyranny but to burnout.

Fourth, this view allows for the proper and effective implementation of discipline, which the minister could not appropriately or practically provide on his own. Egalitarianism leads to moral chaos.

Finally, the three-office idea provides for the needs of all of the people. Miller beautifully depicted this full-orbed ministry:

In every department of official duty, the Pastor of this denomination has associated with him, a body of pious, wise, and disinterested counselors, taken from among the people; acquainted with their views; participating in their feelings; able to give sound advice as to the wisdom and practicability of plans which require general co-operation for carrying them into effect; and able also, after having aided in the formation of such plans, to return to their constituents, and so to advocate and recommend them, as to secure general concurrence in their favor.<sup>52</sup>

There are several things which need to be done to promote a more biblical view of office in our churches. First, people need to be instructed about the nature and dangers of egalitarianism. Most people are unaware of the democratic assumptions that are part of the fabric of the worldview in which they have been nurtured as Americans. To the extent that these assumptions are unbiblical, church officers, especially ministers, must foster the transformation of people's minds, so that they will not be conformed to this world (Rom. 12:1–2).

Second, pastors and elders need to encourage each other to fulfill the ministries to which God has called them. This means that each must be aware of the biblical requirements, duties, and limits of the offices of pastor and ruler. In particular, each must understand what is specifically

expected of them in the local congregation. The strengths and weaknesses of each officer should be openly discussed in the privacy of the session. Special strengths and gifts should be appreciated and cultivated so that the wide variety of needs in a given congregation will be met.

Third, a good working relationship should be cultivated among elders and ministers. This means developing biblical communication and conflict-resolution skills. The session must see itself as a team. This means that the individualist instinct must be suppressed in ministers and elders. Matters under discussion must be kept confidential. When decisions are made, the dissenter should keep his disagreement to himself unless it involves moral or doctrinal absolutes. Then the proper means of discipline should be judiciously used to deal with sin and heresy.

One of the greatest temptations presented by the democratic mentality is the idea that the ruling elder is a sounding board for congregational discontent or an agent for special interests. Smyth was aware of this danger already in the nineteenth century, when he warned:

Remember, however, that while you are the representatives of the people, you represent not their WISHES and OPINIONS, but their DUTIES and OBLIGATIONS, THEIR RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES, as these are laid down in those heavenly laws to which you and they are both alike subject, and which no power on earth can either alter, modify, abridge, or enlarge.

Because pride enhances this temptation he added, "Seek not popularity at the expense of fidelity."<sup>53</sup>

The idea, rightly emphasized by Hodge and others, that ruling elders are "representatives of the people" can easily be misused in order to pit the minister against the people, as if the pastor did not sympathize with their concerns. Frustrated preachers must not treat their elder as Absaloms.

52 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 311–12.

53 Smyth, *Works*, 4:31.

Annual sessional retreats, together with a wise and regular system of visitation by elders and minister, will do much to prevent such abuse.

The session must present a united front. This means that a wedge should never be allowed to be driven between a pastor and the elders. The pastor must be teachable and humble, never demanding his agenda. But it also means that the ruling elder must protect the pastor from the power of destructive criticism. Criticism itself is healthy, but the Devil, the original egalitarian, is a master at inspiring unjust criticism and using just criticism divisively to ruin churches and drive good men from the ministry. The wise elder will try to answer the criticisms and concerns of members on the spot or bring the matter directly to the pastor (with the critic, if necessary). It is crucial that elders support the pastor, especially when they disagree with him. Gerard Berghoef and Lester De Koster have an excellent section on this subject.<sup>54</sup> This would be a superb book for sessions to work through together. Finally, ministers and elders will serve the Lord and promote the godly government of his church best by being servants of God and his people. The three-office view, by itself, will not restore true ministry to the church. Only if those who fill the offices have the mind of their Master, the mind of a servant (Phil. 2:5–11), will egalitarianism be kept at bay and the kingdom of God built. The individualist will use the office for his own personal fulfillment and thus denigrate the office. The servant will seek the glory of his Lord. ©

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54 Gerard Berghoef and Lester DeKoster, *The Elder's Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Christian Library, 1979), 160–62. Cf. Lawrence Eyres, *The Elders of the Church* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975), 17–18.

# The Power of Poetry for Preaching and Enjoyment

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**Gregory E. Reynolds**

Novelist and poet Larry Woiwode, and Leland Ryken, professor of English and author, are always lamenting the lack of interest in literature and poetry among pastors. They are doing their best to make a difference. But why bother? Well, I'm here to tell you.<sup>2</sup>

Poet Dana Gioia, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, raised worrisome concerns about the state of literary reading in America in the 1990s. Building on a concerning trend, Gioia sounded the alarm in dramatic fashion in 2004 and 2007 with reports “Reading at Risk” and “To Read or Not to Read.” He was often criticized as a doomsayer. But, because parents and educators, including the NEA, did not simply accept this as an irreversible trend, the 20 percent decline in literary reading in the youngest age group surveyed (ages 18–24) in 2002 was reversed to a dramatic 21 percent increase in 2008, as presented by Gioia in a subsequent NEA report “Reading on the Rise.”<sup>3</sup> Sadly the only area of literary reading that continues to decline is poetry.

One of my favorite editorial writers recently lumped poets in with the dilettante, second-generation, trust fund rich kids. Poetry is the literature *par excellence* of daydreamers.<sup>4</sup> Walter Mitty's early twentieth-century daydreaming

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=897](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=897).

2 This essay is adapted from a presentation entitled “Pastors and Poets: The Value of Poetry for Pastors,” given at Westminster Seminary in California, on January 29, 2015.

3 Dana Gioia, “Reading on the Rise,” <http://www.nea.gov/research/readingonrise.pdf>.

4 Gregory E. Reynolds, “The Value of Daydreaming” *Ordained Servant* 21 (2012): 18–20.

was thought to be a disease we moderns should consider vaccinating out of existence.<sup>5</sup> But, unlike polio, it is *not*, I would argue, a disease, but a cure for our modern dis-ease.

## 1. Poetry Is a Thoroughly Biblical Medium of Communication

I always begin my lectures on media ecology by asking if anyone in the audience likes poetry. Invariably only a few say “Yes.” Then I tell them that I’m certain that they do like poetry, because they like the Bible—God’s Word is over one third poetry.

Poetry’s place in the Bible should inspire us to give it prominence in the preparation and practice of preaching. Would a prophet write a poem to communicate God’s truth? Jacob, David, and countless others biblical writers did. One third of the Bible is poetry.

We must admit that our tendency—were we writing Scripture—would be to write a journal article or a lecture. Perhaps we even secretly wonder if the literary forms in which the Bible was written are the best modes of communicating. This is because we are mostly “silent” readers. But the original audience of both testaments would not even have had the luxury of owning manuscripts unless they were very wealthy—the average cost of a book would have been equivalent to a working man’s annual income. The Bereans in Acts 17 would have had to go to the synagogue in order to search the Scriptures. Ordinarily through all of the millennia of Bible history the primary access to God’s Word among God’s people was through hearing the Scriptures read and preached.<sup>6</sup> Thus the patterns of sound in the

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5 James Thurber, “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” *The New Yorker*, March 18, 1939, 19–20. This was made into a movie in 1947.

6 This point is made over and over again by Hughes Oliphant Old in his monumental multi-volume series *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church in 6 volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998-2007). This is a rich historical resource with excellent commentary and extensive bibliography and indexes. And it is more than a history of preaching, loaded with biblical and historical wisdom for the preacher.

structure of the text would need to be memorable—and so they are. A large portion of the Bible is written in poetry and poetic structures like the chiasm. But how often do we take advantage of this in the preparation and delivery of sermons?

In Ephesians 2:10 Paul says that “we are his *workmanship* [ποίημα, poetry, literally *poiēma*, emphasis mine] created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”

## 2. Poetry Fosters the Creative Pleasure and Discovery that Serendipity Allows

Poetry affords the preacher the cultivation of meditation and daydreaming. Since it takes time to understand, it slows us down.

I believe one of the reasons poetry is generally out of favor is that we have very little time for daydreaming in our electrified lives. Thus, we have little chance for the creative pleasure and discovery that serendipity allows. The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines serendipity:

the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way: a fortunate stroke of serendipity | a series of small serendipities. . . . coined by Horace Walpole, suggested by *The Three Princes of Serendip*, the title of a fairy tale in which the heroes “were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of.”<sup>7</sup>

The difficulty of understanding poetry inhibits its ascendancy in our culture because such understanding takes meditation time and concentration. Of course, poetry slams have appeared in venues throughout America. Although this gives a glimmer of hope, it does not usually represent the kind of appreciation that grows out of a deep reading of the best poetry in the English language. I have even encountered disdain among slammers for the forms and discipline of the greatest poets. But this is not to say they are not onto something

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7 Ibid.

important. They read or recite their poetry in small public settings. This is a good thing.

### 3. Poetry Helps Foster a Love of Words, the Basic Material of Preaching

In poetry every word counts. The density and intensity of poetic words make poetry especially helpful for the preacher.

Poetry teaches us to love words—their sounds and their meanings. The preacher must cultivate a love for the English language, especially the spoken word. Ransack the best dictionaries. Above all *read aloud*. Choose the best poetry and prose and read it aloud. Read the Psalms, George Herbert, Dylan Thomas, Shakespeare, the essays and stories of G. K. Chesterton, Hillaire Belloc, Stephen Leacock, Christopher Morley—*aloud!*

How poorly we as ministers often are at reading Scripture in public. Many seek to overcome the monotone by over-reading. The proper expression should be a heightened form of our ordinary speech—each word weighted according to its position and meaning. The *King James Version* is best suited to the practice of reading Scripture aloud, not because it is a perfect or even the best translation—I am not recommending it for public worship, only for practice—but because it was produced in a golden age of orality. One thing is certain: the Authorized Version was translated to be read aloud in churches. The Authorized title says: “appointed to be read in churches.” This certainly did not mean silent, private reading. Reading aloud—even to yourself—impresses the beauty and power of the richest language in history into your oral memory. Words are your tools. Labor to be a wordsmith. As Marshall McLuhan said, “language itself is the principal channel and view-maker of experience for men everywhere.”<sup>8</sup> “The spoken word involves all the

senses dramatically.”<sup>9</sup> The preached Word is the most powerful “view-maker” of all, as it corrects the idolatrous “view-making” propagated by our fallen world, especially by the electronic media. The preached Word inculcates the redemptive “view-making” of the heavenly reality of the incarnate Logos.

Poet Paul Engle:

Poetry is ordinary language  
raised to the Nth power.  
Poetry is boned with ideas,  
nerved and blooded with emotions,  
all held together by the delicate,  
tough skin of words.

A poem is words patterned to impress. This is the genius of hymnody. Poetry and song—the music of the human voice—are very closely related. Not every poem would make a hymn, since hymns must be accessible as well as good poetry. Hymns also need a metrical structure such that each verse is the same length. One could hardly make hymns of most of T. S. Eliot’s religious poems, whereas many of Christina Rossetti’s poems were specifically written to be sung in worship.

“Love Came Down at Christmas”  
Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830–1894)

Love came down at Christmas,  
love all lovely, Love divine;  
Love was born at Christmas;  
star and angels gave the sign.  
Worship we the Godhead,  
Love incarnate, Love divine;  
worship we our Jesus,  
but wherewith for sacred sign?  
Love shall be our token;  
love be yours and love be mine;  
love to God and others,  
love for plea and gift and sign.

Robert Frost’s definition of poetry, “the sound

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8 Marshall McLuhan, “Catholic Humanism and Modern Letters,” in *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, edited by Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szlerek (Toronto: Stoddart, 1999), 2–3.

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9 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 77–78.

of sense,” gets at the essence of poetry. But the reverse does, too. W. H. Auden had this to say about what makes good poetry and poets,

A poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with the language. . . . [I]t is certainly the sign by which one recognizes whether a young man is potentially a poet or not. “Why do you want to write poetry?” If the young man answers: “I have important things to say,” then he is not a poet. If he answers: “I like hanging around words listening to what they say,” then maybe he is going to be a poet.<sup>10</sup>

Preachers should love “hanging around words,” they are the raw material of his preaching, and preaching is primarily an oral, not a written, discipline, although the two are clearly closely related.

“Nothing Gold Can Stay” (a secular poem)  
Robert Frost (1874–1963)

Nature’s first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf’s a flower;  
But only so an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.

Qoheleth, the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, informs us about the powerful beauty of words,

Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making

many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. (Eccles. 12:9–12)

In the age of bits and bytes we are told that science alone gives us truth. Thus, we are suspicious of poetry. Many Christians believe that all talk of literary structures undermines our confidence in God’s Word. The creation debates in our own circles often yield such ideas. Poetry enshrined the Exodus event in many Psalms. They are no less historical or true for being poetry. Poetry in the Bible presents truth in memorable form.

The words of the sage in this text are carefully crafted divine wisdom, “arranging many proverbs with great care.” This is wisdom for living in a fallen world, especially to leave the mystery of the injustice of the vain, i.e. “wacky” world, in the hands of God. We are called to recognize our limits. To communicate this, we are reminded that God’s Word is crafted with care, “weighing and studying and arranging.” It is divinely designed with a purpose. So, artfully wrought truth is communicated. Good design in architecture involves three dimensions: firmness, commodity, and delight. A good building must be well-made, useful, and beautiful. So Scripture is all of these.

In verse 10 we see that Qoheleth sought to use “words of delight” (*khapets* חַפֵּצִים). The basic meaning is to feel great favor towards something. The Author of beauty gave literary skill to the human authors of Scripture in order to memorably communicate “words of truth” (*emet* אֱמֶת) — correct or orthodox words. Truth and beauty go hand in hand. The medium is entirely suited to the message. The medium and the message are perfectly complementary as they teach us the beauty of God’s grace. This should give us confidence in our task of communicating God’s Word.

One of the best aids in this discipline is poetry read aloud, one of our God’s favorite literary forms, as we learn from Scripture. Read the best English poetry from Chaucer to Frost aloud, with special attention to the Psalms. The *King James Version* is, as I have said, best suited to this.

10 W. H. Auden, “Squares and Oblongs,” in *Poets at Work* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), 171.



Prayer, according to the Psalmist is oral: “I cry out to the LORD with my voice . . .” (Ps. 142:1). Note the rhythmic cadences of Psalm 100:

Psalm 100 A Psalm of praise

Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all ye lands.

Serve the LORD with gladness:  
come before his presence with singing.

Know ye that the LORD he is God:  
*it is he that* hath made us, and not we ourselves;

*we are* his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter into his gates with thanksgiving,  
*and* into his courts with praise:  
be thankful unto him, *and* bless his name.

For the LORD *is* good;  
his mercy *is* everlasting;  
and his truth *endureth* to all generations.

So you must have a love affair with words. The preacher must cultivate a love for the English language, especially the spoken word. Winston Churchill, one of the greatest orators of all time, wrote his speeches in verse form.

#### 4. Reading and Memorizing Poetry Trains Us to Meditate Deeply on Texts

I also think the decline of poetry is due to a lack of reading aloud, especially hearing poetry well read or recited. What I have discovered in my “memory walks” is that by memorizing poetry, through regular oral repetition, the meaning becomes clearer with time. Memory muscles are exercised along with the physical. The sound of the words begins to sink in. But few of us have patience to repeat poems aloud until it is etched in our memories. That is why I have learned to combine it with my daily two-mile walk.

Reading and memorizing poetry trains us to meditate deeply on texts. The compression of language in good poetry forces the reader to pay attention to the details of grammar and punctuation. It thus tends to make us better oral com-

municators, speaking in memorable sentences, and—a near miracle for Reformed preachers—making our preaching more concise. I have often finished leading worship before noon since engaging in this exercise. Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address was a little over two minutes long (280 words), while the forgotten Oration by famed orator Edward Everett was over two hours long (13,508 words). The next day Everett wrote to Lincoln, “I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes.”<sup>11</sup>

It is also important to read more accessible poets. George Herbert is surely one of them, although not every poem he wrote is as accessible as “Submission.”

“Submission” (a sacred poem)  
George Herbert (1593–1633)

But that thou art my wisdom, Lord,  
And both mine eyes are thine,  
My minde would be extremly stirr’d  
For missing my designe.

Were it not better to bestow  
Some place and power on me?  
Then should thy praises with me grow,  
And share in my degree.

But when I thus dispute and grieve,  
I do resume my sight,  
And pilfring what I once did give,  
Disseize thee of thy right.

How know I, if thou shouldst me raise,  
That I should then raise thee?  
Perhaps great places and thy praise  
Do not so well agree.

Wherefore unto my gift I stand;  
I will no more advise:  
Onely do thou lend me a hand,  
Since thou hast both mine eyes.

Poetry, also, as all good literature, gives us

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11 Bob Green, “The Forgotten Gettysburg Addresser,” *The Wall Street Journal* (June 22–23, 2013): A15.

insight into the human condition, and in the case of sacred poets like George Herbert, insight into God and his Word.

## 5. Poetry Helps Cultivate the Color and Cadence of Pulpit Speech

As we learn the rhythms and cadences of the spoken word in reading, so the entire sermon should be varied in intensity, rich in linguistic diversity and acoustic texture. Poetry can teach us this. The verbal economy of poetry makes every word tell. Poetry can help us cultivate more concise speech patterns in our preaching.

“The Pulley” (a sacred poem)  
George Herbert (1593–1633)

When God at first made man,  
Having a glasse of blessings standing by,  
‘Let us,’ said he, ‘poure on him all we can;  
Let the world’s riches, which dispersèd lie,  
Contract into a span.’

So strength first made a way;  
The beautie flow’d, then wisdome, honour,  
pleasure;  
When almost all was out, God made a stay,  
Perceiving that alone of all his treasure,  
Rest in the bottome lay.

‘For if I should,’ said he,  
‘Bestow this jewell also on my creature,  
He would adore my gifts instead of me,  
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature:  
So both should losers be.

‘Yet let him keep the rest,  
But keep them with repining restlesnesse;  
Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,  
If goodnesse leade him not, yet wearinesse  
May tosse him to my breast.’

Poetry is invaluable in teaching us the rhythms and cadences of the spoken word. One of the best ways to develop oral skill is to pay attention to how others read—to the best oral presentation. John Gielgud’s recitation of Shakespeare’s sonnets is incomparable.

Poetry is one of God’s greatest gifts to humanity, because language powerfully reflects the very essence of who God is and how he has made us in his image. So, it is no surprise that poetic structure should be found throughout the Bible. As we take time to recite and meditate upon good poetry, it shapes us and enriches our own communication, especially for preachers of God’s Word. ©

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## A Little Exercise for Young Theologians Revisited

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### Gregory E. Reynolds

When I think back on my brashness as a young theologian, I shudder; and whenever that same brashness rears its ugly head today, I shudder still; but age and Christian experience have at least taught me to recognize this monster within.<sup>2</sup>

Very early in my Christian life, while still considering a call to the ministry, I came across a little booklet first published in 1962 by Eerdmans entitled *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*.<sup>3</sup> I recognized the author, Helmut Thielicke

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=913](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=913).

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

3 Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, trans. Charles L. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

(1908–86), from my reading of his *Encounter with Spurgeon*<sup>4</sup> in Bible school in 1972. I have exercised myself with this sage booklet at least once a decade ever since, and never without profit, since the demon of pride is ever in need of being exorcised.

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

You can see that the young theologian has by no means grown up to these doctrines in his own spiritual development, even if he understands intellectually rather well the logic of the system . . . There is a hiatus between the arena of the young theologian's actual spiritual growth and what he already knows intellectually about this arena.<sup>5</sup>

Thieliicke goes on to liken early theological training to puberty, during which it is as unwise to unleash the novice on the church as a preacher, as it would be to let the young singer sing while his voice is changing.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, time spent in the lofty realms of truth makes the novice susceptible to the “psychology of the possessor,” in which love is sadly absent. “Truth seduces us very easily into a kind of joy of possession.”<sup>7</sup> “But love is the opposite of the will to possess. It is self-giving. It boasteth not itself, but humbleth itself.” But when “truth is a means to personal triumph,”<sup>8</sup> the young theologian returns home with a keen sense of membership in an esoteric club, displaying his rarefied tools to the annoyance of all and the hurt of some. Thieliicke observes, “Young theologians manifest certain trumped-up intellectual effects

which actually amount to nothing.”<sup>9</sup>

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

We must also take seriously the fact that the “subject” of theology, Jesus Christ, can only be regarded rightly if we are ready to meet Him on the plane where he is active, that is, within the Christian church.<sup>10</sup>

and it must be worked out in light of eternity,

A well-known theologian once said that dogmatics is a lofty and difficult art. That is so, in the first place, because of its purpose. It reflects upon the last things; it asks wherein lies the truth about our temporal and eternal destiny.<sup>11</sup>

and it must be worked out in spiritual battle,

Thus it is possible to become an eschatological romanticist . . . Such a person nevertheless has not comprehended a penny's worth of what it means to live on the battlefield of the risen Lord, between the first and second coming, waiting and praying as a Christian.<sup>12</sup>

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

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4 Helmut Thieliicke, *Encounter with Spurgeon*, trans. John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963).

5 Thieliicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, 10.

6 *Ibid.*, 12.

7 *Ibid.*, 16.

8 *Ibid.*, 17, 19.

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9 *Ibid.*, 11–12.

10 *Ibid.*, 23.

11 *Ibid.*, 27.

12 *Ibid.*, 29–30.

began teaching at Tübingen, and finally in Hamburg, where he pastored the large congregation of St. Michaelis.

Finally, Thieliicke warns the young theologian—older ones need this, too—to beware of reading Scripture only as a matter of exegetical endeavor rather than God’s “word to me.” He urges a “prayed dogmatics,”<sup>13</sup> in which theological thought breathes “only in the atmosphere of dialogue with God.”<sup>14</sup> “A person who pursues theological courses is spiritually sick unless he reads the Bible uncommonly often.”<sup>15</sup>

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

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

Of course, there is a gray area when it comes to sermon preparation. Most of us use commentaries and even sermon series in our development of sermons. Developing our own outlines from careful exegesis first, will help us to flee the seduction of plagiarism. When we make the ideas or many thoughts and even applications found in

print our own, plagiarism is not engaged in. But copying someone else’s outline or using verbatim sentences and phrases without acknowledging their sources is plagiarism.

While we will not agree with Thieliicke’s theology at every point, the gist of his message to young theological students is so pointed that there is nothing quite like it in English. Within our own tradition, Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield delivered an address at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1911 entitled “The Religious Life of Theological Students.”<sup>16</sup> In the strongest possible terms, Warfield pleads for a godly and learned ministry: “But before and above being learned, a minister must be godly. Nothing could be more fatal, however, than to set these two things over against one another.”<sup>17</sup> He sums this emphasis up nicely, “Put your heart into your studies.”<sup>18</sup>

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

I am here today to warn you to take seriously your theological study, not merely as a duty, done for God’s sake and therefore made divine, but as a religious exercise, itself charged with religious blessing to you; as fitted by its very nature to fill all your mind and heart and soul and life with divine thoughts and feelings and aspirations and achievements. You will never prosper in your religious life in the Theological Seminary until your work in the Theological Seminary becomes itself to you a religious exercise out of which you draw every day enlargement of heart, elevation of spirit, and adoring delight in your Maker and Savior.<sup>19</sup>

We are, after all, called to be warriors; but

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

17 Ibid., 412.

18 Ibid., 416.

19 Ibid., 417.

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13 Ibid., 33.

14 Ibid., 34.

15 Ibid., 40.

the kind of spiritual warrior that Scripture calls us to be is not the gladiator seeking personal victory and glory, but rather the soldier of the cross who seeks to magnify the person of his Savior and Lord. J. Gresham Machen captured this spirit well in his sermon “Constraining Love.” Christian militancy should never be confused with sectarian belligerence, hubris, or meanness of spirit. But pride can also move us to shrink in cowardice from defending the truth of the gospel. Machen made this clear in his sermon to the second general assembly of our, then, new church. How many movements, he asked,

have begun bravely like this one, and then have been deceived by Satan . . . into belittling controversy, condoning sin and error, seeking favor from the world or from a worldly church, substituting a worldly urbanity for Christian love. May Christ’s love indeed constrain us that we may not thus fall!<sup>20</sup>

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

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

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<sup>20</sup> J. Gresham Machen, “Constraining Love,” in *God Transcendent and Other Sermons*, ed. Ned Bernard Stonehouse (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 141.

# ✦ Servant Truth

## Women and General Office

*From the Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office [Extracted from the Minutes of the Fifty-fifth General Assembly (1988), 344–52].<sup>1</sup>*

### A. Biblical Teaching on the Identity of Women

1. Our consideration of the proper ministry of women in the church must take into account what the Bible says about the identity of women in Creation, the effects of the Fall, and the identity of women in Christ. Only then will we have an adequate basis for considering the role of women in the church.

It has often been implied that Galatians 3:28, relating as it does to the position of men and women *coram Deo*, has nothing to say regarding their interpersonal roles and relationships in church and in society. This view would seem impossible to maintain. As Stephen Clark says, “. . . the view that Galatians 3:28 only applied to people’s standing before God neglects the communal or social consequences of religious distinctions. In Paul’s time, religious differences were the basis of social structure.”<sup>2</sup>

And this is not merely something that we would expect theoretically. It is something that we see happening in the church in Paul’s day. “Paul saw social implications of the new oneness in Christ for male-female relationships. It is notewor-

thy that women in the early church were taking on some roles prominent enough to be mentioned in Paul’s letter.”<sup>3</sup>

The exclusion of women from special office in the church (the eldership and diaconate) is a negative conclusion and so leaves open the question of what sort of ministry is given to women in their office as believers. Concerning that large question we offer several general observations.

Women, too, are part of the body of Christ (Gal. 3:27–28) and the unity and the fellowship of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3, Phil. 2:1); they, too, have been baptized with the Spirit (Acts 2:17, 18, 1 Cor. 12:13) and so share in the distribution of the Spirit’s gifts (Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12:4–11; 14ff.). The question, then, how women may give legitimate expression in the congregation to these gifts, including the biblical insights and discernment given to them by the Spirit, must receive a positive answer. The principle of 1 Corinthians 12:7, 14:12; 1 Peter 4:10 is that in the church spiritual gifts are given to edify others, and what is given to edify others obviously must come to expression if others are in fact to be edified.

2. Within the New Testament, 1 Peter 4:10–11, perhaps better than any other passage, provides an overall perspective on the answer to the question before us:

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very word of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength that God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

Citing these verses in this format serves to highlight some pertinent observations either about or prompted by them:

a. The immediate context makes plain that Peter is addressing the whole church, men and women alike.

b. In view are all the gifts given to the church in their full diversity and as shared in by every

<sup>1</sup> [https://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=975](https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=975).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1980), 151.

<sup>3</sup> Report 33 – Committee on Headship in the Bible, *Agenda for the 1984 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church*, 320.

believer (“Each . . . whatever gift . . .”).

c. Each gift, a particular ministration of God’s grace, is to be used for serving (*diakonountes*) others.

d. Verse 11 provides a fundamental profile on the gifts given to the church. Each of the gifts, in their full totality, reduces to either one of two kinds: speaking or serving (*diakonei*; note that this is a different, less broad use than that of the same verb earlier in verse 10, reflecting the variable meaning of this verb, and its cognate noun *diakonos*, in the New Testament). The ministry of the general office, embracing the exercise of the gifts of all believers, has a basic, twofold structure: *word*-ministry and *deed*-ministry.

e. It is difficult to deny an inner correspondence between this twofold structure of the general office and the permanent, twofold structure of special office in the church; the one reflects the other. Specifically, the eldership answers to the word-ministry of the general office, the diaconate to its deed-ministry. These two special offices are not only established in the church so that those who occupy them may exercise the respective ministries of each office to—and for—the rest of the church. Rather, their special office identity involves that, as head and fathers, they are also to lead the whole of “God’s household,” men and women alike, in the diverse word- and deed-ministries committed to the general office (cf. Eph. 4:12).

3. In working at our assignment we have been impressed with the paucity of explicit biblical evidence against women’s ordination, a paucity all the more remarkable in view of the fact that some are making that issue a mark of fidelity to biblical Christianity in our time. We have also been struck, for instance, how extensively Calvin’s remarks on these passages are based on what is “unseemly” and “incompatible” with “natural propriety” and “common sense.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the

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4 John Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, trans. Fraser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 306f.; his comments on the 1 Timothy 2 passage for the most part refer the reader to what he has already said on 1 Corinthians 14.

comments of Charles Hodge<sup>5</sup> on 1 Corinthians 11:13 are revealing (the text is “Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?” but what Hodge says here he would apply as well to women speaking publicly in church meetings):

This is an appeal to their own sense of propriety. The apostle often recognizes the intuitive judgments of the mind as authoritative. . . . The constitution of our nature being derived from God, the laws which he has impressed upon it, are as much a revelation from him as any other possible communication of his will. And to deny this, is to deny the possibility of all knowledge.

As we have reflected on such statements, we have come to recognize that the strength of much of the current opposition to women’s ordination stems from a very large premise, a premise that is not taught in Scripture itself but is assumed to underlie and solidify biblical teaching on the subject.

What is that assumed premise? In the words of one fairly recent Reformed exponent of it, “the premise underlying the Biblical teaching on this subject is that the Creator has not equipped women for positions of authority and initiative in the Christian Church. Her constitution, both in its strength and in its weakness, renders it inappropriate that she had such positions. . . . To require a woman to exercise an authoritative, teaching ministry is like requesting her to sing bass. It is a violation of nature . . . the woman is not constitutionally fitted to be the asserter, maintainer, and defender of the Christian faith. . . . If her Creator intended her for submissiveness, can the woman hope to cope adequately with a situation requiring authoritativeness and assertiveness?”<sup>6</sup>

It is the premise that often includes the ideas that men are relatively more important than

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5 Charles Hodge (1797–1878) was a Reformed Presbyterian theologian and principal of Princeton Theological Seminary between 1851 and 1878.

6 Donald MacLeod, “The Place of Women in the Church,” *The Banner of Truth*, 81 (June 1970): 37, 40.

women and that women are more susceptible to temptation,<sup>7</sup> that woman “is easily misled and easily misleads. The world has always sized her up in this fashion: she is both seduced and seducer. Sharpness of discernment is not in general her principal quality,”<sup>8</sup> that “the peculiar power and usefulness of women depend on their being the objects of admiration and affection” so that “the refinement and delicacy of their sex . . . should be carefully preserved” by permitting them in church to learn as much as they wish but not to speak.<sup>9</sup>

These statements have come to light randomly during the course of our reading. They could easily be multiplied.

Does anyone among us wish to defend this premise, particularly its “ontology” of women or the doubtful piece of natural theology expressed by Hodge? We doubt it. Yet we dare say that because of deeply rooted cultural and historical factors that have found their way into the thinking and life of the church, virtually every one of us is under its influence to one degree or another. And as long as that premise continues to control and the decidedly unbiblical elements in its assessment of women persist, we will not be able to put the issue of women’s ordination in proper perspective, nor will we be able to make necessary and constructive advances in grasping why *Scripture* prohibits their ordination. We need to be especially sensitive here to the apostolic injunction found in another context, “Do not go beyond what is written” (1 Cor. 4:6).

## **B. Women in the Life of the Early Church: Some New Testament Observations**

### **1. Priscilla**

a. **Acts 18:24–26** In the missionary context set forth in these verses, Priscilla and Aquila instruct

Apollos. Previously, the ministry of Apollos, while forceful and Scriptural, had not been conducted from the perspective of the fulfillment that had already arrived in Christ (“he knew only the baptism of John,” v. 25); his “adequate” teaching about Jesus needed to become “more adequate.” That lack is supplied by the teaching he receives from Priscilla and Aquila.

Noteworthy is the fact that in this teaching activity, as elsewhere with one exception, Priscilla is not only paired with her husband, but her name is mentioned first. Perhaps this implies some kind of initiative or superior expertise; perhaps it simply implies that she is better-known. No firm conclusion can be drawn. At any rate, her (apparently full) involvement in teaching Apollos is plain.

Priscilla, however, does not teach independently of her husband. What occurs is fairly described as a mutual or joint effort (“they,” in “their home,” v. 26). Further, their instruction is given privately, not in public but in the context of hospitality extended to Apollos.

It is not easy to assess the complete significance of the latter circumstance. Very likely a strategic element is present; Priscilla and Aquila are concerned not to do anything in public that might diminish the reputation and ministry of Apollos. But is there perhaps as well an intimation that the teaching takes place in a private, nonpublic setting, because Priscilla, as a woman, is involved? The text does not provide an answer. Nor, at the same time, is there any indication that the teaching was “official,” that is, that Priscilla (or Aquila) occupied special office in the church. In sum, the teaching that Apollos received from Priscilla (or Aquila) is best understood as private and personal, nonofficial and nonpublic.

b. **Romans 16:3** In this context of “serving” (v. 1), “helping” (v. 2), and “working hard” (vv. 6, 12), Paul mentions Priscilla and Aquila as “my fellow workers in Christ Jesus.” Paul’s “fellow workers” comprise quite a band of men and women in this “greetings” chapter and elsewhere in the New Testament: for example Urbanus (v. 9), Timothy (v. 21), Titus (2 Cor. 8:23), Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25), Euodia, Syntyche, Clement, and “the rest”

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7 A. Schlatter, *Die Briefe an die Thessalonicher, Philipper, Timotheus und Titus* (Leipzig, DE: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1950), 143.

8 E. L. Smelik, *De brieven van Paulus aan Timotheus, Titus en Filemon* (Nijkerk, Netherlands: G F Callenbach, 1961), 42.

9 Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle of the Corinthians* (repr., 1857; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 305.



(Phil. 4:2, 3), Aristarchus, Mark and Justus (Col. 4:10–11), Philemon (Philemon 1), Demas and Luke (Philemon 2).

The designation “fellow workers” personalizes and intimates an apparently extensive support system of service. Such men and women were extensions of Paul, widening his ability to direct the life of the church in various locations, especially to care for various needs that arose. It is difficult to specify their service in detail and to circumscribe its extent. In the light of the contexts where their work is mentioned as well as 1 Peter 4:10, 11 (cf. above, IV.A.2.), it may fairly be seen to cover the full range of ministering the gospel in word and deed. Also, without undercutting the special office structure in the church, their activity gave them an identity that in relation to himself Paul sees as genuinely collegial rather than subordinate.

Priscilla and Aquila are especially valued members in this partnership for the gospel. Their impressive self-sacrifice and love is evidenced in the fact that Paul says, “they risked their lives for me,” and their renown is such that both, Priscilla at least equally with Aquila, have the gratitude of “all the churches of the Gentiles” (v. 4).

**c. 1 Corinthians 16:19** (cf. Rom. 16:5) Aquila and Priscilla find mention here in relation to “the church that meets at their house.” It is precarious to draw conclusions based on the fact that in this instance Aquila is mentioned first. Perhaps there is in this order an intimation that Aquila, as head of the household, takes the lead in extending the greetings of the church. However, it is, after all, “their house,” not “his.” Also, in Romans 16:5 there is an identical description (the church meeting “at their house”) where Priscilla has just been mentioned first (v. 3).

**d. 2 Timothy 4:19** This text adds nothing to our discussion except to reinforce two things: the high profile of “Priscilla and Aquila” in the heart and labors of Paul, and Paul’s heavy reliance on Priscilla and Aquila.

#### **e. Conclusions**

(1) It cannot be said that women would never teach men. Priscilla, together with Aquila, taught Apollos.

(2) In the one passage where Priscilla’s teaching is mentioned, it is a joint effort. She is a coworker with her husband.

(3) Priscilla taught “at home.” The New Testament is silent as to whether or not she taught the congregation as a whole or in a public setting.

(4) There is no reason to suppose that Priscilla had authority over her husband, or that their relationship was ordered in a manner other than that prescribed elsewhere by the New Testament (e.g., Eph. 5:22f.).

(5) Finally, the case of Priscilla reminds us that having gifts in the church does not imply or bring with it the right to hold special office. The possession of requisite gifts is a necessary but not a sufficient qualification to hold office. Certainly, the nongifted should not occupy special office. In no way, however, does that establish that the gifted have the right to office, and that office is merely the way in which, operationally, we make fullest use of their talents.

## **2. Phoebe**

Romans 16:1–2 contains the sole reference to Phoebe in the New Testament. While she is apparently a person of some importance in the early Christian community, her precise status is less clear.

Paul’s commendation of Phoebe is rather full. First, he introduces her as “a servant of the church in Cenchrea,” a somewhat official-sounding phrase, although, as we have already argued (cf. III.C.1.c. above), not requiring a reference to the office of deacon. Secondly, she has been “a great help” to many, including Paul himself.

Paul’s commendation serves a request he makes of the Corinthian church: “give her any help she may need from you.” This request in itself seems to hint of a woman with some kind of mission, authorization, or capacity to enlist, if not command, resources for a specified ministry as she continues (presumably) to be “a great help to many people.”

Although the phrase “*diakonos* of the church in Cenchrea” does not set forth the ministry of Phoebe in formal or official terms, deference is

still very much due to Phoebe and her ministry. Also, the phrase perhaps points up that Phoebe does not operate on her own but is under authority, the authority of her “home” church in Cenchrea.

### 3. Other women

#### a. Romans 16

In addition to Priscilla and Phoebe, Paul mentions a good number of other women in his “greetings list” of Romans 16: for example Mary (v. 6), Tryphena and Tryphosa (v. 12a), Persis (v. 12b), the mother of Rufus (v. 13), etc. These women are characteristically “(very) hard workers” (vv. 6, 12) in their endeavors, laboring for the good of the Roman Christians and others. Some of them are especially dear to Paul: for example Persis (v.12b) and Rufus’s mother, who had befriended Paul in a motherly way (v.13).

#### b. Philippians 4:2–3

Two women mentioned here by Paul are Euodia and Syntyche. Along with his expressed concern about the disagreement between them and his exhortation for them to be reconciled, he recalls (1) that they “contended *at my side*,” and (2) that in doing so they “contended . . . *in the cause of the gospel*.” The precise character of their ministry, however, is not spelled out.

#### c. “House churches” associated with women

Lydia (Acts 16:14–15, 40) was a woman of some prominence and station in the community. She makes her home available for missionaries (Paul and Silas) and for “the brothers” (v. 40) in a ministry of willing and generous hospitality. Mary, John Mark’s mother, is pictured (Acts 12:12) as a courageous woman, willing to allow her home to be used for an “underground” prayer meeting to secure Peter’s release from prison. Nympha (Col. 4:15) is yet another woman who makes her house available for the church to assemble.

#### d. Conclusions

(1) Paul pays women in the Christian community high honor.

(2) Such honor invariably devolves on their “hard work” and apparently diverse usefulness in

the cause of the gospel.

(3) Their “hard work” is a work of “partnership in the gospel” (cf. Phil. 1:5); these women are Paul’s partners in a variety of ministry contexts and situations. His choice term for describing that partnership is “fellow worker,” a term that suggests coordination, not subordination, a shared common involvement underlying whatever differences may be involved.

### 4. The specific ministry of women

Besides the above examples of women’s ministry to the church of Paul’s day, there are several passages in the Pastoral Epistles which have a more distinctly normative or prescriptive character: 1 Tim. 2:15; 3:11; 5:9, 10; Titus 2:3–5. These will be treated as suggestive rather than exhaustive of the positive role of women in the New Testament. The committee is aware that the argument against *ordaining* women must not be construed as negating or denigrating the ministry of women in the general office of believer. Hence, we conclude our report not with what women may *not* do but rather with what they may and must do to be faithful to their Lord and Savior.

#### a. 1 Timothy 2:15

At least four possible understandings of this verse can be found among commentators. The differences focus on the understanding of the idea of the woman being “saved in childbirth.” In his commentary on the pastoral epistles, William Hendriksen<sup>10</sup> summarizes these (111–112):

- (1) saved by means of The Childbirth, i.e., the promised seed Jesus Christ,
- (2) saved, i.e., kept safely during childbirth,
- (3) saved through the meritorious efforts of childbearing,
- (4) saved by way of, or in the sphere of, childbearing.

The reasons for rejecting 1–3 are:

- (1) While the messianic interpretation is not

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10 William Hendriksen (1900–1982) served as a minister in the Christian Reformed Church, with a period (1942–1952) as Professor of New Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary.

contrary to the analogy of faith, it has no precedent. Its only other usage is the verbal form in 1 Tim. 5:14, which refers to ordinary childbirth. Furthermore, this interpretation doesn't fit the context in which the subject is the woman's place with respect to man's authority in the church.

(2) "Protection" in childbirth does not fit the normal usage of the verb "saved." While it often means "to make whole" in the gospels, the Pauline usage is exclusively soteric (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Tim. 4:18). "Childbearing" is not narrowly defined as "giving birth" but has broad reference to the entire task of raising children. More decisive is the fact that v. 15 is meant to be a consolation in light of the exhortation of the previous verses. The focus is on roles, a concern considerably larger than mere safety in childbirth.

(3) The concept of meritorious salvation is contrary to the entire Pauline soteriology (cf. Rom. 3; Galatians). Moreover, Paul emphasizes "faith" in the second half of the verse.

(4) This alternative commands our respect because it fits the context and does justice to the Pauline usage of "saved." Covenant women are saved in their God-given, created roles as mothers in the tradition of Sarah, Elizabeth, and Mary (cf. 1 Pet. 3:5–6). The curse for which she was partly responsible, by failing to submit to her husband's authority, is lifted in God's gracious salvation. Now by recalling to her God-given role as a suitable helper in the Covenant task, the Lord promises to save her as she trusts and obeys.

Hence, the preposition *dia* in the context refers not to the means of salvation ("through") but the sphere in which one is saved (K.J.V. "in," "by way of," i.e., the "accompanying circumstance").<sup>11</sup>

Among commentators who have held this view are: William Hendriksen, Gordon Clark, John Calvin, Matthew Poole, Richard Lenski, John Trapp, Heinrich Meyer, James Vander Kam, and Patrick Fairbairn.

This sphere to which grace restores her is her highest dignity. As she raises children in the

nurture and admonition of the Lord, she "exerts tremendous influence." Christ came by her childbearing,<sup>12</sup> as do all men (1 Cor. 11:11–12). The promise of blessing to the godly woman who uses the whole range of her gifts and calling, both inside and outside of the home (Prov. 31:10–11), *within* God's authority structure, is a promise which contemporary women need to take seriously.

### b. 1 Timothy 3:11

Having denied the ordained status of the "women" (K.J.V. "wives") of this verse, it is all too easy to say no more. That is a shame, because whether these women were wives of elders or deacons or both, it is clear that Paul had "deaconing women" in view. They were recognized as special assistants to the ordained officers of the church. Phoebe is a classic example. Because of this association their spirituality had to be commensurate with the diaconate which they assisted.

Furthermore, there are aspects of diaconal ministry which can only properly be executed by women. These focus on (though they are not limited to) personal, private needs unique to women and needs in the area of hospitality.

Modern-day diaconates need to employ the gifts of women and even consider publicly recognizing some as officially associated with the diaconate in unordained status.

### c. 1 Timothy 5:9–10

Biblical concern for orphans and widows is an ancient one (Exod. 22:22; Deut. 10:18; Jer. 7:6). This concern is not blind sentimentality. Widows supported by the church must be "truly needy" in the sense of having no other means of support; they must have lived as faithful covenant women who have used their gifts and calling as women to minister practically to the saints. Anna is a classic example (Luke 2:36–37). It is interesting to note the accent on domestic service. Prior to 60 years of age the role of wife-mother is the norm (1 Tim. 5:1ff.).

11 Richard Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Timothy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1960), 572.

12 Henry Vander Kam, *Bible Lessons on 1 Timothy* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, n.d.), 23–24.

The point is that true covenant widows have much to offer the church from their godly experience, not the least of which is prayer (v. 5). The early church designated certain women “intercessors of the church.”<sup>13</sup> Married women don’t have the same amount of time available for intercession.

Though marriage is the Biblical norm, younger single women, like widows, need to be encouraged to develop gifts of service to use their freedom wisely as well as make themselves more “marriageable” in the wholesome covenant sense of that word.

The contemporary possibilities are endless. We need to replace our concept of “career,” focusing on self-fulfillment, with the Covenantal idea of “calling.” It was out of this sense of service (v. 10) that the “hospice” and the “hospital” grew. Hence: the modern orphanage, crisis pregnancy center, and L’Abri Fellowship, which never would have given “shelter” to anyone without the tireless service of Edith Schaeffer.

#### d. Titus 2:3–5

Here is a broader category than widows. “Aged women” does not mean 60 or older, but rather “mature,” i.e., “older,” more experienced. They are to be examples of godly Christlike character and behavior. But they are also to be “teachers.” The Greek word in v. 3 has the same root as the word used for the office of “teacher” in 1 Tim. 2:7, 2 Tim. 1:11, and the verb form used in the prohibition of women teaching men in 1 Tim. 2:12. The point is that while women are forbidden to give official instruction to men in the doctrines of the faith, mature women are encouraged to verbally instruct younger women in the specific area of godliness as wife-mothers.

The verb “teach” in v. 4 is different from that of “teachers” in v. 3. It is translated in other passages as: “to be sober minded” (v. 6); “to be sober” (v. 4); “sound mind” (2 Tim. 1:7). The idea is discipleship in godly wisdom. The mature

wife-mother is to instruct, by word and deed, other wife-mothers in maternal wisdom and domestic discipline which distinguishes the Christian woman from her worldly counterpart. She might use Proverbs 31 and a host of Biblical examples such as Abigail and Lois. While the world teaches its women, like its men, to assert their rights and pursue self-fulfilling careers, the women of the church are to teach the pursuit of godliness (1 Tim. 2:9–10; 1 Pet. 3:3–4), submitting to their husbands, loving their children, “keeping” their homes, (vv. 4–5). They will thereby witness to the world that God’s Word is true (v. 5).

The positive calling of women outlined in the Bible is as wide and varied as any calling on earth. The feminist climate offers Christian women a unique challenge and opens a fruitful field of labor as they exemplify the richness and humanity of serving their risen Lord.

In conclusion, the church, exemplified in its ordained officers, needs to encourage and instruct its women as to the dignity of the unique role as women. We have only suggested lines of Biblical teaching along which this encouragement may take shape.

## V. Conclusion

To the degree to which we as a church have emphasized what women are forbidden to do, and failed to lovingly and wisely lead them to do what God’s Word encourages them to do, we need to change our attitudes and the practices which flow from them. The church is always threatened with the attitudes of the flesh which lead men and women to abdicate their God-given roles and either domineer others or retreat from service. To be always reforming is to be always repenting and following our resurrected Lord.

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

The church under the leadership of its of-

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13 William Hendriksen, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), 173.

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

Finally, sessions should consider ways to make greater use of the gifts of women in the total life of the church, so long as good order is not subverted by replacing or undermining or otherwise eclipsing the teaching and rule of the elders. Specific implementation should be left to the discretion of individual sessions, and will, no doubt, vary from session to session (cf. IV.B. above). And may the church be wonderfully adorned in these days with gifts from her risen Lord. ☉

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# A Summary Report of the Committee on Women in Ordained Office

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**By Gregory Reynolds**

Since 1984 the Committee on Women in Ordained Office has been laboring to report its findings to the church on the question of the relationship of women to the special offices of elder and deacon. Finally, the Committee brought a completed report to the 55<sup>th</sup> General Assembly which convened at Covenant College in Tennessee on May 17, 1988. The following is a brief summary of that forty-page report.

## **Foundational Consideration**

The Committee report begins by reminding the church of her confessional commitment to the biblical mandate known as the regulative principle (WCF 1:6). This means that in all matters of faith and practice, especially in the areas of government and worship, the church must have a clear biblical warrant to establish a doctrine or practice (cf. Lev. 10:1–3; Deut. 12:32; 1 Sam. 13; Isa. 8:20; Matt. 15:6; 28:19–20; Col. 2:20–23 and 2 Tim. 3:16–17). This principle alone prevents the church from compromising with the spirit of the age in its consideration of the matter of women in ordained office.

Women, as created by God, are equal with men as God's image-bearers. Women are also different from men in being created as man's counterpart to complement him in the

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1 [https://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=976](https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=976).

God-given task of dominion. Man is the head of the relationship, and woman is a suitable helper (Gen. 1 & 2). As one flesh the two are united covenantally to image God's covenant relationship with his people (Gen. 2:24; Eph. 5:32).

In Christ, women are equal with men in their status as redeemed and adopted by God's sovereign grace (Gal. 3:28). This equality of status does not negate the created role-distinction; rather it restores man and woman to their God-given relationship as head and helper in covenant life. Paul does not contradict his statement in Galatians 3:28 by delineating the distinction or roles in relationship to authority in the church in 1 Timothy 2:9–15. He asserts that these roles are rooted in both God's creational and redemptive orders.

God has created and redeemed man and woman to be subject to his authority structure. This is expressed in the marriage bond which requires men to cherish and love their wives as Christ loves the church (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:25f.) and women to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ (Eph. 5:22–24). Christ restores the bond and order of marriage which sin has corrupted and distorted.

### **Women and Special Office**

Scripture teaches that calling and ordination to special office are not meant to recognize gifts and abilities but are God's appointment to give leadership and order to the life and ministry of his people. God gives gifts in order to fulfill the function and service of special office, but special office is not required for the use of gifts in the church. Special office is meant to give direction and order to the use of the gifts of the ascended Christ in his body (Eph. 4:7–16).

Church history and our subordinate standards confirm the idea that ordination to special office is induction into a role of authoritative leadership in the service of the church. The church is called to submit to this leadership in the Lord.

Given this understanding, it is no surprise that Paul excludes women from the special office of teaching and ruling eldership in 1 Timothy 2:12. The order of the church is based on the order of the family (1 Tim. 3:15). As the husband/father is the head of the wife/children, so the elder is to take a leading role in overseeing the life and ministry of the church family. The proper exercise of such leadership is a requirement for the office of elder (1 Tim. 3:4, 5). What is perhaps less clear to some in the church is the fact that Paul also excludes women from the special office of deacon. The N.T. prototype deacons of Acts 6 were ordained to "preside over" (v.3) the ministry to widows in the Jerusalem church. The family headship requirement is the same for deacons as it is for elders (1 Tim. 3:12). The list of qualifications for "women" ("wives" in KJV) in 1 Timothy 3:11 would therefore refer to women associated with the ministry of the deacons.

Philippians 1:1 addresses deacons with elders as the ordained leaders of the congregation. The reference to Phoebe as a "deacon" ("servant" KJV) in Romans 16:1 is at best ambiguous. In only three of thirty N.T. uses of this noun does the context yield an unambiguous reference to ordained office (1 Tim. 3:8, 12; Phil. 1:1). Without the clear warrant of Scripture, the committee could not in good conscience include women in the special office of deacon.

Church history and our subordinate standards confirm this conclusion. It is interesting to note that beginning with Calvin, most Reformed churches recognized two types of "deacons" in Scripture: ordained leaders of diaconal ministry and unordained women who assisted them particularly in their ministry to women.

### **Women and General Office**

Every member of the body of Christ is effectually called into the general office of believer. Women's diaconal (and all other) gifts are to be fully used without special ordination,

though our churches are encouraged to consider appointment of women as an auxiliary of the ordained diaconate. The N.T. indicates that under the godly leadership of ordained men, the gifts of women flourish. The report concludes with a survey of the rich variety of ministries performed by women in the N.T. church. Our church needs to encourage its women to use these gifts to the glory of our sovereign Lord. ©

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## Women Deacons? Focusing the Issue

From the Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office [Extracted from the Minutes of the Fifty-fifth General Assembly (1988), 353–55]. Published electronically in *Ordained Servant*, February 2021<sup>1</sup>

By **Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.**

This General Assembly has been served by the Committee on Women in Church Office with two reports concerning women and the diaconate. Both offer some fairly extensive exegetical argumentation but reach opposing conclusions: the one (the Committee) that women may not be deacons, the other (the Minority) that they may. However, in neither report, nor in the two taken together, does the basic difference between them—and so perhaps the basic issue before

this General Assembly—come out as clearly as it might. (The full Committee did not have an opportunity to consider the report of the Minority; it was not produced until after the Committee report had been submitted for inclusion in the Agenda).

The basic difference between the two reports is not that the one favors while the other is opposed to women deacons. An even deeper difference is diverging conceptions of the diaconate as a (special) *office* or, correlatively and more specifically, of the *authority* of the (office of) deacon. For the Committee, women may not be deacons because 1 Timothy 2:12 prohibits women to exercise authority in the church, including the authority inherent in the diaconate; all authority in the church is a function, by covenant-based analogy, of the headship of father/husband in the home. The Minority rejects this position and holds that women may be deacons because the authority of the deacon is “delegated authority, authority exercised *under* the authority of the elders.” The Committee and Minority differ because they have different conceptions of the authority of the deacon and, in that respect, of the office-character of the diaconate.

The ultimate resolution of this difference lies in Scripture. But what about our Form of Government? It might be said that its position concerning authority/office in relation to the diaconate falls between the Committee and the Minority. But that position is surely closer to the former. On the one hand, the work of the deacons is “under the supervision and authority of the session” (11.5). On the other hand, the Form of Government subsumes the specific offices—ministers, elders, and deacons—under a generic notion of office: officers are those who “have been publicly recognized as called of Christ to minister with authority” (5.2). Nothing here even suggests that the authority of the deacon, unlike that of the minister and elder, is *delegated* authority; rather, deacons, equally with ministers and elders, have their authority to minister from Christ. In the same vein, the procedures for electing, ordaining, and installing ruling elders and deacons are stipulated

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=869](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=869).

together in the same chapter and are identical for both offices: (1) the ordination/installation questions are the same for both (25.6.b), and, correspondingly, (2) the congregation promises obedience, without qualification as to its character as *obedience*, to deacons as well as ruling elders (25.6.c, 6.e, 7.c). Considered from the side of the congregation, and the obedience/submission asked (and required) of it, the authority of ruling elders and deacons is equal and parallel.

*Conclusion:* What recommendation 2 of the Minority<sup>1</sup> intends, in detail, is not made clear. What is clear is its effect, if adopted. To revise the Form of Government to provide for women deacons will necessitate as well revising its underlying conception of the nature and authority of office. The General Assembly should recognize that—measured by the existing understanding of diaconal authority in the Form of Government—to “open the office of deacon to qualified women” would bring the OPC into conflict with its subordinate standard of government. Scripture is our final standard and wherever it leads we are bound to follow, but we need to be aware of the full dimensions of the revision demanded to avoid conflict in our Form of Government and to be sure that Scripture really does demand such revision.

It has not been my purpose here to debate the report of the Minority. But several further observations do seem in order in light of the preceding comments.

1. (a) Can we be sure that the exercise of (official) authority prohibited to women in 1 Timothy 2:12 is neatly restricted to teaching and closely related ruling? After all, in terms of the verse itself and its syntax, the prohibited exercise of authority over men is made without qualification and, further, is parallel in addition to the prohibition against teaching. The semantics of that syntax are

open to interpretation, but the Minority has not addressed that question.

(b) Also, if, as the Minority holds, the authority of headship is not at issue for the office of deacon, why then does Paul stipulate that a deacon must lead/rule/manage his household well (1 Tim. 3:12)—essentially identical to the parallel requirement for overseers (vss. 4–5)? If headship is not at stake in the diaconate, why single out proven headship in the home as a requirement for deacons (as well as elders)—especially since, on the assumption that headship is not at stake, their worthiness for office could be adequately established by other criteria?

2. The Minority makes extensive use of the views of J. Van Bruggen,<sup>2</sup> but does not follow them consistently. The tendency of those views, based on his exegesis of the New Testament, is to break the close bond between overseers (ministers and elders) and deacons characteristic of Reformed church orders—so much so that the *office* of deacon (as an authoritative, ordained function) disappears; for instance, in setting out his own view, as far as I can discover, he never uses the word “office” (Dutch *ambt*) for deacons. Apparently, there is really only one office in the church today—that of overseer; all other organized, structured ministry, including the diaconate, exists—without need of ordination—by appointment of the overseers and under their direction.<sup>3</sup> In other words, in relation to the diaconate, Van Bruggen has freed himself from the issue of authority that continues to burden the Minority in his effort to argue for women in the office of deacon.

Van Bruggen’s position on women deacons—in the context of his stimulating, carefully argued work on offices in the apostolic church—merits the thoughtful consideration of the larger Reformed community. But in his laudable attempt

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1 That a committee of three be appointed by the moderator to report to the 56<sup>th</sup> General Assembly concerning what amendments to the Form of Government would be required in order to open the office of deacon to qualified women, and how such amendments could most helpfully be put before the church for consideration.

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2 Jakob Van Bruggen (ThD, Utrecht University) is research professor of New Testament at the Theological University in Kampen, Netherlands, where he taught from 1967 until 2001.

3 See, e.g., the summary paragraph in J. Van Bruggen, *Ambten in de apostolische kerk: een exegetisch mozaïek* (Kampen, NL: Kok, 1984), 117.



to remove deacons out from under the eclipsing shadow of the overseers, it seems to me, he has failed to do justice to the unique bond between the two, as a permanent church order, found in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3, and reflected elsewhere in the New Testament.

3. An overriding fear for me is that those who favor ordaining women to the office of deacon will suppose that thereby a victory has been gained for women, and their full and rightful participation in the life of the church at last secured. I suspect that the effect of such “victory,” rather, will be to limit that participation and inhibit it from being as full as it ought to be. 1 Peter 4:10–11 gives clear profile to the dual principle of ministry (the gospel in word and deed) for all believers, men and women alike—a principle that the dual office structure (elders and deacons) exists, in part, to facilitate by the leadership it gives.<sup>4</sup> In my judgment, only when the issue of women’s role in the church is no longer encumbered with the question of ordination and office will the church make headway, on the principle of 1 Peter 4:10–11, toward realizing an optimum exercise of gifts given to women—for showing mercy, yes, but for administering and teaching in the church as well. ©

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<sup>4</sup> See the fuller treatment of this passage in the Report, IV. Women and General Office, A. Biblical Teaching on the Identity of Women, 2.

# Phoebe Was a Deacon: Other Women Should Be, Too

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Originally published in *New Horizons* (June–July 1988) and republished electronically in *Ordained Servant* February 2021<sup>1</sup>

**By Robert B. Strimple**

I appreciate this opportunity to indicate something of the thrust of my minority report to the 55th General Assembly. But I fear that a brief article which cannot begin to convey the force of the New Testament evidence for recognizing the propriety of qualified women serving as deacons in the church could prove counter-productive! I would therefore urge interested readers to study the full report of over twenty pages which appears in the Agenda for General Assembly (see p. 16).

While I am in full agreement with the bulk of the report of the GA Committee dealing with the role of women in church office and with its argument that the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12 clearly excludes women from the office of elder, I do not believe the Committee is correct in concluding that the Bible also excludes women from the office of deacon.

## **I. The Regulative Principle and the Burden of Proof**

The Committee is certainly correct in asserting that “the answer to the question of whether or not women may be ordained to the office of deacon depends entirely upon the establishment of positive scriptural warrant.” But what must we require as to the nature of that positive scriptural warrant? Must it be clearer and more explicit than the warrant on the basis of which we have determined other matters relating to the worship and government of the church? Must it be

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<sup>1</sup> [https://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=977](https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=977).

clearer, for example, than the biblical command which grounds the participation of women in the Lord's Supper?

Do we really want to take the position that we cannot act on the basis of what we believe the Scripture teaches, unless we find that teaching so 100 percent transparent that no counter interpretation with even the slightest degree of plausibility can be suggested? The requiring of such an absolute demonstration may well leave us paralyzed, unable to obey what we have adequate reason to believe the Bible to be saying.

We must be careful not to make the mistake of thinking that the Reformed regulative principle means that only the positive position, the position that qualified women may be elected as deacons, needs to satisfy the burden of providing biblical proof, while the negative position needs to provide no explicit biblical teaching to the effect that women are to be excluded from this office.

Given the Bible's clear teaching regarding the full equality of the sexes before God (accented in texts like Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28), we would seem to require some biblical basis for excluding them from a particular role and office in the church at least as much as we would require a biblical basis for opening it to them.

## II. The New Testament and Women Deacons

The New Testament seems to contain two texts which speak quite directly to the subject before us, because they speak of *women* deacons. Since it is the Scripture which must decide the issue, the church must have the courage to take a fresh, unbiased look at what the Scripture says. As the Committee report rightly notes, we must not be blinded by the spirit of our times—whether of feminism or of male chauvinism. Neither must we be content to follow the easy course of maintaining the status quo in the church simply because it is the status quo.

### A. Romans 16:1–2

Here the apostle Paul writes, “I commend

to you our sister Phoebe, who is also a deacon of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever manner she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.”

It has been noted that the term deacon (servant) was used for such a variety of ministries in the church that it is surprising, perhaps, that it ever came to be the designation for a particular ministry or office. It did become such an official title, however, and it is clearly used as such in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8,12–13. The question is whether it is used in such an official sense of Phoebe here. If Philippians 1:1 is the first reference in the N.T. to this particular office of deacon, is Phoebe the first (and only!) holder of this office to be named in the N.T.?

It is not enough to suggest, as the Committee report does, that there is nothing in the passage that absolutely rules out the general force of deacon here. We must consider what are the elements in the passage which make it, as the Committee itself concedes, more natural, “perhaps even more likely,” that it should be “read as a fixed or official designation” here.

Space does not permit a careful look at these elements, but there are at least four:

1. The formula Paul employs here suggests that the reference is to Phoebe's holding the office of deacon. He speaks of her, literally, as “being a deacon.” Such a participial phrase is consistently the way in which one identifies the particular office someone holds at a particular time. Examples of this usage in the N.T. are found in John 11:49; Acts 18:12 and Acts 24:10.

2. The force of the “also” in the best attested Greek text seems to be to emphasize that Phoebe is not only a Christian sister but also a deacon in the church at Cenchrea.

3. Most especially, the genitive phrase added (“of the church which is at Cenchrea”) does not simply inform us of the place from which Phoebe came, but underscores again her official status, even as today we refer to Tom Bradley, mayor of Los Angeles, or to Jack Peterson, pastor

of the church in San Antonio.

4. At the end of v. 2, Paul adds that “she herself has also been a helper of many.” If the reference to Phoebe as a “deacon” in v. 1 indicated nothing more than that she had been helpful to many, the words in v. 2 would be a superfluous repetition. As it is, Paul is making clear that not only did she bear the office and title of servant, she really was a servant in her life and practice.

As already noted, it is often asserted that our Reformed regulative principle requires that the alleged example appealed to as providing the biblical warrant for an ecclesiastical practice be clear. But this matter of clarity cuts both ways. We might well be expected to adopt the natural understanding of Romans 16: 1–2 unless the teaching of the N.T. elsewhere that it is not proper for a woman to serve in the office of deacon is so clear that we must conclude that this understanding of the Phoebe reference cannot be the correct one.

### **B. 1 Timothy 3:11**

Six pages of my minority report are devoted to establishing the fact that the “women” addressed in this verse are not the wives of the deacons but are rather women deacons. (The NIV, for example, “their wives,” is not translation but interpretation. There is no possessive pronoun in the Greek text, though one would expect such if the deacons’ wives were in view.)

In answering the question that naturally arises if one sees this text as giving qualifications for wives of the deacons—namely, Why are the qualifications for the wives of the overseers not given?—the Committee suggests that the wives of the deacons had a part in the work of their husbands in a way in which the wives of the overseers did not.

In explaining why this should have been so, however, the Committee virtually concedes the crucial point which I believe must be emphasized concerning the important difference between the office of overseer and the office of deacon, and how this difference makes it appropriate that the office of deacon (but not the

office of elder) be open to qualified women as well as to qualified men! I quote the Committee, “by virtue of the differences between the two offices, deacons’ wives could be more directly and extensively involved in the official activities of their husbands.”

### **III. Elders and Deacons, the Overseers and the Servants**

Professor J. Van Bruggen of the “Liberated” (Article 31) Reformed Churches in the Netherlands uses an interesting figure in arguing that the trail of the women deacons can definitely be traced back into the N.T. itself, but that the church has suffered a “derailment” at this point.

The leading cause of this loss of the N.T. understanding has been “colored by the work of the overseer” in the thinking of the church; “and the Bible clearly says . . . that a woman in Christ’s church is not permitted to teach or have authority over the man.”

This derailment of the N.T. viewpoint is further fostered today by the attempt of many to seize upon the presence of women deacons in the N.T. as an argument for admitting women also to the tasks of oversight and teaching. It is often “as a reaction to this,” as Van Bruggen notes, that “others close to women even the door of diaconal work.”

The solution to all such derailed thinking is to seek a more accurate biblical understanding of the deacon. The important difference with regard to the nature of the authority exercised between the elders and the deacons would seem to be underscored in the greeting of Philippians 1:1 by the use of the, not merely different, but contrasting titles: “the overseers” and “the servants.”

Recognizing the biblical distinctiveness of both the elders and the deacons has proven more difficult for churches from the Dutch Reformed background (with a tradition of seating both on the church consistory with little meaningful distinction) than it should be for Presbyterians. We should recognize that the elders are responsible for the oversight and rule of the total life of the

congregation, including the work of the deacons. The deacon is not a ruling office. That priority is reserved for the elders. The deacons are helps to the elders, analogous to the Seven appointed to assist the Apostles (Acts 6).<sup>1</sup>

Sad to say, contemporary advocacy of the admission of women to the diaconate has too often been embraced by those unwilling to be in submission to the Scripture at all points, with tragic confusion resulting. Fear of the advances of such theological liberalism, however, should not be allowed to prevent us from entering into a more biblical understanding of the office of deacon and the exciting possibilities for qualified women—and qualified men!—in that role. ©

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# Phoebe Was a Deaconess, But She Was Not Ordained

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by Gregory E. Reynolds

In 1986 I was elected an alternate to the study committee “Hermeneutics of Women in Church Office” by the 53<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly. Upon the resignation of George Cottenden, I became a member and then the chairman. The committee’s scope was broadened, renaming it the “Committee on Women in Church Office,” and it submitted its final report to the 55<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (1988). Shortly after this, I responded to Dr. Strimple’s summary of his Minority report, which appeared in the June/July 1988 issue of *New Horizons*, titled “Phoebe Was A Deacon, Other Women Should Be, Too.”<sup>2</sup> I also gave a summary of the report in that same issue of *New Horizons*.<sup>3</sup> I should say that Dr. Strimple was one of my favorite professors and opposing his position was daunting, since I never found anything but sound orthodoxy based on careful exegesis in all that he taught.

Now, in 2021,<sup>4</sup> I think the topic is still germane in light of contemporary discussions about the place of women in the church. While I do not think that anyone in our circles is advocating for the ordination of women to special office, including the office of deacon, I believe that it is important to articulate why ordained office is

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1 My report includes an extensive study of Acts 6 and concludes that the appointment of the Seven was a special provision for that particular time and circumstance only. but one which did guide the church later, by way of example. when it came to appoint helpers to the elders.

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=868](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=868).

2 Robert Strimple, “Phoebe Was a Deacon, Other Women Should Be, Too,” *New Horizons*, 9:6 (June/July 1988): 17–18.

3 Gregory E. Reynolds, “A Summary Report of the Committee on Women in Ordained Office,” *New Horizons*, 9:6 (June/July 1988): 16.

4 This present article is based on an article with the same title originally published in *New Horizons*, 9:7 (Aug/Sept 1988): 17–18. The views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of the committee.

restricted to men. And, more importantly, why this restriction does not inhibit the broad biblical arena of service open to all women and men in our churches.

The question before our church is not whether or not women should be performing diaconal work but rather, whether or not women should be ordained to the special office of New Testament deacon. The work of the deacons is not the issue. Who should lead in this work is the question before us. Therefore, the point at issue is the nature and authority of the office of deacon.

### Using the Regulative Principle

As firm believers in the infallible Word, our church is committed to the principle that the doctrine and practice that bind the church must be “expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (WCF 1.6). The last phrase of this regulative principle is often misunderstood and misapplied.

Dr. Strimple indicates that the “positive scriptural warrant” demanded by this principle is a matter of degrees. He alleges that the demand for one hundred percent clarity “may well leave us paralyzed” (p. 17). This entirely misses the point of our Confession. The principle is a matter of logic (syllogistic reasoning), not probability. The binding conclusions deduced from Scripture must be based on express scriptural premises.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 1:2 Paul addresses all of the saints in the Corinthian church, male and female. In chapter 11 he delivers the Lord’s command for the church to partake of the Lord’s Supper. Based on these two clear premises, we conclude that women are commanded to partake, too. The conclusion is as binding as the premises. This has nothing to do with probability. If either of the two premises in such a deduction is false or merely probable (unclear), the conclusion is invalid and not binding on the church. This is why our Confession instructs us to let the clear passages explain the unclear (WCF 1.9). Romans 16:1–2 and 1 Timothy 3:11

prove that some women were recognized for their diaconal service in the New Testament churches. But these passages do not provide the premises to prove that women were ordained to the office of deacon.

The Minority’s assertion that we need biblical warrant to exclude women from the ordained office of deacon based on Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28 is unfounded. These two passages prove that men and women are ontologically equal as God’s image-bearers and as redeemed in Christ. They refer to the general office of believer and not special office or marriage roles. I hope to demonstrate that the biblical doctrines of office and ordination, as well as passages dealing with special offices in the New Testament, explicitly exclude women from the eldership and the diaconate.

### Ordination and Office

Ordination is the biblical rite of transferring authority from one group of divinely-called leaders (office-bearers) to another, usually with the symbolic “laying on of hands” (1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22). Numbers 27:15–23 is a classic text on ordination. Notice the strong emphasis on authority. “Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation (v. 16). . . . You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey” (v. 20). This was not a magical rite but a public symbol of identification and transfer of power in recognition of God’s call to office.

It is no surprise to find ordination in the New Testament. In fact, the first ordination which we encounter after Pentecost is in connection with deacons in Acts 6:1–6. The absence of the noun deacon in this passage does not argue against seeing this as the first appearance of New Testament deacons. Here the apostolic foundation was laid for the ordinary office of deacon delineated in 1 Timothy 3. The verb *διακονεῖν* (*diakonein*), “to serve (to deacon),” is used in Acts 6:2, and the ministry of “serving (deaconing)” is used in vs. 1 and 4 (*διακονία*). Furthermore, there is a list of

qualifications for (v.3) and ordination to (v.6) the office.

It is crucial to note that the purpose of the apostles was to appoint men over this responsibility. The verb used means “to put in charge of” (v.3 καταστήσομεν *katastešomen*). This language is strikingly similar to that of Numbers 27:16 mentioned above. The apostles understood the importance of ordination in delegating a portion of their ministry to the seven men. Ordination to office is a public appointment to oversee the ministry of the church whether it is word or deed ministry.

When the offices of elder and deacon are set forth by Paul in 1 Timothy 2 and 3, the theme of authority and leadership is prominent. In 2:12–13 women are explicitly forbidden to teach or exercise authority over men in the church. Paul’s purpose in writing the entire section was that “you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God” (3:15). Authority in the church is analogous to authority in the family (household). Therefore, both elders and deacons should be proven family leaders before they can have leadership in the larger family of the church. Both are to rule (lead, manage, προϊστάμενοι, *proistamenoi* cf. 1 Thess. 5:12) their own households well (3:4, 12). The emphasis is on oversight and authoritative leadership.

Philippians 1:1 indicates that the apostle thought of both elders and deacons as leaders of the Philippian congregation, since he singles them out in his greeting. The fact that elders and deacons lead in distinct spheres in no way reduces the leadership involved in each. The titles stand as complements, not as a contrast. Paul’s intention is to address them as leaders not to contrast their ministries. Word and deed ministry represents a division of labor in the life of the church (1 Pet. 4:10–11) which is reflected in the two offices provided to give servant leadership in these ministries.

Acts 6 is clear in emphasizing the oversight involved in both offices. Our Form of Government reflects this emphasis in stating that the board of deacons “shall oversee the ministry of

mercy” (FG 11.4, p. 14). Furthermore, when a deacon is ordained, the congregation is asked to “promise to yield him all that honor, encouragement, and obedience in the Lord to which his office, according to the Word of God and the Constitution of the church, entitles him” (FG 25.7.c, p. 73). The authority conferred to serve by leading is clear.

## Deaconing Women

Who, then, was Phoebe? As I have suggested in the title, she was a deaconess; but she was not ordained. Only three of the thirty New Testament uses of the word διάκονος (*diakonos*), found in Romans 16:1, clearly refer to the office of deacon. For this reason, the KJV, the NIV, and the ESV translate this word as “servant” in Romans 16:1. The most that can be ascertained from this reference is that Phoebe was recognized for her diaconal service in the Cenchranean church. Nothing is said of her leadership in ordained office.

As the Minority inadvertently concludes, we must look elsewhere to decide whether or not it is “proper for a woman to serve in the office of deacon.” What is disturbing is that the Minority is willing to ordain women to the diaconate based on a “natural understanding” of a passage which says nothing about ordained office. It is just at this point that we must be guided by 1 Timothy 2 and 3.

Who, then, were the “women” of 1 Timothy 3:11? While both the KJV, the NIV, and the ESV translate this word as “wives” (γυναῖκας, *gunaikos*), this probably limits the word more than the context requires. The absence of the possessive pronoun “their” is decisive at this point, though certainly deacons’ wives may have been included. The most that can be deduced from this verse is that some women, like Phoebe, were closely and publicly associated with the work of the deacons (which as Acts 6 shows would be of special help in dealing with ministry to women).

The very presence of this verse in the middle of Paul’s discussion of qualifications for the office of deacon proves that he could not have women

office-bearers in mind. If women were included in the office of deacon, Paul would have no reason to single out “women” in verse 11. Furthermore, the requirement for deacons to be husbands of one wife and rule their own households well (v. 12) would make no sense. If Paul had female deacons in mind, surely he would have used that word to refer to them here.

What we have in Romans 16:1–2 and 1 Timothy 3:11 are what Calvin wisely referred to as a “second order” of deacons made up of an auxiliary of women who assisted the ordained deacons (*Institutes* 4.3.9).

### Van Bruggen

It is somewhat surprising that the Minority should quote so extensively from Prof. J. Van Bruggen.<sup>5</sup> In *Offices in the Apostolic Church*,<sup>6</sup> Van Bruggen contends that there is one continuing office in the New Testament, that of overseer or elder. Therefore, deacons should not be ordained as part of the consistory (session and diaconate). They should be “assistants” to the elders and not “deacon-office-bearers.” They are to be elected and appointed, not ordained.<sup>7</sup>

This reasoning would effectively remove the possibility “of unlocking the office of teaching and overseeing for women, which Scripture expressly forbids.” If this one-office scheme is to work, “then either one has to change the profile of the diaconate or to declare that the deaconesses to be elected are not female-deacons.” Out of great respect for the history of his church, with its high view of deacons as ordained office-bearers, he concludes, “It is possible to leave the situation concerning the deacons as it is and to create next to it a second diaconate (with deaconesses).”

While I disagree with Van Bruggen’s conclusion that deacons are not ordained officers, I

appreciate his respect for the authority connected with ordained office. He has dealt with this question quite differently than the Minority.

### Some Practical Effects

Let us conclude by focusing on the practical effects of these three views before us: If the deacons are not ordained (Van Bruggen) or have no overseeing authority (requiring a revision of our Form of Government) though ordained (Minority), the oversight of the broad range of diaconal ministry will burden the elders in precisely the way that the New Testament diaconal office was designed to avoid (Acts 6:2b, 4).

If women are ordained to the diaconate, it is hard to understand how this will square with the biblical doctrines of the office of deacon and the authoritative nature of ordination. And because our churches associate authority with ordination and office, two dangerous results are likely: (a) women deacons will exercise authority and oversight in policy-making and administration, and (b) it will only be a short step to “unlock” (Van Bruggen) the office of elder to women.

If we add a deacon’s auxiliary to our present structure, the ordained deacons will lead the auxiliary in its work, relieve the session of direct oversight, and will not compromise on the issue of male headship and authority in the church. And the Phoebes (as well as the Stephens) will be mobilized to use their gifts to God’s glory and the good of the whole body of Christ.

Our church’s limiting the ordination of officers to men is not inimical to, but goes hand-in-hand with, the robust enumeration and encouragement of women’s gifts in fruitful ministry in the church. We should expect this since the Word of God is clear in limiting special office to men and in encouraging women to exercise all of their God-given gifts in the general office of believer.

One of the influences that radical feminism has infected the church with is that special office is a privilege that women are being denied, whereas the Bible wants us to think of it as a heavy responsibility from which women are being

5 New Testament professor emeritus in the “Article 31” seminary in Kampen, the Netherlands.

6 J. Van Bruggen, *Ambten in de apostolische kerk: een exegetisch mozaïek* (Kampen: Kok, 1984).

7 Quotes are from an “Unofficial and Preliminary Translation of Chapter Five” by Adam DeJong, and thus are not paginated.

lovingly exempted. “And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28). While this is not the only reason for the exclusion of women from special office, it is rarely considered. The other reasons are articulated in the 1988 general assembly report. But it most certainly does not imply that women are in anyway ontologically inferior to men, as the report also clearly asserts.

Women’s ordination is like the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Only one tree surrounded by gorgeous fruit is chosen as the loyalty test, and yet that is the one that gets the attention. The devil is a master magician.

Back in 1998 the OPC defeated the proposal of ordaining women to the diaconate, thus, sending a clear signal to our churches and to a watching world that we follow Scripture and do not allow the zeitgeist of the fallen world to alter the doctrine and life of Christ’s church. Let us gladly acknowledge the ministries and gifts of the Phoebes in our churches in the way our Lord has ordained in his infallible Word.

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## Reflections on Race and Racism

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by **David VanDrunen**

**R**ace and racism are obviously controversial issues. Writing on the subject is a thankless

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=874](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=874).

task, bound to provoke accusations that an author is enthralled by some nefarious ideology and insufficiently enlightened by a better one. This essay has no agenda either to call out the church for racism or to strike the death blow against wokeness. It simply offers reflections on race and racism intended to help Reformed Christians work through these matters in humble, wise, and Christ-honoring ways. Five basic ideas guide these reflections. (A terminological note: I use “anti-racist” to refer to scholars and activists who use this term to describe themselves, *not* as a general term for all people who think racism is immoral. Although antiracists differ among themselves on some issues, they share many core convictions addressed below.)

### 1. Race Does Not Exist, although Racism Does.

Perhaps the most important thing to say about *race*, in the typical American sense of the word,<sup>2</sup> is that it does not exist. Unlike sex, it has no biological reality, and unlike ethnicity, it has no cultural reality. The human community simply is not divided into half-a-dozen (or whatever) racial groups united by distinct genetic markers or a common culture. Let me explain this claim.

The idea that race exists did not originate in Scripture. Scripture speaks of all human beings descending from one man, and thus the only “race” it knows is the one human race. Scripture distinguishes among humans, but does so in terms of people-groups. Egyptians, Babylonians, Israelites, and dozens of others had different customs and religions, but they were not different races. The geographical theatre in which the biblical story unfolded, at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe, ensured that biblical writers were familiar with people of dark skin, light skin, and many shades in between, yet they gave no hint

2 “Race” has been used in different senses, especially as a way to refer to ethnic-groups or other smaller people-groups. For a brief but helpful discussion of this development of terminology and some of its implications, see Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), ch. 2.



of regarding Cushites and Galatians (Celts) as racially separate.

Contemporary genetic science comes to the same conclusion. Mapping the human genome is one of the most amazing scientific accomplishments of recent decades. By studying the genetic information of living humans and comparing it to DNA from human remains of past millennia, genetic scientists have been able to reconstruct the migration of peoples and their inter-breeding with other peoples in ways hitherto impossible. Data is still coming in and scientists will undoubtedly modify their reconstructions, but one basic conclusion is clear: the modern conception of race has no genetic basis. People around the world are related to each other in complex and often counter-intuitive ways. Who would have thought, for example, that Western Africans are more closely related genetically to Western Europeans than to Eastern Africans? Population-groups have certain genetic markers distinguishing them from other population-groups, but this does not translate into anything corresponding to the “races” of modern mythology.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, race has no cultural reality because, unlike ethnic-groups, modern races (“black,” “white,” “Asian,” etc.) do not share a common culture. Rather, they consist of a multitude of groups with often very different histories, languages, and the like.

I do not know how many contemporary Reformed Christians believe that race is a biological and cultural reality, but they would be well-advised to abandon such a spurious notion.

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3 See generally David Reich, *Who We Are and How We Got Here: Ancient DNA and the New Science of the Human Past* (New York: Vintage, 2018); and Adam Rutherford, *A Brief History of Everyone Who Ever Lived: The Human Story Retold Through Our Genes* (New York: The Experiment, 2017). Antiracists also deny that race has any biological basis. E.g., see Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 53; Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon, 2018), 5, 15; Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 19, 27; and Jennifer Harvey, *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 44.

Race, instead, is a figment of the human imagination. One way to put it is that race is a *social construct*.<sup>4</sup> Certain people in a certain historical context developed the notion of distinct human races. Although social constructs are not necessarily bad or unhelpful, this one was pernicious. Europeans constructed race in conjunction with the colonization of the Americas and the African slave-trade, and they used it to justify the subjugation of non-Europeans and the elevation of Europeans as morally and intellectually superior.<sup>5</sup>

This explains why racism exists even though race does not. (I take “racism” as treating and judging people not according to what is true about them but according to their racial categorization.) Social constructs can be powerful. Often what we imagine to be true shapes our thoughts, feelings, and behavior more strongly than what is actually true. Christians should understand this. Scripture emphasizes that there is no God but one. Yet idolatry exists and it is seductive. Baal was a construct of the human imagination, but it inspired people to dance around altars cutting themselves and provoked Israel to forsake the living God who redeemed them from bondage. Race is something like a conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories are based on fabrications, yet they can powerfully reshape the lives of those who buy into them. They scare people into moving off the grid, rejecting life-saving vaccines, or hoarding gold coins under their mattress. Likewise, race is based on lies, but the idea became very important to those who believed those lies and forced others to live as if

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4 Perhaps there is a better term, but the basic idea is correct. Antiracists often use “social construct” terminology. E.g., see Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 9; DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 5, 15; Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 35, 37; Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 44; and Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 19, 27.

5 E.g., see the account in Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, ch. 2.

they were true.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. The Interests of Truth and Peace Call for De-Racialization.

If race is a fabrication of the sinful imagination, there seems to be one fundamental and necessary response: Deal with the idea as the lie it is. Stop acting as though race is real. Stop treating and judging people according to what is false. As people are unlikely to escape Baal-worship until they cease to think and act as though a powerful deity named Baal exists, so people are unlikely to escape racism until they cease to think and act as though race exists.

Some of what this entails is obvious, even if easy to overlook. Most of us have become aware of racial stereotypes and made efforts to give them up, but we all need to stay alert and keep striving to put them aside. Most of us have been warned about the hurt caused by racist jokes, although many people still tell them privately now and then, thinking no one is harmed. But whether in public or private, that is acting as though a destructive lie were true. Or consider some people's habit of mentioning a person's racial categorization when it is irrelevant: the European-American, for example, who relates a funny incident at the grocery store and describes one of the people involved as an "Asian guy," although it has no bearing on the story. Perhaps she intends nothing malicious, but she perpetuates racial thought-patterns that have wrought profound harm.

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6 It is also interesting, then, that some antiracists (surely unwittingly) describe the power of racism with rhetoric that sounds like that of conspiracy theorists. For example, DiAngelo speaks of racism as largely invisible to most "whites" until she and others unveil "interlocking patterns" that reveal it. And all possible evidence supports her conclusions, while seemingly nothing can falsify them. For example, if "whites" warn others about a neighborhood because it is "black," that demonstrates racism, but if they do not use racial language and warn about a neighborhood because it is "dangerous," that also demonstrates racism, because they speak in code. See *White Fragility*, 23, 29, 44–46. After developing this conspiracy-theory analogy, I discovered that Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay also use it; see *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2020), 36.

Recognizing the myth of race calls for de-racialization. That is, to live by truth and at peace with all our fellow humans, we ought to (continue to) strip our minds of racial categories and treat our neighbors without respect to them.

What I just wrote is highly controversial. Its most prominent opponents, however, are not unrepentant racists but antiracists. For antiracists, the preceding paragraph promotes *color-blindness*, the idea that we should not see other people's race. They believe this is a terrible thing that impedes racial justice and reconciliation rather than promotes it.<sup>7</sup> Progress, they argue, requires seeing racial tensions and dynamics everywhere. When "whites" do not see race, it manifests their dominant place in society and their privilege over others. "Whites" need to become increasingly cognizant of their "whiteness" and hence remain aware of others' different identities.<sup>8</sup>

These antiracists have legitimate concerns. If wrongs have been done in the name of an imaginary concept, it is surely impossible to rectify wrongs and change course without mentioning that concept. To return to a previous analogy, the Old Testament prophets did not pretend as though they had never heard of Baal or ignore the seduction of idolatry. Likewise, battling racism throughout de-racialization should not mean that we simply stop talking about race and hope that this clears things up. Antiracists are also rightly concerned about an alleged color-blindness that sees the world only through the lens of one's own cultural assumptions. Ceasing to judge people according to racial categorization should not mean making one's own culture the universal standard. Cultural diversity is generally a good

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7 E.g., see Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 26; Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 10, 20, 54; DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 7, 11, 40–42; and Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 152–53. It is interesting, however, that antiracists sometimes (inadvertently?) recognize the virtue of color-blindness. For example, Kendi (*How to Be an Antiracist*, 55) speaks appreciatively of when one of his grade-school principals "suddenly saw me not as the misbehaving Black boy but as a boy...." Yet on his own theory, this principal's conduct was racist.

8 E.g., see DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 24–38.

thing.<sup>9</sup> Finally, antiracists correctly oppose a color-blindness that evaluates all formally identical racial statements identically. For example, an African-American who says “black is beautiful” and a European-American who says “white is beautiful” make formally identical statements. But in the context of American history, they obviously do not communicate the same thing.<sup>10</sup>

These concerns should keep us from a simplistic color-blindness, but if we are concerned about truth and peace, our goal ought to be the elimination of thinking and acting in racial terms. The best strategy for getting there is open for debate, but it is far-fetched to think that the concept of race might disappear by demanding that people see all things through the lens of race.<sup>11</sup> Racism is doomed only if we de-racialize our thoughts, words, and behavior.

### 3. We Need an Elusive Combination of Humility and Critical Thinking.

We are dealing with “profoundly complex” issues.<sup>12</sup> It may be easy for some of us to understand that race does not exist, but when an imaginary but powerful concept has taken hold of so many minds for so long and wreaked so much harm, charting a viable way forward is not simple.

We see this complexity in all sorts of ways. Prominent antiracists, seemingly allies, disagree

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9 This is a rich issue to explore from a Christian theological perspective. The diversity of individuals and people-groups seems to be an inevitable development of multiplying and filling the earth (Gen. 1:28; 9:1, 7). It reflects the great potential of humans created in God’s image—potential which no single individual or group can fully embody. Of course, there is also a sense in which our experience of diversity reflects human sin and the misuse of God’s gifts, as the story of Babel illustrates (Gen. 11:1–9). Nevertheless, Scripture indicates that God redeems people in the midst of their diversity and without eliminating all differences, people “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). The redeemed community is profoundly united, but not because everyone is identical.

10 Cf. Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 53.

11 According to Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 54: “Terminating racial categories is potentially the last, not the first, step in the antiracist struggle.”

12 DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 8.

with each other about basic matters such as what racism is and which people are racists.<sup>13</sup> We see it in controversies about the police. In some cases, the evidence of police misconduct is overwhelming. But very few of us really understand the culture of police departments or are experts on effective policing—which does not stop people from sloganeering (Defund the police! Blue lives matter!). We also see this complexity in our churches. A family of one racial categorization begins to worship and fellowship at a church consisting primarily of people of another racial categorization. Everyone is happy for a while, except that this family finds the worship persistently unfamiliar and the fellowship awkward, for a host of cultural reasons that baffle and frustrate all involved.

In the face of such complexities, humility and open-mindedness are highly important.<sup>14</sup> Proverbs repeatedly urges readers to take counsel and listen to advice. The wise person recognizes that any opinion can seem right when first presented, until another person offers a different argument and puts things in new light (Prov. 18:17).<sup>15</sup> At a time when most people get their news only from sources that they trust to

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13 I mention a few examples: For DiAngelo, “whites” are inevitably racist (*White Fragility*, 4, 87), while for Kendi no one is inevitably racist (*How to Be an Antiracist*, 10–11). For DiAngelo, only “whites” can be racist (*White Fragility*, 22), while for Kendi anyone can be racist (*How to Be an Antiracist*, 10, 128, 136, 140–44). For DiAngelo, generalizing about people based on race is proper and helpful (*White Fragility*, 11–13), while for Kendi this is improper (*How to Be an Antiracist*, 44).

14 Much of the antiracist literature, I am afraid, does not exemplify such virtues. Kendi’s *How to Be an Antiracist* presents his vision as the way to be antiracist and labels dozens of dissenting opinions on various aspects of his vision as racist. (He does describe his own mistakes and learning in the past, but he gives the impression that he has now arrived.) DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* properly praises listening and learning from others, yet she repeatedly demeans and belittles the people who have participated in her seminars and disagreed with things she said.

15 The “Report of the Committee on the Problems of Race,” presented to the 1974 General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (available on [opc.org](http://opc.org)), is dated in some obvious and understandable ways, but it remains worthy of consideration. For example, section IV.2 reflects on the mutuality of love among those of different racial categorization, and I believe such mutual love would go a long way toward the sort of humility and open-mindedness that I am encouraging here.

tell them what they already think, the wise will ensure they get multiple sides of the story. In a culture in which most people spend most of their time with people of their own racial categorization, the wise will want to listen carefully to the stories and experiences of people of other racial categories—and to listen not to critique but to understand, appreciate, and sympathize. These things are incumbent upon all, but European-Americans should probably pay special attention. Arguments that the drug war and the criminal-justice system work to the unjust detriment of African-American communities, for example, may not resonate with typical European-American experience, but many of them are compelling and at least demand open-minded reflection.

Nevertheless, critical thinking about race controversies is also essential. I think, for example, of a number of controversial ideas promoted by influential antiracists. Some of these ideas have an element of truth, yet all of them demand close scrutiny. I cannot provide this close scrutiny here, but simply call attention to a few matters briefly.<sup>16</sup>

One notion demanding critical reflection is *systemic racism*.<sup>17</sup> Racism can be systemic, to be sure. American slavery and South African apartheid are obvious examples that institutionalized racism in the law. It is much less clear how to evaluate claims about systemic racism in America today, since racial discrimination is outlawed throughout American society. Many people continue to suffer disadvantages because of their racial categorization, but the extent to which it is due to a “system” rather than to individuals’ malice or carelessness is nearly impossible to prove. “Socialization” into racist prejudice undoubtedly

also remains present in American society.<sup>18</sup> Yet claims that this socialization is so pervasive that racial bias shapes everything seem very exaggerated, underestimate differences in cultures and upbringings, and grant race a greater power than it has.<sup>19</sup> Lingering systemic racism is a legitimate topic of conversation, but there are dangers of emphasizing racism as systemic, such as blaming the system instead of individuals’ and groups’ immoral behavior<sup>20</sup>—whether the immoral behavior of the alleged oppressors<sup>21</sup> or the alleged oppressed.<sup>22</sup>

Another issue concerns many antiracists’ embrace of *identity politics*.<sup>23</sup> This approach divides people into an ever-increasing number of identity groups, each with its own set of interests and grievances.<sup>24</sup> This naturally leads to an emphasis upon race relations as a struggle for *power*.<sup>25</sup> Identity politics is not about working together for what is good and just, but about redistributing power from oppressor groups to oppressed groups. And this is inseparable from *cultural relativism*. As

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18 DiAngelo focuses a great deal on socialization. As she puts it: Racism is “a system into which I was socialized” (*White Fragility*, 4).

19 See DiAngelo again on the alleged pervasiveness of racism. For example, “racial disparity” exists “in every institution across society,” and racism is present in every “cross-racial friendship.” See *White Fragility*, 22–23, 81.

20 In confessional terms, focusing on systemic issues may distract from the responsibility to repent of “particular sins, particularly” (Westminster Confession of Faith, 15.5).

21 E.g., DiAngelo believes that being racist is simply inevitable for “whites” and is not a matter of whether they are moral or immoral people. See *White Fragility*, 13–14.

22 E.g., Kendi frequently emphasizes that troubles within “Black” communities are *only* the result of bad political policies and *not* of the behavior of people within them. See *How to Be an Antiracist*, 8–9, 18–20, 64, 117, 153. He does not even permit discussion of other potentially contributing factors (27, 185).

23 DiAngelo explicitly embraces identity politics in *White Fragility*, xiii–xiv.

24 As Amy Chua puts it, “Once identity politics gains momentum, it inevitably subdivides, giving rise to ever-proliferating group identities demanding recognition.” See *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 183.

25 Kendi often speaks about race in terms of a struggle for power. E.g., see *How to Be an Antiracist*, 34–35, 38, 42, 130, 208. Cf. Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 17.

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16 Many of the ideas I have in mind are associated with critical race theory. For a positive presentation of critical race theory, see Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*. For recent critiques of it, see (from a Reformed perspective) Carl R. Trueman, “Evangelicals and Race Theory,” *First Things* 310 (Feb. 2021): 19–24, and (from secular liberal perspective) Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, ch. 5.

17 For some expressions of this, see e.g. DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 3, 19–22, 83; and Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 16.

one prominent antiracist puts it: “To be antiracist is to see all cultures in all their differences as on the same level, as equals.”<sup>26</sup> These ideas thus have no prospect of promoting peaceful relations among people. If social life is merely a relativistic struggle for power, who can blame people for fighting back against anyone who challenges them? If you tell “oppressors” that any attempt to make an objective, reasonable argument for what is morally right is only a cynical power play, there is nothing left but perpetual war among identity groups.

Finally, it is worth thinking critically about how some influential antiracists link race with a host of other categories in which oppressors and oppressed collide.<sup>27</sup> Of special note, they claim that opposing racism requires support for the LGBTQ agendas.<sup>28</sup>

#### **4. Success in Race Issues in the Church Looks Different from Success in Our Political Communities.**

God calls Christians to live peacefully and justly in political communities alongside their non-Christian neighbors. He also calls Christians to gather in the church as a redeemed community of justified believers. Racism is a terrible thing in either community. But the answer and alternative to racism in each community looks different.

In political communities, the antidote to racism is recognition of our *common humanity*. Christians believe that all human beings are children of Adam, image-bearers of God, and beneficiaries of God’s common grace under the

Noahic covenant. However it is understood, our common humanity provides grounds for unity over against the divisiveness of racism and identity politics. But such political unity is relatively shallow, a unity of peaceful co-existence that will always remain fragile in a sinful world in which so many things threaten to divide us. In this context, I believe the (classical) liberalism of the U.S. constitutional order, or something like it, is the best we can do.<sup>29</sup> Such a system supports a broad array of liberties and aims at the kind of society in which people are judged not “by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”<sup>30</sup> Many antiracists (despite being designated “liberal” in contemporary American parlance) oppose such a system, due to their vision of social justice through identity politics and power redistribution.<sup>31</sup>

In our churches, however, the antidote to racism is recognition of not only our common humanity but especially our *redeemed humanity*. Christians are co-heirs with the Last Adam, re-created in the image of Christ. Their source of unity flows not from common grace but from saving grace, not from this present creation but from the new creation. These redemptive resources are far more powerful than anything political communities have at their disposal, although churches have often used these resources poorly. Consider two advantages the church’s resources provide.

One concerns *identity*. Finding political unity in, for example, being an American with constitutional liberties is meaningful. But it is

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26 Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 91.

27 This raises the complicated issue of *intersectionality*. For discussion of the importance of intersectionality for antiracism from a prominent antiracist, see Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 188–200. For critical discussion of the same topic, see e.g., Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 123–32.

28 E.g., see DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 15, 40; and Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 38, 193–98. To mention two other issues, some antiracists also claim that true opponents of racism must be feminist and anti-capitalist. E.g., see Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 156–63, 189.

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29 For a detailed argument for this, see David VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), especially ch.12.

30 These words, of course, are from Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech; see *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 219. Antiracists frequently assail such appeals to King and portray him as a much more radical critic of the American polity. E.g., see Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 179; DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 41; Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 148; and Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 32–33.

31 E.g., see Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 3, 26–29.

proving tenuous in the face of the fragmentation promoted by identity politics. The church has a much more powerful alternative to “the idea that one’s position within society, as determined by group identity, dictates how one sees the world . . .”<sup>32</sup> Christians’ vision of the world cannot be thus dictated, for their union with Christ through faith and baptism makes them *one*, and thus there are no Christian identity groups, either of ethnicity (Jew or Greek), class (slave or free), or sex (male or female) (Gal. 3:26–28), let alone the imaginary concept of race.

Another advantage concerns *hope*. A sort of Pelagianism pervades much antiracist literature. Evil resides in social structures and individuals learn it by socialization. Pessimism often accompanies this quasi-Pelagianism, and with good reason: if changing an individual’s behavior is difficult, changing social power structures is much harder, and where there is no true sin there is also no true grace. There is a lot of Romans 7 in antiracist literature, but without the triumphant note of hope at the end: “Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (7:24–25). Most antiracists want to keep trying, through therapy and/or activism,<sup>33</sup> but there is nothing like *biblical* hope, which is certain and assured—even if fully realized only in the age-to-come. Christians rightly grieve over the church’s many racist failings, but unlike the world we do not grieve without hope (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13). Christians are rightly humbled by the church’s slow and uneven progress in de-racialization, but we remain confident that God’s grace is more powerful than our sin and that our sanctified striving for Christian unity and peace is not in

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32 As described by Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 118.

33 I take it, generally, that DiAngelo’s approach in *White Fragility* is one of therapy, while Kendi’s in *How to Be an Antiracist* is one of activism. At the end of his book, Kendi proposes combatting racism in the body politic as physicians combat cancer in the human body, that is, by saturating “the body politic with the chemotherapy or immunotherapy of antiracist policies” (237). This analogy makes some sense if the problem with racism does not lie in the human heart but in social structures.

vain (cf. 1 Cor. 15:58).

## 5. We Need a Serious and Consistent Commitment to a Non-Political Church.

Some Christians with antiracist sympathies criticize churches that, when faced with racial issues, appeal to the church’s non-political nature. This critique is valid insofar as it addresses inconsistent application of the idea,<sup>34</sup> for many churches have indeed appealed to it to avoid committing to political positions on race while expressing plenty of political opinions on other issues. But often the critique runs deeper and charges churches with improperly focusing on evangelism and conversion at the expense of promoting political reform.<sup>35</sup> This deeper critique is unsurprising when it comes from antiracist authors: if racism is primarily systemic rather than individual, then churches cannot oppose racism without political activism.

In this final section, I urge Reformed churches to resist the call to be politically engaged and to strive to be *consistently* non-political, refusing to “intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth” (Westminster Confession of Faith 31.4).<sup>36</sup> Contemporary tensions over race makes this idea *more* important, not less.

To be sure, the church must proclaim the whole counsel of God found in Scripture, even about issues that get dragged into political controversy. And of course, Christians may engage in political affairs as one of many legitimate vocations. But politics constantly involves making difficult judgment calls—about when to compromise and settle for a partial good when the full good is unattainable, about which candidate to support when all the choices are flawed, etc. Politics constantly involves judgment calls because politics constant-

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34 E.g., see Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 86.

35 E.g., see Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 69, 135, 140–41, 149.

36 Some Reformed theologians discuss this issue in terms of the “spirituality of the church” while others believe the term has been poisoned by its abuse and that we should not use it. I will not engage this debate here.

ly involves morally ambiguous things.<sup>37</sup> Of course, political players often pretend that what is morally ambiguous is unambiguous. One political faction views itself as good and other factions as evil. Being critical of one's own faction, or saying something positive about another faction, is forbidden. But no political party or agenda is unambiguously good. None is beyond critique.

Thus, when the church plays politics, it unnecessarily takes sides with some of its members over other members on "opinions" or *debatable things* (Rom. 14:1).<sup>38</sup> It makes some members' judgment call on morally ambiguous matters the official position of the church and dismisses the judgments of others. The church thereby goes beyond its mandate to proclaim the unambiguous Scriptures and that alone.

Although I hate to bring it up, the Trump presidency provides an excellent example. To act as though it was either unambiguously good or unambiguously evil is preposterous (although many Americans do one or the other). It is one thing, then, for individual Christians to take all things into consideration and make a judgment call to vote for Trump or to decline to vote for him. But it is far different for a church to be pro-Trump or anti-Trump. If a church chooses one of these paths, it must either admit that it makes a judgment call about a morally ambiguous matter or pretend that the matter is morally unambiguous. If the former, it violates its mandate to teach only the Scriptures. If the latter, it not only deceives itself but also communicates that its members who made a different judgment call have sinned.

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37 By "morally ambiguous things," I mean issues that involve genuine moral choices yet require us to choose between things that involve mixtures of good and evil rather than between things that are wholly good or wholly evil. Whether to defraud one's neighbor is not morally ambiguous. Whether to speed through a residential neighborhood where children are playing to get a person having a stroke to a hospital is morally ambiguous.

38 On some *ecclesiastical* matters, this is necessary. A congregation's members may have different opinions about what time to begin Sunday morning worship, for instance, but the church must make a decision.

These comments are relevant here, in part, because racial issues were one of the flashpoints of the Trump presidency. Many Christians were willing to overlook his inflammatory rhetoric in light of his support for other issues close to their hearts. Other Christians were not willing to overlook it. These were morally ambiguous decisions. Christians should at least be able to agree on that, which means the church has no business deciding the issue for all its members. The preceding comments are also relevant because, as is well-known, Christians of different racial categorization tended to make this ambiguous decision in rather different ways. Thus, churches that take it upon themselves to decide the issue seem likely to exacerbate the racial segregation of American Christianity, not heal it.

## Conclusion

When it comes to race and racism, Reformed churches must reflect on their history soberly and work toward a better future seriously. May the Lord grant us much humility, charity, and wisdom. ©

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## Poured Out Like a Drink Offering: An Ordination and Installation Charge

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by **Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.**

**J**ohn,<sup>2</sup> you have just been set apart by the church, under the lordship of its head, Jesus Christ, as a minister of the gospel, a ministry that is to be for the wellbeing of the church. As you have requested, I am privileged now to charge you on this important occasion from God's Word, and I have decided to do that along these lines.

According to the Nicene Creed—true to Scripture—the church is one, holy, catholic (or universal), and apostolic. These four attributes, it is important to see, stand or fall together; each depends on and is qualified by the other three. From one angle, then, the church is and will remain one, holy, and universal, only as it is and remains truly apostolic.

It is the church—one, holy, and catholic—as *apostolic* that I want to reflect on with you now for a few minutes. While it is true that we have not ordained [or installed] you as an apostle (I am assuming that is clear to you!), nonetheless my charge to you is to aspire to a ministry that

may be said to be apostolic, to a ministry that is in the interest of furthering the unity, holiness, and catholicity of the church, as it is a ministry intent on maintaining and preserving the apostolicity of the church.

How are you to do that? What would such an apostolic ministry look like? Well, many things could be said in this regard. For instance, I could remind you that the apostolicity of the church resides first and most deeply today, as it always has down through the centuries, in its *apostolic foundation*, in being founded on the witness of the apostles. I would remind you that the church is and remains apostolic only as it holds fast to that apostolic witness as the very words of the exalted Christ. I would also remind you that the Reformation's *Scriptura sola* reflects its renewed appreciation of the church's true apostolicity.

So, for all this, it would be appropriate this evening, in a time where so much is at stake for the church in its fidelity to Scripture and doctrinal soundness, where trends of unbelief and rejection of the gospel and Scripture are on the rise as never before in our culture—it would be appropriate for me to exhort you, for example, to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). Or in the words of Paul—the apostle—to Timothy—among the first of his non-apostolic successors down through the centuries—I could charge you to “hold fast the pattern of sound words, . . . to guard the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Tim. 1:13–14).

I could do that—I could do that most appropriately—but instead I want rather to challenge you by reflecting with you on what is fairly seen as another dimension of true apostolicity, an aspect that is as transferable as it is enduring. It surfaces, for instance, in a number of places and different ways throughout the letters of Paul. Here I focus on it as we find it in Philippians 2. There in the latter half of the chapter, in verse 17, he writes, “But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.”

First, we see here immediately that sacrificial language and images are plain and pronounced:

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=914](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=914).

<sup>2</sup> A charge, with slight variations, given on a number of occasions over the years in ordination and installation services, most often of a former student either as a pastor, a missionary evangelist, or a seminary teacher. “John” is no one in particular but stands for all those charged.



Paul is being poured out like a drink offering, a sacrificial libation. No doubt the sacrificial system of the Old Testament is in the background—for instance, the burnt offerings with the accompanying drink offerings of wine offered every morning and evening at the entrance to the tabernacle to consecrate it as the place where God is present and meets with his people. With something like this background in mind Paul sees himself as a drink offering.

What specifically or concretely does he have in mind? Some maintain—he is in prison in Rome at this time—that he is thinking of what may be his impending martyrdom (“poured out” is seen as referring to his own bloodshed). But that view, I think, misses the point. In fact, it blunts Paul’s point.

Rather, here Paul is looking at the *whole* of his ministry and, we may fairly say, not only in its apostolic uniqueness but also in a way that is to be true of every minister of the new covenant. To be sure, that ministry may culminate in a martyr’s death, as it has for many and apparently did eventually for Paul. But here he has in view the present and the past as well as what may be the future of his ministry. Sometime later he will write to Timothy, using the same verb, “I am *already* being poured out as a drink offering” (2 Tim. 4:6). In view, then, is a mark of his ministry that is a *constant* mark.

So, when he says, “I am being poured out like a drink offering” (the present tense he uses has a progressive sense here), he is best seen as likely having in mind all the difficulties and suffering that have been true and continue to be true of his ministry, like the things he lists toward the close of 2 Corinthians 11, beginning in verse 23: frequent persecution and opposition, abuse, physical discomfort and danger, exhaustion, perplexities, misunderstanding, and disappointment.

But now note, second, that as Paul reflects on all this adversity, he says, “I am glad and rejoice,” and he wants the church in Philippi to “rejoice and be glad” with him (v. 18).

Why does he say this? How can this be? Is it because he is of a certain personality type that

delights in the negative with an inverted love of misery—a prominent characteristic of Christian clergy, as an *Atlantic Monthly* survey some years ago concluded?

No, that is hardly the answer. The reason rather is because Paul knows the “secret” of a successful gospel ministry, a secret he shares throughout his letters, and I now remind you of. It is a secret among those “open secrets” that have been revealed in Christ, the secret that the glorified Lord Jesus revealed to Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

Here is that “foolish” wisdom of God, that it is not the wise and powerful in the eyes of the world but those in themselves weak and insignificant whom God uses to advance his gospel. As Paul puts it elsewhere of his relationship to the church in Corinth, “So death is at work in us, but life in you” (2 Cor. 4:12)— this for the church, by the way, is a permanent “first principle” of successful evangelism and edification.

Paul had learned this secret—that “when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10). And that is why he is so positive, so upbeat, so joyful in writing to the Philippians, why he says elsewhere that “he will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Cor. 12:9).

John, let this, then, be your aspiration: to experience this blessing, this gospel-related power, of being “poured out like a drink offering” in serving Christ and his church.

But, third, there is still another point to consider. As you may have already noticed, Paul is not the only sacrifice in view in our verse. As he considers those he ministers to, he speaks of “the sacrificial offering of your faith,” or, as we may gloss, “the sacrificial service coming from your faith.”

It is worth noting that here, as so often in the New Testament, faith is in view in its activity and fruitfulness, what is done by faith, what Paul calls “the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5 and 16:26) and is expressed in the first long, multifaceted sentence of Westminster Confession of Faith 14.2.

Just because we are saved by faith—because we are justified solely by faith, by the sole instrumentality of faith and not by our own efforts—faith, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is (to be) the proximate source of ceaseless activity for God and the gospel. Just as faith is trust in Christ, as faith receives and continues to rest on him alone for salvation in all its aspects, its ongoing concern, as Paul exhorts the Philippians just a few verses earlier, is to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (v. 12).

Faith, as Martin Luther is reported to have said, is “a busy little thing”! Faith, we may say, is a “restless resting”—a resting in Christ that is restless to do his will. Because we do nothing for our salvation, we are to be intent on doing everything for our Savior—despite the struggles and difficulties, small and great, and the opposition often encountered.

This, then, is “the sacrificial offering of your faith” to which the church—the *whole* church—is called.

But then, fourth, we must not miss either how Paul sees his sacrifice in relation to that of the congregation, how he relates his ministry to their sacrificial activity. Against the background of the Old Testament sacrificial system we have already noted, they, not he, are the *main* sacrifice. He is but the accompaniment, the accompanying drink offering poured out over their sacrifice.

Here in a quite striking and evocative way is the humility, the due deference, that is to characterize the minister of the gospel. The more important concern for Paul is not himself, his office and status, his prerogatives and privileges (although, when necessary, he was ready to assert them and knew how to defend them forcefully), but the church, the whole congregation, and what he can do to serve it and to facilitate its sacrificial service.

Here Paul shows that he has learned what Jesus meant in telling his disciples that in the kingdom of God, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). In the church “greatness” is in fact a four-letter word, spelled L-A-S-T.

Finally, back to the apostolicity of the church.

Paul, in fact the entire New Testament, is clear: for the church to be apostolic, its ministers must be true to the apostles not only in their message but also in the manner they minister that message. *Apostolic content* and *apostolic conduct* are not the same, but they are to be inseparable.

Where all too often that is not the case, where our manner is less than apostolic, our conduct something unbecomingly other than apostolic, then inevitably the apostolic word will come across with a confusing edge of dissonance, and its clarity will be obscured.

This is the sobering reality to consider: where the apostolicity of the church is not what it ought to be—not just in its message but also in its manner of ministering that message—then we face the dark prospect of which the history of the church already provides all too much evidence. As its apostolicity is diminished not only by compromising the apostolic word but also by unapostolic conduct, its catholicity will be inhibited, its unity undermined, and its holiness tarnished.

We are confronted here, then, with a considerable challenge. Not only is the ministry of the gospel to be marked by sacrifice, but it is to be sacrifice that is in the interests of, even subservient to, the sacrifice of others.

So, the unavoidable question for you, John, is this: How will you be capable of such sacrifice? How will you be able to say to those you are called to minister to, “I am glad and rejoice with you all,” and mean it, say it with integrity. How will you find such joy and gladness, such *apostolic* joy and gladness? For this is so contrary to our persisting self-serving inclinations. Left to ourselves, such gladness, such joy is simply beyond us, beyond our capacities, beyond our best will and intentions.

But, of course, the good news is that you are not left to yourself and your own resources in this. You have the same promise that Paul had, the promise of our risen Lord Jesus: “*my* power is perfected in *your* weakness.”

John, cling to this promise and rely on it. And as you endeavor to do that—I will end with this—let me remind you of what may be obvious

yet is so easily overlooked and neglected, and that is *prayer*, the importance of prayer.

In that regard listen to these words of Abraham Kuyper, words that I first read many years ago now and still continue to find searching and often unsettling, words that ministers of the gospel especially need to take to heart. They come at the conclusion of his discussion in a section on theology as “sacred,” holy:

. . . theology has flourished only at times when theologians have continued in prayer, and in prayer have sought the communion of the Holy Spirit, and . . . on the other hand it loses its leaf and begins its winter sleep when ambition for learning silences prayer in the breast of theologians.<sup>3</sup>

John, be ever on guard against that kind of silence and against falling into that “winter sleep.” May God, as ultimately only he can, keep you from that.

John, in the ministry you now begin—and in whatever other forms of ministry you may take up in years to come—may God grant that for and to those you are called to serve, you “may be poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of [their] faith,” and that in doing that, may you always be “glad and rejoice.” ©

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<sup>3</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898), 340.

# Servant Church

## A Charge to the Congregation

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By John W. Mallin III

In twelve chapters, the writer to the Hebrews displays to us the superior excellence of the person and work of Christ, and he calls us to live by faith in the perfect priest, as he brings us to worship with the church in heaven.<sup>2</sup> In chapter 13 he quickly sets before us particular practical commands for life in the church, the heavenly Jerusalem, to which he referred in chapter 12:22–24:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

In 13:7 he directs us to “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and

imitate their faith.” In verse 8, he roots that command in the unchanging character of Christ. He cautions against doctrines which would call us to rest in sacrifices which do not last, moving on to verse 14, where he refers again to the heavenly Jerusalem: “For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” So, he exhorts us to continually offer the sacrifices of praise to God and mercy toward men, which we bring, depending on the perfect sacrifice of Christ. He finishes off this section by referring again to “your leaders” in verse 17.

Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ, you have made promises tonight. Those promises make specific applications of Hebrews 13:17:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

The question I would like you to consider is: Now that you have installed a pastor, *what must you do?* What will it look like for you to “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. . . .”?

Let me make a few observations. First, notice what you *have* done. You have received your pastor. In response to the question, “Do you, the people of this congregation, continue to profess your readiness to receive Kurt Waterson, whom you have called to be your minister?” you have said, “Yes.” Notice that you have received him, not agreed to *examine* him. There is no test left for him to take in order to be accepted by you. There is no period of probation. You have received him, and he has begun his work.

In Philippians 2:29, Paul calls on the church at Philippi to “receive him [Epaphroditus] in the Lord with all joy . . .” That is the way you are to receive your pastor, not just on this occasion, but in the coming weeks, months, and years. The writer to the Hebrews tells us, in the middle of verse 17, to let him do his work. Rejoice in what he does on your behalf. Do not complain about

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=930](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=930).

<sup>2</sup> This article is based on a charge addressed to a congregation upon the installation of a pastor, which charge was based on Hebrews 13:17 and the four questions addressed to the congregation in the Form of Government 23.9. The name of the pastor used here is fictitious.

what you would like him to do that he is not doing.

You and your pastor will need to grow together. He may seem flawless now, but he is not. Whether or not you have seen them, he has faults: they will stand out in time. You can be sure of that.

Epaphroditus had been near death. He was returning to Philippi, no doubt more experienced, but certainly with apparent weaknesses and limitations. So, Paul tells the Philippians to receive him in the Lord with great joy.

So, you must continue to receive your pastor with great joy, as his flaws and limitations become apparent. Continue to receive him with joy because, as you profess in your response to the question, you recognize him and receive him as your minister. He is a brother with frailties similar to your own, but he is sent to be your minister, your servant, your pastor. Jesus says in John 13:20: “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.” Your new pastor is a brother, a servant of God, sent by Christ to serve you. The writer to the Hebrews expresses this in verse 17 by describing “your leaders” as “keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” He has been sent by Christ, who is your Master. Kurt is not *your* master. He is your brother. But he is not your employee, either. You are not *his* master. Christ sent him, and Christ is his master, to whom Kurt must give an account.

The focus in the verse and in the question is not on the man. It is on the task, the ministry he has been given. You have called him to be your minister, your pastor, and you receive him as one who has been given the task to lead you, to rule over you, to govern, “keeping watch over your souls,” to be on guard for your lives, to stay awake and be on the lookout for dangers to your safety. Of course, he does not do that alone. He is joined by your elders. But he has been given the task of an under-shepherd of the flock where you are kept by the Lord Jesus Christ, that great Shepherd of the sheep.

So, continue to receive Kurt with great joy as your minister, your frail brother who has been called by your common master to serve you as governor and guardian. But now, notice what you have promised to do. You have answered three more questions, by which you promised to do specific things in your relationship to Kurt.

In the first of those three questions you really promised to use the benefits of his ministry. Listen again to the question: “Do you promise to receive the word of truth from his mouth with meekness and love, and to submit to him in the due exercise of discipline?” The first part of that question asks you “to receive the word of truth.” It is by the word of truth that those who rule—and particularly those who are devoted to the ministry of the Word—govern and guard your lives in the service of the great Shepherd of the sheep.

So, you receive the Word from your pastor’s mouth, but you do so because it is not simply his word but the Word of the Lord who sent Kurt to you. So, you receive that word with meekness and love, you “obey” and “submit,” as the writer to the Hebrews puts it. You will be like the Thessalonians to whom Paul wrote: “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess. 2:13). You will be obedient to the command of James 1:21–22: “Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and *receive* with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”

Notice that receiving the word can save you. But receiving the word means doing it, not just hearing it. Do not deceive yourselves. Receive from Kurt’s mouth the word of truth with love for the Lord, who is the Word of God incarnate, who is the truth. That is the first aspect of the question’s call to use the benefits of Kurt’s ministry.

The second aspect of this question’s call to use the benefits of Kurt’s ministry is in the words,

“Do you promise to . . . submit to him in the due exercise of discipline?” This appears in Hebrews 13:17 in the words “obey” and “submit.” “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.”

Those are dirty words in our culture, which is so sensitive to protecting every individual’s right to be his or her own god. But they are also misunderstood words. These words may conjure up in your mind an image of groveling at the feet of a mean master. But that is not what they mean. The word translated “obey” here means to “be persuaded by those who lead you.” You are commanded to “be persuaded.” That does not mean you should give up intellectual exercise. It means you should listen to their discernment and judgment. Heed their wisdom, which is not really theirs in the first place. Let your conscience and thinking be instructed by your pastor’s leadership, so that you will be persuaded to follow. The word translated “submit” means to “defer” to your brother, not to grovel at his feet.

You will do that as you heed the words of the writer to the Hebrews in verse 7 of this chapter, where he calls you to “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of *their* way of life, and imitate *their* faith” (emphasis added). Again, Paul gives the Thessalonians a picture of what this will look like: “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work” (1 Thess. 5:12–13a). Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 16:16: “. . . be subject [that is, submit] to such as these [who have devoted themselves to the service of the saints] and to every fellow worker and laborer.” And in Ephesians 5:21 he writes that we should be: “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” The opposite of submitting, in the biblical sense, is not being respected and treated with dignity. It is disorderly rebellion and mob rule. And in this case, it means rebellion against King Jesus in the person of his appointed governors and messengers.

The call to submit to your pastor in the due exercise of discipline simply means following godly leadership, even when you think it is mistaken, and willingly giving heed to instruction and correction when it is given within the bounds of biblical authority. Your conscience cannot be bound beyond the boundaries of God’s Word, and you cannot be compelled to do what God forbids or faith does not allow. Having said that, submission to Kurt in the due exercise of discipline simply means heeding biblical instruction as it applies to your life, which is your reasonable use of the benefits of Kurt’s ministry of the Word. So, “receive the word of truth from your pastor’s mouth with meekness and love, and submit to him in the due exercise of discipline.”

The next two promises follow almost inevitably from the first. The second question is a call to join in the work of your pastor’s ministry: “Do you promise to encourage him in his arduous labor and to assist his endeavors for your instruction and spiritual edification?”

Kurt is not your hired gun. His work is really the work of the church. He is devoted to that work in a more continual way than the rest of you, always on the front lines. You join in the work, first, by encouraging Kurt. The temptation to quit, just give up on the work, is real and powerful at times. It is work that sometimes seems impossible and hopeless—a battle that cannot be won, with no end in sight. Living by faith is not easier because you are a pastor, a seminary graduate, constantly working in the Word. In fact, it may be harder because of all those factors. At least, sometimes it *seems* harder. Ministers of the Word need to be encouraged.

“Do you promise to encourage him in his arduous labor . . .?” Paul commands the Colossians in Colossians 4:17 of his letter to them to encourage Archippus: “say to Archippus: ‘See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.’” Archippus must have been in danger of quitting out of discouragement or weariness. The aim in your obedience and submission, according to the second half of Hebrews 13:17, is that the pastor’s work will be with joy and not with

groaning . . .” Literally, “that they may do this [work] with joy and not with groans of grief.”

Kurt will encounter grief in his work, and he will groan with those who groan. But that work should be a joy to him as well, even in grief. His work should be a joy, rather than grief that he has to minister the mercy of God to people who will have none of it. Kurt should not be like the prophet Jeremiah, whose task was to warn the people of God, although he knew they would ignore him.

So, encourage Kurt in his labors, not just to make him feel good, but to remind him that the One he serves accomplishes his purposes and makes his strength perfect in weak, flawed servants—sinners like Kurt—and like you and me.

The second aspect of this second question as you join in the work by assisting Kurt is: to “assist his endeavors for your instruction and spiritual edification?”

It is, after all, your work. Paul says, in Ephesians 4:11–12, 16:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ . . . from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

You are the parts, the joints, the workers that are growing and being built, prepared, equipped for work. It is your work, because his endeavors are for your instruction and building in the faith by the Spirit. That kind of growth will be advantageous to you.

So, assist Kurt’s endeavors by laboring with him, studying what he teaches, following where he leads, without complaining or making his work grievous. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it, if his work is not joyous, but grievous, it will be “of no advantage to you,” literally, “not worth the price.” The value of his work is enhanced by your encouragement and assistance as investments in the construction project whose chief

architect and builder is Christ, and the price of which is Christ’s blood.

The third and last question is a call to support his ministry, to run interference for him: “And do you promise to continue to him, while he is your pastor, that worldly maintenance which you have promised, and whatever else you may see needful for the honor of religion and his comfort among you?” Paul writes in 1 Timothy 5:17–18: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and ‘The Laborer deserves his wages.’” It will not be profitable for you to make it *unprofitable* for him.

Free him from the distraction of wondering whether his family will enjoy the fruit of his labor when they sit at table and get dressed and take shelter. Wages are not a weapon you can use to push your agenda or move him. Enable Kurt to focus his energy on faithful ministry, caring for you while you care for him. The price you pay will be less than the value of his governing and guarding work, because his work is made worthy by the government and guard-work of Christ, who rules and defends you, who preserves you perfectly, and who uses his appointed servants to do so. So, provide for Kurt, “while he is your pastor, that worldly maintenance which you have promised, and whatever else you may see needful for the *honor* of religion and his *comfort* among you.”

Finally, what will you do when you fail in these duties of yours, which you have promised today to keep? You will fail, just as he will fail in *his* duties, because you are all sinners. As always, go to Jesus, seeking forgiveness and cleansing by his sacrifice, and give praise to him, giving thanks to his name, who makes us complete in every good work to do his will, working in us what is well pleasing in his sight. Go to Jesus as you repent, and go to Kurt to do good and share in the Lord’s work.

Also, seek help from others in that repentance, if necessary. But at all costs, be sure to see

your duties and your failures, as well as Kurt's duties and failures, in the light of the perfect work of Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep, who rules you and watches out for your souls, having given an account for you, rejoicing to bear your grief and your sin. In other words, as always, trust Jesus in your relationship to Kurt. I charge you, be faithful to do that. ©

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# ✦ Servant Living

## God's Work in Our Adult Children's Lives

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By Gerald P. Malkus

“Robbie, I’m done!” Some statements one never forgets. These words came from a friend, an elder of the church, but most importantly from a loving parent. He had made all the normal efforts, and had gone beyond the normal, all with the desire to bring his youngest son to submission and to the faith. He told me of that encounter when he said, “Robbie, I’m done.” But the full paragraph was the most important part. He went on to tell his son,

I have tried, I have taught, I have disciplined, but now I must tell you that I am putting you into the hands of God, and you will have to deal with him. But be assured that as you answer to him, you will not be able to say, “I didn’t know, no one told me.”

In my friend’s mind, these were loving words and provided him with the greatest hope for the life of his son.

Perhaps the greatest trial for any Christian parent lies right here. For it is with anguish of heart that a parent comes to a pastor and recounts how their adult child has departed from the path of the Christian faith. Parents bring up a child with a conscientious effort to establish and reinforce the faith in the home by faithful atten-

dance and participation in a church, in corporate worship, Sabbath school, youth groups, camps, and even Christian school. This was truly one of those “good kids.” He, or she, made a credible profession of faith, participated in youth groups, helped out in Bible School, and was a counselor at summer camp. But now, sadly, without warning or maybe over time, at college, in the work force, with new friends, even in marriage, this “good kid” has rejected Christ and the Christian faith and practice.

The cry comes from countless parents, “What can I do now?”

This is a broad subject with countless variations in detail and circumstance. I cannot address every aspect of the problem in one article. My hope is to encourage the reader who identifies with the struggle by reminding us together how it is that God can work in the lives of our adult children.

I begin by addressing what I might call “the elephant in the room”—baptism.

I would submit that the starting point of the anguish of a Reformed Christian parent is that when we bring our children before the church to be baptized, we do so based on this fundamental covenant promise of God: “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, *to be God to you and to your offspring after you*” (Gen. 17:7, emphasis added).

We have diligently considered those baptismal vows to affirm that our children are holy subjects of God’s covenant of grace. We have taught them, not perfectly, but truly, the principle of the holy Christian faith. We have prayed for them and with them and endeavored to rear them in the nurture and discipline of the Lord. These are the phrases used in the explanation of the sacrament. And in our hearts we took those vows, understanding they are attached to promises—not our promises, but the promises of God.

None of that was faulty or out of place. And, frankly, it is those vows and promises that form the firm foundation for everything from the beginning and going forward as parents. The seed of God’s

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=904](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=904).

Word is planted; they have been in the presence of God, worshipping with God's people. The Lord Jesus of all salvation has been held up before them as the only hope for sinners. Still, they have wandered. Is this baptism deficient? No, the Lord's sacrament is never at fault. Allow me to briefly think with the reader about baptism.

When the sign and seal of baptism is placed on a child, we do not believe that the sacrament bestows the saving grace of God to the child. To be certain, that bit of water does signify union with Christ and membership in his body. It is the certification by God that salvation is never found outside of that union.

At the same time, for children or baptized adults, we may never divorce a trust in God's covenant mercies from the discharge of the obligations of the covenant relationship. Professor John Murray wrote, "Covenant privilege always entails covenant responsibility."<sup>2</sup> This is a necessary perspective for both the baptized child and the faithful parents. This is the very sobering reality that so troubles the parents' hearts. The fear of the Lord, the submission to the commands of Christ, bowing the knee to the Redeemer are all means by which those who have received the promises of God's faithfulness may have any confidence or comfort.

While the mere act of baptism does not ensure confidence in the covenant promises, it does secure the reality of those promises. The truth we hold before our child is of the never diminishing spring of God's promise to save to the uttermost anyone who will return to that mercy, no matter how far away he may have wandered.

So it is that baptism is first God's continuing visible pledge to his church that he will fulfil the promises of his covenant to those who place their faith in him. That promise, sealed in water baptism, is that God does reach down from heaven to embrace the parent and the child with the confident assurance of his grace, based upon his mercy, not the merit of either parent or child.

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2 John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), 90.

In our moments of great pride in our children, or in those flashes of great shame for our own or the child's failure, God's pledge of merciful grace, so evident in baptism, is always ours by faith. We may claim it for ourselves, but our children must make the same claim.

Baptism has placed each of our children in a most privileged position. They have heard the truths of the gospel. The child has seen, though imperfectly, the example of parental devotion to the Lord. He has lived in a nurturing home and church environment. Each covenant child has been prayed for, that he might know the realities of God saving grace.

So, I return to the beginning. There comes a time when every parent, like my friend, must or should say, "Robbie, I am done. I am placing you in the hands of my merciful Father." This is a loving and true warning to the disobedient or rebellious adult child.

Is that the end of it? Certainly not. Let me suggest six principles by which parents, using myself as an example, might now continue to rely on the work of God in the lives of their children. Remember how God continues work in the life of my adult child.<sup>3</sup>

**1. God has not given an infallible promise of believing children to faithful parents.** Even though we might read Proverbs 22:6 that way, "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it," there is a viable alternate translation which reflects the literal wording, "Bring up a child in his own way, and when he is old he will not depart from it." "His own way" is often contrary to the right way, and so the proverb is as much a warning as it would be a promise. In either case, it is not presented as a guarantee.

Furthermore, the very first words of Isaiah's prophesy declare the dismay of the LORD that *children I have reared and brought up have rebelled against me*. Is not our Father in heaven the perfect

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3 I believe that the ideas for these principles came from a discussion leader's handout my wife brought home from a Presbytery of New York and New England women's retreat.

Father, yet he had a rebellious and adulterous child in Israel. If it were true that good parenting always brings perfect results, would it not be odd that Almighty God would say such a thing?

Jesus also speaks of the certainty of strained family relations in his kingdom.

Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. (Luke 12:51–53)

Based on these references it does not appear that the Bible gives us an absolute assurance that even faithful parenting will always bring us believing children. To be faithful is likely to give us believing children; we should always continue to hope and pray that it will.

**2. I am not responsible for my adult child's sinful choices.** We would never have tried to teach our child how to sin. “Now Robbie, I want you to learn here how to lie, how to cheat at *Chutes and Ladders*, the children's game (I often found that I had to figure how to cheat to lose at *Chutes and Ladders*), here is how you can use God's name in vain.” Now, I certainly would admit to giving plenty of examples of harshness, being critical, having an uncontrolled temper, and he could tell you a multitude of his parent's sins. But that is the exact point. He knows many of his parent's actions were sinful, noting especially any sinful actions that affected him but were certainly an abomination before God. He knows sin as sin. So, when he sins, even if that choice is not recognized as offensive in today's changing moral environment, my child still knows. It is God's prophet who tells the parent, “The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. . . . the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself” (Eze. 18:20).

Parents should remember that one of the ways

that the enemy of their own souls operates is as an accuser. He will constantly remind every parent of a wandering child of multiple general, or even specific failures to assault a sensitive conscience. Does that mean I am absolved of my own parental errors? Not at all. I stand before my Father in heaven convicted of my own sins, from which I need to repent and seek forgiveness from God and my child. However, as a parent I know that my child is solely responsible for the immoral choices he has made.

**3. I must not protect him or her from all the consequences of his or her sin, because I might be interfering with the work God is doing in his or her life.** Protection is one of the innate responses of most animal and human parents. It is noble and often necessary. I ran myself to exhaustion up and down the street, holding the seat of my daughter's new bicycle so that she would not crash and be injured. But when that same daughter steals, or lies, cheats on her school exams, or becomes pregnant out of wedlock, I dare not protect her from just or hard consequences. One of the very fundamental characteristics of the naïve in the book of Proverbs is that she is warned, but goes ahead against all wisdom, warning, and exhortation. The *simple* never seem to see the danger approaching, and so they must pay the penalty for their choice (Prov. 27:12). In addition, often it is the observation of justice or consequence that has the greatest benefit to the foolish one (Prov. 19:25; 21:11).

**4. All my failures as a parent cannot negate the work of God in my child's life, or my life.** Notice the premise here: I, as a parent, have failures. Because I recall some of those failures, I can be very sad that God has not ordained that, as a parent, I will be the Lord's servant who “reaps the harvest.” First, that does not mean that God does not use my planting, watering, and cultivating work in the heart of my child. God uses the wise and often amazing spectrum of his providence to bring his children home. So, realize that part of praying for your child acknowledges that God would use whatever events necessary to turn his heart to the truth of grace in Christ.

**5. I am just one of many means that God may use and is using in the life of my child.**

This is a true principle in all the work of God in his Kingdom. Our prayer is that God will use us as parents to lead our children to the Christian faith. But, perhaps, I am just the sower of the seed. That seed bears fruit in the heart of the child as God the Spirit uses other means to expose his sin and shine light on his spiritual need. And the only solution to his need is the person and work of the Lord Jesus. Hopefully, it could be that even the errors and failures we transparently admit and confess in our parenting could be one of the instruments the Spirit uses.

**6. It is within God's power to save my child; however, I cannot save him or her.** One of the prevailing questions hanging in the air in times of reflection, or even in our prayer, is whether it is too late. Perhaps, we are prone to think, the child has gone too far and has committed such grievous sin that there is no hope.

Christian parents must reaffirm the conviction of the truth we know, that “Salvation is from the Lord” (Jonah 2:9). Think again—which character in the biblical history was worthy of God's redemption? Which of our church fathers merited saving grace? Which of us? Yet God, in his own time and in his own way, reaches to the depths of man's sin and brings light and grace, faith and sanctification, the redemption of lives to undeserving men and women, young and old. This is called grace.

I conclude with a reference to Jesus's parable of the kingdom which describes the man who cast his seed upon the ground in Mark 4:26ff. When he had finished, he went to bed. He did not get up in the middle of the night, or even the next day, to dig up the small seed and check for a developing tap root or for signs of fruit. He knows the “earth produces crops by itself”—slowly by slowly. But “when the crop is ripe, he knows the time of the harvest has come.” Believing parents do not need to constantly be asking, checking, commenting on the spiritual condition of their children. They know where you stand, they know where they

stand, and God is dealing with them in his own way and time.

If it comes to it, and you have to say, “Robbie, I'm done,” leave it indeed in your Father's hands. Keep loving that child; continue to pray for him, even when you feel that your prayers have become rote or mere repetition. Pray against the footholds of the enemy; speak words of truth when it is appropriate, and do not apologize for the truths of your faith. Remember the covenant promises of God in your child's baptism.

By the way, in the case of Robbie (the name has been changed), it has been a delight to know that the Lord did bring that son to himself, and he is now a godly man, married and rearing his own family to know and love the Lord, his God. ☺

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# Servant Work

## How to Select a Financial Advisor

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* January 2021<sup>1</sup>

by **Gregory S. DeJong**

Selecting a trustworthy, competent financial advisor may be one of the most important and challenging decisions you will make regarding your personal finances. The following are a few considerations as you begin your search.

First, although we are using the general label “financial advisor” here, there is no consensus on what exactly allows someone to identify themselves as a financial advisor or financial planner. Indeed, you may encounter insurance agents, stockbrokers, accountants, attorneys, and financial planners all offering to provide financial advice. Each of them could legitimately claim to be a financial advisor, despite great differences in the types of advice and expertise each provides.

Second, methods of compensation can vary greatly, the nature of that compensation may not always be transparent, and each way of compensating your advisor has the potential for creating conflicts of interest. While some advisors may bill for their work on an hourly basis, two other arrangements are more common. First, the advice might include recommendations to purchase financial products (such as a mutual funds, annuities, or insurance policies), which then provide a commission payment to the advisor. Alternatively, an advisor who is “fee based” will provide ongoing

investment management and financial planning guidance in exchange for an ongoing fee. While none of these are inherently right or wrong, a particular compensation method may not be most appropriate for your needs. If you suspect you need more life insurance and would like a general financial checkup, using a commission-based insurance agent could be an excellent choice. However, if you are seeking ongoing financial advice as you get closer to retirement, a fee-based advisor has an incentive to meet with you year after year, while his commission-based counterpart probably does not.

Third, any advisor who has managed to stay in business for more than a few years is invariably someone with above-average interpersonal skills. Convincing people to pay for intangibles and helping them to understand financial concepts require specific talents: verbal facility, empathy, persuasiveness, and the appearance of trustworthiness are essential. Unfortunately, if these traits are not anchored to rock solid ethics, and ideally God-honoring ethics, the advisor may turn out to be a charlatan. Choosing an advisor primarily because “he seemed like such a nice guy” could become a costly mistake. Sadly, many church members have fallen prey to unscrupulous or merely incompetent advisors who found their way into the flock and seemed to be “one of us.”

Here then are recommended steps you can take to evaluate whether an advisor might be the right one for you:

1. Obtain a referral from someone you trust. While a solid referral can be helpful in finding a competent, ethical professional, do not blindly hire someone because your neighbor says he is a nice guy (or gal!). Ask the referrer:

- How did you find this individual? What kind of research did you perform?
- How long have you worked with him or her?
- What is the nature of the work they have done for you?
- How are they compensated?
- Have you experienced any mistakes by the

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=862](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=862).

advisor, and if so, how were they rectified?

When you meet with a potential advisor to interview him or her, consider bringing along a trusted friend or relative who may have greater experience in financial matters. Inquire about how often they would expect to meet with you in the years after the initial work has been done. Will they recommend regular review meetings or are they assuming you will raise your hand if you need help? Ask for details in writing regarding what you will be paying and how the advisor will be compensated. Ask if the advisor has any upcoming client events, such as an update on the financial markets, which you might attend as a guest. If so, speak with several existing clients and learn as much as you can about their experience with the advisor and his staff. There should be no pressure on you to make a decision at a first meeting, but you should also be respectful of the advisor's time and not draw out your decision unnecessarily.

2. Check with the appropriate regulatory agencies to determine if there is any disciplinary history for the individual you are considering:

- **Investment representatives:** anyone handling or recommending investments for compensation must be registered through FINRA (Financial Industry Regulatory Authority) as a representative of a broker/dealer or as a representative of an investment advisory firm regulated by the SEC (Security and Exchange Commission) or (for small firms) by the state. Visit <https://brokercheck.finra.org>.
- **Insurance & annuity agents:** anyone selling insurance or annuity policies must have a state insurance license issued by the state in which they reside. They must also be licensed as a non-resident agent in any other states in which they conduct business. Contact your state department of insurance to ask if the agent has any disciplinary history or customer complaints, although the amount of information they will share varies by state.
- **Accountants:** there are various specialties

within the accounting profession, many of which have little bearing on matters of personal finance. The AICPA (Association of International Certified Professional Accountants) confers the Personal Financial Specialist (PFS) designation on CPA's who have completed an extensive course of study on personal financial planning and have passed an exam. While other accountants may be able to assist you, a CPA with the PFS designation would be the ideal choice. Visit <https://nasba.org> to find your state's board of accountancy and then search for the individual accountant to determine if they have any disciplinary history.

- **Financial Planners:** unfortunately, many practitioners may identify themselves as "financial planners," but the use of the term provides little guidance as to their background and experience. However, the designation Certified Financial Planner™ can only be used by an individual who has completed an extensive course of study on personal financial planning, passed an exam, and has attained a certain amount of experience. Since most CFP® professionals handle investments or provide investment advice, you should find them in the Broker Check database (<https://brokercheck.finra.org>). Visit the website of the CFP board to determine whether there is any disciplinary history: <https://letsmakeaplan.org>.
- **Attorneys:** an attorney will rarely be a primary source for personal financial planning advice, but his or her services can be invaluable for formulating or updating your estate plan (wills, trusts, powers of attorney). To determine if an attorney has a disciplinary history, perform an internet search for "ABA National Lawyer Regulatory Data Bank."

Finally, don't forget to bathe this process in prayer. ☺

*Gregory S. DeJong serves as a ruling elder at Bethel Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Wheaton, Illinois, and is a member of the OPC's Committee on Ministerial Care and serves on the board of the OPC Loan Fund.*

## My Sabbatical: A Pastor's Experience

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* April 2021<sup>1</sup>

by **Brett A. McNeill**

This is not intended to be a theological or academic defense of sabbaticals—there are others who are more qualified to do that. Rather, this is simply meant to be an honest reflection on my own experience, with the hope that it might help and encourage other pastors and churches to consider sabbaticals.

It all started when I asked for permission from my session to fill the pulpit for a few Sundays at a sister church while their pastor was on sabbatical. The response from my elders was, “That is fine, but what about a sabbatical for you?”

To be honest, I did not really think I needed one. I had only been a pastor for about eleven years, and things seemed to be going pretty well. But I agreed to track down some material for us to read and consider. To our surprise, there was not a lot out there, and most of what was helpful was not coming from Reformed authors. But we did find some incredibly honest and insightful materials that talked about the toll ministry takes on pastors. Pastors have one of the highest rates of burnout and depression, along with mental health professionals and social workers. This is especially

true of smaller churches where pastors are intimately involved in the lives of their members—the intense counseling load, the late-night phone calls, the walking families through tragedies and grief. We did not want to wait until I felt burnt out to do something, so we began the process of planning for me to take a sabbatical the following summer.

There are so many things that could have prevented us from moving forward. We did not have the money. We did not have an associate pastor. We did not know how every aspect of my ministry would be covered in my absence. But my elders refused to let these become barriers. They committed to doing it and figuring *how*. We figured that it would cost an average of \$300 per Sunday to cover pulpit supply and mileage, so they put \$4,000 into the annual budget (and committed to putting \$700 a year moving forward toward future sabbaticals). I made a list of everything I did, and we started finding volunteers to take over those tasks while I was gone. We recruited pulpit supply for thirteen Sundays. We figured out how the session would function in my absence. But the most important thing we did was prepare the congregation. Six months before it happened, we let them know what was coming. We answered questions. We let them know I was coming back. We set the expectation that I would not be attending worship at our church during that time.

That was all the outward preparation. It was a lot of work, but it was straightforward and expected. What I did not anticipate were the fears that started to fill my heart as the sabbatical drew closer. What if the church fell apart while I was gone? What if families left? Or *worse*, what if things went well while I was gone? What if the church liked the visiting pastors better? What if they decided they did not want me back? What if I was not indispensable? These are the secret fears of a pastor's heart that none of us want to admit.

My session has just read Zack Eswine's *Sensing Jesus*, which talks about idols of ministry—the desire to know everything, fix everything, and be everywhere. It is far too easy for pastors to try to be their congregation's savior, rather than point them

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=884](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=884).

to their Savior. The idols of ministry lead us to teach our congregations to look to us rather than to Jesus. As my sabbatical drew closer and all of my fears became harder and harder to silence, my own idols became harder to ignore. And I began to worry, “What happens when all the craziness stops? What happens when I stop working on other people’s issues and have to be quiet for a season? What am I going to find when I slow down, and am I prepared for what I will find?” Those questions scared me to the point where I seriously considered calling off the sabbatical. By God’s grace, I did not. And so on the first week of June 2016, I began a three-month sabbatical.

The first two weeks were great. My family packed up the trailer and we headed out camping. Standard issues with camping with four daughters aside, it went well. Once we got into a rhythm, we relaxed, read books, and had fun. Feeling rested, we headed home to begin this sabbatical thing in earnest. I had been directed by some to see my sabbatical as a study leave, a time to read what I did not have time to read in the midst of ministry and work on improving myself as a pastor. My “plan” was to get up, grab my coffee and breakfast, and head into my study for the morning. I finally had time to read without feeling rushed. I could tackle (at least part of) that stack of books I had wanted to get to. I could read the Bible slowly and thoughtfully. This was what I had dreamed about for years. In the afternoons, I planned to work on house projects (I was in the process of drywalling the basement) or do something fun with the family.

I started with a book on leadership, recommended by a friend. It was good—too good. It felt like a spotlight on all my failures in my first decade in ministry. I saw my failures and insecurities and felt overwhelmed. Very quickly I started to dread picking it up. So I tried other books, but it was going much slower than I expected. My sabbatical was almost half over, and there was no way I was going to accomplish all I had hoped to. I was not feeling encouraged and charged about the next decade of ministry; I felt anxious, weak, and scared.

By the fifth week I was a complete mess. My fears were coming true. When all the busyness of ministry stopped and I looked at my own heart, what I found was in far worse condition than I could have predicted. After five weeks of “time off,” the longest I had experienced since high school, I was a basket-case. The idea of resuming ministry overwhelmed me, and it was not getting better; it was getting worse. I started to wonder, “Was I too broken? Was I beyond repair?”

Then wisdom came in the form of my wife (as it usually does). “When do you feel most relaxed?” she asked. Sheepishly, I told her it was when I was hanging drywall in the basement. It was there that I was able to just stop worrying about the future and process where I was at with God. She said, “So why not start there each day and work until you are ready to quit? Put everything else aside. Stop trying to do too much. Be still. Be quiet.”

So I did. I still read my Bible each morning (a few Psalms), then I headed down to the basement. Finally, after six weeks of being on sabbatical, I started to decompress. I started to gain perspective. I saw benefits to slowing down and not always being in a rush. I realized I did not need a to-do list, I *was* the to-do list. I confessed my idols and honestly desired to see God remove them from me. Over those next three weeks, I felt the anxiety start to subside. I felt forgiveness for my failures as a pastor, as a husband, as a father, and as a child of God.

Around the ninth week I started to feel human again. By the tenth week, I started to believe that I could return to ministry when the sabbatical was done. By the eleventh week, I was looking forward to ministry. By the twelfth week, I was at a point where I felt I was ready any time. By the last week, I was eager to be back in ministry, though I hoped to do things differently upon my return.

So what did I learn? A lot. I learned that ministry takes a greater toll on ministers than they realize (and they often do not realize it until the damage is done). I learned that I had elders and a congregation who care a great deal for me and wanted to make sure that I am cared for. I learned that it is easy to hide behind our list of



things to do and books to read, and that keeps us from being still and knowing God. I learned that slowing down is sometimes the hardest and most important thing we can ever do. I learned how easy it is to try to be a savior to my congregation, which I am simply not equipped to be. I learned that a sabbatical is not a study leave, but a time of rest and healing. Resting means surrendering and not accomplishing. It lays an axe to the root of our pride and self-reliance.

In retrospect, I also saw that I was overly focused on myself. I did not provide enough ways for my children to stay connected with their friends at church. I should have taken more time to play with the family. Should the Lord allow me another sabbatical, there are things I would like to do better.

Would I recommend a sabbatical to other pastors and congregations? Absolutely. In fact, I do it all the time. Commit to it. Volunteer to help. Make it happen. But I think the way we do sabbaticals is as important as having a sabbatical. Pastors need to find a way to slow down so they can reflect, pray, meditate, repent, and heal. For me that was doing projects around the house. For others it might be camping, long walks, gardening, or something else. For some, that might include reading books, taking a class, or attending a conference. Whatever it is, you need to figure it out (hopefully quicker than I did) and learn to be still. It is then that you remember he is God, and you are not. It is only then that you are really able to minister. ©

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# Reflections from the Front Lines

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* October 2021<sup>1</sup>

by **Gregory E. Reynolds**

In light of a new focus on the office of elder, three elders who have been moderators of the general assembly have responded to several questions that I posed to them. They each represent outstanding service in the OPC. But each had different strengths. I am grateful that elders Jim Gidley, Paul Tavares, and Dave Winslow were each willing to reflect on their ministries on the front lines of spiritual warfare.

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*Elder James Gidley, who moderated the 2000 General Assembly, is a ruling elder in Grace Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Sewickley, Pennsylvania.*

When I was in graduate school in the late 1970s, I wrote a letter to Edmund Clowney, then president of Westminster Seminary, asking his advice about whether I should drop out of my engineering studies and go to seminary. He advised me to stay where I was. Perhaps he didn't want any more nerds in the seminary student body, but at any rate I took his advice and in time became a university professor.

In November 1985, I was ordained as a ruling elder at Reformation Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Morgantown, West Virginia, where I was teaching civil engineering at West Virginia University. The church was a mission work at the time and needed elders. Jim Alexander, Joe Camp, and Jim Thomas were ordained along with me.

Over the years, I have assisted the ministry of the pastor primarily through teaching adult Sunday School classes. For many years I have typically taught at least one quarter each year.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=915](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=915).

In the last few years, while my congregation has been without a pastor, I have been called upon to do some counseling which would normally have fallen to the pastor.

I attended my first presbytery meeting in October 1987 and was elected as a commissioner to the 55<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (1988). I have attended about thirty general assemblies; my calling as a college professor has made me more available in the summers than other ruling elders. I was elected moderator of the 67<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2000).

Since the early 1990s I have served on the Candidates and Credentials Committee of the Presbytery of Ohio. Throughout my time on the committee, I have had the responsibility of administering the English Bible exam. Candidates are often weak in several aspects of the exam, especially on Scripture memory. Perhaps their seminary studies have accustomed them too much to talking about theology rather than becoming intimately acquainted with the Bible itself. The two things need not and should not be separated.

In 1989 I was elected to the Subcommittee on Ministerial Training of the Committee on Christian Education, and I continue to serve on both. I have chaired the SMT since the mid-1990s, and I served as President of the CCE from 2003 to 2019. Among many other things, I helped to establish *Ordained Servant*, the SMT's seminary visitation program, and the Ministerial Training Institute of the OPC. The MTIOPC came into being after a serious discussion of establishing an OPC seminary.

Since 2018 I have served on the Special Committee on Updating the Language of the Doctrinal Standards. The committee is charged with proposing changes to archaic language in the standards without changing their meaning.

The most heart-wrenching episodes in my service as an elder have involved church discipline. The general lesson I have learned is that church discipline requires us to excel in love and humility. Falling short in these virtues, which I have done too often, not only fails to fulfill the purpose of church discipline but also does great harm.

The office of ruling elder exposes a man's faults and weaknesses. It is vain to think that our own efforts can accomplish the work of the kingdom, for nothing good occurs except by the work of the Holy Spirit. The greatest service an elder can do is to pray for the outpouring of the Spirit of God upon himself, the church, and the world.

\* \* \*

*Elder Paul Tavares, who moderated the 2016 General Assembly, was a ruling elder in Covenant Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Grove City, Pennsylvania.*

Born into an OPC pastor's home, I was heavily influenced by the ministry of my parents and the many ministers and godly men and women who passed through our lives throughout my upbringing.

My father was called to Covenant OPC in Grove City, Pennsylvania, when I was nine. Over the next sixteen years the congregation observed and contributed to the development of my faith. At the age of twenty-five (six months prior to my father's retirement) I was ordained a deacon, serving for ten years. Visitation of the sick, elderly, and shut-ins (including a nursing home ministry that provided hymn singing and devotional messages) were our regular responsibilities.

My interest in the work of presbytery began when I was elected to serve on the presbytery's Diaconal Committee. That involvement brought me into a working relationship with the men of presbytery and deepened my knowledge and appreciation of how the church labors as a larger body.

Rubbing shoulders with the Lord's under-shepherds, observing how they strived to know God's truth and will for his church, how they prayed for one another and sought to work as one, made a great impression on me. In particular, the care they showed for individuals and congregations demonstrated to me Christ's love for his church. These were faithful shepherds who sacrificed their lives to build, strengthen, and watch over the flock that was entrusted to them.

Having been nominated an elder candidate, I began to sense that inner call to continue their good work. When approved by the session, and having received the congregation's affirming vote, I was ordained an elder on June 6, 1989, with the words of the apostle, "Woe to me if I do not," resonating in my heart.

Shepherding through hospitality, home and hospital visitations, Bible studies, and private conversations with prayer became a way of life. Particularly difficult matters were shared with the session for counsel and prayer. Hours spent in travel and "parking lot" discussions have yielded rich blessings in the raising up of faithful elders and deacons.

Overseeing a minister's doctrine and conduct is a daunting task. Their lives/ministry are dissected constantly, justly and unjustly. Some lack humility to acknowledge their failures. They need wise, constructive counsel and encouragement.

Ministers and elders are like bricks and mortar. Working together in Christ builds a beautiful structure. A failing brick stresses and mars the wall. Standing in the gap can be very painful, but necessary. They need encouragement when injustice rises up due to the sin or ignorance of others. Guiding others to the truth without discouraging them requires much prayer, patience, time, and self-sacrifice.

Then there is the work to be done in the broader church. I first served on the Visitation Committee of our presbytery for several terms, visiting the churches once a year to inquire as to their well-being; the Candidates and Credentials Committee for twenty-five years, presenting church history exams; the Home Missions Committee for several terms, spending eight years traveling an hour twice a week in an effort to restart a church, and forty-five minutes once a week for eleven years to another community seeking to establish a work there.

Presbytery often called upon me to be a commissioner to the general assembly. There I served as chairman for various advisory committees over the years and was elected to the Committee on Coordination for eighteen years (serving as

secretary for several years and President for several others). In 2016 I was elected moderator of the Assembly. Now retired and relocated to Florida, I look for the Lord's next assignment in life.

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*Elder David Winslow, who moderated the 1996 General Assembly, is a ruling elder in Westminster Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Westminster, California.*

I was ordained as a ruling elder in 1982 in the Garden Grove (now Westminster) California Orthodox Presbyterian Church and continue to serve there almost forty years and fourteen re-elections to three-year terms later. My first pastor, Edwards E. Elliott, mentored me in doing door-to-door calling, recommended books to read, and encouraged me to attend presbytery meetings even before my ordination. My next pastor, William E. Warren, encouraged me to stand for election as a ruling elder, and he too set a sterling example of serving in the presbytery and on committees of the general assembly. Along with these pastoral encouragements, the Lord also gave me a thirst and some measure of aptitude for reading Reformed literature and teaching and serving youth.

Three months after being ordained, the moderator of presbytery, ruling elder Robert Coie called and asked me to go to the general assembly to fill a vacant spot. That phone call changed my life and the horizons of possible service open to me in the OPC. Attending the assembly and observing the overall vitality of the church in her gospel ministry around the continent and world was a refreshing, invigorating experience in so many ways. It remains so to this day, some thirty-four assemblies later. Becoming a father quite soon after ordination helped to make me a better elder, in fact the 1985 General Assembly passed a motion excusing me "to go to be with my wife" for the birth of my first daughter. And I repaid that generosity by missing most of her birthdays thereafter because I was at GA.

In our presbytery I was able to serve for several decades on the Youth Committee helping in the

administration and leading of camps, foreign missions' teams, and backpacking trips for the presbytery. I also took turns serving on our judicial, ministerial oversight, visitation, and credentials committees and even got to moderate for a couple of years back in the 1980s. I have found that I serve best when I am supporting and enabling the ministerial vision of the presbytery's pastors, evangelists, and teachers.

That last observation has also been true serving on general assembly committees and especially the Committee on Christian Education. Helping Danny Olinger and David VanDrunen execute VanDrunen's brilliant idea for the OPC Timothy Conference gave me (and my wife Susan) so much joy; it was youth ministry at the denominational level with potential impact on the whole church for decades to come. Again, serving with Danny Olinger and Alan Strange facilitating the business aspects of the Trinity Psalter Hymnal project for the sake of two denominations (OPC and URC) has been among the most fulfilling work of my life.

As a Presbyterian I get it when Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 11:28 that in addition to all his trials he "faces the daily pressure of my concern for all the churches." The blessing of serving on presbytery and denominational committees brings "all the churches" into my heart and mind, but unlike the apostle, I am keenly aware that the core of a ruling elder's concern and service is a local congregation in which he has been called and elected to serve. I believe this awareness is a big part of why I have been a member of only one OP congregation for forty-five years. Going to presbytery and assembly committee meetings is almost always a collegial, brotherly experience of the highest order with elevated discussion, debate, and devotion, at least it has been that way for me. And presbytery is a meeting where you share the burdens of life in the local church with other ministers and elders. You are not alone in the joys and struggles of your own congregation.

The life of our congregation is daily on my heart and mind. Indeed, life in the local church is where elders face their greatest challenges. Deter-

mining when to institute formal judicial process in contrast to administrative discipline or continuing informal counseling is always very challenging. Making sure that I am actually helping the pastor shepherd the flock: making home visits, hospital visits, leading worship to the extent he requests, not leaving the tough pastoral situations for him to handle alone, and protecting him from unjust criticism are all challenging.

The greatest challenge I faced was a three-year period involving all of these aspects, which led to causing a ruling elder of long standing to be removed from office and defending that decision before the presbytery. Thankfully the session was unanimous in these tough decisions, but as clerk this involved hours and days of meticulous record keeping and communication.

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Working with men of this caliber, with which our little denomination is filled, has been one of the greatest privileges and joys of my life. How gracious our Lord is to gift and call such men into the office of ruling elder. Please remember your elders in regular prayer since they are on the front lines of spiritual warfare. ☺

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

# Who Cares for Us When We Can No Longer Care for Ourselves?

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* November 2021<sup>1</sup>

by Gregory S. DeJong

One of the most challenging areas of personal financial planning is how to provide the care which is often needed late in life. The topic is an uncomfortable one for most people, and thus few take the time to research alternatives, get sound advice, discuss options with their loved ones, and formulate a realistic plan before events overtake them.

We all hope to live to a ripe old age in nearly perfect health and then die peacefully in our sleep one night. But a survey of the elderly members of your extended family tree, both living and deceased, will probably reveal that such an outcome is rare. With life expectancies typically stretching into one's eighties and nineties, most Americans will live out their final years with significant physical impairments, mental limitations, or both. While most married couples hope to stay in their own home and care for each other until their earthly days are ended, failing to plan for alternative scenarios can create substantial hardships for the couple and their family.

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the issues, challenges, and options involved in planning for late-in-life care needs, or what we will call "long-term care." We will explore:

- Who can provide such care?
- Where might I receive such care?
- What are the cost considerations of various types of care?
- Is such care provided by government or community-based programs?

- Is insurance available which covers long-term care expenses?

As you will quickly discover, this topic is complex, both in the sense that there are many different options to weigh and in the recognition that such planning involves unknowables and must be conducted in a spirit of "if the Lord wills." As the Puritans put it, "Man proposes, God disposes."

## Who Might Provide Additional Care for Me?

For a married couple, the most common answer is "my spouse." Wedding vows typically include "in sickness or in health . . . 'til death do us part," so looking to your spouse is a reasonable place to start. There may, however, be many circumstances where your spouse, despite a fervent desire to help, simply cannot provide the support needed. He or she may end up with physical limitations of their own. A 140 lb. wife may be incapable of helping her 200 lb. husband dress, bathe, or recover from a fall. A healthy husband may find that the constant demands of a wife suffering from dementia overwhelm him, thus impairing his health due to stress or lack of sleep.

A second common assumption is "the kids will help us out." Certainly, many adult children do contribute significantly to the care of their parents. Whether this is a desirable arrangement which was entered into willingly by all parties may be another matter. Adult children have their own responsibilities, increasingly with their own children and grandchildren, who also may have significant needs. Adult children in their fifties and sixties are often expected to provide significant leadership in their local church or may have career obligations which cannot be easily shed. Intra-family dynamics can also create challenges. If one child lives nearby and the rest are scattered around the country, how is it practically possible for all of the children to share equitably in caring for a parent?

Friends, including members of your local church family and your church's deacons, may also be a source for some assistance, but within reasonable limits. If you will, at some point, need daily physical assistance, specialized care, or regu-

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=923](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=923).

lar monitoring (such as with a cognitive impairment), most local congregations would be taxed or overwhelmed covering these needs.

Another group which may be of some help would be community-based resources. For example, there may be a senior citizens transportation service which could provide rides to the doctor or grocery store. There may also be “senior centers” with daily activities to help fill some of your time, provide social engagement, and give relief to your other caregivers. Such centers may also be an excellent source of information for other programs and benefits in your area.

Beyond these sources, those who can assist you fall into various categories of professional caregivers. This might be a helper or aide who comes into your home to cook or clean, or a home health aide. Professional caregivers would also encompass the staff of an assisted living facility, memory care facility, or nursing home. Or it could be professional medical personnel such as nurses, doctors, or therapists. The common theme in this group is that they will be compensated for the services they provide you, whether by you or by another.

### **Where Might I Receive Care?**

The desirable answer for most of us would be “in my home.” Fortunately, there are a wide variety of care services which can be provided in the home. In fact, insurance companies which provide long-term care insurance are generally eager to see you receive care in your home if possible. Remaining in familiar surroundings can provide important psychological and sociological benefits.

If care in your home is not feasible, or the ability to maintain your home properly is beyond you, it may be that one of your children has a residence which could provide separate living quarters for you. This decision should not be made lightly nor unilaterally, as it can have significant ramifications for the host family.

If your home or a child’s home is not viable, a residential care facility of some sort will provide your remaining options. As most seniors know,

there are a variety of facilities or “care communities” available, starting with independent living arrangements, continuing with assisted living, memory care, and if needed, full skilled nursing care facilities. So-called “continuing care communities” (CCC) have become popular, in that they allow their residents to stay within a residential community and transition to more advanced levels of care if needed. This can be a significant benefit if both spouses are alive but need differing levels of care. Some CCC’s may also guarantee you lifetime care even if your own financial resources end up being exhausted.

### **How Will the Expense of My Care be Covered?**

The first line of defense will of course be your own savings, investments, retirement accounts, and whatever sources of income you receive, such as Social Security, pension benefits, or perhaps rents or royalties.

Since a home may be one’s largest asset, the value it represents may also help pay for needed care. A reverse mortgage can, in the right circumstances, be an effective way to extract the value from your home over time in order to pay for needed in-home care. Among other important considerations, a reverse mortgage can only continue as long as you reside in your home. Despite your firm intention of remaining in your home the rest of your earthly days, this plan could collapse if your final year on this earth requires full nursing care, with potentially dire financial consequences. Reverse mortgages should only be considered with the assistance of knowledgeable professional advisors. The value of your home could also be tapped to finance some of your care needs by selling your home and using the sales proceeds to cover the entrance fee, or a portion of it, for a CCC.

Will federal government programs such as Medicare, or will a Medicare supplement insurance policy, cover long-term care expenses? Generally not. Many people are under the impression that Medicare will pay for nursing home care, but on closer examination this is true only for a

limited period of no more than one hundred days. For such care to be covered, it must follow a period of hospitalization (of not less than three days), and the nursing care must be for medical needs directly related to the cause of hospitalization. Certainly, this is a valuable, albeit limited, benefit if you qualify, but it does not fit the progression of health impairment experienced by most with long-term care needs.

Medicaid is another possible source of funding. Medicaid is a program administered by the states with funding from the federal government, which is designed to pay health care costs, including nursing home and certain personal care services. However, Medicaid is a “safety net” program which is available only to individuals with very low incomes and minimal assets. Since Medicaid provisions vary by state, it is best to consult the particular details of one’s own state of residence as well as the federal government’s website ([www.medicaid.gov](http://www.medicaid.gov)).

Due to the limitations of what Medicaid will reimburse, some nursing care facilities may not accept Medicaid patients, and facilities that have a large percentage of Medicaid patients will generally provide a lower level of amenities and may be less appealing than facilities populated primarily by private-pay or insured residents. In order to qualify for Medicaid, a couple will first need to spend down most of their own assets. This is true even if only one spouse needs care and the healthy spouse is capable of continuing to live independently. At the death of the second spouse, the state may recoup some of its Medicaid outlays for care through a lien on your personal residence. In short, Medicaid should be viewed as the payer of last resort when your savings have been largely depleted.

### **Can I Purchase Insurance to Cover Long-Term Care Expenses?**

Insurance has been available for at least thirty years to help individuals transfer some of the financial risk of a long-term care need to an insurer in exchange for paying premiums on an insurance policy. For individuals without a spouse,

such policies can help pay for the care that they might have otherwise received from their husband or wife. For married couples, long-term care insurance can prevent the care needs of one spouse from draining the couple’s savings and leaving the surviving spouse impoverished. Originally, these policies were referred to as “nursing home insurance,” but policies quickly evolved to cover expenses incurred for in-home care as well as various types of in-facility care. Such insurance today takes the form of either a stand-alone long-term care insurance (LTCI) policy or a hybrid policy where a long-term care rider is added to either a life insurance policy or an annuity policy.

Whether coverage is provided through a stand-alone policy or a hybrid, several key principles will most likely apply:

- Your health needs to be good enough to qualify for coverage.
- Premiums are higher for older applicants than for younger; many insurance advisors suggest that age 50–65 is the “sweet spot” for obtaining this type of insurance.
- For stand-alone policies, premiums are *not* guaranteed to remain level as the years go by, and existing policyholders have endured unexpected (and often substantial) rate increases over the past 15–20 years.
- Benefits will be paid as a reimbursement for long-term care expenses incurred, capped either by a maximum amount payable per month and a maximum number of months or by an overall dollar limit.
- Benefits become available after a waiting period, commonly known as an “elimination period,” which may be as short as thirty days but typically would be ninety or one hundred eighty days. The concept is that you should be able to cover expenses from your own savings for a time, after which the insurance benefits kick in. Selecting a longer elimination period will yield a lower premium.
- You qualify for benefits by filing a claim with the insurance company; your claim

would ordinarily be approved if you are unable to perform two or more “Activities of Daily Living” or your doctor attests to your having a severe cognitive impairment (such as Alzheimers or dementia) requiring substantial supervision. Activities of Daily Living are generally defined as eating, bathing, dressing, transferring/mobility, toileting, and continence.

- The insurance company will often provide a “care coordinator” who will, in conjunction with you, your medical professionals, and your family, develop a “plan of care” which is appropriate to your needs. While a care coordinator is there in large part to keep the insurer from paying for unnecessary services, you will also find them to be a valuable resource in helping you find the right kind of help.
- Stand-alone policies are not inexpensive, depending of course on the level of benefits selected. For example, a couple aged sixty purchasing a policy which, after a ninety-day waiting period, would provide a \$7,000/mo. benefit<sup>2</sup> for up to 48 months<sup>3</sup> would likely pay premiums of more than \$600/month. People of average financial means may find that paying the ongoing premiums of a stand-alone policy simply is not affordable. Hybrid policies attempt to address affordability concerns by pairing some coverage for long-term care needs with either life insurance or an annuity. Hybrid Life/

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2 The national average for a single bedroom assisted living facility was \$4,800/mo. in 2020, and the national average for a semi-private room in a nursing home was \$8,177/mo. Source: Mutual of Omaha, “The Cost of Long Term Care Services, 2021 Update.”

3 For this example, a “shared benefit” approach is assumed. The husband’s policy provides for 24 months of benefits, as does the wife’s policy. If one spouse exhausts all of their benefits, they can use as much as 12 months of their spouse’s policy benefits. This policy also adjusts future benefits upward by 3% yearly to partially offset inflation. Many other policy configurations are possible. This example is meant to illustrate a fairly modest level of coverage. The annual premium is \$7,993. Pricing current as of September 2021, for an Illinois resident.

LTC policies will be based on permanent cash value life insurance, not low-cost term insurance. If the policy has had, or will have, sufficient premiums paid into it, then the insurer can be confident that they will pay out the insurance policy face amount, or how much insurance your life policy has, eventually. Normally this would be at the death of the person insured, but with the LTC component, should you incur qualifying long-term care expenses, the insurer can in essence pay a portion of the eventual death benefit to you early. While it becomes very difficult to assess whether LTC insurance is “a better deal” through a stand-alone policy or a hybrid, the hybrid approach has understandable appeal. The hybrid policy owner knows that they or their heirs will receive a financial return one way or another.

Hybrid Annuity/LTC policies are fundamentally different in that you are not offloading financial risk to the insurance company. Instead, you are using your own cash to purchase an annuity from the insurer, and in addition to the normal means by which you might later withdraw your funds from that annuity, you can also withdraw funds to pay for long-term care expenses. The benefit is that such LTC withdrawals will be tax free, where any other withdrawals may be taxable. A simple example will illustrate: when James was age fifty he received a \$100,000 inheritance and decided to invest this money in a deferred interest annuity. As the years went by, the annuity earned interest and the value grew. James is now age eighty, and the annuity has grown to \$225,000. If he begins withdrawing money, he will have to declare all of the earnings (\$125,000) as taxable income and pay taxes at his then-current income tax rate. The original \$100,000 comes back as his principal and is tax free, but the taxes on the \$125,000 of earnings could be as much as \$30–40,000. In contrast, should James have qualifying long-term care expenses, those withdrawals would be tax free, potentially allowing annuity proceeds



which otherwise would have gone to the IRS to instead pay for his LTC needs. As you might surmise, the Annuity/LTC hybrid will provide the greatest benefit to someone who has had money invested and growing in an annuity for many years.

A final consideration regarding LTC insurance, whether stand-alone or hybrid, is that these financial products are generally provided by an insurance agent or broker who will be compensated through a commission arrangement. Typically, their pay will be some percentage of the premiums that you pay. While there is nothing inherently wrong with such an arrangement, it does create the possibility of a conflict of interest between you and the agent. Deal with someone whom you know to be trustworthy, and who is part of an organization that is likely to be able to continue servicing your policy for years into the future.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

As was promised, planning for late-in-life long-term care needs and expenses is complex. It is rare that anyone arrives at a plan which can be executed with 100% certainty as to the outcome. But as Christians, we are called to be wise stewards, not to guarantee results. In that light, make a plan carefully and prayerfully. Involve your children as well as trusted professional advisors. But make a plan and communicate it to those whose lives may be impacted. Then leave it to your sovereign Lord to provide for you as only he can. If his eye is on the sparrow, then we know he watches over you.

### **Resources**

- Brian L. De Jong, *Honoring the Elderly: A Christian's Duty to Aging Parents* (Sheboygan, WI: Brian L. De Jong, 2017).
- Carol Levine, *Planning for Long-Term Care for Dummies* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2014).
- Joy Loverde, *Who Will Take Care of Me When I'm Old?* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2017).
- Medicare, [www.Medicare.gov](http://www.Medicare.gov) ©

**Gregory S. DeJong** serves as a ruling elder at Bethel Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Wheaton, Illinois, and is a member of the OPC's Committee on Ministerial Care and serves on the board of the OPC Loan Fund.

# ✦ Servant Literature

## Your Personal Odyssey in Stereo

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*  
June-July 2021<sup>1</sup>

**Mark A. Green**

My wife Lucy and I often recall lighthearted moments spent conversing with friends who spoke English as their second or third language. After living in different countries for twenty years, we have spent thousands of hours like this. At times we have been in the middle of a conversation with friends but utterly unable to follow their English because of unique speech patterns or heavy accents. When this happened, we continued nodding our heads to affirm the speaker, waiting until we could latch onto words that made sense to us. Then we could enter again into the joy of the conversation.

Poetry can be like that for many of us. In English there are poetic ways of using the same words that are vastly different from colloquial speech. We often give up reading mid-poem because we just cannot quite understand the flow of the poet's discourse. We might persevere for a while, because we have heard that this journey of poetry can be a fruitful one. But eventually we set the book aside, exasperated. One day, we say, we will have more time to tackle the excursion into the dense thicket of verse.

Years ago, I discovered a group of wonderful individuals who helped me interpret poetry. They

are voice actors who have spent their lives bringing words to life without the aid of visual cues. A famous example would be Richard Burton's YouTube reading of "The Hound of Heaven," that magnificent poem by Francis Thompson that paints a picture of the pursuit of our heavenly Father.

Now of that long pursuit,  
Comes at hand the bruit.  
That Voice is round me like a bursting Sea:  
And is thy Earth so marred,  
Shattered in shard on shard?  
Lo, all things fly thee, for thou fliest me.  
Strange, piteous, futile thing;  
Wherefore should any set thee love apart?  
Seeing none but I makes much of Naught  
(He said).  
And human love needs human meriting —  
How hast thou merited,  
Of all Man's clotted clay, the dingiest clot.  
Alack! Thou knowest not  
How little worthy of any love thou art.  
Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,  
Save me, save only me.  
—*Hound of Heaven* by Francis Thompson

This approach—joining talented voice actors on the poetic journey—might be just the motivation we need to start our own personal journey along the poetic line. Allow me to recommend this approach with one of the foundational poems in our Western canon, *The Odyssey* by Homer.

After fighting in the Trojan War, Odysseus tries to return to his wife and son in Ithaca. We join the story with Odysseus trapped on an island, still not reunited to his wife after ten years. His wife Penelope is besieged by suitors who continually pressure her to remarry (and give up the family riches), because it seems obvious that her husband is dead. Her son, not quite of age to take over the household, simmers with rage against the suitors and longs for his father's return.

Odysseus's long journey, aided by the fickle Greek gods of old, is told in spectacular style by Homer, the legendary epic poet from ancient Greece who wrote both *The Odyssey* and *The*

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=898](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=898).

*Iliad*. Homer's epics were foundational for key aspects of Greek civilization and form the basis of any curriculum focused on The Great Books. The translation of these epic poems from the original Greek by Robert Fitzgerald is reputedly one of the best English translations in print.

Here is my suggestion for a rollicking great yarn, in poetry no less.

Begin with a used edition of *The Odyssey* on AbeBooks.com. For around five dollars you can have the book shipped to you at no cost. (I recommend getting a used copy of *The Iliad* at the same time for reasons I'll explain below.)

Once the book arrives, point your browser to <https://archive.org/details/hm-rio/The+Odyssey+by+Homer/Book+01+-+A+Goddess+Interven.es.mp3> where a new friend will make *The Odyssey* come to life. You may know this actor already if you, like me, loved every episode of *Downton Abbey*. Do you remember Matthew Crawley, the husband of Lady Mary, who dies unexpectedly in a car accident at the end of the third season? Matthew Crawley is played by actor Dan Stevens, a renowned Shakespearean and film actor from England.

Dan Stevens has recorded the entire Fitzgerald version of *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* for free on this website. (Alternatively, you can do as I did and purchase *The Odyssey* from Macmillan.com for \$26.99, so that the artist will receive royalties.) Notice that *The Odyssey* is broken down into only twenty-four chapters (or books), averaging about twenty-five minutes of listening time each.

Having the written word in front of you with Master Stevens delivering the lines is like listening to a poem in stereo. I cannot recall when I first heard of this approach, but I have used it for Homer as well as the classic *Divine Comedy* by Dante.

Before starting your own poetry listening odyssey, take the time to read the foreword to the poem in Fitzgerald's translation by D. S. Carne-Ross, a renowned critic of poetry translation. (He sets up *The Iliad* so very well and helps you get your bearings before heading out. There's even a map for those of us who yearn for more Bilbo

Baggins!)

I encourage you not to hurry. Listening to Dan Stevens's lyrical recitation while writing your own notes in your already well-loved book is pure New York cheesecake. Enjoy every delicious step. I sometimes pause and just praise God for the tangible example of such beauty still existing in our fallen world.

"But you, brave and adept from this day on . . . there's hope that you will reach your goal . . . the journey that stirs you now is not far off" (Book 2, *The Odyssey*). ©

**Mark A. Green** is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as the President and CEO of White Horse Inn in San Diego, California.

# ✦ Servant Reading

## Book Reviews

### Is It Abuse?

by Darby A. Strickland

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant*  
January 2021<sup>1</sup>

by Joseph W. Smith III

*Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims*, by Darby A. Strickland. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2020, 353 pages, \$19.99, paper.

According to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, “one in four women experience severe physical violence from an intimate partner.”<sup>2</sup>

That statistic is cited in Darby Strickland’s excellent new book *Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims*. Strickland goes on to point out that these numbers do not change inside the church—even the evangelical church. Indeed, one study found that religious leaders believed one-fifth of couples in their churches were violent—“and 9.3 percent of the surveyed pastors had counseled *five or more* abused women during the previous year alone” (28).

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=865](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=865).

2 Darby A. Strickland, *Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2020), 27–28. All subsequent in-text page numbers are from this book.

Such startling figures make this urgent reading for pastors, church leaders, counselors, and other concerned Christians; but of course, Strickland offers more than mere statistics.

Published by P&R in September, *Is It Abuse?* makes an invaluable resource, offering wise counsel to sufferers, abusers, and those seeking to alleviate abuse—though Strickland prefers the more biblical term “oppression.” As she writes in her introductory note, “I hope to equip you to think biblically about oppression and to teach you how to be a trusted guide for those who are enslaved and ensnared” (15). And indeed, she fully meets these goals. With a counseling degree from Westminster Theological Seminary and seventeen years of experience at the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation (CCEF), Strickland has given us a book that is, in her own words, “both biblical and practical in every chapter” (15–16).

As a long-time OPC elder in a church with many families, I found it tremendously useful and illuminating. One eye-opener is its dissection of the motives behind abuse and oppression. As Strickland points out, it is less a matter of anger and violence than of control, entitlement, and rampant self-centeredness. Rather than “losing their temper” due to some past trauma or outside influence, “oppressors are not out of control; they *seek* control. Oppressors are driven by their selfishness and their desire to dominate their spouses”—by an intensely narcissistic resolve to have all their needs met, all the time: “Oppressors do not oppress because they are wounded or weak; they wound so that they can make their world the way they want it” (34).

Another vital takeaway is the extraordinary patience required of anyone trying to help wives escape domestic violence. (And yes, Strickland shows it’s almost always female spouses who are thus victimized.) These women are often so exhausted, so confused, so badly gaslighted—so shamed and guilty from lies, attacks, and accusations—that they cannot even see the reality of their situation. It sometimes takes years of counseling before there is movement toward

freedom—and if the counselor pushes too soon, an abuser may sense he is losing control and intensify his hurtful tactics.

Along the same lines, Strickland is often brutally honest about her own missteps in counseling—and this again serves as a wake-up call to church leaders. Too often an abusive husband, being skilled in control, can manipulate a counseling session so it looks like everything is the wife's fault (which he's already made her believe anyway). And just as Strickland recounts her own successes and failures, she likewise shows common errors churches make in addressing abuse, together with real-life examples of their right reactions—plus a hands-on appendix called “Ten Ways to Educate Your Church.” One common thread in all of this is that many oppressive husbands are at the same time active and respected in church, perhaps even actual leaders and teachers—and this makes their victimized wives very hesitant to come forward, naturally fearing they will not be believed.

That particular appendix is one of six, addressing such practical issues as “Red Flags During Dating,” “Abusive Argument Inventory,” and “Who Are Domestic Abuse Experts?” Other helpful resources include case studies, many questions for personal reflection, and screening questionnaires for both victims and helpers.

But perhaps the book's strongest aspect is the way it grounds its discussion in Scripture. In addressing abuse and abusers, Strickland applies such texts as 1 Peter 3:7; Ephesians 4:29–32 and 5:25–30; 1 Corinthians 13:4–8; and the oppressive tactics of the Pharisees as lambasted in Matthew 23:1–12. To help victims, Strickland cites Psalms 10:1 and 118:13; and for helpers, Colossians 3:12, Galatians 6:2, Ezekiel 34:15–16, and Luke 4:18. It's amazing what bold and challenging new applications these well-known passages accrue in the context of domestic abuse.

Especially noteworthy is Exodus 6:9 in which the Israelites were unable to hear Moses's message “because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery”—as well as a lengthy exegesis of the less-familiar bramble parable in Judges 9, which

Strickland sees as a prime example of oppression: Brambles, she writes, “don't protect (see Isa. 9:18). They don't bear fruit (see Matt. 7:16). They consume the goodness of anything around them (see Isa. 5:6). . . . Their very existence is a curse (see Gen. 3:17–18), and the ground they inhabit has to be burned (see Heb. 6:8)” (77).

But by far her strongest use of Scripture is the frequent invocation of Christ's character and ministry. In part, this is a model for helpers—but mostly, it is hope for victims. Rather than shaming with guilt and accusation—a frequent abuser tactic—Christ forgives, exonerates, and sanctifies. Though he actually possesses all the power oppressors really want, “He is the complete opposite of an oppressor in every way. Oppressors wield power and are unwilling to sacrifice it, . . . as they seek to build their own kingdoms.” Jesus, by contrast, “sacrificed everything for us. He demonstrated what kind of king he is when he put aside the strength and power of a king—not out of weakness, but out of meekness and for the benefit of those who are truly weak” (231).

In this way *Is It Abuse?* not only opens a much-needed window on this vital topic, but also demonstrates to victims and helpers how to get out through that window and into the light. ©

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# A Chronicle of Grief: Finding Life after Traumatic Loss

by Melvin Lawrenz

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by Gordon H. Cook, Jr.

*A Chronicle of Grief: Finding Life after Traumatic Loss*, by Melvin Lawrenz. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020, 160 pages, \$15.00, paper.

*Life after Grief: How to Survive Loss and Trauma*, by Melvin Lawrenz and Daniel Green. Waukesha, WI: WordWay, 2015, 160 pages, \$12.47, paper.

There are roads in life we do not wish to walk. They lead to or follow overwhelming loss. Even when we are aware that the loss is coming and seek to prepare for it, the loss still overwhelms us. Even more traumatic is sudden loss, which takes us by surprise and instantly turns our lives upside down. Our self-confidence is shaken to its foundations, and we are cast headlong upon the mercy and kindness of our God.

The year was 2015, Dr. Lawrenz was five years retired from his position as Senior Pastor of Elmbrook Church in Brookfield, Wisconsin, a sizable independent evangelical church. As Minister-at-Large, Lawrenz was free to labor on developing ministerial resources and networks for church leaders through the Brook Network. That year he collaborated with Dr. Daniel Green, clinical director of New Life Resources, on a book about grief and trauma, *Life After Grief*. Little did Lawrenz know that just two years later he and his family would be the ones cast into the

roles of victims and survivors, facing the sudden and devastating loss of their thirty-year-old daughter, Eva.

*Life After Grief* is a fine overview of the issues of grief and loss, which are so commonly encountered by pastors. The book is focused on the pastoral care of those who are grieving, carefully interacting with Scripture and incorporating current theories of grief, loss, and trauma. The volume abounds with grace, guiding pastors and other spiritual care providers to a compassionate ministry with those who are grieving. From a scholarly perspective, we might have expected more citations of the works and theories upon which his ideas are based; however, the gist of these theories is set forth accurately in a very readable fashion for those who lack the time to delve into more academic volumes. While this book is not as well-known as its newer sibling, it is well worth reading. Particularly helpful is Lawrenz's appreciation of the role of trauma in grief and the insights he brings to addressing it, helping people move from being victims to becoming survivors. I would highly recommend the book, particularly for new pastors.

If *Life After Grief* is pastoral, *A Chronicle of Grief* is deeply personal. It traces the response of Lawrenz and his family to the sudden, unexpected loss of his daughter, chronicling their grief over their first year. At many points the story is raw, grabbing our hearts as well as our minds, drawing us into the deeply personal loss experienced by this family. As he notes, "this is a survival story."

Lawrenz is very open and honest about his own experiences of grief. We meet his daughter, Eva, in a richly personal walk through the memories of Lawrenz, his wife, Ingrid, and their son, Christopher. She was a dynamic and independent young woman who loved reading and editing books and who loved the Lord and sought to walk with him. These memories will bring tears, laughter, and opportunities to reflect upon your own children or family.

Throughout the book you can see Lawrenz struggle to apply his faith and the principles so

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=866](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=866).

carefully set forth in his earlier work in order to cope with the overwhelming loss of his remarkable daughter. As a father it forced me to examine my own love and admiration for my daughter, Beth, and to come to grips with the realities of a life of faith in a fallen and broken world where dear ones sometimes leave us.

The book is well written, yet it is not an easy book to read. It does not hide the numbing pain and terrible grief which Lawrenz felt. It is a book which reflects personal faith, but it is anything but “preachy.” While Lawrenz has a firm faith in Christ, he does not pretend that his faith is unshakable. In this sense the book is very different from so many inspiring books which carefully conceal the harsh realities behind a mask of superficial spirituality. Still, we do not grieve as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). Both of Lawrenz’s books bring us to the underlying bedrock of God’s abiding presence and genuine hope in Christ.

Most people do not want to read a book while they are actively grieving the loss of one so close and so dear. This is a book I would share with the few who do want to read in the midst of grief and loss in order to seek hope. It is also the book you should read if you want to comfort others through grief and trauma in a compassionate way—the way of Christ. It will give you clear insight into the practical realities of grief and loss and help you appreciate some of what your grieving friend may be experiencing. The principles you learned in your academic studies of grief, well reflected in Lawrenz’s *Life After Grief*, are seen challengingly applied in his *A Chronicle of Grief*. For pastors and elders, I highly recommend using these two books as a pair for a well-founded and tested treatment of grief, loss, and trauma. ©

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# The Confession of Faith: A Critical Text and In- troduction

by *John Bower*

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by **Ryan M. McGraw**

*The Confession of Faith: A Critical Text and Introduction*, by John Bower, Principal Documents of the Westminster Assembly. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2020, xviii + 415 pages, \$40.00.

The Westminster Confession of Faith is the most robust and widely used Reformed confession of the seventeenth century. Representing the fruit of high orthodox Reformed thinking in the period of confessionalization, the Westminster Confession became the standard of ministerial unity in Presbyterian churches for centuries to come, and it served as the basis for Baptist and Congregational confessions of faith as well. The Westminster Confession continues in use in Presbyterian denominations across the world. This means that this Confession is an important part of the Christian heritage in general, and the Reformed tradition in particular. Yet in many cases, denominations that use the Confession include their own slight modifications to the original text, and the original text received minor alterations even in early printings. John Bower seeks to restore the original text by producing this critical edition of the Confession, with a substantial one hundred and ninety-two-page introduction to the production of the Confession and its contents. All readers interested in understanding the Confession in its own context will profit greatly from

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1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=872](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=872).

his painstaking work.

The author provides valuable historical background to the content and meaning of the Assembly's work, largely building on the earlier research of Chad Van Dixhoorn. As he notes, "this study is more concerned with understanding how the confession was created than in explaining its meaning" (51). Nevertheless, his focus on the creation of the Confession is highly insightful in relation to the intent of the Assembly at key points. Bower illustrates the importance of his textual work by providing an example in which the original revision to the Thirty-Nine Articles included the word "all" in relation to Christ being the Savior of all men. Researchers have consistently based their analyses of atonement theories at the Assembly on the omission of the word "all," which only applies to later copies of the Assembly's work in revising the Articles (14). While the Assembly affirmed that Christ died for the elect only, they were comfortable retaining the biblical language of "all" in their documents.

In addition, Bower draws attention to the fact that "articles of knowledge" containing a brief summary of doctrine were drafted and only discovered recently (28). This issue was that Parliament had omitted a prescription in the proposed text of the Directory for Worship for the level of knowledge required to admit people to the Lord's Supper, fearing that this would relegate the standard of admission to the Supper to the discretion of local church officers without any kind of uniformity (30). The resultant summary provided included Scripture, the Trinity, Christ's two natures, creation and the fall, redemption in Christ and the means of applying his benefits, the nature and necessity of faith and repentance, the nature and use of the sacraments, and the future state (31). While bearing remarkable similarities to the membership vows used in many Presbyterian denominations today, Parliament intended the list to restrict the activities of local elders in examining communicants.

Bower goes on to show the vital role of the editorial committee at the Assembly in harmonizing the wording adopted in earlier chapters

with that of chapters developed and adopted later (72). This committee later even began to change the order of some paragraphs in the final draft (91). It is interesting as well that the chapters on faith, repentance, and good works were added later to the initial chapter outline of the WCF (86). This was partly in response to concerns over antinomianism. Chapters eight and nine of the introduction address various official printings of the WCF and bibliographic issues. The final chapter outlines the method that the author used in his herculean task of producing an authentic critical text.

Bower offers useful insights at times into the content of the WCF as well. For example, he suggests that the reason for including a distinct chapter on adoption was that earlier Reformed creeds had presented adoption as the purpose of election and predestination. Moving election prior to creation resulted in the need for a distinct chapter on adoption (78). This is merely one example of such fruitful insights into the content and intent of the Confession.

Following the introduction, the text of the WCF itself appears in full, with the proof texts in the margins (195–234), followed by a table of corrections made to the proof texts (235–239). The remainder of the material compares the four authoritative printings of the WCF in parallel columns (242–342), a comparison of the WCF with the Irish Articles (343–350), and the Assembly's partial revision of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (351–366). Bibliographic material, a glossary, and Scripture and subject indices make this book even more useful as a guide to the critical text, serving as an approximate guide to the original intent of the authors (190).

I have one minor quibble with Bower's assertions. On page 114 he writes that oaths make an assertion and vows were promises "directly to God." Bower mistakenly asserts that the WCF is at odds with its definition of vows by stating that vows can be between men. In actuality, this neglected the fact that vows were a species of oath in which people called on God to witness



the truth or falsehood of promises made. While people must not make oaths and vows in the name of anything other than God, making vows to others, such as in marriage, fits the general definition of vows current at the time. Digging into more primary sources on this point would likely have resolved the issue.

One of the great blessings of using a confession of faith that is over three hundred and fifty years old is that it connects the church of the present day to the Spirit's work in the church in the past. One of the great challenges of using the WCF today is that it appeared in a context very different from our own. This work helps readers understand what the authors meant in their own context, how the text of the Confession was transmitted, and it gives us insight into its original form. This volume is indispensable to serious students of the WCF, whether historians, pastors, or interested church members. It is a useful complement to Bower's earlier work on the Larger Catechism, and it leads readers to anticipate future books in this series.

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# The Irony of Modern Catholic History

by George Weigel

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by Darryl G. Hart

*The Irony of Modern Catholic History: How the Church Rediscovered Itself & Challenged the Modern World to Reform*, by George Weigel. New York: Basic, 2019, ix + 322 pages, \$30.00.

Anyone familiar with the world of American conservatism beyond the rants and slogans of talk radio, knows that Roman Catholicism plays an outsized role. In the history of Western civilization, the only Christian rival to come close to Rome's central place is the Protestantism that emerged in the sixteenth century. Christians outside the church of Rome often receive attention from American conservatives mainly for unleashing social and political forces that undermined the Christian society of medieval Europe. The result is an outlook where the only serious version of Christianity for righting the wrongs of the modern West (at least) is Roman Catholicism. George Weigel's recent book, *The Irony of Modern Catholic History*, pretty much starts with this assumption. It is a chronicle of the relationship between Roman Catholicism and the modern world (i.e., Europe and North America).

Weigel's purpose is to question and offer an alternative to the dominant way of telling this story—that modernity was on the side of progress and Rome on the other side, a reactive and regressive check on social, political, and intellectual improvement. The result is a history in which Roman Catholicism, through its encounter with modern society, “became more coherent,

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1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=871](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=871).

less defensive, and more influential in shaping the course of world affairs” (7). Weigel also believes (or at least hopes) that Rome’s example may help “secular modernity save itself from its own increasing incoherence” (7). Of course, as a popular Roman Catholic author and public intellectual, with over a dozen titles under his belt, including a successful biography of John Paul II, Weigel’s identity and audience is thoroughly Roman Catholic. At the same time, as a political conservative who has worked in the trenches with evangelical Protestants, Weigel could well have considered what the story of Christianity and modernity looked like with Rome and Protestantism in the picture. Publishing with a trade press (Basic Books) might also have produced a book with advice for Christians outside the Roman church.

The irony at the heart of Weigel’s history of Roman Catholicism since the French Revolution is the ongoing antagonism between Rome’s traditions and the West’s modern innovations. It is a narrative dominated by popes, though Weigel mixes in Roman Catholic theologians and writers (not necessarily clergy) who also supplemented the church’s awareness of—and response to—modern intellectual trends. That addition adds a wrinkle that Weigel never sufficiently addresses, namely, the degree to which bishops sift, approve, and authorize church’s teaching as opposed to scholars whose vocation it is to assess and produce ideas.

Either way, the short story to Weigel’s relatively long book begins with Popes Gregory XVI (1831–1846) and Pius IX (1846–1878) who resolutely, though sometimes for very good reasons, opposed European political developments that replaced aristocratic privilege with democratic access. Next comes Leo XIII (1878–1903), the so-called father of the church’s social teaching, who was guarded about modern economic and political forces, defended the church’s prerogatives, but also signaled forms of accommodation. Weigel calls this a “Leonine Revolution,” which twentieth-century popes implemented with various degrees of success. One successor in Rome

was John XXIII (1958–1963) who called and convened the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). In Weigel’s view, that council advanced Leo XIII’s approach to modernity. Following in the wake of Vatican II were the papacies of John Paul II (1978–2005) and Benedict XVI (2005–2013), conservatives who strongly critiqued “political and cultural modernity” but did so “from inside modern intellectual premises” (11). The story concludes with Pope Francis (2013– ) about whom Weigel is ambivalent. Still, Francis emerges as a figure within the post-Vatican II succession of the church critiquing modernity, who also promotes evangelization and reforming the church (particularly with reference to the sex scandals).

Weigel’s book is not exactly warts-and-all history. His reputation as a certain kind of apologist likely prevents him from compiling the sort of blemishes that could turn a reader away from his Roman Catholicism. For that reason, the irony that his book does not explore as much as it could is the development of the dogma of papal infallibility during a period when popes looked particularly fallible when reading the signs of the times. Of course, papal infallibility means technically that when popes teach from the position of their Petrine authority (as successors to Peter) their declarations are free from error. Popes have invoked this power sparingly (only in connection with Mary, in fact). But the place of the Bishop of Rome in the hierarchy, not to mention the papacy’s universal jurisdiction, means that when popes pontificate, bishops, priests, and laity listen (or are supposed to). The global scope of papal responsibilities accounts in part for the long list of encyclicals and apostolic exhortations over the last 125 years on every manner of world crisis beyond the Roman Catholic Church’s own health.

Here the record of popes’ responses to the modern world hardly justifies looking to Rome as a font of wisdom. After all, the papacy completely reversed course from the early days (which lasted for at least seven decades) of opposition to the political liberties modern people associate with the American Founding (though the French Revolu-

tion’s version of political liberties were decidedly anti-clerical and threatened the papacy directly). After all, the last of the eighty defects of modern society condemned in the famous Syllabus of Errors (1864) sweepingly denied that the pope could or should “reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization.”<sup>2</sup>

One hundred years later, Vatican II changed that estimate of the modern world and elaborated ways that the church could and should accommodate the trends of modernity (from freedom of conscience and vernacular liturgy to a recognition of the laity’s vocation in serving God). Weigel himself admits that Vatican II’s sense of modern life, a time not of crisis but of calm, was naive and revealed “historical myopia” (165). The council’s pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, he adds, described the modern world of 1945–1965 in ways that left the church unprepared for what was coming in 1968 and beyond.

[The] Western world at least, was not an “obsolescent” modern man of the sort imagined by . . . the bishops of Vatican II, but post-modern man — metaphysically indifferent, spiritually bored, demographically barren, skeptical about the human capacity to know the truth. (164)

To be sure, not even the best of Presbyterian or Reformed assemblies or synods is up to the task of understanding the present moment and charting a Christian course for civilization and politics. The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture at its best prevents Protestant communions from teaching on matters where the Bible is silent. But the legacy of the papacy’s place in European history, combined with its universal authority, encourages popes and those subject to them to think that the papacy has the answers and insights to modern society’s woes. It is hard to imagine setting a Christian leader up for a bigger fall.

Despite the popes and bishops’ failure to

discern the challenges of modernity — aside from the recent sex scandals to which Weigel devotes several pages — the author judges Rome’s stature in the modern West still to be vigorous and well situated to supply needed help. The modern world has run up against a crisis of human dignity, Weigel asserts. It is saturated in skepticism, doubt, relativism, nihilism, and emptiness. Prior to Vatican II, the church had largely adopted a defensive strategy. But the modern church has “recommitted itself to missionary discipleship . . . to proposing to the world what it believes to be liberating truths about salvation and the ultimate destiny of human beings,” which includes how to live together in society (284). What the church offers chiefly is “friendship with Jesus Christ,” the answer “to the question that is every human life” (285). In a word, modern Roman Catholicism is Christian humanism at its best, and it offers a better and more stable foundation for “happiness, beatitude, and genuine human flourishing” (287) than the one attempted by science, the Enlightenment, and modern political ideologies.

That may sound tempting to any believer who has thought about the relationship of Christ and culture. But as so often happens in those discussions, the effort to fashion a Christian culture often loses sight of the singularity of Christ’s redemptive work. In that way, Weigel’s book reveals more than he likely intends since it shows the degree to which even conservative American Catholics equivocate on the Augustinian basics of the fall, sin, its penalty, grace, Christ, and eternity. ©

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<sup>2</sup> Vatican website, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9syll.htm>.

# Natural Law and Human Rights: Toward a Recovery of Practical Reason

by Pierre Manent

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by David VanDrunen

*Natural Law and Human Rights: Toward a Recovery of Practical Reason*, by Pierre Manent, trans. Ralph C. Hancock. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020, xxvi + 149 pages, \$29.00.

French political philosopher Pierre Manent offers a relatively brief but intellectually dense account of our present moral and political condition. Although Manent uses the ideas of natural law and human rights to frame his study, readers may think of it generally as an attempt to explain the cultural changes that have agitated Western societies in recent generations and to point to a better way forward.

In the opening chapter, Manent introduces two important concepts. He claims that modern opinion opposes *natural law* because it is an obstacle to *human rights*. Natural law promotes “the idea of freedom under law” and is grounded in “human nature” (7). This refers to *universal* human nature, to characteristics that all humans share in common. The notion of human rights is about nature too, but in the sense of a person’s *individual* nature. There are no particular characteristics of an individual nature, and thus it can be “constructed and deconstructed as we wish” (10). Manent applies these insights to recent developments concerning sex and gender. He concludes that legalization of homosexual marriage

was the paramount way to express the triumph of the concept of human rights, for it declared the rejection of human nature with respect to this most fundamental social institution.

The second chapter focuses on the historical origins of this turn from natural law to human rights. Given that Manent is a politically conservative Roman Catholic, his cast of characters offers few surprises. He thinks Thomas Hobbes’s thought was very important but devotes the most space to Machiavelli, who “contributed more than any other author to the discrediting of natural law” (34). Manent also claims that Martin Luther’s “reinterpretation of the Christian religious experience” (36) made a move analogous to Machiavelli’s. Readers who are familiar with Luther will see that Manent understands some important elements of Luther’s theology but portrays him simplistically as an antinomian.

Chapter 3 then reflects on the reconstruction of political thought emerging from the turn to human rights. Both classical and Christian thought approached politics presupposing that the world was already ordered by law. In contrast, modern human-rights doctrine imagines political life against the background of a lawless state of nature. Individuals grant power to a sovereign state to protect them, but the morality proper to the state remains indeterminate.

What is the result for the modern state? Chapter 4 argues that we now operate with the imaginary idea of the autonomous subject, in which the people supposedly authorize the sovereign’s actions and thereby command themselves. As a result, there is no longer any true commanding or obeying in political life. Manent suggests that the 1960s marked a “point of inflection” (75). The arguments derived from the unlimited sovereignty of individual rights became unanswerable and prevailed over all the rules and meanings of every social institution. Law could no longer aim at objective goods without allegedly violating human rights.

The fifth chapter continues to analyze the modern condition. The moderns define humanity in terms of freedom, that is, a freedom from all

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=877](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=877).

impediments of nature. They reject the notion of freedom under law and insist that law has meaning only as the product or expression of their freedom. The state is regarded as legitimate because the people *consent* to it and because its officials *represent* them. Again, this destroys all true commanding and obeying.

Manent seeks to recover these ideas of commanding and obeying in his final chapter. Here, he develops his thoughts about natural law in the most detail. “The very notion of natural law presupposes or implies that we have the ability to judge human conduct according to criteria that are clear, stable, and largely if not universally shared” (106). But Manent does not think natural law is exhaustive. It leaves “latitude” (110) and “room to deliberate and then to choose.” It “guides action but does not determine it” (111). It does not leave humanity in a state of condemnation but helps us find “a reasonably pleasant, useful, and noble life” (112). In an appendix, Manent concludes by calling for recovery of a proper understanding of law. He points to Thomas Aquinas as the most helpful guide. Such a recovery, he says, would turn back “the disordered extension of rights” that makes “unintelligible the very bases of European moral life” (127).

Reading Manent’s work will be a thought-provoking exercise for people concerned about contemporary morality and politics and who are willing and able to wrestle with intellectually challenging material. Many American Christians think of Europe as a completely secularized, post-Christian, religiously-skeptical place, but there are still plenty of serious European thinkers who are exceptions to this generalization. Manent is one of them. Reformed office-bearers in North America may find his book useful simply as a way to expand their horizons by engaging someone with many similar concerns but who writes from a different theological and social context.

Natural law can be a complex subject, but there is much to appreciate in the way Manent treats it. He is correct, I believe, to portray natural law as an objective moral standard that precedes our own individual lives and experiences. Skepti-

cism about such an idea is indeed a root cause of much that ails Western moral and political life. I also think Manent is appropriately modest in seeing natural law more as a general moral compass than as an exhaustive standard that leaves little room for discretion or good judgment. Nevertheless, his claim that natural law does not condemn “humanity in its ordinary or current condition” as a “mass of perdition” (111) is directly contrary to Paul’s discussion of natural revelation in Romans 1:18–32. Any Christian theory of natural law needs to account for this crucial text.

One might wish to engage Manent critically on many smaller matters, but I conclude this review by focusing on one larger issue. Manent is a learned scholar, and so I wish to say this with modesty and due respect: While I affirm much of his analysis, I also protest that things are more complicated than he often suggests. There have been some good reasons for the increasing emphasis on human rights, and they are not necessarily at odds with natural law or traditional Christian conviction. In fact, as scholars such as Brian Tierney and John Witte have shown, rich notions of human/natural rights long pre-dated the modern period and complemented Christian natural-law theory and moral theology. Human rights is an attractive idea when confronted by rulers who claim extensive authority and use it badly, mistreating many fellow humans in the process. In the face of foolish and unjust rulers, rights-claims (grounded properly in a common human nature) can be a powerful way to defend the dignity of each and every divine image-bearer.

Manent’s book, I must say, has a rather strong authoritarian bent. He rightfully critiques the loss of objective law and morality and its threat to *legitimate authority*, but his repeated characterization of political life in terms of *commanding and obeying* leaves me at something of a loss. Healthy political life undoubtedly involves some degree of commanding and obeying, but to make this so prominent in the relationship between civil officials and citizens seems one-sided and even dangerous. In my judgment, we need both a recovery of natural law as an objective moral

norm to guide legitimate authority and a nuanced affirmation of natural rights as checks upon what governments can do to people. But maintaining both is difficult, even elusive, and there is hardly a Reformed consensus about how to do it. Countless sessions and consistories found themselves internally divided during the pandemic of 2020 between those whose instinct is to defer to authority figures and those whose instinct is to challenge abuse of authority (to put it very simply, I admit). It is a delicate balance, but surely both are necessary. We undoubtedly require ongoing, charitable discussion to get that balance right. ©

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## Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World

by *David VanDrunen*

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Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* March 2021<sup>1</sup>

**By Richard M. Gamble**

*Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World*, by David VanDrunen. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020, 400 pages, \$29.99, paper.

**A**mong the books I will never get around to writing is a history of the apolitical church in

America from the colonial era to the present. It would be a boring book. Americans seem to have an insatiable appetite for books that purport to show how some event “changed America forever.” Prize-winning bestsellers also need to have happy endings, and I doubt the story of the apolitical church will have a happy ending, at least not in the immediate future, although a glorious future awaits the church at the consummation of the ages, and its work in the meantime could not be weightier or more precious.

Such a book would tell about pastors who did not preach that America was God’s New Israel, or that George Washington was a new Moses or Joshua; who did not make abstinence from alcohol a test of sanctification, let alone a standard for church membership, fellowship with other believers, or qualification for church office; who did not speak of their nations in terms of altars and martyrs, apostles and prophets. It would be the history of the ordinary (but extraordinary) ministry of Word and sacrament in the midst of the upheavals of 1776, 1812, 1861–65, 1914–1918, and 1939–1945. Above all, it would be the history of pastors who maintained the distinction between church and state (not a myth concocted by the secular left), the nation and the kingdom of God, the temporal and eternal. A story of pastors who never presumed to treat secular history as prophecy, or progress as providence, or attempted to read events as if they were “God’s alphabet,” who did not feel a warm glow when politicians sanctioned a generic religion or spirituality as if getting right with America was the same as getting right with God.

The only drama in this story would be the heroic resistance of pastors and congregations who refused to mobilize their churches for domestic and international crusades for righteousness. These small stories of integrity and fidelity have rarely been the stuff of headlines in American history, and too often what makes it into the press has been what makes it into the history books. The media follows the extravagant militants, millennialists, and radical pacifists, quoting the most quotable things said by extremists, and historians

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1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=878](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=878).

are only too happy to follow their lead.

After more than thirty years of teaching and writing, it is my conviction that the apolitical church ought to be as much a part of a Christian's historical self-understanding as any abuse of the things of God and the things of Caesar.

These thoughts came to me repeatedly as I read David VanDrunen's excellent new book. His book is not directly about any of these things. Nevertheless, it has deep significance for not only how we think about Christianity and politics "after Christendom" and in the midst of our current confusion, but also for the way we think about the relationship between church and society throughout American history and back beyond it. Bad political theology is nothing new. As a diagnostic tool, VanDrunen's book is invaluable. Much would be gained by applying his insights to history, not as some prefabricated architecture imposed on the past, but as a way to ask fresh questions about church and states, or more broadly, religion and nation, in America. Every denomination at one time or another has been set in turmoil by sincere, earnest, and misguided calls for cultural transformation. Churches that stood by what Walter Rauschenbusch impatiently dismissed as the "pure gospel" have been condemned as indifferent at best and complicit in evil at worst.

VanDrunen has produced a timely and important addition to his body of work on two-kingdoms theology and its practical application with *Politics After Christendom*. It is a welcome companion to his *Living in God's Two Kingdoms*, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*,<sup>2</sup> and others. It is a sane book, and his call for modesty is urgently needed.

By "Christendom," VanDrunen has in mind "the vision of Christian civilization that emerged in the very early medieval period and stretched

well into the modern era, primarily in the West" (15). That vision presupposed a common Christian culture and saw a large political role for the faith even while keeping institutions and callings distinct. The Puritans of Massachusetts Bay referred to church and state as "two twins" ordained by God to care for his people. From New England to the mid-Atlantic colonies, to Virginia, leaders presupposed, as had Martin Bucer, Calvin, Luther, and the Catholic Church before them, that the magistrate was to enforce both tables of the Law. They continued to live under the assumptions of a unified Christendom in place since at least Constantine legalized Christianity, and his heirs made it the only legal religion. Christendom was challenged by Enlightenment notions of individual liberty and America's confrontation with the reality of religious pluralism. The question of how to live with neighbors not baptized into my church became a question of practical politics, and the solution was contested and anything but obvious.

VanDrunen argues that the Bible affirms that earthly government is legitimate, provisional (a temporary means to limited ends), common to believers and unbelievers, and accountable to God. He seeks to reacquaint Christians with the natural law tradition that the Reformers embraced, the doctrine of the two cities as articulated by Augustine and others, the two kingdoms of common and redemptive rule, and the biblical covenants that underlie each. VanDrunen presents his incorporation of covenants into longstanding treatments of political theology in the West as his distinct contribution to the debate. To that end, he turns to the Noahic covenant (Gen. 8:21–9:17) as key to understanding God's relationship to the civil order. God made that covenant with all mankind after the Flood, charging them to be fruitful, creative, and provide for justice, particularly in the protection of life. Even when they do so unwittingly, earthly governments carry out this divine mandate, however imperfectly. These kingdoms are not holy communities, thus not redemptive. That task and honor belongs to the church alone. In a sense, VanDrunen ar-

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2 David VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010); *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); and *Divine Covenants and Moral Order* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

gues for a Christian exceptionalism—the church is distinct, superior to the ambitions of earthly powers, endowed with a mission belonging only to itself, and judged not by the degree to which it transforms the world but by its fidelity in proclamation, worship, and equipping the saints in the present age as the bride awaits the Bridegroom.

At a time when the social gospel makes even greater inroads into American evangelicalism in matters of racial politics and social justice, when Pope Francis breaks down further the distinction between the church and the world in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (Oct. 3, 2020), and when a bizarre mix of the prosperity gospel and Donald Trump gathers on the Mall in Washington, DC, for what Michael Horton recently denounced as “Trumpianity,” the need for a sane defense of two-kingdom theology could not be more obvious. Both the left and right in American politics have to one degree or another mobilized the church for action. Believers who resist the itch to intervene and defend the apolitical calling of the church can expect little sympathy and much misunderstanding and no thanks for their efforts. But how many believers have the biblical framework, especially a theology of the proper relationship between ancient Israel and the church, to see what is going on in these calls for relevance and know how to mount a defense?

We are in VanDrunens’s debt for doing the painstaking work of scholarship and biblical exegesis to reground the church in her high calling in the midst of “a fractured world.” We have Jesus’s promise that we will have tribulation in the world and also the promise that he has overcome the world. And he has done so and is doing so in a way that no Christian should exchange for any substitute, no matter how alluring. ©

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## 7 Big Questions Your Life Depends On

by William J. Edgar

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* March 2021<sup>1</sup>

**By Charles M. Wingard**

*7 Big Questions Your Life Depends On*, by William J. Edgar. Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant, 2020, 68 pages, \$9.00, paper.

Only a rare book fits well in the hands of both the unbeliever (exploring what Christianity is all about) and the mature believer who wants to think deeply about the demands of God’s Word upon his life. William Edgar’s *7 Big Questions Your Life Depends On* is one of those books.

The author identifies four fundamental questions from Genesis:

Did God really say?

Where are you?

Where is the lamb?

Am I in the place of God?

To these he adds three questions from the gospels:

Where is the baby born to be King of the Jews?

Do you want to be healed?

Why are you looking among the dead for one who is alive?

The author has a gift for pinpointing core issues of concern: attitudes toward authority, yearnings to fix a broken world and our own broken lives, the delusion of the autonomous self, just how much we truly desire salvation, and where we look for it.

As Edgar explains and reflects upon these questions, the reader is forced to consider his responses—both to the voices of unbelief in our

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=879](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=879).



culture, as well as the rebellious thoughts that tempt us to doubt what God has said. Have we taken into account the reality of our offenses against God and his holy wrath, contrasted with the offenses of others against us and our *unholy* wrath? No matter how long one has walked with Christ, these remain pressing concerns.

Chapter 3 gives a flavor of Edgar’s approach as it surveys Genesis 22 and Isaac’s question, “Where is the lamb?” Our world is twisted, broken, and impervious to rehabilitation and fixing. The real problem is sin and the suppression of truth that brings God’s righteous wrath upon man. What is the solution that makes man right with God? That solution is sacrifice—and hence Isaac’s question: “Where is the Lamb?”

Confronted by the world’s brokenness and his own guilt, man has two choices: Do I try to fix the broken world myself—perhaps by supporting one of the grand utopian schemes that, if unchecked, inevitably lead to totalitarian oppression—or do I trust the sacrifice that God has provided in Jesus Christ? Yes, our life depends on how we answer.

Between the Genesis and Gospel questions is a six-page chapter, “The Story of Israel from Joseph to Jesus’s Birth,” that supplies readers with a history of Israel. No words are wasted; scripture’s plot line is summarized well. Preachers will find here a model for concisely communicating a large swath of biblical history to their congregations.

This short volume is proof that a book need not be long to be theologically rich.

I write this review on New Year’s Eve. Another year of my life concludes, and I prepare to enter the next—a perfect time to contemplate seven big questions upon which my life depends. ©

**Charles Malcolm Wingard** is senior pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Yazoo City, Mississippi (PCA), and associate professor of pastoral theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi.

# A Workman Not Ashamed: Essays in Honor of Albert N. Martin

*David Charles and Rob Ventura, eds.*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* May 2021<sup>1</sup>

by **Ryan M. McGraw**

*A Workman Not Ashamed: Essays in Honor of Albert N. Martin*, David Charles and Rob Ventura, eds. Conway, AR: Free Grace, 2020, 163 pages, \$30.00, paper.

Over the past several decades, Al Martin’s preaching and pastoral ministry has influenced many pastors across denominational lines. His power and presence in the pulpit and his gift at imparting pastoral wisdom to the next generation have marked a fruitful ministry. Honoring Martin’s contribution to the church today, the essays in this volume focus primarily on preaching and pastoring. These essays show the carry-over of Martin’s ideas to a new generation of pastors, helping those interested in the ministry to stay on the right track with the Spirit’s help.

The topics included in this volume are relatively divisible into preaching and ministry. While the contributors are mostly Baptists, they include one Presbyterian, plus a bonus chapter by eighteenth-century Baptist, John Gill, a foreword by Joel Beeke, and a biographical sketch of Martin’s life (excerpted from volume 1 of his *Pastoral Theology*). Related to preaching, the authors cover Peter’s Pentecost sermon (ch. 1); how and

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=895](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=895).

why preachers should prepare new preachers (ch. 2); the witness of the martyrs (ch. 4); the content of the gospel (ch. 6); the Spirit's work in preaching (ch. 7); and "the deeper Protestant conception and preaching" (ch. 11). Regarding pastoral ministry more broadly, authors explore Christian ministry in the church (ch. 3); shepherding the flock (ch. 5); the administration of Baptism (ch. 9); and the "form and substance" of worship (ch. 10). Michael Haykin's intriguing and useful historical biography of William Kriffin (ch. 8) does not fit neatly into either category. While the order and organization of the book could be clearer, the targeted issues reflect the core aspects of Martin's legacy. Chapter 10 is the most "Baptist" in content, arguing that the Baptist application of the regulative principle of worship is traditionally stricter than the rest of the Reformed world regarding the form that elements of worship take. Most of the chapters, however, reach across denominational lines, touching on genuine (and sometimes urgent) needs in the church today.

Some highlights stand out. Conrad Mbewe's challenge to seminaries and churches in chapter 2 to pursue a model of pastors training pastors, instead of those with no pastoral experience filling academic positions, is particularly pointed and apt, even if readers do not agree with every detail. Regardless of how this point affects the process of training ministers, in light of Mbewe's scriptural evidence, it is hard to reject his conclusion that "pastors should realize that they are the main instruments in God's hands to prepare the next generation of pastors" (47). As a seminary professor (and minister), I find that this issue arises often when elders send students to seminary in order to let the seminary find out whether or not they are called to the ministry. My standard reply is that this is the job of the church and not of the school. While it is my view that such professors should be experienced pastors, seminaries are servants not substitutes of the church in training pastors. Additionally, chapter 4, treating the place of martyrdom in Scripture and the church, is particularly stirring and thought provoking. Jeffrey Riddle's affirmation of the administration of

baptism by ministers in the visible church is also timely in the aftermath of the modern patriarchy movement (117–18).

Yet there are a few drawbacks to this volume. The tone of the book is a bit too colloquial at times, and highly academic at others, making its general audience somewhat unclear. This makes the quality of the material a bit uneven. Sometimes major themes are missing as well. For example, Rob Ventura stresses that in order to understand the Spirit's work in preaching we need to understand that he is both a person and divine (96–97). While this is undoubtedly true, it is also vital to remember that the Spirit is the third person in the Trinity. This means that he not only comes to us personally with divine power but that his works reflect the order of the Godhead. He aims to glorify Christ because he proceeds from the Father and the Son. As Christ declares to us what he receives from the Father, so the Spirit declares what he receives from Christ. This is why the Spirit's work in preaching, and in anything else, always directs us to Christ's glory. This means that the Spirit as the power behind preaching and Christ as the content of preaching are wedded. A fuller Trinitarian ontology can better shape a practical responsibility. We not only need to understand who the Spirit is and what he does but why he does so. Otherwise, we run the risk of the detaching the work of the divine persons from each other, rather than integrating them. This point by no means implies that the content of this chapter is not sound and orthodox. It merely points out that the eternal relations between the divine persons strengthens the grounds on which we understand their temporal missions.

Lastly, Scott Aniol's call for Baptists to become stricter in recovering seventeenth century Baptist principles regarding the minutiae of the forms of worship (132) runs a dangerous risk of promoting sectarianism in otherwise unified churches. In spite of such things, the book as a whole contains some solid material to help readers meditate on important truths.

I have benefited greatly from Al Martin's preaching over the years, as well as from his solid

counsel on pastoral theology. It is fitting that some of his friends and students have honored him in this volume. The editors note that, “By design, no new ground is broken in these chapters” (5). Old issues presented from Scripture continue to press upon new situations we face. The church continues to need Spirit-filled preachers who are compassionate and diligent pastors. As such, this book is one link in the chain of church history, showing the Lord’s faithfulness in sustaining gospel proclamation one generation at a time. ©

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## Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents

by Rod Dreher

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* May 2021<sup>1</sup>

by Stephen C. Magee

*Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents*, by Rod Dreher. New York: Sentinel, 2020, 240 pages, \$27.00.

Those who benefited from the bestselling book by Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, have no doubt heard of his new volume, *Live Not by Lies*. The subtitle of this 2020 publication, “A Manual for Christian Dissidents,” reveals the author’s perspective that we are in for some difficult

years ahead in a culture that has become more openly hostile to historic Christianity.

Dreher has a varied spiritual background. Once an evangelical Protestant, and then a Roman Catholic, he is now following the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Given his current spiritual home, he is particularly aware of the struggles of Christians and churches from Eastern Europe during the years of Soviet totalitarianism. Beginning in 2015, he began to hear from people that had firsthand experience with persecution in that setting. They were noticing developments in Western countries reminiscent of the early stages of oppression that they lived through decades earlier.

Dreher believes that we are currently living in a “pre-totalitarian culture” (21). His easy-to-read book is not an invitation to panic, but a diagnosis of our societal condition and a plan for survival and even flourishing in these challenging days. In particular, Dreher encourages sincere believers to “value nothing more than truth” (97). This is not only a prescription for the theological mind but an invitation to a life lived well in the midst of a hostile world.

The author gives us the tested advice of people who suffered through the darkest years of communism in countries like Romania and Czechoslovakia. He shows a deep regard for divinely ordained community in both the family and the church, emphasizing role models who were able to face their trials with courage and joy. He recommends practices that enable interested neighbors and younger family members to learn truth and to value the heritage that they receive from those who have come before them.

Quoting from one of the heroes of the twentieth-century Christian resistance, Dreher makes the case that we are facing something more than the trials of living under powerful demagogues. “Dictatorships can make life hard for you, but they don’t want to devour your soul. Totalitarian regimes are seeking your souls” (136). This distinction ends up being important for those of us who understand our duties as guardians of sacred truth. Our needs may change to some degree

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=894](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=894).

when the church knows the real possibility that we might be unjustly detained for our faith. We devote ourselves to memorizing Scripture, not only because it is helpful for our sanctification, but because it provides a “strong basis for prison life” (154).

For those of us who serve as officers in churches of less than 150 souls, we can resonate with the author’s appreciation for “the importance of small communities” of faith (169). In such environments we learn to love God with the people we actually know. It is in the small church that we may readily find ways to “join our grief with the grief of others,” helping us to bear heavy burdens together (178).

*Live Not by Lies* is not a depressing book, but I found it useful to combine it with another account of how evangelical churches are working together for good in places where any kind of connection with the broader community might seem implausible. This second book, *Unlikely* by Kevin Palau, tells the amazing story of how churches in Portland, Oregon found practical opportunities for holy service that led to new relationships and solid evangelistic fruit. Reading both books together gave me what I hope was a balanced perspective concerning how we might work together with other churches who hold to historic Christian doctrine, ethics, and experience. The Palau book teaches us to ask those who live around us, “How can I help?” and then to follow through with deeds of love. *Live Not by Lies* prepares us to be ready for the arrival of that day when we must finally say, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right for us to obey God or you.” ©

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# Pastors and Their Critics: A Guide to Coping with Criticism in the Ministry

by Joel R. Beeke and Nick Thompson

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* June-July 2021<sup>1</sup>

by Ryan M. McGraw

*Pastors and Their Critics: A Guide to Coping with Criticism in the Ministry*, by Joel R. Beeke and Nick Thompson. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2020, 177 pages, paper, \$15.99.

Few people enjoy receiving criticism, and most avoid critical people. Yet regular criticism, whether well-intended or not, is a standard fixture of the Christian ministry. To be fair, this is endemic to any public position, especially those speaking publicly like pastors, politicians, and teachers. Receiving criticism is unavoidable in Christian ministry, it is an inevitable reason why many leave the pastorate, and it is indispensable for humble growth in Christ. Joel Beeke, with the help of Nick Thompson, provides pastors with biblical wisdom and sanctified common sense for addressing criticism in the Christian life. This book is not only for pastors, but for everyone, since malicious critics need repentance and friendly critics need encouragement and instruction in how to help build up their ministers.

Building on biblical Christ-centered foundations, most of this work expounds both destructive and constructive criticism. By lifting our gaze to the fact that the pages of Scripture record a

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=902](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=902).

plethora of criticisms against God and Christ, the authors place enduring criticism on an unshakable foundation. Believers endure criticism best, especially when marked by ill intent, when they keep their eyes on Christ and fellowship with him in his afflictions. Even destructive criticism can have positive effects in our lives. This hinges on whether we learn to respond to criticism in a mature biblical manner and do not merely dismiss criticism because of its source. Some criticism is simply rude, vindictive, and personal. Unfortunately, our “enemies” may be more willing to confront us with our faults than our friends will be to risk hurting our feelings. Beeke and Thompson give us the tools we need, replete with examples, to retain what is good and reject what is bad when this happens. Perhaps even better, and more off the beaten path, they encourage laypeople and elders on how to give pastors constructive criticism well and regularly, and elders how to give constructive criticism to congregations at least once a year. The advantage of both practices, if done well, precludes allowing criticism to devolve into destructive criticism alone. Proactive criticism among loving friends is better than reactive criticism by upset people, whether valid or not. An appendix concludes the book by helping seminary students build godly habits that will enable them to receive criticism well in the ministry by developing godly interpersonal relationships now.

There is one elephant in the room worth noting in passing. Joel Beeke is a seasoned minister who has endured lots of criticism, while Nick Thompson is a recent seminary graduate. Why co-author a book requiring years of pastoral experience with someone who has almost none? Without detracting from the valuable content of the book, this combination of authorship will doubtless strike most readers as strange. The end product, however, is no less outstanding.

*Pastors and Their Critics* is solid, wise, and necessary. Criticism is good for the soul, but only if that soul learns to respond to it humbly and wisely. We will never lose by taking criticism seriously, even when it is mostly wrong, if we are

secure in Christ and learn not to despair. This is an uncommon and pleasant book on a common and painful aspect of the ministry. Whether you are a pastor or you have criticized one, which should cover most of us, this book is for you. ©

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## How to Fight Racism

by *Jemar Tisby*

Originally published electronically in *Ordained Servant* August-September 2021<sup>1</sup>

By **Darryl G. Hart**

*How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey toward Racial Justice*, by Jemar Tisby. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021, 227 pages, \$24.95.

For many years, people in Reformed and evangelicalism knew Jemar Tisby for his work with the Reformed African-American Network (RAAN), a parachurch endeavor designed to bring the theology he learned at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi to African-American Christians. Around 2015, partly in response to the publicity and public outcry surrounding police shootings of black men in the United States, Tisby turned from theology to race—for instance, the disparities between whites and blacks in the United States, the place of blacks and whites in American churches, and the persistence of personal and institutional racism. Around this time, he also began doctoral studies

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=907](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=907).

in American history at the University of Mississippi. Signs of the change in Tisby's thought came first with RAAN becoming *The Witness: A Black Christian Collective*. The organization's purpose is to encourage black Christians "to be stewards of the Black prophetic tradition." Tisby's 2019 book, *The Color of Compromise*,<sup>2</sup> a history of white Protestant church's complicity in American racism, combined his historical training and advocacy for *The Witness*. (Since writing this book, he has taken a position at Boston University's Center for Anti-Racist Research, founded by Ibram X. Kendi.) Tisby's latest book, *How to Fight Racism*, is less scholarly and, as the author admits, more practical than his previous one. That aim may be less successful than planned due to a manner of presentation that offers a range of practical pointers without identifying which are the most important or how they cohere.

The meandering nature of this book may stem from Tisby's assumption that many readers want to fight racism and so do not need to be convinced to do so. In the introduction the author seems to concede this observation by advising readers not to worry about what sequence of tips or sets of data to follow but simply to "jump in." Rather than summaries of policy initiatives, legal remedies, or even spiritual counsel for combating prejudice, Tisby implores readers to take a "journey" of self-discovery (7). "Don't worry too much about where to begin," he writes. "If you want a complete step-by-step plan . . . you will remain stuck in place" (14). This seemingly non-urgent approach could conceivably lead readers to a measure of complacency in their fight against racism. In fact, the procedure that Tisby follows in this battle is often abstract and when specific relies on common talking points.

The three parts of the book revolve around the grids of Awareness, Relationships, and Commitment, which comprise a cycle of practical,

social, and psychological tasks by which to battle prejudices. As such, *awareness* of the problem is one part, which along with *relationships* with those hurt by racism and *commitment* to dismantle racist structures form the book's contents. It adds up to an "invitation to dream" of a world in which racism does not "define so much of our reality." Tisby wants readers to "reimagine a life where we acknowledge our differences but do not use them to dismiss or dehumanize others" (11). This rationale explains why in library catalogs *How to Fight Racism* is listed under subject headings for "Christian life" and "personal growth."

Each of the three parts of the book—Awareness, Relationships, Commitment—receive three chapters, and within each chapter an "essential understanding" orients the contents. That formulaic quality again undercuts a sense of injustice and sin that demands repentance, forgiveness, and remedy. The book's "essential understandings" likely reveal more about the author's habits of mind than they provide a roadmap for personal growth and social justice. To develop an *awareness* of racism, readers need first to understand that race is a social construct, then consider the degree to which race informs self-awareness, and finally learn from the past, from slavery and its justifications to police brutality. In the section on *relationships*, Tisby begins by showing that such personal bonds are basic to racial justice, before calling for humility and listening to others, and then exploring diversity, equity, and inclusion (all of which point to a fully integrated society). An ideal society is like a party to which everyone is invited (diversity), all guests have a chance to set the play list (equity), and all revelers get to dance (inclusion). To build *commitment*, Tisby first appeals to love of God and love of neighbor (part of Christian duty), then argues that racism is not simply about intentions but is part of institutions, and finally asks readers to recognize contempt as foundational to racism. These essential understandings are part of the book's advice but remain an intellectual jumble without an obvious logic. Again, Tisby's intent may be simply to invite readers to a journey. But that is a fairly disappointing

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2 Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019).

strategy for correcting the wrongs and abuses of racism.

Such an evaluation should not be read as a dismissal of the book, though Tisby writes little that is novel or provocative. The point here instead is that the book already assumes readers oppose racism and want directions for their awareness. Instead of saying, “well, before you enter the field of protest or policy, look in your own heart and relationships,” (6) which could be a worthwhile caution against presumption, Tisby mixes a set of platitudes about racism that render it more a social nuisance than a grotesque feature of American society (and its churches). The only mention of specific policies, though very brief, are voting rights, immigration reform, and reparations. But these difficult proposals seem to come more from the headlines than from an informed assessment of the best steps to take, and in which order, to combat racism. The failure to think these policies through becomes apparent in Tisby’s inclusion of immigration, since finding more immigrants to enter the United States is not obviously advantageous to American workers at the bottom of the pay scale, many of whom are black.

The failure to go into depth also applies to Tisby’s appeal to “Courageous Christianity” in the book’s subtitle. Scripture and theology do not drive this book. Notions like men and women being created in the image of God, or appeals to the moral law, or seeing opposition to racism as part of sanctification appear in the book. But they are not its backbone. At times the book does not even appear to be written for Christians. In his conclusion he writes that “we believe that a poor carpenter from Nazareth conquered death and is forming a people who will join in this triumph” of fighting racism (206). Yet, in the beginning, Tisby says that even though his approach is from a “Christian perspective,” the book is “intended for anyone who wants to work toward racial justice” (10). The specifics of this Christian outlook involve the church’s reckoning with its complicity in racism along with the foundation the gospel provides for rebellion “against racism and white

supremacy” (10).

Tisby ends on a note of hope, but it is an optimism grounded in his recent work rather than a broader perspective on American history. His previous book, *The Color of Compromise*, was a catalogue of racism in white Protestant history. It fit the dominant mood in the Trump era that racism has been a deep and abiding part of American history. With a growing recognition of racism’s pervasiveness, Tisby believes “tomorrow can be different.” “The journey for racial justice continues, but the music we hear . . . is not a funeral dirge” but “festival music leading us to a banquet of blessings” (205). Tisby’s is a different version of hope from the one that the candidate, Barack Obama, offered while running as the candidate of hope in the Democratic presidential primaries. In 2008 the U.S. Senator explained that racism in America has not been static, “as if no progress has been made.” But “we know” and “have seen” that “America can change.”<sup>3</sup> That was six years before Michael Brown’s death in Ferguson, Missouri, elevated racism to prominence in discussions of national identity. Will Tisby’s book transcend the current climate of opinion about race, policing, and systemic injustice? If Obama’s understanding proved to be so fleeting, it is hard to imagine that Tisby’s outlook will endure the next cycle of news. ©

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3 “Transcript: Barack Obama’s Speech on Race,” March 18, 2008. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467>. Accessed May 11, 2021.

# The Great Tradition

by *Richard M. Gamble*

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*The Great Tradition: Classic Readings on What It Means to be an Educated Human Being*, by Richard M. Gamble. Wilmington, DE: ISI, 2007, xix + 669 pages, \$20.00.

by **Mark W. Graham**

*De Doctrina Christiana* is not easy to render into English. “On Christian Doctrine” or “On Christian Teaching” have variously stood in as translations for the title of Augustine of Hippo’s most famous work on education. The eminent Augustine scholar James J. O’Donnell convincingly has proposed instead *On the Form of Teaching Suitable for Christians* as the most appropriate translation. Anyone who more than a millennium and a half later would weigh in on the form of teaching suitable for Christians would do well to listen to all the fifty-seven voices Richard Gamble has brought together in this massive collection—men, women, pagans, Jews, Christians, agnostics, ancients, medievals, early moderns, moderns, philosophers, historians, orators, an architect, biographers, theologians, bishops, ascetics, professors, teachers, novelists, essayists, poets, and more.

To be sure, Gamble’s own purpose is far broader than answering the question inherent in the title of Augustine’s famous work. At the outset he explains that he is following a “continual conversation about what it means to be a truly educated human being” (xvi), tracing out a specific strand of what many have called “The Great Tradition.” Now in its fourth printing, the collection has served its purpose well for the time equivalent of one child’s journey from kindergarten into early years of college.

For each author, one first encounters a quotation, expertly chosen and helpfully illuminating. These should not be missed—they are far more than mere ornamentation and left me thinking carefully about each author as I encountered each selection. Gamble’s brief introduction to each author and to their specific work(s) are remarkably consistent in size, content, insight, and style—not an easy task given the broad range of figures involved here. His own particular approaches to education and controversial questions surrounding it are discernible here, but never heavy-handed or preachy. Throughout, Gamble sends the reader elsewhere to explore authors and questions more deeply, helpfully reiterating that this massive compilation is just an introduction. The reader will get a solid sense as well of the foundational modern scholarship on education and on the specific writers anthologized. A future edition of the work could include, as well, some leading scholars on education from the latter parts of the twentieth century—particularly for the premodern period. For the medieval period, for example, I would suggest Rosamond McKittrick and C. Stephen Jaeger as indispensable guides for understanding the varied purposes of medieval education over time.

The collection is most helpful when it is understood for what it is and is not. It is not an anthology of readings in Western Civilization, nor a collection, per se, of readings on the history of western education, nor an illustration of movements or trends within western education, nor even a set of readings illustrating “The Great Tradition.” As the subtitle in particular makes quite clear, it is a set of classic readings on what it means to be an educated human being. In this it is remarkably effective, helpful, and illuminating, perhaps even indispensable. The reader should keep the central purpose in mind when reading through the collection.

Each selection is usually allowed to speak for itself to larger and ongoing educational debates, without much commentary—the usefulness of education, the contemplative vs. the active life are common themes. This method works quite

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=909](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=909).



well, generally. In a few places, though, inadvertent anachronisms are likely on particularly controversial issues today and in our own circles. Aristotle’s emphasis on the state’s role in education, for example, is noted as controversial (56). But such a notion would not be particularly controversial in western history until well after the medieval and even early modern periods. Likewise, Gamble’s note of the “debate between home schooling and public education” (107) when introducing Quintilian might give some readers the questionable impression that the terms of such modern discussion bear notable resemblance to what the Roman Quintilian is talking about in his piece.

Some might quibble here and there with what is included or not included. Given the purpose, size, scope, and thoroughness of Gamble’s project, I would consider such to be as unavoidable as largely unprofitable and pointless (and, I really cannot point to a single selection whose inclusion I would question). Yet, I cannot resist just two omission quibbles: 1) the opening of Petronius’ *Satyricon* and 2) some key selections from Peter Abelard’s *History of My Misfortunes*. The former is a ruthless (and well-known) critique of Roman educational ideals and training, an oft-cited counterbalance to idealistic and uncritical praise of the Roman educational system. The latter illustrates a fundamental shift in medieval understanding of what it means to be an educated human being, which played a key role in ushering in Scholasticism. In both of these cases, the specific articulation and textual context is potentially sordid. Yet might not such famous texts, along with the generally more noble and staid ones which make up this collection, speak directly and even wisely to the central important point here?

A certain mischievous professor of religion that I know likes to advise students in his department who desire to enter the ministry to change their major instead to English. Church officers attuned for any length of time to *Ordained Servant* hardly need another reminder of the importance of reading good literature. Yet, Gamble’s collec-

tion fills a serious lacuna. I would venture that a fair number of authors in this collection are unfamiliar to many, or at least these works and/or selections actually have not been read before. Listening closely to all these voices across time on what it means to be an educated human being—even those with which one disagrees—can sharpen one’s ability to discern what is most suitable for Christians to teach. Church officers would do well to spend some time with this valuable collection, if they have not done so already in the years since its initial publication. ©

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## The Good, the True, the Beautiful: A Multidisciplinary Tribute to Dr. David K. Naugle

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**by William Edgar**

*The Good, the True, the Beautiful: A Multidisciplinary Tribute to Dr. David K. Naugle*, eds. Mark J. Boone, Rose M. Cothren, Kevin C. Neece, Jaclyn S. Parrish. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2021, \$41.00.

I had the pleasure of spending a few days with Dr. Naugle a few years ago at Dallas Baptist University. It was immediately apparent how much he loved the students and how much they

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=910](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=910).

loved him. His colleagues held him in high regard. His book *Worldview: The History of a Concept*<sup>2</sup> had been required reading for my courses at seminary. It is fitting that this tribute volume, *The Good, the True, the Beautiful*, be composed of appreciative essays from Naugle's students, friends, and colleagues.

There can be no more meaningful experience in the professor's life than to see his students carrying the ball down the field and developing their own voices. David Naugle can only be proud of his extraordinary legacy. Knowing him, it is not an unhealthy pride but a sense of satisfaction. His view of vocation, at the center of his teaching, affirms that it is God who calls, and we are mere agents, "ambassadors" of his plan to bring the kingdom forward to this world.

The book is a feast. As one commentator put it, "It's a book about everything." That is about right. Subjects include apologetics, Russia, contemporary Christian music, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Wilberforce, and much more. The obvious strength of the volume is its comprehensive scope. Though in *Worldview* we have a primarily philosophical etymology, with due deference to Augustine, Calvin, Kuyper, Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers, and a host of other philosophers, here we have the wide variety of subjects that we might expect from such an eclectic collection of scholars. The legitimate fear of too much variety, often characteristic of a festschrift without a unifying theme, is offset by the surprising depth of each chapter.

We don't have the space to review every chapter. So, here are three, one from each section, for the sake of sampling. First, from "Part I: The Good," "An Exploration of Calling: William Wilberforce, Julia Sass and Me," by Hannah Briscoe (MLitt from the University of St Andrews). Calling is central to David Naugle's concerns, which has perceptively influenced Miss Briscoe. She pays homage to Os Guinness's powerful

book, *The Call*.<sup>3</sup> William Wilberforce is an obvious choice of a model. Less obviously, Julia Sass, missionary to Sierra Leone, receives the bulk of Briscoe's attention. The parallels as well as the contrasts are poignant. They both keenly felt the compelling voice of God's calling. Wilberforce was well-connected and served in public life. Together with influential colleagues and especially with the Clapham group, he pressed for the end of slavery and the "reformation of morals" in the British Empire. By contrast, Sass had a strongly independent spirit and often fought alone. She created a girls' school and was a strong advocate for women's education as well as for women's roles in missions. The story is moving. With some hesitation Sass became a missionary over the objections of her mother. She battled all kinds of obstacles, including bad health, on the way to success. Though she occasionally dipped into class prejudice, this was not uncommon for the times.

Briscoe credits Wilberforce and his mentor John Newton with the founding of the Christian Missionary Society (originally called The Society for Missions to Africa and the East). Sass and Wilberforce were personally connected through John Venn, one of the founders of the CMS. Much of this article is based on Sass's correspondence with John's son, Henry Venn, to whom she bared her soul. Briscoe reverently draws on this correspondence which reveals a determined woman, who nevertheless had severe illnesses and much psychological anguish. Far from a historical study with a cold recital of facts, Briscoe inspiringly describes her own journey in the light of Sass's.

Second, "Part II: The True," by Scott Shiffer (Criswell College), "An Alternative to Plantinga's Free Will Defense." There is no doubt that Alvin Plantinga changed the face of philosophy in the West. In his famous response to John Mackie's works, which argued that there was a fundamental contradiction between an all-powerful and good God and the existence of evil, Plant-

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2 David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

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3 Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling God's Purpose for Your Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998).

inga painstakingly showed that this is only true if Mackie's premises are right. And they could be challenged. Plantinga's arguments closely resemble the older concept of middle knowledge. Though God knows all things he does not determine human choice. His plan includes the reality of human choice but does not obviate it. So, in one sense he must create a world where sin is a part.

Shiffer argues that this view softens God's sovereignty as well as his goodness. Using numerous Scriptural proof texts, he affirms an immutable, holy, and truthful God, but also one who is incapable of compromising with sin. Though he does not use it, his view accords with the Westminster Confession of Faith's affirmation that God ordains all things yet without being the author of sin (WCF 3.1). He rightly ponders why God created a world in which evil could exist. But he speculatively (in my view) proposes that this situation better opens the way to redemption. Thus, while Shiffer's approach is an improvement over Plantinga's, he never quite recognizes that God's reasons for allowing the fall must remain inscrutable.

Third, "Part 3: The Beautiful," by Episcopal priest David Dallas Miller, "Evangelism Through Beauty." This intriguing essay argues that by emphasizing the good and the true, evangelists have missed the most compelling reason to embrace the gospel: its beauty. He defends this view mostly by citing testimonies of those who came to the gospel through beauty. They include Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, a Jew who was converted to the Christian faith not so much through the Word but because of the beauty of Notre Dame Cathedral. He includes C. S. Lewis, who came to faith through the experience of joy, but not so much through intellectual persuasion nor the moral argument. Miller ventures into the New Testament and contends that Jesus won people over by beauty more than logic. He contrasts the beauty of the raging sea with the greater beauty of the Lord rising to calm the waves. Even the cross becomes a beautiful thing.

As a complement or even a corrective to im-

balance, Miller's view has a certain appeal. Protestants in particular, by stressing the ideational, have downplayed the aesthetic. But as a complete thesis, I find his emphasis lacks equilibrium. And I find some of his evidence disputable. John Frame once wisely said the two happiest words in theology are "not only." If Miller were saying not only goodness and truth but also beauty, we would listen more closely to him. He is aware of the possible imbalance, but slouches into excess. If one looks closely at C. S. Lewis's story, it is impossible to miss the intellectual component and the power of the moral argument. And the New Testament is replete with claims of the truth. John 17:17 is resolute: "Your Word is truth."

The other issue I have with this essay is that the author never actually defines beauty. Of course, the word is famously elusive. But many have taken a stab at it and often convincingly. And Miller seems unaware of Calvin Seerveld's critique of the carelessness with which the term is thrown around, often sounding more like Plato than the Bible.

Having said all of that, the great virtue of this and all the other chapters in the book is that they exist. I do not mean to sound supercilious. I sincerely applaud the wide range of these essays, all of them inspired by the central notion of calling, which David Naugle has so masterfully imparted to his students and friends. ©

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# A Development, Not a Departure: The Lacunae in the Debate of the Doctrine of the Trinity and Gender Roles

by Hongyi Yang

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by Stuart Jones

*A Development, Not a Departure: The Lacunae in the Debate of the Doctrine of the Trinity and Gender Roles*, by Hongyi Yang. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2018, xxii +305 pages, \$30.00, paper.

Whether you are a veteran or a latecomer like me to the debates about eternal submission of the Son (ESS or EFS) and the Trinity, Hongyi Yang's book provides a very helpful distillation and analysis of the controversy. Since the author is a convert from atheism, born in mainland China, her accomplishment is noteworthy as is her sympathy for complementarianism. Her approach to the ESS issue critiques both sides of the debate, though the title of the book suggests a favoring of some version of ESS. The book is essentially her doctoral dissertation but is accessible to many readers of this journal. Basic groundwork for the dissertation predated the 2016 announcement of Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem affirming the Nicene doctrine of eternal generation—a positive change in the eyes of most critics. Interestingly, it was their ESS teaching that gained most attention in 2016—perhaps due to the formal setting of the Evangelical Theological Society where the issue was being discussed.

The book has a reasonable treatment of the early church fathers, in my inexpert opinion, and makes a helpful distinction between the issues they faced (Arianism) and the issues of today (egalitarianism). One interesting observation is the inconsistency of those who condemn the ESS position on traditionalist grounds but embrace an egalitarian gender-relation view that goes against early church tradition.

One frustrating part of the book for me is the discussion of “the Rahner Rule” (the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice-versa) and an alleged gap problem between the economic and immanent (ontological) Trinity. If we simply regard this distinction as one between the Trinity in relation to the Trinity alone versus the Trinity in relation to creatures, then the “problem” is more properly transferred to a “gap” between Creator and creature. For any revelation or relationship to exist between the Creator and creature there must be a voluntary condescension of the Creator. As such, one can argue that the Triune God accommodated himself (Matt. 3:16–17) in the sphere of his external operations (“*ad extra*”)—though clearly, the second person of the Trinity takes on a special “role” in this regard. A noteworthy article by Benedict Bird in the *Westminster Theological Journal*<sup>2</sup> gives John Owen's way of viewing God's *ad intra* and *ad extra* works (vis-a-vis the Covenant of Redemption) that forecloses some problems in ESS that might remain, and the article arguably illustrates a better doctrinal “development” without departure.

This leads to a concern about the exegetical treatment of 1 Corinthians 11:3. Some egalitarian treatments of the text deny that “head” implies “authority” by arguing that such an interpretation is akin to heresy by making the second person of the Trinity (Christ) subordinate to the Father (God). The simple answer to this is that the text references the economic Trinity in God and Christ. This simple and wholly adequate response

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=921](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=921).

2 Benedict Bird, “John Owen and the Question of the Eternal Submission of the Son within the Ontological Trinity,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 80, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 299–334.

would have directed the gender role debate in a better direction.

Yang's thesis—that a doctrine may properly develop in response to new issues confronting the church—is doubtlessly true. It is sometimes argued—wrongly—that ESS was developed as a foundation for complementarianism. The evidence suggests that, in answering faulty egalitarian exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11:3, ESS advocates went beyond a text adequate for their position to root the economic subordination of the Son in an eternal property of divine Sonship. Grudem and Ware—initially rejecting eternal generation—had weak protection from modalism except their “property” of eternal submission.

Yang's interaction with the Rahner Rule suggests that the question of whether any person of the Trinity might have taken on the role of Christ had a part in this development. Since contingency does not exist for God, it is natural to assume there is no accident that the Logos rather than the Father became flesh. If today's ESS advocates confined their views of subordination to Charles Hodge's explanation (subordinate in mode of subsistence and operation), there would be little controversy. Going further, to close gaps between the Trinitarian order and the created order risks the danger of meaningless speculation (cf. Deut. 29:29) or the idolatry of construing God in our image. That said, Yang's book explains serious attempts of Christian scholars to grapple with the revealed mystery of the Trinity, and this is a beneficial contribution. ©

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# Dual Citizens: Politics and American Evangelicals

*Timothy Padgett, ed.*

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by Darryl G. Hart

*Dual Citizens: Politics and American Evangelicals* by Timothy Padgett, ed. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020, 489 pages, \$28.99.

Is the Religious Right, associated primarily with figures like Jerry Falwell (the elder), Pat Robertson, and James Dobson, an organic expression of evangelicalism, or was it the imposition of Republican operatives who saw a bloc of voters worried about secularism and moral relativism that cultivated their support? Those may not be the only alternatives for evaluating the Religious Right, but the question is useful for framing the relationship, to put it simply, between Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell. The former came to prominence in 1949 as the modern-day George Whitefield. In addition, Graham rose to fame as part of the so-called neo-evangelical (now simply evangelical) movement that was important for launching organizations such as the National Association of Evangelicals (1942), Fuller Seminary (1947), and *Christianity Today* magazine (1956). (Graham lent support by serving on the boards of the latter two institutions.) The Moral Majority that Falwell headed, in contrast, began in 1979, and the Lynchburg Baptist pastor had more of a footing in fundamentalism than evangelicalism. That contrast could imply that evangelicalism was more a religious than a political movement, and its public face was more moderate than indig-

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=927](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=927).

nant. The Religious Right, in turn, was from the start political in purpose, and its confrontational stances on abortion, feminism, sexual promiscuity, not to mention nuclear arsenals, may have felt more fundamentalist than evangelical.

This collection from *Christianity Today* in the book under review, *Dual Citizens*, should supply evidence for a plausible answer to the question posed above. Although the editor, Timothy D. Padgett, introduces the essays with a tip of the cap to two-kingdoms theology—Christians live in tension between ultimate loyalty to God and proximate allegiance to the civil magistrate—the book reads like a warm-up for the Religious Right. That is not to say that Falwell and other evangelical spokesmen who came to prominence during the Reagan presidency rejected this model of divided citizenship, as if the Religious Right were theocratic or favored Christian nationalism. Instead, this book suggests continuity between evangelicalism of the Nixon era and the conservative Protestantism of the Reagan and Bush presidencies era because so many of the contributions sound like arguments that contemporary evangelical activists still make.

Padgett arranges the articles around five themes: the presidency, evangelicalism's right and left political sides, foreign policy, domestic issues, and patriotism (or nationalism). Although all of the essays come from the magazine proper, some are anonymous as the collective voice of the editors while others come from writers who occasionally wrote for the magazine. Padgett does not clarify which if any of these authors were on the staff of *Christianity Today*. That leaves a question about which articles reflect the magazine's internal outlook and which were part of the editors' effort to include a diversity of opinions. Either way, the contributions, coming as they do from the flagship publication of the evangelical movement, reveal something of the outlook of born-again Americans between 1956 and 2016. As such, *Dual Citizens* presents the sort of expectations and points of view that made the Religious Right possible.

The difference between an official editorial

and a guest contribution is obvious in the section on presidents. Here readers will see a critical piece from 1978 on Jimmy Carter, which asks whether the president actually lived up to his own standards. The author is John B. Anderson, the Illinois Congressman who ran as a third-party candidate against both Carter and Ronald Reagan two years later. The piece reads like the reasoning of a person looking for votes and testing campaign talking points. Otherwise, the section is solidly behind Republican presidents. An early op-ed column from 1956 about the presidential contest revealed that the magazine's ministerial readers favored Dwight D. Eisenhower over Adlai Stevenson eight-to-one. The editorial itself was not as partisan—it ended with a call for the country to find its way back to the “centrality of the gospel” (21). But it certainly indicated where the magazine's readership was electorally. With John F. Kennedy, the magazine, even after the election, was still raising questions about a Roman Catholic's undivided loyalty to the American Constitution. One official editorial on Lyndon B. Johnson showed support for the Vietnam War as long as it was based on “freedom for all, opposition to all tyranny, and peace with justice” (36). Of the two editorials on Richard Nixon, one expressed hope for a national day of prayer and the other defended Billy Graham's close relationship to Nixon (“no evidence that he has watered down his convictions to gain access”) (40). The magazine did not approve of Watergate, but it did not hammer Nixon even as it spoke positively about Gerald Ford, even trying to find evidence of an evangelical faith in the Vice President. By the time of Ronald Reagan's 1980 victory, the magazine was downplaying evangelical influence on the election and calling for greater maturity among evangelicals as citizens. From Bill Clinton to the 2016 election, Padgett includes no official editorials but a mix of writers, some not household names, addressing each president. One possible inference from these essays on the presidency is that even as evangelicals became more identifiably political, the magazine moved from its largely pro-Republican position to one of

seeming neutrality.

Such moderation was not for the reason of avoiding issues. Most of the essays in the volume repeat the core political convictions of evangelicals (at least as the editors of *Christianity Today* understood them). Some of these concerns are evident in the section on domestic affairs which includes several articles on race and civil rights (in support), and abortion (opposition). But in other essays about elections or government more generally, readers will see recurring themes: anti-Communism, lower taxes, religious freedom, separation of church and state, freedom of speech and the press, just treatment of the poor, pro-life, and pro-family. In foreign policy, the magazine was firmly anti-Communist in the way it framed Vietnam and the Cold War. Later armed conflicts in Kosovo or Iraq allowed writers to draw upon just war theory in ways that expressed support for American intervention. Very few writers, aside from the discussion of just war, employed arguments from schools of political theory or foreign policy. Only in the section on the Evangelical Left and the Religious Right did Jim Wallis, the founder of *Sojourners*, directly appeal to the left's talking points of "the priority of the poor" and nuclear disarmament (186). Wallis was quick to add that his politics came directly from Scripture.

The other book contributor who has at least seven articles and who could sound the most theoretical in his use of political philosophy is Chuck Colson. The aid (of Nixon) who went to jail for his Watergate involvement, converted while in prison, returned to society, started Prison Ministries, and became a popular evangelical pundit on American life through books and his radio editorials on Break Point. Colson is one of the lower visibility figures in the Religious Right. His manner was polished and clearly different from a pastor like Jerry Falwell who seemed to rely on biblical provocation more than political common ground. Colson's ability to present evangelical convictions in principled ways that were intended to persuade (rather than assert or clarify) was likely a reason that he wrote regularly for *Christianity Today*. At the same time,

Colson did not back away from the culture-war side of his positions. In 1985 he wrote, "If you start reading the Bible you will see that there is a whole agenda that God has laid before us on the makeup of a righteous society" (178). For Colson, the list started with abortion. That way of stating the problem indicated that in the 1980s, the heyday of the Moral Majority, the editors and readers of *Christianity Today* were far more part of the Religious Right than they would become by the presidency of George W. Bush.

Overall, *Dual Citizens* is a valuable collection of writers and points of view in the gate-keeping periodical of the evangelical movement. Readers may be disappointed that the book includes less material that explains how Christians should calculate their loyalties to God and Caesar. It certainly provides evidence of how others made that calculation. In that sense, its usefulness is that of a documentary collection. That is, it gives readers examples of what some persons at a particular time thought about certain topics. *Dual Citizens* is especially instructive in taking the political pulse of evangelical Protestants before the rise of the Religious Right. ©

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# Small Preaching

by Jonathan T. Pennington

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by Charles M. Wingard

*Small Preaching: 25 Little Things You Can Do Now to Become a Better Preacher* by Jonathan T. Pennington. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021, 119 pages, \$18.99, hardcover.

Preachers need books on the theology of preaching, works that demonstrate its biblical warrant. Preachers also need how-to books on the preparation and delivery of sermons. Carelessly crafted sermons dishonor the Savior, as does a delivery that fails to compel attention.

But there is a third kind of book on preaching that preachers will do well to read. These books offer the mature reflections on the intangibles of preaching—matters of pastoral bearing, mental attitude, and habits of preparation. Jonathan T. Pennington, preaching pastor at Sojourn East Church in Louisville, Kentucky, and associate professor at Southern Seminary, provides just this kind of book in *Small Preaching*.

The book's twenty-five brief essays fall under three headings: the person of the preacher, the preparation for preaching, and the practice of preaching.

In section one—the person of the preacher—the author clarifies important interactions that take place between congregation and preacher. The pastor must be able to receive both praise and criticism with grace. On the one hand, ministries are crippled when preachers seek the affirmation of men instead of the approbation of God. On the other hand, the inability to receive criticism has left many ministers angry, hurting, and wracked by doubt. Pennington's counsel is

sound: “The wise pastor will look at praise not as an idolatrous source of life but as a gift that enables a healthy life” (12) and will view criticism as “an opportunity for growth” (15).

Other topics in this section include identifying the distinction between preaching and teaching, and the benefits that come from preparing sermons with a group of fellow preachers. The latter idea raises the question: Is this common or even doable? The author shares his own experience of a group of pastors in his city who concurrently preach from the same texts each week, an arrangement he knows will not work for most pastors. Therefore, he proposes that ministers in the same geographic area share constructive ideas together either in person or by virtual meeting platforms.

Section two—the preparation of preaching—offers much commonsense advice. The author reminds that “when it comes to preaching content, less is often more” (54). For each sermon, hardworking preachers gather far more material than should be used—and risk overwhelming their congregations with too much information. They leave the place of worship knowing less, not more. A fine Christian man once put it to me like this: “My preacher tries to pour twelve ounces of content into my eight-ounce brain. What spills over is wasted on me.”

In the previous section, Pennington counseled preaching shorter sermons and saving more extensive teaching for other venues (29). Preaching is by definition monological; teaching can be dialogical, providing opportunities for questions and clarifications (31). Discerning how much is too much is an art all preachers must learn.

Homiletics textbooks debate the merits of taking a manuscript into the pulpit. But who can argue with the author's counsel that “writing is thinking” and “the means by which thought is created” (40)? So, whether you take a manuscript into the pulpit or not, there is value to writing out your sermon prior to entering the pulpit. I point out to my students that when a preacher's explanation of a text is unclear, the fault is frequently his, because he himself lacks a clear understand-

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=928](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=928).



ing of the text. Clear writing facilitates clear thinking and clear preaching.

Section three—the practice of preaching—covers a wide range of topics: the first and last minute of a sermon, the use of the church and cultural calendars, the benefits and challenges of *lectio continua* preaching.

I found especially helpful the chapter titled “The Power of Predictions.” The preacher is encouraged to “learn to ask thoughtful questions that invite [his] hearers to ponder and anticipate what [he’s] discussing” (87). The author points to studies demonstrating the value these questions play in promoting both the understanding and retention of instructional material (86–87).

Pennington is serious about the preacher and his work. A book of this kind is provocative in the best of ways. It compels the preacher to look at his work through the eyes of a seasoned preacher. It serves as a corrective by revealing areas for improvement that might otherwise escape his notice. And in areas of disagreement with the author, the book forces the preacher to sharpen his positions. The goal of this book is to make us better preachers, and to that end, the author has succeeded. ©

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# The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self

by Carl Trueman

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by T. David Gordon

*The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*, by Carl Trueman (with Foreword by Rod Dreher). Crossway, 2020, 425 pages, \$34.99.

Had I entered a coma during my cancer year (2004, only one year after *Lawrence v. Texas* abolished anti-sodomy laws) and emerged nearly two decades later, I would have felt like Rip Van Winkle, who awoke to find that the colonies were now a country (by a generous definition, anyway). Less than a decade before those treatments, the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) passed both houses of Congress by large, veto-proof majorities, and though Democratic President Bill Clinton criticized the law as “divisive and unnecessary,” he nonetheless signed it into law in September 1996. That was before I entered my hypothetical coma. Shortly after, though President Barack Obama disagreed with gay marriage when he ran for his first term (2008), by his second term he referred to those who disagreed with gay marriage as “haters.” DOMA was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in *U.S. v. Windsor* (2013) and *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), both of which argued that it is unconstitutional to regard heterosexual marriage as more legitimate than homosexual unions. Biological males competed against biological females in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. The change was profound and appeared to be sudden.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=936](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=936).

The change was not sudden. As Carl Trueman displays in *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, the re-imagining of what it is to be human took place over the course of more than two centuries in the West, promoted by individuals such as Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche, and Darwin. What we commonly regard as the “sexual revolution” is much larger than that; said sexual revolution was and is merely one manifestation of an entire re-imagining or re-conceiving of what the human essentially is. As Trueman puts it:

the sexual revolution is *simply one manifestation of the larger revolution of the self* that has taken place in the West. And it is *only as we come to understand that wider context* that we can truly understand the dynamics of the sexual politics that now dominate our culture. (20, emphases mine)

Trueman is aided in his analysis by other students of cultural and intellectual history, including Charles Taylor, Philip Rieff, and Alasdair MacIntyre, yet his work goes further and broader and examines particular roots of the modern conception of the self not only in figures we ordinarily associate with the revolution—such as Nietzsche, Marx, and Darwin—but in others who are less frequently observed, such as the infamous Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Shelley, and Blake.

The book is divided into four parts. In the first part, Trueman discusses the Architecture of the Revolution, in which he provides important definitions and concepts that will be crucial to his analysis. The second part—Foundations of the Revolution—is where Trueman’s analysis reaches back further into Western cultural history than most other analysts do, preceding the exposition of Nietzsche, Marx, and Darwin with his analysis of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Blake, and others. This was the aspect that I found to be perhaps the most beneficial in the book, because the roots went back substantially prior to the nineteenth century, even back into the late-eighteenth century. Part 3 of the book deals with the Sexu-

alization of the Revolution and demonstrates how Freud (et. al.) informed the New Left. Part 4 discusses the Triumphs of the Revolution in its tripartite analysis of the Triumph of the Erotic, the Triumph of the Therapeutic, and the Triumph of the T (his term not only for transgenderism but for the entire conception of the human that animates transgenderism).

Throughout, Trueman weaves seamlessly his references to both primary and secondary literature where pertinent, and the proper blending of the two is what makes the book so engaging to read, in a field of study (intellectual history) that is ordinarily so pedantic that it drives away all but its most committed devotees. Not since Goldilocks has an author so frequently gotten it “just right.” The primary references are convincing, and the secondary references assure the reader that Trueman’s view is not idiosyncratic, even though it is distinctive (and possibly, in its entirety, unique).

Rousseau justly plays a large role in Trueman’s analysis, as he did in Paul Johnson’s *Intellectuals*, in which Johnson referred to him in the book’s first chapter as “An Interesting Madman,” with considerable justification. But while Johnson justly called attention to Rousseau’s remarkable failure as a husband and father, Trueman demonstrates that Rousseau was not *un*-principled, but principled; his own intellectual principles led him to believe that monogamous heterosexual marriage was an instrument of oppression that needed to be resisted. He was *committed*, as it were, to being *uncommitted* to his wife and children. For Rousseau, such abandonment of one’s family was not merely permissible; it was mandatory. Prior to Trueman, I don’t recall anyone else demonstrating so convincingly that the re-imagined human is not merely permitted to march to a different drummer; he is required to do so.

The broad movement over the last two-plus centuries has many specific dimensions, each thoughtfully elucidated by Trueman; but the fundamental change in conception is from what we could call “external man” to “internal man.”

Where the older conception defined the human externally by nation, geography, religion, vocation, family, ethnicity, or any other external reality, the newer conception defines the human internally, by the self, untethered by or to any external realities. When Rousseau asserted that the human “was born free, but is everywhere in chains,” any external reality was conceived by him as a kind of chain or bondage. Only the internal self is truly free to be a true self.

As is true with almost all significant books, this one should be read at a single moment, and not spread out over weeks. Those will read it best who set aside a weekend, or a couple days of vacation time, to read the volume in its entirety. Since Trueman’s goal is for readers to perceive the historical trail that brought us to the present moment, it is best to read it with few interruptions. Only then will readers see the coherence of our present incoherence. If you find yourself—as I did—feeling like Rip Van Winkle awakening to an entirely new order, this thorough and insightful work will disabuse you of the notion. Church officers especially will be aided by eschewing the superficial commentary of the various news media in order to see such a convincing display of the historic roots of the present cultural moment.

©

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# ✦ Servant Reading

## Review Articles

### Exploring Recent Covenant Theology

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by **David A. Booth**

*Christ & Covenant Theology: Essays on Election, Republication, and the Covenants*, by Cornelis P. Venema. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017, 462 pages, \$24.99, paper.

Old Testament scholarship has experienced a dramatic renewal of interest in covenant theology over the past sixty-five years. In particular, twentieth-century scholarship on the relationship between Hittite treaties and the biblical covenants has born a great deal of fruit. Nevertheless, the fact that many of the Old Testament scholars working in this field lacked familiarity or concern with the development of systematic covenant theology in the Reformed churches has led to both confusion and controversy. Regretfully, young men seeking licensure for ministry are now sometimes expected to speak with precision and clarity about a range of these challenges from the Federal Vision, to the New Perspective on Paul, to questions regarding the republication of the covenant of works at a level that many experienced pastors would have difficulty articulating.

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=864](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=864).

Perhaps even more troubling, such men frequently are expected to choose sides in such controversies before they have attained a solid grasp of the strengths and weaknesses of the various positions. What young and old alike need is a guide for the perplexed. Ideally such a volume would come from someone with mastery in historical, exegetical, and systematic theology who also writes with clarity, balance, and charity. We all owe Cornelis Venema a profound debt of gratitude for providing us with just such a guide.

Venema begins with three essays dealing with the covenant of works. After establishing the propriety of describing the Adamic administration both as a covenant and one that is characterized by the requirement for perfect, personal, and perpetual obedience, Venema turns his focus to whether or not the Mosaic covenant involved a republication of the covenant of works. These essays primarily interact with the followers of Meredith Kline in general, and the essays in *The Law is Not of Faith*,<sup>2</sup> in particular. The aim of these chapters is not to hinder fresh exegesis regarding the distinctive function of the Mosaic covenant in the history of redemption. Rather, Venema seeks to advance our understanding by critically examining the historical and exegetical claims of the book, along with exploring a few of the important theological implications of those claims. Historically, Professor Venema acknowledges the diversity of ways that Reformed theologians have related the Mosaic covenant to the covenant of grace while also credibly asserting that the authors of *TLNF* have overstated the historical support for their approach through “an accommodated reading of the sources” (78–105). Exegetically, Professor Venema focuses on Bryan D. Estelle’s treatment of Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 30:1–14, T. David Gordon’s treatment of Galatians 3:6–14, and S. M. Baugh’s treatment of Galatians 5:1–6.

In my judgment, Venema achieves the mod-

2 Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen, eds. *The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009).

est but important objective of demonstrating that it is not necessary to embrace republication in order to responsibly interpretate these passages. While I largely side with Venema's critical judgments, further detailed exegesis and debate is required to settle these questions of interpretation more definitively. Theologically, a number of important questions are raised. In particular, since advocates of republication freely acknowledge that Leviticus 18:5 did not require perfect, personal, and perpetual obedience, why should it be identified with the covenant of works rather than with the necessary fruit of saving faith? Like many critics of republication, Venema seems as concerned that the authors of *TLNF* (as he perceives them) fail to affirm fully the importance of the third use of the moral law in the Christian life as much as he is concerned with what they actually do say regarding exegetical details. A helpful step towards peace and unity within NAPARC churches would be for followers of Kline to make clear, even if they believe that they have already done so, that they fully and joyfully embrace the robust exposition of the moral law which is contained in our Larger Catechism. Those interested in studying the relationship of the Mosaic covenant to the covenant of grace further are encouraged to explore the just released *Covenant Theology*<sup>3</sup> from the faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary (which contains a diversity of viewpoints on republication) along with the *Report of the Committee to Study Republication* presented to the Eighty-third (2016) General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

The next section of the book, "Covenant and Election," consists of five essays. The first two essays deal with the connection between the doctrines of covenant and election in the theology of Herman Bavinck, and these are followed by two essays, one on the election and salvation of the children of believers who die in infancy and the other on the relationship between covenant theol-

ogy and the baptism of the children of believers. These are immensely practical essays for every pastor and ruling elder to consider.

Though it is somewhat simplistic to formulate Bavinck's position in these terms, it might be argued that Bavinck views the doctrine of election to underscore God's sovereignty in salvation and the doctrine of the covenant to underscore human responsibility and in the conferral of salvation. (211)

Holding both of these truths together leads to preaching that is simultaneously confident of the covenant promises and that calls our covenant youth to appropriate self-examination, recognizing their need for a personal trust in Christ alone for their salvation.

Professor Venema next turns to giving us three essays on covenant, justification, and the Federal Vision. I strongly recommend that readers not skip directly to this section. Although these essays were originally published separately, the previous chapters in this volume significantly prepare the reader to grapple with the challenge of the Federal Vision within confessionally Reformed churches. Nearly two decades after the Federal Vision first burst onto the scene, I continue to see it more as a theological discussion among friends while Professor Venema sees it more as a coherent theological project. One advantage of the former approach is that it reminds us of the danger of defining orthodoxy by drawing a circle around all of our friends and declaring that everyone inside the circle is by definition orthodox. Venema's interests lie elsewhere.

These essays effectively refute, in summary form, all of the major errors associated with the Federal Vision movement. Those looking for a fuller treatment of paedocommunion will find a valuable guide in Venema's book *Children at the Lord's Table*?<sup>4</sup> It will be helpful for readers to remember that these essays are a revision of the draft report that Venema wrote more than a

3 Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether, eds. *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

4 Cornelis P. Venema, *Children at the Lord's Table?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2009).

dozen years ago for the United Reformed Church of North America (URCNA). His chief concern was protecting the URCNA from errors that he saw coming from the men associated with the Federal Vision rather than carefully distinguishing the views of each of the men involved in that movement. This leads Venema, for example, to present the claim that the Federal Vision is characterized by “the rejection of the teaching of the imputation of the ‘active obedience’ of Christ as a ground for the believer’s justification” (287) without noting that one of the best known men attached to the Federal Vision, Doug Wilson, both affirmed and affirms this very thing. The original focus of these essays also results in Peter Leithart<sup>5</sup> going unmentioned, even though he has gone on to become arguably the most influential promoter of Federal Vision theology in the world. It can be hoped that Venema would continue these studies by turning his keen mind and lucid pen to giving us a thorough treatment of the distinctive theology of Dr. Leithart.

The last essay of the volume deals with covenant and justification in N.T. Wright’s interpretation of Romans 5:12–21. While appreciative of aspects of Wright’s exegesis, Venema points out a number of shortcomings in Wright’s handling of this passage. Of particular note, Venema shows that Wright does not do justice to how Paul uses the expression the “righteousness of God,” nor does he adequately deal with the union of humanity with Adam. With respect to Paul’s critical argument in Romans 5:14–21, Venema carefully shows that the Reformed tradition is worth following, not because it is Reformed, but because it more fully and faithfully explains what Paul has written than does Wright’s revisionist exegesis.

Venema also includes several helpful pages on Wright’s theological method. Since the central claim of the New Perspective on Paul is that Paul should be understood against his own Jewish background, it would have been valuable if Ven-

ema had expanded this section to discuss Paul’s own evaluation of the vast majority of first-century Judaism as being dramatically more unfaithful toward God than N.T. Wright and the key proponents of the New Perspective on Paul allow. Methodologies often determine outcomes, and the New Perspective on Paul is no exception to this maxim. E. P. Sanders self-consciously adopts a sociology-of-religions approach in categorizing Second Temple Judaism.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, Sanders carefully catalogs various strands of Judaism without judging any of them. Apparently, the last thing that a post-holocaust liberal Protestant academic would want to do is to claim that any form of Judaism was being unfaithful to God.<sup>7</sup> This tendency is also found in Dunn’s work where he frequently and defensively states that such and such an interpretation is not anti-Semitic. Similarly, N.T. Wright spends 134 heavily footnoted pages in *The New Testament and the People of God* carefully discussing “First Century Judaism within the Greco-Roman World”<sup>8</sup> without ever considering whether any of these Jews were actually being faithful to God. Whatever merits such an approach might have,<sup>9</sup> it clearly does not reflect the approach that Paul himself takes in his letters. By contrast, Paul insisted that some Jews caused the name of God to be blasphemed<sup>10</sup> because of their behavior. He insisted that “no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of

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6 E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977), 12–24.

7 James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways* (London: SCM, 1991), 15.

8 N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 145–279.

9 There is nothing in principle wrong with adopting sociological approaches as one perspective in assessing Second Temple Judaism. Dunn is certainly correct when he writes: “In the Second Temple period, therefore, the ‘Jews’ would normally denote a group identified by ethnic origin and religious practice, and as such, distinct from others around” (James D. G. Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways*, 144). Nevertheless, to solely adopt this method of discussing ancient Judaism is an enormous handicap in understanding Paul’s polemics.

10 Romans 2:24.

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5 Peter Leithart currently serves as the President of the Theopolis Institute in Birmingham, Alabama and as a teacher at Trinity Presbyterian Church (CREC), which is also in Birmingham.

the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.”<sup>11</sup> What is striking is that Paul presents only a very small remnant of his contemporaries from Israel as having this inward circumcision of the heart. The irony is that in seeking to move beyond Reformation readings of Paul to read Paul in light of Second Temple Judaism, the leading lights of the New Perspective on Paul refuse to read Paul on his own terms.

Venema concludes his work with a very helpful fourteen-page synthesis that helps readers see that the distinct essays in this volume are part of an integrated biblical system that glorifies God while bringing clarity and comfort to his people. For

when Reformed theology seeks to articulate the doctrine of the covenants upon the basis of biblical teaching, it does so in order to magnify the person and work of Christ in the realization of God’s purpose for human life in fellowship with himself. (432)

Many readers will benefit by reading this concluding chapter before diving into the essays in order to have a roadmap for the journey on which Venema so capably leads us.

Of the many books that I have read on covenant theology, this collection of essays is undoubtedly the best. A world of good would flow from every minister and every candidate for ministry within the Orthodox Presbyterian Church carefully reading this volume. I could not recommend this work more highly. ☺

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# Slavery and Covenanters

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by **Alan D. Strange**

*Founding Sins: How a Group of Antislavery Radicals Fought to Put Christ into the Constitution*, by Joseph S. Moore. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, xiv + 214 pages, \$36.95.

Joseph Moore, an Assistant Professor of History at Gardner-Webb University (North Carolina), argues in this book that the heirs of the Scottish Covenanters opposed two things especially as they relocated to the British colonies and the new American nation: the “godless” U.S. Constitution and the chattel slavery that it protected. This book examines both the abolitionism of the Covenanters and their opposition to the lack of any acknowledgment of God and Christ in the nation’s governing charter. The latter manifested itself over the course of many decades in an attempt to amend the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution to read

We the people of the United States, humbly acknowledging Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, the Lord Jesus Christ as Governor among the nations, in order to constitute a Christian government, to form a more perfect Union . . .” (119)

There were some variations on this proposed amendment, but the idea remained the same: Covenanters thought that the nation must formally and legally admit its obligations to God, which they believed was incumbent on all nations to which the gospel had come, and openly submit to “the crown rights of King Jesus.” This was necessary for America to be a properly Christian nation, according to Covenanter reasoning; otherwise, it was a mere rebel government, not

<sup>11</sup> Romans 2:28–29.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=876](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=876).

worthy of the support of Christians, a position that in the Old and New Worlds rendered the Covenanters suspect as purveyors of treason and sedition. The process of the civil authorities in swearing fealty to God and his rule found expression in “covenanting,” the way in which the kings of the earth kissed the Son (Ps. 2).

If the federal government would but acknowledge the Lordship of Christ, Covenanters averred, the U.S. could address “manstealing,” the chief sin associated with chattel slavery, which could then be eliminated. The Covenanters, in addition to insisting on the necessity for such civil covenanting, also found the sin of manstealing to be contrary to a Christian profession (1 Tim. 1:10) and excluded from communion those who refused to manumit their slaves and renounce chattel slavery. On this point the Covenanters differed with their mainstream brethren, particularly the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA). The PCUSA, though it expressed opposition to slavery, never took the sort of uncompromising stance that the Covenanters did with respect both to opposing the U.S. Constitution and slavery.

Moore points out that the Covenanters are among the most influential religionists in this country of which scarcely anyone has heard. The attempt of the Covenanters to amend the U.S. Constitution so that it would reflect national submission to God and Christ continued for many years. The National Reform Association (NRA) was started largely by Covenanters in 1864 to promote such a “God amendment.” It caused no little furor as late as the 1980 U.S. Presidential campaign when it was realized that third-party candidate John Anderson had sought to introduce a version of the “God amendment” in Congress. When Anderson’s support of such was brought to light, the public was shocked. As odd as the “God amendment” seemed at the time, it serves as testimony to how far-reaching this lost cause of the Covenanters was.

Who are Covenanters? Perhaps the readers have seen those charts depicting the “family tree” of American Presbyterianism. The top half typically depicts the majority tradition: The Church

of Scotland, Free Church of Scotland, and the other churches deriving therefrom. The OPC and the PCA, for instance, both derive from this part of Scottish Presbyterianism. The bottom half of such charts shows the Covenanter and Seceder lines. Both are the subject of Moore’s book; he lumps the two groups together, though the Covenanters are decidedly more adamant about these matters than the Seceders. The Covenanters derive from those who promoted the National Covenant of 1638 in Scotland and the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643. The Seceders come out of the Marrow Controversy in Scotland in the early part of the next century. The Covenanters today, at least in their Old School form, are represented by the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America (RPCNA) and the Seceders by the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC). All of these churches—OPC, PCA, RPCNA, and ARPC—are allied in the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC).

Perhaps a brief examination of the origins of “covenanting” would be useful. Reform came to Scotland in 1560 with the Scottish Confession and the First Book of Discipline. What characterized these reforms was opposition to Episcopacy, Erastianism, and later, after its rise in the seventeenth century, Arminianism. All parties continued to embrace the idea of Christendom, as had the Roman Catholic Church, which entailed support of the notion of a religious establishment, in which the civil government supported, including monetarily, the official established church. The problem here was how to do this without promoting Erastianism, the notion that the state is over the church. This idea was core to the Caesaro-papism of the East, which permitted the Emperor to hold decisive sway in the church. In the West the Roman Catholic Church rejected the idea of the state being over the church, proclaiming instead that the church was over the state.

When Reformation came, many Protestant rulers, in seeking to turn the tables on the Romanists, adopted their own view of state over church (the Erastian position), quite egregiously



in the British context, in which the king of England claimed headship over all the church in his realm. The Second Book of Discipline (1578) offered a potential solution to this problem in its doctrine of the Spiritual Independency of the Church.

Another solution to this problem would be to embrace what later became known as the Voluntary Church movement, the kind of disestablishment ethos that came to prevail in America. Scotsmen did not embrace this position, however. They wanted to find a way to support an established church that would not be Erastian, a position that may be hard to avoid with an establishment principle that involves the state itself funding the church and calling and overseeing her synods. Enter the notion of “covenanting.” The Covenanter movement arose as a way to maintain the establishment principle and, at the same time, avoid Erastianism. The covenanting idea is that the state is bound to God’s law and the governorship of Christ and, by sworn oath, is to be in explicit submission to the divine. The question that naturally arises is that in a contract (which is what a covenant is, at least in part) between God and man, to which all men are to subscribe and swear allegiance, “who speaks for God?”

Samuel Rutherford, George Gillespie, and William Henderson, as leading lights among the Covenanters, would say “God, who has already spoken in His Word.” How is such to be understood and interpreted, though? The answer of the Covenanters would be through the agency of the church, particularly through the preaching of the Word. Covenanting is a sort of Protestant version of the church over the state, arguing that the Presbyterian church is established by divine right and, as the only true church in any properly Christian nation, has the right and obligation to inform the state of her duties. How specifically though? How does a book (the Bible) that was meant to govern God’s people in a particular redemptive historical moment—during the time of types and shadows—in a particular land—in a primitive agricultural society—apply, especially

politically, once the gospel goes global and all these conditions radically change? Certainly, one does not see this sort of church/state relationship in the New Testament. Here are some of the problems with the whole covenanting idea. It seems an odd sort of special pleading to argue that the New Testament warrants the Presbyterian Church to instruct the state as to her specific duties and to hold her feet to the fire in assessing the state’s compliance to the church’s proclamations. Might not this approach baptize political views as if such came from Scripture?

Moore treats the rise and fall of the covenanting idea in Scotland itself in the seventeenth century. By the end of the century, the Toleration Act of 1689 and other developments permitted the Scots to maintain an established Presbyterian church without the over-lordship of the British monarch. This was mainly what Scotland desired, and the covenanting movement, earlier embraced to achieve this, was no longer mainstream and, in fact, became radicalized and persecuted as seditious (thousands perished in the “Killing Times”). The now marginalized covenanting movement (and even the Seceding movement of the 1730s, in the aftermath of the Marrow Controversy) never amounted to much thereafter in Scotland. Perusal of a mainstream Free Church of Scotland (founded as a result of the Disruption in the Church of Scotland, 1843) book on the church, James Bannerman’s *The Church of Christ*,<sup>2</sup> makes clear that the Free Church opposed voluntarism and still embraced, at least in principle, establishmentarianism. The principle of “covenanting,” though, was not deemed necessary to secure such.

Some of these covenanters, due to persecution in Scotland, and other factors, moved to America. They settled in Virginia, the Carolinas, and especially Western Pennsylvania, becoming ardent patriots in the American Revolution. They were quite happy to oppose King George III (and British rule generally) and to argue the illegiti-

2 James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 2 vols., (repr., 1869, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974).

macy of the rule of a state (England, especially) that had once covenanted (as they claimed) and now had broken covenant with God.

The Covenanters became sorely disappointed in the failure of the new nation to recognize God in the U.S. Constitution. The Preamble failed to do so, declaring in Lockean fashion that the government derived its authority not from God but from “We the People.” Furthermore, to add insult to the injury of no acknowledgment of God, the Constitution forbade any religious test for office. It declared, in the last part of Article 6, Clause 3: “but no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” This meant that an atheist, a heretic, or a follower of another religion than Christian (Jews, Muslims, etc.) might serve in any office of the Federal government. While some state constitutions retained religious tests for office and religious establishments (Massachusetts maintaining an established church until 1833), the Federal Government, both in the “no religious test” clause and in the First Amendment to the Constitution (which forbade Congress to establish any particular religion or church) explicitly prohibited such.

Accompanying this failure to acknowledge the Supreme Deity in the national charter was the provision made in it for the godless “peculiar institution” of slavery. Slaves first came to Virginia in 1619 and by the time of the country’s founding the institution seemed to be waning. The word “slavery” is never mentioned in the Constitution and the founding document did not permit the slave trade to extend beyond 1808, with the apparent intention being the desired withering away of the institution in the new nation. But the newly revived cotton industry made the South more dedicated to slavery than ever. The PCUSA, before its 1837 division into Old and New Schools, adopted a statement at its GA in 1818 condemning slavery and calling for its abolition. However, this never materialized, and by the 1830s and 1840s the PCUSA, especially the Old School, came to regard abolitionist rhetoric as threatening to the bond of union in church

and state.

This position stands in marked contrast to the Covenanters, who insisted that Africans were in the image of God and thus should not be enslaved. The Covenanters identified with the plight of slaves, seeing themselves also as victims of the establishment. In the early national period, when most Americans were embracing and perpetuating the “George Washington myth,” Covenanters taught that Washington, Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, and the other Founders were not heroes in heaven but rebels in perdition. This did not endear them or their cause to fellow Americans.

As time progressed the American narrative among many Christians ran like this: America’s origin was distinctly Christian and America was a Christian nation at its founding. The Covenanters begged to differ, given the Constitutional absence of any acknowledgment of the Lordship of Christ and the embrace of slavery, with many Christians not only slaveholders but serving as its chief defenders, particularly in the PCUSA. In the South, Seceders supported the American Colonization Society (which chiefly involved the emigration of freed slaves to Liberia) and other measures more acceptable to a South that grew increasingly intolerant of any opposition to slavery. In the North, many Covenanters established and manned the Underground Railroad, spiriting slaves especially through Ohio to freedom in Canada.

They particularly opposed the Fugitive Slave Act as part of the Compromise of 1850, the Dred Scott decision of 1857, and supported John Brown and his raid on Harper’s Ferry. Covenanters viewed the Constitution as a sort of “covenant with death,” particularly in light of the three-fifths clause in which slaves were deemed three-fifths of a person for purposes of taxation and representation. Covenanters embraced the argument, long before William Lloyd Garrison and other famous abolitionists did, that the Constitution promulgated the notion that slavery meant that not only did the labor of the slave belong to the slaveholder but also the person of the slave did. Frederick Douglass opposed this view and averred that the

Constitution taught that there was “no property in man.” The Covenanters were to the left of Douglass and others on this and contributed to the rise of political liberalism, not on the question of the “God amendment,” but in critique of the Constitution, slavery, and matters germane.

Moore notes that the Covenanters in the North, which is where they ultimately came primarily to reside (the South being quite hostile to them), remained staunch opponents of slavery before—and of racism after—the Civil War. The Seceders, largely in the South, muted their abolitionism and sought to do what they could to better the condition of slaves, taking a more moderate course (since abolitionism, at least openly, became impossible in the South in the run-up to the war). After the war, however, some Seceders did not oppose racism nor Jim Crow but gave way to and supported it. Ultimately, then, it remained the preserve of the Covenanters, in distinction from the Seceders, to continue in staunch opposition to slavery and all its attendant evils (whether racism was a consequence or more of a cause of African slavery remains hotly disputed).

Moore’s book is a welcome contribution to the growing literature assessing historic attitudes to slavery, showing that at least some Presbyterians, namely, the Covenanters, stood firmly opposed to slavery from the beginning, though never able to convince wider Presbyterianism, and certainly not the nation, to embrace the idea of “covenanting.” ©

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## Give Me Shelter and Give Me Answers

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by **Darryl G. Hart**

*To Think Christianly: A History of L’Abri, Regent College, and the Christian Study Center Movement*, by Charles E. Cotherman. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020, xv + 301 pages, \$35.00.

What sort of theological education is available to lay people? Maybe the better question is, where do church members go for theological instruction that is not part of a degree program? Orthodox Presbyterians recently have debated the merits of women writing theology. Some officers have questioned whether women should venture into a domain reserved for special office or academic theologians. But this kerfuffle ignored the larger question about the value of doctrinal understanding among the laity. On the surface, who could object to lay men and women wanting to know more about theology and being sufficiently proficient to offer some comment and guidance? Confessional churches, after all, have catechisms which encourage the laity to explore the faith. These communions also call for parents (usually lay people) to give a kind of theological education to children. Meanwhile, for the last sixty years Reformed seminaries have offered a variety of degrees to people who have no intention of being ordained. Theological education for the laity, consequently, appears to be a wholesome endeavor.

But a question that haunts such a positive estimate is whether churches are delinquent in providing the sort of doctrinal instruction lay people want (and related, whether sermons are sufficient). Charles E. Cotherman’s new book, *To Think Christianly*, is a great resource for consider-

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=888](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=888).

ing at least some of these questions. It is a history of the rise of institutions since 1960 in both Canada and the United States whose mission was to provide instruction for Christian lay people. The specific institutions that Cotherman covers are Regent College in Vancouver, L'Abri, the Ligonier Study Center, and the Center for Christian Studies in Charlottesville, Virginia. Many readers may be unfamiliar with James Houston, the man responsible for bringing Regent College to fruition. In the case of L'Abri and Ligonier, with Francis Schaeffer and R. C. Sproul the guiding figures behind them respectively, many people in NAPARC churches will understand how ordinary the idea of lay theological education outside a degree-granting institution is. After all, Schaeffer and Sproul are virtually household names among evangelicals who lean Reformed. And yet, their institutional outlets were study centers designed to draw upon theology as the source for answers to hungry lay Christians' questions about life. No one arguably complained about the effects of these parachurch, lay-driven institutions on the work of pastors and Reformed congregations. Still, that Schaeffer and Sproul responded to an itch in the church world is one indication that the churches were not providing what lay people wanted. That is, at least, one way to read Cotherman's generally fine history of what he calls "the Christian Study Center Movement."

The unofficial guru of this surge in theological education outside the church and for the laity was Francis Schaeffer, a missionary to Switzerland with ties to the Bible Presbyterian Church. Evangelism to children began in 1948 but by 1951 the Schaeffers had begun to bring people into their chalet for meals, conversation, and counsel. By 1955 this informal effort blossomed into something more formal. L'Abri began then as both a Christian study center and a residential community where young inquirers went to find answers to questions about what used to be called "the meaning of life." This was the springboard for Schaeffer's own emergence in the 1960s as an influential apologist, with books and speaking tours in the United States to back it up.

By 1968 L'Abri's reputation had grown to inspire a study center in Vancouver (British Columbia), first conceived by local businessmen and spearheaded by James Mackintosh Houston, a geographer who had studied at Oxford University. The aim of Regent College was a one-year course of study (with a certificate) and a place for research, comparable to the Tyndale House in Cambridge, England. Regent and L'Abri in turn became the inspiration for the C. S. Lewis Institute, begun in 1973, in connection with the University of Maryland. Just a little before that, R. C. Sproul had founded the Ligonier Valley Study Center outside of Pittsburgh with significant initial support from that city's Coalition for Christian Outreach. At roughly the same time, the New College Berkeley, located in California, began as another center in the orbit of L'Abri. The last institution to follow in Cotherman's narrative is the Christian Study Center in Charlottesville, Virginia, began in 1974 in close connection with Trinity Presbyterian Church (PCA).

Cotherman does not say much about the historical context of these centers, even though the photos that he includes show earnest Christians from the 1970s looking every bit like the Jesus People. Did the baby-boomer generation exhibit a degree of hunger for theology that earlier and later generations did not? Or did the first two decades of the Cold War, in combination with Vietnam, race relations, and the sexual revolution, raise a host of considerations that young people encountered on college campuses but found no obvious responses to in the churches? Just as important was the expansion of higher education at this time. Evangelicals, like many other groups, were going to college in record numbers thanks to the expansion of university programs and state funding for such study. Part of the backdrop of the Christian study center movement may well have been a generation of Protestants going to secular universities, encountering material with which their parents and pastors were unfamiliar, and looking for Christians who could speak to those topics. All of these factors may explain why the study center phenomenon prospered for a

time and then required adjustments to sustain its activities.

For whatever reason, the popularity of study centers declined by the late 1970s. The case of Ligonier is instructive. What began as a study center in the early 1970s, partly inspired by L'Abri along with support from networks among Pittsburgh churches, evolved into a parachurch ministry with little in-person opportunities. Initially, Ligonier had a campus made up of homes where staff lived and that provided accommodations for students. In 1978 when the center completed construction of its first dorm, Ligonier had hosted over 3,000 students for overnight stays. Where Ligonier differed from L'Abri, according to Sproul, was that Schaeffer's work was primarily evangelistic (with a good dose of apologetics) while the western Pennsylvania center was committed to theological education for the laity. By the late 1970s, however, Sproul and his colleagues became convinced that Ligonier needed to expand and that the way to do so was through media. In 1977 Ligonier launched *Tabletalk* magazine. Five years later, thanks to technological developments that made VHS recordings and distribution affordable, Ligonier devoted resources to tapes of Sproul and other teachers for sale to viewers and students. By 1985 Sproul and his staff decided to leave the Ligonier campus in Pennsylvania and create offices in Orlando where they would produce the magazine, VHS tapes, and other materials. That was the last year that Ligonier held a summer course at its original Pennsylvania location. One factor behind this development was the ebbing appeal of residential study centers. The thought of living together, working on common projects, and studying in community may have been largely a product of 1960s idealism.

The other cases of Regent and Charlottesville also indicated the limits of the Christian-study-center-as-residential-community model. Although inspired by Schaeffer, James Houston, the initial leader of Regent, saw a way for the institution to become a training center for Young Life staffers. But other advisors and some of the faculty at Regent balked at that idea and shepherded the

college into a graduate school of theology associated with the University of British Columbia. Regent remains one of Canada's largest graduate schools in theology. This turnabout was a possible outcome from the very beginning since many of the Plymouth Brethren, largely academics, associated with the institution from the beginning had received doctorates in theology, biblical studies, or church history at British universities (partly the function of existence within Britain's Commonwealth of Nations). In the United States, in contrast, the chances of study centers moving to degree-granting institutions was the path pursued by mainline Protestant churches almost eight decades prior. By the 1970s, the academic discipline of religious studies was the way that universities and colleges brought faith on campus.<sup>21</sup> As a result, when in the mid-1980s the popularity of informal theological education subsided at the Center for Christian Study in Charlottesville, the institution became a kind of headquarters for Christian ministries at the University of Virginia with programs for the edification of its own students who lived at the Center. (The Center's programs also include ministry to non-residents.) After 1990, Charlottesville's Center, with Drew Trotter at the helm, became the hub for a consortium of Christian study centers at college and university campuses across the United States.

Cotherman's multi-institutional narrative is not meant to be one of declension. His conclusion indicates support for such an enterprise. He appeals both to James Davison Hunter's idea of "faithful presence" (that Christians should seek influence not through big, visible causes but by ordinary, humble means). The author also throws in current platitudes about social justice which seem far removed from the original mission of the study centers. Aside from the odd parts of the conclusion, Cotherman not only raises questions

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2 The parallels between these Christian study centers by evangelicals and earlier denominational campus ministries among mainline Protestants between (1900–1930) are uncanny. See D. G. Hart, *The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies in American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

about the theological education of the laity but also about the timing of Christian young people eager to know more about the faith. Where today do people go for the sort of lectures that students at L'Abri and Ligonier heard by Schaeffer and Sproul? One hunch is that the integration of faith and culture or politics and society is now easier to find and to do than it was seventy-five years ago. Practically any Christian professor or pastor can write a book about art, music, politics, economics, or law from what they claim is a Christian worldview. But the persistence of Sproul's own popular theology seems harder to find even as Ligonier itself keeps their founder's recorded speaking and teaching alive.

Whatever the legacy of the Christian study center, the church's laity have moved higher up the scale of academic degrees and professional careers than their parents and grandparents. Providing the current generation of young adults guidance in theology that is both serious but not overly technical remains a challenge today every bit as great as it was when Francis Schaeffer started L'Abri. ©

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# The Importance of Biblical Anthropology

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by **William C. Davis**

*What It Means to Be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics*, by O. Carter Snead. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2020, 321 pages, \$39.95.

The laudable efforts O. Carter Snead makes as the director of the de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture at the University of Notre Dame to protect the lives of unborn children, their mothers, and all neighbors in need make it unpleasant to point out difficulties with *What It Means to Be Human*. I have been involved with pro-life causes for nearly forty years, and the central concern of Snead's book is showing that the law should protect every human life, "regardless of age, disability, cognitive capacity, dependence, and, most of all, regardless of the opinions of others" (270). All humans, he argues, from conception until biological death, are persons, and the law should acknowledge that and protect them. The fact that current law does not protect the very young and others with health challenges the way that it protects the healthy and cognitively able is evidence, Snead says, that the anthropological roots of the law are defective.

When Snead extends his discussion beyond abortion, however, his zeal to protect the unborn leads him to paint pictures that may hinder effective pastoral care. These sections are not essential to Snead's primary message about protecting the vulnerable. His treatment of abortion law and of our culture's assumptions about what it means to be human make the book's central argument worthy of careful attention, especially by Christian readers.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=887](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=887).

Snead's book is a single argument for an ambitious thesis: The anthropology of American public bioethics is Expressive Individualism. This anthropology is inadequate to lived human reality because it “forgets the body” by failing to take human finitude and dependence into account. American public bioethics ought to be grounded in an anthropology that treats all human organisms regardless of age, ability, or cognitive capacity as full members. As embodied beings we are all limited, dependent, and on a “scale of disability.” The law should encourage the formation of the social networks, virtues, and moral imagination that will fulfill our obligations to give sacrificial care to all humans in need.

By “American public bioethics” Snead means the laws and ethical discussions governing and informing American medical practice. His focus is more on laws and Supreme Court decisions than on the actual practice of medicine. This does not make a difference when he is addressing abortion or physician-assisted suicide; it makes a significant difference, though, when he turns his attention to assisted reproduction and end-of-life decision-making in the hospital. The term “Expressive Individualism” comes from Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*,<sup>2</sup> and it refers to the assumption that “the individual, atomized self [is] the fundamental unit of human reality” (86). On this view, the self has no unchosen obligations; its project is to define itself through the autonomous exercise of the will.

The heart of Snead's argument is his claim that Expressive Individualism is inadequate to lived human reality. Drawing on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Sandel, Snead advocates an anthropology that takes our embodied

existence seriously.<sup>3</sup> Snead's anthropology makes our mutual dependence and social connectedness fundamental. Relationships and obligations exist whether we choose them or not. Networks of unconditional sacrificial giving and grateful receiving begin with family relatives and extend outward to all in need. The virtues of gratitude, just generosity, hospitality, and taking on others' suffering as our own are pursued in response to our finitude and need for each other. Those responsible for shaping our moral imaginations should encourage growth in this “ethic of giftedness” (100). Snead contends that the law should contribute to shaping our moral imaginations, so if the law is teaching only Expressive Individualism, it needs to be changed.

Chapter 3—the longest in the book by far—traces the history of abortion law in the United States, giving a detailed account of the *Roe v. Wade* decision and the decisions after it that have dealt with efforts to limit the right to abortion. With many Supreme Court rulings to consider, Snead finds multiple grounds for concluding that Expressive Individualism is the underlying anthropology. Having already argued that this understanding of human existence is inadequate, Snead proposes (in broad terms) ways that the law should be changed to take human embodiment (and in particular the vulnerable lives involved) firmly into account. Crucial to Snead's argument is his claim that the law must treat all human organisms as *persons* with the same dignity as healthy, mature adults. The dependence and vulnerability of both the unborn child and the mother generate an obligation for the law to protect and care for both of them.

The discussion of abortion is followed by a shorter analysis of assisted reproduction in Chapter 4. Unlike abortion law, the laws regulating assisted reproduction provide no more than

2 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). Taylor develops his analysis in *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) and *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

3 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animal: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1999) and Michael J. Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

consumer protection for people seeking fertility services. The near silence of the law on protecting the children created by in vitro fertilization (IVF) is evidence, according to Snead, that Expressive Individualism is the grounding anthropology. The abuses he describes involving screening embryos to select a baby's sex or to avoid a Down syndrome child are genuinely alarming. Snead would have the law fight these abuses, as well as study the negative health consequences for babies conceived via IVF.

The shortest chapter in the book looks at what the law and bioethical consensus encourage and allow in end-of-life medical decision-making. Snead divides his treatment into two parts. The first considers life-sustaining medical treatment and in particular the difficulties that arise when a person nearing death is unable to make decisions about their own care. Snead argues that the use of living wills to allow incompetent patients to exercise their autonomy insists on binding the patient to choices made long before knowing what their condition will be. He contends that in this the law refuses to take into account the patient's diminished physical and mental condition. Snead proposes that an adequate anthropology of embodiment would empower proxy decision-makers to make choices with the current limitations in mind, enfolding the sick person in their social network rather than confining them to their individual past choices.

The second part of Snead's chapter on death and dying concerns physician-assisted suicide. Focusing on the Oregon law that first legalized physicians prescribing lethal doses of drugs to allow "death with dignity," Snead quickly details the many ways that Oregon's law puts the individual's power of choice over everything else, including the sound practice of medicine. Even though this section of the book is brief, it provides the strongest reason to think that Snead's thesis—that Expressive Individualism is driving the law—is correct.

The final chapter gives a clear, concise summary of Snead's overall argument. He makes clear his hope that as the law takes embodied human

flourishing more seriously, the law will step in and provide all the protection, care, and moral formation that others fail to provide. Snead's expansive notion of the state's authority over many areas of life is evident throughout the book. In his conclusion, he insists on it.

The issues that Snead surveys to make the case that the law needs to change are politically contentious and touch the lives of most people. Much is praiseworthy about the book. His persistent and forceful appeal for the law to protect vulnerable humans, especially unborn children and people nearing the end of life, will be bracing for readers already committed to a biblical view of humans as God's image-bearers. Although Snead does not mention religious reasons for cherishing all human lives, what he says the law should do to protect human life is consistent with a biblical anthropology. The larger ethic he advocates, with its concern for the vulnerable, the sick, and the challenged, is also consistent with a biblical understanding of how humans should treat each other. How Snead gets from the facts of vulnerability to the existence of moral obligations to give care (and without reference to God's law) is not explained carefully in the book. Readers familiar with God's law will see merit, though, in the virtues Snead commends and the importance of cultivating moral imaginations that see every human as a person worthy of protection and care.

Snead is at his best when he is explaining Supreme Court decisions. His account of the history of the high court's rulings on abortion is clear, precise, illuminating, and sobering. He details the ways that Justice Harry Blackmun's reasoning in *Roe v. Wade* depends on legal inventions and novel philosophical arguments never considered in the cases that put the issue before the Supreme Court. Moreover, Snead traces the shifting basis for the right to an abortion from privacy, to liberty, and finally to equality. Without laying any stress on it, Snead makes clear that Supreme Court appointments make a significant difference in the extent to which U.S. law allows the meaning of the life of an unborn child to be determined entirely by the child's mother.



Snead's claim that Expressive Individualism is the anthropology underlying abortion is tempting, but not convincing. This is most evident in the high court's willingness to shift the grounds for its conclusions. Abortion law is *consistent with* aspects of Expressive Individualism, but any individualism explains the law if an unborn child is not a person. Yet Snead's careful explanation of Expressive Individualism shows that it is a threat to all people who are not capable of exercising their capacity for autonomous choice in a robust way. The use he makes of MacIntyre, Taylor, and Sandel to explain the defects in this kind of self-centered approach to human existence is valuable in itself. Carl Trueman's recent book, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, traces the fruit of Expressive Individualism in the Sexual Revolution of the last sixty years, and Snead's compact account of this "modern self" is a useful way into the current discourse on the self's quest for identity.<sup>4</sup>

Snead's dissatisfaction with Expressive Individualism turns out also to work against his stated goal of fostering a political consensus for reforming the law on a more adequate anthropology (10). If his analysis is correct, enough Americans now embrace Expressive Individualism for the courts to take it for granted. Any political debate about establishing a different foundation will depend on reaching out to people who will find Snead's alternative bizarre. Readers who already understand the futility of making autonomous self-assertion our chief end will find Snead's misgivings about Expressive Individualism heartening. Self-centeredness in fact leads to loneliness and undermines real community. As Snead notes, though, Expressive Individualism is at least in part a reaction to stifling moral demands from people in authority. Readers in the grip of Expressive Individualism—the people Snead needs to join the political conversation—are likely to see his alternative vision for the law as paternalistic, authoritarian, and even oppressive.

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4 Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

This rhetorical weakness, though, is relatively minor compared to the curious deficiencies in his treatment of assisted reproduction and life-sustaining medical treatment. His description of assisted reproduction correctly identifies many of the ways the techniques involved can be abused. Snead incorrectly suggests, though, that everyone who makes use of these techniques has killed some of their children in order to have a living child. Most major cities have fertility specialists who will commit to using procedures that honor the life of every embryo conceived and endeavor to bring them to term. In a *Bioethics* class of twenty students at Covenant College last year, I had two students announce (without prompting) that they were conceived by IVF. Their parents were and are PCA members in good standing, and no embryos were destroyed in the process. Snead is right that the law does far too little to protect unborn children in the assisted reproduction process. Telling only part of the story about how IVF works runs the risk of leading people to believe that all parents of IVF babies were reckless with human life.

The most disappointing section of Snead's book is his brief discussion of decisions surrounding life-sustaining medical treatment. Most of what he says about the laws and hospital practices regarding end-of-life decision-making is fifteen years out of date. I have been serving as a volunteer ethics consultant for hospitals since 1995. The legal and medical environment that Snead describes would have been accurate back then. Patients who could not make decisions about their own care were called "incompetent," and the "living wills" in use were blunt instruments that asked the medical team to obey choices made years before that rarely fit the situation the patient was facing. Things have changed a lot since 2005. No patient is called "incompetent" without the declaration of a court. Patients who cannot make decisions are called "decisionally incapable," and maybe only for a short time. The rise of Palliative Care as a medical specialty has shifted the focus from what the doctors think is best for the patient to what the patient would choose. Most importantly, Advance Directives have replaced living

wills as the legal means of documenting a person's intentions for end-of-life care. Every state legislature has designed and approved specific forms that empower a surrogate decision-maker—usually a loved one—to make choices according to the patient's values in light of the actual medical situation. The changes to the law and medical practice that Snead calls for to take human embodiment seriously have already taken place. It is hard to explain why Snead does not celebrate these developments. His readers deserve a more current picture of how these decisions are made. With an outdated picture, people may neglect to bless their families by documenting their intentions for medical care at the end of life.<sup>5</sup>

*What It Means to be Human* is a valuable resource for people eager to understand how abortion law changed so quickly in less than one generation. It is also a concise summary of recent efforts to diagnose a key element in the spirit of the age (Expressive Individualism) and to explain the alternative vision for human flourishing offered by critics of Enlightenment Individualism such as MacIntyre, Taylor, and Sandel. Snead's argument that American public bioethics is ultimately rooted in Expressive Individualism is less convincing. Weaker, more pluralistic explanations are available, and some recent developments in the law and medical practice suggest that Americans are taking vulnerability and concern for others more seriously: End-of-life law and practice is one area; the rising acceptance of COVID-19 mask and vaccine policies that put the public good ahead of individual rights is another.

As a final word, it is worth noting that Snead assumes that the purpose of the state is to protect *and provide for* human identity and flourishing (269). Consistent with this understanding of the extent of the state's mandate, Snead would remedy our current situation by giving the state

the authority to “create, maintain, and nurture the networks of unconditional giving and grateful receiving,” to inculcate the virtues of dependence, and to cultivate the “moral imagination” of citizens (274). He would give the state the authority to “step in” whenever these networks and virtues do not result in care for the needy. It is hard to see biblical warrant for giving the state this kind of power. God's Word gives the state a clear role (to maintain order and to punish wrongdoers), but responsibility for shaping the moral imagination, forming virtuous people, and nurturing the God-created networks of mutual accountability are the work of the church, the family, and other voluntary mid-level institutions between individuals and the state. If the state intervenes wherever it sees an unmet need, it is likely to cause individuals and these institutions to withdraw from making the sacrifices involved. Rather than strengthening biblically sound networks and virtuous character traits, giving a coercive power the authority to enforce them will in fact weaken the networks and virtues that are nothing if they are not voluntary.

Snead's willingness to give the state such a large role, though, comes from his frustration that no one is stepping up to protect the vulnerable and provide for their needs. He does not mention the church or any other institutions, instead placing the blame on Expressive Individualism. If families, communities, and, most of all, churches were caring for the vulnerable—including pregnant women and their babies—Snead would not have to propose that the state take on the task. I agree with Snead that the law is doing too little to protect the unborn. I also agree that the vulnerable need more than protection and that the networks, virtues, and moral imagination that he commends should be nurtured in order to promote flourishing. State coercive power cannot do that effectively. The church, however, can and should. ©

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5 Spurred by the 1989 PCA Study Committee Report on Heroic Measures at the End of Life, I have written on the biblical basis for the use of Advance Directives and what God's law says directing how they may be used faithfully. See William Davis, *Departing in Peace: Biblical Decision-Making at the End of Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017).

# The Idea of Office

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by Gregory E. Reynolds

*The Golden Key for Life and Leaders: The Idea of Office*, by Kornelis Sietsma, David H. Schuringa, ed. NL: North Star Ministry, 2019, 123 pages, \$10.00.

During the early years of my ministry, while working on the report of the Committee on Women in Office, I discovered the earlier version of this volume, published by Paideia Press in 1985, simply titled *The Idea of Office (TIOO)*, by K. Sietsma. In this original book, what is called the “Introduction” is actually a foreword by the translator, Henry Vander Goot. Then what is titled the “Foreword” is actually the author’s introduction, as it appears in the present volume. The new edition simply more correctly titles this “Introduction.” While Vander Goot does not tell us much about Sietsma, he offers an excellent apologia for the importance of office in the modern context. “Office, then, is service indeed, but always service in a specific work. . . . Far from being a consequence of having gifts, office is that delegated and limited authority God has apportioned to each area of life” (*TIOO*, 11, 13). It is unfortunate that this section is eliminated in the new edition and that the translator, Vander Goot, is only acknowledged in the new edition on the copyright page.

The foreword by David T. Koyzis in the new edition (*TGK*, 7–10), however, is valuable because he provides important biographical information about Sietsma. In 1942 Sietsma was arrested by the Nazis at his home in Amsterdam, where he was a pastor. Soon after he was executed in Dachau at the age of forty-six for helping the Jews. His final sermon on Jesus’s temptation in the wilderness, from Luke 4:1–13, emphasized

the temptation that comes with power (7). This makes his teaching on the nature and limits of office all the more poignant.

Sadly, the final chapter, “The Office of Believer and Ecclesiastical Life,” has been eliminated, no doubt to appeal to a broader audience as well as to view the idea of office in a broader sense. It is replaced by a brief epilogue by the editor, H. David Schuringa. Ecclesiology is the weakest link in the Western church today. The new Foreword focuses on the importance of office in general, whereas Sietsma moves from the general biblical concept of office, to office in various spheres of life, and concludes with three of the six chapters in the original by dealing with office in the church, both special and general.

The six chapters of the original could be divided into, chapter 1–3: “The Biblical Idea of Office in General,” and chapters 4–6: “The Biblical Idea of Office in the Church.” Sietsma tellingly begins chapter 4 by observing that in “a discussion of the office that the believer holds in the church, we shall touch upon those matters which, in our view, are most neglected” (*TIOO*, 56; *TGK*, 67).

There is still much value in this slightly abridged edition. But the original is still available in PDF.

The new edition has reformatted the text in block paragraphs. Otherwise, the first five of the six original chapters are faithfully reproduced. The editor, David Schuringa, has added several informative footnotes. In two places he adds a subheading for clarification (28, 38).

I often summarize each chapter of a book in a review article in order to save time for busy pastors, elders, and deacons, who may not be able to read the book under review. In this case I shall only offer some hors d’oeuvres to whet your appetite because the book is both brief and very important. It should be read by every church officer. What follows is from the new edition (*TGK*).

In the Introduction, Sietsma describes the two ecclesiological poles he seeks to navigate: “In church affairs it has been the domination of the hierarchy or the triumph of the enthu-

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=893](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=893).

siastic leader, the extremes of clericalism or Montanism,<sup>2</sup> which have damaged our sense of office and official relationships” (11). God’s sovereign control over all earthly authority and scriptural data inform Sietsma’s idea of office. The New Testament brings out the riches of the idea of office, focusing on office, especially in the church as service to God—stewardship of a God-given task (18–19).

Chapter 1, “Office Lost and Restored,” explores the nature of office and the damage sin has done to it since the fall. Human beings exist in official relationship to God, but now because Adam walked away from his calling, office and the idea of office have been corrupted. Hence, born in sin, we are all by nature office-breakers (30).

Chapter 2, “Christ the Office-Bearer,” begins: “The restoration of man to his rightful office has come into being in and through Christ” (31). This rich chapter shows how Christ as the Second and Last Adam has restored the office to his redeemed people (39). We are prophets, priests, and kings in him.

Chapter 3, “Office in the Various Spheres,” explores the idea that “office involves institutional authority granted by God” (41). Office is present in every sphere of human life: family, church, and state. Obedience to the authority assigned in each of these arenas is never blind, but it must be exercised with the wisdom of the community (46–47). Power and authority do not ultimately reside in the leader or the people, but in God. This alone is sufficient to counter revolutionary ideas. “No single human being has the natural right to rule over another except in his capacity as office-bearer. . . . The idea of office stresses the authority of the office-bearer even as it sets limits on that authority” (51–53). And then this relevant gem on the practical consequences of the idea of office:

One such consequence is that we honor,

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2 This was the movement, led by the late second century self-proclaimed prophet, Montanus, who claimed direct revelation, resembling the present day Charismatic movement.

obey, respect, and support bearers of the office, even when they are not the representatives of our choice.

If we hurl defiant and dishonoring words at our office-bearers, if we think it right to advance our own views by undermining the authority of those who have been clothed with the office of government by God’s providence, then we have not understood the idea of office. We are still under the spell of personalism, of glorying and trusting in persons . . . (52–53)

How poignant this is coming from one who knew the extreme abuses of power in the Nazi regime, and who himself would be executed by the same.

Chapter 4, “Office in the Church,” is nicely summed up by Sietsma: “the office-bearers are called primarily to *administer* the Word of God and the Rule of Christ to the congregation” (72). He affirms the importance of the office of elder by insisting that “the congregation errs when members would rather see the pastor than an elder at their door” (68). The congregation must obey its officers because they minister God’s Word. The officers in turn must make sure that God’s Word is the basis of their words and deeds (73–74). The last part of this important chapter deals with the difference between person and office and reasons for declining office. The high spiritual quality of Sietsma’s exposition is exemplified when he observes that “The office encourages modesty” (80).

Chapter 5, “The Office of Every Believer,” explains in very practical terms that every believer has the office of a servant of God dutybound to be a vital part of the visible church. Each believer is an office-bearer, clothed with the dignity of their chief office-bearer, Christ, and must treat each other accordingly. Sietsma supports this by quoting a portion of Belgic Confession, Article 28, dealing with the duties of believers to and in the church (87). This is similar to the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 26, “Of the Communion of Saints,” which asserts our duties

to Christ the head of the church and our fellow believers.

Chapter 6, from the original version only, “The Office of Believer and Ecclesiastical Life,” stresses the importance of church attendance and “participation in worship” (97–101). One cannot imagine a more relevant chapter on the topic of the idea of office. This is the end toward which the entire book is aimed, and yet oddly omitted from the new edition.

Hearing God’s Word is not only an activity of the first order but the only activity befitting humans in relationship to their God. A relationship of equality never exists between God and His people; however, that fact in no way detracts from the dignity or office of the believer. Therefore, when in the administration of the Word, this relationship between speaking God and listening man shines forth, then the office of believer is most beautifully displayed and exercised. (99)

There is in every area of life an idea and the embodiment of that idea. As Sietsma asserts, the idea of office “extends to the whole of a Christian’s life” (13). This is why the original title is so valuable to church officers. When I asked a retired Christian Reformed pastor, John Piersma, how to control emotion while conducting funerals, he said, “Remember your office.” This I never forgot, and it proved an enormous help in many aspects of my pastoral ministry. Sietsma’s little book cultivated this idea in my heart.

The dowager queen Mary in the Netflix series, *The Crown*, has some profound advice for the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth II. The letter is a fictional addition in the series, but it accurately expresses the Windsor idea of royal duty. The letter addresses the new queen while she is still grieving the loss of her father the king:

You must put those sentiments to one side now. . . . Duty calls. . . . your people will need your strength and leadership. I have seen three great monarchies brought down through their failure to separate personal

indulgences from duty. . . . And while you mourn your father you must also mourn someone else—Elizabeth Mountbatten—for she has now been replaced by another person—Elizabeth Regina. The two Elizabeths will frequently be in conflict with one another. The fact is: the crown must win, must always win.

While the series tends to view the monarchy and its sense of duty as repressive (witness the free-spirited portrayals of Elizabeth’s younger sister Margaret and Prince Phillip), and while it is true that office, and the power and authority connected with it, can be abused, it is also true that office is often denigrated and even despised in Western democracies, to its own hurt. As Vander Goot, in the original edition, observes,

Modernism must be opposed to the idea of office. Modernism realizes that no human being has the right to exercise authority over others *by nature*, but it concludes from this that by *nature* every person is essentially the same and that office is at best a functional idea. Hence modernism replaces the concept of difference with the concept of sameness, the notion of equity with the idea of equality; whoever has the ability has the right to rule. (*TIOO*, 10)

Sietsma’s humility, maturity, balance, and spirituality is displayed in his final sentence: “With respect to the special dignity of the three offices instituted by Christ and His apostles, they [the Reformers] nevertheless maintained the principle of the priesthood of all believers” (101). ©

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# Medical Technology: A Blessing Not to Be Idolized

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by William Davis

*Bioethics: A Primer for Christians*, by Gilbert Meilaender. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020, 176 pages, \$18.92.

Bioethics is concerned with at least three different kinds of questions. All three types of questions have become more difficult to answer with rapid advances in medical technology over the last six decades. To see the differences between these kinds of questions, consider a married couple who is struggling to get pregnant. Sixty years ago, In Vitro Fertilization was not an option. It was not possible to test embryos for genetic abnormalities. No one was growing “eternal” stem cell lines from aborted fetuses to enhance medical research. One kind of bioethical question would focus on the choices available to the couple seeking to conceive and carry a child to term. For Christians, these questions would revolve around identifying the biblically permissible ways to pursue having children and acknowledging their biblical obligations to protect every life that resulted from their efforts. Another kind of question raised by this couple’s situation would focus on the public policies that best protect the interests of the couple and others involved with infertility: parents, babies, health care providers, and researchers. A third type of question would ask what kind of people the parents should have become in order to handle the crisis of infertility when it arose. This kind of question properly goes beyond the couple to their parents (eager to have a grandchild) and their church community (in

all the ways they support and set expectations on the couple). These questions are clearly different. Someone helping an infertile couple make choices about reproductive technology options should not insist that the couple spend years growing in patience, self-control, and dependence before helping them. The questions about public policy do not matter to the couple in the midst of their crisis. Public policy impacts the kind of people we become, but it is only one influence among many.

Gilbert Meilaender’s *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians* is an outstanding guide to the third kind of question: what kind of people should we become in order to deal faithfully with the possibilities offered by advancing medical technology? The positions that Meilaender takes on public policy questions are sound. However, the book does not provide detailed reasons for these positions that would help a Christian in a debate with someone who disagreed (nor does Meilaender intend to provide debating points). For questions about how to help people in the midst of a medical crisis—the first kind of question—the book will be frustrating. Because Meilaender is most concerned to help Christians guard their hearts against idolatry, the fourth edition does not take account of some important changes in the practice of medicine between the first edition in 1996 and 2020. As a result, the book’s implicit advice for people in the midst of medical crises may end up wounding the people who need guidance. With this caution in mind, however, the book is an exceptionally important resource for people *not* in the midst of a crisis. Careful attention to Meilaender’s work here and his other publications will prepare Christians (and others whom Meilaender invites to “listen in”) to have hearts that handle medical crises faithfully when they come.

The central concern of Meilaender’s *Primer* is the need for Christians to recognize that the rapid advance of medical technology has the power to tempt us into idolatry. Meilaender’s chapter topics are chosen to highlight medical advances that encourage us to alter where we are

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=901](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=901).

placing our trust and thus what we are willing to allow. The threats to our hearts posed by expanding medical options for fulfilling the mandate to “be fruitful and multiply” take up chapters two through five (“Procreation versus Reproduction,” “Abortion,” “Genetic Advance,” and “Prenatal Screening”). For Christians *not* in the midst of the crisis of infertility, Meilaender’s recommendations are sobering and wise. Legal and efficient “assisted reproduction” options are often reckless with the lives of the unborn. Meilaender rightly insists that Christians cannot set aside protecting every child in pursuit of having a child “of their own.” Making an idol of childbearing is wrong, and these technological advances intensify temptation to idolatry. The church needs to be talking about these idols and taking seriously Meilaender’s warning that “technology has a momentum all its own” (13).

Chapters six through eleven (“Suicide and Euthanasia,” “Refusing Treatment,” “Who Decides?,” and “Gifts of the Body: Organ Donation,” “Gifts of the Body: Human Experimentation,” and “Embryos: The Smallest Research Subject”) consider the temptations to idolatry near the end of life. Aside from a curiously out-of-date argument against the use of “advance directives” for end-of-life decision-making, the guidance that Meilaender gives in this section is biblically sound and insightful. (The chapter “Who Decides?” is largely unchanged from the first edition in 1996. A lot has changed in the way families are asked to make decisions for loved ones in the hospital since 1996. Although Meilaender correctly supports the use of “Durable Powers of Attorney for Health Care” in all editions of the book, this chapter deserved to be updated lest it cause confusion.) Meilaender’s warnings about creeping idolatry in these chapters lead him consistently to ask how the new medical realities threaten our relationships and corrupt our understanding of what it means to be human. For example, the rapid rise of efficient organ transplantation and the push for donor organs threatens to alter our relationship to our own bodies. These developments encourage us to allow organ-seekers to pressure

families to “bring some good” out of the death of their loved one, suggesting that their embodied life and death would have no meaning otherwise. Although I believe it is biblically appropriate to be a volunteer organ donor (and am one myself), Meilaender’s warnings about this feature of current medical practice are sound.

The final chapter, “Sickness and Health,” goes to the heart of the idolatry and how-we-understand-ourselves problem. Modern medicine is prone to see all health challenges as pointless. Drawing on Jesus’s answer to his disciples’ question about the man born blind (John 9), Meilaender points out that the issue was not who was to blame, but rather how God would use the blindness for his glory. Health is not our chief end. Sickness and suffering are not pointless. Jesus Christ himself took on flesh like ours—limited, dependent, frail, and ultimately suffering—not only to accomplish our redemption, but also to draw intimately near to us in our sickness and suffering. A crucial part of resisting making an idol of medical advances is rejecting the lie that sickness and suffering are pointless. The goal is to “become people who give thanks for medical progress without worshiping it or placing their trust in it” (123).

Meilaender’s analysis is spiritually rich, making reassuring use of allusions to Scripture. Even so, readers unfamiliar with Lutheran theological ethics may find two aspects of Meilaender’s book puzzling. First, Meilaender uses Scripture to draw attention to the *works* of God, and in particular the incarnate Christ in his life and death on the cross. When Meilaender refers explicitly to Scripture, it is not with a list of passages that support his recommendations. While I prefer seeing many explicit references to Scripture, Meilaender’s approach gives human embodiment the attention it deserves. The Lutheran imagination is drawn to Jesus hanging on the cross. From there, it easily sees that Jesus suffered *in his body* and so he knows what it feels like to be limited and sick. Not only did Jesus suffer *for* us, Jesus suffers *with* us.

The second feature of Meilaender’s book that

may puzzle non-Lutheran readers is his pushing back against seeing medical advances as “redemptive.” Giving medicine that kind of credit, according to Meilaender, increases the chances that we will make medical advances an end in themselves, and thus objects of worship. Many Calvinists are comfortable with seeing everything that pushes back against the effects of the fall as part of Christ’s cosmic work of redemption, and thus as foretastes of Christ’s consummate kingdom. Although I am comfortable thinking of medicine as “redemptive,” Meilaender’s warning is worthy of careful consideration. Triumphalism in the guise of “redemptive activity pushing back against the fall” may owe more to Enlightenment confidence than it does to Scripture.

The fourth edition of Meilaender’s *Bioethics: A Primer* is most valuable for its persistent attention to the impact that our frequent encounters with medicine can have on our hearts. Meilaender is a clear and compelling writer, making profound spiritual questions easy to understand. Ministers of the Word and everyone involved in church education should give this book sustained, careful attention. A year of COVID-19 has made the role of medicine in our lives unavoidable. Thoughtful efforts to preach and to teach in ways that nurture biblical attitudes about health, sickness, parenting, suffering, and death will bless the church in ways that will pay dividends for years. Meilaender’s book is a good first place to look for help with that task. ©

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## The Race Card in a Marked Deck

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by Gregory E. Reynolds

*An Imaginary Racism: Islamophobia and Guilt*, by Pascal Bruckner, trans. by Steven Rendall and Lisa Neal. Medford, MA: Polity, 2018, 206 pages, \$19.95.

Never has the power of language had such varied and pervasive vehicles available to it as the internet, mobile, and social media. The Orwellian corruption of language in the service of propaganda reminds us that we live in a rhetorically dangerous time. This theme and many others are woven skillfully together in this important book. The subtleties and richness of French political philosopher and ethicist Pascal Bruckner’s writing reminds the reader of the exquisite Bordeaux wine his culture produces. Although Bruckner is dealing specifically with Islamophobia, the lineaments of his exploration apply to the broader subject of racism, which I believe is helpful in our present troubled intellectual milieu in dealing with Islam, as well as American black and minority communities.

I have wrestled over the validity of reviewing this book for *Ordained Servant* because Bruckner is a neo-Enlightenment thinker. He reminds me of Neil Postman, who believed that a return to Enlightenment epistemology was the solution to the problem of technopoly,<sup>2</sup> whereas Bruckner believes it to be the way to help assimilate moderate Muslims into European or Western society. He does understand that modern Islam is a vast and diverse religion with large pacifist and moderate

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=908](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=908).

2 Neil Postman, *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century: How the Past Can Improve Our Future* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).



wings, as well as many likely tempered, at least in part, by their contact with Western cultures (consider just three different branches: Sunni, Shia, Sufi, just to scratch the surface). But he also sees that Islam has a large and uniquely militant population committed to its founding texts.

I decided that it is good to review such a book as this (I reviewed Bruckner's book on happiness in *Ordained Servant* in 2011<sup>3</sup>), partly because I think it is important that we challenge and inform our critical thinking with the best thinkers outside of our tradition. Furthermore, Bruckner has insights into the nature of Islam and race that are helpful in unraveling the complexity of our present cultural and religious conflicts.

There are two poles in the discussion of race and the integration of Muslims into Western cultures: difference and unity. Pascal Bruckner points to the different approaches taken by British and French imperialism (18–20). The British allowed the different cultures of various colonies to remain essentially the same, i.e., as they were, respecting their integrity, whereas the French wanted their culture to be imposed on their colonies. For Bruckner the Enlightenment liberalism of France and its European allies is the solution to the integration of Islam.

## Summary

Bruckner begins, in the “Introduction: A Semantic Rejuvenation,” by exploring the definition of “Islamophobia.” He notes that its “lexical rejuvenation” (3) conflates two different meanings:

the persecution of believers, which is obviously reprehensible, and the questioning of beliefs, which is practiced in all civilized countries. Criticism of a religion falls within the domain of the spirit of examination but certainly not within that of discrimination.

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3 Gregory E. Reynolds, “Flying with Wax Wings: The Secular Quest for Happiness,” *Ordained Servant* 20 (2011): 143–49; *Ordained Servant Online* (June–July 2011), [https://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=260](https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=260). Pascal Bruckner, *Perpetual Euphoria: On the Duty to Be Happy*, translated by Steven Rendall. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, 2000 French edition).

Striking a religious believer is a crime. Debating an article of faith, a point of doctrine, is a right. Confusing the two is an intolerable amalgamation. (4)

As an example, Bruckner imagines that closing debate over the truth of Christianity with the use of *Christianophobia* would have stunted its evolution (4). While it is unlikely that by “evolution” he has the importance of doctrinal development in mind, it is certainly true that polemics in response to opposition have strengthened, not weakened, genuine Christian faith ever since the ancient church. So, Bruckner defines fundamentalism as closed to discussion of its doctrinal and ethical assertions (5).

The book is divided into five parts with nineteen chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue. The titles are very descriptive of the content of each. Part I, “The Fabrication of a Crime of Opinion,” is a prime example.

In Chapter 1, “The Disappearance of Race, the Proliferation of Racists,” Bruckner makes the perceptive observation about racism and its supposed opponents, that “anti-racism never ceases to racialize every form of ethnic, political, sexual, or religious conflict. It constantly recreates the curse that it claims to be fighting” (10). As a result, anti-racism undermines the prudent purposes of wise governance by using manipulative language.

Let us recall that the goal of a wise politics is to prevent discord and avoid war. But anti-racism, which has become the civil religion of modern times, has been transformed into a permanent war of all against all, a rhetoric of recrimination. (11)

Bruckner also understands modern technologies have exacerbated this problem:

The contraction of time and space brought about by new technologies and means of transportation leads to the abolition of the distances that used to protect us from what was far away. But on a planet where human tribes, constantly on the move, collide with

one another, the pressure becomes oppressive. (11)

This makes multicultural societies full of conflict. Thus, the unifying fabric—cultural standards and traditions—is being torn apart. “Difference is being reaffirmed at the very time when we want to establish equality, at the risk of involuntarily continuing the old prejudices connected with skin color and customs” (13).

Bruckner observes that “political correctness” is a euphemism for a new kind of conformism, “the convention of the unconventional, an orthodoxy of heterodoxy that merely doubles one dead-end by adding another” (13). Among its dangers is its “allergy to naming things” (14), an anesthetizing of language which seeks to eradicate (cover up) difficulties, in other words, the givenness of reality. He goes on to conclude that “to ban *a priori* any criticism of a system, of a religion, is to risk amputating freedom of thought” (15). Thus, instead of “hate speech” being defined as that which incites violence, it is redefined as any speech that is critical of a system or a religion.

In Chapter 2 Bruckner explores the “Weapon of Mass Intimidation,” in which he asserts that “The celebration of diversity as a supreme norm can in no case provide a common foundation. It is the very idea of human quality that is abandoned.” He goes on to point out something more subtle, “that the unreserved praise of cultural particularities can also conceal a neo-colonial paternalism . . .” (20). In other words, diversity may be used as a weapon to gain control over a particular culture. He further demonstrates how Islam has used this tactic: “So woe be to liberal Muslims who dare to criticize their religion or question their countries’ mores” (23). “The accusation of being Islamophobic is nothing other than a weapon of mass destruction in intellectual debate” (24). Opinion has become the new crime.

In Chapter 3, “The Miracle of Transubstantiation,” Bruckner contends that contemporary Marxism, because of its moribund position in the Western world, looks to Islam as the best disenfranchised, oppressed minority to be an ally in its

cause (30ff).

Part II, “The Left Suffering from Denial,” explores the political left’s denial of the importance of religion in Islam. Bruckner quotes Bernard Lewis to this effect (38). So, he taps into one of the best experts on Islam. Chapters 4–6 seek to demonstrate the existence of and reasons for what Bruckner calls Islamo-Leftism. As odd as such an alliance between Islam and the left would appear, the destruction of capitalism is their common cause (39). Bruckner’s analysis is interesting and often quite perceptive. He observes that “Ultraviolence is a symptom of impotence” (43). Thus, terrorism is witnessed on both sides as it is engaged in by Islamic and Leftist extremists. So, Bruckner seeks to explain this “unnatural marriage.” Thus, in true Orwellian fashion, the Left seeks to rationalize the extreme differences between the two ideologies. So, just as the Newspeak of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*<sup>4</sup> characterizes oppression as liberation, the Left explains the veil, “The more hidden women are, the more they are free!” (53).

In the final chapter of this section Bruckner explores a phenomenon familiar to Americans, the innocence of criminals and the guilt of victims. He concludes, “Beneath the surface, the far left and radical Islam agree on one point: they want to destroy this society . . .” (63).

In Part III, “Are Muslims the Equivalent of Jews?” Bruckner contends that because Jews are now not as easily characterized as victims, Arabs have taken their place. Jews have become the oppressors. Bruckner’s analyses the rise of what he labels a “new pathology: victimism.” So, he asserts that “anti-racism always pursues two contradictory objectives: mixture and diversity, universal non-distinction and the beauty of the multiple” (81). His most troubling conclusion is, “*in our time, true racism expresses itself in the words of anti-racism*” (83, emphasis in original). This point is explored in more detail in the final chapter (10) of this section, “The Semantic Racket.”

In Part IV, “Are We Guilty of Existing?”

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4 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949).

Chapter 11, “The Criminalization of Reticence,” reminds us of the recent popular slogan, “Silence Is Violence.” One is bullied into taking sides. Bruckner points out the tragic irony of the origin of such control in the very terrorist extremists who claim to be the victims. They bully their own into submission (103). I leave the remainder of this four-chapter section to the curiosity of the reader.

Part V, “What Is God’s Future?” begins with a jarring quote from the French poet Jacques Prévert, “Our God who art in heaven, stay there” (135). Bruckner at once respects the Christian church as part of Western culture, while denying the truth of its faith. He does understand what most leftists deny, the reality of radical Islam and its root in Islam’s founding texts. He notes that Islam, unlike Buddhism and Hinduism, “offers propitious soil for it (radicality)” (139). Thus, while seeking tolerance of Islam, he insists that “European Islam must abandon its passivity toward extremists” (143). “What we owe to the Prophet’s (Mohammed) religion is not pity for its fate but the truth: the recognition for its past grandeur, its current tragedy, and the urgency of its transformation” (144).

Bruckner likens the tolerance he is advocating to the tolerance that Catholics and Protestants learned after centuries of ruthless religious wars, and he even acknowledges that Christian religious wars were waged “in spite of the Gospels” (162, 173). For Bruckner, Islam must evolve from the militarism of its founding texts to a moderation commensurate with Western liberalism.

As Chapter 17 announces in its title, “Western Values Are Not Negotiable”; especially freedom of speech must not be compromised. Bruckner wants no part of grounding his solution in Christian faith. So, he applies the principle of the historical French colonial mission at home to Europe: “*Therefore the goal should not be to Islamize Europe, but to Europeanize Islam*” (158). His faith is in secular liberal Western governance with the motto: “Life goes on, stronger than anything. Barbarity kills but does not break” (159). But he hesitates to give up Christianity, at least in as much as it contributes to his solution, understand-

ing that such a void will be filled with something else (161). He seems to long for the old American and European past in the post Peace of Westphalia (1648) era (164). He acknowledges that “The genius of Christianity in its maturity is to have been able to provide a space for skeptics and agnostics, to permit them to breathe, far from the Holy Scriptures, in order to enter into dialogue with them” (166).

Finally, in Chapter 19, Bruckner simply cannot escape dealing with Christianity:

Christianity was redeemed because its teeth were filed down, because it returned to the purity of the Evangelical message, to the pacifism of the first centuries before Theodosius declared it the sole religion of the Empire. It was by moving away from Christ’s word that Catholicism became murderous and violent, and it is by returning to the founding text, to literalist piety, that Islam is dangerous. (173)

Bruckner ends with a tepid hope, which is understandable given his rejection of historic Christianity or any ultimately transcendent reality. Bruckner is essentially dealing with socio-political realities rather than the transcendent truth of Scripture. He believes that we must “persuade ourselves and the rest of the world of the eminent virtues of our civilization and our mores” (178).

## Analysis

It is a sad pleasure to interact with such a fine mind; it is also the duty of Christian leaders to do so. It is part of what Paul calls us to in God’s Word: “For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:4).

## The Corruption of Language

The theme of linguistic manipulation is one of the greatest strengths of this book. Whoever controls language wins arguments and even control over whole populations. Bruckner explores this in detail in Chapter 10, “The Semantic Racket.” But beginning with the “Introduction: A Semantic Rejuvenation,” Bruckner explores this theme

throughout the book.

A prime example of this is the conflation of the meaning of “hate speech,” (4) so that persecution, which is reprehensible, and criticism or disagreement, which is a vital part of a healthy civilization, now become the same. Labeling the analysis and criticism of any belief system as hate speech leads to silencing of opposition.

Another example, noted above, is seen when the Left seeks to rationalize the extreme differences between Islam and their ideology by redefining terms or reconstructing the common understandings of various situations.

As I quoted above, Bruckner’s most troubling conclusion about the manipulative use of language is, “*in our time, true racism expresses itself in the words of anti-racism*” (83, emphasis in original). Also, “Racism” is now being defined so broadly that it functions as an all-purpose weapon to gain power by cancelling the rational discussion of issues.

This point made me think of the analogy of the marked card deck, which is, of course, the manipulated language of the left along with microaggressions (2 through king) and the race card (the ace). This language is used in whatever circumstance manipulation or cancellation is required to silence an opposing idea. Christians must therefore seek to clarify and define terms carefully and not allow the discussion of truth to be derailed by subtle linguistic alterations. What began with the serpent’s manipulation of God’s Word in the Garden has been practiced by every tyrant in history since.

Noticing and analyzing this dangerous Orwellian phenomenon is an important duty of Christian leadership. Christians should be alert to the pervasive redefinition of words in the modern context. This is a communication problem that Christians must be aware of as we seek to distinguish the gospel from all political agendas.

### **A Christian Response to Islam**

The irony of Bruckner’s analysis and desired solution is found in his conception of the necessary transformation of Islam into a tolerant par-

ticipant in Western civilization. This view would be to deny their founding texts, whereas he lauds Christianity for returning to the founding text of the Gospels (162, 173). Thankfully, the liberalization of many Muslims through the existence of pacifist traditions within Islam, as well as the attractions of Western culture, especially its freedom and prosperity, make assimilation possible and in many cases a reality.

But in this case, rather than ignoring foundational elements of their founding texts, as Bruckner wants Muslims to do, Christians came to acknowledge that the New Testament clearly teaches that Christian warfare is entirely spiritual, and thus they fought with spiritual weapons alone, the chief of which is the power of God’s love in the good news of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 10:1–5). So, Christian tolerance came from returning to the text of Scripture.

Bruckner seems to ignore how much of the tolerance he promotes is rooted in the presence of Christianity in French and other cultures. While the degree to which this is true may be debatable in a given culture, the reality of such an attitude is clearly an essential part of Christian ethics. Bruckner contradicts himself here, since the literalist piety of Islam leads followers to theocratic militance, but Christians returning to the gospel message of their text seem to be in a different category. In fact, both religions have texts that the true believer takes seriously; but it is the nature of those texts where the difference lies. So, how can it be that “Plurality is the future of the great religions”?

It is no surprise that, despite Bruckner’s often penetrating analysis of how to deal with Islam, his solution seems largely untenable. His earnestness, certainly, cannot be doubted since, given the fate of Charlie Hebdo editors and death threats to authors like Salman Rushdie, he is risking his life by writing such a book.

Sadly, he wants nothing to do with the “genius of Christianity in its maturity” which he appreciates as an important ingredient in his program of tolerance. This program is a combination of education and wise governance. Christianity,

unlike some other exclusivist world religions, does not need or desire to establish its central authority in an earthly government or caliphate, because its king resides in—and rules from—heaven. Thus, Christianity seeks to establish embassies among all nations.

Christianity seeks its unity broadly in the *imago Dei* in common culture, and narrowly in the mediatorial person and work of Jesus Christ for his people, while respecting God-given cultural uniqueness, provided that this uniqueness is not contrary to biblical orthodoxy. Differences need a solid common foundation.

For a Christian response to Islam, I recommend two articles that encourage a wise and irenic approach.<sup>5</sup> Bryan Estelle concludes that while we must support government efforts to resist radical Islamic terrorism, the church must not lose its focus on its central mission, preaching the gospel to every kind of neighbor.<sup>6</sup> John Muether emphasizes the importance of understanding the diversity of Islam and the effectiveness of the Reformed faith in Muslim evangelism.<sup>7</sup>

While Bruckner proves Islamophobia to be “an imaginary racism,” true racism does exist in some institutions and certainly in individual attitudes. Christians must avoid conflating terrorists with all Muslims and instead treat Muslim neighbors with respect and love and pray for our enemies (Matt. 5:43–47).

Bruckner’s contention that Marxism is seeking rejuvenation by allying itself with Islam, what he calls Islamo-Leftism (30ff.), appears similar to what is happening in America, where the oppressed minority is black, Hispanic, or native American. It is no accident that Black Lives Matter was founded by neo-Marxists. Since Marx divided culture into oppressed and oppressors,

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5 Bryan D. Estelle, “How Should the Reformed Church Respond to Islam?” *Ordained Servant* 17 (2008): 48–54; John R. Muether, “The Reformed Faith and the Challenge of Islam,” *Ordained Servant* 27 (2018): 46–52.

6 Estelle, “How Should the Reformed Church Respond to Islam?” 53–54.

7 Muether, “The Reformed Faith and the Challenge of Islam,” 47–48, 51–52.

it makes sense that neo-Marxism must identify these categories differently in different cultures, since class structure is not the same as it was in nineteenth century Europe, especially in Russia. Marx makes his position explicit in *The Communist Manifesto*.<sup>8</sup> Neo-Marxism emphasizes the presence of racism, not so much in individual attitudes as in the structural systems and relationships in culture. Thankfully, most minority Americans do not agree with this analysis, which brings us to the problem of racism.

### A Christian Response to Racism

Bruckner’s analysis of Islamophobia demonstrates the dangers of imaginary racism and the use of deceptive language imposing racism where it does not exist. But it also, unwittingly, demonstrates the weakness of secular alternatives. Bruckner wants to make a way for peaceful Muslims to be part of European society, while recognizing the existence of large radical Islamic populations and the presence of militancy in Islam’s founding documents.

While some alleged racism may be imaginary and used in a quest for power, the problem of racism is a real and serious problem. Careful analysis is important, but solutions will not come easily. While institutional and government structures may need to change in some instances, clearly attitudes must change, and while that can happen among unbelievers, the profoundest changes will reside in the new creatures of the New Covenant. While racism will exist as long as human sin does, Christians must oppose it with all of our might. Christians have the only ultimately durable ethical foundation to oppose racism in its various forms. Specifically, we must oppose any use of ethnicity, skin color, education, or class to distinguish ourselves as superior to others. More generally, we must oppose anything used to distinguish ourselves as superior to others.

David VanDrunen, in a recent *Ordained Servant Online* article, “Reflections on Race

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8 Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1954), 15ff.

and Racism,” distinguishes between two areas of response to racism:

In political communities, the antidote to racism is recognition of our *common humanity*. Christians believe that all human beings are children of Adam, image-bearers of God, and beneficiaries of God’s common grace under the Noahic covenant. However it is understood, our common humanity provides grounds for unity over against the divisiveness of racism and identity politics. But such political unity is relatively shallow, a unity of peaceful co-existence that will always remain fragile in a sinful world in which so many things threaten to divide us. In this context, I believe the (classical) liberalism of the U.S. constitutional order, or something like it, is the best we can do.<sup>9</sup> . . .

In our churches, however, the antidote to racism is recognition of not only our common humanity but especially our *redeemed humanity*. Christians are co-heirs with the Last Adam, re-created in the image of Christ. Their source of unity flows not from common grace but from saving grace, not from this present creation but from the new creation. These redemptive resources are far more powerful than anything political communities have at their disposal, although churches have often used these resources poorly.<sup>10</sup>

Bruckner’s analysis of language and its purposeful corruption in the interests of power is especially helpful in alerting us to deal in a wise and loving way with those who oppose a Christian understanding of the race problem.

David VanDrunen’s article, mentioned above, offers an excellent analysis of the word “race.” He insists that it does not exist but is a so-

cial construct. Unlike sex, which has a biological foundation, race has no objective basis; ethnicity on the other hand does and has nothing to do with a person’s skin color,

We are dealing with “profoundly complex” issues. It is easy to understand that race does not exist, but when an imaginary but powerful concept has taken hold of so many minds for so long and wreaked so much harm, charting a viable way forward is not simple. . . . I urge Reformed churches to resist the call to be politically engaged and to strive to be *consistently* non-political, refusing to “intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth” (Westminster Confession of Faith 31.4).<sup>11</sup> Contemporary tensions over race makes this idea *more* important, not less.<sup>12</sup>

Echoing VanDrunen’s conclusions on dealing with racism, church officers need to cultivate what he calls the “elusive combination of humility and critical thinking.” While the concept of race is imaginary, racism is not, and it must be dealt with using intelligent compassion and self-reflection. There are two poles in the discussion of race which I believe only Christianity can ultimately hold together: difference and unity.

In dealing with racism in whatever form, hatred of—or disrespect for—Muslims or American blacks, the *imago Dei* is central to the formation of a godly attitude, for to despise others made in God’s image is to despise God himself. With so many voices wanting to insist and not discuss, we must exercise a patience, love, and fortitude, which only our Savior can provide. ©

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9 For a detailed argument see David VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), especially ch.12.

10 David VanDrunen, “Reflections on Race and Racism,” *Ordained Servant Online* (March 2021), [https://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=874](https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=874).

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11 Some Reformed theologians discuss this issue in terms of the “spirituality of the church,” while others believe the term has been poisoned by its abuse and that we should not use it. I will not engage this debate here.

12 VanDrunen, “Reflections on Race and Racism.”

# Preaching the Word with John Chrysostom

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by Joseph A. Tipton

*Preaching the Word with John Chrysostom*, Gerald Bray. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020, xii + 132 pages, \$12.99, paper.

The stated mission of Lexham Press's Lived Theology series is to trace "the way that biblical concepts and ideas are lived out in the lives of Christians" (xi); the newest addition to the series, Gerald Bray's *Preaching the Word with John Chrysostom*, accomplishes this mission quite well, bridging the often treacherous divide between *theoria* and *praxis* and showing how the former influenced the latter in Chrysostom's preaching. Thanks to this approach, the result is not just an intriguing and fascinating look at the way Chrysostom expounded the Word to his congregation. It is also an insightful glimpse into the way Chrysostom read the biblical text. As such, it is an excellent starting place for anybody wishing to familiarize himself not just with Chrysostom but with early Christian thought as well.

Bray bridges the divide between theory and practice by concentrating on a theological principle, then exploring how that principle might have informed the way Chrysostom interpreted the biblical text for his hearers. Bray focuses on four sets of homilies: those on Genesis 1–3, Matthew, John, and Romans. This gives Bray a foothold within the enormous literary output Chrysostom produced that enables him to examine the way Chrysostom handled issues that are of particular interest to us today. The theological idea that Bray sees as most formative in Chrysostom's exposition of the Bible is accommodation (16). Just as God adapted his revelation of himself to us in a way that would

make sense to our finite minds, so in his preaching Chrysostom strove to meet his audience where they were in order to lead them to the higher knowledge contained in the gospel (24).

This tack allows Bray to come to terms with the sometimes-unexpected ways Chrysostom expounded the Bible. For instance, when trying to understand why Chrysostom went so far beyond the biblical text in his laudatory epithets of Paul (as when he dubs him a gospel "gladiator"), he applies the principle of accommodation and understands Chrysostom to be adapting his message to terms his congregation understood (105). Yet approaching Chrysostom through the principle of accommodation also enables Bray to elucidate the way Chrysostom read the Bible. For instance, it serves as the background to Chrysostom's non-literal reading of the creation account in Genesis (32) and of the creation of woman from the rib of man (52). While we may never know this side of heaven how exactly God did both of these things, he told us in a way that sufficiently conveys the meaning we need.

Within this framework Bray is able to broach larger issues of general interest, as when he examines Chrysostom's interpretation of the creation of man in God's image. Image, he points out, is taken by Chrysostom to refer to man's function, namely, his authority over creation, as opposed to the way it was commonly interpreted in his time, as referring to man's form (43). Bray explores other interesting topics such as whether sex was meant to be practiced before the fall or resulted from man's sin. Pointing out that Genesis 1:28 suggests it was meant for man all along, Bray discusses ancient attitudes towards it and the general consensus in antiquity that sex was inherently sinful and a consequence of the fall (54). He also takes several opportunities to discuss the way ancient Christians typically (and wrongly, he adds) mapped the Greek matter-spirit dichotomy onto the New Testament flesh-soul dichotomy, and he explores the implications involved there (50). He even manages to discuss textual issues, and in very layman-friendly terms at that.

Discussing Genesis 1:2, Bray points out how

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=919](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=919).

Chrysostom was not misled by the Septuagint mistranslation of *tohu wabohu* (הוהו ובהו) “without form and void”) as “invisible” because of the corruption of the Greek *aoristos* (ἀόριστος) into *aoratos* (ἀόρατος) (34), but he was able, despite not using the Hebrew text, to arrive at the correct meaning just by following the logic of the passage. Thus, because of these larger discussions Bray’s treatment of Chrysostom serves as a good introduction to ancient Christian thought and the way ancient Christians read their Bible.

Accommodation also furthers Bray’s understanding of Chrysostom’s interpretation of many things Jesus said and did. The theme of Jesus as Benign Teacher is ubiquitous in Chrysostom. Jesus spoke to the woman at the well about the spiritual water because the physical water there at the well could serve as a visual aid to help her better understand the higher truth (92). This same basic exegetical orientation explains Chrysostom’s interpretation of the healing of the two blind men at Jericho (78), as well as Jesus’ treatment of his family (82). For Chrysostom, this accommodating behavior of Jesus was what all people, and pastors in particular, were supposed to imitate (85). Indeed, Chrysostom lays so much stress on imitating Jesus that he even runs the risk of deemphasizing Christ’s divinity for fear that his congregation might feel that imitating the Savior was too impossible a task (76).

Regarding this theme of Christ as example and model for imitation, Bray identifies one of the most characteristic features of not only Chrysostom’s, but many of the early fathers’ exegesis. Reading texts in order to have models to emulate or avoid had a long history in Greco-Roman literary criticism, going back at least to the Alexandrian interpreters of Homer and finding its most famous exponent in the biographico-moral writings of Plutarch. It is no surprise then if Chrysostom read the biblical text in a similar way. Yet the overall impression this literary methodology often produced in the Greek and Roman writers who applied it was exacting, fastidious, and demanding moralism. And, sad to say, this is also the impression one often gets when reading ancient Chris-

tian writers, Chrysostom in particular. His homilies are full of exhortations to his congregation to imitate Christ here or Paul there, to mind the way one behaves with the self-conscious introspection of an ascetic. Meanwhile, discussions of grace are far fewer than many modern readers would like. Bray tries to account for this by arguing that Chrysostom’s ministerial bent was pastoring, not evangelizing. That people were justified by grace Chrysostom took for granted; what he cared most about was that his congregation show the fruits of that justification in their daily lives, and so he preached to that end (99, 106).

While this is an important point to consider, its application is limited, and one worries that Bray might be flattening out some undeniable differences between ancient and modern Christianity, at least in its pre-Augustinian and post-Reformation forms. This is particularly an issue in Bray’s treatment of the Christian’s participation in his own sanctification. Interpreting *Homily 16 on Matthew*,<sup>2</sup> where Chrysostom says all God wants is a sincere hatred of the devil, and if he gets this, he will do the rest, Bray takes this semi-Pelagian-sounding statement and explains it in more Augustinian terms by importing another statement Chrysostom makes in *Homily 55* (section 8).<sup>3</sup> There Chrysostom admits the Holy Spirit must be present for one to do anything pleasing to God (89–90). Yet the mere confession of our dependence on the Holy Spirit does not amount to an Augustinian version of sanctification whereby God commands what he will, yet gives what he commands.<sup>4</sup> Any adherent of the medieval *via moderna* certainly acknowledged the Holy Spirit’s importance yet harped on the value of works more than the Reformers were comfortable with. And to the casual reader, Chrysostom’s emphasis on works is just as pronounced as any *via moderna*

2 Phillip Schaff, ed., *NPNF (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers)*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1880–1900), 1/10:115.

3 *NPNF*, 1/10:344.

4 This is the famous statement made by Augustine that created so much trouble for him with the Pelagians. See *Confessions* 10.29 (NPNF 1/1:153).



writer. One would prefer a more straightforward exposition of Chrysostom’s theology on this point rather than what sometimes feels like an attempt to make him jibe with post-Reformation ideas.

One gets a similar impression when it is suggested that Chrysostom would have subscribed to Martin Luther’s doctrine of *simul iustus et peccator* (at one and the same time justified and a sinner). The reasoning here seems to be that since Chrysostom equated sinlessness with immortality and sinfulness with mortality, inasmuch as we still perform “the good works of justification” in our mortal (and therefore sinful) bodies, we are “justified sinners” (112). Now, apart from the fact that the phrase “the good works of justification” is puzzling and probably requires some fleshing out, behind Luther’s doctrine of *simul iustus et peccator* lies a forensic formulation of justification. Just because Chrysostom says we perform, or are to perform, good works while still sinners, it does not mean he subscribed to forensic justification. Every Christian tradition admits as much. Again, one feels that differences between ancient and modern Christianity are getting flattened out.

Yet despite this tendency to make the famous ascetic—and famously ascetic—presbyter of Antioch square with modern evangelical sensibilities, the book has many commendable qualities. Besides the one already mentioned, Bray is very balanced in his portrayal of Chrysostom. He does not indulge in hagiography but points out Chrysostom’s shortcomings (e.g., his antipathy toward the Jews in Antioch, his reading much of Scripture through the lens of Greek philosophy, his indifference to the Hebrew text, etc.). Bray offers his own translations of passages from Chrysostom that are a breath of fresh air to those familiar with the nineteenth-century alternative, and the text is for the most part free of errors. Besides different dates of birth on the timeline and the first page, I counted only three other typos.<sup>5</sup> The reader also on occasion receives helpful synopses on the

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<sup>5</sup> On page 2 “charged” should read “charges,” on page 31 “hexi” should read “hex,” and on page 84 a “this” (I believe) should precede “explains.”

current state of scholarship regarding important issues, as when Bray mentions the obsolescence of the Antiochene/Alexandrian divide in ancient biblical exegesis (22). Thus the book is, all in all, a good starting-place for one wishing to learn something about Chrysostom. Much like Oxford’s Very Short Introduction series, the book introduces Chrysostom, explores the way he read the biblical text and expounded it to his congregation, and gives insights into ancient Christian thought. Its efforts to find common ground between Chrysostom and post-Reformation Christianity may strike readers as too simplistic and distracting, but that really does not detract from its usefulness as a very short introduction to the ill-starred bishop of Constantinople. ©

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## Can We Fully Separate Ecclesiology and Polity?

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**by Ryan M. McGraw**

*The Church: An Introduction.* Short Studies in Systematic Theology, by Gregg R. Allison. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021, 181 pages, \$14.99, paper.

There is a difference between what constitutes the being of the church and its well-being. What the church is in relation to God, and a church’s confession of the gospel, are essential to the church, while churches can still be churches

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=920](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=920).

while differing over things like the form of government or the administration of the sacraments. This introductory book focusses on the catholicity of the church in its local expression. Seeking to cut across denominational distinctives, Allison highlights what churches have in common in what he calls “mere ecclesiology,” while introducing potential differences under the heading of “more ecclesiology.” Though we must retain the vital distinction between the being and well-being of the church, it is not always possible to separate the two fully. This book is a useful primer on the doctrine of the church in the main, yet it simultaneously illustrates how underlying issues drawn from distinct denominational convictions shape our ecclesiology, as a whole, as well as our polity, in particular.

Allison lays the foundation for the doctrine of the church in the first two chapters, both doctrinally and biblically. Grounding the church first theologically in the Trinity, he then illustrates the nature of the church in both the Old and New Testaments. From chapter three onward, each chapter follows the pattern of “mere ecclesiology” and “more ecclesiology” (51). Topics include identifying the church around “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” (via the Nicene Creed), church leadership, government, sacraments, ministries, and eschatology. Allison fills his pages with extensive Scripture citations, making the biblical text stand in the foreground as his readers follow his arguments.

Often the “more ecclesiology” sections present differing viewpoints without any attempt to resolve them, such as with respect to the cessation of extraordinary gifts of the Spirit and various views on the millennium. Other times, however, he does decide issues, such as whether we should baptize infants (or rather why we should not do so) or how many offices the church should have. Strangely, the author bypasses some standard ecclesiological questions, such as the visible and invisible aspects of the church. Whether he receives, rejects, or modifies such distinctions, omitting them results in an incomplete feel to the book. Readers should note as well that the

author also takes deaconesses for granted among his readers (86), later arguing for them explicitly (144–46). Overall, the book establishes a biblical doctrine of the church that should resonate with most Christians.

The being and the well-being of the church, though necessarily distinct, are not easily separable. How we frame ecclesiology shapes our understanding of church government and practice in subtle ways. Several issues in this work illustrate why and how this is the case. The author is a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. As such, his ecclesiology, and not merely his polity, differs to an extent from other communions, such as Presbyterians and Episcopalians. Without blunting the force of what all true churches have in common, these differences filter into one’s understanding of the nature of the church and her ordinances. For example, Allison asserts that the new covenant church, composed of Jews and Gentiles, is the “elect” people of God (29). While this point is generally correct, it can create problems with regard to practical issues like apostasy. Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8 was admitted to the church through baptism, yet Peter later concluded that he was unconverted. Was he a church member in any sense if he were unregenerate and, presumably, not elect? This is where distinguishing the visible and invisible aspects of the church bears fruit. Jesus also refers to unfruitful branches in the vine in John 15, whom the Father will cut off, and 2 Peter 2:1 refers to some who deny “the Lord who bought them.” The church must encompass more than the elect. There is a corporate election and purchase by Christ resulting in an external union with his body, as well as an individual election and atonement of Christ that applies to true believers. Israel “according to the flesh” had “the adoption” (Rom. 9:4; Deut. 32:6), even though some of them were not his children (Deut. 32:5). Is this not equally true in the new covenant, where some bear the family name of the Triune God in their baptism while they prove later never to have been “of us” because they departed from us (1 John 2:19)? The focus of the church, both old

covenant and new, is on the elect of God savingly united to Christ by the Spirit's power. Yet there always have been those who are in the church and not of the church. A Baptist doctrine of a pure new covenant church consisting of elect believers only picks up one key idea in ecclesiology, but it cannot say all that the New Testament says about the church. There are always people under the administration of the covenant of grace through the church's visible aspect who do not belong to its essence through its invisible aspect.

A few other issues arise in relation to Allison's accuracy in sketching the three most common forms of church polity. His depiction of Episcopalians is relatively straightforward, but a few points require correction in his outline of Presbyterian and Congregational polity. While associating government by elders with Presbyterianism, Allison omits the issue of the keys of the kingdom being exercised beyond the local level, which is the primary point that distinguishes Presbyterianism from some forms of Congregationalism (99). In other words, all Presbyterian churches are governed by elders, but not all elder governed churches are Presbyterian. This results in a twin problem in his definition of Congregationalism, which he notes is marked by "autonomy" from other churches and "democracy" in government (101). While this may often be true, it was not always true historically, nor is it now. Congregationalism means that church government terminates at the local level, whether or not those churches are democratic or elder governed. English Congregationalists who participated in the Westminster Assembly, for example, were not democratic but were governed by elders. This stands in contrast to Allison's claim that elder ruled Congregational churches "is almost an oxymoron" (103). Moreover, Allison appears to relegate the election of officers by church members to Congregationalism alone (102). Yet this is part of what distinguishes Presbyterianism from Episcopalianism. While not encroaching on the being of the church directly, the assumptions underlying this sketch of church polity assume that the term "church" in the New Testament can refer to local

congregations only, which nearly implies that the church is inherently Congregational and possibly democratic in government.

One last illustration of the difficulty of entirely disentangling "mere ecclesiology" from "more ecclesiology" relates to the sacraments. Allison states baldly, "the nature of baptism is a human act by which faith in God's provision of salvation is expressed" (116). However, this contradicts the nature of the sacraments as the visible word of God, which definition the author relies upon earlier (106). Regardless of whether we baptize infants and adults, or adults only, does not treating the sacrament as "a human act" contradict the nature of the sacraments by muting the divine promises standing behind them? Instead of prioritizing personal faith in God's promises, the Scriptures stress God's promises, which require personal faith. This point does not decide the issue over infant baptism, but it opens the door for discussing the question. It likewise highlights the Baptist position on the nature of the sacraments by reducing the essence of baptism to one's profession of faith. Regarding baptism, Scripture states that by one Spirit we have all been baptized into one body (1 Cor. 12:13). We have been buried with Christ in baptism and raised with him by God's power (Col. 2:12). We are joined to Christ in baptism and buried with him in baptism (Rom. 6:3-4). These texts and others like them illustrate why baptism is God's act rather than a human act. Sacraments are the visible word of God rather than the visible word of man. In light of the fact that Allison makes sacraments a mark of the church, this difference stretches beyond polity, encroaching on ecclesiology.

Distinguishing "mere ecclesiology" from "more ecclesiology" is important and necessary. Yet this book illustrates an equally important point; we can never fully disentangle the two. How we establish the principles of the nature and ordinances of the church affects how these principles find practical expression in church government, ministry, and ordinances. Our definition of the church affects our church polity and how we administer the sacraments. Whether we

understand the church as local only, or regional and ecumenical by definition, shapes our grasp of unity and catholicity. This book simultaneously shows us a model of being broad in our affections, and why secondary matters still matter. ©

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## Covenant Theology Today

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by **Bryan Estelle**

*Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives*, by eds., Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020, 672 pages, \$35.00.

The faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary have produced a massive and comprehensive book on various aspects of covenant theology. The annotated bibliography itself, produced by John R. Muether, is worth the price of the book, although it too is already dated and needs revision (more below). The book is organized around three parts: biblical covenants, historical theology, and finally a section entitled collateral and theological studies.

Ligon Duncan, the chancellor, CEO, and professor of systematic and historical theology, writes the foreword. Then, the book begins with an article by Guy M. Richard on “The Covenant of Redemption.” We can be grateful to the editors (and Guy Richard) that this article is included since this doctrine has been treated so dimin-

tively in the past generation. Nevertheless, some important recent bibliography is not cited in this article. Richard P. Belcher takes up the covenant of works in the second chapter. Perhaps one of the most controverted areas he tackles is under the subheading, “The Role of Grace in the Covenant of Works” (69). I do appreciate Belcher’s strong defense of the covenant of works (COW). Nevertheless, discussions of “merit” with regard to Adam will have to take into consideration now and in the future the recent work of Harrison Perkins in *Catholicity and the Covenant of Works*.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, it would be unfair to criticize Belcher for failure to engage this work since it just appeared. However, it is a shame that Perkin’s work was not published prior to the book under review, since it possibly could have helped at least one author, D. Blair Smith, from making historical gaffes (367–68). Prior to this work, we only had Aaron C. Denlinger’s work, *Omnes in Adam ex pacto Dei*,<sup>3</sup> which discussed the issue of merit *ex pacto* (i.e., covenantal merit) among seventeenth-century Reformed theologians. But now, with Perkin’s work, we know that James Ussher himself held to a *notion* of merit that challenges all the disproportionality arguments (i.e., that Adam’s portended intrinsic obedience would have been “out of proportion” to the infinite reward of life offered) so commonly bandied about today, even in the book under review. One of the most important aspects of the discussion of the covenant of works is whether Adam had the ability by his God-given natural strength to obey and meet the terms of the covenant or whether he needed added grace (e.g., the Roman Catholic doctrine of *donum superadditum*) in order to rise to the obedience required. Perkin’s work has shown that Ussher, who was profoundly influential on the Westminster divines, thought that

2 Harrison Perkins, *Catholicity and the Covenant of Works: James Ussher and the Reformed Tradition*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

3 Aaron C. Denlinger, *Omnes in Adam ex pacto Dei: Ambrogio Catarino’s Doctrine of Covenant Solidarity and Its Influence on Post-Reformation Reformed Theologians* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010).

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=925](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=925).

“Adam was able to earn the eternal state for himself and his posterity by use of faculties granted to him by creation.”<sup>4</sup> Although Ussher was not enthusiastic about the word “merit,” he was very precise in his formulations to suggest that merit *ex pacto* as opposed to some notion of condign, congruent, or ontological merit was the category to use. Ussher maintained that “Adam could earn a reward from God in a relationship of justice where the covenant defined the terms.”<sup>5</sup> Ussher and all orthodox Reformed theologians would agree that human beings cannot properly merit anything from God. Yet, we now know that in the sixteenth and up to the eighteenth centuries, Reformed theologians covering a wide geographical area, used the category of *ex pacto* merit—especially in their discussion of the COW—to polemicize against Roman Catholic paradigms, as demonstrated by Perkins in “*Meritum ex Pacto* in the Reformed Tradition.”<sup>6</sup> To Belcher’s credit, he is willing to talk about the weaknesses of John Murray’s approach to the COW. Any future discussions of the COW will have to integrate John Fesko’s exquisitely written and recently published work, *The Covenant of Works*,<sup>7</sup> since it is now the most important work of historical survey and analysis on the study of the COW.

The next article by Guy Waters (one of the editors) tackles the issue of the “Covenant of Works in the New Testament.” Waters’ treatment, as one would expect, is confessional and robust with exegetical nuance. However, the reader should be aware that Waters’ treatment of Galatians 3:10–12 with regard to the law and what the Judaizers’ teaching about justification requires, namely “the fulfillment of the entirety of the law’s commandments for justifying righteousness” (95), is only one interpretation of this crucial passage.

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4 Perkins, *Catholicity and the Covenant of Works*, 104.

5 *Ibid.*, 109.

6 Harrison Perkins, “*Meritum ex Pacto* in the Reformed Tradition,” *Mid America Journal of Theology* 31 (2020): 57–87.

7 John Fesko, *The Covenant of Works: The Origins, Development, and Reception of the Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

And to this author, it does not cohere with Paul’s intentions in light of his laconic discussion of Christ’s work in Galatians 4:4–5.

True enough, God does require personal and perfect obedience to his law, and the reality is that no mere human being following the fall is able to fulfill such demands due to innate moral corruption. The real issue here is whether Paul is referring to the Judaizers’ aberrant teaching or describing a reality that existed in the old covenant that showcases a typological works principle that Christ has fulfilled. Consider the OPC’s report of the Committee to Study the Doctrine of Justification which was commended for Study by the Seventy-third General Assembly (2006):

In Galatians 4:4 Paul writes that Christ was “born under the law.” This statement indicates, with marvelous brevity, what Christ’s redemptive work entailed. To say that Christ was “born under the law” is striking, for being “under the law” is precisely the state from which we have been redeemed and to which Paul warns that we must never return (Gal. 4:21; Rom. 6:14–15). In what condition does that put Christ? First, it puts Christ under the curse of the law, culminating in his crucifixion. Being under the law entails a curse for Christ because he stood in the place of sinful people, whose failure to obey all the law brought that curse (Gal. 3:10, 13). In addition, however, being “under the law” means that in order to live one must *do the law* (Gal. 3:12); it means that one is justified according to the obligation to *perform the entire law* (Gal. 5:3–4). To be justified and live, then, Christ had to render positive obedience to the law’s demands. The fact that he was justified and lives in everlasting glory indicates that Christ in fact did obey the law perfectly. And this he did for our redemption (Gal. 4:5).<sup>8</sup>

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8 *Justification: Report of the Committee to Study the Doctrine of Justification* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee of Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2007), 35.

In short, the reference to Leviticus 18:5 in Galatians 3:12, according to this view, is that Paul is not referring to the misappropriation of the law by the Judaizers. After all, does it make any sense that Paul will use a faulty view of the Judaizers (Gal. 3:12) to describe positively a works principle that Christ has fulfilled perfectly in order to secure our salvation in Gal 4:4–5? It is noteworthy that Waters' position is followed by others in this volume, e.g., J. Nicholas Reid in "The Mosaic Covenant" (169). Waters has another article later in the book, "Covenant in Paul." Here, he continues his claim that Paul is correcting his opponents misreading of the Mosaic covenant but also develops in a very helpful and clear manner the relationship between the two Adams. Echoing WCF 7:5–6, Waters takes pains to emphasize that the Mosaic covenant is an evangelical administration of the one gracious covenant that God inaugurated in Genesis 3:15 (the covenant of Grace). In fact, he repeats the phrase four times in the space of three pages (237–39). Thankfully, he comes around to register certain discontinuities when he engages 2 Corinthians 3 and Galatians 3–4 (243).

John D. Currid's article, "Adam and the Beginning of the Covenant of Grace," showcases sensitivity to NT echoes and works hard to speak plainly and clearly by explaining difficult terms. Miles Van Pelt's article, "The Noahic Covenant of the Covenant of Grace," is well done. Aside from too many split infinitives in the body and the footnotes, VanPelt affirms, significantly, that the Noahic covenant is a non-redemptive covenant. VanPelt does an able job of distinguishing and separating the covenant described in Genesis 6:18 from the Noahic covenant in Genesis 9. The importance of this may not be understated. Too many biblical theologians do not maintain this, and if it is not rigorously maintained, then the consequences for a proper view of Christianity and culture results in fuzzy boundaries.

The next article by Scott Redd, "The Abrahamic Covenant," covers many important areas and overall is well done. I appreciate that he engaged the difficult issue of conditionality in the cove-

nants: after all its demands are designed, defined, and fulfilled by God alone, its basis is unconditional, inviolable, and irrevocable. Human beings in no way fulfill conditions in the Abrahamic covenant in order to receive grace. Nevertheless, as Herman Bavinck says, this covenant was destined to become bilateral in its administration since human beings are expected to offer grateful obedience. This difficult topic is handled very well by Nicholas Reid in the next article (153). Finally, there are a couple of typographical errors here. First, the reference to Genesis 15:1 on page 139 should be 15:2, and the Hebrew of Genesis 15:18 on the next page is incorrectly pointed.

Nic Reid writes on the Mosaic covenant. Reid, an expert in Assyriology, should be commended for tackling the issue of the exile and its relationship to conditionality in the Mosaic covenant. He is irenic and generous in his discussion of others with whom he differs. Moreover, he rightly cites WCF 7.5–6 which insists that the Mosaic covenant is part of the administration of the covenant of grace. Nevertheless, Reid makes a claim regarding the Pentateuch which potentially has systemic ramifications for any biblical theology of covenant and calls for reconsideration.

On page 153, following the work of L. Michael Morales, he claims that the Pentateuch's main theme is God's opening a way for humanity to dwell in the divine presence and further claims that Leviticus 16, which of course discusses the Day of Atonement, is the "literary and theological centre" of the Pentateuch. Mary Douglass and many other legal experts on the Pentateuch would challenge this notion, claiming that Leviticus 19, not 16, is the theological center of the Pentateuch. This is no small quibble. Reid claims:

If this thesis is correct, the broader perspective of the law is the context of facilitating worship and dwelling with God, thus facilitating the relationship that already exists between God and his people. The Mosaic covenant, then, as a covenant arrangement, does not use law to create the relationship

between God and Israel. Rather, it provides a way for that relationship to be maintained, especially through ongoing atonement. (153)

This sounds at first glance commendable; however, the real problems, seismic at that, lie below the surface. By foregrounding and making primary the personal and relational dimension of the covenant (following Morales), Reid has made a methodological error that does not allow him to incorporate the importance and primacy of legal categories in his system. Secondly, and related to the first criticism, is that when one makes grace (or “relationship”) primary in their evaluation of biblical covenants, this begs for more precision and nuance. If the Bible communicates that the covenant at creation in the garden was a covenant in which God assigned a stipulated work to Adam as the representative head of the human race with the promise of a reward upon the condition of performance of that work, and if creation precedes redemption, then law must be the foundation of any biblical covenantal system. A similar point could be made regarding the Covenant of Redemption. Only when *law is made the foundation of covenant relationships and primary in a covenantal system* can consistent covenantal integrity be maintained. Although law and love, or law and kinship or relationship, are typically contrasted in contemporary theology, such should not be part of our system in covenant theology. Reid authors another chapter later in the book, “Ancient Near Eastern Backgrounds to Covenants” (447–65). Not surprisingly, given his profound training in ANE studies, this article is very well done. This is especially the case since he deals with the controverted area of “land grants” and the various theologians that have attempted to incorporate insights from that area of study into covenant theology. Reid takes pains to correct Moshe Weinfeld’s influence in this area, particularly citing Gary Knopper’s (recently deceased) important work. An abbreviation used in footnote 47 (*KASKAL*) is missing in the list of abbreviations on pages 15–21. On that topic, the important NT journal abbreviation *JSNT* is also

missing, even though it too is cited in the book.

Belcher covers “The Davidic Covenant” next. Although the majority of his time is taken up in exegesis of 2 Samuel 7, he introduces a well-done intertextual comparison between that passage and 1 Chronicles 17. Michael McKelvey covers the new covenant in Jeremiah and the book of Isaiah in the next chapter. He aims to discuss how the new covenant is a central concern of the prophetic literature.

Michael Kruger shifts the discussion to the NT in the next chapter entitled “Covenant in the Gospels.” He recognizes that although the word covenant is missing by and large from the NT Gospel accounts, the concept is not. He tackles the notion of the genre of the Gospels and thankfully recognizes and affirms that the exodus is the backdrop for the Gospel genre, first proposed by M. G. Kline and later embraced and enjoined by many NT scholars. Kruger does not equivocate about the legal elements in the Mosaic covenant and recognizes Jesus’s obedience echoing Adam’s arrangement in the garden. Bob Cara covers covenant extensively in his chapter the “Covenant in Hebrews.” He notes that the author of Hebrews uses the word more than all other NT writers combined. Cara expositis the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and new covenant in the book. He designates the writer to Hebrews’s treatment of covenant as “contrast within continuity” (249). The reader can learn much about the function and use of typology from this chapter. It is marked by smooth prose which leaves the reader appropriately adoring God’s developing redemptive history.

Gregory R. Lanier, one of the relatively newer additions to the RTS faculty, had one of the more creative and interesting chapters to this reviewer in “Covenant in the Johannine Epistles and Revelation.” He handles well the recurring issue about unilateral versus bilateral arrangements in the covenant (274). He appropriately recognizes John’s allusions to exodus and new exodus categories.

Ligon Duncan leads the segue into the historical chapters with “Covenant in the Early

Church.” Duncan demonstrates deliberate attention to his role in writing in such a way that fits well with the other essays. Doug Kelly’s article “Covenant in Medieval Theology” thankfully demonstrates the influence of Thomas Aquinas on the Medieval period and his overall influence on theology; however, besides this it does not add much that is new in any way.

Howard Griffith (recently deceased and one of the authors to whom the book is dedicated) writes on “Covenant in Reformation Theology.” His article is largely indebted to Peter Lillback’s book, *The Binding of God*.<sup>9</sup> His discussion of Luther is engaging and he also comments on Zwingli, Bullinger, and Calvin. D. Blair Smith writes on “Post-Reformation Developments” in the next chapter. I have already made some comments on the weaknesses evident in this essay. One strength is that he is clear on the unilateral/bilateral distinction that comes up repeatedly in the book (cf. 371).

The article by Bruce Baugus on “Covenant Theology in the Dutch Reformed Tradition” was one of the most rigorous and interesting in the book. It is well done. To his credit, he leans heavily on Brian Lee’s dissertation (written under Richard Muller, professor of historical theology) on Cocceius. Mark McDowell’s article on “Barth and the Torrances” makes gains in helping us understand the influence of these theologians and the diminution of legal categories in discourse on the covenants. Michael Allen engages the recent trends in theology towards participatory categories. He engages with the work of John Webster (recently deceased), who was concerned about overreach of participationist language and enjoined a return to covenantal categories. He also engages Michael Horton’s four-volume dogmatics, which is guided by the topics of covenant and eschatology.

Part 3 contains essays under “Collateral and Theological Studies.” I have already commented

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<sup>9</sup> Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin’s Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

on Nic Reid’s article in this section earlier. Peter Lee takes up the subject of “Covenant and Second Temple Judaism.” Lee covers background texts that deal with the Abrahamic, Sinaitic, Davidic, new covenants, and even a “Covenant of Eternal Priesthood” in the War Scroll from Qumran. Most interesting here is how often the NT teaching on a subject (e.g., “works of the law”) is vastly different than what occurs in Second Temple texts, especially from Qumran.

Benjamin Gladd tackles “Covenant in New Testament Scholarship” in the next article, which helpfully outlines the state of the question in NT studies today. His chapter primarily outlines the rise and fall of influence of New Perspective(s) on Paul.

Palmer Robertson pens some new and interesting thoughts on Israel in “Israel and the Nations in God’s Covenants.” He claims that “if the Abrahamic covenant provided redemptive blessings to all nations, then the Mosaic covenant also must provide redemptive blessings to the nations.” This, and his following argumentation, is a stretch, at best. Better is the terse, simple, and clear prose of T. David Gordon, who claims in his recently published commentary on Galatians, *Promise, Law, Faith: Covenant-Historical Reasoning in Galatians*,

Paul also indicated that the new covenant realities are similar in kind to the Abrahamic realities and dissimilar in kind to the Sinai covenant realities. The Abrahamic and new covenants comprehend Gentiles within their blessings, whereas the Sinai covenant is made with a single nation.<sup>10</sup>

The next chapter, by Michael Glodo, is simply titled, “Dispensationalism.” Glodo is irenic in his tone, but he also engages in a critique of their views. This is a helpful chapter since Dispensationalism has been influential and remains so in certain quarters of the Presbyterian church, not to mention the rise of Christian Zionism as well

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<sup>10</sup> T. David Gordon, *Promise, Law, Faith: Covenant-Historical Reasoning in Galatians* (Hendrickson, 2019), 40.



by some evangelicals in unconditional support of Israel as a kind of divine imperative.

In the next chapter, Scott Swain discusses “New Covenant Theologies” (hence, NCT) or as they sometimes fashion themselves “progressive covenantalism” (hereafter PC), views held by a number of leading evangelical NT scholars. After tracing the biblical data for differences between the old and new covenants (including a great analogy of likening the distinction between a puppy and a dog vis-à-vis a dog and a cat), Swain engages the state of the question in the NCT writings (often self-published and therefore difficult to access). NCT and PC writers are occupied with the question of continuity and discontinuity in redemptive history. After a lengthy exegesis of Jeremiah 31:31–34, Swain concludes that they suffer from an “overrealized eschatology.”

The final chapter, by Derek Thomas, is on “Covenant, Assurance, and Salvation.” In this chapter, he takes up the issues of how the sacraments are “holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace” (572–74) and answers the question of how the sacraments “confirm our interest in Christ.” Something is missing in his footnote, #15, since he says, “A basic bibliography on paedocommunion includes the following volumes,” but then he only cites one book. Perhaps something fell out of the note, or perhaps he meant to say “volume,” singular, instead of the following volumes since he does include a title previous to this sentence. Kevin DeYoung provides a short “afterword.”

In conclusion, this volume demonstrates that we can have confessional unity, with appropriate exegetical diversity, and without unanimity among our reformed academic colleagues and ministers. To that end, many can profit from the book. I learned much from many of the essays. Since many of these authors are ministerial and professional colleagues, and some I consider friends, I have attempted to deal with their project in a charitable vein, even when I disagreed.

Even so, I did wonder what the ultimate purpose for writing this book was. First, there is way too much redundancy in the book. The editors

probably should have been more deliberate with the assignments to their authors in order to avoid this. Second, with the exception of a few articles, there was not enough serious rigor in the articles so that it could be helpful to the academic guild. Third, the section dealing with “collateral studies” lacked robust systematic conclusions. Finally, it was too detailed and too lengthy for the typical busy pastor. Although the authors were committed to classic Reformed theology as found especially in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the essays were somewhat uneven, and they lacked an overall coherent argument. Nevertheless, in a day when participatory categories threaten to swallow up discussion engaging covenant as the architectonic organizing principle in Scripture, I was grateful for their courageous confessional stance. ©

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# Swain and Poythress on the Trinity

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by Robert Letham

*The Trinity: An Introduction*, by Scott R. Swain. Wheaton: Crossway, 2020, 154 pages, \$15.99, paper.

*The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God*, by Vern S. Poythress. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2020, xxx + 688 pages, \$39.99.

Books on the Trinity have abounded in recent years. By no means all have been satisfactory. Social trinitarianism has prevailed, with God portrayed as a community, akin to a human family. Some evangelicals have propounded a form of subordinationism. The books being reviewed are two quite distinct contributions produced by highly regarded Reformed scholars, neither of which fall into these categories.

Swain focuses on the *doctrine* of the Trinity. This is not a historical discussion as such nor is there a consideration of recent scholarly work, although Swain is more than capable of addressing both. It is a primer, one that can conceivably be used in adult Sunday school, for elder training, in college or seminary classes, or simply for general reading. That is not to say that scholars could not benefit from it; they certainly could. Swain gets to the heart of the matter and expresses complicated and profound ideas in cogent ways, doing so in a remarkably succinct and accessible manner.

This is the best concise introduction to the doctrine of the Trinity that is available in print. The Roman Catholic scholar, Gilles Emery, has written an almost definitive work on a similar scale, more advanced and technical, but Swain

has the field to himself both for the novice and for anyone wanting a concentrated distillation of the biblical and historical doctrine with clear and accurate delineation of major heresies and errors. Sessions, ministers, anyone should get hold of a copy.

Poythress's latest tome is more speculative and complex. It also raises some significant questions that require a lengthier discussion. In this, I will refer to matters that may be a cause of concern if the book were to be read in a particular way. However, it becomes clear that the author does not intend these outcomes. As we shall see, the concluding section (591–94) is perhaps not as carefully expressed as it might be and should be tightened up when the time comes for a second edition in order to avoid possible misunderstandings.

Poythress is a polymath, equally at home in mathematics, science, and linguistics as well as New Testament studies and theology. Even critical reviewers have agreed that he has made “a significant achievement.” They have noted his irenic and humble example. This is greatly needed at present in view of a welter of sulfurous writing belching forth in recent years. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” our Lord taught; it is evident that Poythress wishes to bring together warring factions, not create more of them. In this, he is on the side of the angels.

Poythress discusses successively the classical attributes of God, the doctrine of the Trinity, the trinitarian basis of language, philosophical conundrums, and challenges in classical Christian theism, focusing mainly on Aquinas and his use of Aristotle. He aims to enhance Christian theism by encouraging a more pervasive trinitarian focus.

Each chapter has study questions, suggestions for further reading, and a prayer. The book abounds in diagrams, reminiscent of the profusion of charts in Ramist works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Both Poythress and his close collaborator, John Frame, have a penchant for diagrams. These may be helpful for some readers, but I must be visually challenged as diagrams generally leave me bemused, so I stick

1 [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=935](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=935).

to the text!

Poythress has a similar readership in view as Swain does, although we have a comment on that later. He writes, as usual, in a very simple, direct style, readily comprehensible but not simplistic.

## Positive

One cannot but be struck by Poythress's pervasive use of Scripture and commitment to a faithful rendering of it. The book throughout is worshipful. Its focus is on the mystery of the Trinity, which goes beyond the powers of human reason. This is not the Palamite idea<sup>2</sup> in orthodoxy, where the mind is to be emptied and where God is in his essence unknowable, but rather is to be understood in Van Tilian terms, in the sense of the transcendent greatness of God. This is vital in thinking of God. Considering the Trinity is inevitably a life-changing practice; it will either lead us to greater love for and communion with the living God, or if not, we would be better off never having begun. We approach with reverence and awe for our God as a consuming fire. If we come from this book with nothing other than that, it will be a lesson well learned.

## Questions

However, several significant questions arise. In some way, they are interconnected—unified, distinct, and co-inherent, we might say, to use categories that Poythress himself adopts. Each one relates to how far philosophy is and should be deployed in service of the truth, to what extent its use has been beneficial, and in consequence how the past teaching of the church and its leading figures should inform our reading of Scripture. My comments are more reflections that flow from my reading, addressing common dangers and possible misconstruals.

First, there are questions of hermeneutics.

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2 Gregory Palamas, a fourteenth century Orthodox theologian, taught that the essence of God is inaccessible, our knowledge of God limited to his energies (his workings), an unacceptable division in the Trinity.

Poythress does not adopt these problematic positions, but the general stance he takes may give rise in the reader to the suggestion that they follow from what he says. This is particularly the case in his final summary where he calls us to abandon a primary reliance on tight, abstract logical argument in theology (592–94). Much depends on what is meant by that. From elsewhere in the text, it appears that “perfect being theology” is in view, where an abstract notion of perfection is applied to God, without recourse to the Bible. This warning would serve a salutary purpose. On subsequent readings it is clear that Poythress is opposed to the influence he detects from Aristotle, especially as mediated by Thomas Aquinas. The Bible is enough, he asserts.

At this point his language might lead the reader to suspect, wrongly, that behind this lies a common and false view of the slogan *sola Scriptura*. It is thought by many that this principle commits us to base our thought, theology, and language exclusively on the Bible, without recourse to any extrinsic authority. However, when the slogan was devised—various proposals locate it from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century—it merely asserted the belief and practice of the generality of Reformers and their successors that the Bible is the *supreme* authority. This is the position of the Westminster Standards. It does not exclude other authorities but rather subordinates them to Scripture. This is the position Poythress actually and correctly takes, since he interacts at length with a range of such figures.

B. B. Warfield pointed to the absurdity of rejecting reason and logic. He wrote,

the re-emergence in recent controversies of the plea that . . . human logic is not to be trusted in divine things, is, therefore, a direct denial of a fundamental position of Reformed theology, explicitly affirmed in the Confession, as well as an abnegation of fundamental reason, which would not only render thinking in a system impossible, but would discredit at a stroke many of the fundamentals of the faith, such e.g. as the doctrine of the Trinity,

and would logically involve the denial of the authority of all doctrine whatsoever, since no single doctrine of whatever simplicity can be ascertained from Scripture except by the use of the process of the understanding.<sup>3</sup>

In line with this, Poythress states that God is supremely rational (594). However, there can arise a potential danger of misunderstanding when revelation and faith are apparently set against philosophical language.

The outcome of such a misunderstanding is that so many times one is faced by books that attempt to construct doctrinal arguments based on biblical exegesis without recourse to the history of discussion. These are effectively attempts to reinvent the wheel. This is a recipe for heresy. By ignoring the consensus of the historic church, one ignores the biblical exegesis that underlay that consensus. The Socinians, Arians, and Jehovah's Witnesses are but a few instances of how this can work out in practice. The Socinians had a high view of the Bible and would have passed presbytery exams on that question, but by rejecting past tradition, in practice they privileged their own exegesis over the accumulated centuries of the biblical exegesis of others. Of course, Poythress is *most emphatically* not to be associated with these aberrations. I know that he will repudiate them with every atom of his being, as his outline of his interlocutors demonstrates (3–5).

However, the not uncommon methodology by which the Bible is pitted against the traditional formularies ultimately leads in that direction. That is an exceedingly dangerous path to follow. Calvin did not go that way, neither did the Westminster divines, as the minutes and papers of the

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3 B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1934), 226. I am grateful to Sherman Isbell for pointing out the following works which address the question of inferences from Scripture; George Gillespie, *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions* (Edinburgh: Gedeon Lithgow for George Swintoun, 1649), 243. Wing /G371; Aldis, H.G. Scotland /1367. James Bannerman, *Inspiration: The Infallible Truth and Divine Authority of the Holy Scriptures* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1865), 582–88; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992), 1:37–43.

Assembly amply illustrate.

Second, pressing the issue further, Poythress calls for changes in technical terms and abandonment of both Aristotelian metaphysics and tight, abstract reasoning in theology (592–94). His particular target is Thomas Aquinas (283–338).

The argument is undermined by Poythress's ahistorical reading of Aquinas. Poythress accuses Aquinas of constructing an approach to the Christian faith that is heavily reliant on reason with heavy doses of Aristotle. The context in which Aquinas wrote was the threat posed by the Islamic interpretations of the recently rediscovered corpus of Aristotle. There are hints that some form of "double truth" theory was in vogue, by which theological integrity could be maintained while accepting the new criticism, with theology and reason held in contrasting tension. Into this confusion, Aquinas sought to demonstrate that while Christian truth depends on revelation, it is compatible with reason and can be rationally explained and defended.

It appears that Poythress is relying on outdated scholarship on Aquinas. In fact, Aquinas was primarily a biblical commentator, and his doctrine of the Trinity was founded in biblical exegesis, especially in his commentary on the gospel of John (which is on my desk at the moment). He was thoroughly trinitarian. His great *Summa Theologia* needs to be read in the light of his biblical commentaries. Indeed, right at the start of the *Summa* he insisted that the teachings of the fathers and doctors, and the philosophers, are all subject to the supreme authority of Holy Scripture:

Since therefore grace does not destroy nature but perfects it, natural reason should minister to faith as the natural bent of the will ministers to charity . . . (2 Cor. 10:5). Hence sacred Scripture makes use of the philosophers in those questions in which they were able to know the truth by natural reason, as Paul quotes a saying of Aratus . . . (Acts 17:28) . . . Nevertheless, sacred doctrine makes use of these authorities as extrinsic and probable

arguments: but properly uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as an incontrovertible proof, and the authority of the doctors of the church as one that may properly be used, yet merely as probable. For our faith rests on the revelation made to the apostles and prophets, who wrote the canonical books, and not on the revelations (if any such there are) made to other doctors. Hence Augustine says (*Letter to Jerome*, 19:1): “Only those books of Scripture which are called canonical have I learned to hold in such honor as to believe their authors have not erred in any way in writing them. But other authors I so read as not to deem anything in their works to be true, merely on account of their having so thought and written, whatever may have been their holiness and learning.”<sup>4</sup>

Aquinas considers reason to be compatible with revelation and faith if grounded upon it. We should remember that Aquinas was not attempting to convince unbelievers for there were few if any self-identifying unbelievers around at the time. Rather, the mystery of the Trinity engendered a determined, focused, and highly refined engagement of the intellect. Faith was seeking understanding.

While many in Reformed circles have adopted a dismissive attitude towards Aquinas, Poythress, to his credit, has taken the trouble to read him. While I am being a touch critical here, it is clear to me that Poythress has seriously engaged with “the angelic doctor” and recognizes the primacy he accords to the Scriptures over all human opinions.

It appears to me that the use of thought patterns and methodologies not found in the Bible is unavoidable, indeed necessary, if we are to communicate the truth clearly in our own context. The key question to ask ourselves is from where does the control come? How far do we go before the message is shaped by the contextual language rather than being expressed by it?

Third, Poythress suggests areas where theology has been corrupted by Greek philosophy, specifically by Aristotelian metaphysics. He is critical of a range of theologians down through the years who he considers have tainted their work by imbibing alien philosophical ideas. In some cases, such as Dionysius the Areopagite (458–62), this is evidently so. This may seem superficially akin to the theory of Adolf von Harnack, which led to a widespread distaste for the historic Christian faith as expressed in its creeds and confessions. Systematic theology went through a period when it was regarded with disfavor for this very reason, and biblical theology was held out as the ideal. Yet systematic theology distinctively provides the tools to defend the church from heresy and error.

Harnack’s theory has been undermined many times over, from the days of J. N. D. Kelly, Jaroslav Pelikan, and Aloys Grillmeier onwards. His argument was invalid. For example, the incarnation and resurrection were nonsensical to Greek philosophy of whatever stripe. Moreover, the evidence demonstrates that the church took Greek words and gave them new meanings, adapted and fitted to reflect the truth. The agreement on the use of *ousia* and *hypostasis* brokered by St. Basil the Great is an obvious instance. In the face of teaching that would have destroyed the gospel, the classic councils distilled their reading and understanding of Scripture by borrowing language from elsewhere to elucidate “the sense of Scripture,” as Gregory of Nazianzus put it. They stretched such language and accorded it meaning appropriate to the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

These criticisms are of a general nature and highlight the dangers that can arise when the historic formularies of the church are questioned or relativized. While Poythress does not go in that direction, it is easy to come away from the reading, if not better informed, with a sense that the cumulative wisdom and biblical exegesis underlying the historic ecumenical councils is somehow damaged.

Fourth, I have a series of observations that are broadly sympathetic, with certain qualifications. Poythress attempts to read trinitarian distinctions

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4 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a.1.8. Responsio, obiectio 2.

back into the divine attributes. The orthodox teaching is that the attributes of God are identical with his being, with who he is, and are so eternally. Poythress agrees. To oppose this would be to suggest that God has parts less than the whole of himself, or else that there are eternal entities other than God, or that God has accidents (things that are not inherent and necessary to God's being).

At the same time, the attributes are manifested in distinct hypostatic ways. The love of God is indivisibly common to all three hypostases, which Poythress affirms, yet in the external works of God, love is demonstrated in the Son in a manner peculiar to him, for only the Son, in our nature, went to the cross. However, since the Trinity is indivisible, and the works of the Trinity are inseparable, all three hypostases are involved in all such works, the cross included. Poythress's diagram of unity, distinction, and coinherence embraces all these aspects. Focus on the unity to the exclusion of distinction and you are on the road to modalism. Stress distinction and the perils of social trinitarianism are not far off. Ironically, Poythress's recognition of this is reminiscent of Aquinas's treatment of essential love and personal love in God.<sup>5</sup>

There are some fine balancing acts required here. Poythress states that the "mercy [of God] is differentiated: the Father initiates, the Son accomplishes, and the Spirit applies" (569). This has echoes of Calvin, who wrote that to the Father "is attributed the beginning of activity . . . to the Son . . . the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity."<sup>6</sup> However, it may convey a possible suggestion that the three are separable, exercising different functions. In reality, all three are engaged indivisibly in initiation, accomplishment, and application, since in all God's works all three hypostases work inseparably. Poythress appreciates this, for unity and coinherence are

integral to his trinitarian thought, together with distinction (90–100). The point is that such elements, as Peter Martyr Vermigli put it, terminate hypostatically (*personaliter*) on, or as the Latin tradition calls it, are appropriated to, one particular person.<sup>7</sup> John Owen wrote of the one indivisible will of God as coming to hypostatic manifestation as the will of the Son, the will of the Father, or the will of the Spirit, not as divided into three wills but as distinct hypostatic manifestations of the one will.<sup>8</sup> This is reiterated by Poythress (571–74). If each hypostasis had its own will, one would have tritheism. If there were no hypostatic distinctions in the one will of God, one would have modalism. This is an example of where someone may go astray through a simple, basic reading of the Bible but where refined theoretical or metatheoretical tools, clarified over centuries, can keep us from danger—philosophy, in other words, in the service of the truth revealed in Scripture.

In summary, Poythress calls us "to abandon tight, abstract logic in theological reasoning" (594). On one level, that was how the trinitarian crisis was resolved in the fourth century, in the Greek church. The Nicene Creed was confessed at the Council of Constantinople by bishops, not philosophers, mainly through biblical exegesis, particularly of Old Testament passages. The problem was that the anti-Nicenes, Homoian Arians and Eunomians, insisted on the Bible only, to the exclusion of the cumulative wisdom of the church's interpretation of the Bible. In rebuttal, the church, through figures such as Gregory of Nazianzus, defended what they called "the sense of Scripture." In later years, Article 8 of the *Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, a document that profoundly influenced the Westminster Confession, put this brilliantly: "The Three Creeds, Nicene Creed, Athanasius's

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7 Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Commonplaces*, 2:17, trans. Anthonie Marten (London, 1583), 599–600.

8 *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 23 vols. (1850–1855; repr., London: Banner of Truth, 1965–1968), 19:86–88.

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5 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.37.1

6 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:13:18.

Creed, and that which is commonly called the Apostles' Creed, ought thoroughly to be received and believed: for they may be proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture."<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the fathers achieved this from a perspective that held to the simplicity and immutability of God every bit as much as Aquinas did. Both they and he were saying the same thing in differing ways. Both affirmed the mystery of the Trinity. However, at Nicaea in 325 it had become evident that biblical language could be cited by orthodox and heretics alike, the latter using it in support of their own beliefs. To mark the boundaries between truth and heresy new terminology was needed. This call to abandon tight, abstract logic in theological reasoning should be carefully reconsidered in a second edition of the book.

There is something of a puzzle over the precise readership Poythress has in mind. He writes in such a way as to engage the general reader, with basic language, diagrams, and prayers, yet he calls for an abandonment of abstract logic and philosophical terminology they are unlikely ever to encounter. On the other hand, if his aim is to persuade specialist theologians and others of that ilk, a more extensive and informed historical analysis is required that would go well beyond the bounds of this volume.

This is not at all to negate the fact that this is a most stimulating piece of work, indicated by the questions it provokes. It is a book replete with wisdom, insights, and perspectives, too many to enumerate here. However, as with anything written on the Trinity by whomever it may be, it is well to read it critically, under Scripture, with deference to the considered biblical exegesis that underlay the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed (Nicene creed) and the tradition that stemmed from it, confessed down through the centuries. It is clear that Poythress wishes to operate within these bounds, and, at the end, he acknowledges that he does not want to change "what orthodox Christians have believed through the centuries"

<sup>9</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, n.d.), 636.

(591). Thank God, we have no need to reinvent the wheel. ©

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## Exodus Old and New

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by **Bryan D. Estelle**

*Exodus Old and New: A Biblical Theology of Redemption*, by L. Michael Morales. InterVarsity Academic, 2020, 207 pages, \$22.00, paper.

Michael Morales has done it again: he has written a thought-provoking, stimulating, and well researched book on biblical theology. The work has made a fine contribution to the growing number of books on the exodus theme in Scripture. It is well written and very accessible, but not at the expense of intellectual rigor. In short, readers will grow in their appreciation of this important theme in Scripture and be better equipped to see the broad rubric that this theme provides for analyzing the atoning work of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Morales shows great sensitivity to philological and literary structural details throughout. Moreover, the publisher (IVP) and editors are to be commended for producing a handsome but inexpensive volume, one in which there are no typographical errors as far as I could discern.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=936](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=936).

The book has three major sections: the historical exodus out of Egypt, the prophesied second exodus, and the new exodus of Jesus the Messiah. Most of the chapters occur in the first section where Morales focuses on the plight of humans as “exiled” from the garden before the actual historical exodus. He also develops the important theme that the deepest longing of humans is for relationship with their Creator. This becomes an important leitmotif for the author. For Morales, the atonement becomes the central focal point of the Pentateuch, and consequently, the rest of Scripture. The so-called “recognition formula” (i.e., then they will know that I am the Lord) is pervasive in Exodus (and Ezekiel) and Morales recognizes this and develops it. This formula becomes important then in the four chapters that occur in the second section with a focus on the second exodus in the Prophets and answering the particular and very important question of who the servant of the Lord is, especially in the book of Isaiah. Finally, the third section contains three chapters with a study of the exodus pattern in the Gospel of John followed by two summary chapters that draw matters together and address the significance of the pattern that has been traced throughout the rest of the book.

One way in which Morales distinguishes himself in this book (and in others he has written) is engaging the so-called mythical motifs, especially the so-called combat motif which is a subplot of the divine warrior motif in Scripture. In this, God is presented as a king who conquers the tumultuous waters, or sea dragon of chaos, and proceeds after gaining victory in this cosmological battle to build his kingdom. Morales does not fall into the anti-historical mentality that so many commentators do when they are dealing with the influence of these themes upon the Scripture.

Chapter five deals with the important theme of the Passover. Of course, this theme could not be neglected in a book dealing with exodus patterns. Indeed, Morales picks up this matter later in the book in the chapter devoted to the Gospel of John. Again, substitutionary atonement moves into the foreground as Morales covers this impor-

tant theme. There, Morales claims that Jesus instituted “the Eucharist as the Passover meal of the new exodus” (160). Morales makes the significant point that “John’s Gospel [is] where one finds the deepest meditation on the new exodus” in Passover, and that “Jesus the Son of God is the true Passover Lamb” (160). My wish here is that Morales had emphasized discontinuity between the New Covenant institution of the Lord’s Supper vis-à-vis Passover: The Lord’s Supper is not to be identified with the Passover of the Old Covenant and its regulations. The celebration of the Passover by our Lord and his disciples provided the occasion for the institution of the New Covenant perpetual ordinance, but it is not to be identified with it. After all, Jesus fulfilled the entire sacrificial system in addition to the Passover. This point needs to be made and bears repeating considering that so many Christians assume that the Lord’s Supper is merely a New Covenant practice of Passover; however, this is not so. Moreover, the practice of paedocommunionists (which is against our confessional standards) continues in some Reformed and evangelical churches.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter six of Morales’s book emphasizes Moses as the servant of Yahweh. This is a helpful chapter that can strengthen our appreciation of Moses as a unique prophetic figure in the Old Testament economy (cf., Hebrews 4), who was a servant over God’s Old Testament economy. One can grow in his interpretation of Moses as type of the Messiah to come. Nevertheless, it is here that this reviewer wanted Morales to be perfectly clear about the role of Moses as mediator, as a type of Christ. Moses is a mediator in so far as he is a type of Christ. Zacharias Ursinus, who is acknowledged far and wide as the best commentator on the Heidelberg Commentary, notes in his own day that some say that Moses was the Mediator of the Old Covenant. However, in the opinion of Ursinus, and this reviewer’s as well, the

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2 See Bryan Estelle, “Passover and the Lord’s Supper: Continuity or Discontinuity?” in *Children and the Lord’s Supper*, edited by Guy Waters and Ligon Duncan (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2011).



better opinion is that Moses “was Mediator only as a type of Christ, who was even then already Mediator, but is now the only Mediator without any type; for Christ having come in the flesh, is no longer covered with types.”<sup>3</sup>

In Part 2 of the book, Morales begins to treat the second exodus theme that is so pervasive throughout the Protestant canon of Scripture. Overall, Morales demonstrates that he is up to date on the scholarship and thoughtful in his reflections. The focus here should be his treatment of the Mosaic covenant. First, it is helpful when discussing this difficult and complex subject to distinguish between the Mosaic covenant and the Mosaic administration. Confessional scholars, who adhere to the Westminster Confession of Faith (hence WCF, 7:5–6), should, without equivocation, affirm that the Mosaic Covenant is part of the administration of the unfolding Covenant of Grace throughout redemptive history. Nevertheless, Morales identifies Mosaic covenant as a “gracious covenant” (120, 130) and one that was intended to bring the Gentiles out of their estranged relationship with God (this side of being exiled out of the garden) and back into fellowship with their God. But it bears repeating that the Mosaic Covenant was made with one nation only: Israel. Noticeably absent was any discussion of a typological works principle embedded during the Mosaic administration. Furthermore, although the covenant of grace is continuous throughout redemptive history, and although the covenant initiated at Sinai—in its substance—is part of the administration of the covenant of grace; nevertheless, the Mosaic Covenant and Mosaic “economy” need to be distinguished. After all, the same WCF, for example, uses the term *law* to refer to the Sinai covenant-administration by way of synecdoche (in which the part is taken for the whole).<sup>4</sup> The Mosaic Covenant could not accomplish the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. But a Messiah who would perfectly fulfill

the works principle embedded in the Mosaic Covenant could and did. Therefore, we see that the Westminster divines did not shirk from recognizing the forensic foundation of the covenant of grace. There is a conspicuous absence of Scriptural texts in this book that refer to the Mosaic Covenant as a “ministry of death” (cf., 2 Cor. 3:10). Although it would be an error to magnify this Pauline point to the exclusion of others, this important emphasis cannot go unregistered.

The best chapters of Part 2, in my opinion, were ten and eleven where Morales does a very able and eloquent job. There is much grist for the mill here on how to preach and teach these important chapters. Part 3 shifts to the New Testament. A creative and stimulating discussion of the exodus motif in the Gospel of John occurs in chapter twelve. The final two chapters tie everything together, and Morales really brings it to bear upon the reader. Indeed, the edifying, almost evangelistic tone in the end of the book reinforces that this sadly neglected theme—the exodus motif—is the warp and woof of salvation grammar throughout Scripture.

The last point that needs to be made is that this reviewer wishes that Morales had taken pains to distinguish between “pattern,” “motif,” and “theme” throughout the book. They are not the same, but they are often used almost synonymously throughout the book. That would have strengthened Morales’s overall excellent presentation. Aside from the criticisms mentioned above, the book deserves careful attention and a wide reading because Morales has ably discussed a complex and very important motif in our Bible. ©

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<sup>3</sup> *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R), 99.

<sup>4</sup> See WCF 25.2, 7:5–6, and WSC 27.



## EDITORIAL POLICIES

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

2. *Ordained Servant* publishes articles inculcating biblical Presbyterianism in accord with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and helpful articles occasionally from collateral Reformed traditions; however, views expressed by the writers do not necessarily represent the position of *Ordained Servant* or of the Church.

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