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Is Jesus Lost?

Evangelicals and the Search for the Historical Jesus

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The 'quest of the historical Jesus' has been one of the dominant features in the landscape of NT studies over the past two centuries. This quest has employed the methods of rigorous, critical historical inquiry in order to understand who Jesus was as an historical person, as a Jewish man living early in the first century of the Common Era. However, in spite of this topic's dominance in the discipline, evangelical scholars have often been reluctant to engage in this discussion. In large part this stems from the commonly felt scepticism regarding the conflicting and often negative results of the quest.¹ More to the point, the 'rules of the game', the methods of historical criticism, have frequently been seen by evangelicals as destructive to orthodox faith, undermining cherished evangelical doctrines such as a high Christology and a high view of Scripture.² Perhaps evangelicals can be forgiven for criticizing the critics and questioning the quest, for Jesus – the *real* Jesus – is certainly not lost and in need of any sort of 'search and rescue' effort.

There are many evangelicals, however, who wade boldly into the deep waters of historical Jesus studies. Scholars such as N. T. Wright,³ Craig

¹ The work of the Jesus Seminar has been particularly problematic for evangelicals. See especially Robert W. Funk et al., *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

² E.g. Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990); Robert Thomas and David Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998).

³ Especially his *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996); *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

Evans,⁴ Ben Witherington,⁵ and others,⁶ have made constructive and wide-ranging contributions to historical Jesus research. The international, evangelical Institute for Biblical Research is currently involved in a Jesus Seminar-like 'acts of Jesus' research project, scheduled for completion and publication perhaps by the end of this decade.⁷ As for motive, much of the evangelical initiative to this point seems to spring from one of two purposes: apologetic or exegetical. Evangelicals have responded to perceived challenges to biblical Christian faith in historical Jesus scholarship with strong apologetic appeals.⁸ Or they have worked more behind the scenes as exegetical stagehands, producing bibliographies, introductions, and surveys of the quest or bringing to light aspects of the historical, cultural, and literary setting of Jesus and the first Christians in order to understand better the Gospel portrayals.⁹ This evangelical effort has been generally positive and persuasive, and these are not insignificant motives.

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- 4 Especially his *Jesus and His Contemporaries: Comparative Studies* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1995); and as co-editor with Bruce Chilton, *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1994); *Authenticating the Words of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1999); *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1999).
 - 5 Especially his *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994); *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (2nd ed.; Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1997); *Jesus the Seer: The Progress of Prophecy* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999).
 - 6 E.g. Darrell L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1998; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000); Markus Bockmuehl, *This Jesus: Martyr, Lord, Messiah* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994); idem, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Graham Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus* (repr. ed.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994); idem, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999)
 - 7 According to Darrell Bock, 'The State of Historical Jesus Studies in Evangelicalism', paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Atlanta, Ga., November 20, 2003; confirmed in private correspondence. Individual studies are published annually in the *Bulletin for Biblical Research*; see also <http://www.ibresearch.com>.
 - 8 E.g. in response to the Jesus Seminar, Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, eds, *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995)
 - 9 E.g. much of the material by evangelicals listed above

Nevertheless, many evangelical scholars have recognized other good reasons for involvement in historical Jesus studies. There are deeper historical, literary, and theological reasons that encompass these two typical motives but move to a level more amenable to critical historical study. In particular, this paper will explore two realities upon which an evangelical student of Jesus and the Gospels, with a high Christology and a high view of Scripture, can and should critically engage in the quest for the historical Jesus.

The Nature of the Gospels

First, *the nature of the canonical Gospels allows for, even demands, critical historical inquiry about Jesus.* At a basic level this can be acknowledged by any curious reader of the Gospels, for they leave many historical questions about Jesus unanswered. Most of Jesus' life is simply not described, notably his formative years of adolescence and early adulthood. Issues of larger chronology are touched on in the Gospels but not emphasized, leaving scholars to wonder as to the precise dates of Jesus' birth and death, the exact beginning point and length of Jesus' public ministry, and so on. There are also general matters of Jesus' historical and cultural setting that are often simply assumed by the Gospel authors. These assumptions raise ongoing questions regarding the role of the Pharisees in first century Judea and Galilee, the beliefs and praxis of the Sadducees during this period, the socio-political and religious forces at work in Jesus' trials and execution, and a host of others.

In addition to these historical lacunae, any reader can recognize stylistic and thematic differences between the three Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John. The fourth Gospel moves at a measured pace, with Jesus pausing throughout for lengthy, reflective dialogues and discourses about his divine origin and mission. The Synoptics, on the other hand, move much more quickly (especially Mark), with Jesus speaking in succinct, memorable sayings and parables, reluctant to publicize any divine origin or messianic purposes. A careful reader can perceive similar, yet more subtle, stylistic and thematic differences among the Synoptics themselves. Thus, however much one may observe a basic unity in the gospel portraits of Jesus, the distinctiveness of each of these four sketches invites careful inquiry about the person they portray.

Underlying these initial observations is the question of the genre of the Gospels, an important issue that has been examined off and on

throughout the period of modern Gospels' scholarship. The use of an established genre forms a sort of implicit contract between author and readers, outlining the acceptable parameters for reading the text while typically allowing the author flexibility within those parameters. No text is produced completely apart from established genres, however much one might modify the genre he or she is employing.¹⁰

From an evangelical standpoint, even strong statements regarding the inerrancy of Scripture recognize that this concept must be understood within the historically conditioned constraints – including the literary constraints – of the human communication used in the divine production of Scripture. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, for example, affirms that 'God in His Work of inspiration utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared', and that 'the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices'. Furthermore, the Statement denies that 'inerrancy is negated by Biblical phenomena such as ... the topical arrangement of material, [or] variant selections of material in parallel accounts', reflecting phenomena particularly found in the Gospels.¹¹ Certainly, Scripture is more than merely human writing, but it is just as surely not less than, nor other than, human writing.

Recent research on Gospel genre, particularly that by Richard Burridge, has affirmed that the Gospels fit best within the ancient genre of *bios* or *vita*, or ancient biography.¹² This must not be confused with modern biographies, with their more comprehensive historical and chronological concerns regarding the subject's life, and with their particular interest in

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- 10 Heather Dubrow, *Genre* (London: Methuen, 1982); Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).
- 11 Articles VIII, XIII, and XVIII, and the exposition of the statement under 'Infallibility, Inerrancy, Interpretation'; the statement can be found at <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/history/chicago.stm.txt>
- 12 Richard A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); with a concise summary in 'About People, by People, for People: Gospel Genre and Audiences', in *The Gospels for All Christians* ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 113–45. See also David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 17–157; idem, 'Greco-Roman Biography', in *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament* (ed. idem; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1988), 107–126.

demonstrating the subject's formative influences or psychological development. Rather, while ancient *bioi* certainly have real historical interest in their subject, they

do not cover the whole life in strict chronological sequence ... Often, they have only a bare chronological outline, beginning with the birth or arrival on the public scene and ending with the death; the intervening space includes selected stories, anecdotes, speeches, and sayings, all displaying something of the subject.¹³

The death of the subject is particularly emphasized, as it was believed that 'in this crisis the hero reveals his true character, gives his definitive teaching, or does his greatest deed'.¹⁴

These general features of the *bios* genre can be seen in the Gospels. They certainly have an historical intention focused on a single individual, 'writing' what Jesus 'did and taught'.¹⁵ The details prior to Jesus' 'arrival on the public scene' are sparse, the suffering and death of Jesus is of primary focus in the Gospels, and the material in between gives episodes and teachings of Jesus displaying who he is and what his central message is. Although the Gospels give some specific chronological indicators which must be taken seriously, a general lack of concern for chronological precision is confirmed by a simple comparison of the different ordering of parallel events among the Gospels. This is the case even in recounting singular events not repeated in Jesus' ministry: in the sequence of events within a specific episode,¹⁶ of episodes described within a specific period of Jesus' ministry,¹⁷ and in the overarching frameworks of the Gospels.¹⁸ Given that Matthew and Luke probably knew and used Mark, that Luke may have also used Matthew, and that John may have known one or more

¹³ Burrige, 'About People', 122

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1; John 20:30-31; 21:24-25

¹⁶ E.g. the different sequence of Jesus' temptations in Matt. 4:3-11 and Luke 4:3-13

¹⁷ E.g. the order of events in Mark 1-5 compared with parallels in Matt. and Luke.

This difference in sequence even occurs related to singular events where one source has a specific chronological indicator (e.g. Mark 4:35-41; cf. Matt. 8:23-27; Luke 8:22-25).

¹⁸ I.e. the single-Passover, Galilee-focused framework of the Synoptics compared with the multi-Passover, Jerusalem-focused framework of John's Gospel.

of the Synoptics,¹⁹ it seems that even in reading one another the Gospel authors did not view the other sequences as absolute chronologies. Thus, Luke's statement that he intends to write 'in order' (*kathexēs*) in his Gospel and presumably also in Acts (Luke 1:3) refers to an order that is 'proper' or 'fitting' to the subject at hand, not one that is strictly chronological.²⁰

As an inclusive genre, *bioi* incorporated the various speech forms common to broader Greco-Roman historiography. The longer speeches of Greco-Roman history writing were typically summaries of what the speaker was believed to have said on a given occasion,²¹ while shorter speech forms could be paraphrased, expanded, or condensed as necessary.²² Thus, speech material was not always or even often *ipsissima verba* – the very words of the speaker – but rather an attempt at *ipsissima vox* – the very 'voice', faithful to the original message.²³ This general feature of Greco-Roman historiography must be the case at least to some extent in the Gospels, as indicated by the simple fact that, whereas the Gospels present Jesus' teaching in Greek, he almost certainly taught in Aramaic.²⁴ It is further confirmed by comparison of the variation in sayings material in the Gospels, even in recounting singular events.²⁵

While the Gospels fit well within the genre of ancient *bios*, they also have their own distinctive features that utilize the flexibility of the generic category. These features centre on the Gospel *bioi's* distinctive understanding of who their subject is and what he has done: that the life

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- 19 On the Synoptic Gospel relationships especially, see Mark Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem: A Way through the Maze* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM Press, 1989).
- 20 Of course, a 'fitting' order for a large-scale biographical account would be at least to some extent chronological. On Luke's use of this term, see David P. Moessner, 'The Meaning of $\kappa\alpha\theta\epsilon\chi\eta\sigma\theta\eta\iota$ in the Lukan Prologue as the Key to the Distinctive Contribution of Luke's Narration among the "Many"', in *The Four Gospels 1992* ed. F. Van Segbroeck et al. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 1513–28.
- 21 Charles W. Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 142–68.
- 22 Vernon K. Robbins, 'The Chreia', in Aune, *Greco-Roman Literature*, 1–23.
- 23 Darrell L. Bock, 'The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Live, or Memorex?' in Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, 73–99.
- 24 John P. Meier, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (vol. 1 of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 255–68.
- 25 E.g. the accounts of the exchange between Jesus and his disciples at Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:13–20; Mark 8:27–30; Luke 9:18–21), or the dialogue at Jesus' hearing before the Sanhedrin (Matt. 26:57–68; Mark 14:53–65; Luke 22:54–71).

of Jesus is the unique life of the Messiah, the Son of God, manifesting God's saving sovereignty in the world in anticipation of his future dominion. Each Gospel author has redacted his inherited tradition in different ways, with different particular theological emphases, but all four Gospels share this common *kerygmatic* focus. This unique focus served to set them apart as a particular, innovative class of ancient biography which would be imitated often and greatly modified over subsequent generations.²⁶

How does this understanding of the Gospels as '*kerygmatic bioi*' relate to the quest of the historical Jesus?²⁷ At least four points stand out.²⁸ First, as *bioi* the Gospels have a basic historical purpose, an intention to describe what Jesus said and did. Second, however, as *bioi* they were not intended to provide a precise chronology regarding individual speeches and actions of Jesus. Rather, the authors adapted traditional stories and sayings of Jesus from prior sources, setting them within a broad chronological framework. Third, as *bioi* they were not designed to provide the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus, at least not in all cases. They more often reflect what the authors believed to be the *ipsissima vox* of Jesus as derived from the tradition they inherited. Fourth, as *kerygma* they are supremely concerned with the theological significance of Jesus' life, with the historical concerns serving the didactic, apologetic, evangelistic, and other 'faith-building' emphases.²⁹ I would argue that acknowledging these features of the Gospels immediately opens up the range of critical historical questions that can be asked legitimately by evangelicals about the words and deeds,

²⁶ For Burrige's account of the Gospel genre's development, see his *What Are the Gospels?*, 247–51

²⁷ In the terminology of 'kerygmatic bios' some may hear an echo of the dominant 20th century notion of the Gospels as 'expanded apostolic kerygma'. This is intentional, as I wish to affirm some connection between the Gospels and the early apostolic preaching. However, recognizing the Gospels as *bioi* precludes a merely mythical understanding of the Gospels, and demonstrates the authors' belief that this apostolic proclamation was grounded in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

²⁸ It should be noted that, even if it could be conclusively demonstrated that the Gospels are not a form of ancient *bioi*, these general features of the Gospels can still be seen in the Gospels themselves and must be accounted for in any understanding of the Gospels.

²⁹ Cf. Luke 1:1–4; John 20:30–31

the life and aims of the historical Jesus.³⁰

The Nature of the Incarnation

There is a second, more broadly theological foundation for evangelical historical Jesus study. That is that *the nature of the incarnation allows for, even demands, critical historical inquiry about Jesus*. As Joachim Jeremias affirmed:

the incarnation implies that the story of Jesus is not only a possible subject for historical research, study, and criticism, but demands all of these. We need to know who the Jesus of history was, as well as the content of his message. We may not avoid the offense of the incarnation. And if one objects that we fail to apprehend the essential nature of faith if we make historical knowledge the object of faith, and that faith is in this way offered up to such dubious, subjective, and hypothetical study, we can only reply that God has offered up Himself. The incarnation is the self-offering of God, and to that we can only bow in assent.³¹

Of course, orthodox Christology has always affirmed the full humanity of Jesus as well as his full deity, from the point of his incarnation on. The Son of God 'came down' and 'was made flesh' and 'became man'.³² He is 'at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man'; 'of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood'; 'as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten ... of Mary the Virgin'; 'recognized in two

³⁰ Notice carefully what is being said: one can believe that Jesus did miraculously feed large crowds, raised people from the dead, and so on. However, based on the Gospels' genre the precise nature, the timing, and significance of these actions are open for discussion. Jesus did pronounce blessings on the outsiders and the persecuted, teach the disciples a pattern for prayer, and so on, but based on the Gospels' genre the precise wording, original setting, and intended meaning are open for discussion.

³¹ Joachim Jeremias, 'The Search for the Historical Jesus', repr. in *Jesus and the Message of the New Testament* ed. K. C. Hanson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 8

³² 'The "Nicene" Creed', in Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 25–26

natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation'.³³

What exactly did this look like for Jesus in early first century Galilee and Judea? How are we to understand the traditional attributes of God in Jewish creational and covenantal monotheism in relation to the man Jesus: his divine covenant love (*hesed*), covenant righteousness (*tsediqah*), and sacred 'otherness' or holiness (*qadosh*)? How do we perceive in the man Jesus the traditional attributes of God in Christian systematic theology: his transcendence, his omnipresence, his omniscience, his omnipotence? What does a 'God-man' look like, how does he act, what does he say, and how does he think?

The simple answer would seem to be, 'he looks like the Jesus of the Gospels'. However, as discussed above, the Gospels are first and foremost *kerygma*, thus providing theological interpretation of historical events and making explicit what may have been only implicit or even unknown when the events being described first happened. The Gospels undoubtedly give us our most direct evidence of 'what a "God-man" looks like', but even taken at face value they raise at least as many questions as they answer regarding this issue. Why does the 'God-man' seem unable to do certain things?³⁴ Why does he not know certain things?³⁵ Why does he at times seem to deflect attention from his divinity,³⁶ while at other times seem to embrace it?³⁷ More generally, how is it that the 'God-man' could not be immediately recognizable as such? Why does he do the specific things he does, in the way he does them? What is he thinking on a day-to-day basis?

At first glance John's Gospel may seem to give the most straightforward answers to these sorts of questions, offering a clear window into Jesus' self-understanding, but it presents something of a paradox. On the one hand, it is in some respects the most historically oriented of the Gospels, providing more detailed geographical and chronological indicators than the Synoptics.³⁸ On the other hand, it is clearly the most theologically oriented of the Gospels, redacted to reflect explicitly a high Christology.

³³ 'The Definition of Chalcedon', in *ibid.*, 51–52

³⁴ E.g. Mark 6:5

³⁵ E.g. Mark 5:30–33; 9:21; 13:32; cf. Luke 2:52, describing Jesus' growth in wisdom

³⁶ E.g. Mark 10:17–18

³⁷ E.g. Mark 14:62

³⁸ On the historical concerns of John's Gospel, see Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001)

We *may* be closer to the inner self-understanding of Jesus in John's Gospel, but given the comparison with the Synoptics one suspects that we are reading the unknown, unconscious, or implicit Christology of Jesus made explicit through apostolic redaction.

In order to see the difficulties in using John as a source for Jesus' self-understanding, it is worth pausing at this point to explore the nature of the Johannine redaction of the prior Jesus tradition. In view of the 'Johannine thunderbolt' in Matthew 11:25–27 and Luke 10:21–22, and the presence of Synoptic-like sayings embedded in the Johannine discourses, one should be reluctant to pronounce with certainty that Jesus could not have spoken as represented both in the Synoptics and in John. However, even these examples actually highlight the contrast, as the 'Johannine thunderbolt' is not an extended, repetitive, thematically dualistic discourse like one finds in John. Also, any Synoptic-like sayings in John are thoroughly embedded within characteristically Johannine discourses or dialogues. Nevertheless, at least two combined factors point to the relative primitivity of a Synoptic-style Jesus tradition over against the Johannine redaction. The first is that the vocabulary and style of Jesus' teaching in John is indistinguishable from the vocabulary and style of both the Gospel narrator and the Johannine epistles. The second factor is that the Synoptic tradition is that which is explicitly referred to as Jesus tradition in the earliest Christian writings and in most of the Christian writings through the beginning of the second century.³⁹

One can get a sense of this Johannine redaction of prior Jesus tradition with an example: Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus in John 3. The setting is quite historically plausible, as is the initial dialogue understood in 'new covenant' terms.⁴⁰ Jesus' response to Nicodemus is framed by at least two traditional Jesus sayings. One is about entering the kingdom of God as a child (3:3), and the other about the heavenly Son of Man being exalted to fulfil God's salvific plan (3:14), and possibly one on the wind and the Spirit (3:8). Of course, these first two themes – 'kingdom of God' and 'Son of Man' – are the dominant themes in Jesus' teaching in the Synoptics, and probably represent Jesus' original idioms and ideas spoken within his

³⁹ E.g. 1 Cor. 7:10; 9:14; 11:23–25; 1 Clem. 13:1–3; Did. 8:3–10. One can also note the existence of Mark, Matthew, and Luke themselves, in addition to the many allusions to distinctively Synoptic-style tradition in the other Pauline writings and works such as Hebrews and James.

⁴⁰ Cf. Ezek. 36:24–28

Palestinian Jewish context. The dialogue in John 3, however, quickly moves to a discourse on 'life' and the 'one-and-only (*monogenēs*) Son of God', the Johannine equivalents to the original Jesus concepts, in such a way that translators are unsure where the author understood Jesus' speech to end and his interpretation to begin. A similar analysis of the whole Gospel would seem to indicate that this is typical of John's redaction. That is, traditional Jesus material forms the foundation for further, apostolic theological reflection, making explicit what may have been only implicit in Jesus' original life and teaching. Thus we have *ipsissima vox* broadly conceived – faithful interpretations and expansions of original statements and concepts of Jesus.⁴¹

The Gospels, then, are of mixed benefit in answering critical questions about the precise nature of the incarnation in history, and other NT passages have often been invoked to aid in this discussion. Paul's hymnic citation at Philippians 2:5–11 has received special attention, especially the concept of Christ's *kenosis*, his 'self-emptying', at the incarnational step of his humiliation. However, this *kenosis* is a much-debated concept. Interpretations range from a complete emptying of the divine 'form' to a sociological description of Jesus' poverty or slave status; from a second-Adam Christology to a restatement of the Isaianic servant's 'pouring out' his life unto death.⁴² Other texts, notably Colossians 1:19, 2:9, Hebrews 2:14, 10:5, and John 1:14, similarly provide important information regarding the fact of the incarnation, but give little help in understanding the exact *nature* of the incarnation in historical terms, determining 'what a "God-man" looks like' in first century Galilee and Judea.

The point of all this discussion is simply to emphasize that the precise way in which the divine intersected with the human in the inner personality and daily life of Jesus of Nazareth is to a very great extent not addressed in Scripture. It seems we are left to apply the wonderfully

⁴¹ Cf. Peter W. Ensor, *Jesus and His 'Works': The Johannine Sayings in Historical Perspective* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1996). This approach in general terms follows the classic lead of C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963). It is suggested by the Gospel itself with its explicitly post resurrection perspective on Jesus' words and deeds (e.g. 2:22; 12:16; 14:26). See Peter Stuhlmacher, 'Spiritual Remembering: John 14.26', in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Origins* (ed. G. N. Stanton, B. W. Longenecker, and S. C. Barton; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 55–68.

⁴² Ralph P. Martin, *A Hymn of Christ* (rev. ed.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 165–96

precise-yet-ambiguous Nicene and Chalcedonian descriptions of the mystery of the incarnation quoted above. In view of this, I would argue that a balanced, 'mysterious', orthodox Christology opens the door to many critical historical questions regarding Jesus – his aims within the constraints of history, the extent and precise nature of his messianic and divine self-understanding, possible development in his self-understanding, and so on. The uniqueness and inscrutability of the phenomenon of the 'God-man' in history surely invites discussion regarding these sorts of issues.⁴³

Conclusion

The nature of the Christian faith allows for – even *demand*s – critical historical inquiry about Jesus. Christianity speaks of a God who reveals himself by hiding himself as a 'marginal Jew' in backwater Galilee, a God who unveils himself by veiling himself through utterly human writings of various types in particular times and places. Christianity is a thoroughly historical faith, making theological truth claims that are based upon and about particular real events in space and time: Jesus' birth, his life, his teaching and miracles, his crucifixion, his resurrection. This means that most of the foundational theological claims of Christianity are subject to broader historical investigation, and conversely, that the foundational historical claims of Christianity are subject to broader theological study.

The Christian notion of divine-human concurrence in the writing of Scripture and the person of Jesus suggests that ultimately the oft-affirmed 'ugly wide ditch' between history and revelation may prove to be only a mirage, a 'trick of the light' from Enlightenment rationalism. It is certainly alien to the perspectives of the Gospel authors and subsequent orthodox Christianity, which claim that particularly in Jesus human history and divine revelation find their nexus. This is not to minimize the problems reflected in Gotthold Lessing's 'ugly wide ditch' regarding the ways in which human beings are to approach and understand the relationship of human history and divine revelation, or historical understanding and religious faith. For individual human beings confined to a present, particular, space-time

⁴³ Notice the way in which this is all framed: this does not deny that Jesus was fully God during his earthly ministry; it simply questions whether, to what extent, and in what way Jesus understood his divinity. Cf. Raymond Brown, *Jesus, God and Man: Modern Biblical Reflections* (Milwaukee, Wisc.: Bruce, 1967), 93–99.

location and attempting to discern divine action in a past, particular, space-time location, the problems are significant ones that need to be wrestled with. Rather, the claim that human history and divine revelation converge in the person of Jesus is meant to affirm that there are ways of viewing the complementary nature of human history and divine revelation, and that ultimately, from a divine perspective outside space and time, the problem would seem to be only apparent.⁴⁴

From this perspective of divine-human concurrence in Jesus, then, one cannot exclusively examine Jesus theologically, or exclusively historically, without missing the full significance of who he is and what he has done. In line, then, with the primary *kerygmatic* emphasis of the Gospels and their authority for Christian faith, it must be affirmed that there is greater *salvific* significance in knowing, for example, the theological truth that 'Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures' than in knowing the historical truth that 'Jesus died to preserve Roman peace in Judea'. This does not, however, make the historical truth irrelevant or unimportant for a full understanding of Jesus. The historical truth supports and even illuminates the theological significance of the event, even as the converse happens as well.

Evangelicals can enter the deep waters of historical Jesus scholarship with confidence. Indeed, one can argue that evangelicals should be at the forefront of critical historical Jesus scholarship. Evangelicals can bring to the table a healthy blend of historical and theological concerns, both critically conceived and employed. Thus many of the questions of current historical Jesus research are within their rightful purview: What exactly did Jesus say? What did he mean by what he said? What exactly did Jesus do, and when? What was the original significance he or others at that time saw in what he did? How did others view Jesus and his public ministry? What was Jesus' self-understanding? Was there development in this during his lifetime, and if so, how and to what extent? What were Jesus' aims for his public ministry? Given the fully divine, fully human nature of both our sources and our subject, evangelicals can and should direct a critical eye to these sorts of questions, while maintaining a sympathetic ear

⁴⁴ For one evangelical approach to these issues, see C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).

to the faith of the Gospel authors and a receptive heart to the person they proclaim.⁴⁵

45 This paper was originally presented at *Tolle Lege 2004* at Prairie Bible College, January 19, 2004. Thanks are due to Mark Goodacre and those at *Tolle Lege* for offering helpful comments on earlier drafts.

What's Emerging in the Church?

Postmodernity, The Emergent Church, and The Reformation¹

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In 2001 I returned from studying in Britain and landed a teaching position in Washington DC. My transition to the metro DC area was eased greatly by an old friend whom I had not seen for five years since his seminary graduation from Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS). He was a fresh, young, newly wed youth minister, ready to tackle the challenging demands of pastoral ministry. Like the majority of DTS graduates, my friend was theologically precise, socially conservative, and winsomely evangelical. Five years later the clean-cut youth pastor now sported a fashionable goatee, had shed the 'traditional' ministry career track in favour of opportunities which he described as 'out of the box' and was fascinated by progressive theologians wrestling with the ideological challenges of postmodernity. My friend had undergone a radical transformation and what emerged was my first encounter with a self-conscious postmodern Christian. His experience, like many others, was an awakening stirred by the unassailable effects of a massive intellectual and cultural paradigm shift.

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I. The Emergent Phenomenon

Postmodernity began as an intellectual discussion reserved for the halls of the academy.² Yet in the past decade we have seen it trickle down to more popular levels, including the evangelical church. Carl Raschke claims that the result of this trickle down effect has left evangelicalism in a state of crisis. Evangelicalism is facing 'an intellectual challenge of a magnitude it had never before confronted'.³ The crisis has impacted many evangelical pastors, like my friend, who count themselves among a growing number of pastors/para-church workers/scholars/writers who are convinced that the evangelical church is ill-equipped to handle the challenge of postmodernity. In response, these church leaders are attempting to address this challenge with a new Christianity, suited for the postmodern environment. D. A. Carson writes, 'At the heart of the "movement" – or as some of its leaders prefer to call it, the "conversation" – lies the conviction that changes in the culture signal that a new church is "emerging"'.⁴ As Carson goes on to describe, the 'emerging' or 'emergent' movement connotes something which is connected with what preceded it, yet fully engaged with the progress of the present.⁵

What impact is the Emerging Church having? This is the question that inspired the recent cover articles of many prominent evangelical magazines.⁶ The Emerging Church is undeniably a voice gaining great

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- 2 Kevin J. Vanhooser (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3–4
 - 3 Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2004), 11
 - 4 D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 12
 - 5 *Ibid.* 12. The labels Younger Evangelicals, postconservatives or postevangelicals are also used to identify this movement. See Roger E. Olson, 'Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age', *Christian Century* 112 (May 1995), 480, and Millard J. Erickson, Paul K. Helseth & Justin Taylor (eds), *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 21
 - 6 Andy Crouch, 'The Emergent Mystique', *Christianity Today* (November 2004), 36–41; Scott Bader-Saye, 'The Emergent Matrix', *The Christian Century* (November 30, 2004), 20–27. Likewise articles have appeared in smaller denomination journals: Chuck De Groat, 'A Growing Hunger for Honest and Authenticity: 'Younger Evangelicals' in the PCA', *By Faith* (January/February 2005), 26–29.

attention.⁷ The most recognized Emergent pastor, Brian McLaren, was named one of the twenty-five most influential evangelicals in America by *Time* magazine.⁸ Likewise the plethora of Emergent publications – including internet websites – is generating a phenomena that is beyond the infant stage. As in the case of all new movements, careful evaluation must follow.

II. Church History and the Postmodern Reader

The purpose of this article is not to provide a comprehensive critique of the Emergent Church.⁹ Instead I would like to give a somewhat narrowly focused evaluation from the perspective of a historian and then offer some suggestions from Church history to help to address some of the concerns expressed by Emergent leaders. At first it may seem to be misplaced to invoke a primarily retrospective discipline while commenting on an extremely prospective movement. Moreover some readers might be anticipating a predictable, traditionalist critique that eschews anything progressive. After all, the Emergent Church, like all postmodern thinkers, is attempting to move beyond the past and discard the shackles of modernity.¹⁰ While many within this movement prefer to engage current issues or anticipate future challenges, the motivation for insisting upon a 'new Christianity' is deeply historical.

Postmoderns agree that the age of modernity is declining and with it many of the modern assumptions, convictions and propositions. All of the Emergent leaders insist upon this historical periodization between modern and postmodern as a necessary starting point from which to evaluate the Christian message and practice, and reformulate a Christian faith that is suitable for the postmodern culture. As a result, the Emergent Church

7 Recently PBS aired a two-episode documentary entitled: 'The Emerging Church'. See: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week846/cover.html>

8 *Time* (February 7, 2005)

9 Two more comprehensive resources are: D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, and Michael Horton's comments in Leonard Sweet (ed.), *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

10 An example of this postmodern programme is the work of postfoundationalist theologians like Nancey Murphy, Stanley Grenz and John Franke. See N. Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996); S. Grenz & J. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

claims that many of the so-called 'modern' Christian distinctions are no longer appropriate.¹¹ According to McLaren, modern distinctions that separated Charismatics from non-Charismatics, Arminians from Calvinists, Liberals from Conservative Christians, and even Protestants from Roman Catholics must be revised in favour of a more generous orthodoxy.¹² Those in the Emerging Church advocate an orthodoxy that is not entrapped by the assumptions of modernity that were tainted by the rationalism of the Enlightenment.¹³ We must be careful at this point to describe the Emergent Church accurately. They are not suggesting that Christianity has no positive historical roots, or that the form of Christianity needed to address the postmodern culture must be constructed *de novo*. In fact certain leaders are returning to the 'ancient faith and practices' for Christian examples which pre-date modernity. Thus, some writers are deeply interested in the history of the Church Fathers and Medieval Christianity.¹⁴ It is difficult to argue against the premise that the study of history has played a crucial role in the intellectual formation of the Emergent Church.

In his book *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren writes:

My quarrel with accumulating orthodoxy does not mean I advocate a 'know-nothing' approach to church history. The very opposite is the case. The orthodoxy explored in this book invites as never before to study not only the history of the church, but also the history of writing the church's history.¹⁵

As a historian this quote excites me. I believe that understanding Church history is vitally important for today's Church; and likewise the responsible method of studying Church history is to examine judiciously both the primary and secondary sources. However, it is on this very point that McLaren, and many other Emergent thinkers, fail to follow their own suggestion. Earlier we described the Emerging Church's attempt to move

11 John Franke, 'Generous Orthodoxy and a Changing World: Foreword to *Generous Orthodoxy*', in B. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 9

12 McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*

13 *ibid*

14 Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999)

15 McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 29

beyond the era of modernity and many of the theological polemics associated with that period. Again, modernity is characterized by rationalism, primarily exemplified by the Enlightenment, which postmodernity now questions. When did this period begin? Many Emergent thinkers date the beginning of modernity with either the sixteenth or seventeenth century.¹⁶ Consequently, the Protestant theology of the Reformers, and the Roman Catholic theology affirmed by the Council of Trent were both modern constructions. I am confident that Roman Catholic historical theologians would protest this description; and I will let them defend their tradition. But it is historically irresponsible to claim that the Protestant Reformers believed that human reason and science were the sole means to obtaining absolute truth and certainty.¹⁷ This is a claim that must, at the very least, engage the substantial scholarly work of Reformation historians who have given us a much more complex and nuance history of Protestant Christianity.

Reading about the history of the Church does matter. Although many Emergent leaders recognize the value of this and consider the study of Church history fundamental for understanding the present culture, they have not moved beyond a superficial reading. To be fair, one could argue that I have taken McLaren's statements out of context. His point is that we should study Church history as well as how Church history has been written, because he recognizes that all historians have biases. He is concerned with many who have written about the past in light of their present convictions, and thereby confirm the old adage: 'those who win the battles write the history'.¹⁸ Again, on this point I have no quibble with McLaren. But how do we assess historians' biases? To answer this question we need to place the historians and their work in a historiographical context. Following this approach reveals an interesting intersection where the seemingly divergent paths of Reformation historical studies and the Emergent Church surprisingly cross.

¹⁶ Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 14–22; Rascke, *The Next Reformation*, 26; Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 58

¹⁷ McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, 17

¹⁸ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 29

III. History and Those Who Write It

By the early twentieth century scholars who were committed to a neo-orthodox agenda dominated Reformation studies.¹⁹ These scholars attempted to read the writings of the Reformation through their neo-orthodox theological lens.²⁰ The result was a reconstruction of Reformation theology that resembled certain neo-orthodox assumptions concerning revelation, Scripture and the central function of Christology.²¹ Likewise this historiographical approach erected a divide between the untainted theology of the early sixteenth-century Reformers and the rationalistic theological systems of the seventeenth-century Protestant scholastics. Ostensibly Calvin's theology was lauded, but Calvinism (as perpetuated by men like Theodore Beza, William Perkins, John Owen and Francis Turretin) was denigrated.²² At this point one might notice that this neo-orthodox historiography is very similar to the postmodern periodization. Neo-orthodox historians and Emergent leaders place the blame on the seventeenth-century as the precise historical moment when Christian theology was corrupted by the rationalism of modernity.

The implications of this historical analysis are staggering for today's evangelicals. If the Reformation and post-Reformation signal the beginning of modernity, and postmodernity questions the modern

19 Hans J. Hillerbrand, 'Was There a Reformation in the Sixteenth Century?', *Church History*, 72:3 (September 2003), 525-52. For examples see W. Niesel, *Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (London: Westminster Press, 1956) and J. B. Torrance, 'The Concept of Federal Theology – Was Calvin a Federal Theologian?', in W. H. Neuser (ed.), *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor: Calvin as Confessor of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, 1994), 15-41.

20 C. R. Trueman and R. S. Clark (eds.), *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), p. xii

21 Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2003), 63. Muller writes, 'This neoorthodox historiography not only shifted the discussion of Calvin away from the nineteenth-century models that had placed him in continuity with the Reformed orthodox [seventeenth-century Reformed theologians], it also added to the discussion a series of highly debatable dogmatic premises that have served to cloud the understanding of the Reformation', *Ibid.* 66.

22 For examples of this approach see Basil Hall, 'Calvin Against the Calvinists', in G. Duffield (eds.), *John Calvin: A Collection of Distinguished Essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1966), – 19-37, and Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

intellectual and cultural assumptions, then one could argue that the theological heritage of the Reformation is obsolete.²³ What do we do now with the confessional standards of our churches which were written in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? How do we assess the continual ecumenical dialogue between Protestants and Roman Catholics or any other post-sixteenth-century division? This historical analysis potentially calls for a complete postmodern revision of Protestant theology as we know it.²⁴

Before we dismiss all of the theological output of the seventeenth century, we must return again to McLaren's comments about those who write history. The neo-orthodox reading of the Reformation must be evaluated as well. The thorough historian must explore two contexts: the specific sixteenth and seventeenth-century context and the twentieth-century context of the neo-orthodox historians. From the perspective of postmodernity, both the historical period that these neo-orthodox historians sought to study and neo-orthodoxy itself are in fact thoroughly modern.²⁵ Thus the way history was written by neo-orthodox historians (rationalistic, euro-centric, metanarrative, etc.) is vulnerable to the same modern shortcomings that are supposedly found in the historical subjects they were studying.²⁶ To be consistent, McLaren's postmodern approach

23 See John Franke, 'Reforming Theology: Toward a Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics', *Westminster Theological Journal*, 65 (2003), 1–26.

24 This is precisely what McLaren is seeking to do in *Generous Orthodoxy*. For a more scholarly attempt see Stanley Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2000).

25 Some theologians who embrace postmodernity claim that neo-orthodoxy, particularly the theology of Karl Barth, was a proto-postmodern approach. See Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (2001) and John R. Franke, 'God Hidden and Wholly Revealed: Karl Barth, Postmodernity and Evangelical Theology', *Books and Culture: A Christian Review*, 9:5 (Sept/Oct. 2003), 16–17, 40–41. However, this positive appropriation of Barth is debatable amongst postmodern theologians. Nancy Murphy writes, 'Barth is certainly open to being read as a scriptural foundationalist, even in passages quoted by those arguing against this claim', N. Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism & Fundamentalism*, 95. Moreover I believe Cornelius Van Til's critique of neo-orthodoxy as a 'new modernism' is still relevant. See C. Van Til, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing 1946).

26 Millard Erickson identifies a 'new historicism' in the postmodern agenda, M. Erickson, 'On Flying in a Theological Fog,' in Erickson, Helseth and Taylor (eds.), *Reclaiming the Center*, 332–37.

should be equally suspicious of the modern influences in the neo-orthodox method.²⁷ Yet, McLaren and other postmodern Christians blindly accept this periodization and historical interpretation without carefully investigating either the theologians of the seventeenth century or the historians of the twentieth century. Postmodern and neo-orthodox historians agree that the rationalism of the seventeenth century, in philosophy and theology, marked the dramatic shift from pre-modern to modern.

What McLaren and other Emergent leaders and scholars have failed to do, is to examine carefully the historical sources as well as the writings of other historians who have contested the neo-orthodox historiography. The study of the intellectual history of the Reformation and post-Reformation which was first begun by Heiko Oberman and then continued by David Steinmetz, Richard Muller, and others is an attempt to introduce a new historical methodology. This method seeks to understand the Protestant Reformation and post-Reformation in its own historical-intellectual context, without the neo-orthodox premises. The studies from this new methodology paint a very different picture of the past.

IV. Protestant Scholasticism: The Modern Culprit?

Did post-Reformation theologians like Theodore Beza, John Owen, and Francis Turretin depart from the teachings of Calvin and the other Reformers because of their positive appropriation of scholasticism? After all, was not scholasticism a form of theological rationalism perverted by Aristotelian philosophy?²⁸ Stanley Grenz and John Franke accept this reading in their postmodern assessment of the 'modern' theology of Charles Hodge at Old Princeton, since Hodge was so dependent upon the seventeenth century. They write, 'Hodge's own understanding of theology is generally derived from the scholasticism characteristic of post-Reformation Protestant orthodoxy and its emphasis on rationalism'.²⁹ At

²⁷ As far as I am aware neither McLaren nor any other Emergent writer has commented in detail on Reformation or post-Reformation historiography. But I would imagine, given their generous orthodoxy, neo-orthodoxy would not trigger the same theological red flags. Still, they would need to account for the modern influences on neo-orthodoxy and its implications for writing history.

²⁸ See Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, 32

²⁹ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 14

the end of this sentence Grenz and Franke cite the monumental work of Richard Muller. They are correct in citing Muller as the foremost authority on post-Reformation theology, but his four volume *magnum opus* entitled *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, in no way substantiates Grenz and Franke's claim. In fact, it proves the very opposite. Muller's work disproves the neo-orthodox historians' claim that seventeenth-century Protestant scholasticism broke with the sixteenth century and moved in a rationalistic direction.³⁰ A few examples will illustrate this.

Historically the Protestant scholastics were contemporaries of early Enlightenment thinkers, but they held a particular view of the relation between faith and reason that did not anticipate the Enlightenment. Muller states:

The rationalization and intellectualization of theology into system characteristic of the orthodox or scholastic phase of Protestantism never set the standard of scriptural revelation and rational proof on an equal par and certainly never viewed either evidential demonstration or rational necessity as the grounds of faith. Quite the contrary, the Protestant orthodox disavow evidentialism and identify theological certainty as something quite distinct from mathematical and rational or philosophical certainty. They also argue quite pointedly that reason has an instrumental function within the bounds of faith and not a magisterial function. Reason never proves faith, but only elaborates faith towards understanding. There is, moreover, underlying this traditional view of the relationship of faith and reason, an anthropology in which sin and the problematic nature of human beings plays a major role – in significant contrast to the Enlightenment rationalist assumption of an untrammelled constitution of humanity.³¹

³⁰ Muller argues 'it is no longer sufficient to note that the post-Reformation orthodox used scholastic method and that some of their theological and philosophical views stand in contrast with those of presumably nonscholastic or antischolastic Reformers'. Muller, *After Calvin*, 72; Trueman & Clark (eds), *Protestant Scholasticism*, p. xiv.

³¹ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, Volume One: Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2003, 2nd edition), 141–42

Scholasticism referred to a method for arranging and communicating theology, and not the content of one's theology. Post-Reformation theologians were not abandoning the theology of the early Reformers in favour of a more rationalistic approach, but expanding, clarifying and codifying that theology. Take Francis Turretin as an example. Turretin was professor of theology at Calvin's academy in Geneva from 1653 to 1687. In his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, he frequently used scholastic distinctions and arrangements. Yet Turretin was careful to differentiate between reason as the foundation or principle of theology and reason as an instrument or means for constructing theology. The first, Turretin adamantly denied. Turretin explained that reason is never the foundation or principle of theology, but rather it is useful as an instrument for illustrating and collating theological doctrines.³² It is interesting to note Turretin's precision on this issue. He was not saying that reason is unequivocally antithetical to faith. Instead he clarified:

[f]or a thing to be contrary to reason is different from its being above and beyond; to be overthrown by reason and to be unknown to it. The mysteries of faith are indeed contrary to corrupt reason and assailed by it, but they are only above and beyond right reason and are not taught by it.³³

Turretin, and other Protestant scholastics, were not propagating a rationalistic theological agenda. Scholasticism was a pedagogical method for teaching a full Protestant theological curriculum in the first Protestant universities.³⁴

Likewise seventeenth-century (as well as sixteenth-century) theologians saw themselves in continuity with a wider Western Christian tradition. While defending the absolute authority of Scripture, they went to great lengths to demonstrate their theological dependence on the Church Fathers, and their measured appropriation of certain aspects of Medieval theology. Irena Backus, David Steinmetz and Anthony Lane have written

³² Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Volume One: First through Tenth Topics*, edited by J. T. Dennison Jr, translated by G. M. Giger (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1992), 25–27

³³ *Ibid.* 27

³⁴ Richard Muller, *After Calvin*, 27–33; *idem*, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 62

numerous volumes detailing the substantial use of patristic sources by Reformation and post-Reformation writers.³⁵ Protestants were eager to establish their theological continuity with the past and thereby demonstrate that the Protestant Church was not a new invention. They looked to Irenaeus, Tertullian, Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, Bernard of Clairvaux and John Duns Scotus to confirm and refine their theological positions. Their intention was not to start a new church, but to recover the true 'catholic' or universal Church. Consequently, it is very difficult to sustain the argument that either the sixteenth or seventeenth-century Reformed theologians were making a radical 'modern' break from their past.

In failing to take into account of the current state of Reformation scholarship, McLaren and others have allowed their own postmodern presuppositions to shade their interpretation of the past. But are the results so problematic? The simple solution would be to shift the starting date of the modern age forward and possibly narrow the intellectual roots to the early Enlightenment philosophers. This correction would keep their critiques of modernism intact while maintaining a more accurate historical reading. While this may be an easy solution, the implications for this adjustment are significant. The Emergent Church is not introducing a new Christianity completely detached from any historical roots. Yet the postmodern periodization of history has contributed to the utter neglect or at the very least gross distortion of Reformation and post-Reformation history and theology. Other than a hollow view of *Semper Reformanda*, the Reformed tradition is abandoned as a meaningful theological partner in their 'emerging conversation' with postmodernity. My purpose is not to deny the importance of addressing postmodernism, nor to insist upon a blind traditionalism that seeks to return to some past 'golden age' of the Church. I agree with D. A. Carson's assessment: one positive contribution of the Emergent Church is their desire to present an authentic Christianity that moves beyond a formal religious faith. This desire has led many Emergent leaders to see the problems with nineteenth and twentieth-

³⁵ Irena Backus, (ed.), *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1997); David C. Steinmetz, 'Calvin and the Patristic Exegesis of Paul', in D. C. Steinmetz (ed.), *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century* (Durham, N.C.: and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 100–118; Anthony Lane, *John Calvin Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000).

century evangelicalism and seek to offer something with more integrity. But is this 'new Christianity' using all the resources available to address the postmodern questions? A more careful investigation of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century theologians reveals a pre-modern theology that bears little resemblance to the intellectual assumptions of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers. In fact this pre-modern theology provides a number of helpful theological tools for addressing the concerns of the Emergent Church.

V. The Reformation meets Postmodernity

Let me offer three modest examples of the usefulness of Reformation theology for addressing the concerns of the Emergent Church. These are tentative examples, which should be explored more fully, but I propose them as a positive contribution in this discussion. First, in his article entitled 'From the Third Floor to the Garage,' Spencer Burke describes his dissatisfaction with evangelicalism and his eventual 'emergence'.³⁶ Burke writes about his discontentment with what he calls 'spiritual McCarthyism'. Historically what he is describing is the legacy of Fundamentalism within the evangelical Church. Burke laments the authoritarian approach of many pastors that stifles theological investigation (because it automatically leads to Liberalism) but claims doctrinal absolutes with little intellectual substantiation. Emergent leaders take seriously the need for Christians to engage the culture intellectually. This was not always the case in the history of evangelicalism. For much of the twentieth century, evangelical Fundamentalism was on the retreat intellectually.³⁷ Yet Emergent thinkers are riding the tide of intellectual rediscovery within evangelicalism and moving forward within a postmodern context.³⁸ Still, D. A. Carson is convinced that much of the

³⁶ Spencer Burke, 'From the Third Floor to the Garage', in Mike Yaconelli (ed.), *Stories of Emergence: Moving from Absolute to Authentic* (El Cajon: Zondervan, 2003), 27–39

³⁷ See David Wells, *No Place for the Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1993) and Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995).

³⁸ Alan Wolfe, 'The Opening of the Evangelical Mind', *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 286, no. 4 (October 2000), 55–76

thinking within the Emergent community is intellectually lacking.³⁹ One way for the Emergent Church to address Carson's concern is to look for examples of theological engagement in a pre-modern context like the Reformation.

Intellectual engagement was, and continues to be, a hallmark of the Reformed tradition. Reformed theologians were the leading intellectuals in early modern Europe. They taught at prestigious ancient universities like Oxford, Cambridge, Heidelberg, Geneva, and Utrecht. Their writings engaged a host of disciplines beyond just theology. In fact the seventeenth-century theologian, Johann Heinrich Alsted, wrote an encyclopedia which attempted to summarize the corpus of all human learning.⁴⁰ But what is most applicable for the Emergent concerns is the Reformers understanding of epistemology. One of the most popular postmodern criticisms of modern evangelicalism, including Fundamentalism, focuses upon the foundationalist approach to epistemology.⁴¹ Foundationalism, as described by postmodern thinkers, seeks to establish an incontrovertible ground for absolute truth through rationalistic methods. Emergent thinkers reject this approach, arguing that such a method is no longer tenable in a postmodern context.⁴² Instead they offer an approach that has been characterized as intellectually shallow and relativistic.⁴³

Nancey Murphy has argued that nineteenth-century Reformed theologians, specifically the theologians at Princeton Theological Seminary, were foundationalists shaped by the commonsense philosophy of Thomas Reid.⁴⁴ However, the Reformed confessions of the sixteenth and

³⁹ Carson writes 'The almost universal condemnation of modernism, and of Christianity under modernism, is not only historically skewed and ethically ungrateful, but is frequently theologically shallow and intellectually incoherent'. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 68.

⁴⁰ Johann Heinrich Alsted, *Encyclopaedia* (Herborn, 1630). For more details about Alsted see Howard B. Hotson, *Johann Heinrich Alsted: Between Renaissance, Reformation and Universal Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴¹ Again, see Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* and Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*.

⁴² McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 117. For an assessment of the foundationalist/post-foundationalist discussion see J. P. Moreland and Garret DeWesse, 'The Premature Report of Foundationalism's Demise', in Erickson, Helseth and Taylor, *Reclaiming the Center*, 81–107.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 89

⁴⁴ Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 5

seventeenth-century do not reflect the same common sense philosophical influence. While the confessions and the Princetonians shared the same material understanding of Scripture, as authoritative and infallible, they differed somewhat on how they formally defended Scripture's authority. Princeton was influenced by the modern intellectual priority on scientific method, while the Reformers emphasized the self-attesting nature of Scripture.⁴⁵ Scripture is the Word of God because it carries with it the authority of the author, God himself. This is not a rational construct, though it does not contradict reason. Instead the Reformers offered an approach that distinguished carefully between God as the *principium essendi* (essential foundation) of all theology and Scripture as the *principium cognoscendi* (cognitive foundation) of revealed theology. The authority of Scripture as the cognitive foundation is not found in a rational method for demonstrating reliability; but Scripture presupposes God, the essential foundation, while at the same time teaching us who God is.⁴⁶ Thus the foundation for theology is not a scientifically verifiable Scripture, or the consensus of a community, but God himself as he has been revealed in his inscripturated Word. For those in the Emergent Church who seek an alternative to modern foundationalism, the Reformed confessions offer a historical pre-modern standard.⁴⁷

Second, Spencer Burke goes on to describe his rejection of 'spiritual isolationism'.⁴⁸ This isolationism is demonstrated in the flight of evangelical Churches to the suburbs and away from the pressing socio-economic and cultural issues of the secular urban centres. Burke laments the loss of an authentic Christian community. Evangelicalism in both its message and method emphasized the individual. The message was a simple gospel, narrowly defined by the 'Four Spiritual Laws,' and offering Jesus as one's 'personal Saviour'. Built into this message was the urgency

45 Westminster Confession of Faith, 1:4

46 Belgic Confession, VIII, Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. II, 152

47 This alternative to foundationalism is recognized in the nineteenth and twentieth-century Dutch Reformed tradition which did not follow Old Princeton. See George Hunsinger, 'What Can Evangelicals and Postliberals Learn from Each Other: The Carl Henry-Hans Frei Exchange Reconsidered', in T. R. Phillips & D. R. Okholm (eds.), *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 134–50 and Michael Horton, 'Yale Postliberalism: Back to the Bible?', in M. Horton (ed.), *A Confessing Theology for Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 183–216.

48 Burke, 'From the Third Floor to the Garage', 32

for individual conversion. The popularity of classical dispensational pre-millennialism and the special blessing of a secret rapture for believers can explain part of that urgency. The practice of massive evangelistic crusades gave way to the mega-churches and a corporate model for ministry. Instead, the Emergent Church seeks to establish a community, both theological and ecclesial, that breaks down the isolation and integrates Christian faith and life. But their reaction to evangelicalism's radical individualism has led them to emphasize the community at the expense of the individual. The writings of McLaren and other Emergent leaders focus very little on individual salvation and doctrines associated like justification, final judgement and hell.⁴⁹ In fact, when McLaren does comment on soteriology, he is woefully confusing.⁵⁰

Christianity addresses both the individual and corporate/communal issues. Emphasizing one over the other is equally problematic. Reformed theologians in the sixteenth and seventeenth century attempted to balance these two extremes. In the context of Roman Catholic/Protestant

⁴⁹ McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 99–101; 112–14

⁵⁰ When asked a question on universalism, McLaren responds, 'each road [universalists or exclusivists] takes you somewhere, to a place with advantages or disadvantages, but none of them is the road of my missional calling ... Inclusivism says the gospel is efficacious for many, and exclusivism says for a comparative few. But I'm more interested in a gospel that is universally efficacious for the whole earth *before* death in history', McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 113–14. By calling for a prelapsarian gospel (which is already confusing, for why would salvation be necessary before Adam sinned?) – McLaren has confused the probationary period with the necessary redemptive plan of God, culminating in the work of Jesus Christ. This confusion is illustrated in another place. McLaren affirms that salvation is by grace through faith, yet at the final judgement Christians are not judged according to the meritorious work of Christ, but by 'how well individuals have lived up to God's hopes and dreams for our world and for life in it', McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 166–67. D. A. Carson points out how similar this is to certain strands of the New Perspective on Paul approach within Pauline studies, Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 181. Carson is correct in identifying the similar theological conclusions reached by the two movements. In many ways the New Perspective on Paul complements the Emergent agenda. As we have been arguing, the Emergent Church seeks a postmodern revisionist Christian theology that is not conditioned by modernity, but informed by pre-modern sources. The New Perspective on Paul supplies a pre-modern revisionist Christian theology based on a reconstructed history of early Christianity in the context of Second Temple Judaism. Addressing the Emergent Church's concern, this Second Temple context predates Christianity's captivation with Greek rational philosophy.

polemics, the issue of justification was central. The doctrine of justification by faith alone was at the very heart of the Reformation's message. Yet, the Reformers would address corporate issues alongside of this important individual doctrine. John Calvin's Reformation project touched nearly every aspect of city life in Geneva.⁵¹ I recognize that the social, cultural and political context of sixteenth-century Geneva was very different from the twenty-first century; however, it is undeniable that the Reformers carried out their work in the urban centres of their day. These were the cities setting the pace for intellectual, social and cultural exchange.⁵² They did not isolate themselves in Medieval monasteries, or limit their message to a simple gospel; instead they worked to reform their cities according to their Christian convictions. It is important to note that I am not attempting to declare with John Knox that 'Geneva was the most perfect city since the time of the Apostles'. I am only highlighting the intent of the Reformers, while fully recognizing their depravity and need for grace; and consequently their intent was not always carried out in the most Christian manner. Nevertheless the example is still valid.

Finally, Burke's labels his third issue 'spiritual Darwinism'.⁵³ Again, Burke is describing the capitalistic/marketing approach found in many evangelical Churches, often identified as 'church growth' methods. Evangelicalism fostered a culture of upwardly mobile professional ministers, looking for the latest method to increase their congregation's size and public profile. For Burke, success was measured quantitatively, and the pressure to succeed was overwhelming.⁵⁴ In response to this 'spiritual Darwinism', Burke and other Emergent pastors are right to ask some fundamental questions: how do we define the ministry of the gospel and how should that ministry be conducted? Once again I believe the Reformed tradition has something helpful to contribute.

⁵¹ See Robert Kingdon, T. A. Lambert, I. M. Watt, J. R. Watt (eds.), M. W. McDonald (trans.), *The Registers of the Consistory of Geneva at the time of Calvin, Volume 1: 1542–1544* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000).

⁵² See Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 210–66 and Berndt Hamm, 'The Urban Reformation in the Holy Roman Empire', in T. A. Brady Jr., H. A. Oberman, J. D. Tracy (eds.), *Handbook of European History, 1400–1600: Late Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation, Volume 2: Visions, Programs, and Outcomes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 193–227.

⁵³ Burke, 'From the Third Floor to the Garage', 34

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 35

I admit that Reformed Christians are not immune from Burke's 'spiritual Darwinism'. All prominent ministers to some degree face the temptation to be 'superstars'. Power and authority must be exercised with great humility. But again, some of the emphases of the Reformation can help us avoid the cycle of spiritual Darwinism. The ministry of the gospel for the Reformers was utterly ecclesial. Ministry was conducted within the context of the Church, and characterized by the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. The ministry of the Word and sacrament became the primary function of the Church and the priority for those who were called to serve as pastors. The pulpit was central to the life of the Church and ministers laboured diligently to craft substantive sermons that would instruct and encourage their congregations. In describing the preaching of the puritan pastor, Richard Baxter, Paul Lim writes:

In exhorting his ministerial colleagues, Baxter called preaching "the most excellent" part of the work. At the same time, preaching was a difficult task since it was "a work that requireth greater skill, and especially greater life and zeal, then any of us bring to it." Furthermore, it was "no small matter" to stand before the congregation as well as before God, but it was no easier "to speak so plain, that the ignorant may understand us, and so seriously, that the deadest hearts may feel us; and so convincingly, that the contradicting Cavillers may be silenced."⁵⁵

Contrary to this model, evangelical and Emergent Churches alike have turned preaching into multi-media presentations complete with dramas, video clips, and light shows, claiming this is the only way to reach effectively the sophisticated image-dependent postmoderns. Gone, like the dinosaurs, is the old Reformed model of preaching. Many have claimed that it cannot survive and communicate in a postmodern world. Yet in New York City, arguably one of the most culturally progressive urban centers, thousands gather each Sunday at Redeemer Presbyterian Church to listen to a pastor, without any visual aids, simply preach. Now these sermons are not the old reductionist evangelical gospel, but they profoundly engage the contemporary culture with the person and work of Jesus Christ.

⁵⁵ Paul Chang-Ha Lim, *In Pursuit of Purity, Unity and Liberty: Richard Baxter's Puritan Ecclesiology in Its Seventeenth-Century Context* (Leiden & Boston: Brill Academic Press, 2004), 27.

Finally, the dominant corporate mentality of the evangelical Church must be redirected back to the biblical understanding of the covenant community. The Reformers recognized that the sacraments helped to reorient Christians and shift their focus from upon themselves to Christ and his visible Church. The sacraments identify an individual as united with Christ and likewise a member within the covenant community. Clarifying this was crucial for the Protestant Reformers as they sought to define the role and function of the Church. The Westminster Confession of Faith, 28:1 reads:

Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him; as also to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his word.

Baptism is the initiatory sign and seal of God's covenant promises, and the Lord Supper is a regular confirmation of that reality. Church members are not opportunistic employees, self-gratifying consumers, or anonymous faces in the audience. They are participants in the covenant community, who need and desire the grace of God given in Christ. A recovery of the Reformed understanding of the sacraments can help address the spiritual Darwinism that Burke rejected.

VI. Conclusion

What's emerging in the Church? According to many Emergent leaders, something old and new; but without accurately understanding the old, the new lacks the rigour and depth which can be achieved only through years of testing and refinement. Meeting the challenges of our contemporary culture is not an easy task. We must have the humility to admit that we cannot meet this challenge alone. Thankfully we are not historically isolated. We have a rich history of theological reflections and writings from which to draw.

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Putting Suspenders on the World: Radical Orthodoxy as a Post-Secular Theological Proposal or What Can Evangelicals Learn From Postmodern Christian Platonists?

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Introduction: the cast, the canvas, the call

No theological movement in recent memory has simultaneously occasioned such high praise and vehement opposition as has the movement self-termed Radical Orthodoxy.¹ A recent phenomena spanning the Atlantic (moving from French philosophy and classical Christian resources through Britain and recently arriving with a bang in America), RO constitutes the most daring effort in modern theology to retell the story of theology and recast the role of theology. This bold ethos

¹ Hereafter the movement, persuasion, or group known as Radical Orthodoxy will be abbreviated RO.

was, of course, set by the magisterial book, *Theology and Social Theory*,² in which John Milbank hoisted the canvas upon which later RO thinkers would paint.

Milbank's project sketched the history of Christian social thought from the classical era to the present day. However, the broader acceptance of this sketch has been impeded by its communication in opaque language, the immense breadth of its historical judgements which continue to be questioned at critical points, and the particular nature of its highly-debated theological claims. Many substantive theologians have entered the foray as adherents of some form of RO (John Milbank, Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock, William Cavanaugh, Frederick Bauerschmidt, Gerard Loughlin, etc.); however, it has not yet moved beyond high-brow academic discussion.³ As of yet, evangelical interaction with RO remains sparse, undoubtedly owing to a general discomfort with its categories and context. Seeking to fill such a void, an introductory sketch of the major trends of RO, particularly its theological narration of the world, will be offered here. Possibilities for future evangelical conversation with RO will also be suggested.⁴

More mediating, less accommodating: a theological imperative

Radical Orthodoxy has claimed to remove a 'false sense of humility' from modern theology and to return theology to its rightful place as the 'queen

² John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990). Hereafter, this will be abbreviated TST within the text.

³ One instance of more accessible interactions with RO (albeit overly negative) is that of R.R. Reno, 'The Radical Orthodoxy Project', *First Things* 100 (2000), 37–44.

⁴ Thus far, interaction between RO and evangelical theology remains limited to the efforts of Dutch Calvinists. See especially James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); James K. A. Smith and James H. Olthuis (eds), *Creation, Covenant, and Participation: Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, forthcoming). Smith's introductory volume is incredibly helpful; however, his interaction (for better or for worse) is Dutch Calvinist interaction with RO and might need supplementation from other evangelical traditions. Thus far, the best interaction with RO has come from Catholic theologians; see Laurence Paul Hemming (ed.), *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Enquiry* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000).

of the sciences' (TST, 1–6). RO acknowledges that part and parcel of a robust doctrine of creation (and incarnation) is a commitment to theological engagement with the world as is, eschewing the Manichean tendencies of the 'Neo-Orthodox'.⁵ Moving beyond both correlationism and biblicistic dogmatism, RO attempts to situate theologically all human discourse by theologically situating creation itself. In so doing, RO authors attempt to engage all aspects of human life theologically.⁶ A motto of RO has always been to be 'more mediating, but less accommodating' regarding the distinctly Christian nature of all intellectual work.⁷

Milbank's magisterial critique of the secular in TST stands underneath all later RO work. Central to this claim is the historical judgement that the secular emerged from Duns Scotus' placement of being above and beyond God, such that statements might be made univocally of God and humanity (TST, 302–306). In doing this, Scotus segmented the world and acknowledged the existence of zones that were independent of God's creative sustenance.⁸ Such a historical critique traces the rise of liberalism and secularity in ways reminiscent of (among others) Stanley Hauerwas, Rowan Williams, Nicholas Lash, and Alasdair MacIntyre. Books in the RO series include engagement with various academic disciplines such as economics (Stephen Long), government (Daniel Bell and Graham Ward), hermeneutics (James K. A. Smith), epistemology (Catherine Pickstock and John Milbank). Each of these engagements requires a denial of the secular void and a reaffirmation of a distinctly Christian ontology. The RO project, therefore, implies a re-articulation of some type of Christian Platonism through its use of the doctrines of participation, incarnation, and eucharist.

5 Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), 69. Hereafter, this will be abbreviated CG within the text.

6 Note that Milbank has expressed discontent with the Kuyperian notion of 'distinct spheres' of sovereignty, noting the shifting, historical nature of aspects of creation. See Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 13.

7 John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (eds), *Radical Orthodoxy: a New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 2. Hereafter, this will be abbreviated RONT within the text.

8 The most helpful discussion of Scotus occurs in John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 74–78. See also Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 122–25 (hereafter, this will be abbreviated as AW within the text). For more complex accounts of Scotus and his alleged doctrine of the univocity of being, see Fergus Kerr, 'Why Medievalists Should Talk to Theologians', *New Blackfriars* 80, no. 941 (1999), 369–75; David Bentley Hart, 'Review Essay: Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing*', *Pro Ecclesia* 9, no. 3 (2000), 367–72.

Radical Orthodoxy was developed in the environment of Cambridge University in the late 1990s and was first expressed publicly in a self-titled collection of essays. Whether or not there is a true unity amongst those who make up RO is debatable. This is further complicated by a substantive group of individuals who have not written in the RO series but are cited by the authors as being, generally, of like mind. In this list are names such as David Burrell, Gillian Rose, David Ford, Michael Buckley, and Donald MacKinnon (as well as the above-mentioned Hauerwas, Williams, and Lash). RO is best viewed as a particular intensification of the call of all these theologians to engender a distinctly Christian engagement with the world, focused around truly theological ways of being. RO takes its particular place within this broader persuasion by articulating a distinct invocation of Plato, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas.

Participation and Christian Platonism: graced being

Authors of RO have constantly noted the centrality of the doctrine of participation, owing to the centrality of the primary theological problem: that of relating God and world (CG: 8). In fact, 'the central theological framework of RO is "participation" as developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity, because any alternative configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God' (RONT, 3). As any engagement with culture requires a theological ontology, RO has turned to the Christian Platonic tradition (particularly as exemplified in Augustine) to provide an account of the divine gift of being. To avoid nihilistic accounts of the world, RO articulates an ontology that is based upon participation as a divine gift. Being is never arrived or already accomplished. Instead, the gift of being continually overflows from the superabundant being of God.

The gift character of being (always being given, rather than already gifted; Trinitarian, rather than deistic) safeguards RO engagement with cultural studies from lapsing into atomism. Particular accounts of temporal states of affairs hang together (CG: 75). The Augustinian tendency to narrate political history, beginning with the individual, is countered by RO with an acknowledgment of semiosis as tied to the eucharist. All cultural symbols (be they advertisements or despairing newscasts) are governed by the symbolic force of the identification of bread and wine with the body of Christ (CG: 6). In fact, the doctrine of transubstantiation is 'the condition of possibility for all meaning' (AW: 261). Empirical or inductive accounts of reality cannot lay claim to normative status when Christ has

exemplified an ecclesial pattern of participatory naming. In short, what may appear quite crude and dirty can, in fact, become divine.

In attempting to articulate a participatory ontology, RO authors have sought to move beyond any dichotomy between faith and reason. Milbank argues that faith is simply the intensification of reason perceived by divine illumination.⁹ Aquinas' doctrine of the beatific vision becomes the paradigm for epistemology, literally embodying a fully-realized divine illumination of divine gift.¹⁰ Knowledge, therefore, becomes eschatologically oriented and graciously mediated. Neither anxious pursuit of epistemic closure nor nihilistic defeatism can remain in such a theological account of participatory giving. In this vein, the RO account of Aquinas continues to be the most disputed point of their re-narration of intellectual thought.¹¹ In fact, Nicholas Lash of Cambridge has claimed that 'Milbank has Aquinas wrong both on (the doctrine of) analogy and on the relations between theology and metaphysics'.¹² Whereas Milbank and Pickstock are correct to note that grace permeates both philosophical and theological study, their excessive polemic¹³ tends to completely overwhelm the very place of graced philosophical work and disallow any mediation of philosophical activity *qua* philosophy.¹⁴

Uses of Postmodernity: radical?

At a time when many shirk from association with the label 'postmodern', John Milbank has blatantly styled his project one of 'postmodern, critical

⁹ John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2000), ch. 2

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38

¹¹ Even an original contributor to RONT, Laurence Paul Hemming, finds the RO Aquinas to be lacking. See his 'Quod Impossibile Est! Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy', in *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Enquiry*, 76–93.

¹² Nicholas Lash, 'Where Does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy? Questions on Milbank's Aquinas', *Modern Theology* 15 (1999), 433–44

¹³ Note their polemical titles, such as, 'Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics', in *Word Made Strange*, or *On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, the subtitle of Pickstock's *After Writing*.

¹⁴ See Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 161–62; Lash, 'Where Does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy?', 438–40. It is quite strange that Smith elsewhere praises RO for its engagement of metaphysics (see *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, pp. 186).

Augustinianism'.¹⁵ Postmodernity represents a helpful moment in that the distinctly cultured nature of secular rationality has been uncovered. However, in place of modern accounts of rationality, postmodern thinkers (such as Derrida) cannot get beyond nihilism without providing a proper ontology. Catherine Pickstock engages in lengthy debate with Derrida regarding proper readings of Plato and the notion of (authorial or oral) presence, attempting to move beyond the dichotomy of absence/presence through a particular account of the eucharistic liturgy (AW: 3–46).

While RO is certainly not in bed with postmodernity *qua* postmodernity, modernity fares equally badly in the narrative told by RO. RO discussion of participation in the divine does not come at the expense of the particular mediation of human activity within language and history. Divinely-based ontology cannot come at the expense of linguistic mediation and pneumatically-mediated creativity. There, simply put, is no immediate knowledge apart from prejudices and the powers of persuasion (CG: 17). Modernity must be redirected away from nihilism, by the embrace of the particularity of the work of the Triune God. Therefore, discussion of Christology and pneumatology is tied explicitly to the complex cultural spaces of communal life.¹⁶

Participation, of course, guards such an acknowledgment of particularity from lapsing into sheer relativism. However, particularity and situatedness must not be viewed as depriving God of creative power. RO seeks to counter postmodern nihilism with a 'theological textuality' which respects situatedness (difference) amidst affirmations of expansive divine action (CG: 8; AW: 262). Divine action extends beyond mere causal force; the divine actually bestows being.¹⁷ The non-competitive relationship between God and world, grounded in the giving nature of God, allows human action (in its particular distinctives) to be simultaneously divine action. Interdisciplinary description of divine bestowal of being to the world safeguards intellectual confession from becoming mere dogmatic circularity (CG: 22); in short, theological description is necessary everywhere. James Smith helpfully summarizes the matter, 'the issue is not

¹⁵ John Milbank, 'Postmodern, Critical Augustinianism: a Short *Summa* in Forty-Two Responses to Unasked Questions', in *The Postmodern God: a Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 265–78

¹⁶ Milbank has offered a two-part project regarding mediation of the Logos and Pneuma in human activity. See *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), and *Being Reconciled*.

¹⁷ John Milbank, 'Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics', in *Word Made Strange*, 44

modernity or postmodernity *per se*, but rather the politics of secularity rooted in an ontology of immanence, which is common to both'.¹⁸

Doctrine: whose orthodoxy? which church?

Trinity, christology, and eucharist: each of these doctrines is given important attention by RO. Whereas most scholarly interaction with RO has gravitated around historical judgements rendered, relatively little effort has gone into a theological critique of RO. Theological discussion is complicated given the ecclesial location of RO: of the original contributors to RONT are five Roman Catholics and seven High-Church Anglicans. The three editors are all Anglicans, yet they espouse Catholic doctrine which has been renounced resolutely by the Anglican church (i.e. transubstantiation). To whom is this movement accountable? Can RO articulate a concrete ecclesial home or must it claim to speak for the church which does not yet exist? Anyone who wishes to come to terms with the Catholic vision without falling into dogmatism faces this question, as the writings of Stanley Hauerwas (an ally of Milbank and RO) demonstrate.¹⁹

Regarding the possibility of avoiding sheer relativism, RO tends to accentuate the robust nature of a Christian doctrine of creation. Whereas secular theory has postulated backwards from the agonistic and dire results of the twentieth-century, Christians are theologically committed to positing ontological peace as original (TST: 430–32). Without lapsing into Hegelian immanentism, theological hope resuscitates and, in fact, surpasses creation's original peace.²⁰ Such a peace amongst difference is, of course, demonstrated most fully in the very life of the Triune God, whereby persons commune in utter harmony (TST: 429–30). Once the triune possibility is demonstrated, its absorption of humanity into this peaceful differentiation occurs as humans participate in the life of the Son of God, who unites the divine and human. Doctrines of the Trinity and Christology, mediated via a robust eucharistic theology, provide a truly theological ontology for RO.

¹⁸ Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 140

¹⁹ See Hauerwas' ecclesial and theological agony (if that's not too sharp a word) in his *Unleashing the Scriptures: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993), 157 fn.10.

²⁰ Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 33ff.

It is fitting that a section devoted to the particular doctrinal commitments of RO be kept short, for RO is committed to discussing doctrine through other modes of discourse (economics, literature, sexuality, etc.). The theological commitments of RO are best seen in the discussion of other disciplines, demonstrating that its commitment to mediation of theology via other topics is inherent (and not merely illustrative) to its theological commitments.

Augustinian Politics: parodies and plenitude

Radical Orthodoxy has been, from TST to its more recent publications, a movement of theological politics. To note the arguments of RO against secular rationality, *everything* is political. A substantive part of the RO project, then, is to re-narrate things as they are politically. By calling a spade a spade in identifying the non-Christian politics that are implicit in so much contemporary culture, RO notes the particularly presupposed nature of all theory. Capitalism has fallen under the critical eye of RO, as it rests upon notions of lack and scarcity. Quite to the contrary, Christian Platonism glories in the overflowing bounty that is created by the divine energies. Given the participatory metaphysics underlying the RO project, God is not thought of as a competitor with creation for being. On the contrary God can give freely, creatively giving being without suffering any loss. Divine plenitude fosters an expectation of material bounty, never to be identified with class struggle or technological progress. The optimism of RO, amidst the ruins of communism and unrealized excesses of liberalism and capitalism, is owing to its eschatological expectation of divine giving.

Graham Ward and William Cavanaugh have given extensive treatment to the theological nature of city and state, respectively.²¹ RO is committed to upholding the transcendental difference between God and world (in this case, earthly politics) without losing the ability to critique the nitty-gritty reality of actual history (CG: 8). The modern state must be deconstructed as an unfulfilled promise, necessitating adjusted expectations.²² The

²¹ Ward, *Cities of God*; William Cavanaugh, 'The City: Beyond Secular Parodies', in RONT; idem, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2002)

²² William Cavanaugh, 'Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation-State is Not the Keeper of the Common Good', *Modern Theology* 20 (2004), 267

deconstructive task functions to demonstrate the complex nature of space, eliding all attempts to provide the good via method or management (WMS: 271). Only complex accounts of space maintain the integrity of the particular without merely collapsing it into one more causal link in the great chain of eschatology (WMS: 276).

All claims of the state or market which encroach upon the ever-bountiful giving that is present in the church (and the state and market are ever-encroaching in this way!) merely parody the diffusive presence of Christ amidst this particular people (RONT: 182). Globalization, rather than delivering freedom from the tyrannous rule of the state, escalates and broadens the power of the state to obliterate the particular and bind the unity possible to what is merely virtual – *cyberspace*, rather than real communion around shared purposes (RONT: 194). Deconstructing the state entails deconstruction of false unity pledged by false gods, thereby allowing theological depiction of the diffusive and intricate nature of God's creative work.

Evangelical questions for RO: a conclusion in search of co-operation

How might evangelical Christians interact with such tendencies and concerns? To note suggestions, certain questions might be put to RO by evangelicals.

Scripture

Thus far, no RO author has entered into any sustained interaction with Holy Scripture. Certainly the emphasis upon historical re-narration and philosophical theology can be appreciated. Evangelicals, however, will want to know if sustained use of Scripture, so essential to the evangelical impulse, can and will be brought into the RO project. While recent work has demonstrated that Augustine and Aquinas managed to avoid simply being secularized by their interactions with Plato and Aristotle owing to their continual subservience of all metaphysical discussion to the Scriptural narrative itself.²³ RO has not yet demonstrated such a submission of

²³ On the use of metaphysical discussion in aid of Scriptural exegesis in Aquinas, see the brilliant work recently published by Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

philosophical inquiry to the service of the explicit account of the narrative of salvation.²⁴

Protestant

While most of the adherents of RO are, in fact, Protestants, the theological face of RO is, as noted above, resolutely Catholic.²⁵ Are we simply witnessing a new Oxford Movement? Can RO find any positive place for the 16th century Protestant Reformations? More pointedly, it should be noted that RO has yet to engage any distinctively evangelical thinkers. While philosophical theology has never been a central concern of evangelical interests (which tend toward the more pragmatic), RO still has to acknowledge any evangelical Protestant voices in the mediating discourses to which it is committed.²⁶ Will evangelicals find themselves accounted for by RO? Can our story explicitly fit into the story told by RO?

Sacramental

RO prioritizes the doctrine of transubstantiation as requisite for meaning. Evangelicals do not uphold this doctrine. Something of an impasse can only be averted, it seems, if RO renegotiates sacramental options by considering other notions of presence/absence in between the Tridentine and Zwinglian extremes. Graham Ward offers a very brief excursion into Calvin's doctrine of 'real presence', albeit (perhaps overly) critical (CG: 161–67), but no mention seems to have arisen of Lutheran views. One also wonders if looser notions of union with the divine might uphold the particular metaphysical needs of RO – is 'participation' the only or best way to describe the human union with Christ? What of notions like 'identification' or 'fellowship'?

²⁴ See the sharp concerns of David Ford: 'Scripture is so intrinsic to the traditions, practices, and theologians they espouse that without it their claim to be in continuity with these is hopelessly compromised ... a theology that does not inhabit the Bible in lively ways is very unlikely to be more than a set of ideas unable to reach beyond a very limited "high culture" milieu' ('Radical Orthodoxy and the Future of British Theology', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001), 397–98).

²⁵ For helpful summary of the 'reformed catholicism' which RO implies, see Pickstock, 'Reply to David Ford and Guy Collins', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001), 408. Where does such a 'reformed catholicism' concretely exist? Can RO point to a historical community? Is this idealism?

²⁶ James Smith notes several examples of evangelical philosophical theology that might, at various points, chasten the RO project. One such example is Jonathan Edwards' work on regeneration and interpretation. See Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 164 fn. 66.

Sin and Atonement

Is RO capable of offering an account of sinfulness and redemption that satisfies evangelical concerns with the deep and pluriform depiction of these opposing realities in the Scriptures? RO tends to describe creation and participation (TST: 397), often to the exclusion of fallenness and regeneration. It is in this realm that James Smith has addressed RO helpfully from a distinctly Dutch Reformed perspective, particularly in contesting the Thomistic and RO notions of 'common grace'.²⁷ Will the Platonist tendencies of RO override further engagement with other soteriological categories more amenable to those in the Reformation traditions?

Educational Curriculum

With the goal of reinstating theology as 'queen of the sciences', RO seems to thoroughly reconfigure the disciplinary divisions of education. Apart from prior discussions of the possibility of philosophy existing in a post-secular period, RO still stuns one by suggesting that everyone must be a theologian. Whereas few would actually protest that all humans do, in fact, hold beliefs about divine things (and can therefore, at one level, be termed 'theologians'), it is entirely another thing to define educators as, one and all, theologians. Can this be maintained at a professional level, with each professor matching specialized competency with that of Christian theology? Would Christian theology cease to be a second-order discipline focused in one department of the academic institution? Can it only be mediated via other conversations (i.e. economic, political science, gender studies, etc.) as exemplified in the writings of RO?

Conclusion

In short, RO reshapes the task of engagement with the world. The lordship of Christ must be extended over all creation, thereby necessitating a distinctively theological manner of engagement with all aspects of life. Whereas the particular metaphysics of RO and its way of telling the story of philosophy may be debatable, the broad persuasion of RO must summon each of us to take all things captive to Christ. For evangelicals who too often have allowed secular disciplines to segment our lives in

²⁷ Ibid., 163–66

unhealthy ways, RO presents a clarion call to truly (and distinctly) Christian participation in the world. At the very least, modern theology must shirk the false humility which RO has so thoroughly documented in its history of the withdrawal of modern theology from any place of prophetic power.

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Chastity and the Goodness of God: The Case for Premarital Sexual Abstinence

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I still identify myself as a religious woman, but I feel that the Lord has a big world out there to take care of, and I take care of my sexuality. I feel that some of the proclaimed [sexual] rules that the churches have were made and interpreted by men, and they have no right to try to control my body.¹

Surely one of Satan's most widespread, persistent lies is that one must go outside of God's commandments to find well-being because God's interests and our best interests don't always intersect. This misconception lay behind the very first recorded sin in Genesis three. In fifteen years of pastoral ministry working with adolescents and university students, over and over again I heard young adults express the misconception that if they scrupulously followed biblical sexual guidelines, they would have a diminished life. They assumed that they were infinitely more concerned about their emotional and sexual well-being than God was. As a result I want to frame this essay around the concept of sex as a divine gift – not to promote an anthropocentric, feel good theology ('trust Jesus and you will be healthy, wealthy, and have better orgasms'). Rather, I want to exalt the goodness of God in an area of life where his character is most frequently maligned because his commandments are so frequently misconstrued.

The creation account in Genesis 1–2 makes it very clear that God is the

¹ Samuel S. Janus and Cynthia L. Janus, *The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1993), 244

gracious creator of everything in the universe, including humans and sexuality. God made humans sexual beings, not as a begrudging afterthought, but as a deliberate way to manifest his own character. We see this in Genesis 1:26–27: ‘then God said, “let us make man in our image, according to our likeness” ... and God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created him.’² Since God does not have gender, the obvious question here is ‘how does creating humans as sexual beings (male and female) reflect the image of God?’ The answer is suggested in the very grammar of the passage, for plural pronouns are used of God (us, our), suggesting that God is not a solitary being, but rather that God is in intimate relationship with himself.³ Further biblical revelation fleshes this out, for Scripture teaches that the divine being has three equal persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are in perfect intimate union with each other (John 17:21). Thus, human sexuality is central to humans, being made in the image of God, for our sexuality gives us the longing and the capacity for intimate relationships.⁴ For this reason, some have said that our sexuality is the most God-like part of who we are as humans.

But if the creation account affirms that God designed our gender, does it follow that the sex act itself is a gift from God? Absolutely, for the two are inextricably connected. Immediately after creating the man and the woman, God blessed them and commanded them to ‘be fruitful and multiply’. In other words, in a clear context of divine blessing, God essentially commands Adam and Eve to have sexual relations.

² Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations are from the NASV.

³ For an exegetical defence of the view that the plural pronouns in Gen. 1:26 refer in some manner to fullness within the godhead (as opposed to taking them as unassimilated fragments of polytheistic myths, plurals of self-deliberation, plurals of majesty, or a reference to the angelical court), see D. J. A. Clines, ‘The Image of God in Man’, *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 62–69; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 132–34; Gerhard Hasel, ‘The Meaning of “Let Us” in Gen. 1:26’, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 13 (1975): 58–66.

⁴ Karl Barth most notably has developed image of God in terms of gender, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 183–212. On the way sexuality is beautifully designed by God to drive humans to intimate relationship, see Lewis B. Smedes, *Sex for Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 32–33; see also Stanley J. Grenz, ‘The Purpose of Sex: Toward a Theological Understanding of Human Sexuality’, *Crux* 26 (1990): 27–34; Donald M. Joy, *Bonding: Relationships in the Image of God*, rev. ed. (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1997).

Furthermore, when God was finished creating he reflected on what he had made, including human gender and procreation through the sex act, and pronounced it 'very good' (Gen. 1:31). It is quite sad that Christians often imply that sex is dirty and unspiritual, for this is not God's verdict. He created sex as a divine gift, and put his enthusiastic stamp of approval on it by exclaiming that sex as an expression of love between a husband and a wife is not just good, but 'very good'.⁵

Additional divine approval (and hence blessing) of the sex act is found in the very words he uses to describe the man and the woman he created. In Genesis 1:26, the Hebrew words *zachar* and *nekebah* are used to convey 'male' and 'female'. These two words are expressly sexual, and literally mean 'piercer' and 'one pierced'. So in the very words God uses to describe the male and the female he created, he graphically describes the sex act. Clearly, God is not embarrassed by sexual intercourse; it was his good creation. A final indication that sex is a gift from God is seen at the end of the creation account, where after God made a wife for Adam, the author declares that in marriage a man and a woman are to create a new family unit and become 'one flesh'. Thus, the sex act in marriage is intended by God to express, reinforce, and re-enact the marital covenant itself.⁶ This helps to explain the beautiful Hebrew euphemism for marital sex – 'to know'. Adam, who had been given Eve as his life companion on the sixth day of creation, could continue to express and re-enact their union throughout their earthly days by 'knowing' Eve sexually (Gen. 4:1). What a beautiful picture of sex bringing pleasure and bonding a man and a woman in marriage. Thus, marriage and the sex act itself are wonderful gifts from God.

Sadly, very few people today understand that God is a loving creator who wants to bless his creation, and thus his commandments are not capricious or inimical to our well-being. Satan, not God, wants to corrupt goodness, diminish joy, and steal our well-being. We see this conflict clearly when Jesus declares: 'The thief comes only to steal, and kill, and destroy; I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly' (John 10:10). Similarly the psalmist proclaims: 'no good thing does he [God] withhold from those who walk uprightly' (Ps. 84:11). Since God is

⁵ For a very helpful articulation of sex being a divine gift as revealed in the biblical creation account, particularly in terms of God creating humans with a body (unlike angels), see L. Smedes, *Sex for Christians*, 29–30.

⁶ Steve Tracy, 'The Mystery of Marriage', *Christianity Today*, January 7, 2002, 63

good and desires to bless, his commandments are always in our best interest. In this vein Cornelius Platinga brilliantly clarifies the nature of sin. He begins by using the concept of shalom to explain God's desire for creation, and then shows how sin violates shalom:

In the Bible, shalom means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight* – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.

God hates sin not just because it violates his law but, more substantively, because it violates shalom, because it breaks the peace, because it interferes with the way things are supposed to be. (Indeed, that is why God has laws against a good deal of sin.) God is for shalom and *therefore* against sin.⁷

This theological understanding that God's commandments are always designed to bless us is not a modern capitulation to a narcissistic culture. For instance, seventeenth century Puritan pastor Richard Baxter in *A Christian Directory*, his magisterial work on spirituality, argues that Satan's greatest lie is that God's commandments are not in our best interest, and that a life of obedience to God will result in 'a terrible or tedious life'.⁸ But in reality, 'God doth not command us to honour him by [telling us to do] anything which would make us miserable'.⁹ In other words, obedience to

⁷ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 10, 14

⁸ *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, vol. 1, (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, reprinted 2000), 52. It is worth noting that no less a theocentric theological giant than J. I. Packer maintains that Richard Baxter's *Christian Directory* is 'the fullest, most thorough, and in this writer's judgement, most profound treatment of Christian spirituality and standards that has ever been attempted by an English-speaking Evangelical author', *ibid.*, introduction, vii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 64. The point here is certainly not that God exists simply to make us happy, but that his glory and our happiness or well-being are not mutually exclusive. In fact, he is most glorified in us, when we are most satisfied in him. John Piper, a modern pastor and prolific author who stands in the reformed tradition of Richard Baxter, has thoroughly developed this concept in *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1986).

God will always result in blessing, not boredom, happiness, not misery. This is true regardless of the subject matter, be it salvation or sex.

Biblical Teaching Regarding Premarital Sexual Relations

There are countless liberal religious voices proclaiming that consensual sexual relations outside of marriage are morally acceptable. Liberal Christian ethicists have generally made this case in one of two ways:

- 1 they argue that a careful reading of Scripture reveals that the NT does not actually condemn non-married adults having consensual sex;¹⁰
- 2 they more commonly argue that while some writers of Scripture did condemn all sexual activity outside of marriage, these authors wrote from a pre-modern perspective which must not be accepted wholesale by modern Christians. The spirit of the gospel allows for consensual sexual expression in non-married loving adult relationships.¹¹

This is a very recent Christian perspective. The overwhelming consensus of historical Christian teaching, as well as modern evangelical biblical

¹⁰ For instance, L. William Countryman argues that OT sexual prohibitions against sex outside of marriage are primarily based on Mosaic purity codes from which the NT believer has been freed, *Dirt, Greed & Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). Taking a slightly different line of argument, but arriving at the same conclusion is Joseph Fletcher, who argues that the Bible never expressly forbids premarital sex; it only condemns extramarital sex, 'Ethics and Unmarried Sex', in *Moral Issues and Christian Responses*, ed. Paul Jersild and Dale Johnson (New York: Holt & Winston, 1971), 113.

¹¹ For instance, Christine E. Gudorf argues that we must dismiss various biblical sexual texts as divine revelation because they are permeated with patriarchy, misogyny, and anti-sexual attitudes 'which are in conflict with the central message of the gospel'. Instead, the spirit of the gospel (which accepts sex as a divine gift) leads us to a Christian sexual ethic which chooses 'sexual pleasure as the primary ethical criterion for evaluating sexual activity', *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 11, 115. See also James B. Nelson, *Body Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992); John Shelby Spong, *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988).

scholarship is that sexual relations are only appropriate in marriage.¹² We see this sexual ethic given explicitly and implicitly in numerous biblical passages. For example, virginity before marriage is greatly prized in Scripture (Gen. 24:16; Lev. 21:14; Luke 1:27), so much so that a new bride kept the bloody sheet from the first night she slept with her husband as proof that she entered marriage as a virgin (Deut. 22:15–17). Loss of virginity before marriage was cause for severe sanctions (Deut. 22:20–21). Overall, there are not a large number of OT passages which specifically address premarital sex, since sexual chastity among singles was apparently thoroughly accepted and practised. This is seen in the widespread use of the term ‘virgin’ simply to signify those who were unmarried (Lam. 1:14, 18; 2:10; Amos 8:13; Zech. 9:17).

Due to the sexually permissive Greco-Roman culture, the NT gives much more specific attention to premarital sex. Various terms are used in the NT to indicate sexual sin, but by far the most important term is *porneia*. A careful reading of the NT reveals that *porneia* is a broad term for sexual sin, including prostitution (1 Cor. 6:13, 18), and promiscuous sexual activity (Matt. 15:19; 1 Cor. 7:2; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3; 1 Thess. 4:3–5). It certainly includes premarital sex, though it is not limited to it. A study of the Koine papyri reveals that in the first century secular writings *porneia* had the same meaning as in the NT – illicit sexual activity, including prostitution, adultery, and premarital sex.¹³ Though some liberal scholars have sought to restrict the meaning of *porneia* to prostitution or non-consensual sexual activity,¹⁴ the data is clear. NT sanctions against *porneia* forbid premarital sexual activity.

¹² Thus, Richard B. Hays in his magisterial work on NT ethics summarizes the biblical sexual ethic as follows: ‘from Genesis 1 onward, Scripture affirms repeatedly that God has made man and woman for one another and that our sexual desires rightly find fulfilment within heterosexual marriage’, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 390.

¹³ James H. Moulton and George Milliagan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), 529

¹⁴ Bruce Malina argues that *porneia* has a more restricted meaning than has been previously understood, and that it does not prohibit non-commercial, non-exploitive premarital sex, ‘Does *Porneia* Mean Fornication?’, *Novum Testamentum* 14 (1972): 10–17. Joseph Jensen however, counters Malina’s arguments, and gives abundant evidence that all forms of premarital sex are included in the scope of the biblical use of *porneia*, ‘Does *Porneia* Mean Fornication? A Critique of Bruce Malina’, *Novum Testamentum* 20 (1978): 161–84.

Other NT passages affirm the fact that premarital sex is forbidden. One of the clearest examples is in 1 Corinthians. 7:1–5, where Paul responds to the Corinthians' suggestion that it is best for a married man not to have sexual relations with his wife. Paul's response is that because of immoralities (*porneia*), each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and the husband and wife must meet each other's sexual needs so that they do not fall into sexual temptation. There is no moral loophole here for premarital sex, for Paul instead argues that marriage is the only God ordained provision for sexual needs. Other passages such as Hebrews 13:4 link those who practise premarital sex ('fornicators') with adulterers, indicating that sex before marriage and sex after marriage to someone other than one's spouse are equally condemned ('God will judge'). The marriage bed is cited as the exclusive place for God ordained sexual activity.

In summary, both the Old and New Testaments bless sex in marriage as a gift from God, and unequivocally condemn sex outside of marriage. But the affirmation of sex in marriage and the prohibition of sex outside of marriage are both based on the fact that sex is a gift from God. As the good and holy creator, he knows the best way for us to use his gifts, and he has every right to govern their expression.

Arguments for Premarital Sex Based on Sex as a Basic Right

In the past three decades there has been a dramatic shift in the western world regarding the moral acceptability of premarital sex.¹⁵ Most modern westerners find the biblical sexual ethic to be illogical, outdated, and utterly unacceptable. Thus, by the age of nineteen, 85% of American males and 77% of females will have had intercourse.¹⁶ In England and Wales, 39% of non-married adults ages 25–29 are cohabiting, as are 35%

¹⁵ Pamela J. Smock, in an excellent survey of cohabitation in the western world and especially the United States, notes that cohabitation before marriage rose 10% in the United States between 1965 and 1974, but it rose to over 50% of those marrying between 1990 and 1994, 'Cohabitation in the United States, An Appraisal of Research themes, Findings, and Implications', *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 3.

¹⁶ Alan Guttmacher Institute, 'Teen Sex and Pregnancy'; can be viewed on the web at http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_teen_sex.pdf

of non-married adults ages 30–34.¹⁷ From the outset of the sexual revolution in the 1960s, sexual expression has increasingly been viewed as a basic right that no one has a right to restrict. Singer Billy Joel powerfully articulated this ethic in his song, 'My Life' in which he stated that people have a right to sleep with anyone they want to; they answer only to themselves. Hence, he doesn't care what others think about his sexual behaviour. He declared that those who want to restrict his sexual expressions should live their life and 'leave me alone'. While Billy Joel simply offers an artistic proclamation that premarital sex is a basic right, some liberal Christian ethicists academically argue the same point.¹⁸

Flowing out of the idea that unrestricted sex is a basic right, other arguments are commonly given for premarital sex. One of the most common is that sexual abstinence is unnatural and leads to psychologically unhealthy sexual repression. This argument was first articulated by the influential sex researcher Alfred Kinsey.¹⁹ Many argue that premarital sex strengthens future marriage by helping couples adjust to each other and by insuring that they are sexually compatible. Hence it ultimately strengthens marriage. Others note that sex is a powerful way to deepen love between two people and enhance the relationship. Hence, couples who love each other should have sex, regardless of whether or not they are married. All of these arguments fly in the face of the biblical teaching that sex is to be reserved for marriage. If in fact sex is a good gift from a gracious Creator who prohibits premarital sexual relations, what evidence is there that abstinence before marriage is good and healthy? Are we simply to take the biblical sanctions against premarital sex by faith and tell others they must do the same?

Arguments for Premarital Sexual Abstinence Based on the Goodness of God

While Christians are called to 'walk by faith' and obey God's Word regardless of whether it makes sense, this is not a call to intellectual

¹⁷ *National Statistics Population Trends* 119 (2005): 69; can be viewed on the web at http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_population/PT119v2.pdf

¹⁸ Douglas J. Miller, 'Sexual Activity as a Basic Human Right', *American Baptist Quarterly* 8 (1989): 84–93

¹⁹ Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Company, 1948), 197–213

suicide. In fact, there are numerous cogent arguments for premarital sexual abstinence which are supported by modern medical and social science research. In particular, we will note five arguments for reserving sex for marriage. All of these show the wisdom and benevolence of biblical premarital sexual prohibitions.

1. Abstinence before marriage enhances personal and marital health.

The sex act is the most intimate form of human interaction. The very fact that sex involves being naked before another person and embracing them in their nakedness suggests great vulnerability and exposure. Furthermore, this very act can have dramatic, life or death consequences (the creation of life or the ultimate loss of life through sexually transmitted diseases). For these reasons, sex is most meaningful and healthy in a relationship in which a couple has made a vow of life long commitment to each other. This provides the safest and most intimate setting for sex, for only in marriage is sex experienced in a relationship in which all of life is shared together.²⁰ Premarital sex is not the best context in which to experience this powerful act, and undermines personal and future marital health.

In terms of personal health, those who are sexually active before marriage often struggle later in life with the need to change their perceptions of what sex means, lack of trust, comparisons of the sexual performance of their spouse with former boyfriends/girlfriends, and struggles with the demands of fidelity in marriage. My wife (who is a family therapist) and I continually counsel women as well as men, who are experiencing emotional and marital struggles due to sexual experiences before marriage. For many of the people we work with, their sexual health in marriage was negatively impacted by their sexual behaviour before marriage.

²⁰ Thus, in a recent study of sexual satisfaction among married, cohabiting, and dating couples, researchers found that married men and women experienced significantly more emotional satisfaction with sex than sexually active singles. They in particular linked married men's 60% higher emotional satisfaction rate to 'the greater emotional investment of those who are married in their wife, than of those who are cohabiting or single in their girlfriend', Linda J. Waite and Kara Joyner, 'Emotional and Physical Satisfaction with Sex in Married, Cohabiting, and Dating Sexual Unions: Do Men and Women Differ?', in *Sex, Love, and Health in America: Private Choices and Public Policies*, ed. Edward O. Laumann and Robert T. Michael (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 266.

In terms of marital satisfaction, one of the most wide-spread modern myths is that couples need to live together before they get married to see if they are sexually and relationally compatible and thus to enhance future marital health and satisfaction. In reality, research shows that couples that live together before marriage have higher infidelity rates, lower marital satisfaction rates, and higher divorce rates than those who don't live together before marriage. In spite of the intuitive logic that cohabitation should have a beneficial affect on subsequent marital stability by allowing individuals to truly get to know their partner before committing to marriage, research on this specific dynamic has shown 'no positive effect of cohabitation on marital stability'.²¹ In fact, there is a tremendous amount of social science research, particularly studies of cohabitation, which demonstrates the injurious personal and relational effects of premarital sexual relations. For instance, in one major recent study, 1,425 couples were studied to determine the relationship between premarital cohabitation and marital dysfunction. Researchers found that couples who cohabited before marriage 'reported poorer marital quality and greater marital instability'.²² This dynamic of cohabitation having a negative impact on subsequent marriage has been replicated in so many different studies that some social scientists have labelled it 'the cohabitation effect'.²³ Hence, it is not surprising that the research shows cohabiters are more likely to divorce or separate if they do get married. A study of over 4,000 Swedish women reported that women who cohabit before marriage have an 80% higher marital failure rate than women who did

²¹ Lee A. Lillard, Michael J. Brien, and Linda J. Waite, 'Premarital Cohabitation and Subsequent Marital Dissolution: A Matter of Self-Selection', *Demography* 32 (1995): 455

²² Claire Kamp Dush, Catherine Cohan, and Paul Amato, 'The Relationship between Cohabitation and Marital Quality and Stability: Change Across Cohorts', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65 (2003): 539–49. See also Alfred DeMaris and G. Leslie, 'Cohabitation with the Future Spouse: Its Influence Upon Marital Satisfaction and Communication', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 46 (1984): 77–84; A. Elizabeth Thomson and Ygo Colella, 'Cohabitation and Marital Stability: Quality or Commitment', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 54 (1992): 259–67.

²³ Catherine L. Cohan and Stacey Kleinbaum, 'Toward a Greater Understanding of the Cohabitation Effect: Premarital Cohabitation and Marital Communication', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64 (2002): 180–92

not cohabit with their future spouse.²⁴ In short, living together and having sex before marriage does not prepare one for marriage, but decreases the likelihood of a future healthy marriage.

In terms of sexual satisfaction, it is very interesting to note that in the Sex in America Survey, one of the largest studies released in the last decade of American sexual practices, married couples reported considerably higher rates of sexual satisfaction than singles; and among women, conservative Protestant women had the highest rates of orgasm.²⁵ These secular researchers made the following comments that support the contention that marriage is the best environment to experience sex, and reserving sex for marriage can in fact enhance future marital satisfaction. They comment on their findings:

Those having the most partnered sex and enjoying it the most are the married people. The young single people who flit from partner to partner and seem to be having a sex life that is satisfying beyond most people's dreams are, it seems, mostly a media creation. In real life, the unheralded, seldom discussed world of married sex is actually the one that satisfies most people.²⁶

While these findings do not tightly prove that sex before marriage is unhealthy, they point in that direction by strongly suggesting that marriage is the healthiest, most satisfying context in which to have sex. The findings also suggest that those who have conservative sexual values, which in most cases would include a commitment to save sex for marriage, have better sex lives when they do get married.

²⁴ N. G. Bennett, A. K. Blanc, and D. E. Bloom, 'Commitment and the Modern Union: Assessing the Link between Premarital Cohabitation and Subsequent Marital Stability', *American Sociological Review* 53 (1988): 127–38. See also Alfred DeMaris and K. Vaninadha Rao, 'Premarital Cohabitation and Subsequent Marital Stability in the United States: A Reassessment', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54 (1992): 178–90; David R. Hall and John Z. Zhao, 'Cohabitation and Divorce in Canada: Testing the Selectivity Hypothesis', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57 (1995): 421–27.

²⁵ Robert T. Michael, John H. Gagnon, Edward O. Laumann, et al., *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* (New York: Time Warner, 1995), 127–28

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 131

2. *Abstinence before marriage increases the likelihood of being respected and treated with dignity.*

This point flows out of the previous point. Marriage is by far the best, safest, and healthiest environment for sex because it involves the highest level of relational commitment. For instance, studies indicate that 70% of couples that live together fail to get married and soon break up. The majority of cohabiting couples are together less than two years, and the average time together is only thirteen months.²⁷ It is safe to say that when sex is practised outside of marriage, it is inevitably expressed in a context that lacks the highest level of commitment, and this creates great potential for disrespect and selfish manipulation. It also creates much greater potential for harm and heartache. For instance, countless women have been pressured into sex by boyfriends who manipulated them by saying they loved them, when in reality they just wanted to use them. Surveys reveal that a high percentage of singles, especially males, admit to lying about their sexual history, including having a sexually transmitted disease, so that they could have sex. It is much more likely that a man will abandon his girlfriend who becomes unexpectedly pregnant, than a husband will leave a wife who becomes unexpectedly pregnant. While domestic violence is problematic in all spheres of society, including those who are married, research shows that cohabiting couples are much more likely to physically abuse each other than are married couples or non cohabiting dating couples.²⁸ According to a 2002 United States Department of Justice report on intimate partner violence, unmarried women are almost five times more likely to experience violence at the hands of their sexual partner than are married women.²⁹

A final example of the way that premarital sex can weaken respect and increase potential for being harmed is seen in rates of infidelity. In one

²⁷ L. Bumpas and J. Sweet, 'National Estimates of Cohabitation', *Demography* 26 (1989): 22–24; C. Surra, 'Research and Theory on Mate Selection and Premarital Relationships in the 1980s', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52 (1990): 844–65

²⁸ Lynn Magdol, Terrie E. Moffitt, Avshalom Caspi, et al., 'Hitting without a Licence: Testing Explanations for Differences in Partner Abuse between Young Adult Daters and Cohabitators', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 60 (1998): 41–55; Jan E. Stets, 'Cohabiting and Marital Aggression: The Role of Social Isolation', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 53 (1991): 669–80

²⁹ Callie Marie Rennison and Sarah Welchans, *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report: Intimate Partner Violence*, a special report prepared at the request of the Department of Justice, May 2000, rev. 1/31/02, Appendix table 8.

major study of couples living together, cohabitators were found to be almost twice as likely to be unfaithful as those who were married. Upon analysis, this was found to be due to the weaker nature of the cohabitators' relationships compared to married couples, not to cohabitators having lower expectations of fidelity than married couples. The researchers noted: 'this finding suggests that cohabitor's lower investments in their unions, not their less conventional values, accounted for the greater risk of infidelity'.³⁰

Not only can premarital sex foster disrespect and even abuse, but it can mask abusive character which already exists. Saving sex for marriage allows couples to get to know the other person for who they really are, for sex has an amazing way of creating instant romance and connection that may well be shallow and ultimately deceptive. Sex often blinds people to the reality of the other person's character, which can be very costly if the other person has serious character flaws. Conversely, saving sex for marriage forces couples to get to know their partner in a much deeper way. It also tends to create more respect and love for the other person because it forces them to sacrifice their immediate sexual needs for the greater long term good.³¹

3. Abstinence before marriage helps one develop self-control and character necessary for a healthy marriage (and for life in general).

The popular notion that premarital sexual abstinence is psychologically unhealthy is curiously inconsistent and groundless. It is curiously inconsistent because in virtually every domain of life except for the sexual, western culture strongly affirms the propriety and healthiness of denying our physical appetites for a greater long term good. We particularly affirm and handsomely reward athletes who abstain from sleep, food, physical comfort, and even medical care to get an Olympic gold medal, win the Tour de France, or climb Mount Everest. We recognize that when a greater good is in view, it is commendable, healthy, and beneficial to give up various physical pleasures. Our culture does not apply this same logic to

³⁰ Judith Treas and Deirdre Giesen, 'Sexual Infidelity among Married and Cohabiting Couples', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62 (2000): 59

³¹ Sociologist George Gilder brilliantly expresses this in terms of the way saving sex for marriage 'tames the male barbarian', who would otherwise put his own needs above the woman's and become increasingly disrespectful, crass, and unfaithful, *Men and Marriage* (Gretna, LA: Pelican, 1992).

sex, but it should. It is the Christian sexual ethic that is most logical and defensible. Christians affirm that food, drink, sex, and physical comfort are all good gifts from God, but God graciously proscribes the use of those gifts. A primary way he asks singles to live out their sexuality is to abstain from this physical pleasure for the greater good. For most, this will mean abstaining until marriage. For some who are called to a life of singleness, it will mean life long abstinence for the greater good of the kingdom of God. Jesus himself modelled this principle.

The argument that sexual abstinence before marriage is psychologically unhealthy is also groundless. As long as one is abstaining from sex for the right reason (saving a divine gift for a greater good), abstinence is very healthy. In particular, sexual abstinence before marriage can enhance sacrificial love and respect for one's partner. It also develops self-control that is essential for healthy personal and marital life. Young singles often have the mistaken impression that their sexual frustrations would disappear if they could just hurry up and get married and enjoy limitless sex. While the Bible itself instructs married couples to enjoy regular sexual relations (1 Cor. 7:1–5) the rude fact is that in the most healthy marriages spouses get sick, wives menstruate and get pregnant, and small children dissipate the time and energy needed for passionate sex. The beauty of the biblical sexual ethic is that marriage is a life-long commitment of love and fidelity. So, even if illness or pregnancy precludes sexual relations for a week or even months, the love and the commitment live on. And sex will be celebrated when it can be celebrated. Most people deeply long for a life partner who will love them unconditionally, someone they can bond with, share life with, and enjoy sex with for the rest of their life. One of the greatest threats to this type of wonderful life long intimate love is marital infidelity; and abstaining from sex before marriage develops self-control, and enhances fidelity after marriage.

Social science researchers have noted the correlation between premarital sex and marital infidelity. For instance, the Kinsey report on female sexuality revealed the more premarital sex a woman engaged in, the more likely she would be to commit adultery once married.³² More recently, in a major study on sexual infidelity researchers demonstrated a causal relationship between premarital sex and marital infidelity. In fact,

³² Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin, *et al.*, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Company, 1953), 427–28

they actually quantified the effects of premarital sex on subsequent marriage. They discovered that early sexual experience increased sexual infidelity in marriage 1% for each partner between ages eighteen and marital union.³³ These research findings are predictable, for sexual abstinence before marriage helps to develop self-control and character that later enhances marriage.

4. Abstinence before marriage guarantees that one will not have to deal with an unplanned pregnancy.

Since abstinence is the only 100% effective form of birth control, singles who practise abstinence will never have to deal with an unexpected pregnancy. Though married couples also have unplanned pregnancies, they are generally much better equipped to handle them in a healthy manner, given the committed nature of their relationship. Many researchers are now saying that out of wedlock births are the single most significant factor influencing long-term poverty in America. In many inner city areas of America, up to two-thirds of the births are to unwed mothers, and these single parent children are much more likely to live below the poverty line, drop out of high school, end up in prison, become single parents themselves, and get locked into a cycle of poverty.³⁴ The point here is certainly not to condemn single mothers (who need and deserve compassion and assistance) but to underscore the fact that much long-term, even generational suffering is a direct result of sex outside of marriage. God forbids sex outside marriage to save us from individual and societal harm.

5. Abstinence before marriage eliminates the threat of contracting STDs.

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are at epidemic rates in many countries and communities, and are literally disrupting the modern world. There are more than fifty STDs, and STD rates in the United States are among the highest in the industrialized world. In 2003 the Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported that nineteen million STD infections occur annually in the USA, with almost half of these infections occurring among

³³ Treas and Giesen, 'Sexual Infidelity among Married and Cohabiting Couples', 56

³⁴ For a very readable overview of the negative individual and societal impact of single parenting, see, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, 'Dan Quayle Was Right', *Atlantic Monthly*, 271, issue 4 (April, 1993): 47-68.

the youth aged between fifteen and twenty-four.³⁵ Furthermore, the CDC notes that in addition to potentially severe health consequences for the populace, STDs create a great economic burden, creating direct annual US medical costs of 15.5 billion dollars. The physical and financial burden of STDs is a much greater burden around the world. According to the World Health Organization, STDs are 'among the most common causes of illness in the world', and have far reaching health, economic, and social consequences.³⁶ In spite of medical advances, several STDs are currently incurable, notably HIV, genital herpes, hepatitis B, and human papilloma virus (HPV). In fact, it is estimated that in the USA, half of the people who are annually infected with an STD, are infected with one that is incurable.³⁷

The HIV virus, which leads to AIDS, is particularly devastating in much of the developing world. There are now some forty-two million people with AIDS worldwide, with roughly five million new cases a year. Africa has been most affected by the AIDS epidemic, having some communities with the majority of adults HIV+. Sub-Saharan Africa has just 10% of the world's population, but is inhabited by more than 60% of all people living with HIV (over twenty-five million). In 2004 it is estimated that 3.1 million people in the region became newly infected with HIV, and almost 2.5 million died of AIDS.³⁸ AIDS is having an overwhelming economic and social impact in Africa. For instance, in nine African countries AIDS has lowered life expectancy rates below forty years of age.³⁹ In the past twenty years AIDS has created approximately thirty million African orphans, and some estimate that by the end of the decade there could be one hundred million AIDS orphans in Africa.⁴⁰ While the HIV virus can be spread through contact with blood or other bodily fluids (particularly through childbirth or sharing of infected needles) the vast majority of HIV

35 'STD Surveillance 2003', available at <http://www.cdc.gov/std/stats/trends2003.htm>

36 'Guidelines for the Management of Sexually Transmitted Infections' (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2003): vii, available at http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/publications/rhr_01_10_mngt_stis/guidelines_mngt_stis.pdf

37 'Tracking the Hidden Epidemics: Trends in STDs in the United States 2000', 1, available at http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/dstd/Stats_Trends/Trends2000.pdf

38 UN Aids Fact Sheet, available at http://www.unaids.org/html/pub/publications/factsheets04/FS_SSAfrica_en_pdf/FS_SSAfrica.html

39 *Ibid.*

40 'All the Dying People', *Canada and the World Backgrounder* 67, issue 3 (December, 2001): 28-31

infections, particularly in Africa, are the result of heterosexual sexual activity.

While AIDS rates in the United States are nothing like Africa's, other STD rates in America are very high and very dangerous. The most common sexually transmitted disease in the USA is the human papilloma virus (HPV). In 2003 the Center for Disease Control reported that approximately nineteen million Americans are currently infected with HPV, and least 50% of sexually active men and women acquire genital HPV infection at some point in their lives.⁴¹ By the age of fifty, at least 80% of women will have acquired genital HPV infection. About 6.2 million Americans get a new genital HPV infection each year. What is most troubling is that certain HPV types cause abnormal Pap smears and are etiologically related to cervical, vulvar, anal, and penile cancers; other types cause genital warts, recurrent respiratory papillomatosis, and low-grade Pap smear abnormalities. Gynecologists report that virtually all abnormal Pap smears indicating precancerous cells are a result of infection from HPV.⁴²

A final common STD we will note is chlamydia. In 2003, 877,478 chlamydial infections were reported to the CDC nationwide.⁴³ Chlamydia is often particularly devastating for women, for as the infectious organism (chlamydia trachomatis) begins multiplying in a woman's uterus, tubes, and ovaries, it causes inflammation of the pelvic region (PID). This can cause permanent damage to the reproductive organs, which is why chlamydia is one of the leading causes of infertility. Physician Joe McIlhane notes that if a woman's reproductive organs have been infected once by chlamydia, she has a 25% chance of becoming sterile. If she is infected a second time, she has a 50% chance of sterility.⁴⁴ What is particularly troubling about chlamydia is that while it is treatable, symptoms often don't appear for weeks after exposure if they appear at all (studies indicate that 75% of the women and 50% of the men who have chlamydia are unaware of it; it is asymptomatic). Furthermore, since it is spread by skin-to-skin contact in the genital region, condoms offer limited protection against transmission.

41 'Genital HPV Infection – CDC Fact Sheet', available at <http://www.cdc.gov/std/HPV/STDFact-HPV.htm>

42 See Joe S. McIlhane, *Sexuality and Sexually Transmitted Diseases* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

43 'STD Surveillance 2003', available at <http://www.cdc.gov/std/stats/trends2003.htm>

44 Joe S. McIlhane, *Sexuality and Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, 98

While these STD statistics are depressing, it is important to put this discussion back in the context of the essay. Sex is a wonderful divine gift, but when engaged in in the wrong context, it can bring devastating consequences. This truth is nowhere made more clear than with STDs. We can again see the goodness of God in the premarital chastity ethic, for if both partners practise sexual abstinence before marriage and remain faithful after marriage, they virtually eliminate the possibility of contracting an STD in their lifetime.

At this juncture it is important to offer a word of encouragement to those who have had premarital sex and suffered negative consequences. God is a God of grace. The beauty of the gospel is that God loves fallen sinners and calls them to be his children not because of their innate moral beauty but in spite of their sin. Thus, the apostle Paul reminds us 'while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' (Rom. 5:8). Furthermore, Scripture is replete with examples of God forgiving and healing sexual sinners (Josh. 2:1–21; 2 Sam. 12:1–23; Hos. 1–3; John 4:1–39). The negative consequences of premarital sexual activity need not be final, for God delights in restoring broken sinners (Joel 2:25–27).

Conclusion

As strange as it sounds to modern ears, sex before marriage is morally wrong because God prohibits it. But God did not prohibit premarital sex because he is whimsical or mean. As the almighty, holy creator, he has the right to dictate human sexual behaviour. As a loving creator, his commandments are always for our good. God prohibits premarital sex, not because sex is bad, but because it is such a precious and powerful gift. God knows that reserving sex for marriage enhances the gift, builds personal and relational health, and protects us from harm. Oh that more singles would experience the goodness of God in their sex lives!

The Last Word: A Stone Hushin' Life

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When my son Scott was a youth pastor, he worked with a musically talented friend and wrote the lyrics for a few new songs. He wanted to write lyrics that better reflected the richness, complexity and often paradoxical truth of Scripture. He wanted the young people in his youth group to think and sing at the same time. Scott and his friend compiled a self-published songbook and entitled it *Stone Hushin' Music*. The idea, of course, is based on Jesus' admonition in Luke 19:40, 'I tell you, if these be silent, the stones would shout out.'

I loved the idea implied by Scott's Americanized southern term '*Stone Hushin'*'. What does it mean to be a *Stone Husher*? To live a *Stone Hushin'* life? What does it mean to do all that we do as an act of praise? G. K. Chesterton asserts that Gothic architecture was literally a fulfilment of this prophecy. Chesterton makes the point that in the time in the Church's history when all but the clergy were marginalized, silenced and greatly excluded from the central acts of worship, medieval lay-people, the architects, stone masons, wood carvers, and artists quietly contributed their best work (Orthodoxy). These cathedrals still stand as monuments of silent praise, still draw the eyes and hearts of tourists and pilgrims upward to the truth framed in stained-glass and hidden in the beauty of the high altar.

The praises of God's people can be carried by any work of God's people (the definition of liturgy!) that honours God, reflects his Word and is offered to him as our very best. As a university professor, I want to motivate all my students, not just the Bible and theology majors, to be *Stone Hushin' Scholars*. How do I help students understand that worship isn't confined to sanctuaries or chapels, but should be manifest in laboratories and classrooms? In the particularity of the incarnation, Jesus asserted his Lordship over all the created order. Farms, construction sites and stores should be places of praise as much as mission fields, church buildings and homes.

However, my students often feel compelled by the world's needs to 'do something', but that something only seems spiritual if it's directly (and often-times instantly!) related to church or mission. The sacred-secular split is alive and well in the world-view of many Christians. Students often assume that dropping out of school, going to Africa and caring for a hundred AIDS victims for six months is really spiritual, radically obedient and what Jesus would do. But they don't automatically consider that hard work and excellence in the micro-biology lab can help lead to a career that eventually finds them on a team of researchers that discovers the cure for HIV-AIDS that can save millions. My point is not to set these two things against each other in a who-is-holier competition, but to urge people of faith to see all work done with excellence as *Stone Hushin'* work.

Stone Hushin' Scholars realize that God values science, education, music, history, maths, economics as much as missions, ministry and biblical studies. *Stone Hushin'* Scholars want to love the Lord with whole-life stewardship, including the life of the mind. *Stone Hushin'* Scholars know that brains and belief are not mutually exclusive, that every square inch of creation is indeed the Lord's, and that the sacred-secular split is a lie from the father of lies. The implications of this are legion.

American evangelicals often bemoan the outcome of 'Roe versus Wade', the Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in the United States. The justices of that court are vilified and abhorred for this January 1972 decision. The law may have gone into effect that January, but the case was lost well before then when Christian parents failed to value their children's decision to study the law instead of 'enter the ministry' and when churches took more interest in the lawyer's income than in his or her law practice. None of the Supreme Court justices would have identified themselves as atheists or pagans, and most, if not all, were members of Christian congregations. But they had never been challenged or taught to 'think Christianly' in a world gone wrong.

If Jesus is Lord of the universe, the sacred-secular split in our world and in our lives is anathema to what we believe and know. Thinking believers who love God must be good for the world. Men and women in holy partnerships in work and family are to exercise benevolent dominion over all the cosmos God loves. As bearers of God's image, we are to bring light out of darkness and order out of chaos. We are to organize, categorize and name creation. The beginnings of art, the sciences, the humanities, worship and recreation are all there in the first creation account of Genesis. The persistent and joyful exercise of the Creator's mandate is

more urgent, and more difficult after the Edenic rebellion, but it has never been revoked.

Stone Hushers remember that 'the creation waits with eager longing ... to be set free from decay ... groaning ... while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies' (Rom. 8:19–23). 'The redemption of our bodies' is a startling reminder in the Scripture that the final sanctification of embodiment ends the war between body and soul. In Christ, our humanity is fully redeemed. In the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of God we see the fulness of our own humanity and the promised restoration of all creation. Because of this, all work that contributes to the benevolent dominion of God's world is sacred and has the capacity to praise the Creator. *Stone Hushin'* people recognize the doxological possibilities of their work as worship. And we will not be silent!