

Ecumenicity



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From the Editor

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church has always been deeply interested and involved in ecumenicity. Our joint venture in Great Commission Publications with the Presbyterian Church in America and our Psalter-hymnal project with the United Reformed Church are evidence of that commitment. In this issue URCNA pastor William Boekestein and OPC pastor William Shishko present articles based on lectures given at the “Semper Reformanda Conference” during the United Reformed Churches in North America Classis Eastern US, on October 14, 2014. These warm and thoughtful presentations should spur us on in our Reformed ecumenical endeavors.

Beginning last month Westminster Theological Seminary PhD student Sherif Gendy began providing very useful reviews of contemporary Old Testament literature. His chapter by chapter summary and critique should provide pastors with a helpful guide to available literature. This month Gendy reviews Middleton’s *A New Heaven and a New Earth*.

Fellow media ecologist T. David Gordon reviews *The Digital Divide*, an important collection of articles by a wide range of authors on the pros and cons of the electronic media.

Finally, Susan Felch reviews Jamie Smith’s *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. This is a guide to Taylor’s monumental work *The Secular Age* through the lens of Smith’s own philosophical understanding.

Don’t miss Herbert’s brilliant poem, “The Church-floor,” which links the patterns of his church’s floor to the human heart. His visual metaphor nicely illuminates his meaning.

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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- “All Ecclesiology is Local.” (Matthew W. Kingsbury) 11:3 (Jul. 2002): 60–61.
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- “Practical Ecumenicity.” 5:1 (Jan. 1996): 24.
- “Some Thoughts on the Practice of Ecumenicity.” (Bill DeJong) 7:2 (Apr. 1998): 27–28.
- “Some Timely Thoughts from John Calvin on Differences among Christians.” (Stephen Doe) 9:4 (October 2000): 91–92. [reprinted 15 (2006): 55–57]
- “Biblical Principles of the Unity of the Church: A Reformed (Continental) Perspective – Part 1.” (James de Jong) 11:1 (Jan. 2002): 29.
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Ordained Servant exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

ServantChurch

The Path to Ecumenicity

by William Boekestein

I love biblical ecumenicity.¹ I am thrilled that “the Son of God, out of the whole human race, from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers, defends, and preserves for himself, by his Holy Spirit and Word, in the unity of the true faith, a church, chosen to everlasting life.”² I am thankful that our “Catholic and undoubted Christian faith” can promote unity and cooperation.³ I relish reading in the pages of Acts and the Epistles about cooperation among churches and believers. I’ve enjoyed serving on denominational committees for church unity. Along with our elders and congregants, I have worked hard to pursue ecumenicity on a local level. I’ve been enriched by expressions of inter-church fellowship that have left an appetite for more.

But, perhaps like you, I have experienced frustration over how churches are sometimes content to allow ecumenicity to remain at a formal, denominational, and theoretical level. Biblical ecumenism is possible because of spiritual unity, but it is practiced through concrete activities that promote tangible fraternity. So, what does ecumenicity look like locally?

The answer is not immediately obvious. The Church Order of the URCNA (United Reformed Churches in North America) simply says that, “Fraternal activities between congregations . . . may include occasional pulpit exchanges, table fellowship, as well as other means of manifesting unity.”⁴ In addition to pulpit exchanges and communion, what are some “other means” of expressing practical ecumenicity? Much of the literature on the subject focuses on the important subject of what we might call macro-ecumenicity or formal, denominational ecumenicity.⁵ There seems to be much less written on what we might call micro, or local, ecumenicity.⁶

¹ This article is drawn from William Boekestein and Daniel R. Hyde, *A Well-Ordered Church: Laying a Solid Foundation for a Vibrant Church* (Welwyn Garden City, Wales: Evangelical Press, forthcoming). This article is also based on a lecture given at the United Reformed Churches in North America Classis Eastern US, “Semper Reformanda Conference” on October 14, 2014.

² The Heidelberg Catechism 54.

³ The Heidelberg Catechism 22.

⁴ *Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America*, 4th ed., 2007, Article 34, http://urcna.org/sysfiles/member/custom/file_retrieve.cfm?memberid=1651&customid=23868.

⁵ For discussions on ecumenicity particularly related to the OPC and URCNA see: Peter De Klerk and Richard De Ridder, eds., *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church: Studies in Its History, Theology, and Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 261-383; Henry Zwaanstra, *Catholicity and Secession: A Study of Ecumenicity in the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); John Muether and Danny Olinger, eds., *Confident of Better Things: Essays Commemorating Seventy-Five Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, PA: Committee for the Historian of the OPC), 447-94.

⁶ For a notable recent exception see Chris Bruno and Matt Dirks *Churches Partnering Together: Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism, and Compassion* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), which offers very

To help move forward the pursuit of more meaningful catholicity at the congregational level, I suggest three main action items our churches should take.

Evaluate Ecumenical Commitments

Most meaningful endeavors begin with evaluation. In the pursuit of biblical ecumenicity this will mean several things.

First we should evaluate the ecumenical history of our congregations. Ask questions like, “What does our congregation know about faithful churches in our area? On what level of fraternity are we with other congregations? How often does our church pray for other local churches? How have we partnered with regional churches in gospel ministry? Secessionist churches, whose history has been characterized by isolationism, might have to overcome significant hurdles before engaging churches outside of their congregations and tradition.

Second, we should evaluate our ecclesiastical reputation. Our ecumenical efforts will be affected by how other churches perceive us. Is your church known for being cooperative or schismatic; affirming or judgmental? For better or worse, perception will often be the reality upon which other churches will decide to interact with your congregation.

Third, we should evaluate our current challenges. What keeps us from connecting with other churches? Are we hamstrung by past conflicts with other local congregations the fallout of which continues to keep congregations at arm’s length from each other? Maybe your congregation has overreacted against the broader ecumenical movement and needs to learn to distinguish between true and false ecumenism. Maybe your church fears that engagement with other churches will lead to distraction, theological compromise, or ecclesiastical wanderlust. We must avoid the cult-like habit of discouraging our congregations from positively connecting with the broader church (cf. Mark 9:38–41) and firmly trust Christ to build his church as he pleases.

Fourth, we should evaluate our congregation’s ecumenical goals. For some churches that might not take long! Perhaps we lack goals because we subtly assume that ecumenicity happens spontaneously. If we do have goals for promoting practical catholicity, we should determine how much energy we are exerting toward those goals.

Evaluation helps us identify the true starting point from which we must move forward in pursuit of realistic goals.

But goals call for activity.

Exemplify Ecumenical Activity

As church leaders, we must lead by example. This means a number of things.

First, church officers need to practice ecumenicity before they preach it. Perhaps much of our teaching on ecumenicity falls flat because it is not borne out of real experience. But a church will seldom be more ecumenical than its leaders. One way of leading by example is for ministers to join their local ministerium. Even when local clergy groups are formed from a broad theological spectrum—an often unwelcome situation for confessionally-minded leaders—they can help a minister think more ecumenically. Further, if community spiritual leaders are having ongoing conversations about religious matters, should we not participate? In my own experience, being part of the Carbondale (PA) Area Ministerium has allowed me not only to speak from a confessional perspective during the meetings, but also to contribute

concrete suggestions in terms of how churches can partner together on a local level and do more together than they could individually.

to a weekly newspaper column called “Faith Matters” (to which I try to contribute with disproportionate regularity!). Beyond the ministerium, church leaders should develop relationships with other local church leaders outside of their own congregation. The enthusiasm that results from deepening personal inter-church relationships can be contagious.

Second, ministers should preach ecumenicity. When preaching Lord’s Day 21 (if you preach from the Heidelberg Catechism), or John 17, or Ephesians 4, or Psalm 133, etc., ministers should bring the theology to bear on their local situation. In Ephesians 4, for example, Paul teaches on the catholicity of the church. He says, “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all” (vv. 4–6). But Paul starts that chapter by admonishing believers to walk worthy of the calling with which they were called (v. 1).

In our preaching and teaching we should apply the “body principle” of the church, beyond our congregations. The principles of 1 Corinthians 12 describe the interconnectedness of both believers and churches; there is one church with many parts that have been brought into intimate *koinonía* (κοινωνία), or fellowship (cf. John 10:16). Fellowship could be briskly defined as “having in common, and giving, and receiving.” Believers are called to give and receive for the benefit of the body. If we have study habits, enthusiasm, policies, seriousness, joy, or evangelistic zeal, we must share these things with those who differ from us. Perhaps “they” have something to teach us as well.

We should also preach about the dangers of failing to be ecumenical. We need to remind our people that, as Christian churches continue to functionally disregard each other, the world will increasingly perceive us as schismatic and irrelevant (John 17:21). Our effectiveness will be reduced, and our churches and believers will become more prone to imbalance. In a hostile world a robust, Reformed witness requires practical catholicity.

Third, leaders should help their congregation develop and apply a standard for fellowship. Specifically, we need to figure out how to engage churches around us by allowing both theology and geography to direct our ecumenical energies.

In the early years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, J. Gresham Machen and Ned B. Stonehouse attempted to express the unity of Christ’s church, “while at the same time do[ing] justice to their confessional commitment to the Reformed faith . . . by recognizing different levels and purposes of fellowship and unity.”⁷ They recognized that even dissimilar churches of Christ already have some relationship with each other. The crucial task is to figure out how respective proximity or distance, both theologically and geographically, impacts that relationship. Such an approach can help congregations develop a protocol for interacting with all congregations that cross their path. In a sense, denominational affiliation as well as networks like the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) can help us to pursue relationships with regional churches of similar theology.

But how do we engage local churches outside our theological “inner-circle?”

First, we should exercise a judgment of charity; not by ignoring the marks of the true church, but by charitably using those marks to evaluate other churches. The Second Helvetic Confession is helpful: “Hence, we must be very careful not to judge rashly before the time,

⁷ Sean Michael Lucas, “J. Gresham Machen, Ned B. Stonehouse, and the Quandry of Reformed Ecumenicity,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 62 (2000): 197–222.

nor to exclude and cast off or cut away those whom the Lord would not have excluded nor cut off, or whom, without some damage to the church we cannot separate from it.”⁸

Second, we should attempt to develop meaningful relationships with neighboring churches. For some churches, limiting their ecumenical activity to NAPARC churches would rule out practicing local ecumenicity. Those churches that are closer to us in proximity might be further from us in theology. But the fact that they are our neighbors should drive us to at least pursue ecclesiastical neighborliness. Doing so will help us avoid caricaturing their theology, and, if possible, help them find a better way.

Exercise Practical Ecumenicity

What follows are three areas in which we might begin the work of practicing local ecumenicity.

First, we should work to cultivate common ground between congregations. One of the simplest ways of doing so is to introduce NAPARC to our own congregations. It might be news to our congregations—perhaps to our leadership—that NAPARC members have committed “to advise, counsel, and cooperate in various matters with one another, and hold out before each other the desirability and need for organic union of churches that are of like faith and practice.” We agree to “exercise mutual concern in the perpetuation, retention, and propagation of the Reformed faith” and to “promote cooperation wherever possible and feasible on the . . . local level.”⁹ Better yet, we might introduce to our congregations the local churches of NAPARC, and pray for these congregations publicly. Our folks need to know that we value these churches and that we have more than a formal relationship with them.

It might also be helpful for Reformed churches to teach through the Westminster standards, and for Presbyterian churches to do the same with the Three Forms of Unity.¹⁰ By so doing our congregants will note how much commonality we have even with respect to our differences.¹¹

Second, be pro-active, persistent, and patient. Some of us may be more comfortable being on the receiving end of ecumenical contact. Remember that the officers of the churches in your region might have a different notion of ecumenicity; if we don’t take the initiative, perhaps no one will. Ecumenically minded churches will also be persistent. Churches should beware of defending their so-called ecumenism by citing long out-of-date examples of inter-church interactions. Persistence and regularity is critical; local churches might be skittish and need repeated contacts and phone calls between leaders before a relationship can bud. Relationships that are forged will need steady nurturing to remain healthy. One caution: As we take initiative we should be careful to be patient, wise, and respectful. “Keep in mind that rushing to get commitments too quickly can kill a budding partnership. Allow God to build the relational foundation for the ministry efforts that will come later.”¹²

⁸ Second Helvetic Confession 17.14.

⁹ North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) website address is <http://www.naparc.org/basis>.

¹⁰ For help in this endeavor see Alan D. Strange, “Presbyterians and the Heidelberg Catechism,” *New Horizons* 34 (October 2013): 3–5; John R. Muether, “The Heidelberg Catechism in the OPC,” *New Horizons* 34 (October 2013): 6–7.

¹¹ Cf. Joel Beeke and Sinclair Ferguson, eds., *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

¹² Bruno, 147.

Third, be creative. What follows is an attempt to give shape to the nebulous “other means” of manifesting unity referenced earlier. Consider these suggestions and brainstorm for more!

- *Hold joint church picnics between congregations.* Depending on the liturgical differences you might face with other congregations, this less-formal way of expressing church unity might be advantageous.
- *Participate in joint prayer meetings.* Reconsider your decision to never again participate in community National Day of Prayer gatherings (being fully prepared to hear myriad atrocious prayers). By participating we take the opportunity to demonstrate our interest in the people of the city, while at the same time modeling biblical prayer.
- *Hold joint worship services.* With due diligence in considering potential practical and theological concerns, combined Christmas Eve services, Good Friday services, Reformation Day services, or occasional combined evening services can bear great fruit. Some potential awkwardness can also be avoided by hosting the service rather than being hosted.
- *Organize occasional conferences, speaker series, or choral concerts.* Approach these types of events as genuine opportunities to be sharpened, to enjoy fellowship, and to strengthen solidarity among local believers. Depending on where you live, your conference might also be a great way to introduce people to sound theology and worship.
- *Promote and participate in pulpit exchanges.* The small congregation I pastor has come to know and appreciate dozens of other churches and their respective denominations through pulpit exchanges. Not only do pulpit exchanges capitalize on various ministerial gifts in building up the body, they also can help build awareness and trust between congregations.
- *Brainstorm.* Might your church participate in cooperative mission, education, or relief efforts? Would involvement in local pregnancy resource centers or prison ministries be more effective if the work-load were shared? Could you form a joint softball team with another church? What if your church held an in-house ecumenicity symposium so the members could share ideas by which you could partner with other believers?

It is not enough to confess our belief in the catholicity of the church by way of the Apostles' Creed. It is not enough for our churches to be mutual members of NAPARC if our membership amounts to a badge of Reformed conservatism. We need to take the principles and the commitments that we've already made through our NAPARC involvement, and which are impressed upon us in the Word of God, and translate them on the local level. When that happens we'll no longer have to “sell” ecumenicity. It will easily sell itself.

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ServantChurch

L'chaim: An Invitation to the Blessedness of Ecumenical Life

by William Shishko

Consider the beautiful case for true ecumenicity¹ pictured in Psalm 133:

A Song of Ascents. Of David. Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.

This is part of the Songs of Ascents beginning with Psalm 120 and ending with Psalm 134. These depict the various stages of the pilgrimages of the tribes of Israel making their way to Jerusalem for a time of united worship.

It's interesting that Psalm 120 is about strife, war, and division. The Psalm ends with these words, "I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war" (v. 7). Then, in Psalm 133, as this pilgrimage progresses, we read the word "behold . . .": "Stop and think about the opposite . . . the goodness, the pleasantness of brethren dwelling in unity" (v. 1). It is no coincidence that Psalm 134—the end of the Songs of Ascents—is a beautiful fanfare of the worship of people who have gone from strife and war to the blessedness of holy unity.

Behold is significant. It (like the word *Selah*) calls us to stop and think about what God has just said. *Behold* calls us to "stop and think about this" beautiful thing called ecumenicity.

True ecumenicity is a *blessed* thing: "Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity." Psalm 133 culminates with, "There the Lord has *commanded* the blessing." (v. 3; emphasis added). Here is a sure path to blessedness.

It is a unity that must begin at the top and flow down. It is like precious oil on the head running down on the beard and then on the garments of Aaron the priest. Or it is like the dew of Hermon that falls on the lower mountains of Jerusalem. Ultimately, this is in and from Christ, the one who is supremely greater than Aaron. It is a unity that represents the unity of the Father and the Son, together with the Holy Spirit. This is the unity for which Jesus prays so passionately in John 17:22: "That they may be one, even as we are one."

¹ This article is based on a lecture given at the United Reformed Churches in North America Classis Eastern US, "Semper Reformanda Conference" on October 14, 2014.

This is not so much an achievement as it is a blessing, a blessing that begins by communion with Christ who is the head. The closer you are to him the less comfortable you will be with disunity with any who call on the name of the Lord out of a pure heart. If our unity flows from the unity of the Son and the Father and the Spirit, then we have the heart of what that true unity is all about.

This blessed unity must begin with the leaders of the church. John Calvin, who furthered ecumenicity in the early years of the Protestant Reformation, wrote:

If men of learning [here he is speaking of ministers] conduct themselves with more reserve than seemly, the very heaviest blow attaches to the leaders themselves, who, either engrossed in their own sinful pursuits, are indifferent to the safety and entire piety of the church, or who, individually satisfied with their own private peace, have no regard for others.²

Ecumenicity is hard. It is difficult. It is upsetting. But, beginning with the leaders in the churches, the work must begin. That will never come to minds and hearts that are full, first, with debate and difference. For minds and hearts full of the love, the longsuffering, the patience, the kindness, and the goodness of God in Christ, there will be a passion for biblical ecumenicity.

Notice that this is messy stuff. Oil coming down on the beard of Aaron, running down on the garments: that's messy stuff. Most of you wouldn't like a lot of oil dumped on your head, and then running down your face and then on to your shirt or your blouse. It's messy stuff—but it's messy stuff that is accompanied with God's blessing.

One of our elders is fond of saying, when we deal with difficult things, “the agony is part of the answer.” The agony of working through ecumenical relations is part of the answer. But that messiness brings blessing to every member. It goes down to the garment. It goes to the very base of the mountains of Zion and causes lush plants to grow. The end result is a pleasant thing.

The word *pleasant* in Psalm 133:1 is used for the music produced by instruments playing together in what we would know of today as an orchestra—the pleasantness of various instruments and the various types of sounds in those instruments in concert together, all playing as they ought to, none of them out of tune, and all responding to the leadership of the great conductor. *Pleasant*. That's the kind of a beauty that describes true ecumenicity.

Notice the beautiful symphony of true brotherly unity in Psalm 133:3: “There the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.” This is both the life that comes to people regenerated by the Spirit of God and the richness of the life of which Jesus speaks when he says, “I've come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

This is the heart of the invitation to ecumenicity in our culture. Our culture is dying at a very rapid rate. We are seeing the last half of Romans 1 played out before our eyes. God is giving us up to a culture of death. You don't need to think very hard for illustrations. Against that bleak backdrop, the greatest invitation to ecumenicity is that, in

² Jules Bonnet, ed., *Letters of John Calvin: Compiled from the Original Manuscripts and Edited with Historical Notes*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 348.

the context of healthy, biblical, principled ecumenicity, there is life—just what our culture needs and needs to see.

Our Jewish friends in New York have the concept right. At a toast you say, “L’chaim”—to life, to the blessedness of life. That’s what’s in view in Psalm 133. The writer says that true ecumenicity is an invitation to the blessedness of life.

Let me invite you to the blessedness of life in the bonds of true ecumenical unity. Here “the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore” (v.3). What is the blessed life that comes in the development of biblical ecumenicity at any level?

L’chaim: To the blessing of lives of humility that comes by having to work together as a family. The blessedness that the Lord gives when there is true humility is that it makes us realize that we need to work together as a family—whether the biological family or the ecclesiastical family. It’s the humility of being able to say, “My preferences are not the same as my convictions.” Can you say that? In many cases ecumenicity has been stopped for one reason: We make convictions out of our personal preferences, rather than being humble enough to say these are not necessarily equal.

Background does not equal Bible. That is a very humble thing to admit, regardless of our backgrounds. Likewise, personal and church traditions are not necessarily equal to the Scriptures. The only right way to deal with backgrounds and traditions that can become impediments to true ecumenicity is with this grace called humility. Remember Ephesians 4:1–3.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager [working hard, making every effort] to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

This is not a suggestion. It is a solemn and earnest mandate.

If you’re going to keep a family together, you must work through your differences with grace and love. It’s hard, and it takes humility. You must know where you can bend and where you cannot. But there is blessedness in that. That’s also true of God’s family, which is composed of his churches. *L’chaim!*

L’chaim: To the blessedness of a life of more multi-dimensional Reformed faith and practice. True ecumenicity brings together the richness of more diverse cultural backgrounds. The prospect of having a fuller expression of the Reformed faith bringing together the Dutch and Scottish and English and American expressions of the Reformed faith is blessed; but we should think beyond that.

It’s a joy as well as a challenge to minister in the metropolitan New York City area. It is the most culturally diverse area in the world. It’s a joy and a challenge to be part of a Reformed church in which we have Hispanics, people from the Caribbean, blacks, Asians, and Italians. They did not come to us knowing the *OPC Book of Church Order*. Reformed faith and practice doesn’t come hard-wired into them. You must teach them. We disciple them in the things we believe are right and good. And we learn from them as well. When we have the humility to learn from different cultural traditions, we invite the development of a more multi-dimensional (and beautiful) church life. That doesn’t mean we’re going to always be completely of one mind. But there will be a unity of one heart and mutual submission. *L’chaim!*

L'chaim: To the life of a little more visible unity in what, to the modern world, is a confusing mess. Split “peas”—OPC, PCA, ARP, RPCNA, KAPC. Then add URCNA, RCUSA. Oh, my!

Do you want to know what the church is to our culture? If you turn your desktop computer around, what do you find? Unless you're fully wireless, you see dozens of cords connected to all different ports and holes and plugs. It looks like a multi-colored pile of spaghetti. And unless you are of a very rarified, geeky type, you don't want to have anything to do with those cords.

We're the geeks when it comes to our ecclesiastical spaghetti. Each of the cords of our faith and practice is important; but the world doesn't want to have anything to do with them. “By this the world will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another” (John 13:35).

Let's be honest. Our divisions have had a negative impact on our own children and grandchildren. For the sake of our generation and generations to come, let's start addressing our differences in honest love and in genuine grace. *L'chaim!*

L'chaim, to the life of more efficient use of our resources in a time of increased expense and expertise for ministry. There is so much wasteful or prideful duplication of effort as we try to become adept in dealing with modern means of communication. (And remember that communication of the Word of God is what we are about.) We are making some progress in this area. It's wonderful that the OPC and the URCNA are working on a Psalter-Hymnal together. We are sacrificing no principles, and we will be benefitting both bodies (and others) as we pool our resources. Similarly the OPC and the PCA work together to produce the finest of Reformed educational resources through Great Commission Publications. That's the kind of thing that promotes ecumenicity and benefits the church as a whole. Let's do more! *L'chaim!*

L'chaim to a life of practical, observable love, constrained by organizational union. What does that mean?

Our relatively small church bodies struggle to get money for our various mission projects. It is understandable and right that we give priority to the projects of our respective church bodies. Wouldn't it be better to have a life of practical, observable love constrained by an organizational union in which we work *together* on things like disaster relief and home and foreign mission projects? Could it be that, then, the world might better see our love as those committed to the historic Reformed faith? *L'chaim!*

L'chaim, to a life that is in a position to ask the very blessing God has commanded. “There he has commanded the blessing, life forevermore” (Ps. 133:3). How many of us have seen many conversions in our churches? I don't mean people “converted” to the Reformed faith from broad evangelicalism, but people converted from the worst forms of paganism and wickedness. Are you seeing those kinds of conversions? Does not this text invite us to ask for this blessing as we work together and truly learn from one another in humility and love? “Lord, as we honestly seek to develop our visible unity in the truth, will you please honor your promise to bless us with the life of heaven, and with that life in more people?” He has promised to do that. He *will* do that—but not so long as—for whatever reasons—we avoid the responsibility of seeking visible unity among ourselves. *L'chaim!*

Finally: *L'chaim*, to a life that honestly lives out of our eschatology. By the Holy Spirit, God gives us a down payment of the “not yet” of glory in the “already” of this age.

If we live out of that truth that heaven is, as Jonathan Edwards says, “a world of love,” what does that mean for biblical ecumenicity? It means that we will have the spirit of a John Calvin, who says things like, “I think it right for me at whatever cost of toil and trouble to seek to obtain the object of this church unity.”³ This is not a reluctant, begrudging view of working for ecumenicity. It’s the impulse of eternity itself in one who felt impelled to move forward in the work.

Commenting on Psalm 133, Matthew Henry expressed this so well:

They that dwell in love not only dwell in God but do already dwell in heaven. As the perfection of love is the blessedness of heaven, so the sincere outworking of love is the earnest of that blessedness. Those who live and love in peace shall have the God of love and peace with them now, and they shall be with Him shortly, with Him forever, in the world of endless love and peace. How good then is this unity, and how blessed!⁴

L’chaim!

May God renew our zeal to see the beautiful picture of Psalm 133 realized more and more before our eyes, beginning with the principled, earnest labors of churches committed to the Reformed faith. *L’chaim!* To the special blessedness and life that come when brothers and sisters and churches dwell together in unity!

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³ Bonnet, 348.

⁴ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (New York, NY: Revell, 1935), 3:746.

ServantReading

A New Heaven and a New Earth

A Review Article

by Sherif Gendy

A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology, by J. Richard Middleton. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014, 336 pages, \$26.99, paper.

In this book J. Richard Middleton brings in a fresh presentation to the biblical teaching about a new heaven and a new earth. His primary purpose is to sketch the coherent biblical theology of the eschatological vision of the redemption of creation. He does so by exploring some of the ethical implications of a biblically grounded holistic eschatology for our present day and investigating what happened to the biblical vision of the redemption of the earth in the history of Christian eschatology.

The book contains twelve chapters and an appendix. Chapter 1, which serves as the introduction to the book, highlights what is wrong with the traditional Christian view of heaven as final destiny. Middleton argues that the Old Testament does not place any substantial hope in the afterlife. Rather, it presents a holistic vision of God's intent to renew or redeem the creation. The expectation in Old Testament eschatological texts (e.g., Dan. 12:2–3) is manifestly this-worldly. Middleton then sketches the historical origins of the otherworldly idea of heavenly afterlife in the teachings of Plato to show how Christian forebears have used his ideas to articulate their theology in the context of Greco-Roman culture.

Chapters 2 and 3 are grouped together under part 1 of the book which is titled "From Creation to Eschaton." Middleton focuses in chapter 2 on God's original intent for humans to image him by developing the culture and caring for the earthly environment—an intent that was blocked by human sin. He questions the belief that man was created to primarily worship God. For Middleton, man worships God in a distinctive way by interacting with the earth to transform the environment into a complex sociocultural world.

Although man was not created primarily to worship God, he was created chiefly to glorify him (cf. Ps. 86:9; Isa. 60:21; Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 6:20; Rev. 4:11). Certainly, worship is one form of glorifying God. Active obedience to God's revealed will is another way through which man ought to glorify God as his image bearer.

Chapter 3 presents the structure of the biblical metanarrative from creation to eschaton, which clarifies God's purpose to redeem earthly creation (rather than take us out of earth to heaven). Here Middleton emphatically argues that heaven was never part of God's purposes for humanity and has no intrinsic role as the final destiny of human

salvation. For Middleton, eschatological redemption consists in the renewal of human cultural life on earth.

While Middleton might be right that the Bible does not describe heaven as the eternal destiny of the believer, I find his emphasis on the human's labor of transforming the cultural life on earth as the ultimate purpose of God, and the eschatological hope for the righteous, biblically ungrounded. Middleton goes as far as to say that to name the Christian hope "heaven" diverts our attention from the expectation for the transformation of our earthly life. Yet, the Bible clearly speaks of new Jerusalem that will come down *out of* heaven (Rev. 21:2, 10). This heavenly Jerusalem ushers in the "new heavens and new earth," a totally new order of things (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). This is not the result of human effort, nor is it simply a development of earthly culture and environment, as Middleton would like to propose. This is the supernatural work of God in Christ who is making all things new (cf. Rev. 21:5; cf. 2 Cor. 5:1, 17; Heb. 12:27).

Part 2 "Holistic Salvation in the Old Testament" consists of chapters 4 through 6 and uncovers the Old Testament's portrayal of God's ongoing commitment to the flourishing of earthly life. Chapter 4 analyzes God's deliverance of Israel in the exodus narrative and suggests that this paradigmatic event functions as a pattern for understanding salvation in both the Old and New Testaments. Though the exodus event shares many components with the overall work of God's salvation and is a shadow of Christ's redemption, one has to keep in mind that the core nature of the exodus deliverance is not salvific. After all, the exodus generation died in the wilderness for disobedience (Num. 26:64–65; 32:11–13). Therefore, there are some major dissimilarities between the exodus and Christ's work of redemption. Building upon the full analogy, Middleton seeks to make the case that a life of obedience to God is necessary to *complete* salvation. He states that "obedience completes the salvation begun in the exodus" (87). From that premise Middleton goes on to say that in the New Testament obedience is a crucial aspect of salvation, which for him entails the reestablishment of justice and restoration of communal well-being. Here Middleton is influenced by N. T. Wright's new perspective theology which many evangelicals would find problematic. Surely a believer's obedience naturally follows his God-given faith and grace (Eph. 2:10; Titus 2:14). But this obedience does not contribute to his salvation nor does not complete it (Eph. 2:8–9). Salvation is entirely the work of Christ, and he alone will bring it to completion at his return.

Chapter 5 examines how Israel's laws and wisdom traditions, together with prophetic oracles of judgment and anticipations of restoration beyond exile, testify to God's desire to bring shalom and blessing to ordinary human life on earth. In chapter 6 Middleton addresses the Old Testament's theophany texts that present judgment as an inescapable reality for those who resist God's will. These texts show that God's ultimate purpose beyond judgment is to accomplish his original intent for the flourishing of humanity and the nonhuman world.

Part 3 "The New Testament's Vision of Cosmic Renewal" is comprised of chapters 7 and 8. Chapter 7 explores the inner logic of the hope of resurrection and its connection to the restoration of human rule of the earth, beginning with late Old Testament texts and on into the New Testament. The comprehensive and holistic scope of salvation in the New Testament is discussed in chapter 8 as it brings together various strands of expectation that sin and evil will be reversed through the renewal of all things.

Part 4 “Problem Texts for Holistic Eschatology” contains chapters 9 and 10. In chapter 9 Middleton seeks to correct the misunderstanding of some New Testament texts that are typically misread as if they teach the destruction or annihilation of the cosmos at Christ’s return (e.g., Matt. 24; Rev 6; 20–21; Heb. 12). Worthy of note here is Middleton’s discussion on the destruction of heavens and the elements in 2 Peter 3. He makes the case that this text does not describe the obliteration of the cosmos on the last day. Rather, it depicts God’s judgment of demonic powers as he purges the world of evil so that it might be renewed and transformed. Middleton argues that the earth and its works will be “found” (2 Pet. 3:10). The destruction is not of creation but of sin, thus cleansing or purifying creation.

Middleton is clear that not everyone will be finally saved. He does not deny the fact of judgment. He does, however, suggest that the final judgment is akin to cosmic disinheritance of the earth; a permanent exile from God’s creation. Judgment, therefore, is an annihilation of the person rather than eternal torment. Certainly, this conclusion does not seem to be supported from the Scriptures. At different places, the Bible does in fact confirm eternal punishment to those fallen, sinful, and guilty persons who rejected the perfect atoning work of Christ (cf. Isa. 34:10; Matt. 18:8; 25:41, 46; Jude 7; Rev. 14:10–11; 19:3; 20:10).

In chapter 10 Middleton covers the New Testament texts that seem to promise an otherworldly destiny in heaven including the “rapture” texts and those that speak of the interim or intermediate state between death and resurrection (e.g., Matt. 24:40–41; 25:34; 2 Cor. 5:1–5; 1 Thess. 4:13–18; 1 Pet. 1:3–5; Rev. 6:9–10; 21:1–2). His main point is that these texts present an apocalyptic pattern of preparation in heaven followed by unveiling on earth. Middleton insistently dismisses any view of heaven being a place to which the righteous go when they die.

While Middleton tries to make the case that an interim state is not taught in the Scripture, he offers no insight on where the righteous go when they die. He suggests that the notion of “soul sleep” where one moves subjectively from death to resurrection, with no consciousness of the intermediate state, is more plausible. This applies, according to Middleton, to Jesus’s promise to the believing criminal on the cross (Luke 23:39–43). Middleton takes 2 Corinthians 5:6–9 and Philippians 1:23, for example, to mean that Paul is looking at the second coming of Christ and thinking of the eschaton rather than being with Christ immediately when he dies. This seems to be a farfetched way of understanding Paul in these passages. The theory of souls sleep does not really find biblical warrant and is nowhere taught in the Scriptures.

The last part of this book, Part 5 titled “The Ethics of the Kingdom,” consists of chapters 11 and 12. Chapter 11 focuses on the holistic, this-worldly character of Jesus’s announcement of good news in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:16–30), unpacking the implications of Christ’s message for the renewal of the entire person and social order itself with the opening of the kingdom to outsiders. According to Middleton, the good news of the kingdom is nothing less than the healing (literally, the establishing) of the world in which we are all invited to participate. The last chapter of the book, chapter 12, addresses the ethical challenge of the kingdom that Jesus brings, both in his day and ours. The good news of the kingdom can be grasped only through a radical challenge that requires a fundamental reorientation of life. The overall thrust of the biblical story from

creation to eschaton unveils a vision of God's kingdom that is both applicable to every dimension of earthly life and open to the entire human family.

Middleton concludes this book with an appendix that continues the historical analysis of a Platonic otherworldly vision discussed in chapter 1. It looks at how the idea of a heavenly destiny came to dominate popular Christian eschatology by tracing the eclipse of the biblical vision of the redemption of the cosmos over the course of church history. Middleton notices hopeful recent signs of the recovery of a more holistic eschatology.

Comprehensive in its scope, this book is an attempt to develop a holistic biblical worldview regarding the teaching of the redemption of creation, including both physical cosmos and human culture and society. Middleton's ethical implications of such a vision are noteworthy. Ultimately, what we desire and anticipate as the culmination of salvation is what truly affects how we attempt to live in the present. "Ethics is lived eschatology" (24). Thus, a holistic vision of the future can motivate and ground compassionate yet bold redemptive living in God's world. Middleton's endeavor to ground eschatology in the entire biblical story, beginning with God's original intent for earthly flourishing and culminating in his redemptive purpose of restoring earthly life through the work of Christ, is another commendable aspect of this book.

What might cause some controversy, especially among evangelicals, is Middleton's view that heaven is not the hope for Christians or their home after this life. His alternative suggestion of soul sleep may not be welcomed by many in the historic Reformed tradition. While many would rightly agree with Middleton on his emphasis on the renewal of the world as the biblical vision for eschatology, this renewal is not a man-made effort that involves the flourishing of earthly culture and environment. Hugely influenced by N. T. Wright, Middleton's consistent pursuit of an eschatological notion that requires a this-worldly final state is highly questionable. Middleton mentions Reformed biblical scholars and theologians like A. A. Hodge, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and others to support his position. These scholars do indeed speak of the renewal of this earth and the reconstitution of the world—the redemption of the created order—as the eschatological work of God in Christ. However, they sharply differ from Middleton's view that the redemptive work of world renewal is done gradually by man through the prospering of earthly culture. Rather, it is a divine work accomplished by Christ himself that will accompany his return in the consummation of all things and the establishment of the new heaven and new earth.

In sum, while elements of this book, particularly Middleton's disavowal of heavenly afterlife, will be controversial, this book is a welcome reminder of the biblical story of holistic salvation and God's commitment to an integral and comprehensive restoration of the creation.

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ServantReading

The Digital Divide, *edited by Mark Bauerlein*

by T. David Gordon

The Digital Divide: Arguments for and Against Facebook, Google, Texting, and the Age of Social Networking, edited by Mark Bauerlein. New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2011, xiv + 354 pages, \$17.95, paper.

Readers of *Ordained Servant* may very well recall that Mark Bauerlein, in addition to teaching English Literature at Emory University, is the author of the influential 2008 volume *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone under Thirty)*. The present volume consists of twenty-seven essays by twenty-five authors, including essays by such well-known media ecologists as Todd Gitlin, Maryanne Wolf, Steven Johnson, Nicholas Carr, Sherry Turkle, Christine Rosen, and Maggie Jackson.¹ The twenty-seven essays are divided into three sections of nine each, arranged around “the brain, the senses,” “social life, personal life, school,” and “the fate of culture.”

The essays range across a fairly significant amount of time; Sherry Turkle’s is the oldest (1995), and the next-oldest is the paradigm-making 2001 essay by Marc Prensky, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants.” Most fall into the 2006–10 time frame. The editor of *Ordained Servant* even wondered if the essays were not dated, in light of so many recent developments in the digital world, and he was/is right—who talks about “Web 2.0” anymore, for instance? But this editorial concern itself is instructive, because in almost no other arena could a book, only two of whose twenty-seven essays antedate 2002, already be “irrelevant” in some of its particulars. The digital world is a head-spinning, rapidly-changing world. New words and expressions come (“You can Google it.”) and go (“my favorite Usenet group,” “MySpace”) quickly in such a world. The essays in this volume are, therefore, both timeless *and* dated, if that were possible—timeless because the observations about digital alterations to social structures, consciousness, and cognition itself are indeed altered by the digital environment, and “dated,” because some

¹ Todd Gitlin, *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms our Lives* (New York: Metropolitan, 2002); Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (New York: Harper, 2007); Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today’s Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (New York: Riverhead, 2005); Nicholas Carr, *The Big Switch: Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google* (2008); *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010); Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic, 2011); Christine Rosen, many essays and editorials in *The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology and Society*; and Maggie Jackson, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2008).

of the particular software or hardware is already obsolete. But that is, of course, part of the point.

Some of the particular essays have become cultural bell-weepers that will be read by media ecologists for years to come. Marc Prensky's distinction between digital "natives" and digital "immigrants" will remain useful for the next couple decades, as it helps to describe the "divide" between the two that is so different between the generational divide that existed between my 1960s generation and our parents. We were very self-conscious of our intentional rejection of the *status quo ante* that we inherited. Digital natives, by contrast, are virtually (pun intended) unaware of a pre-digital world. They do not rebel *against* a pre-digital environment, because they simply do not know it; and can no more push against it than a Venetian gondolier with a four-foot pole can push against a water-bottom that is sixteen feet beneath the surface.

Among the important differences in point-of-view among the essayists are those between what I call inevitablists and non-inevitablists. For some of the authors, the digital world is simply a given—like gravity—that must be accommodated; for others, it is a given—like radon gas—that must be carefully monitored and limited, lest it become dehumanizing (my sympathies are more with the latter). It is beneficial to have that range of point-of-view present in a single volume.

All of the observations in this volume are insightful. Many are as pertinent now as when they were originally written, because they are observations about the rapidly-changing, visually-biased, language-contemptuous nature of the digital world *per se*. For students of media, the no-longer-pertinent observations are nearly as beneficial, because they remind us that we live in a world in which our capacity to develop new media is many times faster than our capacity to evaluate them. Readers who may be interested in media ecology *per se* will wish to familiarize themselves with evaluations of earlier media: orality, manuscript, typography, photograph, etc.; but busy pastors, elders, and deacons who wish to understand the present digital environment may very well find no other single volume that covers that environment (and the differing assessments thereof) better than this one.

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ServantReading

How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor by James K. A. Smith

by Susan M. Felch

How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor, by James K. A. Smith. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014, xi + 148 pages, \$16.00, paper.

In *How (Not) to be Secular*, James K. A. Smith offers an atlas to Charles Taylor's 800 plus page tome, *A Secular Age* (2007). Taylor's book itself is a richly detailed topographical map that charts the journey of Western culture from near universal belief in God to our contemporary age where it is possible to "to account for meaning and significance without any appeal to the divine or transcendence" (141). Despite its erudition and detailed analyses, Taylor's book, Smith claims, might better be read as a novel (24), which is a useful way to approach its diagnosis, critique, and prognosis. One need not subscribe to all the particularities of Taylor's theory to appreciate his description of our current malaise. What Smith helps us to see is not an abstract philosopher, but a Christian thinker whose work has "existential import," because, as Taylor insists, "we're all secular now" (28). To be secular means that we live in "an age of contested belief, where religious belief is no longer axiomatic. It's possible to imagine not believing in God" (142).

It is that imagining which affects both believers and unbelievers alike. Our secular age is not just a world with God neatly subtracted from the equation, as many would have us think; rather, it is a world of rival stories and rival claims to how meaning can—and should—be made. It is not so much an age of disbelief as "an age of believing otherwise" (47). In this contested "cross-pressured" space, Christians may find themselves unwittingly succumbing to a pernicious individualism and to arguments for God that circumscribe his transcendence. Smith and Taylor make the point, for instance, that modern concerns with theodicy are based on the presumption that, like God, we can see everything and therefore can "now expect an answer to whatever puzzles us, including the problem of evil. Nothing should be inscrutable" (52). On the other hand, those who are not Christians, especially musicians, writers, and other artists, may be haunted by a profound sense that there is "something more," despite their commitment to understanding all of life within the "immanent frame" of this present, tangible world.

Smith points us not just to Taylor's diagnoses, but also to his two-fold constructive agenda: to show unbelievers that their dismissal of God is itself a "construal," not a neutral, unbiased, objective stance and to tell them a better story, a story that more fully accounts for the richness, beauty, and heartbreak of this world. The language here is

inflected by phenomenology and Taylor's Roman Catholic faith, but it resonates with Kuyper and Van Til's critique of neutrality and the biblical mandate to proclaim the gospel. Because Smith wants us not merely to understand the arguments in *A Secular Age*, but also to learn from it *How (Not) to be Secular*, he goes beyond Taylor to urge readers to restore the centrality of communal worship, Word, and sacrament to their own lives.

With a book as long, complex, and suggestive as Taylor's *A Secular Age*, it is handy to have a knowledgeable and articulate guide. Like all good maps, Smith's book has a key, the very useful glossary of terms at the back. In fact, the serious reader may wish to begin there, in order to familiarize him or herself with the basic terrain.

At times, Smith's atlas shows signs of its genesis in an undergraduate classroom (he wrote the book after teaching Taylor in a senior seminar). The occasional assumption that all readers are philosophy majors, some name-dropping, and references to 1990s popular culture may strike the reader as helpful, tangential, or slightly annoying, depending on age and preference. But these creases in a serviceable road map can be overlooked.

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Servant Poetry

George Herbert (1593-1633)

The Church-floor

Mark you the floor? that square and speckled stone,
Which looks so firm and strong,
Is *Patience*:

And th' other black and grave, wherewith each one
Is checker'd all along,
Is *Humility*:

The gentle rising, which on either hand
Leads to the Choir above,
Is *Confidence* :

But the sweet cement, which in one sure band
Ties the whole frame, is *Love*
And *Charity*.

Hither sometimes Sin steals, and stains
The marbles neat and curious veins:
But all is cleansed when the marble weeps.
Sometimes Death, puffing at the door,
Blows all the dust about the floor:
But while he thinks to spoil the room, he sweeps.
Blest be the *Architect*, whose art
Could build so strong in a weak heart.