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# Ten Commandments, Two Tablets: The Shape of the Decalogue

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**David L. Baker** is the Deputy Warden and a Research Fellow at Tyndale House, Cambridge.

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**T**he Ten Commandments are the basis of Western civilisation, yet according to a recent article in *The Times* (Gledhill, 2004) few young people in Britain today even know what they are. A follow-up letter revealed that even an adult who claimed to know all Ten Commandments was quite confused about the numbering and thought that ‘Catholics, Protestants and Jews have different versions of the commandments’ (Lloyd, 2004). So what exactly are the Ten Commandments, how does the numbering work, and how do the various traditions and texts relate to each other? The present article sets out to answer these questions.

## Ten Commandments

The term ‘Ten Commandments’ or – more accurately – ‘Decalogue’ comes from the Hebrew *aséret haddevarim*, literally ‘the ten words’ (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4), though it was not commonly used before Clement of Alexandria in the second century AD (Houtman, 1996). There are two canonical versions of the text, in Exodus 20:2–17 and Deuteronomy 5:6–21.

Why ten? Does this number have any particular significance? Nielsen (1965: 6–10) surveys various possibilities, but is unable to come to a clear conclusion. It would seem there is no need to look for theological significance here. Perhaps it was simply a practical number for memorisation, one for each finger of the hands. Or the number itself may be incidental, simply resulting from the fact that the matters of crucial importance which were included in the list came to ten.<sup>1</sup>

Although all traditions agree on the number ten, they differ slightly on

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<sup>1</sup> Lang (2003) argues – unconvincingly – that in its present form the Decalogue is really a dodecalogue (‘twelve words’), which was expanded from an earlier decalogue by the addition of the Sabbath commandment and by splitting the last commandment in two.

the division of the material. Three different numbering systems have been used, which result from different divisions at the beginning and end of the list:

Content (verse numbering from Exodus 20)	Philo <sup>2</sup> , Josephus, Eastern Orthodox, Reformed, Anglican	Peshitta <sup>3</sup> , Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, Roman Catholic, Lutheran	Orthodox Jewish
I am the LORD your God (2)	Prologue	Prologue	1
You shall have no other gods before me (3)	1	1a	2a
You shall not make for yourself an idol (4–6)	2	1b	2b
You shall not misuse the name of the LORD (7)	3	2	3
Remember the Sabbath day (8–11)	4	3	4
Honour your father and your mother (12)	5	4	5
You shall not kill (13)	6	5	6
You shall not commit adultery (14)	7	6	7
You shall not steal (15)	8	7	8
You shall not bear false witness (16)	9	8	9
You shall not covet your neighbour's house (17a)	10a	9	10a
You shall not covet your neighbour's wife (17b)	10b	10	10b

<sup>2</sup> Philo has the same enumeration as the others listed here, except that he places the prohibition of adultery before that of murder.

<sup>3</sup> This is the predominant numbering in the Syrian tradition, but not the only one (Koster, 1980).

Each of these enumerations has its merits, but the first has greater antiquity and is preferable from the perspective of form and content. There are three main issues. First, at the beginning of the list, Exodus 20:2 is better taken as a historical prologue (as was common in the ancient treaties), rather than as one of the commandments. The Hebrew term 'ten words' could accommodate such a prologue as the first 'word', but it would be strange to have just one indicative followed by nine imperatives in a carefully structured list like this.<sup>4</sup> Second, at the end of the list, it is artificial to divide the commandment concerning coveting into two, since the repetition of the same verb makes a very close link between the two prohibitions. Third, there is a clear distinction in meaning between the prohibition of worshipping other gods in verse 3 and that of making idols in verses 4–6, and these are better understood as two separate commandments. Although idolatry was a common feature of the worship of other gods, the two were not identical: it was certainly possible to make images of  $\Upsilon\eta\upsilon\varsigma$ , and presumably also to worship other gods without actually making any images of them.

## Two Tablets

The biblical traditions are clear that the Ten Commandments were written on two stone tablets (Exod. 31:18; 34:1, 4, 29; Deut. 4:13; 5:22; 9:10–11), inscribed on both sides (Exod. 32:15), which were kept in the ark of the covenant (Exod. 25:16, 21; 40:20; Deut. 10:1–5; 1 Kgs 8:9; 2 Chr. 5:10). The use of stone rather than clay indicates the importance of this document and its intended permanence (Tigay, 1996: 48).<sup>5</sup>

The question arises whether the commandments were divided between the tablets (as has generally been assumed) or whether the two tablets were identical copies of all Ten Commandments (Kline, 1960).<sup>6</sup> If the Ten Commandments were understood to be the text of the covenant (treaty) between God and Israel, then the latter could be the case, since it was conventional to make duplicate copies of the treaty document for the

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<sup>4</sup> Biddle (2003) says that the syntax of the commandments makes statements of fact rather than using imperative verbs, but this overlooks the fact that the Hebrew 'imperative' form is only used for positive commands, and negative commands are commonly expressed by the imperfect/jussive preceded by *lo*, as here.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the nature of the stone tablets, see Millard (1994).

<sup>6</sup> See also Kline (1963: 13–26); cf. Collins (1992); Youngblood (1994).

suzerain and vassal respectively, and it is arguable that the sanctuary would be the appropriate place to deposit both the copy for God and that for the people. However, while it would make good sense to make duplicate copies and keep them in separate places for security, making duplicates and then keeping them in the same place (which is clearly what happened, if they were indeed duplicates) seems to be a rather pedantic imitation of the treaty-making procedure. Moreover, while it would be logical to keep God's copy in the ark, and thus in the most holy place, keeping the people's copy there as well would make it inaccessible to them and of little practical use. It would seem more probable that the pair of tablets kept in the ark were viewed as God's copy of the covenant, and that one or more accessible copies were made for reference by the people and their leaders (cf. Deut. 27:3; Josh. 8:32).

The OT itself does not give any indication whether the two tablets were thought of as identical copies, or whether the material was divided between the two. It is impossible to be certain, but the latter seems more likely.

## Division

Is there a division or structure intrinsic to the Decalogue? If so, does this indicate how the material was divided between the two tablets? There are at least three suggestions.

First, the commandments may be divided into two groups of five: the first group can be seen as distinctively Israelite, whereas the second group reflects a social morality common to all mankind (e.g. Weinfeld, 1991). The first group concerns the love of God, and defines the relationship of each individual Israelite with YHWH. Each commandment includes the phrase, 'The LORD your God', and each one has various motive clauses and/or literary expansions (if the introduction can be taken to supply these for the first commandment, as it does according to the punctuation of NRSV). The second group concerns love for other human beings.<sup>7</sup> These

<sup>7</sup> Ewald (1876: 160–62) sees the first group as specifying the duty owed by the inferior and dependent to the superior, and the second group as treating the mutual duties between human beings. Phillips (1970), who also divides the commandments into two groups of five, believes that the second group is designed to protect the person (not property), but this depends on the doubtful assumption that the eighth commandment refers to kidnapping rather than stealing.

commandments are mostly brief in form though the last is somewhat extended. According to Jewish (and Calvinistic) tradition, each tablet contained five commandments, which would accord with this division of the Decalogue (cf. Philo, *Decalogue* 50; Josephus, *Antiquities* 3:101). It, however, does not account for the fact that the first five commandments are almost six times as long as the second five, unless it was thought to be only a brief form of the commandments that was engraved in stone.

Second, the commandments may be divided into two groups, one of four and the other of six, respectively dealing with relationship to God and to one's neighbour (cf. Nielsen, 1965: 33–34). This was suggested by Augustine and has been the traditional division in the Catholic and Lutheran churches (though in their enumeration the division is actually between the first three and last seven commandments). This division of material is slightly more balanced, but the first group is still three times longer than the second.

Third, Kratz (1994) divides the text on the basis of first and third person references to God, in Exodus 20:2–6 and 7–17 respectively. The first part consists of just two commandments, emphasising the exclusiveness of the LORD's claim on his people. The second part therefore consists of eight commandments, which can be subdivided into verses 7–11 and 12–17, two dealing with sacred and six with secular matters. Clearly this scheme is related to the second mentioned above, in that the honouring of parents is grouped with the commands concerning everyday life rather than with those concerning worship.

Of these three suggestions, the third is least convincing, since OT laws are not always consistent in the use of first or third person forms in referring to God (e.g. Exod. 22:20, 23, 28, 31; 34:24; Lev. 19:2–4, 5–8, 12, 14). We should be wary of reading too much into the change of form here, especially since it results in a division that does not work well in respect to content. However, it is not so easy to choose between the other two suggestions. At first sight it seems the first is preferable from the perspective of form (distinction between long and short commandments), while the second provides a clearer division on the basis of content (between matters relating to God and to other people, assuming that the honouring of parents belongs in the latter group).

The determining factor here is the interpretation of the fifth commandment. Philo (*Decalogue* 106–107) believes that it was placed on the borderline between the two groups because parents stand on the borderline between the mortal (in their kinship with other human beings)

and the immortal (since in the act of generation they are like God, cf. Amir, 1985: 156–58). It may be argued that in OT times the honouring of parents was not merely a matter of social relationships, but part of one's respect for God. Filial piety was not so much a matter of refraining from harming other people (as expressed in the last five commandments) as a fundamental virtue (expressed positively, like the fourth commandment on honouring the Sabbath) which followed naturally from honouring God, his Name and his Day. Of course, what this did mean was that to harm a parent was a particularly serious crime, and often led to capital punishment (e.g. Exod. 21:15, 17), but the emphasis in the Decalogue itself is on the positive aspect. The reward for keeping the fifth commandment is long life 'in the land that the LORD your God is giving you' (20:12), referring back to verse 2 and thus making an *inclusio* to round off the first half of the Decalogue. In Leviticus 19:2–4, the honouring of parents is closely integrated with the honouring of God and keeping of the Sabbath. Ephesians 6:2–3 distinguishes this as the 'first commandment with a promise', while the Jewish sages consider it the weightiest commandment (Weinfeld, 1991: 312).

Therefore the division of the commandments into two groups of five is preferable to either of the other suggested divisions, with respect to both form and content. The honouring of parents forms the conclusion to the first division rather than the introduction to the second. However, whether two distinct groups of commandments were deliberately written on separate tablets, or whether the material was spread over two tablets on the basis of how much text fitted on one tablet, is difficult to ascertain. The scarcity of writing materials in the ancient world, and the fact that the first few commandments are much longer than the later ones, may point towards the latter as being more likely.

## Order

It appears that the order of the commandments within each group accords with the seriousness of the offence:

Loving God	Loving others
1. You shall have no other gods before me	6. You shall not kill
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol	7. You shall not commit adultery
3. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord	8. You shall not steal
4. Remember the Sabbath day	9. You shall not bear false witness
5. Honour your father and your mother	10. You shall not covet

To break a commandment in the first group generally leads to capital punishment (Exod. 21:15, 17; 22:20; 31:14–15; Lev. 20:9; 24:16; Deut. 17:2–7; 21:18–21)<sup>8</sup> while in the second group only the sixth and seventh are capital offences (Exod. 21:12; Lev. 20:10; 24:21; Deut. 22:22). For the eighth and ninth, lesser punishments are decreed (Exod. 22:1–4; Deut. 19:16–21).<sup>9</sup> The tenth is different in nature, for it concerns intention rather than action and people could hardly be taken to court for breaking it. The fact, however, that it is included here is significant since it shows that people could be morally guilty before God without having committed any visible offence at all (Wright 2004: 291).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The punishment for making an image is not specified, but it was certainly considered a very serious offence (cf. Exod. 20:5–6; 32:1–35; Deut. 27:15) and probably resulted in capital punishment too.

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the sanctions for breaking the commandments, see my article 'The Finger of God and the Forming of a Nation', forthcoming in *Tyndale Bulletin* 56 (2005): 21–24.

<sup>10</sup> Smith (1991) suggests a chiasmic arrangement for the commandments in the form of an arch, with the prohibition against murder at the apex, those against idolatry and coveting as the two bases, and those in between forming matching pairs. It may be true that the commandments concerning idolatry and coveting are parallel in meaning (cf. Col. 3:5) and that there is an element of chiasm in this, but the rest seems rather artificial. To make the structure work, Smith has to count just nine commandments (by making the first into a declaration of exclusive sovereignty after the pattern of the suzerainty treaties) and this goes against the very strong tradition that there were ten.

On the order of laws in various ancient Near Eastern law-codes, see Kaufman (1987), who argues that 'within each topical unit the laws are arranged according to observable principles of priority'



## Form and Style

Since the classic essay of Alt (1934), it has been conventional to distinguish two main kinds of law in the ancient Near East: *casuistic* (conditional, defining specific legal cases) and *apodictic* (unconditional, imperative). The former is widely used in ancient Near Eastern law-collections, whereas apodictic law is relatively rare outside the Bible. The essence of the latter is a categorical prohibition, which may take various forms, including:

- 'Whoever ... [offence] shall be ... [punishment]' (e.g. Exod. 21:12, 15, 17)<sup>11</sup>;
- 'Cursed be anyone who ... [offence]' (e.g. Deut. 27:15–26);
- 'You shall not ... [offence]' (e.g. Exod. 23:1–3, 6–9; Lev. 18:7–18).

The Ten Commandments are formulated in consistently apodictic style. This is unusual compared to other biblical laws, which have a mixture of apodictic and casuistic styles (e.g. Exod. 22; Lev. 19). The closest parallel to such a consistent format is the series of curses in Deuteronomy 27:15–26.

The second person singular is used for the audience, which is unusual in OT law and unique in the Ancient Near East (cf. McConville, 2002: 20–25). Evidently the Decalogue is a personal address to the people, not a textbook for lawyers. The divine Law-giver speaks directly to those from whom he expects obedience. 'The law given by God has a fundamentally personal and interrelational character' and 'obedience to law is thus seen to be a response within a relationship, not a response to the law as law' (Fretheim, 2003: 192).

The commandments in the first group are significantly longer than those in the second. This may be because those in the former group are specifically Israelite and need justification and explanation, while the latter contains universally-recognised ethical principles.

Within the first group there is variation between the use of first and third person pronouns for God, but this appears to be simply a matter of

<sup>11</sup> This is superficially similar to casuistic law, but the grammatical structure in Hebrew is distinct and consists of a single imperative clause beginning with a participle, in a five-beat line of verse.

style and there is no need to draw theological conclusions.<sup>12</sup> The same variation is found in the Book of the Covenant, while the Holiness Code tends to use the first person and the Deuteronomic Laws the third person form.

Eight of the commandments are negative, while the fifth and sixth are positive, though there is also a negative element in the expansion of the fifth. Such juxtaposition is characteristic of all OT law and there is no tension or proof of priority between the two types (Childs, 1974). The predominantly negative format should not be viewed as a deficiency, as if the emphasis was on banning pleasurable activities. On the contrary, it allows a maximum of self-determination to the semi-nomads recently freed from slavery, whereas positive commands would be more restrictive (Mendenhall, 1954). The prohibitions mark the outer limits to be observed so that the divine-human relationship is not disturbed and the community protected from behaviour which could destroy it (Fretheim, 1991; Houtman, 1996).

## Two Canonical Versions

What is the relationship between the versions of the Decalogue in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5? The former is presented as the direct words of God to Israel at Mount Sinai, while the latter is part of Moses' address to Israel on the plains of Moab, quoting the divine words. The content of the two versions is substantially the same, though there are some differences in wording, mainly in the fourth, fifth and tenth commandments:<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Some of the rabbis suggested that the Israelites heard God speak only the first two commandments (which use the first person), but this is contrary to the claim of the text that all ten were received without human mediation (Goldman, 1956: 22–24).

<sup>13</sup> The text is from NRSV. A more detailed comparison of the two versions is provided by Charles (1926: xxxiv–xliv) and Nielsen (1965: 35–44).

Exodus 20	Deuteronomy 5
<p>8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.</p> <p>9 Six days you shall labour and do all your work.</p> <p>10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave,  your livestock,  or the alien resident in your towns.</p> <p>11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day;  therefore the LORD blessed  the sabbath day and consecrated it.</p>	<p>12 Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you.</p> <p>13 Six days you shall labour and do all your work.</p> <p>14 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work – you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.</p> <p>15 Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.</p>
<p>12 Honour your father and your mother,  so that your days  may be long  in the land that the  LORD your God is giving you.</p>	<p>16 Honour your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.</p>
<p>17 You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife,  or male or female slave, or ox,  or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.</p>	<p>21 Neither shall you covet your neighbour's wife. Neither shall you desire your neighbour's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.</p>

Scholars have drawn various conclusions from these differences. Stamm and Andrew (1967) believe Exodus preserves an older version of the Decalogue, even though they consider the written form to be later than that in Deuteronomy because they connect the sabbath command with the priestly account of creation. On the other hand Hossfeld (1982; followed by Lang, 1984) argues that the version in Deuteronomy is original and that it was reworked and incorporated into the Sinai narrative of Exodus by a post-exilic redactor, a hypothesis which has been widely refuted<sup>14</sup>. According to Weinfeld (1991), both versions are expansions of an original shorter form, though that in Exodus is older. He admits there are some apparent Deuteronomistic phrases in the Exodus version, but argues this does not prove it was later, as they could be from the northern decalogue which he believes influenced Deuteronomistic literature.

Although certainty is impossible, it seems reasonable to assume that the Exodus version is earlier, since it is intrinsically more likely that extra material would have been added rather than original material omitted, and much of the extra material is characteristically Deuteronomistic (e.g. 'as the Lord your God commanded you', cf. Deut. 1:41; 5:32–33; 6:17; 9:12, 16; 12:21; etc.; 'that it may go well with you', cf. Deut. 5:29, 33; 6:3, 18; 12:25, 28; etc.).<sup>15</sup>

## The Nash Papyrus and Samaritan Pentateuch

The Nash Papyrus was discovered in Egypt in 1902, and since then has been preserved in the Cambridge University Library. It contains the text of the Decalogue plus the Shema (Deut. 6:4–5), dating from the second century BC. Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, it was the oldest extant manuscript of any part of the Hebrew Bible. However, although it is a very old manuscript, the form of the text appears to be a combination of that in Exodus and Deuteronomy, later than either of the canonical versions, and does not provide an independent testimony to the original text (Stamm and Andrew, 1967: 13). It is close to the Septuagint translation of Exodus, and may have been taken from the Hebrew text

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<sup>14</sup> E.g. Levin (1985); Graupner (1987); Kratz (1994); Graupner (2000).

<sup>15</sup> See Greenberg (1985: 91–96) and Houtman (1996: 10–11). Also 'field' is a natural addition in view of the imminent prospect of the settlement. As a result of the additions, the divine name יהוה occurs precisely ten times in the Deuteronomistic version of the Decalogue, which may well be deliberate.

underlying that version (Greenberg, 1985: 94).<sup>16</sup>

Another version of the Decalogue is found in the Samaritan Pentateuch (see Bowman, 1977: 16–27; Greenberg, 1985: 91–94). It is certainly later than that preserved by the Masoretic Text and is characterised by harmonisation of some of the differences between Exodus and Deuteronomy. The division of commandments follows the Jewish tradition, except that Exodus 20:2 (//Deut. 5:6) is counted as a prologue rather than the first commandment. This leaves room for a distinctive Samaritan tenth commandment, to place stones inscribed with the Decalogue and build an altar on Mount Gerizim, which is drawn from Deuteronomy 11:29–30 and 27:1–8.<sup>17</sup>

Both of these alternative versions of the Decalogue are ancient and of great interest, nevertheless there is no doubt that they are later than those in the canon and give no reason to amend the traditional texts with which we are familiar.<sup>18</sup>

## The Uniqueness of the Decalogue

There are several other texts in the OT which show similarities to the Decalogue, and parallels can be found to almost all the individual commandments.<sup>19</sup> The most important texts are:

### *Exodus 34:11–26*

This so-called ‘ritual decalogue’ focuses on observances related to worship and overlaps to some extent with the Decalogue (re: worship of one God,

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<sup>16</sup> Charles (1926: vii–xliv), writing not long after the discovery, transcribes and translates the text, and compares the three versions in detail, arguing that the Nash Papyrus agrees with the Septuagint in preference to all other authorities, and that it is closer to Deuteronomy but also makes use of Exodus.

<sup>17</sup> Several abbreviated forms of the Samaritan Decalogue have been found on inscriptions (Bowman, 1977: 9–16).

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed study of the textual history of the Decalogue, see Himbaza (2004).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Charles (1926: lix–lxiv); Wenham (1979: 264); Weinfeld (1985: 4–9, 18–26); Weiss (1985); Harrelson (1997: 21–33); Rodd (2001: 82–85).

idolatry, sabbath)<sup>20</sup>.

### *Leviticus 19*

This appears to be a reworking and expansion of the Decalogue, related to specific cases, with eight of the Ten Commandments quoted or alluded to in verses 4[1–2], 12[3], 3b & 30[4], 3a [5], 16[6], 11 & 13[8], 15–16[9].

### *Deuteronomy 27:15–26*

Twelve curses, which overlap in content with the Decalogue but differ in form and character.

### *Ezekiel 18:5–9 (cf. 10–13, 14–17, 18) and 22:6–12*

Two lists of basic moral and religious obligations, some of which are reminiscent of the Decalogue (re: idolatry, adultery and theft in the former; honouring parents, sabbath observance, murder and adultery in the latter) but also moral virtues (e.g. care for the needy, generosity, justice) more characteristic of wisdom literature and prophecy than the Pentateuch, and various ritual and sexual matters.

### *Hosea 4:2 and Jeremiah 7:9*

Two brief lists of crimes, almost all in the Decalogue.

### *Psalms 15 and 24:3–6 (cf. Isa. 33:14–16)*

Mowinckel (1927: 141–56; 1962: 177–180) describes these as 'entry liturgies' for the covenant renewal festival, which paved the way for the formation of the Decalogue, but Weinfeld (1985: 25) rejects the comparison because they mention only 'refined moral demands', and omit gross sins such as murder, theft and adultery.

These similarities are not at all surprising. It seems the Decalogue was well-known in Israel and had an influence on the writing of legal materials, prophecy and liturgy. However, none of the cited texts is as comprehensive

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<sup>20</sup> Goethe (1773, see Nielsen 1965: 13–15) and Wellhausen (1889: 85–96, 327–33) believed the 'ritual decalogue' to be older than the 'ethical decalogue' of Exod. 20 and Deut. 5, but these terms are misleading generalisations and the dating is based on an evolutionary idea of Israel's history which has long been discredited (Gressmann 1913: 473–79; Alt 1934: 117 n. 95; Durham 1987; Harrelson 1997: 28). Also the division of commandments into ten in Exod. 34 is uncertain and it could equally be a dodecalogue.

in scope as the Decalogue, and all of them are almost certainly later in date.

There are also similarities with one or two ancient Near Eastern texts. The 'negative confession' in chapter 125 of the Egyptian Book of the Dead has clauses which are similar in content to the third, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth commandments, but the form is quite different from the Decalogue. There is also an ancient Babylonian ritual formula which parallels the sixth, seventh and eighth commandments (Burney, 1908: 350–52). However, there is no need to suppose literary dependence on these ancient Near Eastern texts, for the prohibition of murder, adultery, theft and the like is common in many cultures, and the parallels simply show that the Decalogue originated in a world which recognised a distinction between right and wrong in such basic areas of human life.

In conclusion, the Decalogue is unique in form, content and scope. There is no other text quite like it in the Bible or elsewhere. Its uniqueness, however, is not limited to matters of shape and structure but also extends to its origin and purpose, as I demonstrate in an article published elsewhere: 'The Finger of God and the Forming of a Nation'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Tyndale Bulletin* 56 (2005):21–24. I have also reflected on the significance of the Decalogue for today in 'Written in Stone? The Ten Commandments Then and Now', *Whitefield Briefing* 9.3 (August 2004)

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# For Now We Live: A Study of Paul's Pastoral Leadership in 1 Thessalonians

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**Marion Carson** is a lecturer in New Testament and Pastoral Care at International Christian College in Glasgow.

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## Introduction

Traditionally, evangelicals hold the apostle Paul in great regard and even awe. His life and letters, we are told, give a shining example of how to live as Christians. We are urged to observe how he deals with people, and his life of selfless service to God. We should imitate him, as he urged his congregations to imitate him. Given what we know of his activities, his teaching, and his influence on the emerging church and Christian history, this seems a reasonable thing to do. As far as his churches were concerned, Paul had a mandate from God and so had a right to exercise authority over them, always with their best interests at heart, and to expect obedience in return. By extension, if he deserved this respect and veneration, how much more does he deserve it from us today given what we know of his life and its legacy? This attitude of respect, however, can easily develop into a tendency to lionise Paul and to set him up on a pedestal as one above human weakness, ambition and petty politics. There is a feeling that it is not quite proper for us to question his motives and his actions, let alone his teaching. We should never find fault with the Apostle to the Gentiles. He is the evangelist, pastor and theologian *par excellence*, and to question his motives and actions is disrespectful and might be rather dangerous.

Many students who have been accustomed to thinking this way can find it hard when they are introduced to views which are critical of and less than friendly towards Paul. For example, the writers that we will consider here have suggested that he is manipulative, controlling and self seeking. Our evangelical instincts may make us want to avoid such views and ignore them completely, or react angrily against them, declaring them to

be dangerous and misleading. Should we, however, warn against reading views of Paul which make us feel uncomfortable and challenge our cherished ideas? Our intuitive reaction may be to try to refute them, to exonerate Paul, to show that such a view is simply mistaken. But the truth is that we cannot speak for Paul as if he were here in a courtroom to be defended, because the evidence is too limited and the time gap too great. We could pretend that no one has ever said such a thing, and ignore the theories as unworthy of our time and effort to consider. That, however, would be to bury our heads in the sand and be arrogant as well as rather dishonest. They are serious charges, particularly for those of us who want to see Paul as a model for the Christian pastorate. That is the question I wish to address in this article. Given these charges, can we, as evangelicals, still say that we think Paul worthy of imitation now, in our present day?

This paper aims to take account of these criticisms, and to see if evidence supports them. Our primary source will be 1 Thessalonians, an epistle which is commonly acknowledged to give some insight into Paul's work as the pastor of one of his churches. In it we see his account of his dealings with the brand new church in Thessalonica. From what we see, is he as benevolent and altruistic as we might like to think? Is he a fit example to follow? Or is he, as Elisabeth Castelli, Stephen Moore and Graham Shaw think, controlling and manipulative and thus of dubious value as a model of Christian leadership?<sup>1</sup>

## Paul as oppressor?

Many scholars agree that in 1 Thessalonians Paul encourages his converts to persevere under pressure.<sup>2</sup> The nature of the pressure (*thlipsis* 1:6), however, is a moot point. It may be due to persecution from outsiders who

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<sup>1</sup> E.A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1991); S. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); G. Shaw, *The Cost of Authority: Manipulation and Freedom* (London: SCM, 1983), 29–35.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the debate on the purpose of the letter see K.P. Donfried (ed.), *The Thessalonian Debate* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000). Cf. also J. Chapa, 'Is First Thessalonians a Letter of Consolation?' *NTS*, 40 (1994), 150–60.

are displeased at believers' conversion from paganism.<sup>3</sup> Or the term could be understood as referring to the 'cognitive dissonance' they have experienced following their conversion from a pagan background to a group with strong links to Judaism.<sup>4</sup> It may be a mixture of both. Whatever the problem, Paul sees it as part of his role to ensure that the new community stands firm in its faith. He has given himself the task of nurturing its growth and unity and to do so he needs to boost their confidence, assure them of his love and concern, and fill gaps in their knowledge. He responds to their question regarding those in the congregation who have died (4:13ff.), reassuring his readers that their loved ones will not be at a disadvantage at the *Parousia*, but will be raised first. He warns against worrying about when the Lord will return, urging behaviour appropriate to their hope of salvation (4:8ff.), and adding some generalised exhortations for daily life (5:12ff.). Although he may have concerns about some who are idling away their time (4:11, 12; 5:14), he is pleased with them and wants them to continue encouraging each other.<sup>5</sup> As part of his strategy of encouragement, Paul praises them for both receiving the word while enduring 'much affliction' and for their joyful attitude (1:6).<sup>6</sup> They have remained a faithful and cohesive

<sup>3</sup> See for example, J.M.G. Barclay, 'Conflict at Thessalonica', *CBO* 55 (1993), 512–30; T.D. Still, *Conflict at Thessalonica: A Pauline Church and its Neighbours* (Sheffield, 1999), 228–67; K.P. Donfried, 'The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence', *NTS* 31 (1985), 336–56.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, A.J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 48. For a detailed study, see Still, *Conflict at Thessalonica*, 208–27.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. also 2 Thess. 3:6–13. For the view that there are idlers (*ataktoi*) who are refusing to work see for instance the relevant passages in the commentaries, C.A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); I.H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); and F.F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco: Word 1982). Cf. R. Jewett in *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 105, who understands the *ataktoi* to be rebellious or insubordinate. E. Best in *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: A & C Black, 1972), 230 translates 'loafers' and suggests that they are 'disorderly' because of eschatological expectation.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Thessalonians is not simply a letter of friendship as some rhetorical critics have argued (*contra* A. Smith *Comfort One Another: Reconstructing the Rhetoric and Audience of 1 Thessalonians* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1995)). See J. Schoon-Janssen, 'On the Use of Elements of Ancient Epistolography in 1 Thessalonians' in Donfried, *Thessalonian Debate*, 179–93; cf. W.A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven & London: Yale, 1983), 114.

group.<sup>7</sup> As a result, their conduct is exemplary for believers in Macedonia and Achaia (1:7).

Like Paul himself, they have stood firm in affliction. They have become imitators of him, and if he can do it, it is implied, so can they. This seems reasonable. He is a well-known figure and at this stage there are few leaders for them to follow. If they have a human model to look to (Paul), the group is likely to pull together and the risk of disintegrating under the strain lessened.<sup>8</sup> In an attempt to encourage them further, he says that they are also imitating the Lord, who suffered and was rewarded for it. *Thlipsis* is part and parcel of the eschatological age, and the language of imitation helps to encourage believers to stay on the right track. Later, he will note that they are imitating the Judaeian church. This has also suffered because it is among people who do not understand their conversion. The believers belong to a widespread movement and can take heart that Jewish converts in the leading church have had trouble from their own kinsmen just as they are experiencing in their pagan environment (2:14ff.).<sup>9</sup> They are part of a wider community whose members learn to see new meaning in suffering and to practise perseverance and hope.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Wanamaker, *The Epistle to the Thessalonians*, 80, rightly notes that the imitation figure here is limited to coping under duress, in contrast to other examples of the imitation figure (e.g. Phil. 3:17; 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1) in which the apostle seems to set himself up as a model for a Christ-like life. On the *mimesis* motif in Paul, see the article by S.E. Fowl in G.F. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin & D.G. Reid (eds), *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 428–30, and the bibliography cited there.

<sup>8</sup> See for example, W.P. de Boer, *The Imitation of Paul: an Exegetical Study*, (Kampen: Kok 1962); B. Dodd *Paul's Paradigmatic 'I': Personal example as Literary Strategy* (JSNT Supplement Series, Sheffield: JSOT Press 1999).

<sup>9</sup> See C.J. Schleuter, *Filling Up the Measure: Polemical Hyperbole in 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1994, 196. J. Holmstrand rightly points out that Paul is not saying here that all Jews were persecutors of the church (*Markers and Meaning in Paul: An Analysis of 1 Thessalonians, Philippians and Galatians* (Stockholm: Almqvist, 1997), 43. See Still, *Conflict 24–45*, for an overview of the problems related to this passage, including the now less popular explanation that this passage is a later non-Pauline interpolation.

<sup>10</sup> Our argument that Paul is encouraging perseverance and unity suggests that this passage is parenetic rather than apologetic in nature. *Contra* J.A.D. Weima, 'An Apology for the Apologetic Function of 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12, *JSNT* 68 (1997), 73–99, and with A.J. Malherbe, 'Gentle as a Nurse: The Cynic Background to 1 Thess ii' *NovT* 12 (1970), 203–217; G. Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography: Toward a New Understanding* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), ch. 4, who argue that Paul's purpose here is parenetic. A collection of essays outlining both views is to be found in Donfried, *Thessalonian Debate*.

Paul's intention in using this *mimesis* motif seems wholly benevolent, however, not all agree with this. Why should the believers in Thessalonica suffer, it might be asked – what is good about it? Who is Paul to set himself up as an example anyway? Not only that, if everyone tried to copy Paul's behaviour, would this not simply produce lots of clones, lots of little Pauls, with no real minds of their own? According to Elizabeth Castelli, this is exactly what Paul wants. For her, his use of *mimesis* smacks of an arrogant power-game: Paul is asserting his own position of power within the congregations. The idea of *mimesis*, in her view:

functions in Paul's letters as a strategy of power. That is, it articulates and rationalises as true and natural a particular set of power relations within the social formation of early Christian communities.<sup>11</sup>

Noting that in Graeco-Roman culture *mimesis* always articulates a hierarchical relationship, she points out that while Paul may praise his converts for having imitated him, they will never be his equal: they will always be 'derivations' of the model. Moreover, if Paul is the example, and they should do as he does, any potential for dissension and subversive behaviour must be reduced considerably. For Castelli, such an attitude is suspect, since it seems designed to discourage individuality and difference among believers. She writes:

Paul's invocation of *mimesis* indicts the very notion of difference, and thereby constructs the nature of early Christian social relationship: Christians are Christians insofar as they strive for the privileged goal of sameness. Christians distinguish themselves from those who are not Christians, who are not saved, precisely in this drive for sameness. Difference has only negative connotations in this mimetic economy.<sup>12</sup>

So, rather than seeing Paul's use of the *mimesis* motif as positive and benevolent, Castelli suspects that widespread imitation of him will lead to the undermining of individual differences within the groups involved.

<sup>11</sup> Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 116f.

<sup>13</sup> Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 89–117.

Moreover, she suggests that Paul wishes to say that no deviation from the norm (i.e. the outward expression of a universal truth as set down by Paul) will be tolerated.<sup>13</sup> Just as they received the Word of God passively, they must endure suffering passively. It is not accidental that this attitude will make them less likely to cause trouble themselves.

The first thing to note is that in criticising Paul as oppressive, Castelli is very much a child of her time. She acknowledges that she is influenced by the French philosopher Michel Foucault's suspicion of the idea that power may be held by one person over another. Foucault wants freedom, and dislikes the notion that a few people – those who occupy positions of power – can enforce a society in which all must conform to a certain pattern, and behave and live in a certain way. Foucault is very suspicious of the danger which he thinks is inherent in power structures – that those who wield the power will only become concerned with their own vested interests. Writing, for example, on the treatment of the mentally ill, criminals and gays, Foucault maintains that society has tried to subjugate these different ways of being, finding them to be a threat, and banishing them or pretending they do not exist. In so doing, existing power structures are upheld and differences are extinguished – not for the good of those who suffer, but to serve the interests of those in power and the institutions they have created. There is in fact no universal reason for power to be wielded, other than to keep others under control, and as such is suspect.<sup>14</sup> Castelli writes:

With Foucault, I reject the notion that there is anything universally human about cultural and social formations and institutions. Societies are organised and power relations emerge in response to very particular historical circumstances. Social formations and institutions are not inevitable forms produced by human necessity, but rather are changeable and arbitrary, – though they may well adhere to a particular logic found to be more or less persuasive at particular moments.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Castelli draws on a wide selection of Foucault's writings, but see, in particular, *Power/Knowledge; Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* ed. C. Gordon (NY: Pantheon, 1980) and *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* trans. A. Sheridan (NY: Vintage 1977).

<sup>15</sup> Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 37.



If all institutions are merely products of their age, 'changeable and arbitrary', the idea of leadership itself becomes suspect, and no one has the right to have power over others. Thus, Paul's claims to authority over his congregations appear questionable. He becomes an oppressive leader, because he tells people how to behave, denying believers the freedom to develop their individuality and coercing them into subjugating themselves to his control.<sup>16</sup>

Stephen Moore is similarly suspicious of Paul's use of the *mimesis* figure. Using Foucaultian language, he sees an exercise of power that is designed to produce 'docile bodies'. This kind of power (Moore calls it 'pastoral power') purports to be 'for their own good', but it is really an invidious attempt to control others.<sup>17</sup> He detects a hidden power strategy behind Paul's instruction, which he finds distasteful, and he distrusts what he perceives as techniques designed to render the community 'docile', with no initiative, spontaneity or drive. If we reply that Paul is merely doing 'God's will', Moore would say that the theistic claim makes Paul's attempts to exercise authority even more questionable. If the very existence of God is questioned, Paul's appeal to theology as a rationale becomes an exploitation of the gullibility of those over whom he is wielding authority, and renders the charge of personal ambition difficult to refute:

<sup>16</sup> The distinction between *power* and *authority* is important. Paul believes he has been given authority from God who alone has the power to do so. According to recent analyses, authority must be distinguished from the idea of power. Holmberg writes, 'An authority relation is distinguished from a power relation by the fact that the subordinate is caused to assent to the ruler's order, not by external constraint or out of sheer calculative interest, but out of conviction.' B. Holmberg, *Paul and Power: The Structure of Authority in the Primitive Church as Reflected in the Pauline Epistles* (Gleerup: Lund, 1978), 134; cf. J.H. Schutz, *Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority* (Cambridge: CUP 1975), 14. However it would not disturb Castelli (or Moore) for whom both concepts are equally problematic because they each imply the control of the other and therefore the curtailing of individual freedom.

<sup>17</sup> Moore, *Poststructuralism*, 109. And, according to Stephen Moore, 'docile bodies' are exactly what Paul wants when he speaks of 'pummelling the body', of believers as 'slaves of Christ', and of their need to imitate himself as the example. Paul demands certain behaviour in order to 'legitimate subjection.'

To appeal to one's own exemplary subjection to a conveniently absent authority in order to legitimate the subjection of others is a strategy as ancient as it is suspect.<sup>18</sup>

In our age, the idea of authority is continuously questioned, as is the very idea of the authority of God, so in our contemporary setting Stephen Moore's words regarding Paul's use of *mimesis* are at least cogent. We should, however, beware of applying modern day constructs of power to the ancient world and its documents. Foucault himself, as Sandra Polaski points out, warns against using a postmodern paradigm of power as a framework with which to understand a first century phenomenon. For Foucault, each particular age of history or community must be considered in its own time, space and stage of development. Each historical age has its own particular 'discourse', its own rules and conditions for living.<sup>19</sup>

The atheistic worldview that is so prevalent today would have made no sense at all to most people in the first century, whether they came from a Jewish or pagan background.<sup>20</sup> Paul's contemporaries lived in a society in which authority was seldom questioned and in which power structures were pervasive from the highest royal palace to the lowest slave kitchen.

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<sup>18</sup> Moore, *Poststructuralism*, 110. For Moore (108) even the central Christian idea of a sacrificial death is invidious, the grotesque desire of a God who makes out that he has the welfare of people at heart. What, he asks, should we have to do with a God who becomes a torturer and his Son the victim?

<sup>19</sup> See S.H. Polaski, *Paul and the Discourse of Power* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1999), 20. Foucault said of his historical projects that he was attempting to free historical 'knowledges' from subjection and render them capable of opposition and struggle against 'the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse' (*Power/Knowledge*, 85). His view of his histories as 'genealogies of problems' means that he views each historical age as a particular discourse – 'a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, or for a given social, economic, geographical or linguistic area, the conditions of operations of the enunciative function' (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 117). On Foucault's own terms, therefore, we should not attempt to glean from Paul any 'truths' or even guidance that will help us in our present day discourse, see T. Flynn, 'Foucault's Mapping of History' in G. Gutting (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 28–46.

<sup>20</sup> See R. MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven & London: Yale 1981), 62–63; 67.

The earliest churches were no different, and it was natural for them to accept the need for leadership and some form of governance over their emergent groups.<sup>21</sup> For Paul himself, both pre- and post- Damascus, the idea of God's existence and his concern for humankind is a given, the questioning of which would make little or no sense at all. We cannot therefore judge the motives of a first century personage and the reactions of the community in terms of a suspicion of power that did not form part of the prevailing worldview.<sup>22</sup> Without evidence to the contrary, it is probably safest to take Paul at his word and believe him when he says that his motivation is God rather than personal power.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See A. Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000, 212ff. Also D.G. Horrell, 'Leadership Patterns and the Development of Ideology in Early Christianity' in D.G. Horrell (ed.), *Social Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 309–338, who traces the development of authority in the churches from itinerant to local leaders. For an alternative view, see R.S. Ascoug, 'The Thessalonian Christian Community as a Professional Voluntary Organisation' *JBL* (2000), 31:1–28.

<sup>22</sup> Clarke, *Serve the Community*, 212f.; A.C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 144.

<sup>23</sup> Castelli's work on 1 Thessalonians 1:6 depends to a large extent on the understanding that the phrase 'and of the Lord' is unnatural in the text. She sees it as a self-correction (following M. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (New York: Scribner's 1934), 5), or a modest addition (E. von Dobschutz, *Die Thessalonicherbriefe* 7th Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (eds) 1909, 72) or as an afterthought (D. Stanley "'Become Imitators of Me": The Pauline Conception of Apostolic Tradition', *Biblica*, (1959), 859–77). However, there is no need to see it in this way. Most commentators see the word order not as indicative of Paul realising that he is setting himself above Jesus, but as writing in a sequence, 'he imitated Christ and the Thessalonians imitated him, he playing an intermediary role Christ and them' as Best notes, Paul himself does not issue instructions to others on the basis of his apostleship, or demand compliance on the basis of his own authority. Rather, he continually acknowledges Christ as the higher power, giving instructions 'in the Lord Jesus' (e.g. 1 Thess. 4:2; 2 Thess. 3:6). He sees his authority as derived from Jesus Christ, and refers to his apostleship only when his call and identity as an apostle have been questioned (1 Cor. 9:3ff.; 2 Cor. 12:11ff.) and need to be defended. E. Best, 'Paul's Apostolic Authority?' *JSNT* (1986), 3–25. Cf. Clarke who thinks that apostleship gives Paul authority but emphasises that this is based not on status but on weakness: *Serve the Community*, 228ff. See also J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1998), 571; N. Taylor, *Paul, Antioch and Jerusalem: A Study in Relationships and Authority in Earliest Christianity* (Sheffield: JSOT 1992), 227–28; Schutz, *Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority*.

But what about the *mimesis* language? Worldview apart, is there something in Paul's usage which is fundamentally oppressive? It does not look as if this is the case. As several scholars have pointed out, in most contexts when Paul uses this language he is concerned with the imitation of *suffering* and his method of supporting himself through work – both ideas which can be seen as contributing to the building up of the community rather than constituting an oppressive regime.<sup>24</sup> He himself is inferior to the ultimate model – Jesus Christ. Jesus is the exemplar even in suffering, and no group can equal his passion or his example as peacemaker and evangelist in times of trial. Further, Paul does not put himself forward as the only believer to be imitated. He writes:

You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit; so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia (1:6, 7).

The Thessalonians themselves, much to his joy, have been, and are continuing to be, models from whom others are learning. The fact that Paul mentions himself first need not be seen as arrogance but as a teacher's strategy of using the familiar (i.e. his own life and ministry) in order to point to the unfamiliar to enable understanding. He is not concerned with promoting 'Paul-likeness', but Christ-likeness.<sup>25</sup>

It thus appears unlikely that Paul *intended* to be oppressive in his use of *mimesis* language. He places himself under the sovereignty of God, his motives being theological rather than personal and his ambition for the Thessalonians benign and nurturing rather than malevolent and stifling. But was this the way his behaviour was perceived at the time? We only have Paul's own writing as evidence: we only have one side of the story. To take another example, Paul speaks of himself as being a gentle, caring

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<sup>24</sup> M.A. Getty, 'The Imitation of Paul in the Letters to the Thessalonians' in R.F. Collins (ed.), *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (Leuven, 1990), 281. See Lyons *Pauline Autobiography*, 219. Lyons emphasises the importance of mutuality and reciprocity. Cf. E. Best, *Paul and his Converts* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 158.

<sup>25</sup> See S. Walton, *Leadership and Lifestyle: The Portrait of Paul in the Miletus Speech and 1 Thessalonians* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 184.

father figure (2:11).<sup>26</sup>

But can we assume that Paul's idea of 'fatherhood' is a matter of love rather than status? He certainly *describes* himself as having been gentle and intimate as well as demanding strict allegiance from his sometimes wayward children (2:7).<sup>27</sup> As we all know, however, parenting can be used for good or ill, and not every parent's declared treatment of and relationship with his children is to be taken at face value.<sup>28</sup> Joubert rightly points out that Paul's own status is to be seen as *paterfamilias* is under that of God's heavenly fatherhood.<sup>29</sup> But once again, we only have Paul's word for it.

Despite these difficulties, there are ways in which we can support our argument that Paul is not oppressive in his ministry. Firstly, it is possible to read between the lines as to how Paul was received in Thessalonica. There is, for example, evidence that the congregation respects Paul, and not

<sup>26</sup> A.J. Malherbe 'Hellenistic Moralists and the New Testament' in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (1993) II 26:3, 267–333 discusses the use of fatherhood language in the Greek moral education tradition in which the teacher called his disciples his children. For other studies investigating Paul's indebtedness to pagan ideas see also O.L. Yarbrough 'Parents and children in the letters of Paul' in L.M. White & O.L. Yarbrough (eds), *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honour of Wayne A. Meeks* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); cf. also Best 'Paul's Apostolic Authority'; T. Engberg-Petersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> This takes the majority view that the textual variant *epioi* should be read (contra T.B. Sayers, 'Wedding Textual and Rhetorical Criticism to Understand the text of 1 Thessalonians 2:7', *JSNT* 80 (2000), 81–98. See also T.J. Burke, 'Pauline Paternity in 1 Thessalonians' *TynB* 51 (2000), 59–80).

<sup>28</sup> This might particularly be so when we consider that first century Roman ideas of fatherhood also entailed the right (among other things) to kill his children, or impose divorce on them. See S.J. Joubert, 'Managing the Household: Paul as Paterfamilias of the Christian Household Group in Corinth' in P. Esler (ed.), *Modelling Early Christianity: Social Scientific Studies of the New Testament in its Context* (London: Routledge, 1995), 217; E.M. Lassen, 'The Roman Family: Ideal and Metaphor' in H. Moxnes (ed.), *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (London: Routledge, 1997), 103–120.

<sup>29</sup> Joubert, 'Managing the Household', 217. Also Lassen, 'The Roman Family', 103–120. Those scholars (e.g. K.O. Sandnes, 'Equality Within Patriarchal Structures: Some New Testament Perspectives on the Christian Fellowship as a Brother or Sisterhood and a Family' in H. Moxnes (ed.), *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (London: Routledge 1997, 150–65) who stress the emergent egalitarian nature of Paul's familial language underestimate the authoritarian nature of fatherhood in the ancient world.

simply because he sees himself as an apostle.<sup>30</sup> Evidently, the believers have considered that his message is valuable; they seem to trust him, look to him for advice (4:13; 5:1), and treasure the epistles he sends them in reply to their questions.<sup>31</sup> They have allowed him to exercise his leadership role, somehow convinced that he has their best interests at heart and the ability to convey God's instructions to them.<sup>32</sup> It seems doubtful that an oppressed group of people would have looked to him for guidance in this way.

Secondly: it is commonly observed that oppressive regimes tend to be characterised by fear and distrust. But there is no evidence of this. He writes to all his converts and not to a handpicked group of 'yes men' (1:1). He wants openness – hardly the behaviour of someone who wishes to suppress dissension. Similarly, when he moved on from Thessalonica, he could have chosen leaders to do the work of building up the community and to take on the hard work of nurturing a new group in all its fragility and vulnerability. However, it seems that Paul (as was to become his custom) did not stipulate who was to take authority in the church after he had gone.<sup>33</sup> Instead, he seems to have allowed a leadership to surface

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<sup>30</sup> It used to be held that Paul derives his authority from the fact that he is an apostle. His call to evangelise the Gentiles gives him authority both to preach throughout the nations and to exercise leadership over the communities which he founds. However, research has suggested that apostleship should be seen, not in terms of office (i.e. authority and status) but of function: he is sent by God to perform a given task. The fact that Paul is an apostle does not give him a particular status with authority attached. Rather, it means that he has been commissioned to be an ambassador for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20). For an overview of the debate, see Dunn, *The Theology of Paul*, 571–79.

<sup>31</sup> See Best, *Paul and His Converts*, 158.

<sup>32</sup> Leadership has been defined as 'a process in which one or more group members are permitted to influence and motivate others to help attain group goals'. See E.R. Smith & D.M. Mackie, *Social Psychology* 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Psychology Press, 2000), 486. See also M. Weber, *Economy and Society* (1968), 241 who describes those who are granted leadership status because of individual qualities as 'charismatic' leaders (cited in Horrell, 'Leadership Patterns, 312; Holmberg, *Paul and Power*) 138. In Paul's case this means their acceptance of his message and adoption of its principles in their everyday lives (Polaski, *Paul and the Discourse of Power*, 34).

<sup>33</sup> See Best, *Paul and his Converts*, 144. Best notes that Paul does not delegate authority to people in the churches he founds, but allows each church to develop along lines to suit itself. See also H. Von Campenhausen, *Ecclesial Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* trans J.A. Baker (London: A & C Black, 1969), 70; M.Y. McDonald, *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-Historical Study of Institutionalisation in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), 60–61.

naturally (probably those who owned the houses in which they met) and says that his readers should respect and obey them.<sup>34</sup> He does, of course, delegate authority to Timothy, whom he sends to check that the Thessalonians are persevering (3:2), but in doing so he takes a risk by not being there to see exactly what Timothy will do and say. He has to trust Timothy as well as the Thessalonians, that they will remain loyal to him, even at a distance.

Further, if Paul intended to oppress we surely would see this in the parenetic sections of the letter. We would find evidence of a desire to control and curtail freedom. However, we do not, in fact, his instructions to care for the weak (5:14) suggest the opposite. As the history of tyranny in the twentieth century has shown, in an oppressive regime there is no room for those who are unable to live up to the ideals of the envisaged society. The weak, the ill, the dissenters and the doubters, the different for whatever reason, are rarely tolerated because they are seen as liabilities or threats to the general order. There is no such idea in Paul, who, besides admonishing the idlers, exhorts the Thessalonians to 'encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all'.<sup>35</sup>

Lastly, it is also striking that Paul appeals to the Thessalonians to try to gain the respect of outsiders (4:12). He wants to ensure that this new group is accepted in mainstream Graeco-Roman society. Certainly, he wants them to find their identity and honour within the community and

<sup>34</sup> For G. Theissen (*The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1982)) and Holmberg, (*Paul and Power*) these emergent leaders are likely to have been the wealthy, in accordance with local realities of power and patronage in the ancient world; see also R.A. Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity* Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994. Cf. however, J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998); L. Schottroff, "'Not Many Powerful": Approaches to a Sociology of Early Christianity' in D.G. Horrell (ed.), *Social Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 275–87; Horrell, 'Leadership Patterns' who challenge Theissen's notion of 'love patriarchy' in the Pauline churches. Horrell, ('Leadership Patterns', 316) maintains that despite the emergence of local leaders the real locus of power was, at this stage, to be found among the itinerant missionaries.

<sup>35</sup> D.A. Black, 'The Weak in Thessalonica: A Study in Pauline Lexicography' *JETS* 25 (1982), 307–21, suggests the weak are those who have become weary waiting for the *parousia* (5:1–11).

from God himself,<sup>36</sup> but he does not urge secrecy, or detachment from everyday life. *Contra* Castelli, Paul does not seem to exercise stringent control when he allows society's norms to be part of the influencing factors on the new community. A leader who wishes to oppress is more likely to promote isolation and suspicion of the outside world, rather than to advise conformity to its expectations.

## Is Paul manipulative?

If we have gone some way toward defending Paul against the charge of being an oppressive leader, we still have to tackle the complaint that he is *personally* controlling and manipulative, concerned only for his own position. This is the view of Graham Shaw in his book, *The Cost of Authority*. For Shaw, Paul's language about the congregation is questionable. For example, his declarations of affection, praise and concern for them (1:3, 8; 2:8; 3:3; 4:9) are mere flattery and a cynical ploy to elicit loyalty to himself and to keep them under control. Paul is paranoid and ambitious, his effusive praise for them in 1:4–9 'the initial stage of manipulation'.<sup>37</sup> Paul is only concerned for himself and his position, and will resort to anything in order to maintain it.

Now Shaw assumes throughout that manipulation is a bad thing. It is true that when we think of someone being manipulative, we generally mean that that person is controlling (or attempting to control) people and situations for his or her own advantage. In other words we think of it as a negative and harmful activity. This, however, is not always the case. It is sometimes appropriate to manipulate a person away from something which is harmful for them. We may, for example, want to divert a person's attention away from an unpleasant incident (say, an accident on the road) in order to protect them from painful memories. Such an action would be

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<sup>36</sup> On the importance of honour and shame discourses in maintaining social control in first century Graeco-Roman society, see D.A. De Silva "'Worthy of his kingdom": Honor Discourse and Social Engineering in 1 Thessalonians' *JSNT* 64 (1996), 49–79. See further B.E. Daley 'Position and Patronage on the Early Church: The original Meaning of "Primacy of Honour"' *JTS* 44 (1993), 529–53. Cf also H. Moxnes 'Honor and Shame' in ed. R. Rohrbaugh, *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation*, 1996, 19–40.

<sup>37</sup> G. Shaw, *The Cost of Authority: Manipulation and Freedom* (London: SCM, 1983), 29–35. Shaw also considers that Paul's imitation motif is designed to rule out the possibility of defection, and to effect social control and the unity of the congregation.



done with good intent, which is quite different from manipulating a situation or a person in order to further one's own ambition or status. From what we have seen it does not seem likely that Paul is concerned with his own personal ambition to the detriment of those people in his congregations.

Further, it must be admitted that even the best of leaders need to have a mind to maintaining their position and ensuring that certain things are done, and have to manipulate others to achieve this. Thus, even if we accept that Paul is motivated by his love for God, this does not exempt him from the charge that he may sometimes be manipulative – in the sense of controlling events and people in order to maintain his position of authority.<sup>38</sup> A theistic rather than a selfish motivation does not mean that Paul is to be seen as somehow above self-preservation, 'people management' and politics. As our survey of his self-description in this letter has shown, Paul is more than willing to use strategies to get his people behaving in the way he wants. He may not be ruled by personal ambition, but this does not mean he is politically naïve. He does have to consider the opinion of others, and maintain his position. It is simplistic and wrongheaded to think of Paul as somehow above politics and personal interest. Such a view fails to take adequate account of information we have about Paul and his ministry. For example, while he is reassuring the Thessalonians about the status of the dead at the *parousia*, Paul distinguishes between those who have hope and those who do not (4:13), between those who are in the light and those who are in darkness (4:4, 5), and between those who sleep and those who are awake (4:8). As Wayne Meeks has pointed out, Paul is using the dualistic language of apocalyptic to make a sharp differentiation between the church and those outside, between believers and non-believers, reminding them of God's judgement at the end times. As Meeks notes, the threat of judgement is a powerful tool in maintaining order within the community. If the follower

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<sup>38</sup> See also Polaski, *Discourse*. She is disturbed by Paul's insistence that he and the church have been given a unique grace, and thinks that such a view of believers' identities gives Paul an 'unassailable position of power'. He has special knowledge and seems to feel at liberty to define the nature of that grace. The result is that Paul's authority becomes part of the will of God, and therefore unquestionable. Grace becomes part of Paul's 'discourse of power,' something which is used to impose values and norms of behaviour on other people. How can one challenge someone who operates under this special grace?

believes that his mortal soul is in danger – he will comply with the leader's instructions, and order will be maintained.<sup>39</sup>

We know from other letters, too, that he has trouble with the Jerusalem church and that he always works with an eye to their approval (e.g. Rom. 15:31).<sup>40</sup> We know from the Corinthian and Galatian correspondence that he sometimes has to fight to get his own way in matters of doctrine and behaviour. He has to ensure that interlopers do not try to take over and that false teachers do not steal his people away. For precisely these reasons, Paul needs to develop 'people skills' and strategies. He must exercise discretion and self-preservation. So, in 1 Thessalonians, he is not above rather effusive praise for their reputation in Macedonia and Achaia (1:8) and their perseverance (1:6). He is not above expressing pleasure that he was instrumental in leading them from a life of paganism to a new faith (1:9). The exhortation to ensure that they are respected by outsiders (4:12) may betray a fear for Paul's own reputation, whether this be with his Jerusalem colleagues, with the secular government, or simply society at large.<sup>41</sup> The service of Christ does not rule out the need for social and political awareness.

It would be naïve then, to protest that Paul is not manipulative in his dealings with his congregations, but we need not dismiss him as unscrupulous and untrustworthy. Paul is no different from any other leader who has to be politically sensitive in order to achieve his stated aim. It is necessary even for benevolent leaders to be crafty in order to achieve results. This does mean that he has to adopt strategies: threats, 'battering up', and even judicious flattery are all part of the leader's armoury and may be used with the best interests of the group at heart. It may be necessary to be harsh with some for the benefit of many. A need to curb subversion and the desire to prevent the break-up of the community do not necessarily point to a paranoid or power-crazed leader. Rather, we should think in terms of Paul as benevolent but astute, allowing the development of his congregation along relatively free lines, using the language of family with genuine care and affection, but without exonerating himself from the

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<sup>39</sup> W.A. Meeks, 'Social Functions of Apocalyptic Language in Pauline Christianity' in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1983), 687–705.

<sup>40</sup> On the relationship between Jerusalem and Paul see Taylor, *Paul, Antioch and Jerusalem*, 223.

<sup>41</sup> See Holmberg, *Paul and Power*, 56. Paul, while considering himself to have authority, still sees recognition by the church in Jerusalem as important.

concomitant responsibilities.

So far we have been arguing that Paul is not oppressive in his dealings with his congregation at Thessalonica, but neither is he politically naïve. Indeed, I have been arguing that Paul is a rather astute and skilled manager of people. This, however, should not lead us to believe that Paul is aloof from his congregation, working at a distance and having a kind of 'top down' approach to leadership. On the contrary, there is important evidence in the letter that Paul does not think of his leadership role at Thessalonica as somehow setting him apart from, or indeed above, his congregation. In fact, we see Paul acknowledging the need for mutuality between leader and congregation, and recognising that he is as much in need of support as anyone else. He may be an astute leader, but he also knows that he is vulnerable and he is willing to show it.

He does this in two ways. First, from his description of the time he was with them when he first arrived at Thessalonica, it is evident that he did more than simply preach. Although he seems only to have stayed with them (perforce) a short while (Acts 17:1–10), it was long enough to build up a small group of believers (1:4ff.). The message itself may have been powerful, but Paul did not hold a mass rally and – Billy Graham style – immediately move on to the next venue. Had he done so, an unrealistic reputation might have built up, even while he remained a largely unknown quantity to his new converts. He might even have become some sort of hero – idealised and revered. Instead, he stayed, working at his trade while teaching them the basics of the faith, acting as their leader, guiding them as to how they should conduct their lives (2:1–12). He made himself vulnerable to charges of being a liar or a charlatan, of being exposed, at worst, as a fraud, and at best, as one whose life did not match up to the high ideals he preached.

Second, he reveals that he has the basic need of knowing that he is loved by them and welcome among them. In 3:6ff., following the visit of Timothy, he is glad of the reassurance of reports of their love for him. It is important to him that they have expressed love and concern for their mentor (3:7). They are a source of joy to him (3:9), a comfort to him in his own affliction (3:7), and he wants to visit them not simply to teach them and help their faith grow (3:10), but to benefit himself from being with them. *They* will encourage *him*, boost his confidence and enable him to carry on with his ministry with renewed vigour.

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<sup>41</sup> See Holmberg, *Paul and Power*, 56. Paul, while considering himself to have authority, still sees recognition by the church in Jerusalem as important.

Moreover, he says that the fact that they are thriving has a direct effect on his own spiritual well being.<sup>42</sup> Their perseverance has an impact on his own resolve. 'For now we live', he says in 3:8, 'if you stand fast in the Lord'. Their continued loyalty and affection is as life itself to him, and to his colleagues Silas and Timothy.<sup>43</sup> He is given renewed vigour by the news; he derives strength from it, and the will to live.<sup>44</sup> The proviso – that they must stand fast in the Lord – contains a warning, and a recognition of the dependency of the apostles on those to whom they preach.<sup>45</sup> The Thessalonians are not only responsible for themselves, but somehow also for Paul, Timothy and Silas. They all 'live' together in their new identity 'in the Lord' and such solidarity and fellowship is in sharp contrast to the way they would have viewed community prior to their conversion. They are dependent on each other, and this gives a greater 'quality of life' in the present, and the hope of more to come (cf. 1:9–10; 5:9–10).

Similarly, Paul will be encouraged by visiting them because he will see the fruit of his ministry, the results of his hard work. He had sent Timothy to see them to reassure himself that they (3:5 cf. 2:1) are continuing in faith. He is fully aware that if they do not persevere, much of his life's work will be perceived to have been in vain and his mission failed.<sup>46</sup> There is a sense in which their continued love for Paul symbolises the success of his mission. That Paul's work is 'alive' is evidenced by the very existence of the

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<sup>42</sup> Marshall, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 95.

<sup>43</sup> This view takes *gar* as 'for' rather than 'because': Paul is responding to the news of their perseverance: See Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 136.

<sup>44</sup> Best, *First and Second Epistles*, 142.

<sup>45</sup> The proviso suggests that the phrase 'for now we live' is more than simply conventional language expressing delight at the knowledge of their continued loyalty (*contra* A.J. Malherbe *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (New York: Doubleday 2000, 202–201)). Much more is at stake here than simply a continued good relationship.

<sup>46</sup> Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 136.

<sup>47</sup> For Paul, the Thessalonians may symbolise his vindication in the eyes of the Jerusalem church, whose authority he seems to recognise (Holmberg, *Paul and Power* 55–56), but with which he has had repeated and prolonged difficulties. He does not forbear to criticise them and even disregard them if he thinks that is necessary for serving God and his command: see D.M. Hay 'Paul's Indifference to Authority', *JBL* 88 (1969), 36–44. Nevertheless, the success of the mission needs to be proven in the eyes of those with whom relations have been strained. A fleeting church presence in Thessalonica would be grist to the mill of those who wish to undermine Paul's claim to apostleship and his call to the Gentiles.

Thessalonian believers.<sup>47</sup> This in turn means that besides being a major source of joy for him in the present (2:20), they also bring him 'glory', being the proleptic first fruits of his eschatological divine vindication. They are the evidence of his past labours and the assurance that he will be able to stand in front of Christ with impunity at the final judgement and receive the 'wreath of victory', the reward for his hard work and, in particular, his obedience to God.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

The argument of this paper has been that, from the evidence of 1 Thessalonians, Paul should be seen as a benevolent leader, driven by theological rather than selfish motives. Against Castelli and Moore, we have contended that he is not concerned with his own self-advancement or the control of others, but by a genuine desire to serve God and nurture his converts. Against Graham Shaw we have argued that Paul is not maliciously manipulative, but we have insisted that it is naïve to think that Paul is politically simple-minded. The influence of the hermeneutic of suspicion urges against an unquestioning assumption of unalloyed benevolence on the apostle's part, but we can still see him as an appropriate role model for today's pastoral leaders. Paul needs to be an astute manager of people and politicians. Therefore he may cajole, and even threaten, in order to ensure that his ways remain prevalent. He knows he cannot prevent dissension although he will try every technique in the book to do so. At the same time, however, he does not seem to set himself up as a remote figure, unapproachable and aloof. Despite his conviction that his authority derives from God, he is conscious of his vulnerability and need of others to help him in the task. Leadership, Paul is well aware, requires mutuality – the leader is only there because of the consent and continued support of those he is leading. Each is responsible for the other: Paul needs the Thessalonians as much as they need him.

<sup>48</sup> Ch. 2:20 is not simply parallel to 2:19 as Wanamaker (*The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 126) suggests. It points out that Paul is proud of them and in need of their support in the present – it is eschatologically significant but so is their loyalty now. They can bring him joy in the present simply by existing – the reward for his mission work is already tangible. On this verse see also J.G. Van der Watt 'The Use of ZAW in 1 Thessalonians: A Comparison with ZAW/ZW.

# From Pride to Peace:

## An Augustinian Engagement with Pluralism and Postmodernism

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**Scott Harrower** is an Anglican minister in Melbourne, Australia. He is currently pursuing post-graduate studies at Ridley College in Melbourne where he is a visiting tutor in Church History.

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### Abstract

This article aims to make two points:

1. To propose a theological framework which draws heavily upon Augustine, and which can be used in an engaging manner with postmodern and pluralist people. This Augustinian theological framework allows for the positive expression of the uniqueness of Christ in our own times, when this is becoming increasingly difficult.
2. To draw those elements from Augustine's manner of engagement with his opponents which are most appropriate for us today.

In 2005, Augustine provides theological and methodological points of engagement with a postmodern and pluralistic world. This is because Augustine's time shared some similarities with our own. Augustine's time was one in which people looked for individual subjective happiness in all manner of exploitative religious whims and fancies. Many of these bear similarities to current postmodern thought. In addition, the pluralistic nature of Augustine's time included wide beliefs such as those that all gods are one, while at the same time believing in there being many competing gods, demons and angels.<sup>1</sup> In his multi-faith context, Augustine and his contemporary Christians ran the same risks as we do today: the risks of being 'silenced, banished, and put an end to'.<sup>2</sup> This was a complex and confused environment. Despite this, Augustine established the uniqueness of Christ. Augustine's theological points of engagement with his culture, and his methodology of engagement have much to offer us. This is, first, because Augustine's theological points of engagement provide a framework which enables and promotes nuanced discussion concerning those timeless questions about humanity and its relationship

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 4. 11–32; 6; 7; 8; 9.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 2.20.

to God. Thus, Augustine creates a framework in which the uniqueness of Christ can be positively stated within a multi-faith and relativistic environment. Second, Augustine provides not only theological points of engagement, but also a method of engagement which is highly commendable.

*The first section* of this paper will look at a theological framework which draws heavily upon Augustine's own theology and methodology, in order to engage the world around us and to helpfully discuss the uniqueness of Christ. In this section, the elements of the framework will be discussed one at a time. Special reference will be given to how each point can be a helpful starting interface in evangelistic conversations today. These elements, drawn from Augustine, are as follows:

1. Positing a close relationship between God and humanity.
2. A generous view of general revelation.
3. Understanding pride as humanity's primary problem.
4. Stating that grace is the context for self-knowledge and the knowledge of God.
5. The need for confession/honesty/'being real' without getting discouraged.

*The second section* of this paper discusses the manner and means with which Augustine engaged with the world around him. There are many positive and applicable points which may be drawn from them, these are:

1. An honourable manner.
2. The need for prayer before entering into discussions about the gospel.
3. Remaining expectant and perseverant in the face of opposition.
4. We should offer Scripture positively.
5. We need to be confident in God's Words as God's means for conversion.



## Section 1: An Augustinian framework for engagement

### *The relationship of God to humanity*

Augustine states that the Creator has made us so that at our most fundamental level humankind is prompted to praise him.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, our task in 2005 is to respond to this prompting. Evangelistically, we should respond by helping people find God so that they should praise him. We, therefore, assume that all people, including non-Christians, will suspect that God has made all of us for himself and that a person's heart is restless 'until it comes to rest' in him.<sup>4</sup> We thus recognise the work of God in the heart of the non-believer and take a positive view of this work of God.<sup>5</sup> This approach shows respect and takes the non-Christian seriously because s/he is a human being created by, and for, God.

In response to God's work in people's lives, we should take Augustine's lead in his *Confessions* and seek to share our own story of meeting 'the righteous and good God' in order to 'excite men's minds and affections toward him'.<sup>6</sup> Thus, our relationship with those to whom we reach out with the gospel is not an adversarial relationship. Rather, we make the Augustinian assumption that the One whom non-Christians know as the Supreme Power, is the One whom we know more fully as the Trinity.<sup>7</sup> At this point the uniqueness of Christ must be introduced to the discussion with non-Christians because we believe we can only know the Trinity through the mediating work of Christ.<sup>8</sup> This is truly unique in the work of

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.1

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.1

<sup>5</sup> in his anti-pelagian writings, Augustine is clear that the will of a human does not seek God of its own volition. Thus, this is not a valid starting point. Rather, the outcome of the work of the Trinity (a person seeking God, at God's prompting) is a valid starting point. Williams, R., 'Augustine and the Psalms', in *Interpretation*, Vol. 58, No.1, Jan. 2004, p. 21

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *The Retractions*, 2.6 (427 AD), in Outler, A.C., (ed. and trans.), *Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion*, (London: SCM Press, 1960), 24.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 3.11; 3.9.

<sup>8</sup> 'When he said "The Glory of the only begotten of the Father", this means "Full of Truth" Indeed it was truth himself, God's only begotten Son.' *Enchiridion* 11.36.

'This then is the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord – that we are reconciled to God through the Mediator and receive the Holy Spirit so that we may be changed from enemies into sons.' Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 10.33.

Christ and therefore in Christian understanding and life. Given the close relationship between humanity and God, this mediation by a member of, and on behalf of, the Trinity is no surprise. It is no surprise because by positing a close relationship between God and humanity, we have already established an interpretive framework which points towards the unexpected loving nature of God. Thus, if we begin to challenge people's assumptions about God and God's relationship with humanity at the outset, then the uniqueness of Christ in restoring this relationship is not such a stumbling block when we necessarily arrive at the topic.

The necessity of the uniqueness of Christ is established by the previous discussion about the relationship between the Trinity and humanity. As far as the Christian evangelist is concerned, the Augustinian assumption that there exists a close relationship between God and humanity is essential. Indeed, a close relationship between God and humanity is the goal of our evangelistic efforts, (in terms of a post-conversion life). This holistic life-goal is found on Jesus' lips: love for God and love for one's neighbour.<sup>9</sup> For Christians, therefore, the uniqueness of Christ and his call on every life throughout the world today, establishes the goal of evangelism in a post-modern and pluralistic world.

### *A generous view of general revelation*

Given Augustine's view of the relationship between God and humanity, it is no surprise that Augustine has a high view of general revelation. Augustine welcomes the knowledge of the Creator that other faith systems recognise by means of creation, general revelation and people's consciences in particular. Augustine is open to affirming points of commonality between the Christian faith and other faiths with reference to elements in creation. However, he makes it clear that general revelation serves only to point to God's and Jesus' words. Therefore it is not sufficient

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<sup>9</sup> 'Whoever thinks that he understands the divine Scripture or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and our neighbour does not understand it at all.' Augustine, *De Doct. Christ.* 1.36.40. Quoted from a translation by D.W. Robertson, *Saint Augustine: On Christian Doctrine*, The Library of Liberal Arts 80, (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1958) cited in K. Froehlich, 'Take Up and Read,' in *Interpretation*, Vol. 58, No.1, January 2004, p. 11.

on its own.<sup>10</sup> This means that Augustine interacts with the outworkings of general revelation in terms of other belief systems. As a direct consequence of this, Augustine interacts carefully and thoughtfully with the religious and philosophical world around him.<sup>11</sup> This is a great example to us: we need to take the time to find out the beliefs of others, rather than dismissing them outright. Augustine takes the time to read the 'books of the Platonists'; how many of us today have made the effort to read the Qu'ran or Buddhist texts? Surely our interaction with others, and thus our opportunity to present the uniqueness of Christ, will be limited if we cannot engage with the results of general revelation in the lives of other people.

In the evangelistic context when we have to grapple with the beliefs of others, an Augustinian approach to the uniqueness of Christ in terms of general revelation can arise without too much effort. Augustine believed that the image of God in humanity may be illuminated through the Wisdom of God, the Son.<sup>12</sup> This wisdom is available 'to inner eyes that are healthy and pure'.<sup>13</sup> However, due to human fallenness and lack of pure vision,<sup>14</sup> the result is that humanity's 'eyes are weak and unclean',<sup>15</sup> and our minds are in darkness.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, Wisdom necessarily accommodated itself to humanity's fallenness and 'was prepared to be seen by their eyes of flesh'.<sup>17</sup> As a result of this, through the incarnation, we see what God really looks like. This is because he is God, the only one to whom general revelation had been signifying and pointing. Thus Christ is unique, and no other one can fulfil this function.<sup>18</sup> At the Incarnation,

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<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 10.14; on the relationship between neo-Platonist views of God and the Trinity, see *Confessions* 7.9.13–7.9.15). See also *Confessions* 7.9.16ff on his growing understanding of God.

<sup>11</sup> See how he deals with this in both the structure of *City of God* and the content of this work.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine treats Illumination in *Soliloquies* 1.8.15, *The Teacher* 11.38, *On free Will* 1.6.15. Cited in R.H. Weaver, 'Reading the Signs', in *Interpretation*, Vol. 58, No.1, Jan. 2004, 28–41, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> *De Doctrin.* 1.12.11 R.H. cited in Weaver, p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> *De Doctrin.* 1.9.9, cited in Weaver, p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> *De Doctrin.* 1.12.11 cited in Weaver, p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> Augustine defines darkness as: 'darkness is the foolish minds of men, blinded by depraved desires and unbelief', Augustine, *The Trinity*, 4.1.3.

<sup>17</sup> *De Doctrin.* 1.12.11 cited in Weaver, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Weaver correctly summarises this unique aspect of Christ in Augustine's thought as: 'The humanity of Christ is to be used as the means of access to the deity of Christ. It is the only true sign that is accurate in its pointing because it is joined to the that to which it points, the Trinity.' Weaver, p. 33.

therefore, we see the intersection between general revelation and God. Thus, general revelation's signifying function is relativised because Jesus alone enlightens the minds of humanity so that we can follow the path to God which is Jesus himself.<sup>19</sup> The incarnation is thus 'the pavement under our feet along which we could return home'.<sup>20</sup> The model discussed above demonstrates that by engaging with general revelation and moving to revelation in Christ, an Augustinian model leads to the uniqueness of Christ and a return to God.

### *Pride as humanity's problem*

Augustine believed that pride lay at the centre of sin.

What is the origin of our evil will but pride? For 'pride is the beginning of sin'. And what is pride but the craving for undue exaltation? And this is undue exaltation, when the soul abandons him to him it ought to cleave as its end, and becomes an end in itself.<sup>21</sup>

'Pride' is language that we can employ today for 'sin'. The word 'pride' is more helpful in a postmodern and pluralist context than the word 'sin'. There are several reasons for this 'pride' is a more recognisable phenomena, both at an interpersonal and international level, than is the concept of sin. 'Sin' has unfortunately become both abstract (despite its obvious consequences) and offensive (though people may find it difficult to state the reason for the offence at the word). From a personal point of view, the non-Christian is more likely to find it easier to recognise pride in themselves than to recognise sin. It is more probable people will not only recognise, but also own, their pride than it is for them to own their sin. Augustine, therefore, provides us with helpful language when he describes the nature of sin as pride.

<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, 4.1.3.

<sup>20</sup> *De Doctrin.* 1.17.16, cited in Weaver, p. 33. Augustine also states that 'Even the Lord himself, insofar as he was prepared to be the way for us, did not wish us to hold onto him but pass along ... temporal things, even those he took to himself and carried for our salvation ... to run eagerly along and through them, and so deserve to be swiftly and finally conveyed to him himself ... at the right hand of the Father.'

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 14.13.13.

Augustine also helps us when he exposes the outworking of pride in terms of other belief systems. People do not satisfy themselves with God. Rather, they try to satisfy themselves with 'their own imaginings, not your [God's] truth'.<sup>22</sup> The link between sin, 'these imaginings', and other religions lies in the fact that the Devil 'puffs man up with false philosophy or entangles him in sacrilegiously sacred rites'.<sup>23</sup> Augustine gives us a helpful starting point for conversations with non-Christians when he encourages the use of pride in terms of our relationship to God, and therefore our need for Jesus.<sup>24</sup> Pride is a helpful starting point because the consequences of pride are clearly visible in our time. In particular, the close relationship between pride, anxiety and low self-esteem provides a starting point for discussion with non-Christians. These prevalent and persistent human problems arise due to our lack of relationship to God and our neighbour.<sup>25</sup> This is a valuable insight with regard to pride in a post-modern culture. Our culture is obsessed with, and at the same time disappointed with, the self. We can engage with people's struggle with self-regard as an entry point to the discussion of pride, sin and the need for grace in Christ. We can discuss anxiety and self-esteem and point to pride and its visible consequences in relation to not enjoying God, our neighbour, the world and ourselves.<sup>26</sup> We therefore have to take seriously the major issues facing people's lives at the same time as we point people to the fundamental issue in their own lives.

The discussion thus engages people at the level of a major life issue and moves to the fundamental issue: sin. A discussion of this issue will have to take into account the fact that postmodernism feeds off the influence of

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<sup>22</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, 4, Prologue 1

<sup>23</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, 4.3.13.

<sup>24</sup> Though Aquinas does not use the word pride, he reflects the result of the prideful 'replacement of God with self' as set out in Romans 1, when he points to the result of sin in terms of people's minds: 'through sin man's mind withdrew from subjection to God'. T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2.164.1, cited in T.D. Cooper, *Sin, Pride and Self-Acceptance*, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003) 42.

<sup>25</sup> This is because true self understanding and self regard can only occur in the context of love for God and love for our neighbour because for this we have been created. R. Niebhur, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 1.150, 1.183, cited in T.D. Cooper, *Sin, Pride and Self-Acceptance*, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 35–37

<sup>26</sup> See N. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) on this extension of love for God and neighbour.

humanistic psychotherapy. This philosophy has taught Western society that 'there is no innate selfishness, self-centeredness, or inordinate pleasure seeking'.<sup>27</sup> Here we see a situation which has points of contact with the Pelagian controversy which Augustine faced<sup>28</sup> and therefore an Augustinian theology is most appropriate today. Augustine reminds us that though humanistic views might call us to forget sin and to pretend we live in an Edenic state (and have no need for Jesus), we know the reason that people did not remain in harmony with God, each other and the garden was due to pride. Augustine strongly reminds us, therefore, that pride and its effects must be overcome before harmony with God and our neighbour can be re-established.

As a result the grounds have been laid for a further aspect of the uniqueness of Christ: his mediating actions. Augustine believed that Christ's mediating role between God and humanity pardons and washes away sin.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the death and resurrection of Christ are essential to Jesus' uniqueness and the human pride problem. Jesus alone brings forgiveness of sins and justification.<sup>30</sup> In terms of anxiety and issues of the self, only the resurrection of Christ brings the resurrection and healing of our own body and soul,<sup>31</sup> as well as healing and safety to our wills.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> T.D. Cooper, *Sin, Pride and Self-Acceptance*, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 47.

<sup>28</sup> Cooper notes very strong parallels between Rogerian philosophy and Pelagian theology. See Cooper, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> 'That one sin ... cannot be pardoned and washed away except through "the one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus", who alone could be born in such a way as not to need to be reborn'. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 14.48, quoting 1 Tim. 2:5.

<sup>30</sup> 'The death of Christ crucified is nothing other than the likeness of the forgiveness of sins – so that in the very same sense in which the death is real, so also is the forgiveness of our sins real, and in the same sense in which his resurrection is real, so also in us is there authentic justification'. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 14.52.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, 4. Prologue 1.

<sup>32</sup> 'Evil is done away with ... by healing the nature which has been spoilt and by making straight what had become twisted ... the will spoils itself, it can be restored only by him who had the power to give it. Hence the truth says, 'If the Son has made you free, then in the truth you will be free', which is the same thing as saying 'If the Son has made you safe and whole, then indeed you will be safe and whole', Augustine, *City of God*, 14.11.

## *Grace as the context for self-knowledge and the knowledge of God*

One particularly attractive aspect of Augustine's theology is that he proposed grace as the context in which we should establish the uniqueness of Christ. Outler is correct to point out that 'the central theme in all Augustine's writings is the sovereign God of grace and the sovereign grace of God'.<sup>33</sup> In Augustine's thought, grace is defined as 'God's freedom ... to act in love beyond human understanding or control; to act in creation, judgement, and redemption; to give his Son freely as Mediator and Redeemer ... Grace is God's unmerited love and favour'.<sup>34</sup> This being the case, there are strong reasons for following Augustine's lead today. In our conversations about God we need to highlight his grace. This is a warm and engaging doctrine which invites the pluralist and postmodern person into discussion. Grace initially invites, rather than rejects. Grace means that God has, can, and will act in ways which are much better and greater than we may expect. It transforms the common view that God is basically distant and unloving.

### *The need for confession/honesty/'Being Real', without becoming discouraged*

Our theological engagement with postmodernism must deal with people 'being real' with God. Augustinian theology recognises that people *want* to be known by God and know him. At the point of 'being real' or 'getting real' with God, the acknowledgement of human pride converges with humanity's basic desire to know God. Augustine calls this confession:<sup>35</sup>

*confiteri* [which] means to acknowledge, to God, the truth one knows about God. To confess then is to praise and glorify God; it is an exercise in self-knowledge and true humility in the atmosphere of grace and reconciliation.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Outler, (ed.), Augustine: *Confessions and Enchiridion*, 14–15.

<sup>34</sup> Outler, (ed.), Augustine: *Confessions and Enchiridion*, 14–15.

<sup>35</sup> The confession discussed above refers to the second form of confession, the first is 'the free acknowledgement, before God, of the truth one knows about oneself – and this obviously meant, for Augustine, the 'confession of sins.' But at the same time, and more importantly, Outler, (ed.), Augustine: *Confessions and Enchiridion*, 19.

<sup>36</sup> Augustine: *Confessions and Enchiridion*, 19.

Self-knowledge in the light of knowing God is extremely refreshing in a confused climate. Although the language of confession may not be appropriate today, the language of 'getting real' or 'being true' can be employed appropriately with reference to the definition of confession given earlier. That is, 'getting real' or 'being true' can be infused with the meaning that Augustine gave to the term 'confession.' As Christians, we call people to be real/true with both God and themselves. If God is at work in people's lives, the reality of pride and sin will become apparent when people are honest in the light of God and Christ. We need to bear in mind that this is immensely challenging. However, Augustine's context of grace offers hope. People should not be discouraged in the light of their shortcomings before God, rather, people who need to be 'persuaded how much God loves us, in case out of sheer despair we lacked the courage to reach up to him'.<sup>37</sup>

Thus a theology of grace will be needful in order to move a person beyond the realisation of pride. This realisation of 'what sort of people we are that he loves', serves to prevent people from taking 'pride in our own worth, and so bounce even further away from him and sink even more under our own strength'.<sup>38</sup> Augustine establishes, therefore, that people need to look for a way beyond pride which will lead to 'eternity, truth, and happiness'<sup>39</sup> within the context of the grace of God and their own inability. Here the grounds for the incarnation have been established because 'God's grace became incarnate in Jesus Christ', and God's grace also established 'the ground of Christian humility by abolishing the ground of human pride'.<sup>40</sup>

In the context of postmodern crisis and pluralist confusion, the incarnation guards against fear and discouragement as people seek, find and then continue to walk with God after their conversion. The incarnation of Christ means that God is not distant from us, rather he has in Christ, experienced and voiced the fullness of human suffering. Not only are these experiences of Christ reassuring and significant aspects of the ground of intimacy with God, these expressions of God are available to the

<sup>37</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, 4.1.2.

<sup>38</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, 4.1.2.

<sup>39</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, 4.1.2

<sup>40</sup> Outler, (ed.), *Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion*, 14–15.



believer through the Psalms.<sup>41</sup> We know Jesus to the extent that we can have ownership of his feelings and actions in the Psalms. Conversely, God in Christ can completely know the state of the reader in all circumstances.<sup>42</sup> Through the incarnation God has bridged the existential gap between the Creator and the created. Thus, the believer is never alienated from God ontologically, nor are they alienated from God existentially.

This speaks volumes to the postmodern individual whose current experience determines the reality of God. By anticipating and experiencing their life in Christ, God is always in the present in the experience of the believer and cannot be excluded from their life even in times of darkness. Augustine applies this not only to the individual but to the body of believers too. Thus, the postmodern focus on the 'tribal group' or group consensus is also met in Augustine's theology of Jesus speaking in all of Scripture as the Head of the Body, as well as speaking as the incarnate Son.<sup>43</sup> He addresses corporate believers by stating: 'Do not hear anything spoken in the person of Christ as if it had nothing to do with you who are members of the Body of Christ'.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, at the point of confession, Augustine has made a strong and integrated appeal for the uniqueness of Christ by providing the previous theological framework within which this discussion can take place.

In summary, we can say that Augustine's theological method of engagement with a confused world is relevant to our situation. It seeks

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<sup>41</sup> Augustine, *Enarrat.*, Ps. 30 ii 3–4; 74.4; 142.4. The current Christian interpretation of the Psalms is based upon the double hermeneutic principle outlined in *Enarrationes* exposition of Ps. 140, where Jesus identifies himself as the Body of believers as the Head of the Body 'why are you persecuting me?' as well as the Incarnate Son 'the least of the brethren'. The basis for this is that Jesus is the Word whose voice is heard in all Scripture. R. Williams, 'Augustine and the Psalms', in *Interpretation*, Vol. 58, No.1, Jan 2004, 19–20.

<sup>42</sup> Augustine states that in Ps. 66 the cry is 'God appealing to God for mercy' Reflecting on this in the light of Augustine's Trinitarian and Incarnation theology, Williams is correct to state that 'the eternal difference in the Trinitarian life between the Father and the Son is what makes possible the identification of the Son with even the most radical state of "otherness" from God or separation from God'.

<sup>43</sup> Augustine, *Enarrat.*, Ps. 30 ii.i.3, 4, 56.1, 62.2, 68l and ii passim, 74.4, 87.14, 90, l and ii, passim, 140.5–7. Cited in, R. Williams, 'Augustine and the Psalms', in *Interpretation*, Vol. 58, No.1, Jan. 2004, p.19.

<sup>44</sup> *Enarrat.* Ps. 143.1, cited in, R. Williams, 'Augustine and the Psalms', in *Interpretation*, Vol. 58, No.1, Jan. 2004, p. 21

theological starting points which are biblical, yet resonate with a multi-faith and individualistic environment. The emphasis on grace and the positive work of God in the lives of those who are seeking him provides a context within which pride and our status before God can be discussed in a manner which encourages hope in finding Jesus. Augustine draws many of these threads together when he says:

take a man who has been roused by the warmth of the Holy Spirit and has already woken up to God ... he has taken a look at himself in God's light, and discovered himself, and realised that his own sickness cannot be compounded with God's cleanliness ... and he prays with all confidence once he has received the free gratuitous pledge of health through the one and only saviour and enlightener granted us by God.<sup>45</sup>

## Section 2: An Augustinian Manner of Engagement

### *An honourable manner*

As evangelists and people who teach the faith in our day, we receive a great help from Augustine with reference to the manner by which we engage people who hold a differing view to our own. Referring to the teacher, Augustine advocates a *life* which commends the gospel to others. In our context, we must both firmly promote the truth and express it in a godly manner. Augustine gives us some very valuable insights:

For while he [the teacher] pursues an upright life, he takes care to maintain a good reputation as well providing things honest in the sight of God and men, fearing God and caring for men ... [Paul] says to Timothy: 'Charging them before the Lord that they strive not about words to no profit, but to the subverting of the hearers.' Now this does not mean that, when adversaries oppose the truth, we are to say nothing in defence of the truth ... To strive about words is not to be careful about the way to overcome error by truth, but to be anxious that your mode of expression be preferred to that of another.

<sup>45</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, 4. Prologue 1

The man who does not strive about words ... uses words with no other purpose than to make the truth plain, pleasing and effective; for not even love itself, which is the end of the commandment and the fulfilling of the law, can be rightly exercised unless the objects of love are true and not false.<sup>46</sup>

Augustine encourages us not to be swept away by the ideas of our age, rather, to uphold the truth in a manner which is honest and caring.

### *Prayer before entering discussions about the gospel*

When a person engages with others on the uniqueness of Christ, they need to pray beforehand, as they will 'succeed more by piety in prayer than by gifts of oratory'. The Christian should 'pray for himself, and for those he is to address, before he attempts to speak'.<sup>47</sup> Prayer thus reminds us that our evangelism is like our very being: dependant upon God. Only God can move the inner hearts of people and we must pray that he be active in the lives of those we invite into fellowship in Christ. In a postmodern context when the opinions, feelings and even personhood of those we are trying to reach are continually shifting, it is sometimes difficult to know where to start and what to say. Why not heed the following advice from Augustine:

For in to every matter of faith and love there are many things that may be said, and many ways of saying them, who knows what it is expedient at a given moment for us to say, or to be heard saying except God who knows the hearts of all?<sup>48</sup>

We should follow Augustine's example today, and be people of prayer if we are to be effective evangelists in a confused and often confusing climate.

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<sup>46</sup> Quoting 2 Tim. 2:14b: 'and charge them before the Lord, to avoid disputing about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers' *On Christian Doctrine*, 4.28.61

<sup>47</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 4.16.15.

<sup>48</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 4.14.15.

## *Augustine believes we should be expectant and persevering*

Augustine does not give up on anyone as a potential believer. He reflects the Bible when he asks God the following rhetorical question: 'Are there not many men who, out of a deeper pit of darkness ... return to thee – who draw near to thee and are illuminated by that light which gives those who receive to power from thee to become thy sons?'<sup>49</sup> The fact that people are caught up in postmodernism and different religions does not place them beyond God's reach. We need to persevere even in the face of massive human resistance to the claims of the uniqueness of Christ: 'For God by his grace turns men's wills to the true faith when they are not only averse to it, but adverse.'<sup>50</sup>

## *We should offer Scripture positively*

Given Augustine's understanding of God as relational, it is no surprise that within the relational context of the divine-human relationship, 'Augustine defined the function of the Bible as a privileged means of God's interaction with humanity'.<sup>51</sup> Augustine believed that the aim of Scripture was to move people beyond their pride, and into a loving relationship with God, within which he is enjoyed.<sup>52</sup> The function of Scripture is to promote 'the love of a Being which is to be enjoyed and of a Being that can share that enjoyment with us'.<sup>53</sup> What an encouragement to those to whom we offer Scripture! I believe that if we offer Scripture as a means to enjoying God, and *know and mean* it by virtue of experience, we are much more likely to receive a positive response.

<sup>49</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.4.9.

<sup>50</sup> Augustine, *De Dono Perseverantiae*, 10.53 (428 AD), in A.C. Outler, (ed. and trans.), *Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion*, (London: SCM Press, 1960), 25.

<sup>51</sup> K. Froehlich, 'Take Up and Read' in *Interpretation*, Vol. 58, No. 1, Jan. 2004, p. 9. See Augustine, *Conf.* 13.15.16–18 and Bernard, R.W., 'The Rhetoric of God in the Figurative Exegesis of Augustine', in *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective: Studies in Honour of Karlfried Froehlich on his Sixtieth Birthday*, M.S. Burrows, and P. Rorem, (eds), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 88–99.

<sup>52</sup> F. Young, 'Augustine's hermeneutics and Postmodern Criticism,' in *Interpretation*, Vol. 58, No. 1, Jan 2004, p. 55.

<sup>53</sup> *De Doctr. Christ.* 1.35.39, cited in Froehlich, 'Take Up and Read,' p. 11 Augustine defines enjoyment as 'consists in clinging to something lovingly for its own sake'. *De Doctr. Christ.* 1.3.3–1.4.4, cited in R.H. Weaver, 'Reading the Signs,' in *Interpretation*, Vol. 58, No. 1, p. 30.

*We need to be confident in God's Words as God's means for conversion*

Although Augustine worked from a very firm conviction on the inspiration of Scripture, his belief was that the God-inspired nature of Scripture was personal rather than speculative and dogmatic. Augustine's personal experience was that rather than placing himself as the authority over Scripture, he was exegeted by Scripture. Froehlich states this as:

[Augustine also] regarded the inspiration of Scripture as a matter of personal discovery, not doctrine. Its truth imposed itself on him ... the words hit home. Rather than the teacher of rhetoric interpreting the Bible, the Bible interpreted him through the providential action of God's Spirit.<sup>54</sup>

With reference to this personally explicative or illustrative nature of Scripture, Augustine is also interpreted as believing that 'We mortals no longer make judgements about truth and meaning; rather, the truth and meaning of God judges us and transforms us.'<sup>55</sup> Therefore, by means of God's words, 'theology relativises the self'.<sup>56</sup> This relativising the self is desperately needed in our time where the self rules selfishly.

Augustine ensured this relativising of the self was not at the whim of the reader. He pointed out that there is control over the interpretation of Scripture because Scripture has a *terminus*. This means that we need to ensure the non-Christian reader must have in mind the two-fold interpretive matrix for Scripture: the purpose is to grow love for God and love for our neighbour. Thus, in Augustine's mind, the aim is to convert people.<sup>57</sup> This is because God's words are 'the word of Christ, of which it is written, 'Faith comes by hearing and hearing the Word of God'.<sup>58</sup> Though the critique may be made that the claim that Scripture has the fundamental aim of teaching love for God and neighbour is absolutist, this

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<sup>54</sup> K. Froehlich, 'Take Up and Read,' p. 7

<sup>55</sup> F. Young, 'Augustine's hermeneutics and Postmodern Criticism,' in *Interpretation*, Vol. 58, No.1, Jan 2004, p. 54.

<sup>56</sup> F. Young, 'Augustine's hermeneutics and Postmodern Criticism,' in *Interpretation*, Vol. 58, No.1, p. 54.

<sup>57</sup> F. Young, 'Augustine's hermeneutics and Postmodern Criticism,' in *Interpretation*, Vol. 58, No.1, Jan. 2004, p. 54.

<sup>58</sup> *Augustine, Enarratio in Psalm 119*, cited in A.D.R. Polman, 216.

offer is positive and not negative.<sup>59</sup>

Therefore we need to trust Scripture as God's chosen means for personal conversion to a personal God. Furthermore, we must entrust the non-Christian into the hands of God as his Scriptures exegete the reader as the Holy Spirit works in their life.

Hence in this section, we can see that Augustine provides many helpful pointers in terms of the manner and means by which we speak to the world around us. The task of promoting the uniqueness of Christ is greatly enhanced by the manner with which we conduct ourselves before God and people.

In conclusion to this paper, we can say that Augustine provides many theological and methodological points for engaging a postmodern and pluralist world in 2005. We will be greatly helped if we follow his lead in our endeavours to establish the uniqueness of Christ. The theological matrix provided by Augustine encompasses many points for relevant theological engagement with the world. When applied as a system, these theological points converge to prompt the non-Christian to 'get real' with God and return home to him through Christ. Augustine also recommends that we remove opposition to the uniqueness of Christ by our honourable manner, prayer, perseverance, offering Scripture positively and being confident in God's words as his means for conversion.

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<sup>59</sup> In *De Doctrina Christiana*

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# The Quest for the Historical Machen<sup>1</sup>

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**Joshua W. Jipp** is an M.Div. student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Illinois, and will be teaching Adjunct in the NT department at Northwestern College in St Paul for the 2005-06 school year.

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'The mantle of Warfield fell on J. Gresham Machen, and with it, a double portion of the polemic spirit'. So begins William Baird's introductory sentence to the work of Machen in his masterful second volume of *History of New Testament Research*.<sup>2</sup> Machen (1881–1937), along with his Old Princeton colleagues, most significantly Charles Hodge (1797–1878) and B.B. Warfield (1851–1921), has become a whipping boy for some American historians. Labelled as a fundamentalist for his strict views on biblical inerrancy, reprimanded for helping ignite the so-called 'Evangelical Enlightenment', condemned for his polemic personality, and ignored for an over emphasis on propositional truth, the modern Christian scholar may be tempted to ignore or even disparage Machen – the old curmudgeon. Yet to do so, would be to ignore the value of the lessons learned from Machen's struggles and to be content with faulty caricatures. The largely positive view of Machen which is found in a fairly recent history suggests that a re-evaluation of the received opinion on him may be in order.<sup>3</sup>

The significance of Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*,<sup>4</sup> and its implications for every generation, should be familiar territory for NT students.<sup>5</sup> His erudite defence of orthodox Christianity with respect to the continuity between the religion of Paul and Jesus, against the likes of

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1 Thanks to Dr Robert Yarbrough and TEDS student Amber Francis for their helpful comments on this essay.

2 William Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, Vol. 2: *From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 351.

3 David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary*, Vol. 2: *The Majestic Testimony 1869–1929* (Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), especially 221–35.

4 J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999 [1923]).

5 Note an attempt to remind us of its continuing significance in Darryl G. Hart, 'Christianity and Liberalism in a Postliberal Age', *WTJ* 56 (1994), 329–44.



Bousset, Wrede, and Ritschl, in *The Origin of Paul's Religion* remains a significant work for those concerned with Christian origins.<sup>6</sup> Machen's healthy obsession with the facts of history can be seen in his *The Virgin Birth of Christ*.<sup>7</sup> The virgin birth, along with the resurrection and other critical Christian doctrines, is not simply a matter for faith (contrast Barth) but a fact of history. To relegate the virgin birth exclusively to the realm of faith is to drive a disastrous Kantian wedge between faith and history. Christianity, according to Machen, was nothing if not based on historical facts. As a result, Machen's NT work was historical to the core. Liberalism's primary fault was that it had given up on the historical necessity of Christianity and had relegated science and religion to separate categories of knowledge. For Machen, separating faith and history could only lead to disastrous consequences. As a result, the Bible must be interpreted and read as a historical document since it is primarily a historical book. Machen criticised the chic German dialecticism of Karl Barth for its epistemological scepticism regarding history, which resulted in subjectivism.<sup>8</sup> He rejected Barth's scepticism regarding the modern historian's knowledge of first-century historical facts. Somewhat shockingly, Machen's NT methodology was quite close to that of Adolf von Harnack. They both sought to found Christianity on historical facts. What accounted for the major difference between the two was that Machen was open to the supernatural and Harnack closed.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps most foundational for Machen's work, and his defence of historic biblical Christianity, is his view of history, truth, and faith.<sup>10</sup> Yet even among evangelical historians it is precisely this aspect of Machen's thinking that has been most maligned. Charles Hodge wrote that 'to understand any theological system we must understand the philosophy that underlies it and gives it its peculiar form'.<sup>11</sup> Unashamedly, Machen and his colleagues supported a version of epistemology known as 'Scottish

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<sup>6</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978 [1921]).

<sup>7</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1930).

<sup>8</sup> See Annette G. Aubert, 'J. Gresham Machen and the Theology of Crisis' *WTJ* 64 (2002), 337–62; J. Gresham Machen, 'Karl Barth and "The Theology of Crisis"', *WTJ* 53 (1991), 197–207; Darryl G. Hart, 'Machen on Barth: Introduction to a Recently Uncovered Paper', *WTJ* 53 (1991), 189–96.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 348–49.

<sup>10</sup> See his work *What is Faith?* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991 [1925]).

<sup>11</sup> Charles Hodge, 'What is Christianity?' *PR* 32 (1860), 121.

Common Sense Realism' (SCSR). The roots of SCSR go back to the early 19th century.

In order to combat the scepticism of David Hume, Thomas Reid advocated this epistemology, ultimately indebted to the inductivism of Francis Bacon and the Newtonian view of the world, based on three essential components. First, the *universality* of epistemological foundations for knowledge was stressed as something that is common to all people. The second principle was the basic reliability of language as a medium for expressing truth and the external world. Thirdly, some degree of knowledge of the past was possible as a result of the reliability of testimonies based on memories.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, Machen never tired of stressing that Christianity was at root a historical faith. One did not begin with philosophic ideals (Hegel, F.C. Baur), with the personality of Jesus (Ritschl), or with Heideggerian existential principles (Bultmann). For Machen Paul's religion

was founded not upon what had always been true, but upon what had recently happened; not upon right ideas about God and His relations to the world, but upon one thing that God had done; not upon an eternal truth of the fatherhood of God, but upon the fact that God had chosen to become the Father of those who should accept the redemption offered by Christ.<sup>13</sup>

For Machen, faith was organically connected with history. As a result, the NT critic must be thoroughly committed to establishing and interpreting historical knowledge.<sup>14</sup> Thus, if Paul is some sort of second founder of Christianity who perverted the pure and simple teaching of Jesus, then historic Christianity must be abandoned. Theological liberalism, in order to save some form of Christianity, had separated theology from history and science in important respects. As a result Machen's primary aim in *Christianity and Liberalism* was to argue that liberalism, whatever it may be, as an outcome of its ahistorical tendencies and unscientific

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<sup>12</sup> See Darryl G. Hart, 'The Princeton Mind in the Modern World and the Common Sense of J. Gresham Machen', *WTJ* 46 (1984), 10–11.

<sup>13</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978 [1921], 22).

<sup>14</sup> See the introduction to Machen's *The New Testament: an Introduction to its Literature and History* W.J. Cook (ed.) (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976 [1914–1915]).

methodology was most definitely not historic Christianity.<sup>15</sup>

Though the connection has not been made publicly (at least as far as I am aware), there are some interesting similarities between Machen and the great Swiss scholar Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938) which may be helpful in reconsidering the received view on Machen.<sup>16</sup> Like Machen, Schlatter saw that NT theology and interpretation was a matter of 'seeing' and 'observing' the historical connectedness of the historical facts.<sup>17</sup> For Machen, the prerequisite for a good NT theologian was that he be a first century historian. Schlatter concurred, which explains his massive contribution to first century historical studies. As a result, it is not at all surprising that both Machen (see above) and Schlatter criticised Karl Barth's largely ahistorical exegesis and scepticism regarding the historical origins of Christianity. For Schlatter, 'the Letter to the Romans is for Barth a timeless, entirely modern, entirely contemporary word. All that is human, all that is historical, sinks away'.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Schlatter's opposition to the history of religions school can be seen quite clearly in his work on the Fourth Gospel. Exegeting the Fourth Gospel without recourse to parallels in pagan mystery religion literature or hypothesised pre-Christian Gnosticism, Schlatter argued for the Palestinian provenance for the work. His interpretation of the Fourth Gospel in light of first century Judaism instead of syncretistic Hellenism has been decisively vindicated by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>19</sup> Schlatter defended historic Christian orthodoxy from the remnants of Tübingen School influence, the history of religions school as embodied in Troeltsch and Wrede, and the Marcionite tendencies of his colleague at Berlin, Adolf von Harnack, whereas Machen's primary opponent was theological liberalism. Against the consensus of critical scholarship, Schlatter and Machen denied that first century Christianity was a product of an amalgamation of syncretistic

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<sup>15</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999 [1923]), 7.

<sup>16</sup> For orientation see the short biography by Werner Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter*, trans. R. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> For what follows see his essay 'The Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics', in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: The Contribution of William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter*, Robert Morgan (ed.) (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, 1973), 117–66.

<sup>18</sup> Adolf Schlatter 'Karl Barth's *Römberbrief*' in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 121.

<sup>19</sup> Adolf Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Johannes: Wie er spricht, denkt und glaubt. Ein Kommentar zum vierten Evangelium* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1960).

religion. Most importantly, Schlatter and Machen held in common the belief that true science and historical research were justified in a critical openness to the supernatural – to God’s working in history. Both concurred that the majority of critical scholarship’s NT methodological presuppositions were blindly indebted to Cartesian scepticism, in Schlatter’s words, ‘Atheistic Methods’.<sup>20</sup>

Machen did not, then, *a priori* rule out the possible material influence of the supernatural in the earthly and historical sphere. Taking the testimony of the biblical accounts at something like face value made better sense of the facts than the critical scholars’ reconstructions did. Further, as a result of his Augustinian adoption of ‘All truth is God’s truth’, Machen believed that facts had divinely intended significance.<sup>21</sup> In opposition to Kant (and most who have adopted some version of his epistemology), Machen posited that the human mind does not merely and necessarily impose its own categories of interpretation upon the evidence or the facts.<sup>22</sup> Rather, God has created the human mind in such a way that we are capable of discerning the true meaning of historical facts. Surprisingly, it has been George Marsden and Mark Noll who have come down the hardest upon Machen at this point. For Marsden, Machen has overestimated the power of rationality and has failed to account for the subjective tendencies of the interpreter’s point of view.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Marsden and Noll have criticised Machen’s (as well as his predecessors’) adoption of SCSR as culpable compliance with outmoded Enlightenment

<sup>20</sup> See his essay ‘Atheistic Methods in Theology’ now in Werner Neuser, *Adolf Schlatter: A Biography of German’s Premier Biblical Theologian*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 211–25.

<sup>21</sup> See George Marsden, ‘J. Gresham Machen, History and Truth’ *WTJ* 42 (1979–1980), 157–75.

<sup>22</sup> Comparing the epistemologies of Machen and his younger counterpart Cornelius Van Til would make for an interesting discussion. Van Til argued that the unregenerate human mind does indeed impose its own manmade constructs and categories upon the evidence. As a result of the noetic effects of sin, for Van Til, the unregenerate will always skew and misinterpret the evidence. For this reason his apologetic approach made little use of evidence as opposed to Machen.

<sup>23</sup> George Marsden, ‘Understanding J. Gresham Machen’, *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 11 (1990), 58–60.

epistemology.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, even the late Greg Bahnsen, a committed Orthodox Presbyterian pastor and teacher<sup>25</sup> and disciple of Cornelius Van Til, has criticised Machen's epistemology for being too evidentialist.<sup>26</sup>

Was Machen's epistemology, primarily its advocacy of SCSR, culpably indebted to the Enlightenment? I think we must answer with a resounding 'No!' Rather, Machen's confidence in the universality and absoluteness of truth, the trustworthiness of human language, and the reliability of memory follow (ironically in light of Bahnsen's critique of Machen) from his presuppositions concerning God's self-revelation to humanity in the Word of God. Machen correctly saw the fundamental importance of historical grammatical exegesis for letting the biblical authors speak for themselves.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in light of the fundamental reliability of human memory and language, Machen viewed the Gospel accounts as reliable first-hand eyewitness documents.

Recently Paul Helseth has argued convincingly that the historiographical consensus labelling Old Princeton as scholastic rationalists is almost completely wrong.<sup>28</sup> It appears that at least two factors have misinformed the consensus. First, despite Machen's emphasis upon 'historical facts' as the foundation of Christianity, he did not fail to account for the subjective point of view of the interpreter. Machen knew that a right understanding of Christianity required more than laying forth the facts and the evidence. It will not do to dismiss Machen as a positivist at this point. For Machen, the truth of the historical claims of Christianity could be attained by anyone who was 'truly scientific'. The truth of Christianity does not change, regardless of whether one accepts its claims or not. It is, however,

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<sup>24</sup> See Noll's chapter on 'The Evangelical Enlightenment' in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 83–107. Also note Marsden's chapter 'The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia' in Alvin Plantinga (ed.) *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame: University Press, 1983), 219–64.

<sup>25</sup> Machen was, of course, the primary founder of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

<sup>26</sup> Greg Bahnsen, 'Machen, Van Til, and the Apologetical Tradition of the OPC', Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble, eds., in *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: The Committee for the Historian of the OPC, 1986).

<sup>27</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991 [1925]), 24.

<sup>28</sup> See especially his most recent article, "'Re-Imagining" the Princeton Mind: Postconservative Evangelicalism, Old Princeton, and the Rise of Neo-Fundamentalism' *JETS* 45 (2002), 427–50.

only the Christian, the one who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, who is able best to operate scientifically.<sup>29</sup> Just because the noetic effects of sin cause interpreters to twist and impose their *interpretation of the evidence*, this does not necessarily mean that the objective truth-value of the historical facts is subjective or unknowable. Though the demands of the day called for an emphasis upon the intellectual aspects of the faith that had come under attack by the likes of Harry Emerson Fosdick and others, Machen did not deny that the whole person was involved in an acceptance of the truth of Christianity, nor did he deny the noetic effects of sin upon man.<sup>30</sup>

We are not ignoring the emotional and volitional aspects of faith; we are not denying that as a matter of fact, in humanity as it is actually constituted, an intellectual conviction of the truth of Christianity is always accompanied by a change of heart and a new direction for the will ... But for a thing to be true is one thing and for it to be recognized as true is another; and in order that Christianity may be recognized as true by men upon this earth the blinding effects of sin must be removed ... Regeneration, or the new birth, therefore, does not stand in opposition to a truly scientific attitude towards the evidence, but on the contrary is necessary in order that the truly scientific attitude may be attained.<sup>31</sup>

As a result, it is admittedly somewhat strange to read, 'In their case [non-Christians], the limit was only in the extent of their knowledge, not in quality'.<sup>32</sup> Oddly, after noting Machen's accounting for the noetic effects of sin Marsden summarises Machen, 'So all they lacked were some crucial facts'. That Machen's epistemology was not a form of Enlightenment rationalism may also be seen in his appeal to 'true science'. As opposed to the limited Troeltschian principle of defining history as that

<sup>29</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991 [1925]), 130.

<sup>30</sup> Clearly Machen was not as Kuyperian in his approach to apologetics as Cornelius Van Til and his notion of the 'antithesis' between believers and non-believers. OPC hardliners still frequently debate over whether Machen belongs in the evidentialist camp (supposedly Warfield) or the presuppositionalist camp (Van Til).

<sup>31</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1991 [1925]).

<sup>32</sup> George M. Marsden, 'J. Gresham Machen, History, and Truth', *WTJ* 42 (1979–80), 171.

which can be studied under the auspices of physical causation, Machen advocated an epistemology and form of historical research that was broad enough to include the supernatural.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, Paul Helseth has argued that a faulty caricature of Machen has stemmed from scholars' failure to see that Machen 'recognised that science is a moral rather than a merely rational enterprise precisely because the perception and conception of the intellect is itself conditioned by the moral character of the "whole man".'<sup>34</sup> This explains why Machen, though one might never know it from some interpreters, placed such a heavy emphasis upon reckoning with the noetic effects of sin. Regeneration by the Holy Spirit is necessary in order to sanctify the presuppositions that control a man's epistemology and historical research. Thus, for Machen, epistemology is an inherently moral and not merely a rational issue.

Second: Machen's view of language and memory is entirely compatible with a biblical worldview. Despite the effects of sin upon all human senses, it is by no means wrong to trust human communication or memory – unless we have good reason to do so in particular instances. Global scepticism regarding the trustworthiness of language and memory ultimately leads to deconstructionist and radical reader-response hermeneutics. As Kevin Vanhoozer and others have argued, trusting and relying upon human testimony is a necessary and serious form of intellectual activity and research.<sup>35</sup> Within the last twenty years or so Nicholas Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga (the two leading advocates of Reformed epistemology) have advocated an epistemology that is very much in line with the three central tenets of SCSR as seen above. Arguing that belief in God is properly basic, Plantinga argues: 'What the Reformers meant to hold is that it is entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all; in this respect belief in God resembles belief in the past, in the existence of other persons, and in the existence of material objects'.<sup>36</sup> I think one may justifiably wonder why George Marsden, Mark Noll, and others have

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<sup>33</sup> See especially J. Gresham Machen, 'The Relation of Religion to Science and Philosophy', *PTR* 24 (1926).

<sup>34</sup> Paul Kjos Helseth, 'The Apologetical Tradition of the OPC: A Reconsideration' *WTJ* 60 (1998), 117–18.

<sup>35</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2002), 257–74.

<sup>36</sup> Alvin Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God' in *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame: University Press, 1983), 17.

withheld critique from Reformed Epistemology's adoption of a form of SCSR. Ironically, Marsden blames Old Princeton for an over-confidence in SCSR and a failure to account for man's subjective point of view in a work edited by Plantinga and Wolterstorff.<sup>37</sup> If no critique is forthcoming, a revocation of their critique of Machen, and Old Princeton in general, should be in order.

Furthermore, it may be argued that Machen's NT methodology bears some striking similarities with the somewhat recently advocated 'critical realism' of Ben Meyer and N.T. Wright. Wright defines critical realism as:

a way of describing the process of 'knowing' that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence 'realism'), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence 'critical').<sup>38</sup>

On the one hand, knowledge of reality is possible. Yet on the other, knowledge is never divorced from the point of view of the knower. Thus, positivism (the idea that one can have objective, unmediated truth) and phenomenism (knowledge is only of my own sense-data) should be rejected. For Wright the strict dichotomy between 'objective' (positivism) and 'subjective' truth (phenomenism) must be abandoned as naïve and unhelpful.<sup>39</sup> Clearly, this much is neither revolutionary nor novel. Furthermore, Wright's critical realism is, *at this point*, utterly dependent upon the same principles as SCSR and, *in broad outline*, similar to the work of J. Gresham Machen. For example, both agree that knowledge of external reality is accessible to the historian; both are unwilling to exclude the possibility of the supernatural within history; both must, to some extent, affirm the trustworthiness of memory, language, and testimony. Furthermore, both agree that the path to knowledge of external reality is one of hypothesis and verification. The hypothesis/verification method permeates Wright's work on Christian origins. The same can be said for

<sup>37</sup> George M. Marsden, 'The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia' in *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame: University Press, 1983).

<sup>38</sup> N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Fortress: Minneapolis, 1992), 35.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, 44–45.



Machen's historical work on Paul in *The Origin of Paul's Religion*. Machen believes that his hypothesis, which finds continuity between the Jesus tradition and Paul's theology, explains the historical documented evidence better than the hypothesis of Bousset, Wrede, Ritschl, and other critical scholars who have, in the words of Schlatter, 'atheistic methods'. Where Wright's critical realism presents an especially helpful corrective to epistemology (and NT methodology) is in his insistence that the hypothesis/verification model must work within a larger story / worldview.<sup>40</sup> For Machen, the God of the patriarchs, as seen in historic Christianity, was the larger story/worldview which endowed the historical facts with meaning and significance. Certainly, critical realism, having gone through the purifying forces of postmodern hermeneutics, offers a more chastened and nuanced epistemology than Machen did. Nevertheless, the similarity between Machen and Wright's critical realism suggests we rethink the received opinion on Machen.

Perhaps it is time for some of the stock criticism of Machen (and Old Princeton) to end. From Machen we learn that NT scholars need not accept the implicit Kantian principles which permeate NT scholarship and the history of the discipline, for their own methodology. In Machen we have an outstanding example of one who helped to uphold historic Christianity by interaction with the best of critical scholarship. For Machen, Christianity had its foundation in 'historical facts' – not in religious experience or philosophic ideals. If God has vested memory, language, testimony, and reason with a significant degree of potential reliability and trustworthiness – and if he has acted to reveal himself within history – then something resembling J.Gresham Machen's epistemology may be critically appropriated by NT scholars as a template for a fruitful methodology.

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<sup>40</sup> See the helpful assessment of Wright's critical realism by Thorsten Moritz, *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*.

# Black Religious Experience

## – Conversations on Double Consciousness and the Work of Grant Shockley

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Charles R. Foster and Fred Smith

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**Joe Kapolyo** is the Principal of All Nations Christian College, Ware.

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**F**oster and Smith set out to outline a 'proposal for a view of religious education emerging from the heritage and experience of the black church' (11). The makings of the proposal are set out in Section 4 (125–52). The history of the African American Christian religious experience is traced through the intellectual journey of Grant Shockley whose writings, and the reflections of Foster and Smith on his works, form the basis of this book.

The book sets out the basic problem that African Americans have lived with since the first African slave was forcibly taken to America; double consciousness. W.E.B. Dubois coined this expression in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second sight in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's souls by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels this twoness, – an American and a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Over the centuries, this double-consciousness, always seeing oneself through the eyes of others, white people, who have no real respect for you as a human being, has created problems of identity for African Americans. African American experience is dominated by being black in a 'white-oriented and white-dominated society, which imputes inferiority to non-

whiteness'. The consequences of this status quo not only include discrimination and segregation but inferior social, economic, political, cultural and educational status (30). This affects jobs, equal opportunities, and often creates for black people an identity that 'dehumanizes, depersonalizes, dissocializes and disempowers'. The African American experience is one of oppression, deprivation, exclusion, alienation and rejection (most of Shockley's work was written during the difficult years of segregation in the United States).

Section 1 deals with the African American Christian experience, or more specifically, the Christian education of the African Americans, which for a long time tended to reinforce negative Negro stereotypes. Racism determined what kind of religious education was adequate for black people. The corporate conscience of the white church was muzzled by racist tendencies and sensibilities. 'The main thrust and dominant motif in the Christian education that was offered to blacks during slavery and especially from 1800 onwards was not "religious" or "Christian" basically, but rather sub-Christian and racist' (39).

Section 2 deals with liberationist movements not only for Black Americans but for all black people in all continents of the world, especially Latin America and Africa. The section traces the development from the cry of the oppressed to the liberation programmes and especially the hope that Christian education held potential as an enabling means for the realisation of 'love, power and justice for all people'. Unfortunately, the reaction of the 'white' churches to the long struggle for acceptance of the black population had been at best paternalistic, but overall the church had 'acquiesced in segregation, failed to identify, define, or articulate critically or challenge effectively a single aspect of the problem of racism faced by almost 15 per cent of its nation population, 80 per cent of whom were fellow Christians' (69). This led directly to the marriage between African American Christian aspirations and the Black Power movement leading to Black Theology and a polarisation of attitudes between the black and white churches.

Black theology issued a challenge to the Black church to get involved in the struggle for selfhood of the oppressed black people. It opened up the possibility that Christian education could articulate a new way of looking at oneself which would lead to a new future for the oppressed masses. Black theology forced on to the table a black agenda. Freedom is not something to be handed down to 'me' but something I create. Christian education must therefore move from simply being cognitive and

informative to the task of transformation. Black theology insisted that religious education programmes must 'grow out of and centre around the experiences, relationships, and situational dilemmas that black people face in their day-to-day struggle to survive, develop, and progress in an often hostile, uncaring, majority-dominated society' (73).

Section 3 deals with a 'Quest for a Model' of a Christian education that would make sense of the experiences of Black people in America. The basic sources for any such model were clear in Shockley's mind. They were Black Theology, liberationist teaching, and especially the deprivation and underprivileged experience of life in the inner city. Shockley was determined to develop a model that would move the African American Christian from the 'bondage of double consciousness until the giftedness of double consciousness becomes most evident' (77). The guidelines for developing such a Christian education curriculum must be premised on the assertion that God must be presented as the God of the oppressed. He is to be a God who is not perceived as a God who supports the oppressor and the oppressive environment against the oppressed. Hence the guidelines for such a project must include empowering for the disempowered, fostering a faith that is pro-black without being anti-white. We need a holistic faith that does not compartmentalise life into sacred and secular, and a process that leads to the development of a person that is fully functioning and capable of impacting society. Such an 'education-for-liberation model' needs to start with the plight of the truly disadvantaged in their varied manifestations of homelessness, AIDS victims, the black poor and others who experience the cry of the oppressed and helpless. It must bear in mind the biblical goal of every creature, every tribe and tongue being enabled to bring its peculiar honours to the LORD.

In Section 4 Foster and Smith move beyond the work of Shockley to suggest that the logic of his work would lead to a third movement (after white racism, black reaction in black theology), that is the *Ubuntu* theology as articulated by Desmond Tutu and demonstrated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in which the oppressed and oppressor are both released from the forces that bound them on the opposite sides of the divide. The double consciousness of being African American must lead to a triple or 'a reunited third consciousness of a ... Christian/African/American sense of self' (132).

This book is a very useful digest of the experiences which most African Americans have with regards to the troubled relationship between their

culture and that of white Christianity. Foster and Smith deal with this subject through the writings of Grant Shockley. The book brings to attention the debilitating effect of double consciousness where black Americans as well as black people in general see themselves through Euro-American eyes which have often, historically anyway, been antagonistic, hostile and racist. This has often led to many black people internalising the views of their 'oppressors' in such a way as to despise anything of value in their own background. The anomie that has characterised many inner city areas of the major US metropolises can be directly attributed to this social problem of double consciousness. In many ways this is also true of other parts of the world where white culture has conquered and dominated other people, particularly people of a different colour. The challenges of this book for the Christian Church are clear, Christian education cannot simply be informative, but must be transformative. The plight of the disadvantaged and the flux of life which is their lot must form a major part of the platform for a relevant Christian education, which can and should lead to a truly united community, which accepts, promotes and celebrates difference without erecting unnecessary and unbiblical social and cultural barriers.

This book is truly informative, instructive and relevant for the Church in the United Kingdom as it faces the growing rift between mainstream white churches and the fast growing Black Majority and other ethnic Churches. The hope of the book is the vision of not only Isaiah (19:23–25) but also of John of the Apocalypse in which diverse peoples of every tribe and tongue all come together to be a kingdom of priests to serve their God (Rev. 5:9–10).

# The Last Word

## Joy, the Gigantic Secret

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**Robbie Castleman** - National Director for RTSF/USA and Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies and Theology at John Brown University

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**T**here are a few people that I really want to have a chat with in the Kingdom, when it comes. I would really like to talk to Mary and finally get to hear what it was like to raise a sinless toddler and teenager. If the 'Inklings' have a get-together, I would love to just listen in and share the richness of such imaginative fellowship. Since my doctoral work focused on the development of a new pedagogical approach to trinitarian theology, I want to meet Athanasius, all three Cappadocians, Augustine, the Torrance clan and Karl Barth. I don't think autographs would be appropriate to the Kingdom, but I would like to meet them and say, 'Thanks'! I would like to finally get John Calvin and Ignatius Loyola together and introduce them. (These two were at the University of Paris at the same time and I have always wondered if the church could have reunited in reformation if they had met and become friends over coffee.) It might be 'out of bounds' for the ethos of the Kingdom, but I'd really like to settle the mystery of Nathaniel's fig tree, what it was that Jesus wrote in the dirt, and who wrote Hebrews. (I really hope the latter is Priscilla and she has a book signing!) If all this visiting is allowed, there is one person I know I will find by the sound of laughter coming from his corner: G.K. Chesterton.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton will be naturally at home in the perfected joy of the Kingdom because he was intentional about joy in the world. He had a way of saying something serious without making it sound grave. Chesterton was a lot like the angels he once characterised as able to fly because they take themselves lightly. Chesterton gained the ear of a distracted age through undisguised mirth. In an unenlightened age that wasted its resources and expected both human progress and planetary improvement to be unending, Chesterton pointed out that 'the trees and the planets seemed like things saved from the wreck: and when I saw the Matterhorn I was glad that it had not been overlooked in the confusion'. He maintained that 'the proper form of thanks [...] is some form of humility and restraint: we should thank God for beer and Burgundy by not

drinking too much of them'. Late to the faith that he found through the familiarity of fairy-tales, he tapped his toe to the rhythm of Christ, and longed to teach the church how to dance! In a broken-hearted world, Chesterton reminded God's people that 'Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagans, is the gigantic secret of the Christian'.

This 'gigantic secret of the Christian' needs to be let out of the bag today. Joy needs to break forth as a new rhythm of life in the middle of the mundane, in the mire of the world's misery, and even in the midst of sinners! Now, this gigantic joy has nothing to do with the thin frivolity that attempts to make church fun or worship a storefront window to get the crowd in the door. This joy is gigantic because it refuses to domesticate transcendence. Gigantic joy is rooted in the fear of the Lord. Gigantic joy is not impervious to pain or inattentive to heartbreak. Gigantic joy doesn't laugh in the middle of tsunami sorrow, broken promises or the irrevocable consequences of sinful rebellion. What gigantic joy does, is give the Christian a bottomless pool of hope that allows the Christian the energy and steadfastness to not grow weary in well doing. This kind of joy is the secret of being able to face sin and sorrow honestly and still end the day singing the doxology.

That's the song the world needs to hear today. Maybe joy is still a gigantic secret because Christians reserve 'the doxology' for the part of a church service after the collection of tithes and offerings sometimes given begrudgingly for church bill-paying, with little thought of the God from whom all blessings flow. The self-sufficiency of managing our own happiness has muted the doxology of the church and the world just can't hear it. Often what the world hears are sounds that are just the same as its own, so why listen?

At a funeral it's the sound of children laughing and the sight of them, still able to play, that comforts the most broken-hearted mourner. Joy is why hope can smile. Doxology, the giving of glorious thanksgiving, joy's best expression of gratitude is the most counter-cultural voice that must be heard in a world filled with a cacophony of complaint. What would happen today, this week, this semester, this year, this lifetime if Christians were truly grateful and said so? How would our family gatherings, board rooms, faculty meetings, shopping malls, parks, highways, neighbourhoods, and mission fields be transformed by gratitude expressed with joy? How would the voice of the church be heard as a herald of the Kingdom's coming if we remembered that it is a wedding feast? Would the world turn its head and begin to listen if Christians began to catch the rhythm of

eternal shalom by dancing, singing, drinking, feasting and actually enjoying ourselves – even in public? Would the sinner, the sorrowful, the sojourner, the cynic, the bored-to-death, and the sick-of-life take notice of a joy so gigantic that it couldn't fail to love them?

If we did, maybe they would catch the rhythm of the Kingdom and, in the middle of a hurting world, share our gigantic secret and join our first and final song.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow!  
Praise him all creatures here below!  
Praise him above the heavenly host!  
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost!