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CURRENT ISSUE: THE FIRST THANKSGIVING

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From the Editor

Wheaton College history professor Tracy McKenzie challenges our popular understanding of the Pilgrim's first thanksgiving in "Remembering the Pilgrims." Was their main reason for coming to the new world religious freedom? Was the 1621 feast actually the first thanksgiving feast? This article will give you new things to discuss on Thanksgiving Day.

John Mallin provides a catalog of his experience as a presbytery clerk in the two part article "The Clerk and His Work." Part 2 will be published next month. He has served as stated clerk of the Presbytery of Connecticut and Southern New York for more than twenty years. He covers the work of clerks of sessions, presbyteries, and general assemblies. This should serve as a helpful manual for years to come.

Recently retired Ronald Pearce walks us through how his own church prepared for his retirement in "How to Prepare a Church for a Pastor's Retirement." Since our denomination has a history of very long pastorates—far above the national average—preparation for the transition is all the more important.

Andy Wilson reviews Charles Taylor's new book *Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment* in "The Promise and Peril of Reconnecting with Reality through Poetry." Since many Christian authors, like Carl Trueman, often favorably quote Taylor's *The Secular Age* (2007), I thought it would be important to have his latest book reviewed in *Ordained Servant*. It turns out that progressive politics dominate the text and thus make the latest book disappointing. Taylor's use of poetry as a means of transcendence is interesting but inadequate for the demands of life in a fallen world. Thus, Wilson also reviews a new book by Frost expert Jay Parini: *Robert Frost: Sixteen Poems to Learn by Heart,* for a superbly insightful and more modest appreciation of poetry's transcendent qualities.

David VanDrunen reviews T. David Gordon's latest book: *Choose Better: Five Biblical Models for Making Ethical Decisions*. Gordon explores four models for Christian ethics and biblical decision making that expand the territory beyond just law as the predominant Reformed model.

I review Susan Erikson's latest book of poetry: *Bones in the Womb: Living by Faith in an Ecclesiastes World*. Erikson's well-crafted free verse beautifully covers the thematic terrain of the entire book of Ecclesiastes. The oral and mnemonic power of poetry takes center stage in free verse because it resembles ordinary speech, but artfully condenses language and seasons it with internal cadence and rhyme. This fine poetry should be a significant aid to Bible study and sermon preparation.

Our poem this month is Psalm 136. For almost four decades I have read this Psalm before each Thanksgiving dinner. As a Psalm of redemptive history, Psalm 136 reminds us that our Creator and Redeemer's mercy endures forever. I have chosen the King James Version because it is the most poetic. I do like the *English Standard Version's* translation of the

Hebrew word *hesed* (חֶסֶד), as "steadfast love," better.

Please note a major change in the eighteenth edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style,* which is our essential standard of style. The geographical location of publishers is no longer required in footnotes and bibliographies. Is this a sign of cybergnosticism? Perhaps. However, I have often found the location of small houses difficult to find. On the other hand, large houses like Oxford University Press have a number of locations. So, both of our serial publications will follow the new style.

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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- "Giving Thanks—The Neglected Prayer." (Jeffrey B. Wilson) 21 (2012): 27–31.
- "The Pilgrims: Forgotten, Remembered, Celebrated." (Darryl G. Hart) 29 (2020): 62–66.

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.

ServantHistory
Remembering the Pilgrims

by Tracy McKenzie

If you were born in the United States, you have probably known the basic outline of the story since grade school: A small band of English Separatists, seeking a better life, cross the storm-tossed Atlantic in the tiny *Mayflower* and arrive at the coast of present-day Massachusetts in late 1620. Having arrived on the eve of a cruel winter, they endure unimaginable hardships over the next few months and one half of their number die before spring. But with the assistance of their new Indian neighbors, the remainder survive to reap a bountiful harvest in the fall of 1621, at which time they pause to celebrate the goodness of God with a special feast. It is an inspiring story, and it would be good for Christians this Thanksgiving to remember it.

But will we remember it correctly? If most of us have known of the story since grade school, it is also true that few of us have studied it seriously *since* grade school, and our understanding is usually simplistic—or just plain wrong. Among other things, we tend to misunderstand why these "Pilgrims" came to America in the first place, as well as how they understood the celebration that we—not they—labeled the "First Thanksgiving." This is unfortunate, for the real story is actually more inspiring—and more convicting—than the myths we have created.

Let us start with the question of why the Pilgrims migrated to New England. The popular answer is that they came "in search of religious freedom," but in the sense that we usually mean it, that is not really true. One of my favorite quotes is from *Democracy in America* where Alexis de Tocqueville observes, "A false but clear and precise idea always has more power in the world than one which is true but complex."[1] The Pilgrims' motives for coming to America is a case in point.

The popular understanding that the Pilgrims came to America in search of religious freedom is *technically* true, but it is also misleading. It is technically true in that the freedom to worship according to the dictates of Scripture was at the very top of their list of priorities. They had already risked everything to escape religious persecution, and the majority never would have knowingly chosen a destination where they would once again wear the "yoke of antichristian bondage," as they described their experience in England.

To say that the Pilgrims came in search of religious freedom is misleading, however, in that it implies that they lacked such liberty in Holland. Remember that the Pilgrims did not come to America directly from England. They had left England in 1608, locating briefly in Amsterdam before settling for more than a decade in Leiden. If a longing for religious freedom alone had compelled them, they might never have left that city. Years later, the Pilgrim's long-time governor, William Bradford, recalled that in Leiden God had allowed them "to come as near the primitive pattern of the first churches as any other church of these later times."[2] As Pilgrim Edward Winslow recalled, God had blessed them with

[1] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (HarperPerennial, 1969), 187.

[2] William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647* (Modern Library, 1981), 19.

"much peace and liberty" in Holland. They hoped to find "the like liberty" in their new home.[3]

But that is not all they hoped to find. Boiled down, the Pilgrims had two major complaints about their experience in Holland. First, they found it a hard place to raise their children. Dutch culture was too permissive, they believed. Bradford commented on "the great licentiousness of youth" in Holland and lamented the "evil examples" and "manifold temptations of the place."[4] Part of the problem was the Dutch parents. They gave their children too much freedom, Bradford's nephew, Nathaniel Morton, explained, and Separatist parents could not give their own children "due correction without reproof or reproach from their neighbors."[5]

Compounding these challenges was what Bradford called "the hardness of the place."[6] If Holland was a hard place to raise strong families, it was an even harder place to make a living. Leiden was a crowded, rapidly growing city. Most houses were ridiculously small by our standards, often with no more than a couple hundred square feet of floor space. And in contrast to the seasonal rhythms of farm life, the pace of work was long, intense, and unrelenting. Probably half or more of the Separatist families became textile workers. Cloth production in this era was a decentralized, labor-intensive process, with families carding, spinning, or weaving in their homes from dawn to dusk, six days a week, merely to keep body and soul together.

This life of "great labor and hard fare" was a threat to the church, Bradford stressed.[7] It discouraged Separatists in England from joining them, and it tempted those in Leiden to return home. If religious freedom was to be thus linked with poverty, then there were some—too many—who would opt for the religious persecution of England over the religious freedom of Holland. And the challenge would only increase over time. Old age was creeping up on many of the congregation, indeed, was being hastened prematurely by "great and continual labor." While the most resolute could endure such hardships in the prime of life, advancing age and declining strength would cause many either to "sink under their burdens"[8] or reluctantly abandon the community in search of relief.

In explaining the Pilgrim's decision to leave Holland, Bradford stressed the Pilgrim's economic circumstances more than any other factor, but it is important that we hear correctly what he was saying. Bradford was not telling us that the Pilgrims left for America in search of the "American Dream" or primarily to maximize their own individual well-being. According to the governor, it was impossible to separate the Pilgrims' concerns about either the effects of Dutch culture or their economic circumstances from their concerns for *the survival of their church*. The leaders of the Leiden congregation may not have feared religious persecution, but they saw spiritual danger and decline on the horizon.

The solution, the Pilgrim leaders believed, was to "take away these discouragements" by relocating to a place with greater economic opportunity as part of a cooperative mission to preserve their covenant community. If the congregation did not collectively "dislodge . . .

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[3] Edward Winslow, *Hypocrisie Unmasked: A True Relation of the Proceedings of the Massachusetts Company against Samuel Gorton on Rhode Island* (1646), 88, 89.
[4] Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 25.
[5] Nathaniel Morton, *New England's Memorial, or a Brief Relation of the Most Memorable and Remarkable Passages of the Providence of God Manifested to the Planters of New England in America* (1669), 3.
[6] Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 23.
[7] Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 23.
[8] Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 24.

to some place of better advantage,"[9] and soon, the church seemed destined to erode like the banks of a stream, as one by one, families and individuals slipped away.

So where does this leave us? Were the Pilgrims coming to America to flee religious persecution? No. Were they motivated by a religious impulse? Absolutely. But why is it important to make these seemingly fine distinctions? Is this just another exercise in academic hair-splitting? I do not think so. In fact, I think that the implications of getting the Pilgrims' motives right are huge.

As I re-read the Pilgrims' words, I find myself meditating on Jesus's parable of the sower. You will recall how the sower casts his seed (the Word of God), and it falls on multiple kinds of ground, not all of which prove fruitful. The seed that lands on stony ground sprouts immediately, but the plant withers under the heat of the noonday sun, while the seed cast among thorns springs up and then is choked by the surrounding weeds. The former, Jesus explained to his disciples, represents those who receive the word gladly, but stumble "when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word" (Mark 4:17). The latter stands for those who allow the Word to be choked by "the cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things" (Mark 4:19).

In emphasizing the Pilgrims' "search for religious freedom," we inadvertently make the primary menace in their story the heat of persecution. Persecution led them to leave England for Holland, but it was not the primary reason that they came to America. As the Pilgrim writers saw it, the principal threat to their congregation in Holland was not the scorching sun, but strangling thorns.

The difference matters. It broadens the conversation we can have with the Pilgrims and makes it more relevant. When we hear their resolve in the face of persecution in England, we may nod our heads admiringly and meditate on the courage of their convictions. Perhaps we will even ask ourselves how we would respond if we were to endure the same trial. And yet the danger is still comfortably hypothetical, whatever cultural hostility we may feel in 2024 notwithstanding. Whatever limitations we may chafe against in the public square, as Christians in the United States we do not have to worry that the government will send us to prison—as the English government did to Separatists in the 1600s—unless we worship in the church that it chooses and interpret the Bible in the manner that it dictates.

Do not misunderstand me. I am not suggesting that we never ask ourselves how we might respond to such persecution. Posing that question can remind us to be grateful for the freedom we enjoy. It may heighten our concern for Christians around the world who cannot take such freedom for granted. These are good things. But I am suggesting that we not dwell overlong on the question. I am dubious of the value of moral reflection that focuses on hypothetical circumstances. Character is not forged in the abstract, but in the concrete crucible of everyday life, in the myriad mundane decisions that both shape and reveal the heart's deepest loves.

Here the Pilgrims' struggle with "thorns" speaks to us. Compared to the dangers they faced in England, their hardships in Holland were so . . . ordinary. I do not mean to minimize them, but merely to point out that they are difficulties we are more likely to relate to. They worried about their children's future. They feared the effects of a corrupt and permissive culture. They had a hard time making ends meet. They wondered how they would provide for themselves in old age. Does any of this sound familiar?

And in contrast to their success in escaping persecution, they found the cares of the world much more difficult to evade. As it turned out, thorn bushes grew in the New World as well as the Old. In little more than a decade, William Bradford was concerned that

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[9] Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 24, 25.

economic circumstances were again weakening the fabric of the church.[10] This time, ironically, the culprit was not the pressure of want but the prospect of wealth ("the deceitfulness of riches"?) as faithful members of the congregation moved away from Plymouth in search of larger, more productive farms. A decade after that, Bradford was decrying the presence of gross immorality within the colony. Drunkenness and sexual sin had become so common, he lamented, that it caused him "to fear and tremble at the consideration of our corrupt natures."[11]

When we insist that the Pilgrims came to America "in search of religious freedom," we tell their story in a way that they themselves wouldn't recognize. In the process we can also ignore aspects of the Pilgrims' story that might cast a light into our own hearts. They struggled with fundamental questions relevant to us today: What is the true cost of discipleship? What must we sacrifice in pursuit of the kingdom? How can we "shine as lights in the world" (Phil. 2:15) and keep ourselves "unstained from the world" (James 1:27)? What sort of obligation do we owe our local churches, and how do we balance that duty with family commitments and individual desires? What does it look like to "seek first the kingdom of God" (Matt. 6:33) and can we really trust God to provide for all our other needs?

In the same way that we misunderstand the Pilgrims' motives for coming to America, we are typically confused about the meaning of their 1621 celebration after their first harvest in their new home. Certainly, there is much about it that we should admire. Think again of the context. The previous autumn, 102 men, woman, and children had departed from Holland on the *Mayflower*, taking sixty-five days to cross the stormy Atlantic in a space below deck roughly the size of a city bus. Following that came a bitter New England winter for which they were ill prepared. Due more to exposure than starvation, their number had dwindled rapidly, so that by the onset of spring some fifty-one members of the party had died. A staggering fourteen of the eighteen wives who had set sail on the *Mayflower* had perished in their new home. Widowers and orphans now abounded. That the Pilgrims could celebrate at all in this setting was a testimony both to human resilience and to heavenly hope.

And yet this episode of the Pilgrims' story that modern-day Americans have chosen to emphasize does not seem to have been that significant to the Pilgrims themselves. More importantly, it fails to capture the heart of the Pilgrims' thinking about God's provision and our proper response. Almost everything we know about the Pilgrims' experience after leaving Holland comes from two Pilgrim writers that I have quoted frequently above: the colony's governor, William Bradford, and his close assistant, Edward Winslow. Bradford never even referred to the Pilgrims' 1621 celebration in his history of the Pilgrims' colony, *Of Plymouth Plantation*. Winslow mentioned it but briefly, devoting five sentences to it in a letter that he wrote to supporters in England. Those five sentences represent the sum total of all that we know about the occasion!

This means that there is a lot that we would like to know about that event that we will never know. It seems likely (although it must be conjecture) that the Pilgrims thought of their autumn celebration that first fall in Plymouth as something akin to the harvest festivals common at that time in England. What is certain is that they did not conceive of the celebration as a Thanksgiving holiday.

When the Pilgrims spoke of holidays, they used the word literally. A holiday was a "holy day," a day specially set apart for worship and communion with God. Their reading

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[10] Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 281–83.
[11] Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 351.

of the Scripture convinced them that God had only established one regular holy day under the new covenant, and that was the Lord's Day each Sunday. Beyond that, they did believe that the Scripture allowed the consecration of *occasional* (not annual, scheduled) Days of Fasting and Humiliation to beseech the Lord for deliverance from a particular trial, as well as *occasional* (not annual, scheduled) Days of Thanksgiving to praise the Lord for his extraordinary provision. Both kinds of holy day featured solemn observances characterized by lengthy religious services full of prayer, praise, instruction, and exhortation. The Pilgrims 1621 celebration featured games and feasting and, as far as we know from Winslow's account, no religious service at all.

From the Pilgrims' perspective, their first formal celebration of a Day of Thanksgiving in Plymouth came nearly two years later, in July 1623. We are comparatively unfamiliar with it because, frankly, we get bored with the Pilgrims once they have carved the first turkey. We condense their story to three key events—the Mayflower Compact, their supposed landing at Plymouth Rock (which they never mentioned), and the First Thanksgiving—and quickly lose interest thereafter. In reality, the Pilgrims' struggle for survival continued at least another two years.

This was partly due to the criminal mismanagement of the London financiers who bankrolled the colony. Only weeks after their 1621 harvest celebration, the Pilgrims were surprised by the arrival of the ship *Fortune*. The thirty-five new settlers on board would nearly double their depleted ranks. Unfortunately, they arrived with few clothes, no bedding or pots or pans, and "not so much as biscuit cake or any other victuals,"[12] as Bradford bitterly recalled. Indeed, the London merchants had not even provisioned the ship's crew with sufficient food for the trip home.

The result was that the Pilgrims had to provide food for the *Fortune*'s return voyage as well as feed an additional thirty-five mouths throughout the winter. Rather than having "good plenty" until the next harvest, as they had anticipated, they once again faced the imminent prospect of starvation.[13] Fearing that the newcomers would "bring famine upon us," the governor immediately reduced the weekly food allowance by half. In the following months hunger "pinch[ed] them sore."[14] By May they were almost completely out of food. It was no longer the season for waterfowl, and if not for the shellfish in the bay, and the little grain they were able to purchase from passing fishing boats, they very well might have starved.

The harvest of 1622 provided a temporary reprieve from hunger, but it fell far short of their needs for the coming year, and by the spring of 1623 the Pilgrims' situation was again dire. As Bradford remembered their trial, it was typical for the colonists to go to bed at night not knowing where the next day's nourishment would come from. For two to three months, they had no bread or beer at all, and "God fed them" almost wholly "out of the sea."[15]

Adding to their plight, the heavens closed up around the third week in May, and for nearly two months it rained hardly at all. The ground became parched, the corn began to wither, and hopes for the future began dying as well. When another boatload of settlers arrived that July, they were "much daunted and dismayed" by their first sight of the Plymouth colonists, many of whom were "ragged in apparel and some little better than half

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[12] Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 101.
[13] Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 100.
[14] Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 105, 121.
[15] Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 144.

naked."[16] The Pilgrims, for their part, could offer the newcomers nothing more than a piece of fish and a cup of water.

In the depths of this trial the Pilgrims were sure of this much: it was God who had sent this great drought; it was the Lord who was frustrating their "great hopes of a large crop." This was not the caprice of "nature," but the handiwork of the Creator who worked "all things according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11, NKJV). Fearing that he had done this thing for their chastisement, the community agreed to set apart "a solemn day of humiliation, to seek the Lord by humble and fervent prayer, in this great distress."[17]

As Edward Winslow explained, their hope was that God "would be moved hereby in mercy to look down upon us, and grant the request of our dejected souls. . . . But oh the mercy of our God!" Winslow exulted, "who was as ready to hear, as we to ask."[18] The colonists awoke on the appointed day to a cloudless sky, but by the end of the prayer service—which lasted eight to nine hours—it had become overcast, and by morning it had begun to rain, as it would continue to do for the next fourteen days. Bradford marveled at the "sweet and gentle showers . . . which did so apparently revive and quicken the decayed corn."[19] Winslow added, "It was hard to say whether our withered corn or drooping affections were most quickened or revived."[20]

Overwhelmed by God's gracious intervention, the Pilgrims immediately called for another holy day. "We thought it would be great ingratitude," Winslow explained, if we should

> content ourselves with private thanksgiving for that which by private prayer could not be obtained. And therefore another solemn day was set apart and appointed for that end; wherein we returned glory, honor, and praise, with all thankfulness, to our good God.[21]

This occasion, likely held at the end of July, 1623, perfectly matches the Pilgrims' definition of a thanksgiving holy day. It was a "solemn" observance, as Winslow noted, called to acknowledge a very specific, extraordinary blessing from the Lord. In sum, it was what the Pilgrims themselves would have viewed as their "First Thanksgiving" in America, and we have all but forgotten it.

As we celebrate Thanksgiving this November, perhaps we might remember both occasions. The Pilgrims' harvest celebration of 1621 is an important reminder to see God's gracious hand in the bounty of nature. But the Pilgrims' holiday of 1623—what *they* would have called "The First Thanksgiving"—more forthrightly challenges us to look for God's ongoing, supernatural intervention in our lives.

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[16] Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 143.
[17] Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 144.
[18] Edward Winslow, *Good Newes from New England: or a True Relation of Things Very Remarkable at the Plantation of Plimoth in New England* (Bladen and Bellamie, 1624), 55.
[19] Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 145.
[20] Winslow, *Good Newes from New England*, 55.
[21] Winslow, *Good Newes from New England*, 56.

ServantWork

The Clerk and His Work, Part 1

by John W. Mallin

Clerks do *clerical* work. What does that mean for clerks of ecclesiastical judicatories?

Introduction

A. History/Etymology

The word "clerk" was first in use before the twelfth century in the sense of "cleric," "clergy." It was used in the sense of "one employed to keep records" by the middle of the sixteenth century, as its use as a verb is found as early as 1551. Middle English "clerk" is from the Anglo-French "clerk" and Old English "cleric," "clerc," both of which are from the Late Latin "*clericus*," from the Late Greek "*klērikos*, κληρίκος" from the Greek "*klēros*, κλήρος" meaning "lot," "inheritance" (an allusion to Deuteronomy 18:2), strictly "a stick of wood" (as used to cast lots); akin to Greek "*klan*, κλαν" "to break."[1] Chaucer's clerk ("The Clerk's Tale" in *Canterbury Tales*) is a clergyman.

B. Remember:

The clerk is a servant. He serves the Lord, his judicatory, and the whole church. As such, he is clothed with *limited*, *delegated* authority.

I. The Clerk

So, who may be the clerk?

A. Who?

The Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (FG) says, "Every judicatory shall choose a clerk from among those who are or those eligible to be its members to serve for such a term as the judicatory may determine."[2] In any judicatory of the OPC, this necessarily means a minister or a ruling elder. Clerks of session are usually ruling elders, but ministers may certainly serve there, even if also moderating (as in the case of a small session). Ministers more commonly serve as stated clerks of presbytery, but ruling elders may also serve there. Both ministers and ruling elders have served as stated clerks of general assemblies.

The question may arise, in light of the qualification, "those eligible to be its members," whether an *inactive* ruling elder may serve as clerk. It would appear from the "Form of Government" that an inactive ruling elder (i.e., one not actively serving on a session) could not serve as stated clerk of a general assembly (GA) or of a presbytery

[1] "Clerk," Merriam Webster, accessed December 22, 2023, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/clerk.

[2] Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, The Form of Government, in *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (FG, The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2020), 19.

(although an inactive ruling elder might be used by a general assembly or a presbytery in some other capacities).[3] It may be that a session, however, might use as its clerk a ruling elder who is presently inactive but has been previously active on that session and is otherwise eligible to serve; that is, if the by-laws of the congregation do not require action of the congregation to reactivate him.[4] A retired minister or ruling elder might serve as clerk for the session which he had served, or its presbytery, or a GA.[5] A ruling elder who has served another congregation of the OPC or other church in the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) may be used by the session on committees, but not as a commissioner to presbytery or general assembly nor as clerk of session because he is not eligible until the congregation calls him.[6]

The clerk should be a competent writer; familiar with the resources listed below at III (Resources); a capable organizer of information, inclined to give attention to detail, and able to keep track of various documents, bits of information, and assorted tasks. Since at least the 1990s, he should be able to use digital technology. It should go without saying that he should be responsible, diligent, discreet, and trustworthy. And he should be able to give time to the tasks when the tasks demand it.

Clerks are officers of the judicatory they serve and are to be chosen by that judicatory, by election or, in small sessions, by *unanimous* (or *general*) consent.[7]

B. Assistants

It has become customary for stated clerks of general assemblies to ask a minister or ruling elder to serve as assistant to the stated clerk. Provision for this is made in the "Standing Rules of the General Assembly" ("Standing Rules"), where the duties of the assistant clerk are enumerated.[8] He is to record the daily minutes of the assembly and prepare them for approval and otherwise assist the stated clerk as determined from time to time.

Some presbyteries have provided for the appointment or election of assistant stated clerks. Generally, where these are found, they assist the stated clerk of the presbytery in recording and, perhaps, preparation of minutes.

Although it is not customary for sessions to have an assistant clerk, there is no reason why they might not do so. Church secretaries may be employed by some sessions to assist in the formal preparation of minutes and, at the direction of the session, in other aspects of the clerk's work that do not require the presence of the secretary at session meetings. Such assistance should, of course, not involve the secretary in matters which call for involvement of ordained officers only.

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[3] Stated Clerk, FG, 19.
[4] He would not, however, be entitled to vote or count in achieving a quorum.
[5] See Stated Clerk, FG, 26.6–7.
[6] NAPARC is an ecumenical organization of which the OPC is a member.
[7] The term "common consent," which is commonly used in the sense of "general consent" and "unanimous consent," is not recognized in current editions of *Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised* (*RONR*).
[8] Standing Rules and Instruments of the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, The Orthodox Presbyterian Church (SRGA), last modified 2021–2022, https://www.opc.org/GA/StandingRules2021-2022.pdf; see SRGA, 3.B.3–4.a, and 3.B.6 within the document.

II. The Work

The work of the clerk is the work of the judicatory he serves.[9] The responsibilities of the clerk are listed in *Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised* (RONR), the Book of Church Order (BCO), the "Standing Rules" of the GA of the OPC, and generally in presbytery by-laws and congregational by-laws.[10] Some of these responsibilities are highlighted below.

A. Records

The most obvious task of the clerk is the preparing, presenting, and keeping of records.

It should be remembered that all records kept by clerks are "public," at least in the sense that they may be seen by reviewers in broader judicatories, or by appellate judicatories, and may be requested as testimony or evidence by the civil magistrate (e.g., IRS, civil lawsuit, criminal trial). Additionally, they are historical records. For these reasons, care should be taken that records are orderly, accurate, in accordance with applicable standards, and intelligible to a reader from outside the judicatory or a reader distant in time. They should be complete for the purposes, but discrete, containing no extraneous matter. This last point is a matter for the discretion of the judicatory. It should be remembered that the records are not "the clerk's." They belong to the judicatory.

1. Minutes

The minutes of meetings are the most obvious records of those to be kept by the clerk. The bulk of these are generally the minutes of regular, "stated," meetings, but include all other meetings of the judicatory as well. Minutes should be kept in continuously paginated form, kept in permanent binders, signed by the clerk who took the record (i.e., by the clerk *pro tempore*, when the case requires) at the end of the minutes of each meeting.[11] The clerk must provide for the storage of approved minutes in a safe place. Today, minutes are generally kept in electronic form as well; but, while this practice is a safeguard against catastrophic loss, it does not make it unnecessary for the official record to be kept in permanent binders.

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[9] The clerk's work is done by him on behalf of the judicatory. Someone must do the work that the clerk does because the judicatory is responsible for the work. Although the clerk does not do all the work of the presbytery, all his work is the presbytery's work. When he acts as clerk, he represents the presbytery. The requirement for a clerk and the qualification of a clerk set forth in "The Form of Government," 19 (see footnote 3), discussed above, are the consequence of this fact.

[10] See the index under "secretary" in the current edition of RONR; Stated Clerk, FG, 19 and its index under "clerks;" https://www.opc.org/GA/StandingRules2021-2022.pdf; particularly SRGA, 3.B.4–6, within the document.

[11] With the advent of technology that permits document sharing, it is possible for members of a judicatory, particularly a session, to compose and edit minutes during a meeting and approve them at the end of the same meeting. This is *not* recommended for at least two reasons: 1) it is the responsibility of the clerk to prepare the minutes in final form, not the responsibility of the other members of the judicatory; and 2) most, if not all, presbytery by-laws require minutes of session meetings (unlike those of congregational meetings or meetings of General Assembly) to be approved at the *next* regular meeting. This allows for proper review by the judicatory. Generally, a draft of minutes should be sent to members of the judicatory before the meeting at which they are to be reviewed so that corrections may be made before the meeting at which they are presented for approval. See below at II.B.1 (Reporting: To Your Judicatory).

Minutes should conform to a standard format. By-laws, "Instruments of the GA," and "the Form of Government" will indicate items which are required to be included in the minutes of every meeting and particular items which must be recorded whenever they occur.[12] Beyond those matters required, nothing should be included in the minutes except by direction of the judicatory, which direction should be recorded in the minutes as an action taken by the judicatory. In addition to relevant portions of other governing documents, the current edition of RONR will dictate the language to be used in the minutes (see III.C, Resources: *Robert's Rules of Order*, below).

a. Stated Meetings

Stated meetings are those regularly planned, generally by way of a pattern. A general assembly regularly meets once a year, the dates and place determined at the previous assembly. Presbyteries regularly meet two, three, or four times a year, usually depending on the geographical size of the regional church, smaller presbyteries generally meeting more often. Regular meetings of presbyteries are usually determined for a calendar year in the fall of the previous year. Examples of such patterns are the first Friday and Saturday of March and October; or the third Saturday of January, April, September, and November. Minutes of each regularly scheduled presbytery meeting should indicate that the meeting is "stated." Sessions generally meet monthly or twice monthly and may be scheduled at each meeting. Minutes of congregational meetings (which must occur at least annually) should be kept with minutes of the session, inserted at the chronological point where they occur.[13]

b. Adjourned Meetings

An adjourned meeting is a continuation of another meeting, whether stated, adjourned, or special. It is continued to complete business which was docketed for the meeting from which this meeting is adjourned. It is scheduled at the meeting from which it was adjourned, the minutes of which meeting should indicate that the "meeting was adjourned to meet on [date] at [time] at [place]." The minutes of the subsequent adjourned meeting should indicate that the meeting is an "adjourned" meeting. This is significant because an adjourned meeting is treated as a continuation of the previous meeting, allowing some actions which are not permitted by RONR at successive meetings, such as a motion to reconsider an action previously taken.

c. Special Meetings

A special meeting is called specially; that is, neither a stated meeting nor an adjourned meeting. It may be called and scheduled by the judicatory at a regular or adjourned meeting, or it may be called by the moderator or stated clerk at the request of the number of ministers and ruling elders specified for the relevant judicatory in the "Form of Government" (generally, a quorum of the judicatory).[14] Only business specified in the call to the meeting may be transacted. The minutes of the special meeting should

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[12] Regarding recording dissents and protests and answers to protests in minutes, also note Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, BD 8, 118.

[13] Stated Clerk, FG 16.1, 26.

[14] Stated Clerk, for session, see FG 13.5, 17; for presbytery, see FG 14.7, 21; for General Assembly, see FG 15.5, 24.

indicate that the meeting is special, include the purpose(s) for which the meeting is called, and record that the call to the meeting is found to be in order by those in attendance.

d. Trials

Meetings of trials are separate and distinct from regular, adjourned, or special meetings, even if they occur within the time frame of such a meeting. They have their own rules of proceeding and their own requirements for record-keeping. (The Book of Discipline should be consulted for these rules and requirements.)[15] Minutes of meetings of trials should be kept in the book of minutes with the minutes of other meetings and may be incorporated into the minutes of another meeting if the trial occurs within the time frame of such a meeting, as long as they are distinguishable as minutes of a meeting of trial.

e. Executive Sessions

Executive sessions held during a meeting are essentially a tool for discussion of sensitive matters in secret, excluding non-members (except upon invitation) from the discussion. No action may be taken in executive session, except the determination to arise from executive session. Actions upon matters discussed in executive session must be taken in open session. Accordingly, minutes should not be taken in executive session, although the action to enter executive session and the fact of the exit from executive session (together with times of entrance and exit) should be recorded in the minutes of the meeting during which executive session was entered.[16]

f. Committee of the Whole

A judicatory may determine in the course of a meeting to go into committee of the whole or in quasi committee of the whole, which allows less formal discussion of a matter. Since, technically, the body in such a case is not the judicatory, but a committee thereof, the committee of the whole or quasi committee may vote on recommendations, which recommendations will be “reported” to the judicatory for final decision and disposition. This will require the clerk to record the determination to go into a committee of the whole or in quasi committee (with the time of entrance), the fact of the rising and report of the committee (with the time of rising), and the text of any recommendation(s) brought by the committee, but otherwise no minutes of the committee should be recorded.[17]

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[15] Stated Clerk, BD 4.A.2, 103.

[16] See *RONR 12th Edition* (Hachette Book Group, 2020), §§9:24–9:27, 86–88; or *RONR 11th Edition* (Da Capo Press, 2011), §9, 95–96.

[17] See *RONR: 12th Edition*, §52, 503–14; or Henry M. Robert III, et. al. eds., *RONR: 11th Edition*, §52, 529–42.

2. Membership Rolls and Directories

The records of the judicatory for which the clerk is responsible include the roll(s) of members of the body over which the judicatory has original or immediate jurisdiction.[18] Membership rolls, directories, and attendance rolls or records are not interchangeable terms, although the clerk will track, create, and keep all three. Each type of judicatory has its distinctive membership.

The membership of a general assembly necessarily changes from year to year as a GA is "dissolved" at the end of the assembly's meetings and a new assembly is elected for the next year. The stated clerk of the GA will maintain the attendance at a given assembly, which will include all those commissioned by their presbyteries who actually attend, as well as the moderator and stated clerk of the previous assembly, the stated clerk of the current assembly, as well as fraternal delegates and representatives of the various committees who are in attendance and seated as corresponding members of that assembly. (The action to seat corresponding members at a meeting of any judicatory should be recorded in the minutes of the meeting.) The membership of the assembly is the ministers and elders commissioned by presbyteries and the assembly officers mentioned above. The membership of the assembly (with the presbytery represented by each commissioner) and the attendance at the assembly will be included in the minutes of the assembly. The stated clerk of the GA also publishes and distributes annually a directory, with contact information, of all the ministers and congregations presently in the OPC.

The stated clerk of a presbytery will, at a meeting of the presbytery, keep track of and record in minutes the attendance by ministers and ruling elders commissioned by their sessions, as well as any alternate ruling elder commissioners and fraternal delegates who may be in attendance and seated as corresponding members. All the ministers and all the ruling elders of the congregations of the regional church are members of the presbytery, without respect to attendance.[19] The stated clerk will keep a record of the membership of the presbytery as well as any members at large of the regional church.[20] The stated clerk of the presbytery will also keep a separate list of licentiates and men under care of the presbytery, having recorded in the minutes their reception as men under care, licensure, ordination, and/or dismissal, as would be done with reception and/or dismissal of ministers from/to another presbytery or other denomination. Additionally, the stated clerk of the presbytery may maintain and publish a directory of the ministers and ruling elder members of the presbytery, men under care and licentiates, fraternal contacts, and members at large of the regional church.

The clerk of session may maintain and publish a directory of members of the congregation he serves, and possibly, with permission, regular attenders. He will record in the minutes attendance at session meetings and at meetings of the congregation. He will record in the minutes of session meetings the reception of members (both communicant and non-communicant), with their full names (including maiden names), dates of birth, and the date of actual reception of each. He will also record in minutes the

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[18] Stated Clerk, FG 13.8, 18; 14. 6, 21; 15.2–3, 23; SRGA (last modified 2021–2022), https://www.opc.org/GA/StandingRules2021–2022.pdf; see SRGA 3.B.4.b–c, 4–5 and B.5.n, 5 within that document.

[19] Stated Clerk, FG 14.2, 20.

[20] Stated Clerk, FG 29.A.1, 81; and 4.a, 82.

removal from membership of any member together with the reason for removal and the effective date, as well as the movement of any member from the roll of non-communicants to the roll of communicant members together with the effective date of change (the date of public profession). These minutes may form the basis for the formation of the rolls of the congregation, which rolls include the record of past and present members, noting full names, dates of reception, dates of birth, dates of baptism, dates of censures, dates of restoration, dates of death, and dates of removal from membership in the congregation. Members of the congregation worshiping with a mission work shall be included and designated.[21]

3. Statistical Reports

The clerk of session is requested and the stated clerk of a presbytery is required to report annually to the general assembly certain statistical data and important changes which have taken place in the past year within the jurisdiction of the judicatory they serve.[22] The information in minutes and rolls described above will be the source for reporting the non-statistical (and some of the statistical) information that is to be reported. The GA's statistician provides a form for reporting this information. Some presbytery by-laws require that a copy of each year's completed form is to be included in the session's minute book at the end of the minutes of the year; some other summary information may also be required by the presbytery for inclusion at the end of the minutes of the year.

4. Other Items

The clerk may be asked to record or keep track of (even temporarily) other matters, as directed by the moderator, the judicatory, or others.[23] Such other matters may or may not be recorded in minutes or otherwise kept permanently.

(To be Continued)

John W. Mallin, a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, is an independent counselor, and has served as stated clerk of the Presbytery of Connecticut and Southern New York for more than twenty years.

[21] Stated Clerk, FG 13.8, 18.
[22] Stated clerk, FG 14.6, 21; SRGA, last modified 2021–2022, https://www.opc.org/GA/StandingRules2021-2022.pdf; see SRGA 3.C.1, 4 within that document.
[23] For example, see Henry M. Robert III, et. al. eds., *RONR*: *11th edition*, §61, paragraphs on "'Naming' an Offender," 646, lines 20–25, and 647, lines 28–31; or in Henry M. Robert III, et. al. eds., *RONR*: *12th edition*, §61, paragraphs on "'Naming' an Offender," 611, paragraph 61:12 and 612, paragraph 61:17.

ServantWork

How to Prepare a Church for a Pastor's Retirement

by Ronald E. Pearce

"When and how do you get ready for retirement?" is a question usually asked about the pastor. And yes, the minister should plan about his retirement—for his and his wife's finances, where to live, and what they would like to do after he retires. But that question needs to be asked about preparing *the church*—When and how does a minister prepare *the church* for his retirement?

It has been my observation that, generally speaking, that question is not being asked, and it needs to be. We all know situations where a pastor retires without preparing the church, and it could result in years of an empty pulpit. The congregation can go through very difficult discouragements while the search lingers on for another pastor. I remember when the Lord took Dr. James Boice to glory. We grieved at our loss that he was gone. But there were other ministers on staff that stepped in and the congregation was cared for. I know most churches in the OPC are not the size of Tenth Presbyterian, and so do not have several pastors. But seeing how the church was cared for at the death of Dr. Boice left me thinking, what can we learn from that to prepare a church for the pastor's retirement so the pulpit is not vacant and the church will receive continuous care?

"When do you get ready for retirement?" I encourage the pastor and elders to begin to ask this question when the minister is about 58—about eight to ten years before he plans to retire. Why so much time? There is too much to do to transfer pastoral responsibilities and care of the flock. But also, there is the important, maybe more important, spiritual and emotional transition of the congregation from one shepherd to the other. I had been the pastor of the Church of the Covenant (OPC) in Hackettstown, New Jersey, since the church began in 1981, so I was the only pastor many had known all their lives. Having a slow, intentional transition allowed the congregation to get to know and trust a new shepherd. After over forty years of one pastor, the transition had to be done very carefully so the church would have time to embrace another pastor with different gifts and personality.

Then to answer the second part—How do I get ready for retirement?—let me share our story. Every church situation is unique, so these concepts will not all apply to everyone. But I hope they will help each church and session think and prepare for this important stage in the life of the church.

Let me share what we did to prepare our church for my retirement by phases:

Phase One (eight years before the pastor's retirement)

Start the discussion of what the transition after retirement will look like for the church. Should the church call an associate pastor, so he would be in place when the pastor retires? We decided to have a pastoral intern with the intent that, should he and the congregation agree, he would become an associate pastor while I was still pastor to help with the transition. These years we had to plan the budget for a future intern.

Phase Two (six years before the pastor's retirement)

Complete the intern process and vet him with the intent that he could become an associate pastor at the conclusion of his internship. We called an intern, Jim Jordan, and during his yearlong internship he came under care of the Presbytery of New Jersey and completed his exams for licensure. At the conclusion of his internship, Jim and the session desired that he stay as an associate pastor, so the congregation voted and called him as associate pastor with the intent that he would be pastor when I retired. The congregation voted to take monies from savings and pay off the mortgage so that we could budget for an associate pastor's salary.

Phase Three (four years before the pastor's retirement)

Begin the transition of pastoral responsibilities to the associate. This is so the associate has time and help to learn all the areas of pastoral and session oversight of the congregation. Each year we planned to transfer areas of responsibility:

The first year we transferred the oversight of the church secretaries, church office, church annual calendar—to learn all the things that happen in the church throughout the year, all the paperwork and files for the church office, the preparing of bulletins, reports, agendas for meetings, et al. Since he was needing to work with the secretaries, he took the pastor's office at the church, and I moved my office to my home. This same year we also transferred the oversight of follow-up of church visitors.

The second year we transferred the oversight of the session. He was elected moderator and had the year to learn all that the session addresses throughout a year at their meetings. He had the year to learn the session's policies and procedures. As moderator of session, he would oversee the interview and reception of new members. He would moderate the trustee and congregational meetings.

The third year we transferred all premarital counseling. We continued to share pastoral counseling, funeral services, and weddings.

The fourth year we transferred the teaching of the New Members' Sunday School class, which is required for membership.

Phase Four (that last year before the pastor's retirement)

All pastoral responsibilities and oversight now have been transferred to the associate pastor. I continued to preach Sunday mornings and the associate would preach Sunday evenings. My retirement date was announced to the church. Seven months prior to retirement, the congregational meeting had to prepare the motions for presbytery to dissolve the pastoral relationship effective on the date I retired. The congregation voted its desire that Jim become "senior pastor" when I retired. When we first called Jim as an intern, he was a single man. Over the years, the church saw him mature as a preacher and watched him become engaged, marry, and become a father. There was sufficient time so that when the congregation had to vote for Jim as pastor, it was not a shock. For most people the transition had already happened mentally and emotionally months before. In other churches, if the retiring pastor has not been pastor for such a long tenure, perhaps the transition could be shorter; but we needed a careful, lengthy time.

Retirement

I preached my last sermon as pastor on Easter Sunday. The following Sunday our new senior pastor began preaching every Sunday morning, and the transition to another pastor was complete. I took several months away so that the church (and I) could "reboot" without me. The session, with Jim's blessing, asked if that fall I would continue as an "assistant pastor" to help carry the load and continue the transition. We agreed that I would preach twice a month, usually on Sunday evenings and visit the elderly and shut-ins.

We received feedback through the years from the congregation that they were aware of the transition. They expressed their gratitude that there was a plan of transition so pastoral care was not interrupted. The elders were able to continue their care of the congregation without having to be working on pulpit supply and processing candidates to find another pastor.

This was all done out of love for the church. These are precious sheep for whom Christ died. We desired that they be best cared for during one of the most unsettling and difficult experiences a church faces. We give thanks to the Lord for leading us and answering so many prayers through these years. All praise to the Lord.

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ServantWork

The Promise and Peril of Reconnecting with Reality through Poetry

A Review Article

By Andrew S. Wilson

Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment, by Charles Taylor. Belknap, 2024, xii + 620 pages, $37.95.

Robert Frost: Sixteen Poems to Learn by Heart, by Jay Parini. Library of America, 2024, xxxii + 120 pages, $24.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has gained considerable notoriety in the Reformed world in recent years, as a number of Christian writers have drawn from and expounded upon the insights in his 2007 book, *A Secular Age*. In his latest volume, *Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment*, the prolific nonagenarian considers how poetry from the Romantic era and beyond responds to the disenchantment that took place as a result of the Enlightenment, resulting in a shift from seeing the world as having its own natural order and mysterious agency to adopting "a picture of the universe as the realm of mechanical causation, without intrinsic human meaning" (179). This reduces reality (including human beings themselves) to something subject to human manipulation and technocratic control. While Taylor does not address this in this book, in our society this is largely done through the propagandistic shaping of narratives and "vibes" that inform the public mood and regulate behavior. This bears mentioning because it is such an obvious misuse of language, and language is central in *Cosmic Connections*.

The book draws upon the way Romantic poets used language in their efforts to counteract disenchantment, as they sought to reveal the true nature of the larger order and thereby bring man to a point of self-realization. As Taylor puts it,

> The central notion here is that this is what revelation through a work of art as "symbol" does. It doesn't just inform you about the links in and with the cosmos. It makes them palpable for you in a way which moves you and hence restores your link to them. . . . [Poetry] evokes for us, gives us a vivid sense of what it is like to be in the situation of the lover, the bereaved, the devout seeker of God. Or otherwise put, it invokes the intentional object of the emotion. (20–21, 70)

Another way Taylor explains this is by saying that a poem can open up an "interspace" of interaction between us and the world, a concept that Taylor puts forth as a third way of discovering human meaning, "challenging the simple distinction [between] ontological

versus psychological" (55), that is, between the reality that exists external to the human mind versus that which is the product of the mind. For Taylor, the interspace created by poetry is not merely subjective, but situates us before nature in a revelatory manner and gives "a powerful sense of [nature's] meaning for our purposes, our fulfillment, or our destiny" (85).

The bulk of the book consists of chapters in which Taylor traces this idea in the works of the poets Hölderlin, Novalis, Shelley, Keats, Hopkins, Rilke, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Eliot, and Miłosz, as well as several others along the way. While there is much to ponder here, it will be best appreciated by avid poetry readers who are already familiar with these works, as Taylor strings together citation after citation, many in the original German or French (with translation). In spite of the amount of space devoted to this, whatever insights into the natural order Taylor derives from these poets remain fairly vague. Perhaps this is related to his appreciation for the Symbolist movement in poetry, which condemned works that attempted to give exact representations of reality and made indefiniteness a virtue (475–76). Indefiniteness is indeed an important aesthetic quality, as Emily Dickinson shows in this poem:

> Tell all the truth but tell it slant—
> Success in Circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> The Truth's superb surprise
> As Lightning to the Children eased
> With explanation kind
> The Truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind—[1]

Taylor's fondness for indefiniteness extends well beyond the realm of aesthetics, even finding expression in the way he follows Miłosz in preferring an "open and human variant of Catholicism, very different from the cramped, self-enclosed, and backward-looking" variety (541, cf. 594). Readers get a sense of what this looks like for Taylor when he expresses his support for "gay rights" (578) and his appreciation of Pope Francis's ambiguous calls for pluralistic openness (580–86).

Given that Taylor's religion is accommodated to our secular age, it makes sense that he embraces the identitarian moralism that is so prominent in Western society. This is seen in his expression of contempt for "U.S. Republican voters," whom he characterizes as being threatened by "universal human rights" and sympathetic to "white superiority," traits supposedly made evident in their embrace of "the scarcely veiled appeal of Donald Trump to uphold 'law and order'" (16). At first, this seems like an isolated rant. But its centrality to the book's argument becomes clear in the penultimate chapter, "History of Ethical Growth," where Taylor considers whether poets help bend the "arc of the moral universe" toward justice (553), drawing upon the Romantic "notion that the things of this world are a language, and that poets are those who can decipher this" (392) and help us reach our destiny of "a condition of harmony and resonance with Nature" (95). His conclusion is that, although humans have "come up with deeper ethical insights" across

[1] Harold Bloom, *The Best Poems in the English Language: From Chaucer through Robert Frost* (Harper Perennial, 2007), 586.

the centuries, we do not "on the whole act more morally than our ancestors" (586). While he acknowledges the advances that have been made in civil rights, he still asserts that "Jim Crow, and white supremacy, continue to wrack American society" (562). Unsurprisingly, the villains are those who belong to "the American Right" (in which Taylor groups such disparate figures as Mitt Romney and Donald Trump), who defend "the individualism of unlimited freedom, of a general license to follow [one's] own way" (560).[2] Taylor also denounces the Right for striving to protect their privileged status in society by clinging to their cultural heritage (570–77), promoting "vote-suppressing legislation" (575), and opposing an expansive welfare-state (576–77).

It would be one thing to criticize certain figures and factions on the Right. But Taylor pathologizes the Right in general as xenophobic and white supremacist. This calls for a response, especially since it is how he applies the insights he gleans from his poetic interlocutors. What evidence does he set forth to support his contention that the Right is racist, and how does the evidence stand up to scrutiny? First, he implies that, because a disproportionate percentage of violent crimes are committed by racial minorities, it is racist to expect the civil magistrate to punish criminals. This illogical, and fundamentally unjust, notion is based on the civilization-destroying fallacy of disparate impact thinking.[3] Second, Taylor claims it is racist to think that a society should be united around a shared past and a shared understanding of the good, rather than be marked by its embrace of a multiculturalism that pits allegedly oppressed identity groups against whiteness. This exhibits Taylor's blindness to the fact that a culture based on repudiation will inevitably break apart, and that some kind of consensus about principles and values is needed in order for a society to enjoy a measure of stability. While there certainly can be diversity within unity,[4] cultural roots and boundaries are necessary because they are constitutive of identity.[5] Third, Taylor claims that it is racist to oppose voting practices that undermine the integrity of elections. This ignores the fact that people oppose such practices because they imperil the legitimacy of the state.[6] And fourth, Taylor suggests that those who oppose an ever-expanding welfare state are motivated by racial animus. This is dismissive of patent evidence indicating that expanding and fostering dependence

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[2] This is an odd criticism. It is the Left that promotes the radical licentiousness of expressive individualism, which it then ironically leverages to bolster its authoritarian managerialism. While the Right is not immune to problems with individualism, it is far more supportive of traditional institutions that constrain the excesses of individualism.

[3] See Heather MacDonald, "Disparate Impact Thinking Is Destroying Our Civilization," *Imprimus*, vol. 53, no. 2 (Feb. 2024): https://imprimis.hillsdale.edu/disparate-impact-thinking-is-destroying-our-civilization/.

[4] For a good example of this, see this article about my alma mater, the University of Pittsburgh: Howard Husock, "Diversity That's Not Divisive," *City Journal* (Sept. 3, 2024): https://www.city-journal.org/article/diversity-thats-not-divisive.

[5] See Adam Ellwanger, "Multiculturalism Is Anti-Culture," *The American Conservative* (May 16, 2022): https://www.theamericanconservative.com/multiculturalism-is-anti-culture/.

[6] See Armin Rosen, "Broken Ballots," *Tablet* (Sept. 3, 2024): https://www.tabletmag.com/feature/broken-ballots-american-voting.

on state aid perpetuates poverty and a sense of victimhood,[7] enables the state to accumulate more power,[8] and pushes the nation closer and closer to a debt catastrophe.[9]

Taylor's broad characterization of the Right as racist is the result of seeing the Right through the lens of an ideology that ignores one of the most basic human realities. As Daniel Mahoney explains,

> The new ideological binary, innocent victim versus rapacious oppressor, forgets the insight so powerfully articulated by Solzhenitsyn in the opening volume of *The Gulag Archipelago*: "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"[10]

Colin Redemer elaborates, "it is best to be reminded that we are all already guilty. The leftists who keep attempting to kill, jail, or otherwise destroy their rivals need to be reminded that our political longing, like all of our longings, will only be satisfied when they are satisfied in God."[11] Carl Trueman adds that victim-oppressor ideology, also known as "critical theory," is marked by its "inability to articulate a positive social vision in anything but the vaguest terms," because it "denies that the world has an intrinsic moral shape."[12] Note the irony. Though *Cosmic Connections* seeks to realign its readers with the order of nature, it concludes with Taylor promoting an ethical vision that is not rooted in that order but is a projection of what some people think the world should be like, a projection that is promoted through manipulative smears of racism. Without making any attempt to explicate the Right's program as it is understood by the Right, Taylor simply asserts that it is indecent of the Right to notice certain realities. This undermines his claim that poets can unlock the meaning of reality and help advance ethical progress.

Being a poet, or a reader of poetry, does not exempt one from the impact that the fall has had on the human faculties. True, some poems may help better attune our thoughts and feelings to reality. But any insights we derive from poetry need to be tested against God's revelation in Scripture, as well as by other insights from the light of nature. As is the case with all other human attempts to understand and connect with reality, poetry can enlighten, but it can also misconstrue, manipulate, and distort. So can the reader of a poem. This is illustrated by the way Richard Wilbur speaks of the power of language in his wonderful little poem "A Barred Owl":

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[7] See John McWhorter, *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America* (Penguin, 2007), 5–14, 63–72, 114–34, 153–96.

[8] See Mark T. Mitchell, "Plutocratic Socialism and War on the Middle Class," *The American Conservative* (Sept. 9, 2022): https://www.theamericanconservative.com/plutocratic-socialism-and-war-on-the-middle-class/.

[9] See Jeffrey H. Anderson, "America's Debt Emergency," *City Journal* (Aug. 8, 2024): https://www.city-journal.org/article/americas-debt-emergency.

[10] Daniel J. Mahoney, "Mimetic Musings," *The New Criterion* (Sept. 2024): 61–62.

[11] Colin Redemer, "Searching for Our Plot of Innocence," *First Things* (Sept. 17, 2024): https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2024/09/searching-for-our-plot-of-innocence.

[12] Carl R. Trueman, "Critical Grace Theory," *First Things* (Nov. 2023): 31.

The warping night air having brought the boom
Of an owl's voice into her darkened room,
We tell the wakened child that all she heard
Was an odd question from a forest bird,
Asking of us, if rightly listened to,
"Who cooks for you?" and then "Who cooks for you?"

Words, which can make our terrors bravely clear,
Can also thus domesticate a fear,
And send a small child back to sleep at night
Not listening for the sound of stealthy flight
Or dreaming of some small thing in a claw
Borne up to some dark branch and eaten raw.[13]

On the one hand, the words spoken by the parent calm fears that are not grounded in reality, as the owl poses no threat to the child. On the other hand, the parent's words intentionally obscure elements of reality that might give the child nightmares. This is a kind of beneficent obfuscation.[14] But because human words have this power, the very ideas that bring ethical advances can also become instruments of ethical regression. This is seen in the way the Civil Rights movement was co-opted to advance the LGBTQ agenda and its rebellion against God's natural order. In fact, even the Civil Rights movement's correction of racial injustices had mixed results. As Christopher Caldwell has pointed out, "Starting with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, . . . the United States had re-created the problem that it had passed the Civil Rights Act to resolve: It had two classes of citizens."[15]

Given that the poems discussed in *Cosmic Connections* are likely to be both daunting and unfamiliar to many readers, I would like to call attention to another book that makes a familiar English-language poet even more accessible: Jay Parini's *Robert Frost: Sixteen Poems to Learn by Heart*. Parini teaches at Middlebury College and authored a highly regarded biography of Frost in 1999.[16] In his new book, he provides a brief introduction to Frost, makes a case for memorizing poems, offers several pages of helpful commentary on each poem, and gives practical tips on how to commit a poem (or even part of one) to memory. He also calls attention to how Frost's poems often make use of elements drawn from the "daily work of farmers" (xxi), a fact that makes them especially helpful in connecting readers to reality. This includes life's darker realities, as is evident in the first poem selected by Parini, "Storm Fear." In it, Frost describes the experience of a father waking in the middle of the night while a fierce New England snowstorm rages outside his small family's isolated farmhouse. Here is the full poem:

When the wind works against us in the dark,
And pelts with snow

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[13] Richard Wilbur, *Collected Poems: 1943–2004* (Harcourt, 2004), 29.
[14] Such efforts are not always necessary. When my daughter memorized this poem at the age of three or four, she found particular delight in reciting the last two lines.
[15] Christopher Caldwell, *The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties* (Simon & Schuster, 2020), 238.
[16] Jay Parini, *Robert Frost: A Life* (Henry Holt, 1999).

> The lower chamber window on the east,
> And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,
> The beast,
> ‘Come out! Come out!’ —
> It costs no inward struggle not to go,
> Ah, no!
> I count our strength,
> Two and a child,
> Those of us not asleep subdued to mark
> How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length,—
> How drifts are piled,
> Dooryard and road ungraded,
> Till even the comforting barn grows far away,
> And my heart owns a doubt
> Whether ’tis in us to arise with day
> And save ourselves unaided. (3)

The reader is made to feel how vulnerable we humans are to the forces of nature, and the ending suggests that the family is on their own in the face of this crisis. The frenzy of the storm is reinforced by the poem’s irregular form and rhyme scheme. Though this confronts us with a terrifying reality, it might nevertheless call our attention to the fact that we stand in need of help from Someone who transcends nature. Similar thoughts emerge as one ponders the other poems in the book, as well as Parini’s reflections upon them.

While discernment and critique are necessary, Christians should be sympathetic toward the notion that poetry can play an important role in helping us modern people reconnect to reality. Reading poetry helps us slow down, notice things, and ponder them. It can make us more responsive to realities that are external to us, and less susceptible to manipulation by those who would seek to control us. It can even be a source of civic cohesion and renewal.[17] Of course, as this article has shown, poetry can be misused. But it also offers considerable benefits, especially for a people who are called to seek the welfare of the earthly cities in which we sojourn (Jer. 29:7), to not be conformed to the pattern of this world, and to be transformed by the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:2).

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[17] “Reflective poetry that connects the past to the present . . . evokes a self-conscious sense of national identity, that is, our distinct humanity, that which makes us human in a specific way in our own specific circumstances.” David P. Goldman, “Can Poetry Save a Nation?” (Sept. 17, 2024): https://tomklingenstein.com/can-poetry-save-a-nation/.

ServantReading

Choose Better: Five Biblical Models for Making Ethical Decisions, *by T. David Gordon*

A Review Article

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by David VanDrunen

Choose Better: Five Biblical Models for Making Ethical Decisions, by T. David Gordon. P&R, 2024, xvii + 123 pages, paper.

T. David Gordon, PCA minister and retired professor at Grove City College, has provided a very helpful new book on Christian ethics. Not only is the content useful, but Gordon also writes in a concise, clear, and engaging way that will make this book of interest to a broad range of readers.

Gordon provides an initial definition of "ethics" at the beginning of his Preface: "the study of how to live and how to live well" (ix). Shortly thereafter, he gives another definition: ethics "constitutes the *disciplined reflection on human choice-making*" (xi) (all italics in quotations are his). The latter definition is key for the book, since, as the title indicates, Gordon focuses on human choice. How do we make good decisions? For Gordon, this is not just a question of making right rather than wrong decisions, although some situations call for this. Ethics is also about making better rather than worse decisions in the many circumstances of life when there are no single right or wrong choices. Gordon proposes five "models" that should guide moral decision-making. He believes Scripture advocates all five and that different Christian traditions emphasize (and neglect) different ones. Since all are biblical, they are complementary rather than competitive. Utilizing one should strengthen use of the others, while neglecting some will impoverish and distort how we utilize others. The five models are like a mechanic's tools. He will do his best work when he uses many tools rather than a single one.

Gordon first considers the *imitation* model. The basic idea is that God has made and called human beings to be like him, in a way appropriate to our creaturely status. God created us in his own image, and Scripture repeatedly exhorts us to imitate him: for example, to be holy as he is holy and to love others as he has loved us (Lev. 19:2, John 15:12). This model encourages us, when faced with a moral choice, to ask, "*Does this decision allow me (or us) to emulate God or to cultivate human traits that reflect his image*" (11)? Gordon suggests that this imitation model has close links to the virtue tradition of ethics, for imitating God is not just a matter of doing what God does but also of becoming like him. This model also encourages us to ponder the communicable attributes of God and to consider how our choices can reflect them. Gordon notes that many prominent Christian thinkers have regarded the imitation theme as the fundamental biblical model, and he agrees with this judgment. According to Gordon, however, a

potential limitation of the model is that it does not tend to provide ready, quick answers to moral problems but requires long and sustained study.

The book's second entry is the *law* model. This understands God to have rightful and wise authority over his creatures. Accordingly, God gives commands throughout Scripture which he expects his people to keep. This model thus prompts us to ask, when faced with a moral decision, "*Has God, in Holy Scripture, commanded or prohibited this behavior*" (31)? Gordon notes, and is surely correct, that this model has played a dominant role in the ethics of churches descending from the Protestant Reformation, as illustrated by the prominent use of the Decalogue in the Heidelberg Catechism and Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms. While Gordon affirms this model's vital importance, he also devotes extended discussion to challenges it poses. In particular, many biblical commands do not oblige all people. God directed some commands toward a specific person, for example, and some commands binding under one biblical covenant do not bind people living under another covenant. While some readers may think Gordon devotes disproportionate space to this model's limitations, this discussion is quite helpful and is obviously directed at Reformed communities prone to emphasize the law model to the detriment of others.

Third is the *wisdom* model. Scripture includes wisdom literature and often exhorts readers to be wise. For Gordon, wisdom entails understanding the true nature of reality and perceiving how things work. This model encourages us to ask, when making moral choices, "*What is the likely outcome of this decision*" (53)? Recognizing that God created the world with wisdom, this model urges us to pay attention to natural as well as special revelation. It also enables us to recognize that what works for one person in a certain situation may not work for another in different circumstances. The wisdom model thereby helps us to live charitably with each other when we make different decisions in matters on which Scripture does not bind our consciences. But this model too has limitations to keep in mind. It provides counsel and perspective but often not clear imperatives. It describes how the world tends to operate, not how it always operates.

The fourth model is the *communion* model. It focuses on the biblical idea that God made us for fellowship with himself and that we alone of God's creatures have the privilege of direct communication with him. This model sets the following question before our ethical decision-making: "*How might this decision enhance or inhibit my (or our) communion with God*" (77)? The Bible commends this model to us in many ways. It urges us to pray without ceasing, the Psalms are filled with praise, thanksgiving, request, and lament that express intimacy with God, and the pattern of God speaking to us and we responding back to him pervades the Scriptures. Gordon notes, however, that this model's special challenge is the danger of subjectivity. We are often not very good judges of our own souls or of what conduces to our spiritual benefit.

Finally, Gordon presents the *warfare* model. This draws on the numerous biblical texts describing life as a great battle pitting God and his people against Satan and his host. God often portrays himself as a mighty warrior and the Old Testament depicts warriors such as David as types of Christ. Scripture also enlists Christians in the fight, exhorting them to put on the armor of God and wage war against the passions of the flesh. This model instructs Christians to ask about their moral choices: "*In the often invisible, yet real warfare between the forces of good and evil, will this decision likely serve the forces of good or the forces of evil*" (101)? This model encourages Christians to

be vigilant, obedient to Christ their commanding officer, and always prepared. It requires us to think strategically, although in doing so it demands that we incorporate insights from the other models.

There is a real sense in which *Choose Better* sells itself. All five models indisputably appear throughout Scripture, so we Christians committed to biblical authority ought to acknowledge the propriety of Gordon's call to incorporate them into our moral thought. One benefit of heeding this call is that it ensures the holistic character of ethics. Far too often contemporary writers treat "ethics" as if it focuses only on big, life-crisis, cultural-war issues. This can leave the impression that ethics has little to do with the 99.9% of life when such issues are not before us. Gordon's book never leaves that impression. Utilizing the five models also helpfully connects us to the broad moral-theological tradition of the Christian church. As Gordon recognizes, great theologians throughout church history have incorporated these themes into their ethical writings.

If I were to interrogate the author, I might ask him two questions, one general and one specific. In general, I wonder why he focuses so intently on *decision* and *choice* throughout the volume. While decision-making obviously is a crucial part of ethics, Gordon himself suggests that ethics is deeper and richer than this. For example, he acknowledges the importance of *virtue* (especially through his imitation model) and of *spirituality* (especially through his communion model), both of which transcend decision-making, it seems to me. Does Gordon's focus on choice, therefore, suggest a narrower view of ethics than he himself holds?

My specific question concerns his discussion of Satan's activity under the warfare model. Since Scripture warns us to be on guard against Satan's devices, Gordon appropriately considers this topic. He speaks of how Satan deceives us, diverts our attention, and employs our corrupt desires. But Gordon doesn't explain *how* Satan does this. Satan spoken audibly to Adam and Christ when tempting them, but he does not do that to us. Does Satan have access to our innermost thoughts and feelings? Can he actually put ideas in our minds or stir up vices latent within us? If not, what exactly is Satan's role in our spiritual struggle against the world's lies and the passions of our sinful nature?

Reformed churches should be grateful for this excellent new contribution to Christian ethics. I recommend it highly for pastors, elders, deacons, and thoughtful laypeople.

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ServantReading

Bones in the Womb: Living by Faith in an Ecclesiastes World, *by Susan E. Erikson*

By Gregory E. Reynolds

Bones in the Womb: Living by Faith in an Ecclesiastes World, by Susan E. Erikson. Resource, 2024, x + 154 pages, $17.00, paper.

It is exceptionally enjoyable to be asked to endorse and review Susan Erikson's new book of poetry, since I am working on a commentary on Ecclesiastes with Meredith M. Kline. I normally do not have endorsers review volumes, but I hope readers will pardon this exception.

> In her introduction Susan Erickson best sums up her intentions in writing this poetry: I have been intrigued for years by Ecclesiastes; its honesty about human struggles, its frank exposé of the futility our excursions into stuff and experiences for meaning and satisfaction; its persistent reminder that death is on everyone's bucket list; and the correct recourse for human peace in the face of this world, is a relationship with the God of heaven. Nothing sentimental here, but the best place for every believer to start. (x)

Erikson's well-crafted free verse beautifully covers the thematic terrain of the entire book of Ecclesiastes. The oral and mnemonic power of poetry takes center stage in free verse because it resembles ordinary speech, but artfully condenses language and seasons it with internal cadence and rhyme. This fine poetry should be a significant aid to Bible study and sermon preparation.

Good poetry in whatever form stimulates the imagination to see things from a different perspective. The artistic structure and craftsmanship of Ecclesiastes is perfectly suited to such a linguistic exploration of its meaning and implications.

The writer of Ecclesiastes has some important things to say about the artistry involved in composing the Scriptures:

> Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. (Eccl. 12:9–12)

The inspired words of the sage in this text are carefully crafted divine wisdom—"arranging many proverbs with great care." He fashions wisdom especially designed for troubled believers living amidst the injustices and wackiness of a fallen world. We must remember to leave the mystery of God's disposition of our lives in the hands of God, recognizing our mortal and human limits. The beauty of the design of the book of Ecclesiastes is itself a testimony of the perfect control and benevolent purposes of our God in caring for us. God's Word is crafted with the original Designer's care—a care with which he gifts the writers of Scripture— "weighing and studying and arranging."

Erikson divides the book into four parts. Rather than moving seriatim through the twelve chapters of Ecclesiastes, she focuses on four essential themes: Chasing after the Wind; A Time to Die; Fear God; and A Pleasing Aroma.

The word *hebel* (הֶבֶל) is used thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes. It has a wide semantic range. It can mean frustrating, perplexing, or fleeting, depending on the context. Erikson's poems reflect this range of meaning. The idea of fleeting and weariness is captured in her poem "All Is Vapor" (8–9).

> People come,
> People go,
> From light of dawn
> to glowing dusk,
> The days roll on
> and on and on.
> Whether harmony
> Or wars increase,
> The boy is young,
> The man grows old,
> Yet earth remains,
> Seedtime, harvest,
> Heat and cold,
> Summer and winter,
> Day and night
> shall never cease.

But like Ecclesiastes the poetry ends in hope. The concluding poem, "Final Thoughts," nicely gathers the Preacher's conclusions.

> How much do we rely
> upon our dreams,
> And our desire?
> Instead of building up ourselves
> in holy faith,
> Instead of running eager fingers
> over pages of His Word
> (What glorious translation of His truth is waiting there!)
> Forgetting how He
> snatched us from the fire?

There are no deeds
He has not seen,
No secret things
He does not know—
Our stumbling,
The weariness of soul in man.
And yet He loves.
We would do better fearing God,
And keeping His commandments.

Indeed, here are “words of truth” crafted as “words of delight” to capture every reader’s heart.

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Psalm 136 (*King James Version*)

O give thanks unto the LORD; for *he is* good: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.
O give thanks unto the God of gods: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.
O give thanks to the Lord of lords: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.

To him who alone doeth great wonders: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.
To him that by wisdom made the heavens: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.
To him that stretched out the earth above the waters: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.
To him that made great lights: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
The sun to rule by day: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
The moon and stars to rule by night: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.

To him that smote Egypt in their firstborn: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
And brought out Israel from among them: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
With a strong hand, and with a stretched out arm: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.
To him which divided the Red sea into parts: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
And made Israel to pass through the midst of it: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
But overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red sea: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.
To him which led his people through the wilderness: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.

To him which smote great kings: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
And slew famous kings: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
Sihon king of the Amorites: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
And Og the king of Bashan: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
And gave their land for an heritage: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
Even an heritage unto Israel his servant: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.

Who remembered us in our low estate: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
And hath redeemed us from our enemies: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.
Who giveth food to all flesh: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.
O give thanks unto the God of heaven: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.