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Ordained Servant Online

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CURRENT ISSUE: THE WORK OF THE RHM

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From the Editor

One of the unique aspects of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's ecclesiology is the ministry of the Regional Home Missionary (RHM). It is the ministry of the Word applied to a region, and it is a very flexible calling depending on the gifts of the missionary and the circumstances in his presbytery; but, in all cases, the aim is to plant churches. Lacy Andrews paints an informative picture of his work over more than two decades.

Another RHM, Steve Doe, challenges us to think about how we relate to our postmodern world. Do we really understand—or want to understand—the language of the latest generation? These are important questions for the church in its mission to a lost world.

Danny Olinger addresses the uneasy relationship between author John Updike and Christians. Updike's often explicit sexuality is offensive to most Christians. Sadly, this eclipses the brilliant style, glimpses of grace, and trenchant cultural insights of this serious twentieth-century literary figure. Olinger helps the Christian navigate this important corpus.

Denominational historian John Muether brings us the sixth in his chronological series on Reformed confessions, the first of the Three Forms of Unity. It is wonderful to observe the progress of the confessing church in its dogmatic symbols.

Stephen Tracey reviews an excellent new anthology on preaching, *Pulpit Aflame*, and I review the biography of an early mentor in my Christian life and a philosopher-theologian whose thinking, writing, and teaching cut a wide swath in the twentieth-century Reformed world, Douglas Douma's *Presbyterian Philosopher: Gordon H. Clark*.

Finally, don't miss William's Cowper's (1731–1800) poem from his *Olney Hymns* (XLVIII), "Joy and Peace in Believing."

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory E. Reynolds

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

Servant Work

The Ministry of the Regional Home Missionary

by DeLacy A. Andrews Jr.

I was thinking it was a good day when my telephone rang in early January 2000. In the first place, the world as we know it had not come to a tragic end as many dooms-day prognosticators had predicted; and second, the new Presbytery of the Southeast of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church was about to be born. I was excited about the kingdom prospects that the new presbytery afforded.

When I heard the happy greeting from my dear friend Jim Heemstra, I was delighted. Jim had served for many years as Regional Home Missionary (RHM) of the Presbytery of the South and was instrumental in my coming into the OPC in 1994. I had already anticipated calling him later in the day. We had much planning to do.

In late fall 1999 the ministers and elders of the churches that would comprise the new presbytery met in Matthews, North Carolina, to adopt standing rules and to elect and organize all committees. We wanted to “hit the ground running” at our first official presbytery meeting after the New Year. I was elected to the Home Missions Committee and appointed as chairman. I eagerly accepted the position, having a zeal for church planting, but I also had an ace in the hole. I was willing to serve as chairman of the committee because it was assumed by everyone involved that Jim Heemstra would serve both presbyteries.

I was shocked when I heard his words, “Lacy, I don’t want the job.”

“What job?” I asked, not believing what I was hearing.

“It’s just too big,” he stated flatly. “I believe I need to continue to work only in the Presbytery of the South.”

“But, you live within the bounds of the new presbytery,” I countered, knowing he was residing in Maryville, Tennessee, helping in the mission work there.

“Sandy and I plan to move back to Florida shortly,” he said.

My mind was reeling. This was not what I had signed up for in the new presbytery. We were inheriting a number of mission works from both the Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic and the Presbytery of the South. We had mission works in Mount Airy and New Bern, North Carolina; London, Kentucky; Marietta, Georgia; and Bristol, Cookeville, and Maryville, Tennessee. How was the newly elected committee, of which I was chairman, supposed to care for so many mission works without a Regional Home Missionary?

“Why don’t you become *our* Regional Home Missionary?” I blurted out, grasping for straws.

Jim was insistent that he needed to continue his labors in the Presbytery of the South and that we would be fine without him.

I made one more attempt to dissuade him, “Jim, we’re going to need a Regional Home Missionary.”

“I know you are,” he replied.

He hesitated for a moment before he continued, “Let me give you some advice.”
“Okay,” I said, looking for any reassurance I could find.

“When you call a man, don’t call a young man,” he said firmly. “I don’t care how gifted he is, RHMs need to have wisdom that is only gained over time and through experience.”

I was mentally taking notes thinking, I need to remember this advice after we hang up the telephone.

“Second, don’t go outside the presbytery. It needs to be a man the churches know and trust.”

I remember little else from that conversation. I do recall thinking of all the older men in our presbytery who might be able to serve as our Regional Home Missionary. My heart started pounding when I finished going through the potential list of names. At the end of my calculation there was only one name that remained on the list. It was *my* name.

Later that evening I told my wife about my conversation with Jim, and also about my conclusion.

I shrugged it off by saying to her, “It can’t be me. Our church is nowhere near ready for me to leave. We’ve got to get the church out of the rented facility we’re in and into a more permanent meeting place. That may be five years down the road. By then we will already have a Regional Home Missionary.”

As we often learn, God has his own plans. In less than two years, on January 1, 2002, I began my labors as the Regional Home Missionary of the Presbytery of the Southeast.

At my first Regional Home Missions Conference as an RHM in November 2002, I immediately realized I’d become a member of a very interesting brotherhood. I recall looking around the table at the more seasoned RHMs, such as Jim Bosgraf, Jim Heemstra, and Don Poundstone. There were also men closer to my age such as Gary Davenport and the newly installed RHM of the Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic—my old friend Dick Ellis.

The thing that struck me most was how differently we conducted our ministries. Jim Bosgraf flew from mission work to mission work in two different airplanes. Jim Heemstra hauled his trailer from place to place, spending six months to a year in each location. Gary Davenport was a very efficient administrator and seemed always to be thinking of new strategies for church planting. Dick Ellis conducted his work in the Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic, while continuing to pastor his congregation in Frederick, Maryland. I have to admit I thought Dick had lost his mind. We were all very different, with varying gifts, serving presbyteries that had unique needs and opportunities. It was clear to me that God had given the right men to the right presbyteries. However, these men all had certain things in common—a love for Christ, evangelism, and church planting, and a love for the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

To consolidate the different approaches of our RHMs would be an impossible task, so this article will view the RHM ministry through my own spectacles.

Finding a Biblical Model

I remember an encounter I had with a charismatic Christian a few years ago.

When she asked me about my ministry, and I tried to explain it to her, she exclaimed as her eyes widened, “You’re an Apostle!”

I was startled by her reply and quickly said, “No, not really; well, only in a very broad sense.”

Some may consider our work to be like that of the Apostles. We are missionaries and church planters. Our ministries are regional, rather than confined to a single congregation. The Apostles clearly did this kind of ministry. Yet, they were commissioned directly by the risen Lord Jesus Christ and had an authority that cannot be duplicated. They were foundational to the church, and once that foundation was laid, the office ceased. Their authority continues in the inscripturated Word.

Titus has also been suggested. His work was regional, among the churches on the Island of Crete. Yet, I’m convinced his labors resemble the work of our church planters more than our Regional Home Missionaries. RHMs often serve as the initial gatherers in mission works. It is later that a church planter is called. The churches in Crete had already been founded by the Apostle Paul. Titus was commissioned to “put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you” (Titus 1:5). I’ve been so convinced of this view that I’ve often preached through Titus in our mission works to prepare for the calling of a church planter. We even call him “Titus” in our prayers until God reveals his actual name to us through the search process and the work of the presbytery.

However, I do believe we have a biblical example that closely mirrors the work of our Regional Home Missionaries. That man is Epaphras. He is mentioned in both Paul’s letter to the Colossians and his letter to Philemon.

The first instance is in Colossians 1:7–8, “Just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.”

He is also mentioned in Paul’s final greetings in Colossians 4:12–13, “Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.”

Finally, we read of him in the concluding greetings of Paul’s letter to Philemon, verse 23, “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you.”

This servant of the Lord was a resident of Colossae and must have heard the gospel from Paul while visiting Ephesus, the chief city of Asia Minor. While there, Paul preached for two years in the hall of Tyrannus. Luke tells us in Acts 19:10, “that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”

Most in Asia did not hear the Word directly from Paul’s lips, but rather from those who heard Paul in Ephesus. Epaphras appears to have been one of these evangelists who was converted under Paul’s ministry and returned to his home town with the gospel.

Many years later, we learn that Epaphras not only took the gospel to Colossae, but to the entire Lycos Valley. In fact, Paul commends him to the Colossians by saying, “For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis.” (Col. 4:13). Epaphras’s ministry was regional, and churches were planted in three cities due to his hard labors.

Epaphras is commended by Paul for his prayers, “always struggling on your behalf in his prayers” (Col. 4:12). RHMs recognize that church planting is a spiritual endeavor. We must trust that Christ is the one building his church (Matt 16:18). This conviction drives

us to prayer and to lead the congregations in prayer. Epaphras gives us this clear example. The work of the RHM is in the trenches of spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:12). I always tell a new core group early in the process, “As soon as we put our hands to the plow to establish a new OPC church, we come into the crosshairs of the enemy.” This burden drives us to our knees, and there we latch onto Christ.

It is a joy to watch Christ build his church. I often think of how blessed I am to be able to see what God is doing throughout the presbytery. Christ is surely at work. Yet, it is the church militant where we labor, and our warfare is spiritual. It is often painful, and there are casualties.

Promising starts sometimes come to naught, destroyed by divisions within. Meager beginnings, which even discourage us overly optimistic RHMs, sometimes blossom by the hand of God and become robust congregations. It is Christ’s work and we are reminded of this again and again, both in our successes and failures.

Things We Have Learned

Over the past fifteen years, God has taught me some things about church planting. When I began in 2002, I jumped eagerly into the middle of every potential core group without much evaluation of the group or its background and motivations. They wanted to start an OPC church, and I wanted to help them do it. We learned as a Home Missions Committee to be more circumspect.

We had groups fail because we didn’t see serious issues underneath the surface. Closer scrutiny and asking hard questions in the beginning would have been wise. However, this can be a double-edged sword. We’ve had groups in the past that God has blessed richly and are now thriving congregations. If those same groups came to us today, they might be rejected. Objective criteria only go so far.

My friend Jim Heemstra also said to me, “I’ll take the right three families over the wrong ten families every time.”

I believe this is true. We don’t ignore objective analyses, but subjective criteria, such as the godliness, motives, and gifts within the group are also considered. Making the call about whether to move ahead is often ultimately a matter of the heart.

At first in my work I was seen only as the initial gatherer, until we were ready for our Titus and he was found. Then I was on to the next work. When serious problems began to develop within some mission works as they entered this new chapter, I realized that I needed to stay closely involved for a much longer period of time. By the time our Titus comes, I have the hearts and ears of the congregation. I’ve learned to stay involved in order to try to discern troubles before they grow.

I had to fight for this with my committee, who cared about me and tried to protect my time and energy. Now I routinely stay on provisional sessions until the works are organized. Sometimes that means I’m serving on five or six sessions at a time. This can be overwhelming, but the Home Missions Committee trusts me to manage that time commitment well. Some works need more attention, and others need less. I’m constantly praying for wisdom in the distribution of my energies. Still, we have learned to start better, continue better, and to end well. This approach has paid dividends.

We’ve learned to be more intentional as a committee. Several years ago we divided our Home Missions Committee into subcommittees to do demographic work. Each subcommittee examined the region of our presbytery where they lived and ministered.

We looked at eastern North Carolina; central and northern North Carolina; Georgia; the Tidewater Region of Virginia; the Tri-Cities area of Tennessee and Virginia; Knoxville and Nashville, Tennessee. We gathered and evaluated the data and now have a mission work in the Tidewater Region of Virginia, a Bible study in eastern North Carolina, and plans soon to investigate opportunities in Nashville, Tennessee.

More Recent Reassessment

A couple years ago, our committee reconsidered my job description. Initially, my priority was to respond to inquiries from potential mission works, but we came to believe that we needed to emphasize a more proactive approach. I still respond to these inquiries when they come. This is one benefit to a presbytery that has an RHM. He is able to respond quickly and more efficiently than a committee can.

Still, we believe we need to be more proactive in our church planting. Groups that come to us often have baggage. Sometimes we find that we have the right demographic, but the wrong group, or conversely, the right group, but the wrong demographic. Demographics do not drive our church planting, as demonstrated in our now vibrant work in the rural/small town area of Royston, Georgia. However, we do take note of them. This was true in our work in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

The Virginia Beach work began with prayer over several years. Steve Doe, Regional Home Missionary of the Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic Pete Stazen, pastor of Grace OPC in Lynchburg, Virginia, and I met for prayer on a number of occasions, specifically targeting the Tidewater Region. In summer 2012 Steve and I combined our list of contacts and organized an informational meeting. That led to a Bible study in Virginia Beach, then to worship services, and now to a thriving mission work.

For our committee the biggest issue with targeting Virginia Beach was the distance. Without the aid of Steve Doe, the work would have struggled to get off the ground. I live 400 miles away, but Steve lives 160 miles from the work, even though he serves a different presbytery. The Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic graciously permitted their RHM to work with us. It has been one of my greatest joys as an RHM to partner with my brother in this endeavor.

Still, the committee wanted to focus on a mission work within a workable distance, two hundred miles, from my residence. We wanted to duplicate what we had done earlier in Gastonia, North Carolina, and call this our R-200 plan.¹

In 2009 I met with two families in Gastonia to consider the possibility of beginning a mission work. Quickly, we had three families and began a Bible study. In God's providence, all our other mission works had organizing pastors in place, enabling me to devote my primary attention to the work in Gastonia. That investment paid off, and God has richly blessed the work. Reformation Presbyterian Church is now an organized congregation.

Our mission work in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, is our present R-200 work. I typically preach three Sundays out of each month at Harvest. God is blessing the work, and we hope to begin searching for our Titus soon.

When our committee began reassessing our ministry, we had great interest in a targeted-church-plant approach. Hoping to avoid some of the pit-falls that come with ready-made core groups, we wanted to target a good demographic and begin with the

¹ RHM within a 200 mile radius of home.

right man. The big obstacle was resources. Typically there are two sources of income for mission works: subsidies from the presbytery and general assembly, and the tithes and offerings from the mission work itself. When beginning with the man, all the initial resources would have to be supplied by the committees. Considering larger markets with higher costs and experienced ministers who need higher salaries, this task became daunting to us.

In God's providence, I was unable to attend a meeting of our committee, which gave them an opportunity to think through our approach in my absence. Afterward I met with the chairman of our committee, Nathan Trice, to discuss their thoughts. It was another one of those defining conversations with a dear friend.

He told me that the committee remained keen on the idea of an intentional church plant and that they wanted me to consider being *the man*. They were essentially offering me the opportunity to go to any larger metropolitan area of my choice, within the bounds of our presbytery, with full financial support. What we all realized was that the presbytery didn't have the resources to do this kind of church plant and also have a Regional Home Missionary program.

I weighed their offer carefully, talked it over with my wife, and prayed. I was pleased that they trusted in God to use me in such a way, but I loved my present labors. After a few weeks, neither my wife nor I had a zeal to start again in a new place. However, more than that, I was concerned about abandoning a ministry the presbytery had established a dozen years before. I wrote out my thoughts and sent them to the committee, and then we met to discuss them.

I asked them to consider what we would have in five or ten years if we did this. If God blessed our labor, we would have another strong church within our presbytery to help with our regional mission. However, how many lost opportunities would there be? I was very frank with them, telling them that a committee cannot duplicate what an RHM is able to do. He has expertise from experience that they don't have. I was also concerned about redirecting our resources to the intentional plant and away from the RHM program. There is a reason why most presbyteries that can afford an RHM have one, and why most who can't afford an RHM want one. God has blessed this ministry and the many men who have served in this capacity for decades in our church.

The committee heard me out and unanimously agreed to continue the RHM program and my service in it. We have not abandoned the desire to intentionally plant a church beginning with the right man in the right place, but recognize that God will make extraordinary provision when that opportunity arises.

Having said this about RHM ministry and the men who have served, I remain convinced of one thing: the ministry of the Regional Home Missionary is not the highest ministry in the church. That distinction belongs to our organizing pastors and pastors of our churches—to those men who live among the people and the communities they serve, often for many years. The role of RHMs is to help mission works get ready to receive their Titus and then to assist Titus in his ministry.

DeLacy A. Andrews Jr. *is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church serving as the regional home missionary for the Presbytery of the Southeast.*

ServantRealms

Postmodernism, Post-truth, Generation Z: What's It All Mean?

by Stephen D. Doe

The title of a recent class I took was intriguing: “Skating to Where the Puck Will Be.”¹ The title came from hockey great Wayne Gretzky, “I skate to where the puck is going to be not where it has been.” If the movement of the “puck” is our culture, the society in which the church finds itself, how does the Lord of both history and the church guide us in his Word to faithfully navigate these times?

The intensity with which cultural shifts are challenging the church is reflected in some of the books being written to try to make sense of what we are seeing:

- *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* – Ross Douthat
- *Culture Shift: The Battle for the Moral Heart of America* – R. Albert Mohler Jr.
- *The Devil’s Pleasure Palace: The Cult of Critical Theory and the Subversion of the West* – Michael Walsh
- *The Disappearance of God: Dangerous Beliefs in the New Spiritual Openness* – R. Albert Mohler Jr.
- *From Here to Maturity: Overcoming the Juvenilization of American Christianity* – Thomas E. Bergler
- *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* – James K.A. Smith
- *It’s Dangerous to Believe: Religious Freedom and Its Enemies* – Mary Eberstadt
- *Strangers in a Strange Land: Living the Catholic Faith in a Post-Christian World* – Charles Chaput
- *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* – James Davison Hunter
- *We Cannot Be Silent: Speaking Truth to a Culture Redefining Sex, Marriage, & the Very Meaning of Right and Wrong* – R. Albert Mohler Jr.
- *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* – James K.A. Smith

No, this is not your reading list for the next year (and it is only a sampling), but it demonstrates that many people are thinking, discussing, and writing in books, articles, and posts, about what is perceived as an age of challenge.

¹ Reformed Theological Seminary, Washington, DC, November 17–19, 2016, taught by Rev. Randy Lovelace, lead pastor of Columbia Presbyterian Church (OPC) and Dr. Michael Metzger, founder and president of the Clapham Institute based in Annapolis, MD, www.claphaminstitute.org.

God has certainly always given the church some men of Issachar to understand the times² in an especially pointed way, but all the people of God are also given the wisdom to learn how to live in a culture where the puck always seems ten yards ahead of us. The Scriptures do not simply make us wise for or unto salvation (2 Tim. 3:15); they are the means by which the Christian must “re-frame” the torrent of information which a culture, unmoored to any transcendent truth, flings at us. For example, as I wrote this, thousands of young people, hoping for the experience of a lifetime, flew to a very expensive musical festival in the Bahamas only to discover that the hype covered poor planning and execution, and left them desperately trying to get home. What was happening? The promise of “an experience” pushed away all thoughts of caution. The believer is told how to see such promises, how to re-frame in light of God’s Word³ the near obsession with “experience” over clear thinking. The promise of experience has to be weighed in light of what is unchanging. Asking, “Is this worth it in light of what is eternal?” can challenge us when we are tempted to click on that website or give into the anger that swells in our hearts.

The church itself must think how to “skate to where the puck will be,” that is, how to proclaim the gospel in the age in which it finds itself, without marrying the spirit of the age.⁴ It is inescapable that we live in a time of cultural change more rapid than any of us has ever faced. Born after the Second World War and growing up in the relatively stable 1950s and early 1960s, I know the sense of dislocation that many people in the church feel. We might be tempted to take comfort in the fact that the percentage of professing believers in the United States may stay at the same level, as pollsters prognosticate. The changes taking place around the church, however, are also forcing their way into the church, simply by virtue of the fact that Christians live in, and are subtly affected by, this culture.

Here is one example: if you had asked church-goers just twenty years ago if homosexuality was a sin, they would have said yes, although they might have been vague about the biblical reasons for saying so. Accepting current data, if you are to ask millennials or Generation Z⁵ (those born after 1995) the same question, the number of those saying yes would be much smaller and perhaps more tentative, as they looked around to see if their friends approved. What’s going on? Is the difference due to age? Is it the result of poor teaching in their churches? I would suggest that Christians of twenty years ago and those of today are in fundamentally different places. Twenty years ago it was socially acceptable to be opposed to homosexuality, even if one didn’t have a clear idea of why it was sinful. Today, however, as Carl Trueman has pointed out, the

² “Of Issachar, men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do . . .” (1 Chron. 12:32).

³ For example: “. . . as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18).

⁴ Cf. William Ralph (Dean) Inge’s quote: “Whoever marries the spirit of this age will find himself a widower in the next.” BrainyQuote website, https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/william_ralph_inge.html.

⁵ James Emery White, “Meet Generation Z,” Church and Culture (blog), August 28, 2014, <http://www.churchandculture.org/Blog.asp?ID=6368>. See also, Jonathan Merritt, “Forget millennials. How will churches reach Generation Z?” Religion News Service, May 1, 2017, <http://religionnews.com/2017/05/01/forget-millennials-how-will-churches-reach-generation-z/> and “Generations X, Y, Z and the Others,” WJ Schroer Company, accessed May 25, 2017, <http://socialmarketing.org/archives/generations-xy-z-and-the-others/>.

challenge Christians face is not simply being out of step but being offensive by their very existence.⁶ This is especially difficult for those living in a peer-driven culture. As sojourners and exiles (1 Pet. 2:11), we are not “idiots” but “bigots” in our current cultural climate.⁷ And what young person (or older person for that matter) wants to be thought of as a bigot?

That is only one of the challenges facing the church in a ceaselessly secular age. Even if the portion of the American population that self-identifies as “Christian,” will be 24–25 percent over the next few years, the same as it is presently, how is the church to reach the other 75 percent, especially if that 75 percent is becoming increasingly disconnected from biblical Christianity? How is the church to bring the gospel to bear on a society and culture which are decidedly secular, and only growing more so? Given our doctrinal commitments to the centrality and infallibility of the Word of God, how does the church speak the gospel into this secular society?⁸

The foundational paradigm is that our thinking must be shaped by the Word of God if we are to speak clearly to our culture. Scripture must speak louder, and have more influence, than anything else. When we check our emails or newsfeeds first thing in the morning, is our understanding of what we read filtered by the Scripture? Do the doom-saying headlines of our news feeds shape our view of the world, or do we live with eschatological confidence in the power of God to glorify himself in all things?⁹ We can be seduced by the promises of a culture that wants us to live for the (next) experience of food, car, house, movie, or relationship. The young people flocking to an island, at the cost of thousands of dollars for an immersive experience of music, tropical paradise, and great times found instead ham and cheese sandwiches and muggings. Their experience was the experience of a world which promises much but cannot deliver, and yet comes back to promise more the next time.

Many people are pointing out that the current mania for transgender rights is the archetypical picture of a culture which is unwilling to let anything besides personal preference define our personhood. Our often-fleeting desires, rather than something as robustly real as chromosomes, and as profoundly transcendent as Genesis 1:26–28 and 2:18–25, win the day. Beyond postmodernism’s questioning of objective truth is post-truth’s¹⁰ focus on truth being determined by how we feel about something. For instance, “I feel like a female, though I have male parts, and you can’t deny my feelings.” The church’s answer, compassionately given to those captured by this confusion, is that what we are as image-bearers of God, is determinative because the Creator knows what he intended when he created us. Again, as we look to where the puck is moving, we must be grounded in what the Scriptures teach.

⁶ Carl Trueman, “Issues for the Western Church in the Twenty-First Century,” Grace Theological College, NZ, video recording of lecture, published July 3, 2015, <http://www.gtc.ac.nz/news/issues-for-the-western-church-in-the-21st-century/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ This was the thrust of the seminar at RTS-DC.

⁹ Romans 11:33–36.

¹⁰ “Post-truth” was the 2016 Oxford Dictionaries “Word of the Year”: “post-truth *adjective* Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>.

People might say, “I went to your church, and I didn’t feel anything, so why should I believe that what you say is true?” When believers try to talk to “Nones”¹¹ and “Exiles,”¹² we can find that we are like “ships passing in the night.” We are speaking a language that Nones and Exiles do not understand. Our task is to speak biblical truth to those for whom the very category of truth is suspect, while trying to listen to them to see what lies beneath their words. We do this because we too were once disobedient, led astray until the goodness and lovingkindness of God appeared.¹³ We must recognize that, in terms of postmodernism, a claim of having *the* truth is an act of oppression. We cannot surrender the gospel and cannot be ashamed of it, but how do we address unbelievers¹⁴ in the time in which God has placed us?

It is because people, postmodern, millennial, or secular, are God’s image-bearers that we always have a communication bridge. Just as we have DNA that determines eye color, height, etc., so God has written into our hearts ways of thinking which, however distorted or twisted by sin, are still there. The pleasant young person waiting on me at the store may be male or female—neither the dress, hair style, or voice gives me a clue, but leaves everything ambiguous. He or she¹⁵ is inescapably an image-bearer, and I should treat “them” as one. My discomfort or puzzlement needs to be replaced by a biblical viewpoint, that that person is created to be a worshiper, and is called to be a worshiper of God the Creator. In this way we are to love both our God and our neighbor (Matthew 22:34–40).

Because of the language Christians speak, we are oftentimes not being heard, so we have to think harder about not only what we are saying, but how we are saying it, and whether our words are reflected in our living. How are believers to see themselves? Though there are those in our society who see themselves as “exiles” from the church, Christians themselves are the exiles. This world is not our home, yet we are placed here to show forth the glories of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). While exiles long for home (Ps. 137:1–6, Heb. 11:13–16), God commanded his exiled people to live here to show forth his glory. We have to learn to speak to those around us and raise as few barriers as we can. In how many of our churches do we fail to recognize the enormous challenge a non-Christian faces in walking through the door and sitting through a service? So much is assumed that people will know how to find a hymn in a hymnal or sing a hymn projected on a screen, or understand that it is okay to put nothing in the plate when the offering is received. Do we realize how our Calvinist jargon is like a foreign language to many people? Do we expect people to simply understand things because it is second-nature to us?

People might be willing to risk coming to worship if we exhibit Christ-like words and deeds; and if we are willing to admit, when we fall short, that this is why Christians need the gospel, too, and need it all the time. We might ask ourselves: “Do I love the world too

¹¹ “Nones” are those who claim that they don’t fit into the categories of religious preference, and therefore don’t go to church, though they may consider themselves “spiritual.”

¹² “Exiles” are those who consider themselves “Christian” but are not connected to any organized body because they don’t see any that “work” for them; hence they see themselves as exiles from the church.

¹³ Titus 3:3–7.

¹⁴ We shouldn’t naively think that our young people in our churches are not being affected by these cultural shifts. The percentage of “churched” young people who think homosexuality is okay because they have friends who are gay, is significant.

¹⁵ The preferred pronoun is actually “they.”

much, or perhaps, don't love my true home enough? We cannot change the *content* of what we say, the gospel is the gospel, and we can't change the fact that it is propositional truth (Rom. 10:5–17) that must be communicated. But the way we communicate it, in our words and lives, must take into account how it is being received.

People, whether Nones, Exiles, or those openly hostile to the gospel, are probably unlikely to be argued into the kingdom. The experience-oriented culture in which we live, with its rejection of absolutes, is perishing because it lacks the truth. The trajectory calls us to think differently about how we communicate the unchanging truth. Are we willing to grapple seriously with the question of the church's faithful proclamation of the gospel in a society increasingly unwilling and unable to hear what we are saying? Christ is building his church, and no cultural shifts can stop that. I believe that we need to talk to and interact with others who are thinking about these things— even if we don't buy everything they say. This will challenge us to ask ourselves whether we are understanding things rightly. The OPC is committed to being a confessional, Word-and-sacrament church. We are already countercultural in that way, and God can use us; but we shouldn't be contrarians for the sake of being contrary. Do we really want to see the OPC shrink while we say that we are being faithful? If we believe what we say we believe, that God is sovereignly calling a people to himself, what is our part in that? How will we communicate the message of the gospel not only in 2017, but in 2030? We can only do so if we are ever more shaped by the Word of God and are not conformed to the thinking, culture, language, and secularism of our age (Rom. 12:2).

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ServantLiterature

John Updike and Christianity

by Danny E. Olinger

In 1989 the acclaimed author John Updike wrote *Self-Consciousness*, a memoir that contained six autobiographical essays.¹ Updike's ordering of the essays, as much as the memories he shared in them, revealed two of the themes that framed his fiction. The first of the six essays, "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington," focused on the importance of the sense of place in his writings. The last essay, "On Being a Self Forever," focused on Updike's belief that his Christian faith, as he defined it, had enabled him to proceed with confidence as a writer.

The fact that *Self-Consciousness* was not a standard autobiography has allowed Adam Begley to fill in the gaps in *Updike*, the first full scale biography of Updike since his death in 2009.² Following Updike's lead in *Self-Consciousness*, Begley expertly picks up on how Updike's sense of place functioned in his fiction. Begley chronicles how what was happening in Updike's life paralleled what Updike was writing in his books and short stories. That aspect of Begley's biography is excellent.

However, Begley's appreciation of the Christian thread running throughout Updike's literary corpus is not as strong. That is not to say that that Begley fails to recognize that faith permeated Updike's writings. He acknowledges Updike's belief that faith in Christ freed him to write boldly about life. But Begley writes with sparse insights about the Christian themes that marked Updike's fiction. It is as if Begley knew it was mandatory to say something, but agreed in principle with Harold Bloom's criticism that the religious aspects were the weak link in Updike's fiction.³

Understandably, many Christians react in the opposite direction when measuring Updike as a writer. They struggle with the legitimacy of Updike's faith claims due to the fact that his fiction contained graphic sexuality. Ralph Wood describes the reaction:

The first thing that nearly everyone remarks about Updike's work is its obsession with sex. It is either the silent undercurrent or the rippling concern of almost every story and scene that Updike has ever written. His fascination with the genital—and hence the spiritual—difference between men and women has put many critics off. They regard

¹ John Updike, *Self-Consciousness* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989).

² Adam Begley, *Updike* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014).

³ Bloom opined, "John Updike, perhaps the most considerable stylist among the writers of fiction in his American generation, is one of the group of contemporary novelists who are somewhat victimized aesthetically by their conventional religious yearnings. His is the Protestant case." Harold Bloom, ed., *John Updike* (New Haven: Chelsea House, 1987), 1.

Updike as an arrested adolescent, a brilliant stylist who has squandered his talent on the obvious: the fact that we are carnal creatures.⁴

Examples abound of the tension that resulted for those interested in studying the Christian aspects of Updike's writings, but were put off by his sexual realism. When a prominent Reformed seminary held a special class examining Updike's novels, the students nicknamed it "the dirty books class." Reportedly, Updike once accepted an invitation to speak about his books from the English department at Gordon College, the evangelical institution located near where Updike lived in Massachusetts. However, when the Gordon president found out, he revoked the invitation saying that he didn't want "that pornographer" to speak to the students.⁵

Updike himself recognized the discomfort his sexual frankness created for many Christian readers. He said, "My art is Christian only in that my faith urges me to tell the truth, however painful and inconvenient, and holds out the hope that the truth—really—is good. Good or no, only the truth is useful."⁶ He also understood that literary critics like Bloom would always see the theological nature of his novels as a hindrance. Updike said, "As to critics, it seems to be my fate to disappoint my theological friends by not being Christian enough, while I'm too Christian for Harold Bloom's blessing. So be it."⁷

In what follows, I will examine the tension that Updike created for a Christian audience, particularly at the beginning and end of his literary career. On the one hand, Updike deliberately placed Christian themes at the center of his stories. On the other hand, his commitment to realism left his writings with little regard for decency, almost openly flaunting his indifference to the law character of Scripture, much less the seventh commandment. Mark Buchanan summarizes the tension well when he writes of Updike, "Even when you know he's up to something—that his sexual explicitness has a cultural critique, even a theological agenda, behind it—it's pretty hard to swallow."⁸

Early Updike: The Influence of Karl Barth

During his adolescent years, Updike was terrified of death and for comfort created a logical syllogism of the existence of God.

1. If God does not exist, the world is a horror show.
2. The world is not a horror show.
3. Therefore, God exists.⁹

Updike admitted in retrospect that the syllogism was flawed, and that his faith was often small, but he also claimed that he never stopped believing in God. Updike said that when he battled the inevitability of death in early adulthood, he would read the Reformed theologian Karl Barth and fall in love with other men's wives.¹⁰ According to Updike, Barth showed

⁴ Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 179.

⁵ See, Jon Busch, "Getting Over Updike," *Curator*, January 14, 2011, <http://www.curatormagazine.com/jonbusch/getting-over-updike/>.

⁶ Jeff Campbell, "Interview with John Updike," in *Conversations with John Updike*, ed. James Plath (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 104.

⁷ See, Stephen H. Webb, "John Updike the Blogger: Reading Karl Barth with John Updike," *First Things*, August 15, 2014, <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/08/john-updike-the-blogger>.

⁸ Mark Buchanan, "Rabbit Trails to God," in *Christianity Today*, July 1, 2003, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/july/4.42.html>.

⁹ Begley, *Updike*, 39.

¹⁰ Begley, *Updike*, 223.

him how saving faith could overcome the nothingness of life. In his autobiographical poem, “Midpoint,” Updike penned the line, “Praise Barth, who told how saving Faith can flow / from Terror’s oscillating Yes and No.”

Updike’s first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*, written in 1957 when Updike was reading Barth daily, shows this influence. *Poorhouse Fair* looked at America’s future, Updike asking, “What will become of us, having lost our faith?”¹¹

Set in the early 1980s, the elderly residents at a nursing home are preparing for the annual summer fair where they sell crafts and other goods. With the threat of rain coming, Conner, the young prefect running the home, cancels the event. Hook, a ninety-four-year-old Christian, objects. Hook, who represents the past, places his hope in God. He views death positively, believing that it is the very thing that gives meaning to life. Conner is a prophet of the emerging new faith, secular humanism. He places his hope in mankind and views death negatively, as it doesn’t contribute anything to the service of humanity.

But Conner’s daily actions at the Diamond County Home for the Aged reveal the emptiness of his claim about the service of humanity. He doesn’t care about people. The elderly grasp his indifference to them, and following his encounter with Hook, they stone him with pebbles. The pebbles bouncing off him, Conner spreads his arms mocking Christ on the cross and says, “I will forgive them.” Conner’s statement rests in the belief that he and his fellow moderns will bring about a utopian future where planned cities will be clean and the poor will be no more.

The residents know better. There is nothing optimistic about the future with Conner in control. He is not the Savior, but Pontius Pilate, the representative of another world, young and secular, set over against them. They rage because they know that their mortality is near, that death is approaching, and Conner’s gospel offers no way to overcome it.

On the twentieth anniversary of the publishing of *The Poorhouse Fair*, Updike wrote that the book was his answer to George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where the atheistic Orwell argued that the ultimate fruit of the future is non-existence. Clues that Updike is writing an anti-Orwell novel are not only Hook’s faith, but also Hook’s background. Hook’s schooling indicates that his birth was around 1890, which would have placed the time frame for the story around 1984.”¹²

Begley sees *Poorhouse Fair* as exhibiting traits that would characterize Updike’s fiction. He agrees with Whitney Balliett’s verdict in his review of *Poorhouse Fair* in *The New Yorker* that Updike “is a writer’s writer,” a prodigious talent who exhibits a poet’s care and sensitivity in choosing every word. He also sees it as projecting onto paper Updike’s spiritual struggles, particularly, his anxiety about death. But, given the “yes, but” nature of the story—Updike saying yes to the joy of persistent existence and no to social homogenization and the loss of faith¹³—Begley finds great value in Balliett’s parenthetical comment that reading *Poorhouse Fair*, “curiously, one never thinks of liking it or disliking it.”¹⁴

What Begley underplays with Updike’s early writings was that Updike agreed with Barth’s criticism of liberal theology. Updike’s stinging criticism of liberal theology can be seen in his short story that followed *The Poorhouse Fair*, “Pigeon Feathers.”

¹¹ Ibid., 175.

¹² John Updike, “Introduction to the 1977 Edition,” in *The Poorhouse Fair* (New York: Random House, 2012): xi.

¹³ George Hunt, *John Updike and the Three Great Things: Sex, Religion, and Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 20.

¹⁴ Begley, *Updike*, 178.

In “Pigeon Feathers,” young David Kern reads H.G. Wells’s dismissal of Christianity. According to Wells, a myth developed around the man Jesus who had survived his own crucifixion before dying a few weeks later. Shaken in his faith, David goes to his pastor for assurance that Wells has wrongly maligned Jesus. In particular, David asks him if he believes that heaven is real. Reverend Dobson replies, “David, you might think of heaven this way: as the way the goodness Abraham Lincoln did lives after him.”¹⁵ David realizes he has been deceived, that Dobson’s answer “amounts to saying that there isn’t any heaven at all.”¹⁶ His pastor is a fraud who doesn’t believe the words that he uses in worship.

Thrown into a spiritual crisis of not knowing who to trust, David’s faith wavers until his grandmother orders him to rid the family barn of the pigeons nesting in it. Shooting the pigeons with his rifle, he felt like a beautiful avenger. But then, when collecting and burying the pigeons, he looks with amazement at the color and shape and texture of the feathers, no two being alike, and has an epiphany that restores his faith. He believes the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would also care for him eternally.

Later, Updike commented that “Pigeon Feathers” was the most important ecclesiastical fiction he ever wrote. David reflected Updike’s own shock when he found out that the nice liberal Lutheran minister in Shillington who was confirming him didn’t really attach any factual reality to Christian doctrines.¹⁷ Updike’s conclusion was that liberal theology with its message of social uplift could not confront the problem of nothingness. Only the historical reality of Christ bodily rising from the dead could confront nothingness and give meaning to life. Updike exclaimed, “Perhaps there are two kinds of people: those for whom nothingness is no problem, and those for whom it is an insuperable problem, an outrageous cancellation rendering every other concern, from mismatching socks to nuclear holocaust, negligible.”¹⁸

Updike returned to writing about David Kern in his short story, “Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, a Dying Cat, a Traded Car.” David, now living around Boston as an adult, finds out that his father has been hospitalized. Driving back home, David warmly recalls his youth when he and his friends would play daily, creating worn paths to their favorite play places before being summoned home. David reflects, “The earth is our playmate then, and the call to supper has a piercingly sweet eschatological ring.”¹⁹

When he arrives at the hospital, David finds out that his father, though greatly weakened, will recover. What has been lost is his father’s Christian faith. David doesn’t say anything in reply because he has lost his own faith as well.

Faith’s place in his father’s life has been usurped by attending movies and doting on his car. David tells his mother, “It worries me the way he talks about the movies all the time. You know he never liked them.” But, what is most obvious is the place of worship his father’s car now holds. David’s father says to him:

“ . . . The only thing that worries me is that *she*”—he pointed at my mother—“will crack up the car. I don’t want anything to happen to your mother.”

“The car, you mean,” my mother said, and to me she added, “It’s a sin, the way he worships that car.”

¹⁵ John Updike, “Pigeon Feathers,” in *Olinger Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1964).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁷ Jan Nunley, “Thoughts of Faith Infuse Updike’s Novels,” in *Conversations with John Updike*, ed. James Plath (Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi, 1994), 249.

¹⁸ Updike, *Self-Consciousness*, 228.

¹⁹ John Updike, “Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, a Dying Cat, a Traded Car,” in *Olinger Stories*, 154.

My father didn't deny it.²⁰

Rabbit, Run and The Centaur

At the same time that Updike was publishing "Pigeon Feathers" and "Packed Dirt," he was also writing the novels that would establish him as a major literary talent, *Rabbit, Run* and *The Centaur*. Updike saw the novels as opposites, a contrast between a rabbit running loose and seeking self-gratification and a horse steadily doing its duty.

In *Rabbit, Run*, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom laments his position in life. Feeling trapped in a stale marriage and a menial job, Rabbit wants to feel as alive as he once did playing high school basketball. In search of this feeling, he leaves his pregnant wife, Janice, and moves in with Ruth, a part-time prostitute.

The authority figures in Rabbit's life, his old basketball coach, Marty Tothero, and the liberal Episcopalian pastor, Jack Eccles, are totally ineffective in persuading Rabbit to do the right thing. Tothero is the one who first introduces Rabbit to Ruth. Eccles has nothing useful to say to Rabbit because as Rabbit observes, Eccles doesn't really believe in anything.

Eccles, though, has opinions, and mainly dislikes the Lutheran pastor in town, Fritz Kruppenbach. Eccles sees Kruppenbach as rigid in creed and a bully in manner. Kruppenbach, for his part, criticizes Eccles in trying to help Rabbit by playing golf with him and not telling Rabbit he is sinning. He asks Eccles, "What do you think it looks like to God, one childish husband leaving one childish wife? Do you ever think any more of what God sees?"²¹

When Rabbit does attend worship services, Eccles's preaching is so lacking force that Rabbit scarcely listens. Still, Eccles's preaching allows the narrator to express the faith problem that confronts Rabbit. "Harry has no taste for the dark, tangled visceral aspect of Christianity, the going through quality of it, the passage into death and suffering that redeems and inverts these things, like an umbrella blowing inside out."²²

Rabbit only goes back to Janice after she gives birth to Rebecca, their second child, but he remains restless. He demands that Janice act like Ruth. Janice accuses him of treating her like a prostitute, and he leaves. Distraught over her situation, Janice begins drinking and accidentally drowns baby Becky in the bathtub. At Becky's funeral, Rabbit proclaims his innocence but continues running—literally, away from Eccles in the graveyard, and figuratively, from caring for either Janice or Ruth.

Updike said that he meant to show that Rabbit saying yes to his urgent inner whispers, results in the social fabric collapsing murderously.²³ And yet, tellingly, Updike refuses to condemn Rabbit at the story's end. James Schiff writes, "Harry never returns home and Updike provides no moral to placate the reader. It would be as if Peter Rabbit were to end with Peter running panicky into the night."²⁴

²⁰ Ibid., 178–79.

²¹ Updike later commented that Kruppenbach was "meant to be Barth in action" and the touchstone of the novel. Picking up on this insight, Hunt observed, "Like Evangelist in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, it is Kruppenbach who offers thematic direction and delineates the issues of the novel's ongoing debate. Kruppenbach's appearance is unusual in that he is the only character that Rabbit does not encounter directly in the novel; he appears, instead, from off stage as it were, entering like a Greek chorus to add clarifying comment upon the dramatic proceedings, thus embodying that 'main beam' of the Apostles' Creed that supports all else." Hunt, *John Updike and the Three Great Things*, 43.

²² John Updike, *Rabbit, Run* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), 197.

²³ Hunt, *John Updike and the Three Great Things*, 20.

²⁴ James A. Schiff, *John Updike Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1998), 36.

With Updike concluding the book in an ambiguous manner, Wood argues that Updike was matching Barth's view of what a novel should be. Barth believed fiction should not educate, but rather should leave the reader questioning what had just happened. Wood writes, "He [Rabbit] is a protagonist who poses a problem rather than a solution, who queries us more than he teaches us a lesson."²⁵

The theological nature of *Rabbit, Run*, however, played a secondary role for many to Updike's raw language. When British publisher Victor Gollancz read the original manuscript, he believed that the book might be labelled obscene, and that legal punishment might ensue for him and his American counterpart, Alfred Knopf, if they went forward with publication. Updike said, "My theory was not so much that I was trying to make a point about censorship, but I did feel that this particular hero lies so exclusively in the realm of the present and the sensational that, once sport was gone, sex was about the realist thing left to him."²⁶

What is lost today, in light of the fame that *Rabbit, Run* brought for Updike is that his next novel, *The Centaur*, was more critically praised at the time, even winning the 1963 National Book Award. Updike wanted to present a counterpart to *Rabbit, Run* that would also serve as a record of his father. Rather than a rabbit running towards instant gratification, Updike's father always did his duty with the reliability of a plodding horse.

Updike encourages a theological reading of *The Centaur* by placing a quote from Barth's *Dogmatics in Outline* as the epigraph: "Heaven is the creation inconceivable to man, earth the creation conceivable to him. He himself is the creature on the boundary between heaven and earth." To emphasize the interplay of heaven and earth, Updike utilizes Greek mythology. The protagonist, George Caldwell, a general science teacher at Olinger High School, is also in alternating chapters a centaur with the head of a man and the body of a horse. When asked why he chose the mythic form for *The Centaur*, Updike said, "I was moved, first, by the Chiron variant of the Hercules myth—one of the few classical instances of self-sacrifice, and a name oddly close to Christ."²⁷

George, the son of a Presbyterian minister but now turned Lutheran, looks around and comes to a conclusion that he believes is irrefutable—things, cars, people never fail to fail. Doctrinally, George believes,

there are the elect and the non-elect, the ones that have it and the ones that don't, and the ones that don't have it are never going to get it. What I could never ram through my thick skull was why the ones that don't have it were elected in the first place. The only reason I could figure out was that God had to have somebody to fry down in Hell.²⁸

His theological musings also extend to the difference between Lutherans and Calvinists. "The Lutherans say Jesus Christ is the only answer and the Calvinists say whatever happens to you, happens to you, is the answer."²⁹ George ponders such thoughts because his job is a necessary burden, a daily martyrdom in order to support his family. He suffers so that his

²⁵ Wood, *Comedy of Redemption*, 207.

²⁶ Melvyn Bragg, "Forty Years of Middle America with John Updike," in *Conversations*, 223.

²⁷ Hunt, *John Updike and the Three Great Things*, 62.

²⁸ John Updike, *The Centaur* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1963), 189.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

son, Peter (Prometheus), will not suffer. George's self-sacrifice serves the "yes" of *The Centaur*. The "but" is the pain he endures as his life dwindles.³⁰

Although Bloom does not mention *The Centaur* by name, undoubtedly it was one of the books that he had in mind when he wrote that Updike had a kind of supernatural smugness allowing Updike to say "the natural is a pit of horror" and "one has nothing but the ancient assertions of Christianity to give one the will to act."³¹ Updike, however, considered *The Centaur* his "gayest and truest novel."³²

Couples

The novel, however, that would put Updike on the cover of *Time* magazine and make him a national celebrity was his 1968 best-seller, *Couples*. For many Christians, it was also the breaking point when it came to reading Updike. The cause for both was Updike's revealing take on adultery in the suburbs.

Couples begins on Friday, November 22, 1963, the day of President Kennedy's assassination. In Tarbox, Massachusetts, a party planned in advance is not cancelled, so dominant are the sexual appetites of those attending. They dine and dance, as it were, on the top of Kennedy's polished casket. Almost everyone at the party will be unfaithful to his or her spouse as the story unfolds.

The central figure, Piet Hanemas, calls himself a Calvinist, but his Calvinism is a mix of fatalism and freedom. He believes in a sovereign God, but openly cheats on his wife, Angela, with Foxy Whitman. Piet's reasoning is he can do whatever he wishes: God has already determined the outcome, salvation or damnation are accomplished facts. When Foxy tells Piet that she likes being with him because he didn't judge her, Piet replies that only God judged.

Piet decides to leave Angela and marry Foxy, and doing so must leave Tarbox for the nearby city of Lexington. But, as he prepares to begin his new life, the Congregational Church building at the center of Tarbox is struck by lightning and destroyed. Updike commented:

When the Church is burned, Piet is relieved of morality, and can choose Foxy . . . can move out of the paralysis of guilt and into what is a kind of freedom. He divorces the supernatural to marry the natural . . . so that the book does have a happy ending. There's also a way, though, I should say (speaking of "yes, but") in which, with the destruction of the church, with the removal of guilt, he becomes insignificant. He becomes merely a name in the last paragraph; he becomes a satisfied person and in a sense dies.³³

Among the adulterous couples, only Piet and Foxy are regular churchgoers. Modern life without faith had left a void that the couples try foolishly to fill with sex. Updike said, "The book is, of course, not about sex as such: It's about sex as the emergent religion, as the only thing left."³⁴

Updike could talk about the usurping of the church by sex as the theme of the novel, but as Begley observes, the title of Wirt William's review of *Couples* in the *Los Angeles Times*,

³⁰ Hunt, *John Updike and the Three Great Things*, 20.

³¹ Bloom, *John Updike*, 1.

³² Hunt, *John Updike and the Three Great Things*, 49.

³³ *Ibid.*, 126.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

“America’s Most Explicitly Sexual Novel Ever,” reflected what everyone else thought.³⁵ Diane Trilling’s review in the *Atlantic Monthly* followed the same path. Calling the book “fancied-up pornography,” she wrote, “I can think of no other novel, even in these years of our sexual freedom, as sexually explicit in its language . . . as direct in its sexual reporting, abundant in its sexual activities.”³⁶

After *Couples*, Updike would write an additional twenty plus novels, including two Pulitzer prize winners, *Rabbit is Rich* (1982) and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), but his emphasis tended more towards sexual exploration. Even in a book like *A Month of Sundays* (1975), where the main character is a minister, Updike stated that he wanted to make the book offensive and abrasive.³⁷ Updike justified his emphasis upon sex in *A Month of Sundays* as an effort to have the reader think about the Christian faith. He stated, “In this particular book, one can question, is it right for this minister to seduce his parishioners? Is his brand of Christianity the only kind left?” According to Updike, Mansfield, the minister, “is a Barthian grown old. He has faith, but not much in the way of works.”³⁸

Critics, however, were not persuaded with Updike’s reasoning. A consensus was gaining momentum that Updike had started not only to write about sex exhaustively, but also to write about sex badly. Reviewing the book in the *New York Times*, Anatole Broyard saw it as sex-laden book “packed with bad puns and Freudian slips of the banana peel sort.”³⁹

In the Beauty of the Lilies

In 1996 Updike returned to examine the place of the Christian faith in American culture in the twentieth century with a pre-*Couples* like novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*. The American exchange of God as the object of worship for entertainment (movies) and possessions (the car) that takes place in “Packed Dirt” in the early 1960s is re-examined in light of the three and a half decades that had passed. Updike had hinted in *Self-Consciousness*, his 1989 memoir, that he was considering writing such a book. He commented:

In the Beauty of the Lilies Christ was born across the sea—this odd and uplifting line from among the many odd lines of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” seemed to me, as I set out, to summarize what I had to say about America, to offer itself as the title of a continental *magnum opus* of which all my books, no matter how many, would be mere installments, mere starts at the hymning of this great roughly rectangular country severed from Christ by the breadth of the sea.⁴⁰

The story begins in 1910 with Clarence Wilmot, a Presbyterian minister in Paterson, New Jersey, a Dutch Calvinist ghetto, losing his faith while in the pulpit. Wilmot, who had studied under B.B. Warfield at Princeton Seminary and owned Calvin’s commentaries, becomes undone after reading a historical-critical attack on the veracity of the Bible. When he reports

³⁵ Begley, *Updike*, 294.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Elinor Stout, “Interview with John Updike,” in *Conversations*, 75.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁹ Anatole Broyard, “A Month of Sundays,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1975, <http://www.nytimes.com/1975/02/19/books/updike-sundays.html>.

⁴⁰ Updike, *Self-Consciousness*, 103.

this to the liberal moderator of his presbytery, the moderator tells him that he doesn't need to believe anything in order to serve in the church, but Wilmot only despairs more.

Around the same time in Paterson, a more newsworthy event is taking place, the filming of the movie *The Call to Arms*, with the actress Mary Pickford. Pickford falls from a horse and loses consciousness, which is national news. According to Schiff, Updike telegraphed the theme of the novel in these two episodes. Schiff writes:

Mary Pickford's loss of consciousness and subsequent fall from a horse during the filming of *The Call to Arms*, and Clarence Wilmot's sudden loss of faith and fall from grace (incidentally, the plot of the movie concerns "a lost jewel beyond price," which suggests the plot of Updike's novel: the loss of faith). The moment that yields these two "falls" is highly symbolic and points to the dominant theme in the novel: the rise of the cinema, which through its powerful projection of images has inspired faith and devotion, and the related decline of religious belief. Pickford loses consciousness at the moment of the "facial close up," which suggests that the human face, divinely enlarged on the big screen, replaces the face of God in the eyes of a worshipping public.⁴¹

In his new life away from the faith, his motto now being "there is no God," Wilmot finds solace in a new sanctuary, the movie theater. His granddaughter, Essie Wilmot, also loves attending the movies. But, with an exalted sense of self, she is not content with remaining a spectator. Her desire is to be a movie star. Believing there must be a God to love her as she deserves, she climbs from beauty pageant contestant to starlet.

Her son, Clark, drifts until he finds purpose in life in the Temple of True and Actual Faith. The cult comes into conflict with the authorities and a Waco-like shootout follows. In the battle, Clark lays down his life to save the children of the cult.

Schiff sees Updike asserting in *Lilies* that the faith is not dead in America, but has been transferred, Americanized. However, such an exchange reduces the grand spiritual yearning that once defined America to images on a screen, which in turn leads to individuals, like Clark, who will follow self-proclaimed messiahs. America is now "shaped by the image it creates and broadcasts."⁴²

Did He Go Too Far?

Updike said that the true test for any of his novels would be if they floated after twenty years.⁴³ Although it has only been eight years since his death, it appears that Updike's literary star is diminished. Part of the problem is that his sex scenes, which made him a millionaire, *Couples* alone selling 4.6 million copies, are found practically unreadable by friend and foe alike.

The upshot is that Updike has become an author whose books are only read once, if read at all. The exceptions for me are *Olinger Stories*, which is what I recommend first when someone asks me what to read by Updike, and *In the Beauty of the Lilies*. Both show most clearly Updike's religious theme at its best, the displacement of Christian faith in American culture and its consequences. Adam Gopnik on the occasion of Updike's death astutely commented in *The New Yorker*:

⁴¹ Schiff, 145.

⁴² Ibid., 144.

⁴³ Hunt, 212.

Throughout all [his] varied work, one theme rose and was repeated over and over. Updike's great subject was the American attempt to fill the gap left by faith with the materials produced by mass culture. He documented how the death of a credible religious belief has been offset by sex and adultery and movies and sports and Toyotas and family love and family obligation.⁴⁴

I cannot remember enjoying a single page of *Rabbit, Run*, but after reading it I was convinced that Updike had taken a page from my life. The captured rhythm and description of life in rural, Protestant mid-century America is eerily accurate. You grow up in such a place as I did, and you know that he has gotten the scene right. But, in receiving the good news by faith and resting upon Christ for salvation, I wanted to leave that scene behind, not the people, but the behavior.

Such realism is what Updike was hoping to attain, but did he go too far in doing so? He claimed that he only wanted to write about an imperfect world, which he believed was why so many readers found his books depressing.⁴⁵ He further stated that his books were intended to be moral debates where an issue is examined and the question is asked, "What is a good man?" or "What is goodness?"⁴⁶

I appreciate those aspects of Updike's books. But, I also believe that his novels would have been better served if he had dialed back his writing about sex. Theologian Albert Mohler has a point when he comments that Updike's "God-plus-sex" model all too often ends up with Updike becoming a "pagan celebrant" of sex.⁴⁷

Begley picks up on this, noting that critic James Wood in his review of Updike's 1998 novel, *Toward the End of Time*, "added his voice to the chorus of critics who objected to the sexual content of Updike's fiction; 'a lifelong distraction,' he called it."⁴⁸ In reviewing Updike's short stories in *Licks of Love* two years later, Wood wrote that Updike's descriptions of sex "have recurred and overlapped thickly enough in his work to constitute, now, the equivalent of an artist's palette: this is how Updike chooses to paint the world."⁴⁹

For his part, Updike believed he had no choice but to write the way he did. Updike's aim was "to write about sex on the same level, as explicitly and carefully and lovingly as one wrote about anything else."⁵⁰ In describing sex, he believed he had to get himself dirty, even if that meant going against his Christian duty.⁵¹

In this regard, Updike's fiction matched Barth's theologizing. Both asked to be absolved from any duty to provide biblical morals. Updike said, "Barth has been a guide and comfort

⁴⁴ Adam Gopnik, "John Updike," *The New Yorker*, February 9, 2009, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/09/john-updike>.

⁴⁵ James Yerkes, "As Good as It Gets," in *John Updike and Religion*, ed. James Yerkes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999): 24.

⁴⁶ Hunt, *John Updike*, 31.

⁴⁷ R. Albert Mohler, "John Updike Strikes Again," Albert Mohler's website, June 26, 2006, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2006/06/26/john-updike-strikes-again/>.

⁴⁸ Begley, *John Updike*, 459.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 203.

⁵¹ John Updike, "Remarks upon Receiving the Champion Medal," in *John Updike and Religion*, ed. James Yerkes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 5.

for me not only in his assertive fundamentalism but in his Antinomianism, his lovely and tolerant acceptance of the wide world beyond the church walls.”⁵²

But, did Updike’s sharing of Barth’s antinomianism expose an inconsistency that Updike recognized indirectly? In *Self-Consciousness*, Updike stated he had not read Barth much in the 1980s after reading about Barth’s view of the afterlife in an interview. Barth had stated that he imagined the afterlife as somehow this life in review or viewed in a new light. Updike said of Barth’s view, “I had not been as comforted as I wanted to be. For is it not the singularity of life that terrifies us? Is not the decisive difference between comedy and tragedy that tragedy denies us another chance?”⁵³

The separation that Barth put forth between the work of Christ in history and one’s faith, the separation that made Updike uncomfortable, parallels the separation between doctrine and life found in Updike’s life and fiction.⁵⁴ Updike claimed to love attending worship services, even proclaiming that when absent he began to hunger for it; but there is no indication from Updike himself or from any commentators that Updike held that believers in Christ are redeemed from guilt and shame and called to holiness.

There is also nothing of this to be found in Updike’s literature. For Updike, such determinations would have strayed from the “middles” that he loved.⁵⁵ Like Flannery O’Connor, he would have had to condemn his characters, something that he philosophically did not want to do. Updike once explained the difference between his approach and O’Connor’s approach when he commented upon O’Connor and Graham Greene:

What strikes me when I think about Flannery O’Connor and Graham Greene is how far they are willing to go in presenting a suffering, apparently Godless world. That is, the very scorchingness with which God is *not* there is something that I don’t feel in my own work. It amazes me. In other words, there’s something kind of Jansenist—I was going to say Calvinist—in both of these writers. I think there may be a Protestant emphasis on the individual conscience and on attempting to locate a consecrated or a graceful inner state of mind that perhaps is not necessary for these Catholic writers. My heroes, at least, are all struggling for some kind of inner certitude, illumination, or something.⁵⁶

O’Connor is after something that Updike is not, namely, conversion. She aimed to sting the world into a reforming act of self-recognition regarding Christ.⁵⁷ After reading *Rabbit, Run*, O’Connor called it “the best book illustrating damnation that has come along in a great

⁵² Stephen H. Webb, “John Updike the Blogger: Reading Karl Barth with John Updike,” *First Things*, August 15, 2014, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/08/john-updike-the-blogger>.

⁵³ Updike, *Self-Consciousness*, 241.

⁵⁴ Louis Menand questions why the faith convictions of characters in Updike’s fiction should be equated with Updike’s own faith convictions. The value of Begley’s biography is that he proves that William Maxwell’s description of Updike as “a conspicuously autobiographical writer” was correct. As one example of the matching of Updike’s life and writing, Begley chronicles at length Updike’s adulterous ways while married to his first wife, Mary, while living in Ipswich, which became the basis of *Couples*. See, Louis Menand, “Imitation of Life,” *The New Yorker*, April 28, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/04/28/imitation-of-life> and Begley, *John Updike*, 256–94.

⁵⁵ When he appeared a second time on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1982, Updike said, “I like middles. It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly runs.” Peter Stoler, “John Updike: Going Great at Fifty,” *Time* 120, no. 16 (October 18, 1982).

⁵⁶ Campbell, “Interview with Updike,” in *Conversations*, 95.

⁵⁷ Wood, *Comedy of Redemption*, 178.

while.”⁵⁸ Updike was less dogmatic. He wanted to explore the human condition in light of the cosmic battle between God and nothingness. Consequently, Rabbit Angstrom, reprehensible in O’Connor’s eyes, was sympathetic in Updike’s eyes in that he continued to struggle. Joyce Carol Oates further elaborates on how this contrast played out in the fiction of Updike and O’Connor:

Because O’Connor’s Catholic faith was unshakable, she could invent for her allegorical people ghastly physical-historical fates, assuming that their souls, encompassing but not limited to their egos, were unkillable. Updike’s faith is possibly unshakeable as well—which, judging from observations scattered throughout his writing, in a way alarms and amuses him—but his sympathies are usually with those that doubt, who have given up hope of salvation as such, wanting instead to be transparent, artists of their own lives.⁵⁹

In a best-case reading of Updike’s spirituality, Ralph Wood argues that this transparency was why Updike was an ironist of the spiritual life. The realities that constrict the freedom of moderns—marriage, children, church—also enhance that freedom and lead to the discovery of grace, which is not from arbitrary Fate but a benevolent God.⁶⁰

The debate will surely continue about the nature of Updike’s Christian faith and the impact that it had on his writings. But, Updike saw it as real. When he was diagnosed with cancer, he turned to writing poems, the last one, *Fine Point*, being about the literal resurrection of Jesus Christ. Updike asked in the first stanza, “Why go to Sunday school, though surlily, / and not believe a bit of what was taught?” Alluding to Psalm 23, Updike answered:

The timbrel creed of praise
gives spirit to the daily; blood tinges lips.
The tongue reposes in papyrus pleas,
saying, *Surely*—magnificent, that “surely”—
*goodness and mercy shall follow me all
the days of my life, my life, forever.*⁶¹

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⁵⁸ Ibid., 208.

⁵⁹ Joyce Carol Oates, “Updike’s American Comedies,” in *John Updike*, ed. Bloom, 58.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 179.

⁶¹ John Updike, “Fine Point,” *The New Yorker*, March 16, 2009, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/03/16/fine-point-3>.

ServantHistory

Reformed Confessions: The Belgic Confession (1561)

by John R. Muether

In the mid-sixteenth century the Netherlands (“low countries”) were seventeen provinces under the Spanish crown. A spirit of religious leniency ended when Philip II inherited this realm from Charles V in 1555; unlike his father, Philip was determined to crush Protestants movements, which were largely Lutheran or Anabaptist.

By 1560 Reformed congregations began to form in the southern provinces through the work of Geneva-trained ministers. Guido de Brès (ca. 1523–67), an itinerant preacher in the southern provinces, wrote the Belgic Confession while pastoring a church in Dornik. Its thirty-seven articles follow the order of the French Confession of 1559, though it is far more elaborate in its discussion of the Trinity, incarnation, justification and sanctification, and church and sacraments. Contemporary readers may be surprised to encounter its affirmation that faith precedes regeneration. The Belgic Confession employs regeneration in a broader sense that is synonymous with sanctification; the narrower sense as new birth gains prominence at the Synod of Dordt in the wake of the Arminian controversy.

Particularly noteworthy is the Belgic’s relatively mild condemnation of the Roman Catholic Church and its stress on distancing the Reformed from Anabaptists. Denunciations of Anabaptism appear in articles 18 (the incarnation), 34 (baptism), and 36 (civil government). Strong language concludes article 36:

Wherefore we detest the Anabaptists and other seditious people, and in general all those who reject the higher powers and magistrates and would subvert justice, introduce community of goods, and confound that decency and good order which God has established among men.

The basic outline of Presbyterian church order is found in articles 30–32. Article 32 include a strong articulation of the regulative principle of worship (see excerpt below). This language challenges the popular contemporary misconception that the regulative principle is a later invention of English Puritanism.

In its original French version the Belgic included a lengthy preface to King Philip II that affirmed the Reformed movement’s eagerness to obey the magistrate in all lawful things. And yet, “having the fear of God before our eyes,” the letter promised to maintain the doctrine of the Confession, even to the point of “yielding our backs to stripes, our tongues to the knives, our mouths to gags, and our whole bodies to the flames,” as they were “ever ready and willing, if it be necessary, to seal it with our own blood.” De Brès

himself was granted that opportunity in 1567 when he became the only author of a primary Reformed confession to die a martyr's death.

The Synod of Antwerp's adoption of the Belgic Confession in 1566 marked the establishment of Calvinism in the Netherlands. A half century later it was incorporated into the Three Forms of Unity by the Synod of Dordt in 1619. According to Philip Schaff, the Belgic Confession was the "best symbolic statement of the Calvinistic system of doctrine" before the composition of the Westminster Confession of Faith.¹

An Excerpt from Article 32 – The Order and Discipline of the Church

In the meantime we believe, though it is useful and beneficial that those who are rulers of the Church institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the Church, yet that they ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has instituted. And therefore we reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever. Therefore we admit only of that which tends to nourish and preserve concord and unity, and to keep all men in obedience to God. For this purpose, excommunication or church discipline is requisite, with all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God.

The Sequence of Confessions

Sixty-Seven Articles of Ulrich Zwingli (1523)
Tetrapolitan Confession (1530)
First Helvetic Confession (1536)
French Confession of Faith (1559)
Scots Confession (1560)
Belgic Confession of Faith (1561)
Heidelberg Catechism (1563)
Second Helvetic Confession (1566)
Canons of the Synod of Dordt (1619)
Westminster Confession & Catechisms (1643)

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¹ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: with a History and Critical Notes*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper, 1877), 1:506.

ServantReading

“Now Then . . .”

A Review Article

by Gregory E. Reynolds

The Presbyterian Philosopher: The Authorized Biography of Gordon H. Clark, by Douglas J. Douma. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016, xxv + 292 pages, \$37.00, paper.

“Now then,” said Dr. Clark as he sat behind a small utilitarian oak table in a second-floor class room in Carter Hall at Covenant College in the fall of 1974. He then placed his pocket watch on the corner of the table as he looked out the window to gather his thoughts. He proceeded to launch us into the complex world of contemporary philosophy. These were deep waters, but the clarity of Clark’s thought enabled us to navigate.

Gordon Haddon Clark was a major influence on my life. To a novice like me in the world of Christian scholarship, Clark was a breath of fresh air with his old-school pedagogy and theology, during my final year at Covenant College from 1974 to 1975. Since most students were intimidated by his demeanor, which reminded some of Alfred Hitchcock, a few of us had him to ourselves. It only took an ounce of humility and a hunger to learn to get his attention. Underneath the stern exterior was a warmhearted man. He excelled in his knowledge of much of the history of philosophy. To this day I regularly consult his one-volume history of philosophy, *Thales to Dewey*.¹ He taught me the discipline of thoroughly understanding a thinker’s philosophy by analyzing and articulating it in detail before engaging in critical assessment. My first assignment was

¹ Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey: A History of Philosophy* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1957).

Augustine's *de Magistro*. Then I did my senior thesis on Jonathan Edwards's *The Freedom of the Will*.

Coming out of the 1960s counterculture, I found Clark's logical rigor to be of enormous help—although it could also be frustrating: I won only one game of chess while playing him by mail for a decade up until his death. Beyond the disciplines he taught me, his love for Scripture and the Westminster Confession and Catechisms had a lasting effect on me. I shall never forget his paternal kindness and instruction.

While Douma's biography is clearly written by an admirer, he does a fine job in tracing the personal biography, intellectual development, and philosophy of Clark. He also doesn't hesitate to paint an accurate picture of Clark. For anyone who has any connection with Clark's thought or life this is a fascinating and very informative read. Some of the philosophical and theological discussions will prove difficult for those without training in these disciplines. Also, the details of some of the history, especially in the Clark-Van Til controversy, will be more interesting to those who are at least aware of some of the issues.

If that controversy is all one knows about Clark, this book will demonstrate the great value of Clark's expansive contribution to the church, whatever one may think of his apologetics. I am convinced of Van Til's version of presuppositionalism, but I have still learned much from Clark's approach. I have learned to value what they both held in common as well as to identify their differences. Douma is very good at explaining both.

Gordon Haddon Clark was born on August 31, 1902, to Presbyterian parents. His father, David, was a minister who attended Princeton Theological Seminary and the Free Church College (4). At Princeton David Clark studied under A. A. Hodge and B. B.

Warfield, so young Gordon had an early and extensive exposure to the Reformed Faith. Gordon attended the University of Pennsylvania with a mature faith, having made a profession at a Billy Sunday campaign in 1915 (8). Clark thrived in a rigorous academic environment, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, and completed his doctorate in 1929 with a dissertation entitled *Empedocles and Anaxagoras in Aristotle's De Anima*. He began teaching undergraduate philosophy in 1924 (10–11) at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1936 he founded a chapter of the League of Evangelical Students there (13).

Chapter 2 on intellectual influences shows how he came to his version of presuppositionalism, seeking to uncover logical inconsistencies in unbelieving philosophies and worldviews, while defending the logical consistency of the Christian faith. Plotinus, Augustine, Calvin, and the Westminster Confession all had a powerful influence on his thinking. Of course, he rejected Plotinus's doctrine of God, some of the remnants of empiricism in Augustine, and maintained that Calvin was the best interpreter of Paul. The Old School theology of Charles Hodge, the Westminster Confession, and the teaching of J. Gresham Machen were all central in the formation of Clark's thinking (17–22).

During the era of the formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), Clark strongly opposed the Auburn Affirmation's denial of the central tenets of orthodox Christianity. As an elder and a churchman he fought against this heresy in the courts of the church alongside men like H. McAllister Griffiths and Murray Forst Thompson (27). Clark especially admired Machen's 1923 *tour de force*, *Christianity and Liberalism*, in which Machen clearly distinguished between true Christianity and the Liberalism that artfully hid its heresies under Christian language (28). Clark was deeply involved in the

founding and early history of the OPC at the behest of Machen (30). Also, Clark's father, David, was on the board of Westminster Theological Seminary, which Machen had founded in 1929. Douma concludes, "Machen, for his part, saw Clark as an ally" (31).

At the first OPC General Assembly both Clark and Van Til were elected to serve on the Committee on Christian Education. In his first year teaching apologetics at Wheaton, Clark even used Van Til's syllabi notes. As Clark began to understand Van Til he came to disagree fundamentally with his transcendental approach. This would lead to a major controversy in the 1940s (35).

The Wheaton years (1936–43) were difficult for Clark because he "expounded theological views that irritated the college's inter-denominational establishment, but despite conflicts with the administration and board of trustees, his years at Wheaton were some of his most productive" (38). He now had an opportunity to influence Christian students, some of whom would become notable church leaders such as Edward Carnell, Edmund Clowney, Carl Henry, Paul Jewett, and Harold Lindsell. Even Billy Graham took Medieval philosophy from Clark (43). Clark sent many students off to Westminster Theological Seminary.

Students often accused Clark of being "cold," and he was stoic, as Douma admits, but he used this sternness to instill logical thinking and scholarly discipline in his students. If he at times emphasized the rational over against emotion, it was due partly to his stoicism but more to his proper aversion to the anti-intellectualism of the fundamentalism of his day. Once, when reading a passage from Jock Purves's *Fair Sunshine* about a Scottish Covenanter martyr, I saw a tear roll down his cheek.

Chapter 5 explore the origins of Clark’s presuppositionalism, which Douma sums as the “synthesis of two factors: (1) the rejection of empiricism and (2) the acceptance of worldview thinking” (58). Clark insisted that absolute truth cannot be obtained through experience. He also believed that the senses are untrustworthy, thus disagreeing with the Scottish Common Sense Realism of his father and old Princeton (63). The idea of the logical coherence of Christianity was not new to Clark. James Orr and Abraham Kuyper held a similar view (64–7). “Clark came to believe that all knowledge possible to man is limited to the propositions of the Bible and that which can be logically deduced from the Bible” (68). This does not seem to allow for various kinds of knowledge, especially in the area of common grace and general revelation. I know that when it comes to science, however, Clark was an operationalist,² a position consistent with the tentative nature of the scientific method, which is empirical. Clark’s rigorous defense of the infallibility of the Bible should not be forgotten by those of us who are not on board with his apologetics.

By emphasizing the importance of a Christian worldview, Clark made a significant contribution to students seeking to navigate a liberal education. On the importance of developing a Christian worldview, Clark and Van Til were agreed. Where Clark came to disagree with Van Til is in the area of epistemology. Clark rejected both empiricism and the traditional proofs for the existence of God, whereas Van Til still held to aspects of empiricism, and believed that the traditional proofs must be formulated in terms of a Christian epistemology (74).

In Chapters 6–8 Douma does a masterful job presenting the great conflict in Clark’s career and the history of the OPC. He has researched the episode with great care and

² Gordon H. Clark, *The Philosophy of Science and Belief in God* (Nutley, NJ: Craig, 1964).

presents the results in a fair and balanced way. For the most part he leaves the reader to decide. I was happy for an opportunity to revisit an old and very complex issue that I had not thought much about for decades. I learned a lot of new things about that controversy, even though I had investigated it very closely in seminary. I believe that, whatever the reader's assessment of the issues involved, he will learn from the history, because Douma is a serious historian. I do not intend to go into much detail on the three chapters covering the controversy, or I will greatly exceed the editor's word limit.

Clark applied for ordination in the OPC through the Presbytery of Philadelphia in March of 1943 (77). The 1944 General Assembly voted to waive the requirements of a seminary education and Hebrew. A protest was submitted arguing that the waiver was premature given the absence of "discussion of the evidence concerning Clark's theological examination" (78). At the same time a document titled "A Program for Action" was circulated by Clark supporters which, among other things, encouraged affiliation with the non-Reformed American Council of Christian Churches, favored a recommendation against the consumption of alcoholic beverages, and pressed for the church to supervise Westminster Theological Seminary and *The Presbyterian Guardian*. So there were more than theological differences at play behind the scenes. "The ministers leading the Program for Action saw Clark's ordination as an opportunity to change the direction of the denomination" (81). It is no wonder that commissioners were alarmed.

On July 7, 1944, the Presbytery of Philadelphia met to consider Clark's ordination. He was licensed to preach, and the GA waiver of seminary education was affirmed on a 34 to 10 vote. Clark read Genesis 1 in Hebrew to prove his knowledge of the language. On August 9, 1944, Clark was ordained as a minister, becoming part of Calvary OPC in

Willow Grove. Douma doesn't make clear what the call associated with the ordination was (82). Three months later, twelve church officers, among whom were R. B. Kuiper, Leroy Oliver, N. B. Stonehouse, Paul Woolley, Cornelius Van Til, Edward J. Young, and Arthur W. Kuschke Jr., lodged a complaint against the ordination (83). Clark was surprised, since he had been the commencement speaker at WTS in 1941 and sent many students there (84). Given the objectives of the Plan of Action, the complaint is very understandable. What is sad is that the ordination was linked to these other very distinct issues (85). Douma helpfully explains the four issues causing the complaint (87–101). Douma makes the point that requirement to subscribe to a particular view of apologetics goes beyond the confessional requirements for ordination. As one who favors Van Til's approach in rejecting the neutral bar of reason as the common ground between believer and unbeliever, I nevertheless think Douma is correct. As Clark concluded, Hodge and Machen would not have passed this ordination test (102).

A special committee of the presbytery, consisting of Clark supporters, responded to *The Complaint* with *The Answer* at the presbytery's March 1945 meeting defending "the decision to ordain Clark and supported his theological positions" (108). Beginning in 1945 Clark accepted a position as assistant professor of philosophy at Butler University, so he sought to transfer his credentials to the Presbytery of Ohio. He was received after examination in October 1945. Earlier that year he wrote an article in *The Presbyterian Guardian* criticizing the OPC for assuming "the position of an isolationist porcupine" (109). From pages 110 to 127 Douma gives a helpful summary of the theological issues: the incomprehensibility of God; the relationship of the faculties of the soul; divine sovereignty and human responsibility; and the free offer of the gospel. He sums up by

discussing the “overriding issue: charges of rationalism.” As Douma points out, technically, this label describes those who base their knowledge on human reason alone (127). Although there is a rationalistic aspect to Clark’s apologetic as there was in old Princeton’s, it should have remained an academic debate and not an issue for ordination.

The complaint that had been defeated at the Presbytery of Philadelphia was appealed to the Twelfth General Assembly in May of 1945. A special committee to deal with the complaint was erected, consisting of Richard Gray, Edmund Clowney, Lawrence Gilmore, Burton Goddard, and John Murray (136). The majority report favored Clark, and the GA agreed by a vote of nearly two to one. The report concluded: “Our committee is of the opinion that [*The Complaint*] requires the Presbytery of Philadelphia to exact a more specialized theory of knowledge than our standards demand” (137).

Although the case was over, the controversy continued, leading to Clark’s departure from the OPC in October 1948 to join the United Presbyterian Church of North America (153). Under the heading of “Changes in the Position of the Complainants” (157) Douma argues that Murray, Stonehouse, and Kuschke clarified *The Complaint* in the area of epistemology in order to avoid the charge of skepticism (158). I found this helpful and wish this clarification had been made at the outset.

Just when the reader may need a break from controversy, Douma digs into Clark’s long tenure at Butler University from 1945 to 1973. He produced an impressive number of books during that time (167). He became deeply involved in his new denomination, but as his daughter Betsy testified, “My dad never complained about the OP church” (172). He strongly opposed the proposed merger of the UPCNA with the PCUSA. When this occurred in 1958, he helped to lead his congregation out into the Reformed

Presbyterian Church, General Synod (RPCGS, 173). After the death of the pastor, Clark preached regularly for over eight years (175). He was truly a churchman. In 1965 he assisted in arranging a merger between his denomination (RPCGS) and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) to form the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPCES). The EPC brought Francis Schaeffer and Covenant College and Seminary (176).

During this time Clark and Van Til both opposed Barthianism with trenchant critiques from different epistemological perspectives in their respective books in 1963: *The Theological Method of Karl Barth* and *Christianity and Barthianism*. They, also, both ardently defended biblical inerrancy (180–81, cf. 209), something Van Til would warmly recall about Clark in their later years and renewed friendship.

Douma reports on Clark's life outside of work (176–80). On the human side Clark was a legendary chess player. A friend of mine and I once played him together. He took us both on at once and beat us handily in a matter of minutes. I recall watching him feed the wild dogs on the Covenant College quad. He kept a supply of biscuits in his suitcoat pocket. Clark also had a dry sense of humor. In a class at Covenant College he referred to distressed blue jeans as “synthetic poverty.”

In chapter 10 Douma enumerates four theological contributions of Clark. 1. An axiomatized epistemological system, built like Euclidean geometry with Scripture as the basic postulate and doctrines as derived theorems (184–88); 2. Theological supralapsarianism in which the logical order of the decrees is the reverse of the temporal execution (188–92); 3. The solution to the problem of evil (192–94); 4. Arguments for a

return to traditional logic (194–98). These comprise an accurate description of Clark’s views on these major topics.

Chapter 11 on “Clark’s Boys” distinguishes between prominent leaders who strayed from the doctrine of inerrancy and those who didn’t. Clark would have been disappointed that, as a minor “Clark boy,” I became a Van Tilian in apologetics. But I heartily affirm the best of his convictions: the inerrancy of God’s Word and the summary of its teaching in the Westminster standards. Whatever our disagreements with Clark may be, we must appreciate his deep commitment to Christian scholarship and the Christian faith which he clung to, to his dying day. He defended Machen, inerrancy, and the Westminster standards. In the end Clark is on the side of the angels.

After a chapter on Clark’s theology of the Trinity and the incarnation, Douma covers Clark’s years teaching at Covenant College (1974–84). This chapter includes an interesting history of Clark’s opposition to the RPCES joining with the newly formed Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) (235–39). Ironically, one of his reasons for opposing the union was that it would be “an unmerited insult to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church,” due to the fact earlier the RPCES had voted against merging with the OPC, despite the OPC’s favorable vote (236).

My favorite part in this final chapter is “‘My good friend’—personal reconciliation with Cornelius Van Til” (240–42). I witnessed the first of four friendly meetings between the two aged apologists. It was significant that two of the original complainants, Leroy Oliver and Paul Woolley, went to lunch with Van Til and Clark after Clark spoke in chapel at Westminster Theological Seminary in 1977. Thereafter Van Til and Clark referred to each other as good friends. “Later that year, in an interview for *Christianity*

Today, Van Til made reference to ‘my good friend Gordon Clark [who] believes in the inerrancy of the Bible’ ” (240). Remarkably, in 1983 Van Til asked Clark to speak at a dinner in Van Til’s honor. Without diminishing their theological differences, reading this was a little taste of heaven. I highly recommend this book.

When I arrive in heaven I plan on having lunch with professors Clark and Van Til.

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ServantReading

Pulpit Aflame: Essays in Honor of Stephen J. Lawson, edited by Joel R. Beeke and Dustin W. Benge

by Stephen J. Tracey

Pulpit Aflame: Essays in Honor of Stephen J. Lawson, edited by Joel R. Beeke and Dustin W. Benge, Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016, 188 pages, \$25.00, hardcover and ePub.

Our Larger Catechism asks in Q. 158, “By whom is the Word of God to be preached?” and answers, “The Word of God is to be preached only by such as are sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to that office.” I often find myself chewing on the phrase “sufficiently gifted”—usually with regard to myself, and usually on a Saturday evening, or Monday morning. The contributors to *Pulpit Aflame* are gifted preachers, and in seeking to improve the gift of preaching it is profitable to listen to their reflections on preaching. These reflections are clouded only by the inclusion of a chapter by the late Iain D. Campbell, bringing to mind our grief for him and the grief caused by him.

This is a beautiful little book. The hardcover edition is beautifully produced on quality paper with an excellent binding. Of course, the binding may be a reflection of the fact that it is a collection of essays in honor of someone: a cheaply produced recycled paper edition would not reflect much honor. But the true beauty of the book lies not in the binding, nor even the honor it pays to Mr. Lawson (though I am sure that is deserved), but instead lies in the honor it gives to the place of preaching in the life of the Christian and the church.

Following a foreword by Ian Hamilton, Dustin W. Benge outlines the ministry of Steven J. Lawson. The remainder of the book is divided into four parts, dealing with the mandate, meaning, motivation, and method of preaching. Part 1, “The Mandate of Preaching,” has essays by John MacArthur, R. C. Sproul, and Joel Beeke. Part 2, “The Meaning of Preaching,” contains essays by R. Albert Mohler Jr., Derek W. H. Thomas, and Sinclair B. Ferguson. Part 3, “The Motivation of Preaching,” includes essays by Robert Godfrey, John J. Murray, and Michael A. G. Haykin. Concluding the volume, Part 4, “The Method of Preaching,” has essays by Iain D. Campbell, Geoffrey Thomas, and Conrad Mbewe.

Sinclair Ferguson’s reflections on *Preaching as Worship* provide the marrow of the whole matter. “Through the ministry of the Spirit, preaching is worship and also evokes worship” (89). Expanding on this, he reflects on two points: first, Christ’s role in

preaching and worship, and second, the implications of this for the preacher and his preaching. The implications are telling. “No one sits ‘under’ my preaching more than I do if I am the preacher” (98). Furthermore, “Worship is the expression of the whole person, and thus, to a great extent, involves the affections” (99). This reveals something of the power of his own preaching, and his improving of the gifts given to him.

R. Albert Mohler Jr. has a powerful chapter on *Preaching as Exposition*. He argues that “the preaching that is central to Christian worship is expository preaching” (62). He means that “preaching must always derive its message from a passage of the Bible” (62). I would have thought that was obvious, but alas, Mohler demonstrates the lamentable fact that the “therapeutic concerns of the culture too often set the agenda for evangelical preaching” (62). The proclamation of the Word of the living God to people who would rather hear stories about themselves is an issue of life or death.

Geoffrey Thomas, having preached from the same pulpit for over fifty years, begins “Building the Sermon” with a reminder that our task is to build up the people of God, “in fact, to make every effort to excel in gifts that build up the church (1 Cor. 14:12)” (159). He draws a vivid picture of preaching as the way to bring people into the building. Starting with the path that leads to the house of God (the preacher), he takes us to the door (the text), the hallway (the introduction to the sermon), the living room (the place where people are dealt with personally), and finally to the dining room (“where together affectionately we eat”). It is a beautifully written chapter, with the insights of a gifted and faithful preacher. Most moving is his brief description of the last occasion Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached in Wales. Thomas says, “It was all over too soon, an hour disappearing like a watch in the night. And then we sang with all our hearts a great Welsh hymn tune” (167). I wish I had been there. God was there. Such is the power of the preached Word.

Conrad Mbewe reflects on “Delivering the Sermon” by asking the question, “What is it about the delivery of the sermon that makes it so powerful and puts it in a class of its own when compared to all other forms of live audio communication?” (173). The answer, of course is the Holy Spirit. Yet the Holy Spirit chooses to work through the preacher: our emotions, voice, gestures, and eye contact. Delivery is important: there must be earnestness, and the responsible use of our body in the service of the King. God can work freely without these things, and often does. I periodically remind myself that God can speak through a donkey. Yet we are more than that. God gives gifts to preachers and then gifts these preachers to his church. We are to improve our gifts by using them; by conscientiously remembering “to fan into flame the gift of God” (2 Tim. 1:6).

I hope these few points are enough to whet the appetite for this book. I expected that this would be a book to be read once, and then shelved. I was wrong. The contributors are themselves aflame with a passion for preaching. The sparks from their passion are infectious and encouraged me to keep fanning the flame. All praise to God.

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ServantPoetry

William Cowper, (1731–1800)

Joy and Peace in Believing Olney Hymns, XLVIII

Sometimes a light surprises
 The Christian while he sings;
It is the Lord who rises
 With healing on His wings;
When comforts are declining,
 He grants the soul again
A season of clear shining,
 To cheer it after rain.

In holy contemplation
 We sweetly then pursue
The theme of God's salvation,
 And find it ever new;
Set free from present sorrow,
 We cheerfully can say,
E'en let the unknown to-morrow
 Bring with it what it may!

It can bring with it nothing,
 But He will bear us through;
Who gives the lilies clothing,
 Will clothe His people too;
Beneath the spreading heavens
 No creature but is fed;
And He who feeds the ravens
 Will give His children bread.

Though vine nor fig tree neither
 Their wonted fruit shall bear,
Though all the field should wither,
 Nor flocks nor herds be there:
Yet God the same abiding,

His praise shall tune my voice;
For, while in Him confiding,
I cannot but rejoice.