

The Covenants



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From the Editor

Fundamental to Reformed theology is the doctrine of the covenants. It has also been one of the most debated elements of our symbolic commitment. Our confession devotes an entire chapter to the topic in six dense paragraphs. The structure of the entire Bible cannot be understood in its historical continuity and discontinuity without it. Hence, the same is true of our theology. We have two offerings this month on the biblical covenants.

OPC historian Camden Bucey considers the nature of the antithesis between believers and unbelievers by exploring its covenantal and ethical dimensions in “The Antithesis: Understanding the Divide between Believers and Unbelievers.” Dave Gordon reviews a new systematic introduction to Reformed covenant theology by Harrison Perkins. Perkins’s historical and theological acumen combined with a deep pastoral and churchly application should make this the best introduction of its kind available.

Celebrating the 100th anniversary of the birth of Flannery O’Connor, Danny Olinger gives us an introductory essay, “Jesus, Stab Me in the Heart! Flannery O’Connor at 100,” to be followed by monthly reviews of several of O’Connor’s most important works. Her Augustinian Catholicism made her Christianity about the intrusion of God in history through Jesus Christ. As Olinger points out,

O’Connor stated that her stories concerned “specifically Christ and the Incarnation, the fact that there has been a unique intervention in history. It is not a matter in these stories of Do Unto Others. That can be found in any ethical culture series. It is the fact of the Word made flesh.”

Shane Lems invites us to focus better this new year by reviewing *Stolen Focus: Why You Can’t Pay Attention—and How to Think Deeply Again* by Johann Hari.

Finally, I have published three poems on the loss of two quite elderly mothers—Susan Erikson’s and mine. Often people unthinkingly, if well-intentioned, comment that she lived a full life. When a mother, or anyone who is loved and revered, dies it is a tragedy and a cause for grief. The longer the lives of our two mothers, the larger the loss we lament. Our mothers’ Christianity leaves us with the hope of reunion, but that is not yet, and now we miss them greatly and deeply. Susan has published a number of books of poetry, two on the biblical books of Revelation and Ecclesiastes, which I highly recommend.

The cover is of alpenglow on Millen Hill (3,356’) in the Presidential range of the White Mountains in New Hampshire, west northwest of Mount Washington, and viewed from the

north tower in the Mount Washington Hotel. We might imagine that its unique alpine beauty is similar to a rainbow and reminds us that God is a covenant keeper.

Happy New Year.

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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http://opc.org/OS/pdf/Subject_Index_Vol_1-32.pdf

- “Clarity on the Covenants.” (Gregory Edward Reynolds) 15 (2006): 22–27.
- “Covenant and Salvation.” (Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.) 18 (2009): 145–49.
- “Covenant Theology Today.” (Bryan D. Estelle) 30 (2021): 147–52.
- “Exploring Recent Covenant Theology.” (David A. Booth) 30 (2021): 115–18.

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 Truth

The Antithesis: Understanding the Divide between Believers and Unbelievers

Camden M. Bucey

Introduction

Few theological concepts are as profound and far-reaching as the antithesis between believers and unbelievers. This fundamental divide shapes our understanding of salvation, human nature, and our relationship with God. Yet, it is often misunderstood or overlooked in contemporary Christian discourse.

The antithesis is not merely an abstract theological concept but a reality that impacts every aspect of life. It speaks to the core of our identity, our perception and interpretation of the world, and our purpose within it. Understanding this divide is crucial not only for grasping the fullness of the gospel but also for navigating our relationships, engaging with culture, and fulfilling our calling as believers.

In this article, we will consider the nature of the antithesis, exploring its covenantal and ethical dimensions. We will examine how it is grounded in the doctrine of the covenant and illuminated by the hope of the resurrection, shaping our daily lives as we seek to live out our faith in a world that stands in opposition to it. In understanding the antithesis, we come to appreciate more fully the magnitude of God's grace and the urgency of our mission to a world in need of redemption.

The Covenantal Chasm: Defining the Antithesis

As expressed in the Reformed tradition, the antithesis refers to the fundamental spiritual and ethical divide between believers and unbelievers. It is crucial to understand that the antithesis does not imply a difference in fundamental human nature or ontological status. Believers and unbelievers are equally human, sharing the same created nature and both bearing the image of God. The antithesis is a difference in our spiritual state and relationship to God. It lies in the covenantal relationship with God and the corresponding ethical orientation that flows from it. This distinction is covenantal and ethical, not ontological.

This profound divide originated with the fall into sin and the subsequent curse, which differentiated between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). After the fall, all humans are born as objects of wrath, with sin affecting not only our moral standing before God but also our very understanding of him and the world. Our hearts are darkened, our thinking becomes futile, and our concepts of right and wrong skewed. We are slaves to sin and in need of regeneration.

By God's grace the elect enter into a new covenant relationship with God, receiving forgiveness and freedom from sin's bondage. Though they continue to struggle with indwelling sin, the Holy Spirit enlightens their minds and renews their wills, enabling them to embrace Christ by faith as offered in the gospel. This spiritual renewal reorients their ethical stance towards righteousness and holiness.

Unbelievers, in contrast, remain in their natural state. Their covenantal status is still "in Adam," and their ethical orientation continues to be defined by their fallen nature. While they may perform moral actions, they remain fundamentally in bondage to sin, totally depraved, and in rebellion against God.

The absoluteness of this antithesis cannot be overstated. There is no middle ground between being in Adam and being in Christ. One either belongs to the fallen creation under Adam's representation or to the new creation in Christ.

Despite this stark divide, it is crucial to recognize that all humans, even in their fallen state, retain aspects of God's image (see Gen. 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9). As Paul argues in Romans, all individuals possess knowledge of God, though they suppress this truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). They are moral beings with the works of the law written on their hearts, though they are totally depraved (Rom. 2:15). The issue lies not in the clarity of God's revelation, which is evident everywhere, or in the awareness of God's righteous standards, but in humanity's sinful desire to conceal and suppress the truth about the God they have rebelled against.

In the Reformed tradition, the concept of the antithesis has been significantly developed by thinkers like Abraham Kuyper and Cornelius Van Til. Kuyper emphasized the antithesis as a fundamental divide in worldviews and cultural engagement. Van Til, building on Kuyper's work, further refined and deepened this understanding. He interacted critically with Kuyper's formulation, refining it with his formulation of the doctrine of common grace and emphasizing the point of contact between believers and unbelievers found in the image of God. While his views have sometimes been misunderstood or misrepresented, Van Til rightly emphasized that the antithesis, grounded in covenant theology, affects every aspect of human thought and action. However, as we have seen, this concept did not originate with Van Til or Kuyper but is deeply rooted in Scripture and Reformed doctrine.

This understanding of the antithesis has profound implications for apologetics and evangelism. It reminds us that unbelief is not merely an intellectual issue but a covenantal and ethical one. Unbelievers are not neutral parties but are spiritually blind to gospel truth (2 Cor. 4:4). This realization should temper our expectations in apologetic encounters and increase our reliance on God's grace.

Our apologetic approach, therefore, must address not only intellectual objections but also the ethical implications of the gospel. We are calling people to more than a change of mind; we are calling them to a fundamental shift in allegiance and way of life. True conversion requires more than persuasive arguments—it necessitates the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, bringing individuals from death to life, from the old creation to the new. For believers, understanding the ethical dimension of the antithesis should motivate us to live in a way that visibly demonstrates the gospel's transforming power. Our conduct should reflect our new covenantal status and ethical orientation in Christ.

While the antithesis establishes a clear divide, God's common grace, extended to all in service of God's special or saving grace, ensures the possibility of genuine interaction

between believers and unbelievers. God restrains final judgment for a time and prevents people from utter depravity, which would be entirely consistent with their spiritual condition. Common grace explains why unbelievers can exhibit intelligence, perform seemingly good acts, and retain a sense of morality, albeit twisted by sin. While they cannot do what is truly good in God's judgment, they remain his image-bearers, providing a starting point for dialogue, apologetics, and evangelism.

Grasping the covenantal and ethical nature of the antithesis gives us profound insight into the transformative power of salvation and the ongoing need for gospel proclamation. It shapes our approach to apologetics, evangelism, and Christian living, underscoring the radical nature of our new identity in Christ and the urgent need to share this truth with those still bound to the old creation in Adam.

From Adam to Christ: The Covenantal Basis of the Antithesis

To grasp fully the concept of the antithesis, we must explore the biblical teaching on covenant representation. This doctrine, central to Reformed theology, provides the framework for understanding our relationship both to Adam and Christ, and consequently, the nature of the divide between believers and unbelievers.

The concept of covenant representation finds its clearest articulation in Romans 5:12–21. In this pivotal passage, the apostle Paul draws a parallel between Adam and Christ, presenting them as representative heads of two distinct covenantal realities. He writes,

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned. . . . For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. (Rom. 5:12, 17)

This text establishes the foundation for understanding both the universal problem of sin and the singular solution in Christ.

Adam, as the first man and the progenitor of the human race, stood as the federal head of all his descendants. In this capacity, his actions had far-reaching consequences that extended beyond himself. When Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, he did so not merely as an individual but as a covenant representative. His disobedience brought sin and death into the world. Everyone who descends from him by ordinary generation sinned in him and fell with him in his first transgression (WSC Q.16).

Because of the covenantal arrangement that God established, Adam's sin was imputed to all his natural descendants. This imputation constitutes the grounds for universal condemnation. Paul emphasizes the reality of Adam's representation by pointing to the universality of death. Even those who have not personally sinned in the manner of Adam's transgression still experience death, demonstrating that they too are born as children of wrath (Rom. 5:14).

In contrast to Adam, Jesus Christ stands as the second and last Adam, the representative head of a new humanity. His role as covenant representative forms the basis for our understanding of salvation and the nature of the antithesis. Where Adam failed in his obedience, Christ succeeded. His perfect life fulfilled the righteous

requirements of God's law, providing the basis for a new covenant relationship with God (Rom. 8:3–4; Heb. 9:15). Christ's death on the cross was not merely an individual act but a representative one. As the covenant head of his people, his death atones for their sins and satisfies divine justice on their behalf.

Just as Adam's sin is imputed to his descendants, Christ's righteousness is imputed to all who are united to him by faith, while their sins are imputed to him (2 Cor. 5:21). This forms the basis for the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone. Paul emphasizes that through Christ believers not only escape death but are granted eternal life and will "reign in life" through him.

This underscores the absolute nature of the antithesis; one cannot belong to both covenant heads simultaneously. The antithesis is not primarily about individual actions or beliefs, but about one's covenant status. Are we represented by Adam in his disobedience and condemnation, or by Christ in his obedience and redemption?

Salvation is not a reset to the original state; it is a transfer of covenant identity and allegiance—from Adam to Christ. This transfer is the essence of what it means to be "in Christ." Moreover, Christ's representative work addresses the full scope of Adam's fall. It is not merely a matter of the forgiveness of individual sins, but about reversing the entire curse that came through Adam (Rom. 8:19–23). For believers, this doctrine provides profound assurance. Our standing before God is based not on our own merit but on the perfect work of our covenant representative, Jesus Christ. This truth should fill us with gratitude and motivate us to live in a manner worthy of our calling in Christ.

This doctrine also has significant implications for our understanding of human nature and the extent of sin's impact. It helps us to see that the problem of sin is not just about individual transgressions but also about a fundamental alienation from God that affects every human being. This understanding should shape our approach to evangelism and apologetics, reminding us of the depth of human need and the power of God's grace in Christ.

Furthermore, this illuminates the corporate aspect of both sin and redemption. While we often think in individualistic terms, the Bible presents a more communal view of humanity. We are not isolated individuals, but members of a human race that has collectively fallen in Adam and can be redeemed in Christ. This should foster both humility and hope—humility in recognizing our shared guilt and corruption, and hope in the far-reaching effects of Christ's redemptive work.

The doctrine of covenant representation provides the theological underpinning for understanding the antithesis. It reveals that this divide is not arbitrary but is rooted in the covenantal structure of God's dealings with humanity. Through Adam, all are born into sin and death. But through Christ, believers are brought into a new covenant of life and righteousness. This reality shapes our entire approach to theology, apologetics, and Christian living, reminding us of the profound nature of our salvation in Christ and the urgent need to proclaim this truth to those still bound in Adam.

From Death to Life: New Identity in the Last Adam

The antithesis between believers and unbelievers extends beyond our present experience to encompass our fundamental identity and future hope. The doctrine of resurrection and the concept of new identity in Christ further illuminate the profound

divide between those in Adam and those in Christ, revealing that this distinction is not merely a matter of current status but of eternal state.

In 1 Corinthians 15:42–49, the apostle Paul provides a vivid contrast between our current bodies and the resurrected bodies believers will receive. He writes, “So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:42–44). This passage reveals that the resurrection is not merely a resuscitation and return to our fallen state or even to Adam’s state as originally created, but an eschatological transformation.

Our present bodies, subject to decay and death, will be transformed into bodies that are incorruptible. The humiliation of our fallen state will give way to the glory of our fully redeemed state. The weakness and frailties of our present earthly existence will be transformed by the Spirit unto resurrection life. This transformation is an elevation to something far greater. It represents the fulfillment of God’s original intention for humanity, surpassing even the glory of Eden.

Paul draws a crucial parallel between Adam and Christ in this context, stating, “The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. . . . The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven” (1 Cor. 15:45, 47). While this passage fundamentally compares Adam in his created state to Christ in his resurrected state (consider the quotation of Genesis 2:7 in 1 Corinthians 15:45), it also highlights the antithetical difference between those in Adam and those in Christ. This contrast becomes even more pronounced when we consider the effects of sin’s entrance into the world. Adam represents humanity in its natural (and now fallen) state, while Christ, as the last Adam, represents a new humanity transformed by resurrection power. Those in Adam express an “earthly” life. After the fall into sin, they are subject to death, while those in Christ are destined for heavenly glory and eternal life. The earthly and protological mode of life which we shared with Adam was characterized comparatively by weakness and mortality, but the heavenly and eschatological mode of life in which we participate through Christ is marked by spiritual power and immortality.

The hope of resurrection is intimately connected to our present identity in Christ. This new identity is not merely a future reality but a present transformation that anticipates our final glorification. In Ephesians 4:22–24, Paul exhorts believers “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” This passage highlights that salvation involves a decisive break with our old way of life. I prefer the literal translation of “old man” rather than “old self” for this very reason: it emphasizes that the old life is bound up with the “old man,” Adam. The “new man” we put on is Christ. Paul’s language is much more covenantal than many of our English renderings. We are renewed to reflect God’s character, marked by true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness.

Paul extends this concept in 2 Corinthians 5:17, declaring, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” This verse encapsulates the radical and comprehensive nature of our new identity. It is not just a personal renewal but participation in a new order of existence—the new creation. While we await the full manifestation of the new creation at Christ’s return, we already

participate in its reality through our union with Christ. This newness affects every aspect of our being—our status before God, our inner disposition, and our outward conduct.

Our new identity in Christ through the resurrection deepens our grasp of the antithesis in several ways. It reveals that the antithesis is not temporary but has eternal consequences, determining not just our present but our eternal state. While the full manifestation of our new identity awaits the resurrection, it is already a present reality that should shape our lives now. The promise of resurrection and our new identity in Christ provide powerful motivation for holy living, distinguishing believers from the pattern of this world. The stark contrast between the two eternal futures—resurrection unto life or unto judgment—underscores the urgency of evangelism and apologetics. For believers, the doctrine of resurrection and new identity provides a firm basis for assurance. Our hope is not in our own efforts but in the transforming power of Christ.

Conclusion

At its core, the antithesis reveals the radical effects of sin and the glorious power of the gospel. Salvation is not a mere improvement of our natural state, but a recreation and eschatological advancement, a fundamental transfer from one realm to another—from being “in Adam” to being “in Christ.” This covenantal and ethical distinction, grounded in the representative work of Christ, shapes our identity, our understanding and interpretation of reality, and our eternal future.

In today’s increasingly polarized society, the antithesis is becoming more pronounced and visible. We see this divide manifested in political debates over moral issues, policies, and even in the realm of scientific interpretation. As the epistemological self-consciousness of the secular world becomes more consistently opposed to Christ, Christians may feel overwhelmed or tempted to retreat from cultural engagement. However, understanding the antithesis as a fundamental covenantal and ethical divide equips believers to navigate these complex issues with wisdom and grace. It reminds us that the ultimate solution to societal problems is not found in political power or social reforms but in the transformative power of the gospel.

Understanding the antithesis deepens our appreciation for the grace of God. It reminds us that our standing before God is not based on our own efforts but on the person and work of Christ. This truth should fill us with humility and gratitude, spurring us on to live in a manner worthy of our calling. We must love our neighbors while standing firm in the truth as we rest in him.

We do this in the hope of the resurrection, knowing that one day the antithesis will be fully realized (Mal. 3:18; Matt. 25:31–34, 41; John 5:28–29; Rev. 20:12–15; 21:7–8). Until then, we are called to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, manifesting our new identity in Christ even as we eagerly await its full consummation. In grasping this truth, we come to see more clearly the magnificent scope of God’s redemptive work and our place within it.

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Servant Literature

Jesus, Stab Me in the Heart! Flannery O'Connor at 100

by Danny Olinger

"Mrs. Greenleaf!" She shrieked, "what's happened?"

Mrs. Greenleaf raised her head. Her face was a patchwork of dirt and tears and her small eyes, the color of two field peas, were red-rimmed and swollen, but her expression was as composed as a bulldog's. She swayed back and forth on her hands and knees and groaned, "Jesus, Jesus."

Mrs. May winced. She thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom. She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true. "What is the matter with you?" she asked sharply.

"You broken my healing," Mrs. Greenleaf said, waving her aside. "I can't talk to you until I finish."

Mrs. May stood, bent forward, her mouth open and her stick raised off the ground as if she were not sure what she wanted to strike with it.

"Oh Jesus, stab me in the heart!" Mrs. Greenleaf shrieked. "Jesus, stab me in the heart!" and she fell back flat in the dirt, a huge human mound, her legs and arms spread out as if she were trying to wrap them around the earth.

Mrs. May felt as furious and helpless as if she had been insulted by a child. "Jesus," she said, drawing herself back, "would be ashamed of you. He would tell you to get up from there this instant and go wash your children's clothes!" and she turned and walked off as fast as she could.¹

March 25, 2025, marks the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Flannery O'Connor, the great twentieth-century fiction writer. When she died from lupus at the age of thirty-nine on August 3, 1964, her literary genius was widely heralded. In an unprecedented ten-year period, she had been the first-prize winner of the O. Henry Award for best short story for "Greenleaf" (1957), "Everything That Rises Must Converge" (1963), and "Revelation" (1965), and the second-place winner for "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (1954), and "A Circle in the Fire" (1955). Her 1953 short story that did not win an O. Henry Award, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," is perhaps the most well-known short story in American history. *The Complete Stories*, a collection of her published and unpublished short stories, won the 1972 National Book Award for fiction, the first time that the award had been given posthumously.

Still, if anything, O'Connor's fame and influence has only risen in the decades since her death. In 2002, R. Neil Scott's magisterial 1,061-paged (3 lbs 5 oz) *Flannery O'Connor: An Annotated Reference Guide to Criticism* summarized—by my count—seventy-five books, 290 doctoral dissertations, and 1,695 articles, chapters, and essays on O'Connor and

¹ Flannery O'Connor, "Greenleaf," in Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (Noonday, 1995), 316–317.

her fiction.² The appearance of hundreds of post-2002 articles and reviews on O'Connor on JSTOR.org alone, much less numerous new books and a 2023 Ethan Hawke-directed O'Connor biographical motion picture, *Wildcat*, testifies that interest in O'Connor has not waned.

This is even more fascinating in light of the fact that O'Connor is arguably the first distinguished writer of fiction in American history whose work is Christian in form and substance. In making this claim about O'Connor, Ralph Wood notes that Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, Melville, Poe, Hawthorne, Twain, James, Frost, and Faulkner were heterodox at best, atheist or even nihilist at worst.³ According to Wood, O'Connor's imagination was shaped by the scandalous claims of the gospel. That is, she was convinced that God had uniquely and definitely identified himself and his will for the world in Jesus and the church.

O'Connor made clear that this was her intention in writing. She declared, Let me make no bones about it: I write from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. Nothing is more repulsive to me than the idea of myself setting up a little universe of my own choosing and propounding a little immoralistic message. I write with a solid belief in *all* the Christian dogmas.⁴

But, contrary to literary expectation with such a stated goal, she did not make her protagonists attractive as she pressed these claims. Her protagonists are the poor, broken in mind and body, rarely happy, and those who possess, at best, a distorted sense of spiritual purpose. They also commit terrible acts—they murder, steal, deceive, and display racist attitudes—that do not give the reader a great assurance of joy in this life.⁵ When she informed Sally and Robert Fitzgerald that she was dedicating her volume of short stories, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, to them, she said, "Nine stories about original sin, with my compliments."⁶

Robert Drake believes this acknowledgment of the reality of sin is what elevates O'Connor's stories. "In her own way, she does seem to have man's number—and the world's. People *are* often as she says; and they *do* often express themselves, in violent words and actions, as she represents them, and not just in darkest Georgia."⁷

² R. Neil Scott, *Flannery O'Connor: An Annotated Reference Guide to Criticism* (Timberlane Books, 2002). Scott also listed author and title information for 521 master's theses, 537 representative reviews, six motion pictures and videos based on her works, and 24 reviews of the 1979 John Huston-directed film of *Wise Blood*.

³ In pointing out O'Connor's pioneering as an American writer who was Christian in a substantive sense, Wood adds that "T.S. Eliot doesn't count, since he became Christian after becoming a British citizen." Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Church Made Visible* (Baylor University Press, 2024), 7.

⁴ Flannery O'Connor to Shirley Abbott, March 17, 1956, *Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), 147. In "The Fiction Writer and His Country," O'Connor made a similar declaration. She said, "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that." Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1969), 32.

⁵ William Goyen in the *New York Times Book Review* (May 18, 1952) described O'Connor's *Wise Blood* as a tale of unending vengeance in which the characters were so strange that they did not seem to belong to the human race. Richard Bernard in *Commonweal* (October 1960) states that the characters in *The Violent Bear It Away* and the world that they live in occupy the last outposts of unregenerate Protestantism.

⁶ Flannery O'Connor to Sally Fitzgerald, Dec. 26, 1954, *Habit of Being*, 74. Joyce Carol Oates maintains that original sin is O'Connor's constant theme, and therefore O'Connor "does not—cannot—believe in the random innocence of naturalism, which states that all men are innocent and the victims of inner or outer accidents." Joyce Carol Oates, *New Heaven, New Earth* (NY: Vanguard, 1974), 172.

⁷ Robert Drake, *Flannery O'Connor: A Critical Essay* (Eerdmans, 1966), 43.

And yet, O'Connor does not look down upon the undeserving lot of murderers and racists, the twisted and neurotic, the guilt-ridden and God-haunted that comprise the heart of her stories. Rather, she makes them serve as the spiritual catalysts of the conflict in each narrative. *The Color Purple* author, Alice Walker, comments,

It has puzzled some of her readers and annoyed the Catholic church that in her stories not only does good not triumph, it is usually not present. Seldom are there choices, and God never intervenes to help anyone win. To O'Connor, in fact, Jesus was God, and he won only by losing.⁸

But if O'Connor annoyed the Catholic church as Walker posits, Michael Bruner argues that "O'Connor's God was mainline liberal Christianity's worst nightmare, a God you could not control, one who was neither respectable nor tame."⁹ That which marks theological liberalism, the goodness of man and the moral uplift of Jesus, is shattered in her stories.

O'Connor stated that her stories concerned "specifically Christ and the Incarnation, the fact that there has been a unique intervention in history. It is not a matter in these stories of Do Unto Others. That can be found in any ethical culture series. It is the fact of the Word made flesh." O'Connor then provided a specific example of her authorial intent, "As the Misfit said, 'He thrown everything off balance and it's nothing for you to do but follow Him or find some meanness.' This is the fulcrum that lifts my particular stories."¹⁰

Although O'Connor believed that salvation is of the Lord, she was acutely aware of the difficulty of revealing the mystery of redemption in Christ in fiction. She maintained that "fiction is the concrete expression of mystery—mystery that is lived," but "it's almost impossible to write about supernatural Grace in fiction."¹¹ She also believed that she wrote "for an audience who doesn't know what grace is and don't recognize it when they see it."¹²

O'Connor's methodological solution was part literary and part theological. She took to heart Henry James's dictum that the morality of a piece of fiction depends on the *felt life* it contains.¹³ O'Connor argued that by showing the concrete—not by saying but showing life as it is—the writer is able to make the action described reveal as much of the mystery of life as possible.¹⁴ In this respect, she praised James's ability to balance the elements of realism (manners) and romance (mystery).¹⁵

The theological turn that enabled her to broaden James's conception of manners and mystery was her adopting an enlarged view of the medieval church practice of the

⁸ Alice Walker, "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (Amistad, 1983), 55.

⁹ Michael M. Bruner, *A Subversive Gospel* (IVP, 2017), 76.

¹⁰ Flannery O'Connor to Cecil Dawkins, June 19, 1957, *The Habit of Being*, 227.

¹¹ Flannery O'Connor to Eileen Hall, March 10, 1956, *Habit of Being*, 144.

¹² Flannery O'Connor to "A," April 4, 1958, *Habit of Being*, 275.

¹³ Flannery O'Connor to "A," Sept. 15, 1955, *Habit of Being*, 103.

¹⁴ Robert Fitzgerald, "The Countryside and the True Country," in *Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Harold Bloom (Chelsea House, 1986), 20.

¹⁵ O'Connor told Betty Hester that she feared being asked in public what she had read and been influenced by. If asked, she said that she intended "to look dark and mutter, 'Henry James Henry James'—which would be the verist lie." Adding that such a statement would be the "verist lie" is perhaps a clever nod to another of O'Connor's literary influences, Dostoevsky, who said, "We consider the verist lies as truth and demand the same lies from others." O'Connor further told Hester, "I've read almost all of Henry James—from a sense of High Duty and because when I read James I feel something is happening to me, in slow motion but happening nonetheless." Flannery O'Connor to "A," Aug. 28, 1955, *Habit of Being*, 98–99.

anagogical interpretation of Scripture.¹⁶ According to O'Connor, medieval theologians found three kinds of meaning in the literal level of Scripture, "one they called allegorical, in which one fact pointed to another; one they called tropological, or moral, which had to do with what should be done; and one they called anagogical, which had to do with the Divine life and our participation in it."¹⁷

Thus, in composing her stories, O'Connor looked for a single image "that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye but believed in by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everyone sees."¹⁸ When Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* arrives in the city of Taulkinham, the sky functions as a description of the visible things that reflect the divine character of creation, that there is a God that created all things visible and invisible. "The black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that looked like scaffolding and depth on depth behind it were thousands of stars that seemed to be moving very slowly as if they were about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete." However, in Taulkinham, "No one was paying any attention to the sky. The stores in Taulkinham stayed open on Thursday nights so that people could have an extra opportunity to see what was for sale."¹⁹

But it is not just the people of Taulkinham who are oblivious to the sky, Hazel is also. After his car is fixed, he tests it by driving it down the road under the sky that "was just a little lighter blue than his suit, clear and even, with only one cloud in it, a large blinding white one with curls and a beard." The imagery suggests the glory-cloud in the Exodus, but Hazel's gaze is elsewhere. In his Church Without Christ, "nobody with a good car needs to be justified." But after the car will not start, a stranger "*whose* liquid slate-blue eyes duplicate the sky" appears, listens without comment to Hazel's gospel, helps him restart the Essex with a push, and gives him some gas, only to refuse payment for his help or gas. The car running again, Hazel drives on, but "the blinding white cloud had turned into a bird with long thin wings,"²⁰ and like the truck the unnamed man was driving, "was disappearing in the opposite direction."

O'Connor also brought her anagogical vision to bear in an action of grace, in her words, "a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make."²¹ This action of God's grace in the midst of life lived, and the moment of awareness for those that the grace touches, is what counted for O'Connor in every story. She said, "It seems to me that all good stories are about conversion, about a character's changing," and what changes a character is "the action of grace."²² The grace manifests itself violently, often subversively, in her characters who are without hope and without God. Among the conversions and indications of potential conversion, narcissistic O. E. Parker ("Parker's Back") crashes a tractor into a tree, comes to an end of himself, endures suffering, and is tearfully grateful. Mrs. May ("Greenleaf"), a works-righteousness advocate, is pursued by a tormented lover and a bull, who stabs her in the heart, and she sees the light of another realm. Asbury ("The Enduring Chill), a lazy,

¹⁶ In the Greek, ἀναγωγή (anagōgē) conveyed an elevated sense, a revelation of mystery. Horton Davies, "Anagogical Signals in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," *Thought*, vol. 55, no. 219 (December 1980), 428.

¹⁷ Flannery O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners*, 72.

¹⁸ Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mystery and Manners*, 42.

¹⁹ Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, in *Collected Works* (The Library of America, 1988), 19.

²⁰ In Matthew 3:16, Mark 1:10, and Luke 3:22 the dove descending on Jesus is a sign of the Holy Spirit.

²¹ Flannery O'Connor, "On Her Own Work," in *Mystery and Manners*, 111.

²² Flannery O'Connor to "A," Aug. 28, 1955, *Habit of Being*, 275.

ignorant, and conceited young man who believes he is dying, has his eyes opened to the terrifying descent of the Holy Ghost.²³

In *The Violent Bear It Away*, Tarwater is faced with the life-defining choice of following the rationalistic, non-believing path of his uncle Rayber or the violent faith-driven path of his great-uncle, Old Tarwater. Tarwater

clenched his fist. He stood like one condemned, waiting at the spot of execution. Then the revelation came, silent, implacable, direct as a bullet. He did not look into the eyes of any fiery beast or see a burning bush. He only knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared in him.

This revelation brought Tarwater to see that his only hope was in “trudging into the distance in the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus.” For O’Connor, following after Jesus is a subversive act. Aesthetically, it is a bleeding act; morally, it is a stinking act; and intellectually, it is a mad act.²⁴

Readers recoil at how Tarwater can be seen as following Jesus when he subsequently drowns Bishop. O’Connor’s plea to them is that they concentrate on the meaning of actions and not just count the dead bodies in her stories.²⁵ The murderous Misfit in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” in this sense served as O’Connor’s surrogate when he utters, “She would have been a good woman, if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.” O’Connor remarked that the action of grace occurred just earlier when “the Grandmother recognizes the Misfit as one of her own children and reaches out to touch him. It’s the moment of grace for her anyway—a silly old woman—but it leads him to shoot her. This moment of grace excites the devil to frenzy.”²⁶

Harold Bloom reacted to O’Connor’s contention concerning The Misfit. Bloom writes, “Secular critic as I am, I need to murmur: ‘Surely that does make goodness a touch too strenuous?’”²⁷ For Bloom, O’Connor’s greatness is diminished by her commitment to the spiritual. He says, “Her pious admirers to the contrary, O’Connor would have bequeathed us even stronger novels and stories, of the eminence of Faulkner’s, if she had been able to restrain her spiritual tendentiousness.”²⁸ It is safe to say that O’Connor would not have cared what Bloom thought. She had no interest in hedging on her Christian commitment as

²³ O’Connor also wrote stories in which the protagonist is seemingly condemned, although ambiguity exists. Mr. Shiftlet (“The Life You Save May Be Your Own”) values his freedom so much that he would rather go to the devil than stay with his wife of one day, the innocent and angelic Lucynell. Greedy Mr. Fortune (“A View of the Woods”), after killing his granddaughter in a rage because she identifies herself with her father, finds that the machinery of modern progress is not able to impart life. But Mr. Fortune’s last glance is one where he sees his vanquished mirror-image in the person of his granddaughter.

²⁴ Bruner, *A Subversive Gospel*, 9.

²⁵ O’Connor, *Habit of Being*, 275. John Desmond, *Risen Sons: Flannery O’Connor’s Vision of History* (University of Georgia, 1987), 118.

²⁶ Flannery O’Connor to Andrew Lytle, Feb. 4, 1960, *Good Things Out of Nazareth*, ed. Benjamin B. Alexander (Convergent, 2019), 95.

²⁷ Harold Bloom, “Introduction,” in *Flannery O’Connor*, ed. Harold Bloom (Chelsea House, 1986), 3.

²⁸ Bloom, “Introduction,” 8. For different perspectives: John Millis maintains that “while no one’s salvation depends on getting Faulkner right, we read Flannery O’Connor knowing that the stakes are ultimate.” See, Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Eerdmans, 2005), 160; Joyce Carol Oates states that O’Connor’s “death in the summer of 1964 marked not simply the end of a career of a powerful descendent of Faulkner whose individual achievements are at times superior to his, but the end of the career of one of the greatest religious writers of modern times.” Oates, *New Heaven, New Earth*, 145.

an author. In Robert Fitzgerald's words, O'Connor's "talent is Pauline in abiding not the lukewarm."²⁹

Her realism, when read today with its unfiltered use of the racist language that she heard living in the South, and at times used herself, is as uncomfortable now to read as it was during the racially sensitive times in which she lived. In 1955 she authored an account of a racist, Mr. Head, and his grandson, Nelson. The story detailed their prejudices and their condescending treatment of blacks in a visit to Atlanta. For the title, "The Artificial Nigger," she picked the object central to the action of grace in the story, Mr. Head and Nelson coming upon a broken Negro statue, which Mr. Head sees and shouts, "An artificial nigger!" O'Connor commented to Betty Hester that "there is nothing that screams out the tragedy of the South like what my uncle calls "nigger statuary."³⁰ O'Connor made clear her intention to Ben Griffith, "What I had in mind to suggest with the artificial nigger was the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all."³¹ Rightly or wrongly, O'Connor believed that if she had sanitized the title, the goal of the story, the power of the death of Jesus to turn racist intention into antiracist redemption, would have been lost.³²

In multiple stories O'Connor lamented those who sought social reform (Shepherd in "The Lame Shall Enter First," Asbury in "The Enduring Chill") but ignored the reality and consequences of sin. Original sin, especially its power, infected not just the racially sinful but also the racially righteous (Julian in "Everything That Rises Must Converge"). Thus, she grew impatient with those who believed that integration was the magic cure to all the problems in the South.³³ For O'Connor, sin is ultimately the problem, and the only cure for sin is the cross of Jesus Christ.

A practicing Roman Catholic, O'Connor nevertheless sparsely presented Catholicism in her fiction. This is not to state that her Catholicism did not inform her fiction. She looked to the teachings of Thomas Aquinas and Augustine of Hippo as foundational for her art, and she relied upon doctrine as a helpful aid in preserving mystery.³⁴ But the case can be made,

²⁹ Fitzgerald, "Countryside," 26.

³⁰ O'Connor to "A," Sept. 6, 1955, in *Habit of Being*, 100.

³¹ O'Connor to Ben Griffith, May 4, 1955, in *Habit of Being*, 78. When John Crowe Ransom, editor of the *Kenyon Review*, mildly inquired about O'Connor changing the title, O'Connor replied if the title would embarrass the magazine that he could of course change it. However, she personally didn't think it should be called anything but "The Artificial Nigger." If he did change it, she asked that he call it "The Good Guide." Flannery O'Connor to John Crowe Ransom, January 12, 1955, *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 23 (1994–95), 181–82. O'Connor's suggestion to Ransom mirrors her use of the adjective "Good" in the titles of her stories, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and "Good Country People." In keeping with the overarching theme of original sin, Mr. Head is not a "good" guide for Nelson despite Mr. Head's opinion of himself; the Misfit is not a "good" man despite the Grandmother's declaration; Manley Pointer is not "good" country people despite Mrs. Hopewell and Hulga's evaluations.

³² Wood, *Christ-Haunted South*, 144. Alice Walker lived for a year as a teenager near the O'Connor farm in Milledgeville, Georgia. In "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor," Walker argues that "essential" O'Connor is "not about race at all, which is why it is so refreshing, coming, as it does out of a racial culture. If it can be said to be 'about' anything, then it is 'about' prophets and prophecy, 'about' revelation, and 'about' the impact of supernatural grace on human beings who don't have a chance of spiritual growth without it" (53). After Loyola of Maryland University removed O'Connor's name from one of its dormitories in 2020, Walker was the first name appearing on the July 31, 2020, "Letter in Protest of the Cancelling of Flannery O'Connor," which was signed by over one hundred English scholars and religious leaders. Walker said, "We must honor Flannery for growing. Hide nothing of what she was, and use that to teach." The "Letter in Protest" acknowledges that "O'Connor may—and does—make some racially insensitive statements in her private correspondence. There is no excusing this. But in her stories her better angels rules. She holds herself—all of her racist white characters—and all white people—up for judgment."

³³ Wood, *Christ-Haunted South*, 110.

³⁴ O'Connor stated, "I have heard it said that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to the writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth. Actually, it forces the storyteller to observe. It is not a set of

that despite her Thomistic philosophical underpinnings, the essential cast of her fiction when read is more Augustinian than Thomistic. In her stories, she incessantly places limits on one's ability to reason to God and focuses on faith as the gift of God.³⁵

One of O'Connor's major laments against Protestantism, however, was what she saw around her in the South, its individualism and neglect of the church. In *Wise Blood*, when Hazel Motes introduces himself to Mrs. Flood as a minister of the Church Without Christ, she asks whether that church was Protestant or Catholic. Hazel replies that it is Protestant. In a letter O'Connor said, "Let me assure you that no one but a Catholic could have written *Wise Blood* even though it is a book about a kind of Protestant saint. It reduces Protestantism to the twin ultimate absurdities of The Church Without Christ or the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ, which no pious Protestant would do."³⁶

Living in the South and seeking to reflect the churchgoers of that region, O'Connor's most important religious characters are almost always Protestant. Negatively, she scorned Protestants who substituted sentimentality for recognition of sin, the necessity of Christ's death to atone, and the coming judgment. Sentimentality, which O'Connor defined as "giving to any creature more love than God gives it,"³⁷ marks particularly the Christianity of O'Connor's widows: Mrs. Cope ("A Circle in the Fire"), Mrs. May ("Greenleaf"), the grandmother ("A Good Man Is Hard to Find"), Mrs. Fox ("The Enduring Chill"), Thomas's mother ("The Comforts of Home"), and Julian's mother ("Everything that Rises Must Converge").

O'Connor's preoccupation with Southern Protestants, however, was not always negative. She declared, "I am more and more impressed with the amount of Catholicism that fundamentalist Protestantism have been able to retain. Theologically our differences with them are on the nature of the Church, not on the nature of God or our obligations to Him."³⁸ In "The River," the fundamentalist preacher Bevel Summers is portrayed as one whose faith and purpose centers wholly on Jesus Christ.

If many hold O'Connor in esteem because of the skill by which she dramatized Christian themes in a realistic manner, others enjoy reading her for her humor. O'Connor knew that her rendering of reality with all its horrors that come from the fall into sin, a very unpopular theme, had to be made bearable, and comedy was one way that she accomplished this.³⁹ Ralph Wood, the preeminent O'Connor critic of the last half-century, heard

rules which fixes what he sees in the world. It affects his writing primarily by guaranteeing his respect for mystery." O'Connor, "Fiction Writer," 31.

³⁵ Attesting that the Augustinian emphasis of O'Connor trumps her Thomistic emphasis, Frederick Asals writes, "Reconciliation and synthesis, the congruity of faith and human reason, the harmonious hierarchy of the faculties—the great accommodations of Thomistic thought seem curiously irrelevant to the central experience of O'Connor's fiction; whereas Augustine's disposition of the major contraries—grace and sin, spirit and flesh, God and self, the heavenly city and the earthly—immediately evokes the tensions and dualities of her work. Frederick Asals, *Flannery O'Connor, The Imagination of Extremity* (University of Georgia, 1982), 200. Also see Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man* (University Press, 2015), 208.

³⁶ Flannery O'Connor to Ben Griffith, Mar. 3, 1954, *Habit of Being*, 69. O'Connor added concerning *Wise Blood*, "And of course no unbeliever or agnostic could have written it because it is entirely Redemption-centered in thought."

³⁷ Kathleen Feeley, *Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock* (University of Rutgers, 1972), 33. Feeley adds that O'Connor despised sentimentality because O'Connor believed it was "an attempted short cut to the grace of Redemption which overlooks its price" (33).

³⁸ Carter Martin judged from an overall assessment of O'Connor's work that she "writes from an orthodox Christian point of view but grinds no theological ax, unless the basic Christian truth of man's fall from grace and his redemption through Christ's sacrifice be so construed." Carter Martin, *The True Country* (Vanderbilt, 1969), 21.

³⁹ Frederick Asals comments that any thesis about the religious dimensions of O'Connor's fiction cannot contain adequately "the incorrigible sense of comedy that animates and burnishes her creations everywhere . . .

O'Connor speak at the college he attended, East Texas State. Those gathered, Wood recalls, laughed raucously at O'Connor's recalling an old lady who had written to her complaining that O'Connor's stories had left a bad taste in her mouth. O'Connor replied to the lady that she was not supposed to eat them. But the impact upon Wood was even stronger. He confesses that it was the turning point in his academic and religious life for "I saw in her work the integration of two worlds that I had theretofore thought to be not only separate but opposed, even divorced: uproarious comedy and profound Christianity."⁴⁰

That O'Connor's wit and humor appeared in stories that were lined with suffering and hardship reflected the wit and perspective that she maintained in her battle with lupus, an autoimmune disorder in which the body attacks not only tissues, joints, and organs, but also the central nervous system. Despite a daily injection of corticosteroid ACTH, O'Connor constantly contracted high fevers, infections, the inability of her jaw to function, the thinning of her hair, the fattening of her face, and the failure of her joints, hipbone, and skeletal muscles.⁴¹ She confessed to Betty Hester, "I have never been anywhere but sick. In a sense, sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it's always a place where there's no company." She then added, "Sickness before death is a very appropriate thing and I think those who don't have it miss one of God's mercies."⁴² The proper measuring of the temporal and the eternal that shined through O'Connor's life and continues with her fiction led Alice Walker to proclaim of O'Connor, "After her great stories of sin, damnation, prophecy, and revelation, the stories one reads casually in the average magazine seem to be about love and roast beef."⁴³

The lasting appeal of O'Connor's fiction is the unparalleled way that she wrote about man's fall and dishonor. Thomas Merton stated that, when thinking of O'Connor as a writer, "I don't think of Hemingway, or Katherine Anne Porter, or Satre, but rather of someone like Sophocles . . . I write her name with honor, for all the truth and all the craft with which she shows man's fall and dishonor."⁴⁴ But O'Connor's value is also in the way that every story is an encounter with Jesus. Robert Drake asserts that Jesus is the principal character "in all of Miss O'Connor's fiction, whether offstage or, in the words and actions of her characters, very much on. And their encounter with Him is the one story that she keeps telling over and over again."⁴⁵ This theme, and its multiple subthemes, comprises the major burden of O'Connor's stories. It is seen in the lostness of her characters—Julian "walked along, saturated in depression, as if in the midst of his martyrdom he had lost his faith," in "Everything That Rises Must Converge." It is witnessed in her character's truth-telling about God and this creation—Harper before helping to set the woods afire around Mrs. Cope's farm declares, "Gawd owns them woods and her too," in "A Circle in the Fire." It is observed in her character's secular mindset and opposition to Jesus—Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* defiantly proclaiming that in his Church Without Christ, "I'm going to preach there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgment because there wasn't the first two. Nothing matters but that Jesus

. . . It overflows the borders, leaps beyond the ironic tones and satiric perceptions that may be ascribed to the prophetic stance, beyond even the caricaturing that accompanies the pressures of the ascetic action, to maintain a life of its own." Asals, *Imagination of Extremity*, 233.

⁴⁰ Wood, *Christ-Haunted South*, ix.

⁴¹ Angela Alaimo O'Donnell, *Radical Ambivalence* (Fordham University Press, 2020), 99–100.

⁴² O'Connor to "A," June 28, 1956, in *Habit of Being*, 163.

⁴³ Walker, "Beyond the Peacock," 57.

⁴⁴ O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, back jacket cover.

⁴⁵ Drake, *Flannery O'Connor, A Critical Essay*, 17.

was a liar.”⁴⁶ It is declared in her character’s pleas to Jesus to save—Mrs. Greenleaf face down in the dirt begging, “Jesus, stab me in the heart!”⁴⁷ in “Greenleaf.”

Confrontation with Jesus, the news of another world hid to her characters’s senses but as real as the world they experience here and now, define her stories. O’Connor’s gift was being able to communicate this without abandoning her belief that she was first and foremost a writer. “The novel,” she stated, “is an art form and when you use it for anything other than art, you pervert it.” She then added,

I didn’t make this up. I got it from St. Thomas (via Maritain) who allows that art is wholly concerned with the good of that which is made; it has no utilitarian end. If you do manage to use it successfully for social, religious, or other purposes, it is because you made it art first.⁴⁸

And yet, she also believed that there exists a more vital world than this fallen one and that in writing she sought “to make the reader feel, in his bones if nowhere else, that something is going on here that counts. Distortion in this case is an instrument; exaggeration has a purpose, and the whole structure of the story or novel has been made what it is because of belief.”⁴⁹

Fiction is not Scripture, but reading and re-reading her stories has caused me to awake and to gaze at trees—to stand amazed in the morning light at the splendor of God’s creation, and to confess silently his goodness, wisdom, and power, knowing that I am without excuse before him. It has caused me to ponder whether, in the pilgrimage that is this life, I am like the children reading comic books or the mother sleeping in the car when all around the trees are full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkle. And it has also caused me to be thankful that stalking me in this life is Jesus, the only One that ever raised the dead.

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⁴⁶ O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, in *Collected Works*, 59.

⁴⁷ O’Connor, “Green Leaf,” in *Collected Works*, 506.

⁴⁸ Flannery O’Connor to Father J. H. McCown, May 9, 1956, in *Habit of Being*, 157. On O’Connor’s methodology and its implications, Ralph Wood elaborates, “She abominated the notion of the novelist as evangelist. Evangelism is what preachers should do, but what true artists do not. She totally embraced St. Thomas’s claim that art is a virtue of practical, not the moral intellect. The artist does not seek to improve the reader’s life, though this may be the salutary effect of her art. First and last, the artist seeks ‘the good of the thing made.’ Never does she set out to render an idea (not even the highest and the holiest) into fictional form. She wants, instead, to master her craft—plot, character, point of view, scene, atmosphere, etc. ‘Sink the theme’ was the motto she learned at the University of Iowa Creative Writing Workshop. In so far as a work has a ‘thesis’ at all, it must emerge silently, even if powerfully, from the work itself—never because the writer has imposed it by literary force. Thus she was willing to risk the mangling of her work by her readers. So be it.” Email correspondence, Ralph C. Wood to Danny Olinger, August 19, 2024.

⁴⁹ Flannery O’Connor, “Novelist and Believer,” *Mystery and Manners*, 162.

ServantReading

Classic Tri-covenantal Reformed Theology

A Review Article

by T. David Gordon

Reformed Covenant Theology: A Systematic Introduction, by Harrison Perkins. Lexham, 2024, xxvii + 491 pages, \$44.99.

General Traits of Perkins's Presentation

Patient and energetic readers of *Reformed Covenant Theology* will be rewarded for both their patience and their effort. I almost sensed that I had returned for a crash course that covered three years in seminary. This almost-500-page book would likely have been nearly twice the length had anyone else written it. However, this is not to say the book is easy; it will richly reward those who give it the effort and time it deserves, but the casual reader should probably just watch television and leave this gem for others. The book is well-titled, because it is devoted to the distinctively “Reformed” covenant theology, while also frequently demonstrating the roots of the same in the early church, in Irenaeus and Augustine (et al.). Perkins has a thorough working relationship with important theologians and, perhaps especially, with the historic Reformed confessional literature, which he cites pertinently and judiciously throughout the volume. The ease with which he transitions from discussing Scripture passages, theologians, or confessional literature is so seamless that some readers may not even realize that he is doing it.

The volume is very strong in interacting with alternative views, both within Reformed covenant theology and without. Perkins appears equally comfortable with the early church (Irenaeus and Augustine), the medieval church (Anselm and Aquinas), the Reformational theologians (Calvin, Witsius, Turretin, Perkins, Bavinck, and Vos), and living contemporaries. The coverage is remarkably thorough and engaging, and the critical reasoning is acute. The book is full of rich biblical theology and precise exegesis, as Perkins explains important New Testament texts in light of the Old Testament texts they develop.

Pastoral application and illustration through the entire book will make the book more accessible than it might have otherwise been. Even so, this work is not for those unable or unwilling to exert significant intellectual effort.

Perkins functions within a classic tri-covenantal approach to covenant theology and even locates his section on the covenant of redemption (about which Westminster was silent, though not ignorant) between the parts on The Covenant of Works and The Covenant of Grace. This section (his “Part Two: The Covenant of Redemption”) is remarkably and refreshingly Trinitarian and gives due justice to the Holy Spirit’s role in the matter:

More specifically, three triads of A's structure the particular functions that the Father, Son, and Spirit fulfill to bring about the elect's redemption: (1) the Father *arranges* redemption by *appointing* the Son as mediator and *assigning* the elect to him; (2) the Son *accomplishes* redemption by *accepting* his Father's will and *attaining* righteousness for the elect; and (3) the Spirit *applies* redemption by *accompanying* the Son in his earthly mission and *administering* Christ's benefits to his elect. (132, emphases his)

Perkins here astutely positions his discussion of the covenant of redemption between the covenants of works and grace, respectively, so that he can observe that the covenant of redemption is a covenant of works for Christ and a covenant of grace for us. His discussion of the covenant of redemption is not only lengthier than some discussions, but it is also profoundly trinitarian and includes all three persons of the Godhead, especially in Chapter VI, "The Father, Son, and Spirit in the Fulfillment of Salvation."

Through the whole book Perkins emphasizes that creation itself was oriented to our future blessedness, though such could only be attained through a federal head, a point that distinguishes Reformed covenant theology from Lutheran covenant theology:

God created us to be oriented by nature toward our supernatural end in the world to come. Had Adam completed his task in the covenant of works, he would have victoriously entered the new creation. Since Adam failed, Christ brings his people into that eschatological communion. . . . The legal character of the covenant of works again reminds us of God's immense love and kindness for Adam and the whole human race. God not only gave Adam the gift of existing in the divine image but also offered him the potential to intensify the communion that he had with God by covenant. (63, 74–5)

Chapter VII ("The Last Adam and His People") affirms all the important tenets of federal theology in the two-Adam framework. Perkins here prefers "satisfaction" to "atonement," because it is the preferred language of our standards ("satisfaction" language appears fifteen times in the Westminster standards; "atoning" language not once), and because it emphasizes what is often called "active" and "passive" obedience by using the two-fold debt of both obedience (called by early Reformed theologians "principal debt") and not disobeying (called by early Reformed theologians "a penalty debt"). Christ paid both, via his active and passive obedience. This distinction

highlights that Christ's work as the second Adam was as much about his covenant-fulfilling obedience as it was about his curse-bearing death. . . . These debts are far from impersonal, despite their association with financial transactions, but are fundamentally relational. We were meant to express our full love for God in our creaturely and covenantal relationship with him by fully keeping his law (John 14:15; 15:14) but defaulted on our relational debts. We failed to satisfy those payments of relational love which we should have happily and joyfully rendered to God for his goodness in making us and in further offering us even greater blessings simply for doing what we were supposed to do. (175)

Throughout, Perkins appears to adopt and embrace the language of the 2016 Orthodox Presbyterian Church study report,¹ which attempted to resolve a half-century of debates about relating the Abrahamic to the Sinai covenant: “The covenant of grace is one in substance but diversely administered” (353). This permits Perkins to display the unity of the covenant of grace while freeing him to notice how profoundly diversely the one covenant of grace is administered:

God’s promises to Abraham and to David were the reason for all of God’s mercies concerning heavenly and earthly blessings—but that the Mosaic covenant provided the rationale for their judgment. This underemphasized development within the Old Testament narrative clarifies the Mosaic covenant as resembling the covenant of works for the nation.

Although God’s promise appears unconditional for David, its fulfillment seems conditional for his heirs. (357)

Perhaps this sort of language, and the OPC committee’s distinguishing of *substance* and *administration*, becomes the language we will use in the future. Note that Section II of the first chapter of that study paper was entitled “Covenant of Grace: Substance and Administration,” and the first sentence in that section began,

When it comes to the covenant of grace, John Ball’s famous statement summarizes the overall principle well: “For manner of administration this covenant is divers, as it pleased God in sundry manners to dispense it: but for substance, it is one, the last, unchangeable and everlasting.”

Note also Perkins’s irenic comment: “Still, these matters of interpreting Mosaic typology are very specific and even niche, rendering overly vitriolic disagreement about parsing these delicate issues inappropriate when our varying interpretations fall within the confessional boundaries” (351).

Affirming the unity of the covenant of grace appears to free Perkins to appreciate, and feel the full weight of, the diversity of administration within that one substance. He affirms throughout that the Abrahamic and Davidic administrations are much more promissory and that the Mosaic administration of the one covenant of grace is much more legal:

Every time God mentions his covenant with David, he appealed to it to explain why he was *delaying* judgment or *doing good to his people*. . . . Alternatively, biblical authors appealed to the Mosaic covenant always to explain *judgment*. In stark contrast to the Davidic covenant, God never mentioned Moses as the reason for withholding 9punishment. . . . The appeals to the various covenants throughout the ongoing biblical narrative confirm that God’s promises to Abraham and David were continual reasons for hope, but the Mosaic administration required obedience to maintain the people’s earthly blessing. In every era, the people were saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, but each administration contributed its own set of types or promises that applied Christ and his work before he came. Those administrations,

¹ “Report of the Committee to Study Republication,” <https://opc.org/GA/republication.html>.

however, cannot be mixed as if they all perform the same exact function since Scripture appeals to them for different purposes as they drive history toward Christ. (359–62, emphasis his)

Unsurprisingly, then, Perkins states, “The new covenant as an administration of the covenant of grace *radically differs* from, specifically, the Mosaic administration” (369, emphasis mine).

“A Covenantal Ethic” (sub-section of XVI, The Shape of Covenantal Life with God) interested me, because I have pursued (and taught about) a biblical theology of ethics for years and this April published a book that summarizes my results: *Choose Better: Five Biblical Models of Ethics*.² Perkins’s discussion was particularly encouraging to me, because he attempts there to augment the “divine command theory” (ethics based on God’s revealed Word) with prayer: “prayer should be the chief factor of our Christian life” (417), and a kind of virtue ethics: “virtue ethics suggests that the image of God entails that we are made for certain ends, namely, to reflect the holy God’s good character” (421). He also says, “The commandments are not exhaustive legislation but encapsulate wisdom principles to be further applied” (426). In *Choose Better* I refer to a “law model,” a “communion model,” a “wisdom model,” and an “imitation model” to convey similar thought.

Perkins’s book is aptly titled *Reformed Covenant Theology*, because it follows and explicates the mainstream of historical Reformed discussions of covenant theology. My rare difference is merely where I have the same difference with the Westminster standards themselves: both Perkins and Westminster drive “law” back into the garden, whereas Paul used (unqualified) νόμος (*nomos*) to designate a reality that was not only post-Eden, but also post-Abraham. Paul said, “Sin was in the world before the law” (Rom. 5:13), and he located “law” 430 years after the Abrahamic covenant (Gal. 3:17). “Law,” for Paul, was not a universal and timeless reality; it was a particular and temporary reality. If our standards (and Perkins) referred to “God’s will,” “God’s moral purpose/s,” “a probation,” or other such expressions, they could probably affirm what they wish (i.e., the covenant of works, which was itself an aspect of the covenant of redemption) without using a Pauline term in an unPauline way. For Paul, “the giving of the law” was one of Israel’s several distinctive realities (“They are Israelites, and to them belong . . . the giving of the law,” Rom. 9:4–5); and even Moses wrote sixty-two chapters (all of Genesis and the first twelve of Exodus) before he ever mentioned torah. Paul followed Moses and Jesus in regarding “law” as distinctly Mosaic. Jesus asked, “Did not Moses [not Adam nor Abraham nor God] give you the law?” (John 7:19, NKJV). The apostle John said, “The law was given through Moses” (John 1:17, NKJV). For those who do not have my scruples (and even those who do), they will find Perkins’s Chapter II, “The Covenant with Adam and Its Law,” to be one of the most nuanced, and most thoroughly informed, discussions about the matter, and I only scruple to his drafting Paul’s “law” into the Eden conversation. For those who share my scruples, they will cringe with me at casual comments such as these, about Romans 5:17–19: “Paul contrasts the first and the last Adam’s work by highlighting how Adam trespassed God’s law . . .” (143). Yet earlier in verse 13, Paul had expressly said, “sin was in the world before the law.” Our tradition unfortunately uses “law” to mean something like “God’s moral

² T. David Gordon, *Choose Better: Five Biblical Models of Ethics* (P&R, 2024).

design,” “God’s moral will,” or “God’s moral purpose,” though, for Paul, νόμος (*nomos*) was not only post-Eden, but it was also 430 years post-Abraham.

If I had to recommend a single volume to introduce someone to Reformed covenant theology, this would be it. It not only employs clearer English than Witsius’s *The Economy of the Covenants* (1677 original in Latin), but it also engages ancient, medieval, and contemporary theologians more thoroughly than Witsius did, and demonstrates remarkable fluency and competence in the several important disciplines of systematic theology, biblical theology, and exegetical theology. Throughout, Perkins distinguishes both the areas of agreement within our tradition and the occasional areas of disagreement, without getting lost in the thickets on the one hand or overlooking them on the other hand. It is rare to encounter such judicious reasoning about such a broad range of knowledge.

Structure of Harrison Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*

I. Meeting God in the Covenants

PART ONE: THE COVENANT OF WORKS

II. The covenant with Adam and Its Law

III. The Covenant’s Legal Character and Reward

IV. Applying the Covenant of Works

PART TWO: THE COVENANT OF REDEMPTION

V. The Trinity and Their Covenant

VI. The Father, Son, and Spirit in the Fulfillment of Salvation

VII. The Last Adam and His People

PART THREE: THE SUBSTANCE OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE

VIII. The Unity of the Covenant of Grace in Christ.

IX. The Unity of the Covenant of Grace in the Benefits of Christ

X. The Time of Tension

PART FOUR: THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE

XI. God’s Multifaceted Plan of Salvation

XII. From Adam to Moses

XIII. The Mosaic Covenant

XIV. From Moses to Christ

PART FIVE: LIVING IN GOD’S COVENANT OF GRACE

XV. The covenant Community

XVI. The Shape of Covenantal Life with God

XVII. Theses on Covenant Theology

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ServantReading

Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention— and How to Think Deeply Again, *by Johann Hari*

by Shane Lems

Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention—and How to Think Deeply Again, by Johann Hari. Crown, 2022, 368 pages, \$30.00.

Most Americans find it difficult to focus exclusively on one thing for more than a few minutes. In fact, some readers of this review will perhaps find it difficult to finish without their attention being pulled elsewhere. What is the problem? Why are our attention spans so short? Why are we not able to focus for long periods of time? Researcher and journalist Johann Hari asks and answers these questions in his book *Stolen Focus*. Hari wrote this book because he, too, was struggling with a very short attention span. This book chronicles Hari's research and gives some remedies along the way.

Stolen Focus has fourteen chapters—twelve of which give specific reasons why so many people are unable to focus. I am not going to list them all, because I do not want to give too many spoilers. However, a few examples are worth sharing. For one example, in chapter three Hari argues that the rise of physical and mental exhaustion has caused our attention spans to shrink. Because people do not sleep or rest enough, their minds and bodies suffer. The result is that they are unable to focus well for long periods of time. Little rest means little focus.

In chapter five Hari gives personal and scientific examples of how a lack of mind-wandering causes our attention spans to diminish. Hari notes that letting our minds wander and daydream is beneficial for overall mental health and the ability to focus. When sounds and screens are not overstimulating our minds, we have time to mentally reflect, make connections in the world, and think ahead. This is true in my own experience. I have written many parts of my sermons when I run, walk, or hike without earbuds. Give your mind undistracted time to wander!

Chapters six and seven give another reason why it is difficult to focus: the rise of technology that tracks and manipulates users. In these chapters Hari summarizes various studies that show how most tech companies have a two-fold goal: to grab our attention and to make money. Those two are related, Hari writes. The longer our phones engage us, the more tech companies profit off us from ads and selling information about us they have mined from us. Big tech purposely designs phones and apps to distract us. The longer they keep us looking at the screen, the larger their profits grow. Our attention means their money.

One interesting aspect of *Stolen Focus* is Hari's own experience. At one point he realized his attention span was so pathetic that he decided to undergo a digital detox: no smartphone or internet for two months. He weaves his story throughout the first chapter. If you have never heard of a digital detox, Hari's story might fascinate you. A few years back I had a similar journey that included me ditching my iPhone for a flip phone that I am still using today. Fewer screens means fewer distractions.

Readers of *Ordained Servant* should note that *Stolen Focus* is not a Christian book. I did not agree with everything in it. Some parts of it are less helpful than others. At the same time, overall, I found it incredibly valuable. Much information in this book is very applicable to all Christians because we certainly need the ability to focus when reading and meditating on God's Word, hearing it preached, and praying to him. And for those in Christian ministry, it is also extremely important to be able to study Scripture for long periods of time without constantly being distracted. If you are frustrated with your lack of ability to focus, I would very much recommend this book. *Stolen Focus* will help you understand the causes of your inability to focus and give you some ways to improve it. Your attention span is extremely important. Do not let it disappear!

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ServantPoetry

The Heaviness of Meaning

Susan E. Erikson (1956–)

I did not know
the magnitude of meaning
I had stapled,
Glued,
Or stitched
to all the pieces of
my mother's life,
Until I had to be the judge,
Erasing and dismissing stuff
as if existence had no weight,
While saving other bits of memories –
Their letters: Save,
Their old receipts from 1952: In a waiting box to shred,
Her necklaces and pretty pins: Divide between those left behind.
And on it went,
From morning light
to when I put my soul to bed,
With me disposing of a life
of artifacts
with grim dispatch
and concentration,
Hating every minute,
Knowing I was doing
what was right,
Knowing I was letting go
at lightning speed,
This we save.

This we don't.
This we put into a bin
for someone later to unpack.

It's been at least eight weeks,
Since I relinquished
all my powers to decree
the boundaries of her domicile.
And sometime yesterday,
The grand enormity
of who I fiercely had become,
Came crashing in,
And made me cry,
And mourn what could not ever be regained.
But in that storm,
I was sustained.
This necessary dragon also knew
I did just what I had to do.

Gregory E. Reynolds (1949–)

The Silence of Death

Death is a great silence—
All your talking ceased one day.
And now, for me, you exist
Only in my mind, my memory
Of your last and all your words.

When God created Adam's tongue
'Twas meant to name the world.
And now your naming has ceased,
Your last words a benediction
On your life—*finis*.

I loved you so,
And yet I seem to love you more now;
For all you have been to me
Has now stopped in time—
A complete whole, the entire you, thusfar.

Yes, I know there's more,
But this is all I now know.
One day perfection will
Bring us each up from below.
Then I will know the completed you!

Norwegian Mother

Your straight frame bends with planting,
Your nose is pointed north;
The weeds set you to ranting,
Their plucking sends you forth.

Your fierce determination
From Arundel came here
To settle the new nation
And quench your family's fear.

With every stone you settled
In the thin New Hampshire soil;
The craggy climate nettled,
You never ceased to toil.

Like fishermen from Norway
You faced the climate down;
You took the challenge every day
With an occasional deep frown.

Your straight nose I inherit
To see me through my days;
Your love I'll never merit
Though I imitate your ways.

The tough stature of those sailors
With their Viking sense of fight
Marsh'ling strength against death's jailor
Will see me through the night.

Yet the human will to conquer
Is not fit to cross the bar;
As you taught me to aver
And trust another from afar.

There must be another Champion
Who has merited the way
To a Garden like you planted
So we'll see another Day.