

# themelios

*An International Journal for Students of  
Theological and Religious Studies*

**Volume 48 Issue 3 December 2023**

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## DESCRIPTION

*Themelios* is an international, evangelical, peer-reviewed theological journal that expounds and defends the historic Christian faith. Its primary audience is theological students and pastors, though scholars read it as well. *Themelios* began in 1975 and was operated by RTSF/UCCF in the UK, and it became a digital journal operated by The Gospel Coalition in 2008. The editorial team draws participants from across the globe as editors, essayists, and reviewers. *Themelios* is published three times a year online at The Gospel Coalition website in PDF and HTML, and may be purchased in digital format with Logos Bible Software and in print with Wipf and Stock. *Themelios* is copyrighted by The Gospel Coalition. Readers are free to use it and circulate it in digital form without further permission, but they must acknowledge the source and may not change the content.

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EDITORIAL

# Dealing with Criticism: Lessons from Nehemiah

— Brian J. Tabb —

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While in seminary, I read C. H. Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students*, and the chapter to which I return most often is "The Blind Eye and the Deaf Ear."<sup>1</sup> The great preacher explains that "a minister ought to have one blind eye and one deaf ear," a vivid image that captures the truth of Ecclesiastes 7:21: "Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you." Spurgeon acknowledges, "You must be able to bear criticism, or you are not fit to be at the head of a congregation."<sup>2</sup> Leaders should not only expect criticism and prepare to endure it, but they must use wisdom to respond rightly to different sorts of critics:

Public men must expect public criticism, and as the public cannot be regarded as infallible, public men may expect to be criticized in a way which is neither fair nor pleasant. To all honest and just remarks we are bound to give due measure of heed, but to the bitter verdict of prejudice, the frivolous faultfinding of men of fashion, the stupid utterances of the ignorant, and the fierce denunciations of opponents, we may very safely turn a deaf ear.<sup>3</sup>

This column reflects on how Nehemiah employs a blind eye and deaf ear when faced with all manner of criticism and opposition. Who were his critics? Why did they oppose Nehemiah and his plans to rebuild the wall? How did the governor respond to his critics, and what lessons might ministry leaders today glean from Nehemiah's example?

## *1. Profile of Nehemiah and His Critics*

Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah is a devout Jew who serves as cupbearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes (Neh 1:1, 11; 2:1). When he learns of the great trouble and shame of Jerusalem, he pours out his heart in prayer and asks the Lord to "give success" to him as he prepares to take action (1:11). Nehemiah then requests a leave of absence and supplies to rebuild Jerusalem, and the king authorizes him to go. Later,

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<sup>1</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 321–35.

<sup>2</sup> Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 326.

<sup>3</sup> Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 330.

readers learn of his appointment as governor in the land of Judah (5:14–15). He completes Jerusalem's wall and initiates various reforms in the land, and at every turn he faces blistering criticism and dogged resistance.

Nehemiah's most strident critics are introduced in chapter 2:

But when *Sanballat the Horonite* and *Tobiah the Ammonite servant* heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. (2:10)

But when *Sanballat the Horonite* and *Tobiah the Ammonite servant* and *Geshem the Arab* heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" (2:19)

Sanballat is Nehemiah's foremost political opponent, mentioned ten times in the book.<sup>4</sup> His Babylonian name means "the god Sin has saved" or "the god Sin has given life,"<sup>5</sup> and the designation Horonite may link him to Beth-Horon (cf. Josh 16:3–5) or Horonaim in Moab (cf. Isa 15:5).<sup>6</sup> Clearly, Sanballat is a person of status and influence. He is the father-in-law of the high priest (Neh 13:28), and a well-preserved papyrus identifies Sanballat as "the governor of Samaria,"<sup>7</sup> which explains why he addresses the army of Samaria (4:2).

Sanballat's chief ally is "Tobiah the Ammonite servant," referenced by name fourteen times in Nehemiah.<sup>8</sup> While the designation **הַעֲבָד** could be pejorative ("the slave"), in this case it is likely an honorific title of an official ("the servant"). In fact, scholars typically identify this Tobiah as governor of the Ammonite region.<sup>9</sup> Tobiah has significant family ties and influence among the nobility in Judah (see Neh 6:17–18). Even though his name in Hebrew means "Yahweh is good" (**טוֹבִיָּה**), Tobiah consistently opposes the Lord's work throughout the book, and the final chapter reveals that this Ammonite leverages his personal connections with a priest to secure personal accommodations in a temple chamber intended to store provisions for priests and Levites (13:4–7).

A third critic, Geshem the Arab, appears alongside Sanballat and Tobiah in Nehemiah 2:19 and 6:1–2. Inscriptional evidence suggests that Geshem influenced politics from northeast Egypt to northern Arabia and southern Palestine.<sup>10</sup> Kidner comments, "So, with already a hostile Samaria and Ammon to

<sup>4</sup> Nehemiah 2:10, 19; 4:1, 7; 6:1–2, 5, 12, 14; 13:28. Unless otherwise noted, biblical citations come from the ESV. Nehemiah 4:1–23 in English translations corresponds to 3:33–4:17 in Hebrew and Greek versions. For simplicity, I employ the English versification when discussing this section of the book.

<sup>5</sup> Respectively, *HALOT* 760 (s.v. **סַנְבַּלֵּט**), and Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 216.

<sup>6</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, WBC 16 (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 182–83.

<sup>7</sup> "Petition for Authorization to Rebuild the Temple of Yaho," in *ANET* 492.

<sup>8</sup> Nehemiah 2:10, 19; 4:3, 7; 6:1, 12, 14, 17, 19; 7:62; 13:4–5, 7–8.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 218; Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Ezra and Nehemiah, Books of," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 292.

<sup>10</sup> Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Ezra and Nehemiah," in *1 Chronicles–Job*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, EBC 4, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 479.

the north and east,” the addition of Geshem the Arab meant that “Judah was now virtually encircled, and the war of nerves had begun.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the governor of Judah faces formidable opposition from a coalition of powerful, influential people. Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem relentlessly criticize and resolutely challenge Nehemiah’s reform efforts, which threaten their own political, economic, and social interests in the region.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. The Efforts and Aims of Nehemiah’s Critics

The opposition and antagonism towards Nehemiah and his work takes various forms (see the table below). The book initially highlights the *displeasure* of Sanballat and Tobiah at Nehemiah’s arrival in Judah “to seek the good of the sons of Israel” (2:10, my translation). Their emphatic disapproval is captured by the Hebrew phrase **וַיִּרַע לָהֶם רָעָה גְדֹלָה**: “it was a great evil to them.”<sup>13</sup> The opponents then *ridicule* and *publicly question* Nehemiah about his plans to rebuild Jerusalem’s wall. They “jeered” (ESV) or “mocked” (NIV)—rendering **לַעַג**—and “despised” (**בִּזְוָה**) Nehemiah and his allies (2:19; cf. 4:1). The hostile trio asks, “Are you *rebelling* [**מִרְדִּים**] against the king?” (2:19).

As Nehemiah moves forward with the work of repairing the city’s wall and gates, the opposition intensifies. Boiling with anger,<sup>14</sup> Sanballat heckles the Jews with a series of derisive questions:

What are these feeble Jews doing?

Will they restore it for themselves?

Will they sacrifice?

Will they finish up in a day?

Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that? (4:1–2)

Tobiah adds his own taunt: “Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!” (4:3).

As the work progresses, Nehemiah’s opponents unite in a plot to fight against Jerusalem and cause confusion (4:8). This confusion manifests in various ways.<sup>15</sup> The people of Judah begin to doubt their capacity to deal with the rubble and complete the task of rebuilding (4:10). Their enemies continue to scheme about ways to attack them to stop the work (4:11). And Jews from surrounding areas urge the workers in Jerusalem to abandon the city and return to them, presumably because they hear news of looming threats to their safety (4:12).

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<sup>11</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 12 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 91.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 226.

<sup>13</sup> Neh 2:10, as translated by Gary V. Smith, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, ZECOT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 15. Compare the renderings of this phrase in the KJV (“it grieved them exceedingly”) and NIV (“they were very much disturbed”).

<sup>14</sup> The Hebrew of Neh 3:33 (4:1 in English Bibles) reads **וַיִּחַר לוֹ וַיִּכְעַס הַרְבֵּה**, which Smith renders, “He became angry and he was very indignant” (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 294).

<sup>15</sup> Blenkinsopp states that this verse introduces “a rather sudden transition to a quite different problem” (*Ezra–Nehemiah*, 248) though it seems more likely that 4:10–12 closely relate to the enemy’s scheming plans in verse 8.



In chapter 6, Sanballat and Geshem repeatedly send messengers to Nehemiah urging him to meet with them “in one of the villages on the plain of Ono” (v. 2 NIV),<sup>16</sup> a considerable distance northwest of Jerusalem. Nehemiah rebuffs their requests, discerning their malicious aims: “But they intended to do me harm [יִרְעוּ].” On the fifth effort, Sanballat’s servant brings an open letter that circulates a salacious report that “you and the Jews intend to rebel [לְמַרְד]; that is why you are building the wall” (6:6). He accuses Nehemiah, not only of rebelling against the king, but of seeking regal authority for himself, restating and amplifying his earlier charges in 2:19. Nehemiah dismisses these baseless rumors and recognizes their efforts to scare and demoralize the builders (6:9). Then Shemaiah warns Nehemiah of a nocturnal attack and urges him seek refuge in the temple (6:10). He refuses to run away from danger and realizes that this prophet has not delivered a message from God but has been hired by his opponents to damage his reputation and taunt him (6:13, לְשֵׁם רָע לְמַעַן יִחְרְפוּנִי). Nehemiah’s prayer in 6:14 signals that this was no isolated occurrence, as he mentions “the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid [מִיִּרְאִים אֹתִי].”<sup>17</sup>

Even after the wall is finished in remarkable time, the opposition to Nehemiah persists. Tobiah the Ammonite leverages his influence and family ties with leading men in Judah (Neh 6:17–19). “His numerous binding agreements (*by oath*, 18) within the Jewish community were probably trading contracts, facilitated by his marriage connections.”<sup>18</sup> Tobiah’s powerful allies openly speak about his accomplishments in Nehemiah’s presence while also leaking information back to Tobiah. These deep social connections within Judah and economic interests exert ongoing pressure on Nehemiah and his allies, even as Tobiah continues to send threatening letters “to make me afraid” (לִירְאֵנִי).

Thus, the book recounts the unrelenting criticism and multifaceted opposition that Nehemiah and his allies faced in the difficult task to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls and institute reforms. His enemies employ various strategies to pressure, intimidate, distract, and demoralize Nehemiah, including public taunting, mockery, threats, bad press, baseless accusations, and sowing confusion in the city.

### Nehemiah and His Critics<sup>19</sup>

<i>Event</i>	<i>Critics’ Response</i>	<i>Nehemiah’s Counter-response</i>
Nehemiah arrives (2:9)	Sanballat, Tobiah are greatly displeased (2:10)	Action: Nehemiah travels to Jerusalem (2:11)
People resolve to work (2:17–18)	Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem jeer, despise, and question (2:19)	Speech: “God ... will make us prosper” (2:20)
People begin construction (4:1)	Sanballat, Tobiah are angry and jeer (4:1–3)	Prayer: “Hear ... for we are despised” (4:4–5)

<sup>16</sup> Scholars debate whether בְּכִפְּתִירִים is a place name (cf. ESV, “Hakkephirim”) or a general reference to villages (cf. LXX, ἐν ταῖς κώμαις).

<sup>17</sup> “Shemaiah’s was only one voice in an impressive chorus of discouragement,” according to Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 109.

<sup>18</sup> Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 110–11.

<sup>19</sup> This table adapts material in W. Brian Aucker, “Nehemiah,” in *Ezra–Job*, ESV Expository Commentary 4 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 152.

<i>Event</i>	<i>Critics' Response</i>	<i>Nehemiah's Counter-response</i>
The wall is joined together to half its height (4:6)	Sanballat, Tobiah, Arabs, Ammonites, Ashdodites are angry and plot to fight and confuse (4:7–8, 11)	Action: They pray and set a guard (4:9) Speech: “Remember the Lord” (4:14)
People return to work (4:15)	Enemies hear that God has frustrated their plan (4:15)	Action: They people work while armed (4:15–23)
Wall is completed without doors (6:1)	Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem ask to meet Nehemiah outside the city and spread false reports (6:1) Shemaiah counsels Nehemiah to hide in the temple (6:10, 12)	Actions: Nehemiah refuses to stop working or run away (6:3, 11) Prayers: “Strengthen my hands” (6:9); “Remember ... O my God” (6:14)
Wall is finished with doors (6:15; 7:1)	All enemies fear, Tobiah sends letters (6:16–19)	Action: They shut the gates and stand guard (7:3)

### 3. *Nehemiah's Response to His Critics*

How does Nehemiah respond to such vicious slander, violent threats, and stringent resistance to his work? What lessons might readers today glean from his wise example? We see that Nehemiah consistently demonstrates *confidence* in the Lord, *dependence* on God in prayer, *courage* to persevere in God's work, and *discernment* to distinguish truth from falsehood.

#### 3.1. Confidence in the Lord

Nehemiah acts with *conviction* because he is confident that the God of heaven is with him. When the king responds positively to his request to return to Jerusalem and rebuild it, Nehemiah recognizes that “the good hand of my God was upon me” (Neh 2:8). He then tells the people of Judah “of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good” (2:18). When Nehemiah receives public criticism and questions, he expresses unwavering confidence in God and commitment to his task: “The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build” (2:20). He is resolute in his plans to do what God has put in his heart (2:11; cf. 7:5).

Later, Nehemiah reassures the discouraged people of Judah. He says, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes” (4:14). Later he adds, “Our God will fight for us” (4:20). This description of Yahweh as “great and awesome” recalls Nehemiah's opening prayer (1:5), and his exhortations may allude to Moses's charge in Exodus 14:13–14, “Fear not.... The LORD will fight for you,” as well as Joshua's words to Israel, “Do not be afraid or dismayed; be strong and courageous. For thus the LORD will do to all your enemies against whom you fight.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Josh 10:25 and Neh 4:14 (4:8 Heb.) are the only two texts in the OT that combine the imperative אַל־תִּירָאוּ (“do not fear”) and a summons to fight (לָחֵם), and Joshua also refers to Yahweh fighting for Israel in 10:14, 23.

The book closes with Nehemiah's prayer, "Remember me, O my God, for good" (Neh 13:31), which reiterates the governor's earlier requests (5:19; 13:14, 22). Such entreaties may seem at first glance to be boastful, self-centered, or even self-justifying, but this conclusion misses the mark. "Nehemiah is not claiming merit but professing sincerity."<sup>21</sup> This leader accomplishes much, he receives much criticism and opposition, and after many years of toil much still remains to be done in Jerusalem. Nehemiah takes confidence not in his reputation or his achievements, but in God. Thus, he asks God to remember him, which is not simply an appeal for divine awareness but for divine action on behalf of his covenant people.

### 3.2. Dependence in Prayer

The book opens with Nehemiah's lengthy prayer in response to news of Jerusalem's woes (1:4–11) and closes with his request that the Lord "remember" him for good (13:31). These petitionary bookends highlight Nehemiah's sincere *dependence* on God, which is particularly evident in his responses to criticism and challenges. For example, when the critics mock and revile the Jews' work on the wall, Nehemiah does not stoop to their level but calls on God in prayer:

Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders. (Neh 4:4–5)

This entreaty reflects Nehemiah's conviction that the Lord is attentive to his people's plight (see 1:10–11) and that he will vindicate them and deal with their enemies. Nehemiah similarly calls for the Lord to "remember Tobiah and Sanballat" and thus hold them accountable for their deeds (6:14).

As opposition swells, Nehemiah and his allies appeal for God's help and also arrange for protective guards (4:9). This recalls Nehemiah's earlier prayer to the God of heaven before he responds to a question from the powerful Persian king (2:4). Later, as he is being publicly slandered by Sanballat, Nehemiah prays, "Now, O God, strengthen my hands" (6:9). These examples illustrate that dependent prayer and bold action are not at odds but work hand in glove, as the Lord supports, sustains, and satisfies his people, whose strength is the joy of the Lord (8:10).

Time and again, the book of Nehemiah recounts the governor's reflexive prayerfulness when he faces danger, distress, and denigration. His example reflects the advice that Joel Beeke and Nick Thompson offer criticized ministers:

Our response to criticism must begin, not horizontally, but vertically. Biblical sobriety calls us to reckon first with God, then our fellow man. If we would reply to criticism in a manner that honors the Lord, we must be well-acquainted with the secret place, which assists us in making God big and people small in our personal estimation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Derek W. H. Thomas, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2016), 286.

<sup>22</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Nick Thompson, *Pastors and Their Critics: A Guide to Coping with Criticism in the Ministry* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), 88.



### 3.3. Courage to Persevere in God's Work

The Judean governor also consistently displays *courage* through intense adversity. Joe Rigney explains, “Courage involves a kind of double vision. It attends to both the danger or hardship before us and the reward and good beyond.”<sup>23</sup> Nehemiah demonstrates this sort of “double vision” as he fearlessly perseveres in the good work he is called to do despite great opposition and real challenges. The cupbearer faces his fears (Neh 2:2) and courageously asks the powerful Persian ruler to send him to Jerusalem. Though Sanballat and Tobiah mock their efforts, Nehemiah and the workers are undeterred: “So we build the wall ... for the people had a mind to work” (4:6). As the opposition increases, we see Nehemiah’s courageous determination on display as he and the people continue working on the wall from morning to night while holding their weapons to guard against potential attacks (4:15–23). Through their fearless resolve, God frustrates the plans of their enemies (4:16).

Repeatedly, the governor of Judah states that his adversaries wanted to frighten him and his allies:

For they all wanted to *frighten* [מִירָאִים] us, thinking, “Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.” (Neh 6:9)

For this purpose he was hired, that I should be *afraid* [אִירָא] and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me. (Neh 6:13)

Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, ... and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me *afraid* [מִירָאִים]. (Neh 6:14)

And Tobiah sent letters to make me *afraid* [מִירָאִים]. (Neh 6:19)

Nehemiah does not allow criticism to discourage him nor threats to distract him from his calling. He replies to repeated appeals from Sanballat and Geshem with a consistent, determined message: “I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?” (Neh 6:3). Faced with slanderous accusations of rebellion, Nehemiah briefly corrects the misinformation and then asks God to strengthen his hands to complete the work (6:8–9). Like the Lord’s servant in Isaiah 50:7, the governor’s face is “set ... like a flint” and he is not put to shame because the sovereign God helps him (cf. Luke 9:51).

In addition to his fearless commitment to rebuild the wall, Nehemiah also demonstrates courage by challenging his fellow Jews about their injustice and faithlessness. For example, on four occasions Nehemiah “confronts” or “rebukes” (Hebrew רִיב): for exacting interest from fellow Jews (5:7), for neglecting the house of God (13:11), for profaning the Sabbath (13:17), and for taking wives from the unbelieving nations (13:25). He also acts decidedly to remove Tobiah’s belongings from the temple chambers (13:8–9). Commentators have called Nehemiah “a man of a volcanic temperament,”<sup>24</sup> an apparently “angry man (13:8, 25) who has lost his patience with the unfaithfulness of his people,”<sup>25</sup> and a reformer who comes to Jerusalem first as “a whirlwind” and the second time “all fire and earthquake.”<sup>26</sup> While there is something to such descriptions, it is crucial to remember *why* Nehemiah responds with

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<sup>23</sup> Joe Rigney, *Courage: How the Gospel Creates Christian Fortitude*, Union (Wheaton, IL Crossway, 2023), 32.

<sup>24</sup> Yamauchi, “Ezra and Nehemiah,” 561.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 453.

<sup>26</sup> Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 141.

such intensity. For example, 13:8 records Nehemiah's strong displeasure<sup>27</sup> when he arrives in Jerusalem and discovers that a priest has provided Tobiah with personal living quarters in the temple courts. Nehemiah acts decisively not because of a personal grudge against Tobiah the Ammonite (though his seedy character is well established) but because the Law prohibits Ammonites from entering God's assembly (Neh 13:1; cf. Deut 23:3–5) and because the temple storeroom intended to keep provisions for the priests and Levites had been grossly misappropriated (Neh 13:5). The governor "was greatly displeased" (וִירַע לִי מְאֹד) because of the "evil" (רָעָה) of the situation (13:7–8), and his leadership action reflects his biblical clarity and courageous conviction.<sup>28</sup> This scene offers something of an old covenant preview of the Lord Jesus's righteous zeal that moves him to overturn tables and drive out traders from his Father's house (John 2:14–17).

Nehemiah does not allow the critics to derail, distract, or discourage him. Rather, he remains focused on the Lord and courageously carries out the Lord's work.

### 3.4. Discernment between Truth and Falsehood

The governor also displays remarkable *discernment* during various public controversies. This is particularly evident in chapter 6, as the trio of critics conspire against Nehemiah. He perceives the malevolent intent behind their request to meet with him outside the city: "But they intended to do me harm" (Neh 6:2). So he refuses their overtures and remains resolutely focused on the important work of rebuilding the wall. When Sanballat publishes spurious reports about Nehemiah, he clearly corrects the false allegations, discerns his opponents' aims, and calls on the Lord for support:

Then I sent to him, saying, "No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind." For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done." But now, O God, strengthen my hands. (6:8–9)

We see a further example of Nehemiah's discernment in response to Shemaiah's counsel that the governor should hide in the temple to protect himself from violent threats. Little is known about Shemaiah or why he was holed up in his house (6:10). The text presents him as a prophet, and he is presumably Levite with some level of temple access.<sup>29</sup> Once again, Nehemiah shows courage by refusing to run away from trouble (6:11). He then explains,

And I *understood* and *saw* that God had not sent him, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me. (6:12–13)

Shemaiah's exhortations do not ring true to Nehemiah on at least two counts. First, he recommends action motivated by fear and self-protection, rather than principled obedience to God. Moreover, following the counsel to seek refuge within the doors of the temple would violate God's law, since

<sup>27</sup> In 13:8, the Hebrew וִירַע לִי מְאֹד may be translated "I was very angry" (ESV), or "I was greatly displeased" (NIV, CSB), though the Septuagint renders the phrase more formally, καὶ πονηρόν μοι ἐφάνη σφόδρα ("and it seemed very wicked to me").

<sup>28</sup> Similarly in 13:28–29, Nehemiah expels the son-in-law of Sanballat, who has desecrated the priesthood.

<sup>29</sup> For additional discussion, see Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 270.

Nehemiah was not a priest and so was not authorized to enter into God's house (cf. Num 18:7).<sup>30</sup> Some have interpreted "within the temple" in 6:10 to refer to the temple courtyard, not the sanctuary itself.<sup>31</sup> However, the specific direction to "close the doors of the temple" and Nehemiah's stern reply ("And what man such as I could go into the temple and live?") more likely suggest that Shemaiah has urged him to violate God's law to preserve his own life.<sup>32</sup> The governor rightly discerns that such a proposal that promotes cowardice and compromises divine standards is surely not from the Lord and must be resisted.

Spurgeon counsels, "Learn to disbelieve those who have no faith in their brethren,"<sup>33</sup> and Nehemiah's discerning responses to his detractors offers a wise model for leaders today. The governor may well have received timely encouragement and constructive correction along the way from faithful allies like Ezra the priest, but the book focuses attention on Nehemiah's refusal to be duped, distracted, or discouraged by critics with ill motives.

#### 4. Conclusion

This column has focused on Nehemiah's responses to criticism, though an expanded study of criticism in the Scriptures could consider Korah's rebellion against Moses and Aaron (Num 16), Shimei's tirade against King David (2 Sam 16), the various insults and hardships weathered by the apostle Paul (2 Cor 12:10), and above all the false accusations and mockery endured by the Lord Jesus (Luke 22–23).<sup>34</sup>

Nehemiah's faithfulness through adversity anticipates the Righteous Sufferer par excellence, who not only endured hostility and injustice but bore our sins on the cursed tree (1 Pet 2:24). Christ did not revile and threaten his critics but entrusted himself "to him who judges justly," and in this way he offers us an example to emulate (1 Pet 2:21–23). Jesus declares that his followers are "blessed" when reviled, persecuted, or falsely accused on his account, and he calls us to "rejoice and be glad" in view of our heavenly reward (Matt 5:11–12).

We see in Nehemiah's account a servant of the Lord who remains focused on a great work and refuses to be swayed by even the harshest criticism. Pastors and other ministry leaders today would do well to employ a blind eye and deaf ear as they endure criticism from within and beyond their churches and organizations. As we seek to honor God and remain faithful in and through criticism and controversy, let us like Nehemiah maintain confidence in the Lord, depend on him in prayer, show courage to persevere in our God-given work, and exercise discernment to know when to humbly receive criticism and when to ignore it.

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<sup>30</sup> If Nehemiah was a eunuch as a condition of his service to the king (Neh 1:11), that would have been a further violation of the Torah (Deut 23:1), as argued by Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra–Nehemiah: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 14 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 139.

<sup>31</sup> For example, Smith, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 327.

<sup>32</sup> For this interpretation, see Rashi, *Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah*, trans. Judah J. Slotki (London: Soncino, 1951), <https://tinyurl.com/38vjvzyw>; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 271; Yamauchi, "Ezra and Nehemiah," 505.

<sup>33</sup> Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 329.

<sup>34</sup> See the discussion in Beeke and Thompson, *Pastors and Their Critics*, 19–51.

STRANGE TIMES

# Skin in the Game?

— Daniel Strange —

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As I reach the middle of middle-age, I am, perhaps rather too predictably, doing a bit of soul-searching. It's not quite a midlife crisis, more a midlife querying. Who am I? Where have I come from? Where I am heading? What will my legacy be? The usual stuff that can very quickly turn into an ugly ungodly self-absorption. The usual stuff that can very quickly tempt me to forget the pre-eminent promises and securities I have in my identity with Christ. In my own variation of this familiar theme, the issue of ethnic identity and heritage increasingly looms large. On the face of it, this is rather odd. On the one hand, I am a British citizen, having been born and lived in the United Kingdom all my life. To all intents and purposes, I am English and patriotically so when it comes to my cultural formation and sporting affiliations. This is a surprise in itself, remembering the quip that the defining characteristic of being English is to be in a state of confusion about what it means to be English.<sup>1</sup> This cannot be said of the Scots, Irish, and Welsh. Such confusion among the English has led to less healthy manifestations witnessed in my lifetime, ranging from hands-over-eyes embarrassment, to hand-wringing guilt, to fist pumping jingoism.

On the other hand, I have dual-heritage. I am half Guyanese. More precisely I am half Indo-Guyanese. My father was born in Guyana, South America, then, still a British colony with strong links to the Caribbean. His great grand-parents (probably from a Brahmin or Warrior caste) were indentured workers brought up from India to work in the sugar cane plantations. In 1964, when my dad was nineteen, he left on a boat for England waived off by his village and his nine brothers and sisters. Guyana would achieve independence the following year, becoming a republic within the commonwealth in 1970. The fact that quite early upon his arrival my dad changed his name from 'Siu Singh' and 'Ram Persaud' to 'Steve Strange', is not simply a nice comic ice breaker I often use when introducing myself, ('yes, I'm Dr Strange ... yes, my middle name is Steven, just like the Marvel character ... and did you know my dad *changed* his name to Strange? [laughter all around]). More importantly this change of name is a microcosm of my father always being reticent to talk about his past, it being something he seemed defensive and even a little ashamed about (you don't have to tell me the irony of his chosen alternative!). And yet, it peeped through as I was growing up, the tale of how he got that huge scar on his thigh from kite-fighting with razor blades and which could have killed him, the sitar music in the house played on cassette tape, egg-and-potato curry served with wonderful rotis, calypso bedtime songs, and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. George Orwell's exploration of this in his 1941 classic *England Your England* (London: Penguin Classics, 2017).

encouragements to watch Saturday morning TV serializations of the *Bhagavadgita*. The recollection that my grandfather on my mother's side to whom I was close growing up, and who eventually had a decent relationship with my father, hadn't attended my parents' wedding in the early seventies seemingly because of the colour of my dad's skin.

Back to my midlife querying. It's ironic but perhaps not surprising that my dad's suppression of his past has meant that I've become more and more fascinated by it. Since his death over fifteen years ago, I've wanted to know more and more about him, about my Guyanese heritage, quizzing extant aunts and uncles living in the US and Canada whom I am in contact with. A few tantalizing details have been forthcoming, but there are still lots of gaps which makes it all the more mysterious and makes me all the more inquisitive.<sup>2</sup> Honestly, it hasn't been a consciously dominant theme of my identity, or the ways others have perceived me, particularly after I was converted. Yes, when people knew my dad's background I was occasionally called a 'half-caste' at school, but no-one really knew what that meant and I wasn't bothered by it.<sup>3</sup> However, as I grow older, it's an itch that I want to scratch. My Indo-Guyanese ethnic consciousness has increased as I try to understand my father—as I try to understand myself.

Such inquisitiveness has coincided with a recent request to do some teaching about 'race' and racism, ethnicity, and critical race theory. The first seminary module I ever taught around 2005 was one I had inherited with a rather ambiguous title: 'Race and Religion'. I was comfortable in teaching the 'religion' side but when it came to 'race' side I was scrabbling around a bit to try get up to speed on some basic sociological material that was new to me, and to try and put it in biblical and theological perspective. In the course of my preparation and teaching I observed at least eight quite complex features of the terrain, from those arising within the sphere of secular thought, to those offered by theologians, and all occurring not merely as a field of discourse but part of a deeply emotional discussion with real life implications. I summarize them as follows.

First, and as the sociologist Steve Fenton notes:

Ethnic group, race and nation are three related concepts sharing a single centre or 'core'—with some notable and important differences at the periphery. Common to all is an idea of descent and ancestry and very closely implicated in all three we find ideas about culture. These ideas about culture will typically include myths about the past, beliefs about 'the kind of people we are', and the idea that 'culture' defines a group in that it may be constituted by language, dress and custom. In this sense they may be all described as 'descent and culture communities'. Ethnic group, race and nation are all viewed by themselves or by observers, as peoples who have or lay claim to shared antecedents.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> One illuminating and beautifully written account that has given me insight into my heritage is Gaurita Bahadur's *Coolie Women: The Odyssey of Indenture* (London: Hurst, 2013). The book serves as a biography of the author's great-grandmother Sujaria, and a study of the indentured labour system at the beginning of the twentieth century as Sujaria was brought up from India to Guyana.

<sup>3</sup> A derogatory term originating from the Latin *castus* (pure), and the Spanish and Portuguese derivative 'casta' (race). For a brilliantly comic and ironic response to being called a half-caste, see the poem 'Half-Caste' by Guyanese poet John Agard (b. 1949) which is performed by the poet here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDQf2Wv2L3>.

<sup>4</sup> Steve Fenton, *Ethnicity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 13. I would want to add the category of 'religion' here too.

Second, that the concept of ‘race’ particularly in its scientific guise is a deeply problematic concept and an enlightenment construction, but as a term continues to be used in the discourse (and I include intra-Christian discourse), and often without the apostrophe marks. In other words, while race does not exist biologically, ‘race’ does imaginatively. My third observation was that while ‘racism’ is a sin, and indeed includes all kinds of sins (e.g., malice, vain-glory), it is not a biblical term. Fourth, that ethnicity<sup>5</sup> was and is a much more suitable term, but that since the Enlightenment there has been a spectrum of thinking shaping one’s thinking on the matter. At one end is primordialism/essentialism where the cry is nature and the theme is that human beings are constructed by history. That is to say that a person or people’s behaviour in the world is fundamentally pre-formed. One could say that ethnicity is part of our make-up. At the other end is instrumentalism/constructivism where the cry is freedom and the theme is that human beings construct history. That is to say that a person or people’s behaviour is not pre-formed but constructed either by them or by others and used as an instrument for other ends (usually economic). One could say that ethnicity is made-up.<sup>6</sup> Fifth, that the clash of those extremes on the spectrum as they seek to suppress the other often leads to more extreme manifestations of each with disastrous social consequences. My sixth observation was that Christians can articulate both in terms of systematic theological categories, and biblical theology, a theory of ethnicity which cuts through the impasse of essentialism and constructivism with profound implications for human identity, the identity of the church, and public and social policy. Seventh, that among those who are committed to the authority of Scripture, that there are slightly different ways of putting biblical material together that leads to *evangelical* construals that look like they are more sympathetic to either essentialism or constructivism and again with implications for identity and public policy.<sup>7</sup> My final observation was that discussing all of the above, even among Christians, and even in the academic setting of a classroom, can be very enlightening particularly where different ethnic groups are present, but also very challenging and painful particularly when brothers’ and sisters’ personal experiences are shared and commented upon.

Fast forward eighteen years. Unless you’ve been living on another planet, you will not be surprised that I have come back to this topic in 2023 with fear and trembling. So much has happened, so much had been said, so many claims and counter-claims have been made, so many fault lines (!) have been drawn within society and within the church with regards to these issues.<sup>8</sup> It’s frankly overwhelming. For evangelical identity and methodology it’s worrying. And it all coincides with my own ethnic identity explorations.

The confluence of these intellectual and personal reflections came at a recent meeting of British evangelical theologians and reflective practitioners where an item on the agenda was racial diversity and unity. A black British evangelical professional of some public standing had been invited to share their experiences of growing up in the UK. Some of the experiences they recounted of conscious and unconscious racism, particularly in their chosen career, were pretty shocking. No-one doubted any of

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<sup>5</sup> And associated terms like ‘ethne’ and ‘ethnocentrism’.

<sup>6</sup> This spectrum is illustrated well in terms of Welsh identity by the late Dewi Hughes in his excellent book *Ethnic Identity from the Margins: A Christian Perspective* (Pasadena: William Carey, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> In my own construal I have been heavily influenced by Mark Kreitzer, *The Concept of Ethnicity in the Bible: A Theological Analysis* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> To quote the title of Voddie Baucham’s book *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism’s Looming Catastrophe* (Washington, D.C.: Salem, 2021).



these experiences and neither did we think they were exaggerated. However, there was an extrapolation made from their own particular experience as a black person in Britain to the general experience of black men and women in Britain, together with the reasons they gave for continuing disparities between black and white ethnic groups in Britain, which focused on the systemic and the structural, and that to my mind needed more exploration and development. Now it happened that I had been dipping into Thomas Sowell's revised and enlarged edition of *Discrimination and Disparities*, which, not without controversy, argues that the reason for disparity within society is often multifactorial, challenging the idea that it can be explained by one factor, be it discrimination, exploitation, or genetics.<sup>9</sup> It's what happened next in our meeting that I want to explore.

I wanted to ask my Sowell question within the room, but here's the thing, I was scared to. Much to friends and colleagues' annoyance, I'm often the first one in with a question, but on this occasion there was a real reticence on my part. Heart-beating, with a lump in my throat, and as if pushing up some extraordinary weight, I slowly raised my hand and squeaked out my question, having decided that it was important for me to preface my question by saying that I was of dual-heritage and that Sowell was an African American, *as if that would give myself, my question, and Sowell's thesis more authenticity and legitimacy*. The response back was in essence that such analysis and statistics were unimportant given their experiences. Silence ensued for a few moments and one could feel the tension.

I've thought a lot about this exchange since. In my opinion, no one came out well in this encounter, including me. More heat than light was produced. The atmosphere was all wrong. As I reflected on what might have been at the root of this I think it was not an issue of personalities or the way in which the discussion was handled. It was a deeper, more foundational problem. The issue was, I believe, methodological and as such goes to the heart of problems that evangelical Christians need to attend to as we discuss this—and other potentially divisive issues.

First, and in previous editions of this very column, I have espoused affection for a methodological multiperspectivalism as championed by figures such as Vern Poythress and John Frame.<sup>10</sup> Recognising our finitude and sin, and that human knowledge is always ectypal (while God's is archetypal), the more perspectives we take time to understand and appreciate, the richer our understanding of the truth will be and the less prone we will be to misunderstanding and error. We are embodied, situated, and limited creatures with a textured history, and understanding how I hear and how I am heard is important. In this sense my mid-life querying to understand my ethnic heritage is both natural and normal. Recognising and recounting one's experiences in life is valid.

Second, however, and again as I have noted previously, it is precisely multiperspectivalism cut loose and untethered from stable epistemological moorings, and as a result 'gone to seed' which describes the epistemological foundations of critical theories espousal of 'lived experience' and 'standpoint theory' which claims the epistemological privilege of certain groups. Certainly, there has been a methodological untethering in certain accounts of 'black theology' which takes it outside the bounds of evangelicalism. For example, here is the conclusion of Anthony Reddie in his description of 'black theology in Britain':

In conclusion, then, black theology in Britain, like her many counterparts in of the rest of the world, is committed to a radical appropriation of the Gospel in order that those who are the 'least of these' (Matt. 25:31–46) might live, and have that life in all

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Sowell, *Discrimination and Disparities*, revised ed. (New York: Basic), 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Strange, 'Dr Strange in the Multiperspectival Paradox,' *Themelios* 47.2 (2022): 242–48.

its fullness (John 10:10). This ongoing work is grounded in a praxis that is not mindful of either doctrinal purity or Biblical literalism. As such, black theology in Britain continues to challenge normative black Christian faith that has for far too long drunk rather too deeply from the well of ‘evangelical post-Reformation theology,’ which has largely muted Christianity’s embodied radical intent. Instead, black theology in Britain continues to offer a radical form of thinking and contextual praxis that simultaneously seeks to empower marginalized and disenfranchised black people alongside the need to challenge and inspire white power to see and act differently.<sup>11</sup>

Returning to that meeting, it’s those stable moorings that I think we’d drifted from on that day and that was unbecoming for an *evangelical* meeting as perceived unspoken dynamics of power and privilege were pinging around that room in all directions.

In short, on that day we had given the ministerial authority of experience precedence over the magisterial authority of Scripture, somewhat ironic for a roomful of theological and reflective practitioners. We had not started with the only secure epistemological starting point, the biblical framework and a theological anthropology<sup>12</sup> *through which* might both interpret our experiences and suggest how we might relate to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.<sup>13</sup> When it was all going awry, no one called this out and suggested a reset to remind the group of key theological guardrails and graces. The Bible’s ultimate authority must never be assumed and we should never be embarrassed by reminding ourselves of it. On that day we had not privileged God’s Word or theology, and for that we were poorer. I had immediately gone to Sowell when perhaps I should have raised a question rooted in doctrine. I should have done better. I need to do better. Praise God that with the Spirit’s help, I will do better, as brothers and sisters whose identity is *in Christ* resolve with each other to interpret the world through the word and build on that solid *themelios* (foundation).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Anthony Reddie, ‘Black Theology in Britain’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 241–42.

<sup>12</sup> With its associated doctrines, such as the image of God.

<sup>13</sup> I think Kevin DeYoung’s fifteen suggestions on how we can discuss the topic of race and racism while maintaining the unity of Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3), and grow into maturity together in Christ (vv. 13–16), are very helpful. See his ‘Thinking Theologically about Racial Tensions’, *The Gospel Coalition*, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/ykhkvu33>. I also recommend many of the practical suggestions for individuals and churches in Jason Roach and Jessamin Birdsall, *Healing the Divides: How Every Christian Can Advance God’s Vision for Racial Unity and Justice* (Epsom: Good Book, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Θεμέλιος, cf. 1 Cor 3:12; Eph 2:20.

# Geerhardus Vos: His Biblical-Theological Method and a Biblical Theology of Gender

— Andreas J. Köstenberger —

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to construct a biblical theology of gender based on Geerhardus Vos’s magisterial *Biblical Theology*. The essay first sets forth five hallmarks of Vos’s method: (1) putting God first; (2) focus on the text; (3) viewing Scripture as progressive divine revelation; (4) displaying a historical orientation; and (5) a belief in the practical utility of biblical theology. The remainder of the essay develops a biblical theology of gender as Vos might have developed it in keeping with the four major scriptural movements of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.

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Geerhardus Vos has set the gold standard for conservative evangelical Biblical Theology.<sup>1</sup> As one who has recently co-written a Biblical Theology,<sup>2</sup> I appreciate the care Vos has taken to define his terms, to lay out his method, and to execute it impeccably in his landmark work *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*. This year marks the 75-year anniversary of the publication of his volume. Remarkably, Vos’s *Biblical Theology* appeared only the year before his death as comprising the essence of his thirty-nine years of teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary. In addition, he has written an essay, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” that spells out his approach to Biblical Theology at some length.<sup>3</sup>

On a biographical level, I am intrigued by the parallels I have detected between Vos and one of my other theological heroes, the Swiss theologian Adolf Schlatter. Vos was born in The Netherlands in 1862,

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<sup>1</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, reprint ed. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2017). The present essay adapts my J. G. Vos lecture delivered at Geneva College, 22 February 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Gregory Goswell, *Biblical Theology: A Canonical, Thematic, and Ethical Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001).

came to the US at age nineteen, and died in 1949 at the age of eighty-six. Schlatter was born ten years earlier, in 1852, and died in 1938, eleven years before Vos, also at age eighty-six. Thus, their life spans overlapped from 1862 until 1938, for seventy-six years, or thirty-eight years each in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. While space does not permit an exploration of the interconnections between these two eminent scholars, I believe Schlatter and Vos have much in common, including their theological conservatism and high view of Scripture and even their approach to Biblical Theology. In fact, I appreciate Schlatter's approach so much that I translated his two-volume New Testament Theology from German into English—about 1,100 pages of difficult-to-translate Swiss German!<sup>4</sup> And I have a similar appreciation for Vos. In addition, I also appreciate the fact that Vos was born in Europe and came to the US as a young man where he went to seminary and later engaged in a longtime career of teaching and writing. I similarly came to the US at age twenty-seven to go to seminary and since then have taught at various institutions for the past thirty years.

In what follows, I will engage in an exercise of historical imagination and extrapolation. Vos never wrote a work on a biblical theology of gender. But if he had, what would such a work have looked like? My starting point will be Vos's magisterial *Biblical Theology*. I will first sketch the contours of his biblical-theological method in order to ensure that the following extrapolation will be faithful to the way in which Vos went about his biblical-theological work. While he never wrote a full-fledged theology of gender, I believe Vos has given us a skeleton, a framework, within which we can plausibly construct a more robust biblical theology of gender as he might have developed it, and such a theology, in turn, can inform contemporary discussions of gender.

### *1. Vos's Biblical-Theological Method*

Before I develop the idea of a biblical theology of gender<sup>5</sup> in Vos's writings and beyond, I would like to register a few observations about Vos's biblical-theological method.<sup>6</sup> Method is important! The first thing to note about his method is that it *puts God first*.<sup>7</sup> This, of course, is the burden of a more recent movement calling for a "theological interpretation of Scripture" (TIS). TIS advocates insist that theology, properly conceived, must start with God, over against mere historical approaches (such as the historical-critical method) or literary or narrative methods. In this regard, theologians should take their cue

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<sup>4</sup> Adolf Schlatter, *The History of the Christ: The Foundation of New Testament Theology*, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997); Schlatter, *The Theology of the Apostles: The Development of New Testament Theology*, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> For purposes of this present essay, I adopt Andrew Walker's definitions of sexuality and gender. He defines sexuality as "God's anthropological design and pattern for the procreative relationship between male and female and to the experience of erotic desire within that design"; and gender as "biological differences in male and female embodiment and the different cultural ways in which the creational distinctions between male and female are manifested." Andrew T. Walker, "Gender and Sexuality," *TGC*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/gender-and-sexuality>.

<sup>6</sup> See esp. Michael Allen, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology: Part One," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 14 (2020): 53–61. Note that I drafted the present essay originally in 2019 prior to the publication of Allen's article. For Allen's overall assessment of Vos, as well as Richard Gaffin and John Murray, see Allen, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology: Part One," 71–72; for his further reflections, see "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology: Part Two," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 14 (2020): 344–57.

<sup>7</sup> Vos, "Biblical Theology," 5.

from previous interpreters including patristic sources (the Church Fathers), medieval theologians (the quadrilateral), the Reformers (Luther, Calvin, and others), and more recent systematians. However, as D. A. Carson astutely observed in a now-classic critique of the movement, much of what is new with the movement is not necessarily true and what is true about it is not necessarily new!<sup>8</sup> This is demonstrated nowhere more clearly as in the case of Geerhardus Vos's biblical-theological method which is nothing if not unapologetically and unequivocally God-prioritizing. At the outset, Vos cites Thomas Aquinas's maxim that theology is "*a Deo docetur, Deum docet, ad Deum ducit*," that is, theology "is taught by God, teaches God, [and] leads to God."<sup>9</sup> So, God is the be-all and end-all of Biblical Theology, its Alpha and Omega, as it were. This theocentricity is all the more remarkable in view of Vos's acknowledgment that he wrote his *Biblical Theology* in a kind of theological vacuum during the first half of the twentieth century.

Interestingly, as you may realize, the title of Vos's *magnum opus* notwithstanding, he himself preferred the nomenclature of "History of Special Revelation" to "Biblical Theology."<sup>10</sup> This nomenclature, I believe, is vital in trying to understand Vos's approach and theological method, as this is exactly what he does in the 400 or so pages of his *Biblical Theology*: He traces the history of God's revelation through two major epochs of salvation history: the Mosaic and the Prophetic periods (in which he includes Jesus's proclamation of God's kingdom). As such, Vos aims to trace the "organic growth ... of the truths of Special Revelation."<sup>11</sup> In terms of its overall scope, Vos's *Biblical Theology* starts with Eden and ends with Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom of God. It may appear that his work is therefore unfinished, as he does not cover Paul's letters, the General Epistles, or the book of Revelation. However, here it is important to remember that Vos does not set out to write a whole-Bible Biblical Theology the way, for example, G. K. Beale recently attempted to do, but instead endeavored to trace the history of divine revelation in Scripture. Just like we may not feel that Mark properly concluded his Gospel, or that Acts breaks off prematurely, Vos's work may appear to conclude earlier than it should. But at a closer look, we realize that Vos did accomplish his stated purpose, since he viewed Jesus as the culmination of divine revelation in keeping with the opening words of Hebrews: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb 1:1–2a).

In terms of its overall relation to the other theological disciplines, Vos rather conventionally places Biblical Theology in a position between exegesis and Systematic Theology. I say "conventionally," because here he essentially follows the classic distinction made by J. P. Gabler, the "father of Biblical Theology," between Dogmatics and Biblical Theology.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, Vos distinguishes between Biblical

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<sup>8</sup> D. A. Carson, "Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But ...," in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. R. Michael Allen (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 187–207. For a more positive assessment, see Allen, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology: Part Two," 349–51. Allen remarks, "TIS ... has ... been helpful in reconstructing the task of reading scripture as both wholistic ... and as spiritual .... TIS has also helped in drawing attention to the canonical and scriptural implications of a Christian doctrine of scripture for the exegesis of the Bible" (p. 350). See also the discussion in Köstenberger and Goswell, *Biblical Theology*, 45–48.

<sup>9</sup> Vos, "Preface," in *Biblical Theology*, v. The maxim recurs on p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 14 (and elsewhere).

<sup>11</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, v–vi.

<sup>12</sup> J. P. Gabler, *De justo discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus* (March 31, 1787); the English translation of Gabler's title is "On the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic

and Systematic Theology by noting that, in contrast to Systematic Theology, the organizing principle in Biblical Theology is historical rather than logical.<sup>13</sup> He observes that “in not a few cases revelation is identified with history”<sup>14</sup> and maintains that in Biblical Theology, “both the form and contents of revelation are considered as parts and products of a divine work” while in Systematic Theology “these same contents of revelation appear ... as the material for a human work of classifying and systematizing according to logical principles.”<sup>15</sup> This continues to be a widely-held view, though some today have rather blurred the line between the two and have produced works that exhibit a certain hybrid approach that combines features of both disciplines.<sup>16</sup> D. A. Carson, my *Doktorvater*, essentially espouses a view similar to Vos’s, except that he seeks to refine the model by postulating a series of “feedback cycles,” in which the other disciplines inform (though not unduly prejudice) one’s biblical-theological reading of the relevant texts.<sup>17</sup> We see a similar insight already in Vos when he notes that in general Biblical Theology precedes Systematic Theology, though, as he observes, “there is at several points already a beginning of correlation among elements of truth in which the beginnings of the systematizing process can be discerned.”<sup>18</sup>

With this, I come to the second important hallmark of Vos’s approach to biblical theology, namely his *focus on the text and exegesis*.<sup>19</sup> I mentioned at the outset certain affinities I have observed between Vos and Schlatter. One such affinity pertains to Vos’s overall stance toward Scripture. Vos asserts categorically that in Biblical Theology, exegesis is primary. As such, the accurate interpretation of Scripture requires a “receptive” attitude on the part of the interpreter and is “eminently a process in which God speaks and man listens.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Schlatter called for a “hermeneutic of perception” that consists first and foremost in “seeing what is there.”<sup>21</sup> Rather than focusing on what is “behind the text” or

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Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each”; see J. Sandys-Wunsch and L. Eldredge, “J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality,” *SJT* 33 (1980): 133–58; cf. Vos’s discussion of Gabler (*Biblical Theology*, 9). See also the discussion in William Baird, *History of New Testament Research, Vol. 1: From Deism to Tübingen* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992), 184–87.

<sup>13</sup> See Vos, “Idea of Biblical Theology,” 23; he observes that in the case of Systematic Theology, the “constructive principle is systematic and logical,” whereas in the case of Biblical Theology, it is “purely historical.”

<sup>14</sup> Vos, “Idea of Biblical Theology,” 9.

<sup>15</sup> Vos, “Idea of Biblical Theology,” 7.

<sup>16</sup> For a survey of approaches, see my essay “The Present and Future of Biblical Theology,” *Themelios* 37.3 (2012): 45–64.

<sup>17</sup> D. A. Carson, “The Bible and Theology,” in *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 2633–36 (see esp. the chart “Feedback Loop” on p. 2636); cf. Carson, “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); and Carson, “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas E. McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). See also “Biblical and Systematic Theology,” in Andreas J. Köstenberger with Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2020), 585–89.

<sup>18</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Allen notes the text-focused nature of Vos’s approach in “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology: Part One,” 55.

<sup>20</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Schlatter, *History of the Christ*, 18.



even “in front of the text,” faithful biblical interpreters and biblical theologians ought to fix their minds on what is actually “in the text,” and, I might add, this would be a good rule of thumb for preachers as well! In this textually-grounded approach to interpretation and biblical theology, we can see Vos’s deep-seated commitment to the authority of Scripture. Indeed, his commitment to proper exegesis as being foundational to solid and accurate Biblical Theology is vital. Exegetical theology, in turn, according to Vos, consists in the study of the contents of Scripture, as well as the science of introduction, the study of the canon (which he calls “canonics”), and Biblical Theology.<sup>22</sup> Thus Vos defines Biblical Theology as “that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.”<sup>23</sup>

Third, therefore, and this follows seamlessly from some of the things I have said above, we observe in Vos’s work a strong *a priori* conviction that in Scripture we encounter progressive divine *revelation*. In his first chapter on “The Nature of Method of Biblical Theology,” Vos states explicitly that, as the science concerning God, theology is concerned with divine revelation, citing Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 2:11 that no one knows God except for the Spirit of God.<sup>24</sup> Yet while creation made revelation possible, sin complicated it. Ever since the Fall, therefore, “every step towards rectifying this abnormality must spring from God’s sovereign initiative.”<sup>25</sup> The progress of revelation—its organic growth—is from seed to fullness; in a qualitative sense, the seed is no less perfect than the tree.<sup>26</sup> The organic character of revelation also explains its “multiformity” (i.e., diversity).<sup>27</sup> Thus, interestingly, Vos grounds both Scripture’s unity and diversity in the God who disclosed himself to his people over the course of redemptive history. What is more, for Vos, God is not merely an abstract concept, or even a literary theme; as he is careful to note, “knowing” God, in the Semitic sense, is not merely intellectual assent but entails “to love” or “to single out in love.”<sup>28</sup> God does not merely want to be known: He wants to be loved; hence the backbone of Old Testament revelation is no mere “school” but a series of covenants.<sup>29</sup> According to Vos, God’s purpose for humanity involves much more than mere education; it is bound up with love.<sup>30</sup> In my own Biblical Theology, I similarly (albeit independently) have chosen to focus on the revelation of God’s love for humanity in Scripture, coupled with God’s desire that the objects of his love reciprocate this love and express it in devoted service and worship of God as well as in love toward one another (Jesus’s “new commandment”).<sup>31</sup> In conjunction with his belief that Scripture consists in divine

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<sup>22</sup> Vos comments, therefore, that “as a rule Introduction has to precede” Biblical Theology, except where “no sufficient external evidence exists for dating a document” (*Biblical Theology*, 15). For a brief history of New Testament introductions, see “A Brief History of New Testament Introduction,” in Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), xviii–xix.

<sup>23</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 4; similarly, Vos, “Idea of Biblical Theology,” 6.

<sup>24</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 8.

<sup>30</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 8–9.

<sup>31</sup> See John 13:34–35. See Köstenberger and Goswell, *Biblical Theology*.

progressive revelation, then, Vos invokes what he calls the “principle of historic progression.”<sup>32</sup> In tracing the history of God’s self-disclosure through Scripture, Vos is convinced, the interpreter and biblical theologian can detect a division into discrete periods along the “lines of cleavage drawn by revelation itself,” manifested foremost in a series of covenants.<sup>33</sup> Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum have recently embarked on a similar project in their work *Kingdom through Covenant*.<sup>34</sup>

To summarize what we have seen so far, Vos’s biblical-theological method is characterized by grounding his study in God; by maintaining a textual focus; and by a strong conviction that in Scripture we encounter a progressive unfolding of divine revelation in human history. A fourth distinctive priority in Vos’s biblical-theological method is its *historical orientation*. As Vos insists, “Biblical Theology, rightly defined, is nothing else than *the exhibition of the organic process of supernatural revelation in its historic continuity and multiformity*.”<sup>35</sup> Vos traces the beginning of Biblical Theology in the modern period to Johann Philipp Gabler (1753–1826) and his distinction between Dogmatic and Biblical Theology, commending Gabler for affirming the historical nature of Biblical Theology in the context of the prevailing rationalism and widespread disparagement of history in Gabler’s day.<sup>36</sup> In his critique of rationalism, Vos asserts that “Reception of truth on the authority of God is an eminently religious act.”<sup>37</sup> He writes that “in religion the sinful mind of man comes ... face to face with the claims of an independent, superior authority”; yet at closer scrutiny, rationalism’s “protest against tradition is a protest against God as the source of tradition.”<sup>38</sup> For Gabler, not just any historical work will do: “Tracing the truth historically” but “with a lack of fundamental piety,” so-called theology “lost the right of calling itself theology.”<sup>39</sup> The problem, as Vos sees it (and I could not agree with him more), is not the use of reason, but irreverence and rebellion against revelation and ultimately against God himself. Accordingly, in my own hermeneutical approach, I postulate a “hermeneutical triad” consisting of history, literature, and theology, which calls for an exploration of the biblical text that does justice to its historical, literary, and theological dimensions in proper balance. In this way, Biblical Theology is enabled to be *both* historical *and* theological (as well as literary), without unduly tilting the balance in one direction or the other, with the result that a so-called “historical” approach submerges any meaningful engagement of the text’s theological message and nature as divine revelation or vice versa. We see this irreverence toward, and rebellion against, divine revelation of which Vos speaks nowhere more clearly in Scripture than in Paul’s momentous declaration in Romans 1:18–23:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about

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<sup>32</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 16. See the discussion in Allen, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology: Part One,” 57–58.

<sup>33</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 16.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

<sup>35</sup> Vos, “Idea of Biblical Theology,” 15, cited in Allen, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology: Part One,” 59.

<sup>36</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 10.

God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

These are convicting words. I will return to this passage shortly when moving on to a theology of gender.

Fifth and finally, I conclude my preliminary discussion of Vos's biblical-theological method by drawing your attention to his extremely useful and perceptive discussion of the *practical* utility of Biblical Theology.<sup>40</sup> Biblical Theology is not merely an arid academic exercise; it is of great value for the church. Vos notes the following benefits: (1) Biblical Theology exhibits the *organic growth of revelation*. He writes, "A leaf is not of the same importance as a twig, nor a twig as a branch, nor a branch as the trunk of the tree."<sup>41</sup> By exhibiting the organic unfolding of revelation, Biblical Theology supplies a "special argument from design for the reality of Supernaturalism."<sup>42</sup> (2) By its careful attention to the pressive divine revelation in Scripture, Biblical Theology also demonstrates its *apologetic value* in that it "supplies us with a useful antidote against ... rationalistic criticism."<sup>43</sup> (3) Biblical Theology is spiritually nurturing: "Biblical Theology imparts new life and freshness to the truth by showing it to us in its original historic setting. The Bible is not a dogmatic handbook but a historical book full of dramatic interest."<sup>44</sup> In this, Vos anticipates the more recent emphasis on Scripture as theo-drama espoused by scholars such as Kevin Vanhoozer in his work *The Drama of Doctrine* and other publications.<sup>45</sup> (4) Biblical Theology shows the indispensable nature of the "*doctrinal groundwork*" of our beliefs. As Vos observes, God has taken great care "to supply His people with a new world of ideas."<sup>46</sup> Doctrine matters, and Biblical Theology, properly conceived and engaged in, underscores the importance of right beliefs in keeping with God's own self-disclosure throughout Scripture. As such, (5) Biblical Theology helps us to move beyond isolated proof texts to an *organic system*.<sup>47</sup> Not only does Biblical Theology engage in a study of biblical texts in their original historical setting, it pays attention to important interconnections along the spectrum of divine revelation in salvation history. Finally, (6) Vos asserts that the "supreme end" of Biblical Theology is "the *glory of God*."<sup>48</sup> He points out that Biblical Theology gives us "a new view of God as displaying a particular aspect of His nature in connection with His historical approach to

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<sup>40</sup> See the discussion in Allen, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology: Part One," 59–61.

<sup>41</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 17.

<sup>42</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 17.

<sup>43</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 17.

<sup>44</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 17.

<sup>47</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 17–18.

<sup>48</sup> Echoes of the affirmation in the Westminster Catechism that "the chief end of man is the glory of God." Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 18.

and intercourse with man”<sup>49</sup>—as I point out in my Biblical Theology, that is, supremely, the love of God. Again, Vos cites Thomas Aquinas’s assertion that theology is *a Deo docetur; Deum docet, ad Deum ducit*. It “is taught by God, teaches God, [and] leads to God” and to a special appreciation of his manifold attributes including his redemptive love for the people he created.

## 2. Vos’s Biblical Theology and a Biblical Theology of Gender

With this, I move on to my primary assignment and purpose for this essay: reconstructing a biblical theology of gender from Vos’s *Biblical Theology*. In so doing, I encounter several limitations. First, as mentioned, Vos himself did not write a biblical theology of gender. Not only this, second, he did not consistently trace this theme in this work. In fact, the primary entry point is his overall biblical-theological approach which conceives of biblical theology in terms of a history of special revelation grounded in the self-disclosing God. This history of special revelation, in turn, according to Vos, proceeded in two primary stages, revelation in the Mosaic and Prophetic periods, the latter of which includes Jesus’s teaching on the kingdom of God. Third, while he did not write a biblical theology of gender as such, Vos has given us a skeleton, a framework within which we can flesh out a more robust biblical theology of gender as he might have developed it. In particular, we find in Vos’s work a very helpful treatment of the Fall narrative in Genesis 3 from which we can glean his views on the way in which the Fall affected humanity specifically as male and female. I have already quoted Paul’s indictment of sinful humanity in his letter to the Romans in Romans 1:18–23 above. In these remarks, Paul makes clear that the problem with humanity is not the lack of divine revelation but rather the fact that humans sinfully suppress the knowledge of God that is, or at least should be, evident to them. God has made his invisible attributes—his divine power and nature—plain to his creatures in the universe he has made; in this way, we can speak of God’s creation as his natural revelation. Thus, humanity’s problem is not ignorance of God but rather the fact that they have suppressed the God they knew, or at least should have known—the God who has revealed himself to them in nature.

### 2.1. Creation

Building on this foundational insight regarding the human predicament—the fact that it is not ignorance concerning God but the unrighteous suppression of the knowledge of God that erects a barrier between God and humans—Paul proceeds to elaborate in greater detail on the way in which unrighteous humanity suppresses their knowledge of God in Romans 1:24–32:

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

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<sup>49</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 18.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.... Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

What we see here is that the preeminent example Paul gives has to do with people's "dishonoring of their bodies among themselves" in form of "dishonorable passions," which Paul describes as women exchanging "natural relations" with unnatural ones—namely, being "consumed with [sexual] passion" for other women and "men committing shameless acts with [other] men" (vv. 26–27). Paul attributes this unnatural way of relating to "a debased mind" resulting in "shameless acts." He notes, first, that people who do such things receive "in themselves the due penalty for their error" (v. 27). Second, as a result of their rejection of divine revelation—more broadly speaking, their knowledge of God, and more specifically, his design of them as male and female—"God gave them up" to "the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies," "to dishonorable passions," and "to a debased mind." Three times, Paul asserts, in a constant refrain in this passage, that God "gave [sinful humanity] up" to their own devices since they rejected him (vv. 24, 26, and 28). As Vos puts it, while creation in God's image has supplied humans with both religious consciousness and a moral conscience, sin has led to a condition in which humanity's religious and moral sense of God has become "blunted and blinded."<sup>50</sup> Third, by engaging in unnatural relations, these people who have suppressed divine revelation have done "what ought not to be done," that is, they have acted contrary to God's righteous and holy purpose for them as men and women. In large part, one surmises this is so because such same-sex acts cannot naturally lead to the procreation of children; also, Paul describes these acts as being motivated by lust (v. 24).<sup>51</sup>

What is more, fourth, such acts are "dishonorable" and "shameless." They dishonor God and withhold from him the respect and glory he rightly deserves. In addition, these acts are carried out with impunity and without shame—they are both shameful and shameless. What is more, not only do such individuals engage in these shameless acts that dishonor the Creator and rob him of his glory, they also heartily approve of others who do the same (v. 32). This underscores the importance of denying such individuals the acceptance they so desperately crave.<sup>52</sup> It is not enough for them to engage in shameless acts and to dishonor their own bodies; they seek the approval of others so as to draw them into their own rebellion against the Creator. In this way, we see that Scripture grounds the biblical teaching on gender identities and roles in God's revelation in and through creation. While Vos does not explicitly draw this connection in his *Biblical Theology*, it seems appropriate to note that it is entirely reasonable to infer that he would have connected Paul's affirmations in Romans 1:18–32 regarding God's revelation of his character in creation with the human rejection of God's creational design for man and woman resulting in blameworthy unnatural acts. And similar to Paul, Vos would have doubtless grounded special revelation regarding God's design for man and woman profoundly in natural revelation.

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<sup>50</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 19–20.

<sup>51</sup> See on this Andreas J. Köstenberger with David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), ch. 10.

<sup>52</sup> On right and wrong notions of tolerance, see D. A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

## 2.2. The Fall

While Vos does not elaborate explicitly on humanity's rejection of the Creator's design as revealed in the creation narrative, he does provide a rather thorough discussion of humanity's plight resulting from the fall in a chapter called, "The Content of Pre-redemptive Special Revelation."<sup>53</sup> He picks up the biblical storyline by speaking of divine pre-redemptive revelation consisting of four elements: (1) life (represented by the "tree of life"); (2) probation (represented by the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil"); (3) temptation (which entered the Garden in form of a serpent); and (4) death (resulting in the dissolution of the body; Gen 2:17; cf. 3:3). In the Garden, which is in the first place God's domain and abode, man enters into fellowship with God (cf. Pss 46:4–5; 65:9); later, the man and the woman are expelled from God's presence (Gen 3:22; cf. Rev 2:7).<sup>54</sup> Probation consisted in the challenge of obeying God's command out of sheer obedience simply because of the nature of God, which Adam and Eve failed to do.<sup>55</sup> Temptation entered in form of a real serpent and a real evil spirit.<sup>56</sup> In this regard, Vos rejects the notion that the serpent approached the woman in the Garden because she was "more open to temptation and prone to sin"; rather, he believes the reason may have been that "the woman had not personally received the prohibition from God, as Adam had" (cf. Gen 2:16, 27).<sup>57</sup> One might infer from this that direct reception of the command from God bestows on the man a certain kind of preeminence and greater, ultimate responsibility as Paul teaches in both 1 Corinthians 11:8–9 and 1 Timothy 2:13–14. The temptation itself, according to Vos, took place in two stages: first, an "injection of [an innocent kind of] doubt into the woman's mind"; and second, a "serious form of doubt" that has "cast off all disguise" and directly challenges the veracity of God's command.<sup>58</sup> Vos sees here in the biblical text a hint that the woman, while seeking to defend God, had already entertained the thought that the prohibition was too severe, especially in the fact that she adds the bit about not even "touching" the tree. Vos proceeds to argue from the Hebrew fronted position of the negative pronoun that special emphasis falls on God's alleged selfish motives for issuing the command. He adds that it was not merely the aesthetic appeal of the forbidden fruit that induced the woman to eat; rather, by yielding to the serpent, the woman, in effect, put the serpent in the place of God: she trusted that the serpent had her best interests at heart while God did not. This is assuredly a profound insight: Sin, in effect, puts Satan in the place of the Creator by giving him and his reasoning first place and first priority.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>53</sup> See "Three: The Content of Pre-redemptive Special Revelation," in Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 27–40.

<sup>54</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 27.

<sup>55</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 32.

<sup>56</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 34; Vos cites Wisdom 11:24: "By the envy of Satan death entered the world"; cf. Matt 13:38; John 8:44 (where Vos recognizes an allusion to Gen 3:15); Rom 16:20; 1 John 3:8; Rev 12:9. On the connection between John's writings (John 8:44; 1 John 3:8; and Rev 12:9) and Gen 3:15, see my essay "The Cosmic Drama and the Seed of the Serpent: An Exploration of the Connection between Gen 3:15 and Johannine Theology," in *The Seed of Promise: The Sufferings and Glory of the Messiah; Essays in Honor of T. Desmond Alexander*, ed. Paul Williamson and Rita Cefalu (Wilmore, KY: GlossaHouse, 2020), 265–85.

<sup>57</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 34–35. See the discussion of this issue in Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, eds., *Women in the Church: An Interpretation and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9–15*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), chap. 4.

<sup>58</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 35.

<sup>59</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 36.



### 2.3. Redemption

With this, we move on to the third movement in the biblical storyline—redemption—starting with the immediate aftermath of the fall.

a. *The Immediate Aftermath of the Fall.* In his chapter on “The Content of the First Redemptive Special Revelation,” Vos observes that, while the term “redemption” is not used in Mosaic period, in the aftermath of the Fall, God’s characteristic saving disposition is at once evident: There is both justice and grace. Justice is manifested in the three curses on the serpent, the woman, and Adam (though it should be noted that, technically, only the ground is cursed, not the man or the woman), while grace is implied in the curse on the Tempter and the promise that the woman’s offspring will crush the serpent’s head. Both the man and the woman hide from God’s presence; God’s interrogation leads them to the realization that their fear and shame are ultimately rooted in sin.<sup>60</sup> The promise of victory over the serpent, for its part, reveals God’s sovereign initiative in deliverance; signals a reversal of attitude by which humanity is realigned with the Creator; accentuates the continuity of the work of deliverance by perennially pitting the woman’s against the serpent’s “seed”; and foretells ongoing enmity between sinful humanity that stands in need of future redemption and personal evil supernatural forces.<sup>61</sup> In this regard, Vos aptly notes that the effects of the Fall are not merely generic—universal human death—but gender-specific. Under the heading “Human Suffering,” he observes that “the woman is condemned to suffer in what constitutes her nature as woman”; the effects of the Fall extend particularly to her role as the man’s companion and as the mother of children.<sup>62</sup> Her relationship with her husband will now be characterized by a continual struggle for control—her “desire” will be to control her husband (Gen 3:16; cf. 4:7)—while giving birth to children will be accompanied by labor pains.<sup>63</sup> With regard to Adam, Vos notes that “the punishment of man consists in toil unto death”; the curse consists in the fact that, objectively, “the productivity of nature is impaired” by the presence of thorns and thistles. And yet, “as the woman is enabled to bring new life into the world, so the man will be enabled to support life by his toil.”<sup>64</sup> Both the woman and the man will experience labor and pain in their own world and primary domain: the woman in relation to the man from whom and for whom God made her, the man in relation to the ground from which he was made.

In his ensuing discussion of the patriarchal and Mosaic periods, Vos does not explicitly address the way in which God’s subsequent revelation in Scripture addresses the redemption and restoration of the male-female relationship in Christ. However, he does provide a broad, general framework for such a discussion. We will therefore first set the overall framework flowing from Vos’s discussion before providing additional reflections on what such an additional teasing out of Vos’s biblical-theological method and content applied to a biblical theology of gender might look like. In chapter 7, “Revelation

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<sup>60</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 41.

<sup>61</sup> Vos here discusses the use of the Hebrew word שׂוּף; cf. Job 9:17; Ps 139:11; Rom 16:20.

<sup>62</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 44, with reference to August Dillmann, *Genesis Critically and Exegetically Expounded*, trans. Wm. R. Stevenson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1897).

<sup>63</sup> The Hebrew simply reads, “Your desire will be for your husband,” though in view of the close parallel Gen 4:7 it seems reasonable to infer that the woman’s desire will be *to control* her husband. This interpretation was given classic expression by Susan T. Foh, “What Is the Woman’s Desire?,” *WTJ* 37 (1975): 376–83. The most recent translation of this verse in the ESV, “Your desire shall be *contrary to* your husband,” carves a new path but is subject to further scholarly scrutiny.

<sup>64</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 44.

in the Patriarchal Period,” Vos discusses the historicity of the patriarchs and Abraham’s faith which involved trust in God’s saving grace (cf. Gen 15:6). Such faith involved renunciation of “all his own purely human resources” while expecting “everything from the supernatural” intervention of God.<sup>65</sup> At the same time, Vos acknowledges that it would be anachronistic to equate Old and New Testament faith. Abraham did not trust in Christ’s resurrection; he trusted in God’s supernatural intervention in the case of Isaac, which required a similar disposition of faith.<sup>66</sup> In chapter 8, Vos discusses “Revelation in the Mosaic Period.” In Israel’s experience of redemption from Egypt, Vos finds a typical discussion of deliverance from sin conceived as “enslavement to an alien power” (cf. John 8:33–36; Rom 8:20–21); the display of divine omnipotence in form of the miraculous signs performed by Moses (e.g., Exod 9:16); and the manifestation of sovereign grace at the Passover.<sup>67</sup>

b. *The Prophetic Period.* In his discussion of “The Prophetic Epoch of Revelation,” Vos discusses the revelation of God’s holiness (e.g., 1 Sam 2:2; Hos 11:9) and righteousness.<sup>68</sup> Of particular interest for our topic is Vos’s discussion of Hosea’s teaching on the spiritual marriage bond between God and Israel.<sup>69</sup> Vos observes that Yahweh initiated the union (Hos 13:5; cf. Amos 3:2), which had a definite historical beginning at the exodus (Hos 13:4; cf. 11:1; Amos 2:10). Israel freely entered the union, which at the root was spiritual in nature. In the beginning, Yahweh is depicted as wooing Israel for her affection (Hos 2:14); later, Yahweh, despite Israel’s sin, continues to furnish proofs of his love to draw her back to himself (6:4). At the same time, the spiritual union between God and Israel is not merely a matter of love and affection; it is a legally defined relationship: Israel is not merely deficient in love and affection; she has broken covenant with her God. Vos also notes that the covenant is a national covenant. Nevertheless, there are important individual implications: If Yahweh is Israel’s “husband” and she is his “wife,” then, by implication, individual Israelites are God’s children (Hos 2:1; 11:3–4; cf. 14:9). Vos also notes that the future salvation of a believing remnant will be rooted in divine election (4:3).

## 2.4. Consummation

Vos does not directly address the fourth and final redemptive movement in Scripture—consummation—and its implications for a biblical theology of gender, though he includes a brief section entitled “Glimpses of Consummation.” According to Vos, the eschatological teaching in the Prophets signals future redemption and even consummation. This is evident particularly in the depiction of future “glory” in the book of Isaiah (11:6–9; 65:17–25). In this regard, it is only a small step of “transition from a restored Canaan to restored paradise” (Amos 9:13; Hos. 2:21–22; 14:5–7); Isaiah even speaks of a “new heavens and a new earth” (65:17; 66:22). In conjunction with the expectation of future deliverance and eternal glory, Vos also discusses the concept of a personal Messiah in passages such as Isaiah 9:1–7 as well as the figure of the “Servant of Yahweh” in Isaiah 53. He remarks that in chapter 9, Isaiah moves “his vision along from the dark scene of the deportation of a part of Northern Israel by Tiglath-Pileser to the scene of light, characteristic of the Messianic glory” and draws attention to the Isaianic conception of

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<sup>65</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 85.

<sup>66</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 85.

<sup>67</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 110–13.

<sup>68</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 245–55.

<sup>69</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 259–63.

the Messiah as “the gift of God” in the striking announcement, “A son is given.”<sup>70</sup> This, I might add, finds a likely New Testament echo in John’s declaration in John 3:16 that “God so loved the world that the gave his one and only Son” (note that the word used here is “gave” rather than the more characteristically Johannine term “sent”).

With this, we conclude our brief survey of the relevant portions in Vos’s *Biblical Theology* regarding a biblical theology of gender. Before we proceed to put some further flesh on the bones, there is one more important broader topic we must address, namely Vos’s discussion of the structure of New Testament revelation. This will have an important bearing on how we construe the relationship between divine revelation in the Old Testament, through Jesus, and through Paul and the other apostles and New Testament writers.

When it comes to the structure of New Testament revelation, Vos identifies three primary ways of discerning its internal organization: (1) *From indications in the Old Testament*: The Old Testament is forward-looking, featuring eschatological and messianic prophecy. In fact, as Vos observes, “The Old Testament, through its prophetic attitude, postulates the New Testament” (see esp. the use of the word “new” in passages such as Isa 65:17; Ezek 11:19; Matt 13:52; 2 Cor 5:17; and Rev 2:17; but esp. Jer 31:31–34).<sup>71</sup> (2) *From the teachings of Jesus*: At the establishment of the Lord’s Supper, Jesus spoke of “my blood of the covenant” (τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης; Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24) or “the new covenant in my blood” (ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη ἐν τῷ αἵματί μου; cf. Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25), as a climax of the series of covenants God had made with Israel. (3) *From the teachings of Paul and the other apostles*: According to Vos, “Paul is in the New Testament the great exponent of the fundamental bisection in the history of redemption and of revelation” in that he distinguishes between the “new” and the “old διαθήκη” (2 Cor 3:6, 14; cf. Hebrews, esp. 1:1–2; 9:15).<sup>72</sup>

Vos notes that when looking at the teaching of the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles, one finds that “the New Testament revelation is one organic, and in itself completed, whole”; the apostles, for their part, are “witnesses and interpreters of the Christ.”<sup>73</sup> In this regard, Vos speaks out against the notion of “going back” from the apostles (and here particularly Paul) to Jesus; rather, Christ himself is “the centre of a movement of revelation organized around Him.”<sup>74</sup> At the same time, Jesus nowhere presents himself as “the exhaustive expounder of truth”; rather, he “is the great fact to be expounded”; rather than cutting himself off from his followers, to the contrary, Jesus bound them to himself (Luke 24:44; John 16:12–15). In this way, Jesus “interweaves and accompanies the creation of the facts with a preliminary illumination of them, for by the side of His work stands His teaching”; thus Jesus’s teaching is the embryo which in “indistinct fashion, yet truly contains the structure, which the full-grown organism will clearly exhibit.”<sup>75</sup> God’s revelation in the Old Testament period is the “overture” to the New Testament; Christ

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<sup>70</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 295.

<sup>71</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 299.

<sup>72</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 301. Cf. Geerhardus Vos, “Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke,” *Princeton Theological Review* 13 (1915): 587–632; *Princeton Theological Review* 14 (1916): 1–61; see also Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle of the Hebrews*, ed. and re-written by Johannes G. Vos (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

<sup>73</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 302.

<sup>74</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 302.

<sup>75</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 303. See Köstenberger with Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, ch. 4.

is the “Consummator” of God’s salvation promises; and a third epoch of revelation is still future—the Apocalypse.<sup>76</sup>

### 3. Toward a Biblical Theology of Gender

In the remainder of this study, I would like to sketch briefly what a theology of gender within the general parameters established by Geerhardus Vos in his *Biblical Theology* would look like. I have already cited Vos’s proposal regarding what he calls “pre-redemptive general revelation” (i.e., creation) and “pre-redemptive special revelation” (i.e., the Fall). My wife and I have written a volume titled *God’s Design for Man and Woman: A Biblical-Theological Survey*, in which we discuss the biblical teaching on gender in four movements: creation, the fall, redemption, and consummation.<sup>77</sup> We propose that at creation, God’s design for man and woman was *revealed*; at the fall, God’s design was *corrupted*; through redemption in Christ, God’s design is being *restored*; and at the final consummation, God’s design will be *completed*.

#### 3.1. Creation

To elaborate a bit further on the first of these four movements—creation—God’s design for man and woman revealed at creation entails God’s creation of the man first, from the ground (Gen 2:7–8), and then his creation of the woman, second, from the man, as his suitable helper or counterpart to provide him with companionship and to partner with him in filling the earth and exercising dominion over it (2:18, 20; cf. 1:28). Thus we see in the scriptural creation narrative a harmonious picture of the man and the woman partnering in ruling the earth as God’s representatives, with the man serving as the God-appointed head.

#### 3.2. Fall

The second movement, the fall, as mentioned, witnesses the corruption (though by no means obliteration) of God’s design. As Vos has ably demonstrated, sin struck the man and the woman each in their respective primary domains, indicated by the source from which God created them. Sin introduced friction between the man and the ground from which he was made, and he will experience “labor pains” in his work. Sin also introduced friction between the woman and the man from whom she was made, resulting in relational tension and a struggle for control, as well as “labor pains” in the childbearing realm which God uniquely assigned to the woman. In this way, sin did not merely have generic consequences such as universal death (both physical and spiritual) but also had gender-specific consequences that accentuate that God made the man and the woman to inhabit different primary spheres in and of themselves and in relation to each other. This is clear both before and after the fall: Already before the fall, God had assigned the cultivation of the Garden to the man, not to mention naming the animals, and had issued to the man the command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:15–17); the fact that the punishment for sin affects the man most centrally in the area of his work merely reinforces that this was the primary domain he was originally assigned by God, along with the responsibility to provide for and to protect the woman and eventually his entire

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<sup>76</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 303–4.

<sup>77</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Margaret E. Köstenberger, *God’s Design for Man and Woman: A Biblical-Theological Survey* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

family as well. Similarly, the woman was meant from the very beginning to complement the man and to partner with him in ruling the earth, in part, by procreation, conceiving and giving birth to children, and nurturing and caring for them in conjunction with her husband (1:28). Again, the punishment for sin only accentuated (but did not create) this primary domain of responsibility and fruitfulness.

### 3.3. Redemption

Moving on to the third, redemptive, movement in the biblical metanarrative, we have seen that Vos subsumes the coming of Jesus the Messiah under the prophetic period of divine revelation, which moves beyond the Mosaic period. Interestingly, as mentioned, his *Biblical Theology* concludes, not with Revelation or even the New Testament letters, but with Jesus's proclamation of God's kingdom.<sup>78</sup> This is in keeping with John's declaration that "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (John 1:18); and also with the momentous opening assertion by the writer of the epistle of Hebrews that "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb 1:1–2a). At the same time, as we have seen, Vos acknowledges that the structure of New Testament revelation can be discerned from indications in the Old Testament, the teachings of Jesus, and the teachings of Paul and the other apostles, so that Jesus provides the climax of the precedent Old Testament revelation and is followed by that mediated through the apostles, who, in turn, are intricately connected to Jesus's teaching. Applied to a biblical theology of gender, this would seem to imply that we ought to give pride of place to the divine revelation in and through Jesus's teaching and actions, while Paul and the other apostles should be seen, not as providing new or different revelation, but as applying the revelation mediated through Jesus to life in the apostolic era—the age of the church and of the Holy Spirit.

Here, then, are seven observations that flow from both Jesus's words and actions, including ways in which Paul and other later New Testament writers applied those principles.

To begin with, Jesus was *incarnated as male*, corresponding to the first man, Adam, a fact that implies male headship, as we have already seen in our discussion of God's design established at creation. The apostle Paul reiterates this connection at some length in Romans 5:12–21, which proves that Jesus's incarnation as male was essential rather than arbitrary. On the basis of the principle of federal headship, God made Jesus the sinless head of a new humanity, just like Adam was the head of original humanity which succumbed to sin at the fall, resulting in universal depravity (cf. 1 Cor 15:20–28).

Second, Jesus *addressed his proclamation of God's kingdom to both men and women*, recounting anecdotes or using illustrations relevant to both (e.g., Luke 2:25–38; 15:1–10). Paul teases out the implications of this principle when he writes that "in Christ, there is neither male nor female, but all are one in Christ" (Gal 3:28).

Third, in the Sermon on the Mount, in relation to the Mosaic revelation in the Law, and specifically the sixth of the Ten Commandments, Jesus *deepened the prohibition against adultery* by including lust in a man's heart as constituting adultery (Matt 5:27–30; cf. Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18).

Fourth, in the same body of teaching, Jesus similarly *reaffirmed God's original prohibition of divorce* (Matt 5:31–32). When later asked about divorce, Jesus reaffirmed God's original design of monogamous,

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<sup>78</sup> Further relevant writings by Vos include *The Teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church*, reprint ed. (Nutley, NJ: P&R Publishing); and *The Pauline Eschatology*, reprint ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1986). See also the recent English translation of Vos's *Reformed Dogmatics: A System of Christian Theology*, trans. Richard B. Gaffin (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020).

lifelong marriage—implicitly rejecting same-sex marriage—adducing God’s original design laid out in the creation narrative (Matt 19:5–6; cf. Gen 1:28; 2:24). He went on to declare Mosaic divorce legislation in the book of Deuteronomy as only temporary, rejecting all divorce except in cases of adultery (πορνεία; Matt 19:9; cf. 5:32; Deut 24:1). Again, we see Paul reiterate Jesus’s teaching in the first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 7:10–11: “Not I, but the Lord”); and then build on it by adding a clause regarding the abandonment of marriage by the unbelieving spouse (1 Cor 7:12–16: “I, not the Lord”). In the same context, Paul reaffirms Jesus’s teaching on singleness, noting, by way of “concession, not command,” that some may remain unmarried for the sake of the kingdom, a calling that Paul refers to as a “gift from God” (χάρισμα; 1 Cor 7:6–9; cf. Matt 19:11–12).

Fifth, Jesus taught throughout his ministry that *discipleship takes precedence over family ties*; in this way, spiritual brotherhood and sisterhood transcend natural flesh-and-blood ties—though Jesus, of course, still honored his parents and related to his half-brothers and half-sisters in a loving and even redemptive manner (Luke 2:41–52; John 2:1–11; 7:1–10). An example of this is Jesus’s declaration that no one who loves father and mother more than him is fit for the kingdom (Matt 10:37; Luke 14:26), as well as his statement that a would-be follower who asked if he could first go home and bury his father before following Jesus should “let the dead bury the dead” (Luke 9:59–60). Jesus also said that he did not come to bring peace but a sword and that he would set the members of a household against one another, in fulfillment of Micah’s prophecy (Matt 10:34, 36; cf. Mic 7:6).

Sixth, Jesus continued the pattern of male leadership by *calling twelve men as his apostles*, his new messianic community patterned after the twelve tribes of Israel, which likewise had men serve in a headship capacity (Matt 10:3–4 pars.). This pattern continues in the church leadership of male elders (1 Tim 3:1–7; Titus 1:6–9) and is symbolized by the twenty-four elders in Revelation (e.g., Rev 4:4).

Last but not least, seventh, Jesus *affirmed women as disciples and as witnesses of the resurrection*. He insisted that Mary chose the right place when sitting at his feet to learn from him as his disciple (Luke 10:38–42); he was followed and even financially supported by a group of women who are first mentioned at the midway point of Jesus’s ministry and shown to follow Jesus all the way to the cross and the empty tomb (Luke 8:2–3; 23:49); and following his resurrection, Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalene, a woman who brought the message of the risen Jesus to Peter and John in a day when the witness of women was not recognized as valid in a Jewish court of law (Luke 24:1–11; John 20:1–18).

In all these and other ways, we see Jesus reiterate and reaffirm God’s original design for man and woman, deepen and even transcend Mosaic revelation, and enunciate God’s revelation with regard to gender identities and roles for his generation and for all time.

As mentioned, the apostle Paul, then, in keeping with Vos’s overall conception of the history of divine revelation in Scripture, should primarily be viewed from the vantage point, not of providing new revelation, but of making application and engaging in contextualization of God’s original design as reiterated and applied in the definitive divine revelation provided through Jesus, the incarnate Word-become-flesh. Thus, as mentioned, Paul applied Jesus’s universal proclamation of God’s kingdom to both men and women to the gospel, which went out equally to both Jews and Gentiles, and men and women (Gal 3:28, with a likely echo of Gen 1:28; cf. 1 Cor 12:13). Also, he applied the biblical teaching regarding God’s design to the church, in particular with regard to women’s participation in the life of the church under male leadership. He does so with regard to prophecy in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, and with regard to teaching and church leadership in 1 Timothy 2:9–15 (cf. 3:2), where Paul cites from both the Genesis creation and Fall narratives (cf. vv. 13, 14). Paul also aligned himself with Jesus’s reaffirmation



of God's original design for marriage, fleshing it out in terms of Christ's relationship to the church (Eph 5:21–32; cf. Col 3:18). He even reaffirmed Jesus's teaching with regard to those who remained unmarried for the sake of God's kingdom (1 Cor 7:6–9). What is more, he reaffirmed Jesus's overall prohibition of divorce and at the same time added a second exception in cases where an unbelieving spouse abandons the marriage (1 Cor 7:10–16). I could give other examples. Suffice it to say that what we find in Paul's teaching regarding gender is essentially an application and occasionally an extension of Jesus's teaching (which, in turn, often consists in a reaffirmation of the Genesis creation narrative) to the Christian gospel and the new entity of the church made of up believing Jews and Gentiles.

### 3.4. Consummation

Finally, let me say a word about the fourth movement in Scripture, consummation. Recall that Vos only provided general glimpses of consummation but did not specifically address implications for a biblical theology of gender. One of the most important data in this regard comes from Jesus himself. When asked about marriage in heaven by his opponents—who, ironically, did not believe in the resurrection in the first place—Jesus declared that there will be *no marriage in heaven* but all will be like the angels (Matt 22:30). This has an important bearing on how we are to understand the fourth movement in the biblical story as it pertains to gender. In the eternal state, God's spiritual relationship with his people—which, as we have seen, has been compared to a human marriage in prophetic books such as Hosea—will culminate in the spiritual marriage of Jesus to his bride, the church, which Revelation depicts symbolically as the wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:6–10).

Thus God's people will be corporately united with Christ for all eternity. As the seer writes, “And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God’” (Rev 21:2–3). Soon thereafter, John receives a vision of “the Bride, the wife of the Lamb” (21:9–22:5). Revelation ends with the Spirit's and the Bride's longing plea for Jesus to come soon, and his promise that will indeed do so. Thus, Jesus will forever be the church's loving spiritual husband who sacrificially laid down his life for her, while she will be responsive to him and joyfully yield to his lordship in complete trust and blessedness.

## 4. Conclusion

I close this all-too-brief sketch “toward a biblical theology of manhood and womanhood” within a Vosian framework with a few concluding observations. First, we saw that *God's original design for man and woman revealed and established at creation is foundational for life on this earth*, even for sinful men and women subsequent to the Fall—though the eternal state will transcend the earthly arrangement and witness a spiritual “marriage” between Christ, the “bridegroom,” and redeemed humanity, the church, as his spiritual “bride.”

Second, we saw that the biblical teaching on gender emphatically substantiates Vos's illustration of divine redemption in which there is *no qualitative difference between revelation in “seed” form and revelation in its full-orbed “tree” form* as seen in the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. This is clearly evident in the fact that both Jesus and Paul reiterate God's original design and apply it to various ministry and ecclesiastical contexts. In fact, Paul declares that the spiritual union of two becoming one

in marriage can serve to illustrate the spiritual union between Christ and the church as head and body (Eph 5:32).<sup>79</sup> This continuity from seed to full-grown tree speaks decisively against any proposals that claim that there is a qualitative difference between God's design for man and woman at creation and his design revealed at later stages of human history, whether in the Mosaic or prophetic periods including even Jesus and the apostles.

Third, Vos's proposal that *Jesus is the climax of Scripture's prophetic divine revelation*, when applied to a biblical theology of gender, elevates Jesus above later New Testament voices, suggesting that the role of Paul and the other apostles and New Testament writers was primarily in the area of *application* rather than *revelation*. This insight is highly relevant in tracing a biblical theology of gender in that it suggests that one should not expect Paul to add any qualitatively new or different element to the teaching already enunciated and exemplified by Jesus, who, in turn, as we have seen, essentially sought redemptively to restore, by the power of the Spirit, God's original design revealed and established at creation.

Finally, with regard to the "progressive principle" enunciated by Vos, we observe that, as mentioned, such a progression should be understood within the context of Vos's *seed-to-tree analogy*. This, it should be noted, is very different than the redemptive-movement trajectory hermeneutic advocated by William Webb, which stipulates a kind of progression that extrapolates from movements within redemptive history and proceeds to forecasting eventual endpoints not spelled out in Scripture itself. This procedure, however, sets a very dangerous precedent by advocating that the church move "beyond the Bible" where such is allegedly warranted in light of later developments. This is not the place to provide a full-fledged critique of Webb's proposal; others have ably done so already.<sup>80</sup> As my wife and I have argued in *God's Design for Man and Woman*, rather than leaving Scripture open-ended, as Webb urges, the progression in Scripture "has as its endpoint, at least as far as the church today is concerned, a restoration of the male pattern of leadership rather than unfettered egalitarianism."<sup>81</sup> As we hasten to add, however, "the type of male leadership in the church (and in the home) that is propagated in the New Testament is that of loving, self-sacrificial service."<sup>82</sup>

With this, I conclude my exploration of a biblical theology of gender within a Vosian biblical-theological framework. I trust that this exercise has been faithful to both Vos and, even more importantly, Scripture itself. God's design for man and woman is an important test case for biblical theology, and biblical fidelity, in our day when many in our culture, and even some in the church, believe they can safely ignore God's good, wise, and beautiful design or improve on it. The assertion that God created humanity male and female, which until recently could be all but taken for granted, has become highly

<sup>79</sup> See my article, "The Mystery of Christ and the Church: Head and Body, 'One Flesh,'" *TJ* 12 NS (1991): 79–94.

<sup>80</sup> See William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001); Webb, "A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: Encouraging Dialogue among Four Evangelical Views," *JETS* 46 (2005): 331–49. For critiques, see Benjamin Reaach, *Women, Slaves, and the Gender Debate: A Complementarian Response to the Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012); Thomas R. Schreiner, "William J. Webb's *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*: A Review Article," *SBJT* 6/1 (2002): 46–65; Wayne Grudem, "Review Article: Should We Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic? An Analysis of William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*," *JETS* 47 (2004): 299–346; Köstenberger and Köstenberger, *God's Design for Man and Woman*, 351–53.

<sup>81</sup> Köstenberger and Köstenberger, *God's Design for Man and Woman*, 353.

<sup>82</sup> Köstenberger and Köstenberger, *God's Design for Man and Woman*, 353.

controversial—even offensive—in the last few years. It is my hope that these brief reflections may contribute in small measure to greater clarity in understanding the divine revelation of God’s design for man and woman, in keeping with sound biblical-theological methodology and as undergirded by reverence for God’s holy, inspired, and inerrant Word.

# The Lamblike Servant: The Function of John’s Use of the OT for Understanding Jesus’s Death

— David V. Christensen —

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**Abstract:** In this article, I argue that John provides a window into the mechanics of how Jesus’s death saves, and this window is his use of the OT. When interpreters look through this window and ask how John understands Jesus’ death, our eyes are caused—by the passages John chose—to see substitutionary atonement as *essential* to the *inner mechanism* of how Jesus’s death saves.

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In a 2006 article, John Dennis catalogued a recovery occurring in Johannine scholarship from the period of Bultmann to the present. He concluded, “When the Gospel text is taken seriously as a unity and when *all* the evidence concerning Jesus’s death in John is taken into account ..., a more traditional atonement interpretation seems to be the result.”<sup>1</sup> This article adds evidence which interpreters must account for, namely that John’s use of the OT provides a window into the mechanics of how Jesus’s death saves.

In the Gospel of John, interpreters regularly note how Jesus’s death is a revelation of God, and frequently, explanations of this revelation highlight God’s love. Naturally, we should highlight the revelatory element of Jesus’s death because by it Jesus reveals (1) his identity (John 8:28; 12:31–38) and (2) the Father (1:18; 12:28; 14:31). Not only that, but Jesus’s death also reveals God’s love (3:16), Jesus’s love for the Father (14:31), and Jesus’s love for his own (13:1; 15:13). A close analysis, however, of John’s use of the Old Testament to characterize Jesus’s death reveals that—for John—categories of “revelation,” “exemplarism,” and “love” are insufficient *as models* for discussing Jesus’s cross-work.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John A. Dennis, “Jesus’ Death in John’s Gospel: A Survey of Research from Bultmann to the Present with Special Reference to the Johannine Hyper-Texts,” *CurBR* 4 (2006): 331, emphasis original.

<sup>2</sup> See David Vincent Christensen, “The Lamblike Servant: Exodus Typology and the Death of Jesus in the Gospel of John” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2021). This paper attempts to summarize the central argument of my dissertation. Due to space limitations, some conclusions are stated without argument, and where this occurs, I have tried to refer the reader to the dissertation itself.

This article lays out the fruit of that analysis in three steps: (1) John 1 and 19 function as adumbration and fulfillment depicting Jesus with lamblike righteous sufferer imagery; (2) we are, therefore, warranted to examine how John employs the OT around the three ὁψωσις-statements which anticipate Jesus's death (John 3:13–21; 8:21–30; 12:20–43); (3) in view of how he uses the OT in those five key contexts, I argue that John characterizes Jesus as the substitutionary sacrifice of the new exodus, and that substitutionary atonement is *essential* to the *inner mechanism* of Jesus's death in the Gospel of John.

### 1. Key Distinctions

Before exploring John's presentation of the death of Jesus in detail, it is important to first explain some crucial logical and theological distinctions that are frequently neglected. I have in mind three related distinctions, all of which are intuitive: mechanism vs. message, objective vs. subjective, and salvation vs. glory.

First, mechanism vs. message distinguishes between what something *does* and what something *says*. For example, the internal gears of a mechanical watch are what *does* the timekeeping, and the watch face is what *tells* the time to the wearer. Without the hands, the watch cannot be read, but without the internal mechanism it ceases to keep time at all. To one who understands watches, the idea that the hands do the time-keeping is clearly mistaken—a category confusion. The hands *display* the time *kept* by the internal mechanism. Johannine scholars who would argue that Jesus's death saves by revealing God are guilty of the same category error—they've confused the *message* of the cross for its *mechanism*.<sup>3</sup> Just as we would surely not mistake an advertisement for Citizen's latest watch face to indicate a change in the *mechanics* of timekeeping, in the same way John's clear emphasis on the revelatory nature of Jesus's death does not indicate a change in the *mechanics* of how it saves sinners.<sup>4</sup> As an aside: we should observe that to equate the message of the cross with its saving mechanism, interpreters must redefine sin as a cerebral malady—a move without support from John's use of the OT.<sup>5</sup>

The second distinction to keep in mind is between the objective accomplishing of salvation and the subjective receiving of salvation. Schreiner and Caneday make the distinction this way: “We make this crucial distinction between the *objective basis* and the *subjective means* of salvation to make it

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<sup>3</sup> The language of “mechanism” is indebted to Horton's similar usage (Michael Horton, *Justification, New Studies in Dogmatics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018], 2:237).

<sup>4</sup> I would argue that the essential components of the mechanism are (1) vicarious substitution and (2) the complete satisfaction of God's character. The complete satisfaction of God's character includes, but is not limited to, the satisfaction of his righteousness and wrath. See John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 112–246; Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 318–27; see also Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, CCT (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 125–94. I prefer to speak “the complete satisfaction of God's character” rather than limiting satisfaction to the attributes usually mentioned in penal substitutionary accounts. I mean more, not less. Naselli writes correctly, “The heart of Jesus's death is that Jesus *paid our penalty* (penal) *in our place* (substitution). All other pictures of what Christ's death accomplished depend on his penal substitution” (Andrew David Naselli, *Romans: A Concise Guide to the Greatest Letter Ever Written* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022], 25, emphasis original). Additionally, Naselli provides an exquisite note (p. 25 n. 12) detailing how penal substitution is the means by which various pictures of salvation are accomplished.

<sup>5</sup> For an (unpersuasive) attempt to do this, see Anastasia Scrutton, “‘The Truth Will Set You Free’: Salvation as Revelation,” in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 359–68.

clear from the outset that what believers do in order to attain the prize of eternal life does not add to or nullify God's grace in the saving work of Jesus Christ."<sup>6</sup> There is a difference between what believers *do* to receive salvation and what Jesus *did* to obtain it. While John undeniably accents the subjective side of this equation—think about the 98 uses of πιστεύω and numerous metaphors for belief—nevertheless, this does not alter what Jesus did objectively. It does, however, explain John's revelatory emphasis—doesn't it? John's emphasis on the revelatory message of the cross correlates precisely with his subjective emphasis on believing to have eternal life. Yet, this subjective emphasis does not militate against the objective accomplishment of Jesus's death.

Schreiner insightfully suggests a final way interpreters err: they misunderstand the "foundational theme" of God's word. He writes, "[There is] a problem with any biblical theology that posits salvation as the foundational theme of Scripture. How is judgment integrated into such a reading of Scripture? If the glory of God is foundational, however, then his glory is featured in both judgment and salvation."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, to limit the revelation of Jesus's death to a single attribute of God, simply does not do justice to John's reflection that "the only-begotten God ... has made [the Father God] known" (1:18)<sup>8</sup> because what does John report is revealed to be *seen, sought, and loved*? Not just the love, but the *glory* of God. "We beheld his *glory*" (1:14); "you do not seek the *glory* that comes from the only God" (5:44); "they loved the *glory* that comes from men more than the *glory* of God" (12:43 cf. 3:19).<sup>9</sup> Atonement theories, therefore, that pit the perfections of God against one another or which see no place for judgment in the revelation of God's glory—these theories are not only theologically untenable but are also ruled out by a close reading of John.

With these distinctions made, we are now better prepared to consider the testimonial bookends of Jesus's life and the three lifted up sayings in order to discern how John understands the *essence* of Jesus's death as the *mechanism* of salvation *objectively* accomplished.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 89, emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, "A Biblical Theology of the Glory of God," in *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. C. Samuel Storms and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 220. Later in his essay, Schreiner clarifies, "We see that he saves his people *for* the glory of his name. Hence, the salvation of human beings is not God's *ultimate* concern but the majesty of his glorious name" (p. 225, emphasis added). Schreiner is referring to passages like Isa 48:9–11 and Ezek 36:22–27. We see something similar in John, for example, when Jesus says that he goes to his hour *to glorify the Father* (12:27–28) and does his work *to display his love for the Father* (14:31).

<sup>8</sup> On retaining this translation of μονογενής, see Charles Lee Irons, "A Lexical Defense of the Johannine 'Only Begotten,'" in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 98–116.

<sup>9</sup> Against translations of δόξα as "praise" in 12:43, Morris is spot on: "John is surely looking back to his use of the term in verse 41. The glory of Christ sets the standard. To love the glory of people above the glory of God is the supreme disaster" (Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, revised ed., NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 538).

## 2. Testimonial Bookends: Behold the Lamb

As Jean Zumstein has noted, John 1:29–34 and 19:31–37 form an *inclusio*, which he says constructs “an *arc of tension* which places the whole of the narrative under the sign of the cross.”<sup>10</sup> This is why I characterized these passages in my introduction, respectively, as adumbration and fulfillment. The former prepares us to understand the latter; therefore, I agree with Jörg Frey who would describe a passage like John 1:29–34 as “introduc[ing] the appropriate categories so that the events [of Jesus’s death] can be properly understood when they are finally narrated in the passion story.”<sup>11</sup> For each passage, I will comment briefly on (1) the preceding context, (2) the structure of the passage, and (3) the identities and actions ascribed to Jesus.

### 2.1. Testimony of the Baptist

In the Gospel of John—unlike the Synoptics—we do not learn of the Baptist’s origins, manner of clothing, unorthodox diet, feud with Herod, or even his message of repentance; rather, John’s focus is almost exclusively on the Baptist’s *testimony*.<sup>12</sup> Although the Baptist’s testimony is properly introduced by verse 19, John prefaced it in the prologue in such a way that we already know *about whom* and *why* the Baptist testifies (1:6–7, 15). The testimony is about the Light, who is the Life, who is none other than the preexistent, divine, creative Word (1:1–5). The purpose of his testifying is that “all might believe [in the Word] through [the Baptist’s testimony]” (1:7).<sup>13</sup> Additionally, John teases the Baptist’s testimony in verse 15 (cf. v. 30), thereby forging a link with 1:29–34. This link connects the divine Word with the coming One (ἐρχόμενος; 1:15, 27, 30).<sup>14</sup>

#### 2.1.1. Structure of John 1:29–34

Turning our attention to 1:29–34, I have depicted the structure of the passage in Figure 1.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This is my translation of the original French: “*courbe de tension* plac[ant] l’ensemble de la narration sous le signe de la croix” (Jean Zumstein, “L’interprétation johannique de la mort du Christ,” in *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift Frans Neirynck*, ed. Frans van Segbroeck and C. M. Tuckett, BETL 100 [Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1992], 3:2120).

<sup>11</sup> Jörg Frey, “The Gospel of John as a Narrative Memory of Jesus,” in *Memory and Memories in Early Christianity: Proceedings of the International Conference Held at the Universities of Geneva and Lausanne* (June 2–3, 2016), ed. Simon Buttica and Enrico Norelli, WUNT 398 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 280.

<sup>12</sup> John D’Souza, *The Lamb of God in the Johannine Writings* (Allahabad, India: St. Paul Publications, 1968), 124.

<sup>13</sup> The Baptist is the referent of αὐτοῦ (cf. 17:20). See Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 93 n. 23.

<sup>14</sup> For more detail on the context of 1:29–34, see Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 90–97.

<sup>15</sup> The arrow glyphs point in the functional direction of reference. The propositions A–E all relate to Jesus’s identity as the Lamb of God; whereas, the propositions A’–E’ all relate to Jesus’s identity as the Chosen One of God. The central proposition (F) reports John’s eyewitness testimony. While I arrived at my structure of the passage independently from Bieringer, I am indebted to him in particular for the labels of action (Handeln) and identity (Identität). See Reimund Bieringer, “Das Lamm Gottes, das die Sünde der Welt hinwegnimmt (Joh 1,29): Eine kontextorientierte und redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung auf dem Hintergrund der Passatradition als Deutung des Todes Jesu im Johannesevangelium,” in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert van Belle, BETL 200 (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2007), 220–21; I originally presented this structure in Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 113, see discussion on 112–15.

A) Ἰδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ	(Jesus's Identity, 1:29b)
B) ὁ αἵρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου.	(Action [↑], 1:29c)
C) οὗτός ἐστιν ὑπὲρ οὗ ἐγὼ εἶπον ...	(Foretold Identity [↑], 1:30)
D) καὶ γὰρ οὐκ ᾔδειν αὐτόν	(Ignorance [↑], 1:31a)
E) ἵνα φανερωθῇ τῷ Ἰσραὴλ ἥλθον βαπτίζων	(Baptism: to Reveal [↑], 31b)
F) ἐμαρτύρησεν Ἰωάννης ... Τεθέαμαι ...	(Testimony: I saw, 1:32)
D') καὶ γὰρ οὐκ ᾔδειν αὐτόν	(Ignorance [↓], 1:33a)
E') ὁ πέμψας με βαπτίζειν ἐν ὕδατι εἶπεν	(Baptism: God Reveals [↓], 1:33b)
C') ὃν ἂν ἴδῃς τὸ πνεῦμα ... μένον οὗτός ἐστιν	(Foretold Identity [↓], 1:33c)
B') ὁ βαπτίζων ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ	(Action [↓], 1:33d)
A') ἐώρακα καὶ μεμαρτύρηκα οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἐκλεκτός τοῦ θεοῦ	(Jesus's Identity, 1:34)

**Figure 1. Structure of John 1:29–34**

The most important observation from this structure, for this paper, is that the paragraph is principally testimony (F) about Jesus's *identity* (A/A'),<sup>16</sup> for which the preceding inquiries into the Baptist's *identity* serve as a foil (1:19–25).<sup>17</sup> Jesus's identity is explained in each of the corresponding actions (B/B'): as Lamb of God, Jesus is the one able to take away sin,<sup>18</sup> and as Chosen One of God, Jesus is the one able to baptize with the Spirit.

### 2.1.2. *Adumbrated: Lamblike Servant*

I will provide my interpretation of each identity-action pair briefly.<sup>19</sup> First, the Lamb of God. Many interpreters would say no single background accounts for the identity-action of John 1:29; instead, in various ways they tend to suggest that John has blended the backgrounds of Passover lamb with that of the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah 53.<sup>20</sup> While I sympathize with this impulse, I disagree that such "creativity" or "innovation" is *John's* doing; rather, I suggest that John evokes a network of OT typological

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Bieringer, "Das Lamm Gottes," 218–19.

<sup>17</sup> In effect the Baptist's posture towards his interlocutors says, "You are asking who I am, but you really need to ask, who is the coming One?" Thus, he embodies John 3:30 from the beginning.

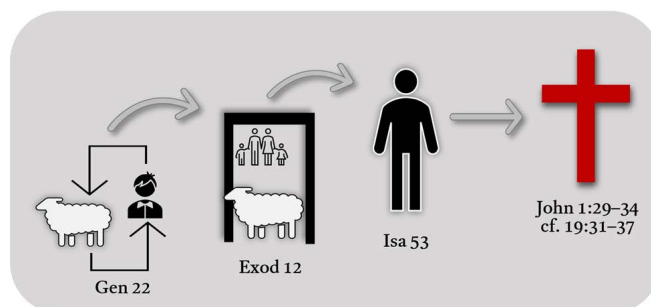
<sup>18</sup> Frey writes, "Die Deutung von Joh 1,29 sollte deshalb zunächst bei der Funktionsbeschreibung ὁ αἵρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου ansetzen" (Jörg Frey, "Die 'Theologia Crucifixi' des Johannesevangeliums," in *Kreuzestheologie im Neuen Testament*, ed. Andreas Dettwiler and Jean Zumstein, WUNT 151 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002], 202 ("The interpretation of John 1:29 should therefore begin with the functional description ὁ αἵρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου").

<sup>19</sup> For a lengthier and more annotated discussion, see Christensen, "Lamblike Servant," 98–106.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Jesper Tang Nielsen, "The Lamb of God: The Cognitive Structure of a Johannine Metaphor," in *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes, and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language*, ed. Jörg Frey et al., WUNT 200 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 217–56; see also those cited in Christensen, "Lamblike Servant," 103 n. 76.



connections—a pattern of redemption—by means of a single primary source. I diagram my view in Figure 2.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 2. Pattern of Redemption**

I understand “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” to refer principally to the Servant of Isaiah 53, and if we asked, what sort of lamb does *Isaiah* envision this Servant as, I would argue he is the Passover lamb of the new exodus.<sup>22</sup> Now, in typology, later installments on or variations of the type usually come with escalations.<sup>23</sup> The Servant is no different. But, just as later variations on the 1964 Mustang are the *same type* of Ford, so the Servant despite variations is based on the type of the Passover lamb. In turn, we must notice that the Passover lamb is patterned off the type of God’s provided lamb from Genesis 22.<sup>24</sup> Just like God provided a ram to die *in the place of* Abraham’s firstborn child of the promise, Isaac—an undeniably substitutionary sacrifice—so too God provided the Passover *sacrifice* (Exod 12:27) to die *in the place of* the firstborn of his people (Exod 12:12–13). One of the typological escalations between the paschal and the lamblike Servant is that Isaiah says the Servant’s substitution deals with the sin, iniquity, and transgression of others. As such, the Servant’s death is properly understood as an atonement for sin.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, John evokes the three most commonly discussed backgrounds for John 1:29 by referring to Isaiah 53 understood in its typological trajectory. The lamb of Genesis 22 is a type of substitutionary sacrifice, the Passover lamb repeats that type during the exodus and adds the aversion of wrath, and the lamblike Servant repeats the type of the Passover lamb and adds (1) atonement for sin, (2) human substitution, and (3) possible divine identity for the substitute. The resonances we hear in John 1:29 of the Passover lamb and Genesis 22 make sense because (1) they are part of the background of the Isaianic reference, and (2) John will later accent or allude to both in his gospel—perhaps to better unpack his own biblical-theological understanding of the Servant. Therefore, I agree with D. A. Carson that John’s presentation of Jesus *as a lamb* introduces “the theme of vicarious substitution as atonement for sin at

<sup>21</sup> I originally set forth this position in Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 103–6.

<sup>22</sup> I argue this at length in Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 27–66.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Friedbert Ninow, *Indicators of Typology within the Old Testament: The Exodus Motif*, Friedensauer Schriftenreihe 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001), 156; Aubrey Sequeira and Samuel Emadi, “Biblical-Theological Exegesis and the Nature of Typology,” *SBJT* 21.1 (2017): 12.

<sup>24</sup> Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 45–52.

<sup>25</sup> See Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 40–66.

the very beginning of his Gospel,” which, Carson continues, “ought to have a shaping effect on the way we read the rest of the Gospel.”<sup>26</sup>

Second, regarding the identity-action of Chosen One who baptizes with the Spirit.<sup>27</sup> I agree with the text-critical arguments of Tze-Ming Quek, who argues that ὁ ἐκλεκτός is the harder reading and more likely original.<sup>28</sup> With Bauckham and Bittner, I understand this identity-action to allude to Isaiah 11:2 and 42:1 to describe Jesus as the anticipated Davidic messiah who has the Spirit.<sup>29</sup> In this Gospel where the disciples are frequently *chosen* (ἐκλέγομαι, 6:70; 13:18; 15:16, 19), Jesus is the Chosen One *par excellence*,<sup>30</sup> and as Jesus was sent and given the Spirit, so he sends them and gives them the Spirit (17:18; 20:21). In this way, the disciples in John are like the servants of the Servant in Isaiah. Therefore, in John 1:29–34 we can see that the identity-action pairs, which describe Jesus, describe him in terms of the Isaianic Servant understood in his literary and canonical contexts. We anticipated this since the Baptist positioned himself as a co-witness with Isaiah. Now, we will turn to John 19, where—once again—testimony is the center of the structure that involves two identities and actions.

## 2.2. Testimony of the Beloved Disciple

As John moves his narrative toward the cross in 18:28–19:30,<sup>31</sup> the prominent theme of Jesus’s kingship is augmented with various intra- and inter-textual connections to shepherd, Servant, sufferer, and paschal texts.<sup>32</sup>

First, John offers a narrative aside in 18:32b to the effect that Jesus’s upcoming Roman execution fulfills his prediction of being lifted up (12:32–33). This connection is plainly made by the exact repetition of the phrase σημαίνων ποίῳ θανάτῳ ἤμελλεν ἀποθνήσκειν (signifying by what sort of death he was about to die) from 12:33. This literary linkage aims to help readers recall the Isaianic allusions to the Servant in the lifted up sayings (3:14; 8:28; 12:32).<sup>33</sup> What all of those passages anticipated is unfolding now for the reader.

Second, John recalls the Shepherd Discourse from chapter 10 a number of times. It appears (1) in Jesus’s words to Pilate, “Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice” (18:37), reminiscent of 10:16 (cf. 10:27); (2) in John’s description of Barabbas as a ληστής (18:40) recalling 10:1, 8 where the robber is

<sup>26</sup> D. A. Carson, “Adumbrations of Atonement Theology in the Fourth Gospel,” *JETS* 57 (2014): 519; see also Max Turner, “Atonement and the Death of Jesus in John—Some Questions to Bultmann and Forestell,” *EvQ* 62 (1990): 121–22.

<sup>27</sup> For more thorough discussion and annotation, see Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 107–12.

<sup>28</sup> Tze-Ming Quek, “A Text-Critical Study of John 1.34,” *NTS* 55 (2009): 22–34.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 155–58; Wolfgang J. Bittner, *Jesu Zeichen im Johannesevangelium: die Messias-Erkenntnis im Johannesevangelium vor ihrem jüdischen Hintergrund*, WUNT 2.26 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987), 138–50, 245–46; see also James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments*, NACSBT 1 (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 100–121.

<sup>30</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 152.

<sup>31</sup> For more detailed discussion of these and other connections, see Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 117–30.

<sup>32</sup> Of the sixteen occurrences of βασιλεύς in John, twelve are in 18:33–19:21 (18:33, 37 [2×], 39; 19:3, 12, 14, 15 [2×], 19, 21 [2×]), and the others are 1:49; 6:15; and 12:13, 15. Jesus also speaks of his βασιλεία (kingdom) in 18:36 [3×].

<sup>33</sup> For a catalog of persons discussing this allusion, see Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 165 n. 1.

the *antitype* of the Shepherd and an *ectype* of the murderer from the beginning (8:44 cf. 10:10); (3) in John's depiction of Jesus's final moment, "He handed over his Spirit" (19:30), definitively fulfilling 10:11, 17–18 where Jesus said that as the Good Shepherd he lays down his life on behalf of (ὑπέρ) his sheep.<sup>34</sup> The value of recalling the Shepherd discourse in these ways includes the continuing characterization of Jesus both as the Shepherd figure anticipated by Ezekiel (34:15–16, 23–24; 37:22–24 [cf. Zech 11; 13:7]) and as the Servant who dies in the place of the many from Isaiah 53.<sup>35</sup> None should seriously doubt the substitutionary nature of the Johannine ὑπέρ passages in view of the way Peter speaks in John 13:37. There, he exclaims with language parallel to 10:11, "I will lay down my life *for* you" (τὴν ψυχὴν μου ὑπὲρ σοῦ θήσω). We naturally understand that Peter is saying he would die *in Jesus's place* (not merely for his benefit) because he is his friend, just like Jesus says two chapters later, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life *for* [ὑπέρ] his friends" (15:13).<sup>36</sup>

Finally, I would be remiss not to highlight how John clearly emphasizes Passover.<sup>37</sup> He does so (1) by placing the entire narrative underneath the heading of the twin temporal markers—Passover and Jesus's hour (13:1), (2) by describing the ironical insistence on keeping the Passover by the Jewish leaders while they are handing over the new Passover lamb to Pilate for slaughter (18:30), (3) by noting Pilate's custom of freeing a prisoner during the πάσχα (18:39), (4) by insisting that the timing of Jesus's death corresponded to παρασκευὴ τοῦ πάσχα (19:14; cf. 19:31, 42), and (5) by using the term hyssop at the cross (19:29).<sup>38</sup>

Even by that quick survey, we can see that John is recalling or reinforcing certain backgrounds and themes that will be both *seen* and *supported* in 19:31–37, namely those of the messianic Shepherd, lamblike Servant, and the Passover lamb. They will be *seen* in the events of the cross and *supported* by the citations that John supplies. Before we consider those, however, I will present the structure of the passage.

<sup>34</sup> Jörg Frey, "Edler Tod—wirksamer Tod—stellvertretender Tod—heilschaffender Tod: Zur narrativen und theologischen Deutung des Todes Jesu im Johannesevangelium," in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert van Belle, BETL 200 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 74; On the ὑπέρ statements, see Dennis, "Jesus' Death," 331–63; Frey, "Theologia Crucifixi," 213–19; John E. Morgan-Wynne, *The Cross in the Johannine Writings* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 162–64.

<sup>35</sup> In addition to those in the previous note, see, e.g., Paul S. Coxon, *Exploring the New Exodus in John: A Biblical Theological Investigation of John Chapters 5–10* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 322–26. Plenty have noted that the LXX of Isa 53:12 includes the phrase παρεδόθη εἰς θάνατον ἢ ψυχὴ αὐτοῦ ("he handed over his soul unto death"), which parallels John 19:30 conceptually and uses the same verb.

<sup>36</sup> I owe this observation to Frey, "Tod," 79–81; and Frey, "Theologia Crucifixi," 215.

<sup>37</sup> For extended meditation on the Passover themes, see Paul M. Hoskins, "Deliverance from Death by the True Passover Lamb: A Significant Aspect of the Fulfillment of the Passover in the Gospel of John," *JETS* 52.2 (2009): 285–99; Stanley E. Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus: In Pursuit of the Johannine Voice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 198–224; Coxon, *Exploring the New Exodus in John*, passim; Gerry Wheaton, *The Role of Jewish Feasts in John's Gospel*, SNTSMS 162 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 83–126.

<sup>38</sup> The use of ὕσσωπος fits nicely into the Passover context but is no sure proof of it—the garnish but not the meat of the argument.

### 2.2.1. Structure of John 19:31–37

I depict the literary-thematic structure of John 19:31–37 in Figure 3.<sup>39</sup>

A) οὐ κατέαξαν αὐτοῦ τὰ σκέλη (Narrated *Identifier*: Unbroken Legs, vv. 31–33)

B) αὐτοῦ τὴν πλευρὰν ἔνυξεν (Narrated *Identifier*: Sufferer Pierced, v. 34a)

C) ἐξῆλθεν εὐθὺς αἷμα καὶ ὕδωρ (Narrated: *Actions* of 1:29, 34 in 19:34b)

C') ὁ ἔωρακὼς μεμαρτύρηκεν (Testimony: [A–C] really Happened, v. 35)

A') Ὅστοῦν οὐ συντριβήσεται αὐτοῦ (Scriptural *Identity*: Lamb, v. 36)

B') Ὁψονται εἰς ὃν ἐξέκέντησαν (Scriptural *Identity*: Suffering Figure, v. 37)

### Figure 3. Structure of John 19:31–37

Notice the intentionality of this arrangement. In the OT citation just prior to our passage, John provided the Scriptural citation immediately after the narrated event (19:23–24; citing Ps 22:18) just like he did earlier in 12:14–15 (citing Zech 9:9); however, in our passage, John delays the citation and calls attention to the truthfulness of his own words. John's testimony (C') separates the citations (A', B') from the narrated events (A, B) to highlight the fulfillment of the actions from 1:29–34 (C) so that his audience might believe.

Notice further that the order is preserved from 1:29–34, Lamb then Messianic Figure, both in the narration of *events* and the provision of *citations*, and, as it turns out, in the symbolism of blood and water. On my reading, *blood* corresponds—in every case in the gospel (save 1:13)—to Jesus's substitutionary lamblike death (6:51–56).<sup>40</sup> As Leon Morris famously concluded, “[Blood] was especially the life poured out in death; and yet more particularly in its religious aspect it was the symbol of sacrificial death.”<sup>41</sup> *Water* corresponds to the promised Spirit who gives life (4:10–14; 7:37–39)<sup>42</sup> and with whom Jesus baptizes (1:33). Together, and in light of the citation in 19:37, the outpouring of blood and water also seem to signify the fulfillment of Zechariah 13:1, as Carnazzo has argued.<sup>43</sup> Now, I will briefly give my understanding of the citations John supplied in 19:36–37.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Sebastian A. Carnazzo, *Seeing Blood and Water: A Narrative-Critical Study of John 19:34* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 24. The main difference between Carnazzo's structure of the passage and mine is that he collapses my (C) into (B) making my (C') the center of his structure; however, as I will explain, I see (C) as relating to both (A/B) and (A'/B') where the former are related as *events* and the latter as *supports*.

<sup>40</sup> Most Johannine scholars agree that references to Jesus's flesh and blood (in John 6:51–56) refer in some way to his death. See those cited in Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 282 n. 205.

<sup>41</sup> Morris attributes this quote to Armitage Robinson (*St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*), as cited in Leon Morris, “The Biblical Use of the Term ‘Blood,’” *JTS* 6 (1955): 82; see also Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 112–28.

<sup>42</sup> The phrase μεγάλη ἡ ἡμέρα links 7:37 with this context (19:31), as noted by Carnazzo, *Seeing Blood and Water*, 63.

<sup>43</sup> See Carnazzo, *Seeing Blood and Water*, 67–76.

<sup>44</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 130–58.

### 2.2.2. *Fulfilled: Lamblike Servant*

First, regarding 19:36, after narrating how the Pharisees ironically keep Exodus 12:10 with respect to the new Passover lamb (“you shall let none of [the lamb] remain until the morning,” ESV),<sup>45</sup> John cites Exodus 12:46. While it is striking to see a festal regulation cited in a *fulfillment* formula,<sup>46</sup> I propose this is not an issue if we understand John as applying the text typologically. Furthermore, the concept of divine preservation embodied in the passive verb, συντηρήσεται, may evidence an additional nuance similar to that found in Jubilees 49:13–15 (cf. Ps 34:19–20).<sup>47</sup> Jubilees makes “a causal connection” between the preservation of the bones of the lamb and God’s preservation of his people; the one whose literal bones are spared—the lamb—is *not spared* death, so that God’s people may be delivered from death.<sup>48</sup> Certainly, this nuance fits well with the substitutionary sense of the Johannine ὑπέρ-passages. Since John views sin and wrath against sin as the reason all shall surely die (John 3:36; 8:21–24),<sup>49</sup> if Jesus’s lamblike death delivers from death, then it necessarily makes atonement for sin by vicarious substitution.

Second, regarding 19:37, John understands the piercing of Jesus at the crucifixion as the fulfillment of Zechariah 12:10. Although there is much debate about this, I understand the pierced figure in Zechariah as a future Davidic king whose identity is closely tied to Yahweh such that to pierce him is to pierce the Lord.<sup>50</sup> The prophet Zechariah, indeed, patterned the messianic figure in the panels of Zechariah 9–14 off of the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah.<sup>51</sup> John 19:37 is—in many ways—the climax of John’s seeing motif:<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> And, since Jesus is the climactic Bread from Heaven (John 6:27–59; see Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 231–92), John may view this as also an ironic fulfillment of Exod 16:19.

<sup>46</sup> As noted by Menken (Old Testament Quotations in the Fourth Gospel: Studies in Textual Form, CBET 15 [Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996], 158).

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., Catrin H. Williams, “Composite Citations in John,” in *Composite Citations in Antiquity: Jewish, Graeco-Roman, and Early Christian Uses*, ed. Sean A. Adams and Seth Ehorn, LNTS 525 (New York: T&T Clark, 2018), 118 n. 73.

<sup>48</sup> Menken, *Old Testament Quotations*, 164. This is the difference with Ps 34:20. In that text, the one whose bones are not broken is also spared death—not so in Jubilees or John; however, I am not suggesting dependence upon Jubilees, only similarity of nuance.

<sup>49</sup> I will say more about this in §3.

<sup>50</sup> See, e.g., Anthony R. Petterson, *Behold Your King: The Hope for the House of David in the Book of Zechariah*, LHBOTS 513 (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 237–38; Adam Kubiś, *The Book of Zechariah in the Gospel of John*, Études bibliques 64 (Pendé: J. Gabalda, 2012), 139–45; R. Reed Lessing, *Zechariah*, ConcC (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing, 2021), 461, 471–75.

<sup>51</sup> See discussions in Petterson, *Behold Your King*, 240–41; Kubiś, *Zechariah in the Gospel of John*, 44–45; Lessing, *Zechariah*, 470–72; Paul Lamarche, *Zacharie IX–XIV: Structure Littéraire et Messianisme*, Études bibliques (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1961), 124–47; Kelly D. Liebengood, *The Eschatology of 1 Peter: Considering the Influence of Zechariah 9–14*, SNTSMS 157 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 51; Martin Hengel and Daniel P. Bailey, “The Effective History of Isaiah 53 in the Pre-Christian Period,” in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, trans. Daniel P. Bailey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 85.

<sup>52</sup> This motif contains both aspects of salvation (e.g., 6:40; 9:36–38) and judgment (e.g., 3:3, 36; 6:36; 9:39–41; 15:24), as acknowledged by Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 4 vols., HThKNT 4 (Freiburg: Herder, 1965–84), 4:173; John envisions the “looking” of 19:37 to “[consist] either of saving faith or of guilty blindness” (Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 155; cf. J. M. Lieu, “Blindness in the Johannine Tradition,” *NTS* 34 [1988]: 84); contra Kubiś, *Zechariah in the Gospel of John*, 201.

foreshadowed in “We *beheld* his glory” (1:14), begun in the narrative with “*Behold* the Lamb” (1:29), deepened by the allusion to Numbers 21 in 3:14, integrated as *seeing* belief in 6:40, exemplified by the formerly blind man’s believing *sight* (9:36–38), exhorted in “*Behold* your King” (12:15), answered by the Greeks’ “We want to *see* Jesus” (12:21), echoed in Pilate’s mockery “*Behold* your King” (19:14).<sup>53</sup> I concur with Catrin Williams who argues that John’s use of ὄψονται in 19:37, because no extant OG text of Zechariah 12:10 contains it, betrays an allusion to Isaiah 52:10, where the LXX uses this verb in this exact form to say that when Yahweh bares his arm, then “every corner of the earth shall see (ὄψονται) the salvation which comes from God.”<sup>54</sup> This is fitting since John already alluded to and cited Isaiah 52–53 alongside Zechariah in John 12,<sup>55</sup> and John identifies Jesus as the revealed Arm of Yahweh in John 12:37–38 (see §3.3). Williams points out that Isaiah 52:13–15 describes two viewpoints on the Servant: (1) Yahweh’s divine call to “Behold” concerning his Servant’s high and lofty status (52:13),<sup>56</sup> and (2) the “eventual *coming to see*” of the nations (52:15, note ὄψονται).<sup>57</sup> These viewpoints appear to parallel the adumbration of John 1:29–34 and the fulfillment of 19:31–37 respectively.

Therefore, the testimonial bookends of Jesus’s life refer to networks of related passages that, when combined, suggest Jesus’s death makes atonement as the messianic figure substituted in a lamblike fashion during a new exodus. At this point, one should note that there is a marked lack of emphasis in these OT passages on the revelation of love, on death as mere example, or on the other kinds of things alternative atonement theories suggest the cross saves by. Certainly, the Servant reveals Yahweh’s love for his covenant people (cf. Isa 54–55), is the example followed by the servants of the Servant (Isa 56–66), and descends in humiliation before his exaltation (Isa 53); however, these things ultimately *depend upon* the Servant’s substitutionary death for their achievement. Hence, the use of the OT in the bookends appears to support my thesis that substitutionary atonement is essential to the inner mechanism of Jesus death in John.

### 3. Singular Solution: Jesus Lifted Up

Turning to consider how John employs the OT in the context of the lifted up sayings (3:14; 8:28; 12:32),<sup>58</sup> I contend that each passage describes the *human situation* for which Jesus being lifted up in death is the *only solution*.<sup>59</sup> I briefly show this in each passage.

<sup>53</sup> See Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 152–59.

<sup>54</sup> See Catrin H. Williams, “‘Seeing,’ Salvation, and the Use of Scripture in the Gospel of John,” in *Atonement: Jewish and Christian Origins*, ed. Max Botner, Justin Harrison Duff, and Simon Dürr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 145–46, 149–51.

<sup>55</sup> On the use of Isaiah in John 12, see esp. Daniel J. Brendsel, “Isaiah Saw His Glory”: The Use of Isaiah 52–53 in John 12, BZNW 208 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014); Adam W. Day, *Jesus, the Isaianic Servant: Quotations and Allusions in the Gospel of John*, GBS 67 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2018), 89–104, 129–40.

<sup>56</sup> On which, see the excellent work of Jaap Dekker, “The High and Lofty One Dwelling in the Heights and with His Servants: Intertextual Connections of Theological Significance between Isaiah 6, 53 and 57,” *JSOT* 41 (2017): 475–91; see also Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 52–57.

<sup>57</sup> Williams, “‘Seeing,’ Salvation, and the Use of Scripture,” 146, emphasis original.

<sup>58</sup> For my extended discussion, see Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 165–230.

<sup>59</sup> In saying this, I affirm the “consequent absolute necessity” of Jesus’s atoning death. With those terms, Murray means that Jesus’s atoning death is an “absolute necessity” because of God’s character and is a “consequence” of

### 3.1. Serpentine Judgment (3:14–20, 36)

In John 3, Jesus's death saves from wrath merited by humanity's default love for darkness. When John applies Numbers 21:4–9 typologically,<sup>60</sup> he is minimally drawing upon the thematic elements of (1) the people's sinful preference for something other than God, (2) unbelief, and (3) salvation from divine judgment. First, in Numbers, the second-generation Israelites wandering in the wilderness sinfully long for *Egypt* (21:5, 7), just like the previous generation did repeatedly (Num 11:5, 18; 16:13 cf. Exod 3:8; Num 20:5). Yahweh, therefore, sets serpents upon them, which “are to be understood in light of Egyptian symbolism,”<sup>61</sup> as they are “the signature animal that Egypt idolatrously venerates.”<sup>62</sup> Second, such a sinful preference betrays unbelief in Yahweh's promises and provision—despite his steadfast love and faithfulness. Third, the uplifted serpent image is “a symbol of Yahweh's vanquishing Egypt,”<sup>63</sup> focusing upon Yahweh as *the exclusive Savior*, which Wisdom 16:7 sought to clarify.<sup>64</sup> This salvific opportunity is provided for “everyone who is bitten” (Num 21:8) and hence, condemned *already*, not simply to ward off bites.<sup>65</sup> The salvation is received by obeying the Lord's command in faith—turning from love for Egypt to Yahweh.

Returning to John 3, we see the same themes. First, fallen humanity loves darkness rather than God the Son incarnate (3:18–20 cf. 12:43).<sup>66</sup> This *philoskopia* is why the people are perishing and needed God to send his Son into the world (3:16–17). They are perishing because the wrath of God abides on the disobedient (3:36). Second, this love of darkness is manifestly *unbelief* (3:18, 36), and if they do not believe, they will neither “see life” (3:36) nor “pass from death to life” (5:24 cf. 12:46). Third, John explains (γάρ, 3:16) that Jesus must (δεῖ, 3:14) be lifted up in death for two reasons:<sup>67</sup> (1) internal to God, the character of the Creator (loving and just; cf. Exod 34:6–7), and (2) external to God, the default and

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electing freely to save fallen individuals (see John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955], 9–18; cf. Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 127).

<sup>60</sup> I lay out ten typological correspondences and the components of escalation between Num 21 and John 3 (Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 180–81); see also Daniel H. Fletcher, *Signs in the Wilderness: Intertextuality and the Testing of Nicodemus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 168–71.

<sup>61</sup> John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 147; see also Karen R. Joines, “Winged Serpents in Isaiah's Inaugural Vision,” *JBL* 86 (1967): 410–15; John D. Currid, “The Egyptian Setting of the ‘Serpent’: Confrontation in Exodus 7,8–13,” *BZ* 39 (1995): 203–24; Duane A. Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, KEL (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2014), 275.

<sup>62</sup> Andrew David Naselli, *The Serpent and the Serpent Slayer*, SSBT (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 75.

<sup>63</sup> Currid, *Ancient Egypt*, 149; see also Naselli, *Serpent*, 76–77.

<sup>64</sup> So, e.g., Jörg Frey, “Wie Mose die Schlange in der Wüste erhöht hat ...: Zur frühjüdischen Deutung der ‘ehernen Schlange’ und ihrer christologischen Rezeption in Johannes 3,14f,” in *Schriftauslegung im antiken Judentum und im Urchristentum*, ed. Martin Hengel and Hermut Löhr, WUNT 73 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1994), 163.

<sup>65</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 4 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 177.

<sup>66</sup> The world in John is regularly a reference to humanity in their fallen state of rebellion against their Creator. On understanding of κόσμος in John, see D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*, reprint ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 163–67; cf. William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 2 vols., NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1953), 1:79 n. 26.

<sup>67</sup> When Reichenbach says, “Why the necessity? The answer is unclear,” he neglects the logic of how John related 3:16–21 to 3:14–15 via γάρ. If it is unclear, it is because Reichenbach's healing reading of Num 21 obscures John's point in the allusion (Bruce R. Reichenbach, “Soteriology in the Gospel of John,” *Themelios* 46 [2021]: 581).

dire state of fallen humanity.<sup>68</sup> Because fallen humanity cannot save itself, the Word took on flesh (1:14) in order to give his flesh up by dying that some might live (6:51).

John 3:36 offers something of a summary of this chapter, in terms reminiscent of Numbers 21, as Weinrich observes, “[The] two gnomic statements [in 3:36] ... refer the reader back to the fiery serpent episode in the wilderness.”<sup>69</sup> If 3:36 were written about Numbers 21, it might sound like this, “The one who trusts in Yahweh has looked and lives, yet the one rebelling against Yahweh will not live; rather, the venom remains in his veins.”<sup>70</sup> As a confirmation that 3:36 reflects on Numbers 21, we should note that one of only two other times in the entire NT and LXX that ὁργή is the subject of μένω is Wisdom 16:5, which speaks of God’s mercy in the serpent episode of Numbers 21 when God would not let his wrath remain until the end.<sup>71</sup> In John 3, therefore, Jesus’s death saves from wrath merited by humanity’s default love for darkness.

### 3.2. Capital Punishment (8:21–30)

Turning to John 8, we see that Jesus’s death is the exclusive way for believers to be saved from capital punishment merited by sinning. Notice how 8:21 repeats 7:34 but alters one clause: instead of “you will not find me,” in 8:21, Jesus says, “You shall surely die in your sin” (ἐν τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ ὑμῶν ἀποθανεῖσθε). Instead of denying they will do something, Jesus tells them what will happen if they continue as they are. Presently, they are not able to come where Jesus is going.<sup>72</sup> Jesus explains his pronouncement further in 8:24.

Their inevitable end is caused by unbelief in Jesus’s divine identity. I say unbelief in his divine identity because the phrase πιστεύσητε ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι is an allusion to Isaiah 43:10, as is γινώσcesθε ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι in John 8:28 (see also 13:19).<sup>73</sup> In that passage, Yahweh is the exclusive Savior in an anticipated new exodus over and against all idols (Isa 43:8–13 cf. 44:6–20).<sup>74</sup> Unlike idols, the Creator-Redeemer declares things before they happen (43:9 cf. 44:6–8) because he has been from the beginning (43:13).

Regarding the inevitable end in view here, “you shall surely die” (John 8:21, 24), I propose that these words allude to the capital punishment decreed upon sin from the beginning—that is, in Genesis 2:17. Although some interpreters have noted the similarity between the Johannine phrase and Ezekiel

<sup>68</sup> Metzner, similarly, calls humanity’s condition the “äußere Anlaß” (external cause), which is the occasion for God’s “innere Motiv” (inner motive) of love to act. See Rainer Metzner, *Das Verständnis der Sünde im Johannes-evangelium*, WUNT 122 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 140.

<sup>69</sup> William C. Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, ConcC (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing, 2015), 453.

<sup>70</sup> Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 192.

<sup>71</sup> Noted by Frey, “Schlange,” 196–97; Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, 453. The other is Wis 18:20, which is also speaking of mercy in a wilderness judgment.

<sup>72</sup> Such inability is a theme in John. See, e.g., 3:5, 27; 6:44, 65; 7:34–36; 8:21; 12:39; 14:17.

<sup>73</sup> For discussion of this, see Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 204–11.

<sup>74</sup> See G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 272–80.



3:20,<sup>75</sup> I am unaware of anyone but myself who has argued this alludes to Genesis 2:17.<sup>76</sup> My argument is fourfold: (1) Ezekiel 3:18 alludes to Genesis 2:17, with the result that the language of Ezekiel 3:20 (the language in our passage) is an established way to describe the punishment that the Lord warned about in the beginning; (2) John 8 refers to Genesis repeatedly, making an allusion to Genesis *far more likely* than Ezekiel;<sup>77</sup> (3) the LXX of Genesis 2–3 contains one third of all LXX uses of ἀποθνήσκω in the Future Middle Indicative Second Plural, including Genesis 2:17 itself (θανάτῳ ἀποθανεῖσθε), and John 8:21, 24 are the only uses in the NT of ἀποθνήσκω in that form; and finally, (4) the immediate context—heavy with emphasis on Jesus’s heavenly origin, divine identity, allusions to Yahweh as Creator, hints that the Jewish leadership are seed of the serpent (8:44–47), etc. All these features coalesce to support Jesus’s revocalization of the archetypal warning against sin from the garden.

Therefore, the consequence of sin in John is none other than the *curse* God warned Adam and Eve about from the beginning—the *curse* that the father of lies (John 8:44) said would not happen (Gen 3:4 cf. Rev 12:9)—*death*, not simply a physical ending of life but an eternal (and spiritual) separation and exile from God’s benevolent presence (John 8:52 cf. 3:36). By warning his hearers with an allusion to Genesis 2:17, Jesus appears to characterize (1) their rejection of him as the rejection of the Creator and (2) its consequence as that which their Creator—who is true (3:33; 8:26) and speaks truth (8:26, 28, 40)—spoke about *from the beginning* (cf. 8:25 [!]).<sup>78</sup> In John 8, the *sole means* of rescue from that inevitable divine judgment comes when Jesus is lifted up in death (8:28).<sup>79</sup>

### 3.3. Divine Hardening (12:20–43)

In John 12, Jesus’s fruitful death is appointed by God to fulfill Scripture and saves from the spiritual darkness of unbelief. When Jesus is glorified (12:23) and lifted up (12:32) in death (12:33),<sup>80</sup> then he says, “I will draw all people to myself” (12:32). Before I turn to the use of Isaiah later in the chapter, notice how John ensures that we think about the *necessity* of Jesus’s death again. He does it through the

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<sup>75</sup> The relevant clause of Ezekiel 3:20 reads, καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις αὐτοῦ ἀποθανεῖται. See, e.g., Edward W. Klink, *John*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 409; J. Terence Forestell, *The Word of the Cross: Salvation as Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, AnBib 57 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1974), 149 n. 10; Metzner, *Sünde*, 169 n. 47.

<sup>76</sup> For a more detailed treatment, see Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 201–4.

<sup>77</sup> See, e.g., Maarten J. J. Menken, “Genesis in John’s Gospel and 1 John,” in *Genesis in the New Testament*, ed. Maarten J. J. Menken and Steve Moyise, LNTS 466 (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 83–98.

<sup>78</sup> The sense of 8:25 is difficult to pin down. See the discussions in Ed. L. Miller, “The Christology of John 8:25,” *ThZ* 36 (1980): 257–65; Chrys C. Caragounis, “What Did Jesus Mean by τὴν Ἀρχὴν in John 8:25?,” *NovT* 49 (2007): 129–47.

<sup>79</sup> Morgan-Wynne argues compellingly that the temporal frame (ὅταν ... τότε in 8:28) of Jesus’s exaltation (ὑψωσις) is primarily the cross (“The Cross and the Revelation of Jesus as Ἐγὼ Εἰμι in the Fourth Gospel (John 8:28),” in *Studia Biblica 1978: Papers on the Gospels from the Sixth International Congress on Biblical Studies*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone, JSNTSup 2 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980], 2:219–26).

<sup>80</sup> Rightly, Chibici-Revneanu concludes “that by the δοξάζεσθαι of Jesus his death is meant is not stated, but the composition of verses 12:23–28 hardly admits of any other conclusion,” (my translation of “Dass mit dem δοξάζεσθαι Jesu sein Tod gemeint ist, wird nicht ausgesprochen, die Zusammenstellung der Verse 12,23–28 lässt aber kaum einen anderen Schluss zu,” Nicole Chibici-Revneanu, *Die Herrlichkeit des Verherrlichten: das Verständnis der δόξα im Johannesevangelium*, WUNT 2.231 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007], 173); cf. Brendsel, *Isaiah Saw*, 137–60.

question of the crowd from verse 34: “How are you saying, ‘It is necessary that the Son of Man be lifted up?’” Their question reflects the wording of 3:14, not 12:32, showing that John is intentionally recalling and emphasizing δεῖ (“it is necessary”).<sup>81</sup> On their view, Messiah is supposed to *abide forever* (μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, 12:34), but Jesus taught in the wheat-grain simile that if he doesn’t die, then he *abides alone* (αὐτὸς μόνος μένει, 12:24). In other words, Messiah’s death is necessary if he would bear the fruit of the “all” whom he will draw to himself.<sup>82</sup>

Now, turning to John 12:37–43, John explains the divine purpose and deeper reason that Jesus was received with unbelief, particularly by the Jewish leaders. While his description of their unbelief in 12:37 reminds us of Deuteronomy 29:4 (MT 29:3), God has appointed it (note ἵνα) to fulfill Isaiah 53:1 because (διὰ τοῦτο → ὅτι) the inability to believe reflects “the sensory-organ-malfunction” foretold in Isaiah 6:10.<sup>83</sup>

Regarding the use of Isaiah 53:1, Brendsel correctly probes the shortcomings of typical interpretations of this citation, “One wonders what substantive loss would occur if John quoted only Isa 6:10.”<sup>84</sup> With Brendsel and others,<sup>85</sup> this would be a substantial loss for two reasons: (1) this citation characterizes Jesus’s identity, and (2) it identifies the unbelieved report as revelation of an unbelievable salvation. In the first place, we must remember that leading up to Isaiah 53, chapter 52 began with Yahweh saying that because his name was despised, they would behold *him* (52:6), *he* would come and redeem (52:9), and that redemption is described as Yahweh baring “his holy Arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (52:10). Of course, what is beheld next is *the Servant* (52:13). Isaiah 53:1 moves from general to specific, as Brendsel writes, “That which was not believed is a report specifically about the revelation of Yahweh’s arm.”<sup>86</sup> The report is given from the perspective of those redeemed by the Servant’s substitutionary death, whose death reverses the judgment of Isaiah 6:9–10—the hardened unbelief, with which they had received the Servant, has now been reversed.<sup>87</sup> They now *speak* about what they *saw* and *heard*, whereas before they could neither see nor hear. In a mysterious way, therefore, when Yahweh “rolled up his sleeves” to bare his Arm, the Arm that is revealed and seen is his Servant.<sup>88</sup>

In John 12, John identifies Jesus as this Servant, as the revealed Arm of Yahweh received with unbelief.<sup>89</sup> Both the *situation* (sin/unbelief) and *solution* (the death of God’s Servant) of Isaiah 53:1 are the same in John. Remember the report concerned the revealing of the Arm—the revelation of someone

<sup>81</sup> Note that in John 3:14 Jesus said, ὑψωθῆναι δεῖ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, but in 12:32 they say, δεῖ ὑψωθῆναι τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου; In the former, the *action* is accented; in the latter, its *necessity*. On necessity, see n. 59 above.

<sup>82</sup> For my discussion of John 6:44 and 12:32, see Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 216–18, 267–79.

<sup>83</sup> The phrase “sensory-organ-malfunction” is Beale’s (*We Become What We Worship*, 36–70).

<sup>84</sup> Brendsel, *Isaiah Saw*, 99.

<sup>85</sup> E.g., Jonathan Lett, “The Divine Identity of Jesus as the Reason for Israel’s Unbelief in John 12:36–43,” *JBL* 135 (2016): 159–73.

<sup>86</sup> Brendsel, *Isaiah Saw*, 105.

<sup>87</sup> Christensen, “Lamblike Servant,” 40–73.

<sup>88</sup> See esp. Matthew R. Akers, “The Soteriological Development of the ‘Arm of the Lord’ Motif,” *JESOT* 3.1 (2014): 41–45.

<sup>89</sup> Brendsel, *Isaiah Saw*, 115; Lett, “Divine Identity,” 172–73.

to be *seen* and *believed*.<sup>90</sup> In 12:37, John describes unbelief as not seeing who Jesus was when his signs were done before their very eyes (cf. 2:11). As we saw in the bookends, John writes as one who *has seen* and *believed*, and he aims that we too would look upon Jesus lifted up, the outstretched Arm of Yahweh, and—seeing this salvation God has wrought—have eternal life. Therefore, ironically, and gloriously, the divinely appointed blindness of the Jewish leaders in particular, which climaxes in the death of Jesus the lamblike Servant, is appointed *to bring about its own remedy* for when Jesus is lifted up they will know his identity (8:24, 28), look upon the pierced one (19:37 cf. 6:40), and—if anyone would look in belief—live (3:14–17).

Regarding the use of Isaiah 6:10, John is making the point that the inability to *believe* (οὐκ ἠδύναντο πιστεύειν, 12:39) comes from an inability to *perceive* (12:40). The divine blinding should not be taken retributively, “as a means of punishing sin,” because John cites it as the reason (διὰ τοῦτο → ὅτι, 12:39) for the sin in question, unbelief (12:37, 39).<sup>91</sup> John emphasizes spiritual perception in 12:40 by fronting the ocular effects of fallen humanity’s inward condition. Our inward condition is initially like the congenital blindness described in John 9:1–3,<sup>92</sup> not as a result of individual sin but of the fall. However, as we have seen already, this fallen condition *loves* the darkness (3:19–20) and *naturally does* evil deeds (πονηρὰ τὰ ἔργα; cf. 8:34, 44). Thus, humanity sins by nature and choice. Without divine enablement—e.g., born ἄνωθεν (3:3; cf. 1:12–13), drawn by the Father (6:44), taught of God (6:45)—without this, spiritual congenital blindness *persists* (οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν, 3:3; cf. 9:39–41);<sup>93</sup> humanity will *remain* in darkness (12:46) and sure to die in their sins (8:24). The Jewish leaders were, therefore, *kept in the dark* to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 53, and the deeper reason they were kept in the dark through Jesus’s hour is that God actively withheld from them the divine enablement necessary for believing sight as prophesied in Isaiah 6:10.<sup>94</sup> Consequently, in John 12, Jesus’s fruitful death is appointed by God to fulfill Scripture and saves from the spiritual darkness of unbelief.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued that John characterizes Jesus as the substitutionary sacrifice of the new exodus, and that substitutionary atonement is *essential* to the *inner mechanism* of Jesus’s death in the

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<sup>90</sup> Day, Jesus, the Isaianic Servant, 96–97.

<sup>91</sup> Blaylock contends, “For DRA [divine reprobating activity] to be retributive, a biblical author must present God as having undertaken reprobating action *as a means of punishing sin*” (386 n. 42, emphasis added). He correctly argues that John does not appear to cite Isa 6:10 to describe the punishment of sin (Richard Monserrat Blaylock, “Vessels of Wrath: A Biblical-Theological Study of Divine Reprobating Activity” [PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2021], 386–87); see also Donald E. Hartley, “Destined to Disobey? Isaiah 6:10 in John 12:37–41,” *CTJ* 44 (2009): 272–73, 279–84.

<sup>92</sup> Hartley, “Destined to Disobey?,” 279–81.

<sup>93</sup> Hartley, “Destined to Disobey?,” 278.

<sup>94</sup> With Hartley and against Blaylock (Hartley, “Destined to Disobey?,” 279; Blaylock, “Vessels of Wrath,” 388), withholding of divine enablement better describes what John would mean in chapter 12 in light of the multiplicity of ways he has already described this reality in the preceding chapters of his gospel (Blaylock agrees [pp. 388–98] this interpretation is the case in John 6, for example). It is not so much that they had spiritual sight and were blinded (τετύφλωκεν, in the perfect, accents their ongoing state of blindness as the result of God’s past activity), as they were blind and—even though the Light walked among them—they were not given eyes to see it. For the idea that this is the climactic fulfillment of Isa 6:10, see Brendsel, *Isaiah Saw*, 89.

Gospel of John. I advanced my case for this by analyzing the texts that John employs (1) in the bookends of the Gospel and (2) in the three ὑψωσις-passages.

First, we considered John 1 and 19, the testimonial bookends of Jesus's life in the Gospel. Both passages concern Jesus's identity and actions, hinge around testimony, and relate to one another. They are related in terms of adumbration and fulfillment—what the former *predicts* the latter *depicts*. In both, Jesus is characterized with networks of OT passages brimming with themes of suffering, substitution, dealing with sin, removing wrath, and messianic expectation. Those passages include Isaiah 53, Exodus 12, Genesis 22, Isaiah 11/42, Zechariah 12, and John 10 (which itself picked up on Ezek 34). The most common theme in these passages is lamblike vicarious substitution, and if my interpretation is accurate, then Isaiah 53 plays a strategically prominent role among those texts.

Second, warranted by the use of the OT in the bookends, we fixed our gaze on the three ὑψωσις-passages in 3:14–21, 8:21–30, and 12:21–43. In this analysis, I pressed beyond the important observation that “lifted up” alludes to the Servant of Isaiah 52:13, and I argued that each passage uses the OT regarding the *human situation* for which Jesus being lifted up in death is the *only solution*. In John 3, we saw that Jesus's death saves from wrath merited by humanity's default love for darkness. The human condition was described in terms of Numbers 21, where a sinful, controlling preference for Egypt merited divine wrath from which the only deliverance was trusting in what the Lord provided. The same is true in John 3, where the Lord's provision of his uplifted Son is the only way to have eternal life.

In John 8, we saw that Jesus's death is the exclusive way for believers to be saved from capital punishment merited by sinning. I proposed that the phrase “you shall surely die in your sin[s]” (8:21, 24) alludes to Genesis 2:17, the archetypal warning against sin. Thus, Jesus's death saves from the *curse* God warned Adam and Eve about from the beginning—the *curse* that the father of lies (John 8:44) said would not happen (Gen 3:4; cf. Rev 12:9)—*death*, not simply a physical ending of life but an eternal (and spiritual) separation and exile from God's benevolent presence (John 8:52; cf. 3:36). This description of the human condition aligns well with what we saw in John 3, and once again, utilizes the OT to deepen our understanding of humanity's dire condition for which Jesus's death is the only solution.

Finally, in John 12, we saw that Jesus's fruitful death is appointed by God to fulfill Scripture and saves from the spiritual darkness of unbelief. Here, John accents the necessity of Jesus's death again, by making it clear that his Messianic ministry would bear fruit only if Jesus was lifted up in death (12:32–34; cf. 18:32). Then, John cites two Isaianic passages to explain (1) the divine purpose and (2) the deeper reason that Jesus was received with such unbelief, particularly by the Jewish leaders. These citations validate my previous contentions that (1) Isaiah 53 plays a strategically prominent role in John's understanding of Jesus's death,<sup>95</sup> and (2) God actively withheld divine enablement to believe, so that Jesus would be lifted up (cf. Rom 9:17).

Therefore, *because* Jesus's death is necessary to save from divine wrath that comes against unbelieving disobedience and *because* John characterizes that death as the substitutionary death of the lamblike Servant—for those reasons, we are warranted to conclude that substitutionary atonement is *essential* to the *inner mechanism* of Jesus's death in the Gospel of John. As Michael Horton writes, “Vicarious substitution is not the whole story, but there is no story apart from it.”<sup>96</sup>

<sup>95</sup> One even wonders whether his prolific use of πιστεύω was influenced by Isa 53:1 (cited in 12:38), calling his audience to believe his report about how Jesus, the Arm of Yahweh, was lifted up that we might have eternal life.

<sup>96</sup> Horton, *Justification*, 2:235, see further 195–255; Jeremy R. Treat, *The Crucified King: Atonement and Kingdom in Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 174–226.

# The Greco-Roman Background to “Fighting the Good Fight” in the Pastoral Epistles and the Spiritual Life of the Christian

— G. K. Beale —

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**Abstract:** What does Paul mean by the expression “fight the fight” in 1 Timothy 1:18 (NASB)? The Greek verb *στρατεύω* with the noun *στρατεία* can be also rendered “battle the battle,” or more generally “perform military service” or “serve in a military campaign.” This expression occurs often in Greco-Roman literature as a patriotic warfare idiom for good character revealed by persevering through warfare or military campaigns. It also occurs in legal contexts to affirm someone’s innocence and good reputation before the court. This idiom is applied to Timothy to demonstrate his good Christian character and reputation over against the false teachers’ bad character. Paul similarly exhorts Timothy to “struggle the struggle” (*ἀγωνίζου τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα*) in 1 Tim 6:12, which most commentators recognize to be synonymous with “fight the good fight” in 1:18 (cf. 2 Tim 4:7).

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The expression “fight the good fight” is often used in Christian circles and even in western culture in general. Indeed, while perusing “Amazon” I found at least 31 books with the title “The Good Fight” and at least 10 books with the fuller title “Fighting the Good Fight,” some of which were overtly Christian in nature but many that were not. The origin of the phrase is 1 Timothy 1:18 (and perhaps in 1 Tim 6:12 and 2 Tim 4:7). In 1 Timothy 1:18 and 6:12, Timothy is exhorted to “fight the good fight;” in 2 Timothy 4:7 Paul says he himself “has fought the good fight.”

I am in the process of writing a commentary on 1 Timothy (for the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series). When I came to 1 Timothy 1:18, I noticed that the phrase “fight the good fight” was composed of a verb (*στρατεύω*) and a noun (*στρατεία*), which was a cognate word with the verb.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A “cognate” word means that it is a word that has the same linguistic derivation as another word. We could say figuratively that a “cognate” word is a “blood relative” of another word, usually composed of the same essential

The repeated use of the noun “fight” after the verb “to fight” in this phrase is a figure of speech, whereby there “is a repetition of the same basic word with the same sense” in order to underscore the meaning of the redundant wording.<sup>2</sup> The redundant wording had a ring to it, so I decided to see if this repeated wording was used elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world, since it did not appear anywhere else in the New Testament or the Greek Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> What I found, after many hours of research, surprised me and encouraged my faith very much. I hope what you are about to read will not only surprise you but also encourage your faith in the midst of the trials of this world.

## 1. The Classical and Hellenistic Background of Στρατεύω + Στρατεία

To my amazement, when I looked at *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, the standard online concordance to the literature of the ancient Greek world, I found that this redundant wording was frequently used from the 5th century BC up to the third century AD onwards.

### 1.1. A Patriotic Warfare Idiom Underscoring a Reputation of Good Character

I began to study the meaning of the redundant expression in all their various contexts. In these contexts, the expression can be translated as “battle the battle” or “serve as a soldier in warfare,” or more generally “perform military service” or “serve in a military campaign.” The wording typically is a patriotic warfare idiom<sup>4</sup> for good character revealed by persevering through, not merely one battle, but military campaigns extending over a period of time. We need further to see how this idiom is used in the ancient Greek world before we can understand how this idiom is applied to Timothy and Paul, and to Christians in general.

For example, in the Classical work of Hyperides, Funeral Speech 23, people who have “fought [the] fight” (στρατεία ... τῶν στρατευομένων) in past battles to provide liberty for their country (Greece) are to receive “praise.” In Athens, one Herakleides Salaminos of Charikleidos is said to have “loved honor for the benefit of the Athenian people,” and due to this he received “a gold crown” and became a “patron and benefactor of Athens,” and, as a result, he and his descendants had the right “to wage wars [στρατεύεσθαι αὐτοὺς τὰς στρατείας] and pay property taxes with the Athenians.” These and “other praiseworthy things” about him were to be “engraved” in a “decreed writing by the Athenian presidencies.” Thus, here Herakleides’s “waging of wars” was among honorable and praiseworthy activities for which he was

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consonants (e.g., “she *drank* a *drink* of water,” “drink” is a cognate noun following the related verb and which is called a “cognate object.”).

<sup>2</sup> E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 266; cf. also 275 and 279. The redundant use of the verb plus noun in both the battle and struggle idioms is a figure of speech known as a “polyptoton,” whereby there “is a repetition of the same word in the same sense but not the same form” (in the two cases the verb is followed by a cognate noun) in order emphatically to underscore the meaning of the redundant wording. I am thankful to my colleague, Peter Lillback, for this reference to Bullinger.

<sup>3</sup> This essay is based on a much longer article titled “The Background to ‘Fight the Good Fight’ in 1 Timothy 1:18, 6:12, and 2 Timothy 4:7,” *ZNW* 113 (2022): 202–30. A much shorter summary of this essay in *ZNW* is published as “What Does Paul Mean by ‘Fighting the Good Fight’?,” *Tabletalk*, 6 September 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/3kksnzj9>.

<sup>4</sup> An idiom is a peculiarity of wording known from common usage to have a meaning not deducible from those of the separate words (cf. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*).

honored by having this privilege of “waging war” being written on a stone stele.<sup>5</sup> A military commander named Astyphilus “fought first at Corinth, then in Thessaly and again throughout the Theban war, and wherever else he heard of an army being collected, he went abroad holding a command.” Afterward, “he was fighting in other war campaigns [στρατεία + στρατεύω] and was well aware that he was going to run risks on all of them.” Then, “he was about to set out on his last expedition, going out as a volunteer with every prospect of returning safe and sound from this campaign,” when he finally died in battle at Mytilene (Isaeus 9.15, *On the Estate of Astyphilus*). His patriotism is expressed both through his amazing perseverance in fighting for his country until death and his religious and civic commitments (for these commitments, see Isaeus 9.13, 21, and 30).

In the Roman military system, in times of danger from foreign powers, citizens who enlisted in the army were “obligated to serve as soldiers in warfare service [στρατεύω + στρατεία] for twenty years,” though only ten years were required for being “eligible for any political office” (Polybius, *Histories* 6.19). The point here was that an extended period of military service was a requirement for political office, since it demonstrated a person’s honorable character as a loyal citizen, willing to persevere in service in order to protect the home country.

Similarly, the Roman commander Pompey affirmed that he had received “the greatest honor” as a result of “the battle campaigns he had fought” (στρατεία + στρατεύω; Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 36.25). On another occasion, while dying, a Jewish martyr suffering execution from the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes IV, encourages his brothers to persevere in their faith and to be “of good courage” and to “fight the sacred and noble fight for godliness” [ἱερὰν καὶ εὐγενῆ στρατείαν στρατεύσασθε περὶ τῆς εὐσεβείας; 4 Macc 9:24]. Likewise, Marcus Cato, a Roman commander, sought “high repute in battles and campaigns against the enemy,” having “fought [his] first campaign [τὴν πρώτην στρατεύσασθαι στρατείαν] when he was seventeen years old.” Such battle renown added to “the weight and dignity of his character” (Plutarch, *Marcus Cato* 1).<sup>6</sup> The emperor Tiberius “waged war with distinction [στρατείας ἐπιφανῶς στρατευσάμενον], served in the second place as the high priest of Asia, and presided over the games and acquired the office of imperial commissioner of the most distinguished cities” of Asia (IG 12.3.1119; 1st cent. AD).<sup>7</sup> Thus, Tiberius’s battle reputation is inextricably linked to religious and political positions, the epitome of the loyal citizen.

In a Greek papyrus (2nd cent. AD), a father writes a letter to his son who was “persuaded ... not [to] enlist to fight [ἐστρατεύσω] at [a city called] Klassan.” The father “grieved” over what appeared to be his son’s lack of patriotism. The father said, “from now on, take care not to be so persuaded ... not [to] enlist

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<sup>5</sup> See IG II2 360, IG II3,1 367 (Cynthia J. Schwenk, *Athens in the Age of Alexander: The Dated Laws and Decrees of the Lykourgan Era* 338–322 B.C. [Chicago: Ares, 1985], 68:10–25). All evidence from IG, FD, and EKM 1. Beroia is cited according to the online edition of Greek Inscriptions by the Packard Humanities Institute (<https://inscriptions.packhum.org/>). See also Aristotle, *Politics* 1324b and Paradoxographus Vaticanus, *Admiranda* 56:1–3, which refers to the same Carthaginian custom as the Aristotle reference with the very same wording (στρατεύσονται στρατείας), perhaps in allusion to the Aristotle reference.

<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Aeschines is said to have “fought the first battle campaign” (ἐστρατεύσατο ... πρώτην στρατείαν) of his career, which is cited in a context where he is repeatedly attributed honor. E.g., apparently, during that first campaign, he was part of a military expedition in which “he fought valorously;” at another battle “he fought ... worthy of his noble birth.” At the end of his life, he received “an honorable burial” (Apollonius, *Life of Aeschines* 35–65).

<sup>7</sup> For other uses of the idiom in a Roman context, see Plutarch, *Caius Marcius Coriolanus* 3, Plutarch, *Caius Marius* 3, and Plutarch, *Comparison of Agesilaus and Pompey* 4.3.

to fight, or you will no longer be my son. You know you have every advantage over your brothers, and all the authority. Therefore, you will do well to fight [σπρατεύω] the good fight [σπρατεία].... Therefore, do not transgress my instructions and you will have an inheritance.”<sup>8</sup> The son’s willingness to “fight the good fight” will certainly enhance his reputation before his father (enough to receive the father’s inheritance) and likely in the eyes of others. “Good fight” refers here to a war in which it is “honorable” to participate in fighting for one’s country (or city) because fighting for one’s country (or city) and overcoming the enemy is “good.” Once again, the idiom demonstrates a person’s good character as a loyal citizen to his king and kingdom.

“Fight the good fight” in 1 Timothy 1:18 refers to the same thing as in the papyrus letter (with the identical three words in Greek), though the warfare is spiritual and is conducted against false teaching opponents (e.g., see 1 Tim 1:3–6, 18–20; 6:20–21; 2 Tim 3:7–14). Also, like the papyrus letter, Paul considers Timothy and Titus each to be a “true child,” though a child in “the faith” (1 Tim 1:2; Titus 1:4). In addition, both also are promised an inheritance, if they persevere. This is clearest in 1 and 2 Timothy. In 2 Timothy 4:8, after saying “I have fought the good fight,” Paul says “in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord ... will award to me on that day.” Like Paul in 2 Timothy 4:7–8, if Timothy perseveres in “fighting the good fight” (1 Tim 1:18; 6:12),<sup>9</sup> he will finally receive an inheritance, i.e., he will “receive [attain to] the eternal life to which he was called.” As with Paul’s command to Timothy to “fight” in 1 Timothy 1:18, so likewise the father’s use of “fight” has an imperatival sense because of the immediate context. The papyrus letter gives a striking parallel to the idiom of “fighting the good fight” in the Pastoral Epistles.

The idiom of “fight the fight” occurs 40 times (including the father’s letter to his son) in the Greek world as a patriotic warfare idiom for one who perseveres in loyalty to king and country by fighting war campaigns to preserve the welfare of the kingdom. As a result, a person earns a reputation as a good and honorable citizen. Paul applies the idiom to fighting for God’s kingdom instead of an earthly kingdom. He is referring to a “fight” against false teaching to maintain and foster “godliness.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, this is a “good” fight or extended “war campaign” through which Timothy is to persevere, which will demonstrate his good Christian character and reputation over against the false teachers’ bad character. “Good” is further defined in 2 Timothy 2:3–4, where Paul exhorts Timothy to be “a good soldier” and then defines part of what such a “good soldier” is: “no soldier while being engaged in a war campaign entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier.” Thus, the warfare is also “good” because the divine Commander who enlisted the Christian soldier to fight would not enlist anyone if the warfare was not a “good” one in which to engage. Ultimate loyalty in this world is to be given to the divine king and not to earthly authorities (though there is a place for submitting to earthly authorities [Rom 13]).

Paul in 1 Timothy 1:18 gives Timothy a “command” to uphold true doctrine for the purpose that he might “fight the good fight.” The “command” picks up the earlier use of “command” in 1:3 and 1:5 (respectively the verb παραγγέλλω and noun παραγγελία), which reenforces that this is a “command” to fight for truth against false teachers. It is likely not coincidental that the main point of the preceding

<sup>8</sup> This papyrus letter can be found at the following online source: *SB*, Vol. 4, Document 7354, lines 2–14, Duke Data Bank of Documentary Papyri (<https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/papyrus/>).

<sup>9</sup> Though as we will see the Greek in 1 Tim 6:12 and 2 Tim 4:7 is different from 1 Tim 1:18 yet synonymous.

<sup>10</sup> See the use of εὐσεβεία (“godliness”) 10x in the Pastoral Epistles, 8 of which are in 1 Timothy (6 of which are explicitly juxtaposed to false teaching; so likewise 2 Tim 3:5).



paragraph (1:12–17) ends with praise of God as “King” and that the warfare idiom occurs directly afterward in v. 18. As the main point of vv. 12–17, God as “king” is surely still in view as Paul “commands” Timothy in v. 18, so that the “command” can be viewed implicitly to have its origin with the “King,” for whom Timothy is to fight.

The only other place in the Pastoral Epistles where “king” is used (excepting 1 Tim 2:2, where reference is to human kings) is 1 Timothy 6:15, where the reference is to God and the doxology is extended as in 1:17 and has several verbal parallels with 1:17 (e. g., “the only” God, “King,” “invisible,” “honor ... forever. Amen”). In addition, 6:15 forms a nice epistolary bookend with 1:17, since “fight the good fight” in 6:12 also occurs in close connection to praise of God as “King.” Furthermore, there is also the parallel of Paul giving another “command” to Timothy (6:13), as in 1:18a (see also “the command” in 6:14). In fact, as the climaxing part of the bookend in 6:15, the kingship of God is emphasized with synonyms (as in 1:17): “the only ruler, the king of kings and Lord of lords.” It is also clear that Timothy and Paul are citizens of a “kingdom” in which they will participate consummately at Christ’s final coming (2 Tim 4:1, 18, though this kingdom is likely inaugurated). God as “King” in 6:15 is closely linked to the imperatival form of the battle idiom in 6:12 (and to the imperative there to “receive eternal life”), since “I command you” in 6:13 and “keep the command” in 6:14 includes the imperatival idiom in its purview. And, as we have seen, God as “King” in 1:17 is in the immediate purview of the “soldier in warfare” idiom of 1:18. These links between 1:17–19 and 6:12–15 show that Timothy’s “fighting the good fight” against false teachers is for the King and the welfare and protection of the kingdom. And, since they form bookends for 1 Timothy, this theme should be seen as a major theme of the book.

The redundant word combination of “fight” + “fight” (στρατεύω + στρατεία) is literally in Greek rendered as “struggle” + “struggle” (ἀγωνίζομαι + ἀγών) in 1 Timothy 6:12 and 2 Timothy 4:7, which is recognized by commentators as a synonymous word development of the phrase in 1 Timothy 1:18. In the Greek world, this phrase also is a well-worn idiom used in the same way as “fight the fight,” most likely highlighting the difficulty of the fight. This is why the expression “struggle the struggle” is synonymous with the expression in 1 Timothy 1:18, even with the added adjective “good,” as many translations agree. However, there is not space to discuss and analyze the “struggle” phrases the way we have the “fight” expressions, but I will summarize them toward the end of the essay.

## 1.2. A Patriotic Warfare Idiom Endorsing a Reputation of Good Character in a Legal Court

The patriotic warfare idiom occurs often in a legal context to affirm the character and good reputation qualifying a person to be an officer of the court or endorsing a person’s character before the court in a legal dispute, showing him to be worthy to be considered of an innocent verdict (so 22 times). This occurs in Classical and Hellenistic Greek often in a context where the accusations are not true. Nine of the seventeen legal uses actually have reference to “witnesses” in the context (either μάρτυς or the verb form or other cognate forms),<sup>11</sup> as we will also see is the case with Paul’s usage.

For instance, in a court case an adopted son claims entitlement to his deceased father’s contested estate against those making wrongful claims. He adduces in support of his good character, in contrast

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<sup>11</sup> We will note when the μάρτυς (“witness”) word group is used in these references, and when an asterisk (\*) follows these references it means people of bad character are in opposition to people of good character.

to the bad character of his legal adversaries,<sup>12</sup> the fact that he had been a “useful citizen” and that, “I have served as a soldier in warfare on behalf of the city” (ἐστράτευμαι τὰς στρατείας τῇ πόλει; Isaeus 7.41, *On the Estate of Apollodorus* [note μάρτυς in 32–33, 36–37]). In a different court case, before deciding a person’s innocence, the following general maxim is stated: “when choosing a man for public office they used to ask what his personal character was, whether he treated his parents well, whether he had fought a war campaign on behalf of [his] the city [εἰ τὰς στρατείας ὑπὲρ τῆς πόλεως ἐστράτευται], whether he had an ancestral cult or paid taxes.” The maxim is applied to a defendant by the name of Aristogiton and it is found that he “could not claim [even] one of these qualifications for himself” (my brackets). He thus was viewed to be a person of poor character and reputation, and on this basis, an appeal is made to find him guilty in court of his accused crime (Dinarchus, *Against Aristogiton* 17;\* though “witness” is not found in context). Those who were to campaign to be candidates for a political office were to be put through a kind of “scrutiny” about whether their character was good or bad, since, if elected, they would have to have their character examined by a law-court to show their qualification for an office. Among the preliminary qualifications to be able to campaign for a political office (such as good treatment of parents, not squandering one’s inheritance) was that the person should not have “failed to perform the military service [τὰς στρατείας ... μὴ ἐστρατευμένος] demanded of him” (Aeschines, *Against Timarchus* 1.29;\* note μαρτυρέω in 1.26).<sup>13</sup> A Roman, Marcius, accused in a legal court of tyranny, recounted “how many campaigns he had fought [ὅσας ἐστρατευμένος ... στρατείας] which were on behalf of the commonwealth” (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 7.62.1; the plural of μάρτυς, “witness,” is found in the directly following context). Marcius adduced his military service as evidence of his good character and faithfulness to his commonwealth, which was an indicator of his innocence.<sup>14</sup>

Not only have commentators apparently not recognized στρατεύω + στρατεία to be a patriotic warfare idiom<sup>15</sup> as background to 1 Timothy 1:18, but they also have not recognized its use in legal contexts as this might relate to 1:18. The first hint that Paul uses this wording not only as a patriotic idiom of warfare in 1:18 but also in a legal context are the words παρατίθημι and παράγγελμα in 1:18a, which both elsewhere have legal associations.<sup>16</sup> The second hint that this idiom of warfare in 1 Timothy 1:18 is to be placed in a legal context is that the epistle concludes with an allusion back to it in 6:12,

<sup>12</sup> These adversaries had a history of bad dealings with other estates and were in an antagonistic and unreconciled relationship with the original deceased owner of the estate who had passed it on to the rightful claimant in this case.

<sup>13</sup> For more examples of this idiom of demonstration of good character in a legal context, see Beale, “Background to ‘Fight the Good Fight,’” 212–13 nn. 23–24.

<sup>14</sup> For other examples of the idiom in a Greek trial to demonstrate good character, see Isaeus 4.29, *On the Estate of Nicostratus* (note μαρτυρία in 31 and μάρτυς in 26); Lysias, *Against Theomnestus* 1.25 (note μαρτυρέω twice in 30 and ψευδομαρτύριος in 25), and Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters* 5.215d.

<sup>15</sup> Some cite the repetition of στρατεύω + στρατεία in a few sources, but no comment is made on these combinations by the commentators (see a list of commentators in Beale, “Background to ‘Fight the Good Fight,’” 213–14 n. 25).

<sup>16</sup> For the notion of “entrustment” (see παρατίθημι in 1 Tim 1:18a) having a legal context, see Christian Maurer, “παρατίθημι κτλ,” *TDNT* 8:162–64 (here 162), who says “the trustworthiness of the trustee was thus most important.” See likewise with respect to παραθήκη, Ceslas Spicq, “S. Paul et la loi des despôts,” *RB* 40 (1931): 481–502; Spicq, “παραθήκη,” *TLNT* 3:26–27; Schmitz, “παραγγέλλω, παραγγελία,” *TDNT* 5:763.

which is in a legal context!<sup>17</sup> The phrase in 6:12 reads ἀγωνίζου τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα τῆς πίστεως (better than “fight the good fight of faith” is “struggle the good struggle of faith”);<sup>18</sup> 6:12 continues, “grasp the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in front of many witnesses [ἐνώπιον πολλῶν μαρτύρων].” The ἀγωνίζομαι + ἀγών expression is a development of στρατεύω + στρατεία in 1:18, as is especially apparent from the similar redundant wording together with the use of τὸν καλόν in the middle of that syntax. Timothy’s “good confession” is then compared to that of Christ’s: “Christ Jesus, who witnessed [μαρτυρήσαντος] the good confession before Pontius Pilate” (6:13), which was done in an explicit legal context and in the face of false accusations to Pilate by the Jews (cf. Matt 27:13; Mark 15:4). The legal context associated with “witnesses” in 6:12 is expressed earlier in 5:19, where the word is used with reference to a church court: “do not receive an accusation against an elder unless it comes on the basis of two or three witnesses [μαρτύρων]” (the number of witnesses needed to convict someone of a crime in the OT; indeed, this is an allusion to Deut 19:15: “on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed;” almost identically, see Deut 17:6). Likewise, the legal context of this idiom is reiterated in 2 Tim 4:7, where Paul says “I have fought the good fight” (again straightforwardly, “I have struggled the good struggle” [τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα ἡγώνισμαι]), which is directly followed in v. 8 by “in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award me on that day”). 2 Timothy 4:7, like 1 Timothy 6:12, would seem also to be a development of 1 Timothy 1:18 for the same syntactical reasons.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, Paul also uses this patriotic warfare idiom in a legal context, which is to demonstrate and acquit Timothy’s character and reputation over and against that of the false teachers, who have made false accusations against the character and teaching of Christian leaders, likely including Timothy (on which see 1 Tim 6:4; 2 Tim 3:3; Titus 2:8;<sup>20</sup> the same happened to Paul [2 Tim 4:14–15, both with respect to his character and teaching]). The accusatory nature of the false teachers is also suggested by

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 410–11; and Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, ECC 54 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 529 (“perhaps the latter phrases [of 1 Tim 6:12] were consciously modelled on the former [1 Tim 1:18]” (my brackets)).

<sup>18</sup> The link of this phrase in 1:18 to 6:12 is further confirmed, as we saw earlier, by observing that the phrase is closely related to a doxology in 6:15–16 that is very similar to the doxology in 1:17, which directly precedes 1:18. Furthermore, “struggle the struggle” in 6:12 is directly followed by παραγγέλλω (“I command”) in 6:13, quite similar to the noun form παραγγελία at the beginning of 1:18, which itself picks up on the earlier mention of the same verb and noun respectively in 1:3 and 1:5.

<sup>19</sup> See Beale, “Background to ‘Fight the Good Fight,’” 215 n. 30, for additional arguments that 1 Tim 6:12 and 2 Tim 4:7 are developments of 1 Tim 1:18, as well as for discussion of the order in which the pastoral epistles were written. If 2 Timothy preceded 1 Timothy, then the way I have explained the development of these phrases would be reversed. That 1 Tim 6:12 is a clear development of 1:18 would, on the surface, appear to point to the same phrase in 2 Tim 4:7 also being a development of 1 Tim 1:18. Whichever way the direction of development is, both epistles are mutually interpretive.

<sup>20</sup> All three of these references focus more on “slandering” or “defaming” the character of Christians, likely including Timothy. See βλασφημία in 1 Tim 6:4; note in 2 Tim 3:3 the use of διάβολος, which means “one who engages in slander” (BDAG 226; so likewise Titus 2:3). See Titus 2:8: “young men [are] to be [...] sound in speech which is beyond reproach, in order that the opponent may be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us,” which is applicable to Timothy, since some likely “were despising his youthfulness” (cf. 1 Tim 4:12). 1 Tim 4:2 also refers to the false teachers who “through the hypocrisy of men ... teach falsely and have their own consciences seared as with a hot iron” (Weymouth New Testament). “Liars” probably includes false ac-

2 Tim 3:8–9, where the false teachers are compared to “Jannes and Jambres” who “opposed Moses;” like these Egyptian magicians, the false teachers will “oppose the truth,” which may include false accusations against Timothy, probably with respect not only to his teaching but also to his character. If Timothy perseveres in “fighting the good fight” by maintaining “faith and a good conscience” in the face of false teaching, it will reveal his character and confirm the truth of his message in the church’s courtroom (cf. 1 Tim 5:19) and, ultimately, in God’s courtroom and vindicate him at the eschatological judgment, where he will be shown to have been in the right and his false teaching opponents in the wrong.

Similarly, in 2 Timothy 2:2–3, Paul exhorts Timothy to “suffer hardship with me as a good soldier [καλὸς στρατιώτης]; no soldier in active service [στρατεύόμενος] entangles himself in the affairs of daily life.” Significantly, these verses are directly preceded by Paul telling Timothy that Timothy has heard Paul’s teachings “in the presence of many witnesses” (v. 2), which again reflects a legal atmosphere. This is especially notable, since 2 Tim 2:2–3 also has a similar redundant expression of fighting (καλὸς στρατιώτης ... στρατεύόμενος, even together with the word καλός) as does 1 Timothy 1:18. This parallel with 2 Timothy 2:2–3 also shows that the expression of fighting in 1 Timothy 1:18 entails suffering or hardship, which must allude to some degree to participating in warfare. Since a “good soldier” in 2 Timothy 2:2 is one who faithfully performs his duty and obeys his commanding officer, the “good fight” must refer to a warfare in which it is worthy of one performing his duty. Similarly, later Paul elaborates on στρατεύω + στρατεία (though with different wording, τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα ἡγωνίσμαί) by explaining it as “finishing the race” and “keeping the faith,” both of which are worthy pursuits and which highlight persevering in faithfully carrying out the task before him. He will be considered worthy to receive a “crown” for enduring in his duty (2 Tim 4:7–8). Both in 2 Timothy 2:3–5 and 4:7–8 Paul combines the “athletic” metaphor with that of “soldiering in warfare” to underscore the nuance of the necessity of perseverance through suffering, training, and the necessity of obeying rules, all of which apply to the picture in 1 Timothy 1:18. Furthermore, in these latter two references in 1 Timothy 6:12 and 2 Timothy 4:7, the phrase is strictly not στρατεύω + στρατεία but ἀγωνίζομαι + ἀγών (as noted above, something like “struggle the good struggle”), which underscores the personal, persevering nature of the fight.

## 2. The Classical and Hellenistic Background of Ἀγωνίζομαι + Ἀγών

Just as was the case with στρατεύω + στρατεία, it is beyond coincidence that this redundant expression ἀγωνίζομαι + ἀγών is an idiom especially for military battles and legal conflicts, which commentators also appear not to have recognized.<sup>21</sup>

### 2.1. A Patriotic Warfare Idiom Using ἀγωνίζομαι + ἀγών Underscoring a Good Reputation (Usually of Courage in Battle)

The use of the idiom for participating in military warfare that enhances one’s reputation is abundant, which is in an implicit context of patriotism. Demosthenes, in defending himself from accusations in a court, appeals to the “men of Athens” and commends them for “the battle of Greece’s freedom which you fought” (ἀγῶνα, ὃν ὑμεῖς ἡγωνίσασθε; *Letters* 2.6). This expresses a reputation for courage in battle.

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cusations about Christians. The verb βλασφημέω refers in 1 Tim 1:20, 1 Tim 2:1, and Titus 2:5 to slandering or defaming Christian truth (see BDAG 178).

<sup>21</sup> On which see further below. LSJ, 18–19, cites “battle action,” “action at law, trial,” and “speech delivered in court or before an assembly or ruler” as three major categories of usage of the word ἀγών.

Regarding a battle against the Athenians and their Lacedaemonian allies, “they fought many and good battles along with one another” (πολλοὺς καὶ καλοὺς ἀγῶνας ἡγωνίσαντο μετ’ ἀλλήλων).<sup>22</sup> In another case, in a battle between the Hernicans and the Romans, “there was at length a good fight which both armies fought bravely [ἔνθα δὲ καλὸς ἀγὼν ἦν ἐκθύμῳς ἀμφοτέρων ἀγωνιζομένων]” (Dionysius of Halicarnasus, *The Roman Antiquities* 8.65.2). After the Romans had defeated the Volscians, one of the two Roman generals leading the battle victory “demanded the [highest honor of the ceremonial] ‘triumph’ [θρίαμβος] usually granted by the senate to generals who had fought a brilliant battle [ἀγῶνα λαμπρὸν ἀγωνισαμένοις],” but he was denied that honor because of a particular conflict with the other Roman general (Dionysius of Halicarnasus, *The Roman Antiquities* 6.30.2, my brackets). Likewise, Plutarch notes that “Tuscany,” an enemy of Rome, “had waged many good contests for glory [πολλοὺς καὶ καλοὺς ἀγῶνας ἡγωνίσαστο περὶ δόξης] and power in her wars with the Romans” (Plutarch, *Camillus* 2.4). Also, Plutarch refers to the last battle in the career of Camillus, a Roman commander: “This last of military struggles was struggled by Camillus” (στρατιωτικῶν ἀγῶνων οὗτος ἡγωνίσθη τῷ Καμίλλῳ τελευταῖος; Plutarch, *Camillus* 42.1). This last battle was among other accomplishments by Camillus that led to his good reputation among the Romans at the time of his death (see Plutarch, *Camillus* 43). Plutarch in addition speaks “of the struggles of Pelopidas, which many he struggled [τῶν Πελοπίδου ... ἀγῶνων ... οὓς πολλοὺς ἀγωνισάμενος] and did successfully,” and afterward “living most of his life in fame and honour” (Plutarch, *Pelopidas* 34.5). Plutarch says of Titus, “From his earliest years, he was trained in the arts of soldiery [στρατιωτικός] since at that time Rome was fighting many great battles [πολλοὺς τότε καὶ μεγάλους τῆς Ῥώμης ἀγωνιζομένης ἀγῶνας], and her young men directly from the beginning [of their youth] were taught by serving as soldiers [στρατεύω] to command soldiers [στρατηγέω]” (Plutarch, *Titus Flamininus* 1.3). Then Plutarch says “he won a good name ... for his conduct in the field [τὴν στρατείαν].” In yet another similar citation, Plutarch refers to Caesar as one “who was waging contests in behalf of the Roman supremacy” (ἀγωνιζομένου τοσοῦτους ἀγῶνας ὑπὲρ τῆς ἡγεμονίας), which resulted in his “glory” and his “enjoying his honours undisturbed” (Plutarch, *Pompey* 56.1). Still in another description of a battle, a certain Lydiades, a commander of the Achaeans, “fell, after having fought brilliantly and a most good<sup>23</sup> fight [ἔπεσε λαμπρῶς ἀγωνισάμενος τὸν κάλλιστον τῶν ἀγῶνων] at the gates of his native city” (Plutarch, *Aratus* 37.2–3).<sup>24</sup> The spirit of patriotism and courage is especially seen in Plutarch, *Alexander* 40.2; see also Plutarch, *Antony* 64.1: “we are told, that an infantry centurion, a man who had fought many battles for Antony [παμπόλλους ἡγωνισμένον ἀγῶνας Ἀντωνίῳ] and was covered with scars, burst into laments as Antony was passing by, and said: ‘Imperator, why dost thou distrust these wounds and this sword and put thy hopes in miserable logs of wood [ships]? ... but give us land, on which we are accustomed to stand and either conquer our enemies or die.’” In yet another passage, the

<sup>22</sup> Cited by Raymond F. Collins, *I & II Timothy and Titus: A Commentary*, NTL (Nashville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 273, who is citing Wilhelm Dittenberger, ed., *Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum*, 3rd ed., 4 vols. (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1915–1924), 1:676 (n. 434–35); cf. *IG* II2 687 [<https://epigraphy.packhum.org/text/2906?hs=569-629>] and *IG* II3,1 912 [<https://epigraphy.packhum.org/text/347825?hs=571-631>]).

<sup>23</sup> “Most good” is a rendering of κάλλιστος, which is the superlative form of καλός, which is strikingly close to the expression in 1 Tim 1:18.

<sup>24</sup> The implication is that Lydiades’s reputation was enhanced by such a noble and courageous fight as a patriot of his “native city.”

Athenian “ancestors” are said to “have conducted many other battles and good battles” (πολλοὺς δὲ καὶ ἄλλους ἀγῶνας καὶ καλοὺς ἡγωνίσαντο; Lesbos, Προτρεπτικός B 12, line 1).<sup>25</sup>

The redundant idiom also containing the phrase “good fight” (καλός + ἀγών) occurs five times with reference to “good” military battles that were fought,<sup>26</sup> as well as two other times.<sup>27</sup> The phrase “good fight” (καλός + ἀγών in various forms and word order) apart from the idiom occurs roughly twenty-three times in Classical and Hellenistic writings. Of those, the majority refer to military battles fought well (16x), four (and possibly five) refer to “good competition” in the Greek games, and several refer to a “good” inward ethical or spiritual struggle.<sup>28</sup>

## 2.2. An Idiom Using ἀγωνίζομαι + ἀγών for Fighting a Legal Court Battle

As mentioned earlier, sometimes ἀγωνίζομαι + ἀγών, somewhat like στρατεύω + στρατεία, is an idiom for a struggle in a legal or courtroom context. Whereas the στρατεία idiom refers to appeal in a legal context to having faithfully served in the army, the ἀγών idiom refers to the battle of a legal trial itself. An adopted son, who is wrongly challenged in court about the legality of his adoption and thus the legality of his inheritance, says he will “fight this legal struggle” (ἀγωνίεσθαι τὸν ἀγῶνα τοῦτον; Isaeus 2.43, *On the Estate of Menecles*).<sup>29</sup> It is thus natural that Paul would use the “struggle” idiom in a legal or courtroom context in 1 Tim 6:12–13: “fight the good fight [ἀγωνίζου τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα] ... you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (both verses developing the church courtroom concept of “two or three witnesses” from 1 Tim 5:19). Similarly, in 2 Tim 4:7, Paul says he “fought the good fight” (τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα ἡγωνίσμηναι), as a result of which “there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day” in his eschatological courtroom (4:8).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> For additional examples of this battle idiom underscoring a good reputation, see Beale, “Background to ‘Fight the Good Fight,’” 220 n. 38. Sometimes the redundant wording is an idiom for mere warfare, without patriotism or reputation being in mind, though these notions may be secondarily included.

<sup>26</sup> These citations have been cited fully in the preceding paragraph, so here we give only the sources: Dionysius of Halicarnasus, *The Roman Antiquities* 8.65.2; Plutarch, *Camillus* 2.4; Plutarch, *Aratus* 37.2–3; Lesbos, Προτρεπτικός B 12.1–2.

<sup>27</sup> The remaining two occurrences refer to an ethically ideal “good struggle” to sacrificially die for someone (Euripides, *Alcestis* 648), and to a “good contest” to demonstrate where faithful friendship has been demonstrated (Lucian, *Toxaris* 10.13).

<sup>28</sup> For Hellenistic and Classical sources attesting the uses in this sentence, see Beale, “Background to ‘Fight the Good Fight,’” 221 nn. 41–43.

<sup>29</sup> The defendant appeals to “witnesses” (μάρτυρες) to help “fight” this case (44; likewise see the verb form of μάρτυς, referring to people “witnessing” in his defense in 38). Other examples of this use of the idiom are documented in Beale, “Background to ‘Fight the Good Fight,’” 222–23.

<sup>30</sup> It is possible that the redundant ἀγών expression is an idiom for the “struggle” of an athletic competition (occurring 4x), but it is not used enough to be considered an idiom in comparison with the other uses throughout this essay.

### 3. Conclusion

There is a lot of discussion today about what “patriotism” in America means. Some believe it means to be loyal to the Constitution and traditions of America, while others believe that America needs to be “remade” or “transformed” into something else. Some believe that Christian faith is inextricably linked to American patriotism. Paul was clear about what he believed was “patriotism” for those who are Christians. His definition would never need revising as long as this world continues, since he was an apostle whose letters were inspired by God and contain truth for all times. His use of “fight the good fight” is a patriotic warfare idiom for one who perseveres in loyalty to King and heavenly country by fighting war campaigns to preserve the welfare of the beginning end-time kingdom on earth. As a result, in this way a person earns a reputation as a good and honorable citizen in God’s kingdom.

Paul and Timothy were to fight against false teachers who were contradicting the truth of the gospel and were even maligning their character. Likewise, we as Christians are in a “fight” in this life. As they, so we are still in the “latter days,” which the OT and Jesus prophesied would be characterized by a tribulation including false teaching (see 1 Tim 4:1–2; 2 Tim 3:1–13). Spiritual and worldly forces are arrayed against us. We need to persevere as spiritual warriors in the face of constant opposition, which is ultimately inspired by Satan (see 1 Tim 4:1–2; 5:13–15; 2 Tim 2:23–26).

Therefore, not only elders and pastors, but all Christians need to know the Bible well to do “sword fighting” with false teachers who distort the Bible (whether that be Mormons or Jehovah’s witness or other teachers within Bible-teaching churches who begin to introduce teachings contrary to Scripture).<sup>31</sup> We need to “be diligent to present ourselves approved before God, workmen ... accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15; so also Titus 1:9!). The word of God is our “sword” in the fight (Eph 6:17). Ironically, even Paul’s exhortation to “fight the good fight” has been adopted and twisted as a title for some books that have nothing to do with true spiritual warfare or with Christianity itself. If we persevere in “fighting the good fight,” which is an extended life-long war campaign, we are being loyal to our divine King and helping to maintain the spiritual welfare of the kingdom in our churches. If we do so, we will prove our good character as a spiritual and faithful patriot and will receive honor as a reflection of the only One who is truly worthy to receive “honor” (1 Tim 1:17; 6:16) for whom we have fought.

Satan causes battles other than that involving false teaching, which we also must fight and persevere through “as good soldiers” of Christ Jesus (2 Tim 2:3–4). We may get battered by Satan, the powers of evil, and the world, but we need to remember that if we are true soldiers of our King, he will give us the armor and armament to battle through the trials we encounter. These trials may include illness, loss of job, breakup of a family or persecution in the workplace (and beyond). Just as a centurion under the commander Antony “was covered with scars” as a result of “fighting many fights,”<sup>32</sup> so may we “bear on our body the [cruciform] brand-marks of Jesus,” as a result of our “fighting many fights” for our Lord (Gal 6:17). May our King give us grace to serve, persevere, and be loyal to him in this life-long war campaign until we meet him face to face, and he says “well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt 25:21, 23).

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<sup>31</sup> See J. W. Shire, *Scripture Twisting* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980).

<sup>32</sup> Plutarch, *Antony* 64.1.

# Postmillennialism: A Biblical Critique

— Jeremy Sexton —

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**Abstract:** Postmillennialism had been pronounced dead when R. J. Rushdoony and his fellow Reconstructionists resuscitated it in 1977 with stimulating though non-exegetical publications. In the following decades, many in Rushdoony's train added innovative biblical arguments whose interpretive methods do not withstand scrutiny. This article examines the hermeneutical idiosyncrasies and exegetical fallacies displayed in defenses of postmillennialism by Greg Bahnsen, Kenneth Gentry, David Chilton, Keith Mathison, Douglas Wilson, and others. Postmillennialists routinely keep textual details out of focus or interpret them tendentiously, in service of the belief that the prophecies of worldwide righteousness and shalom will reach fulfillment on earth *before* rather than *at* the second coming.

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We further condemn Jewish dreams that there will be a golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment, and that the pious, having subdued all their godless enemies, will possess all the kingdoms of the earth. For evangelical truth in Matt., chs. 24 and 25, and Luke, ch. 18, and apostolic teaching in II Thess., ch. 2, and II Tim., chs. 3 and 4, present something quite different.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1977 book *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, George Eldon Ladd responded with extreme brevity to Loraine Boettner's case for postmillennialism, filling only half a page.<sup>2</sup> Ladd's opening sentence explained the terseness: "There is so little appeal to Scripture that I have little to criticize." When that book was published, the postmillennial hope of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) and William Carey (1761–1834) which burned bright in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially in the United States, had been extinguished, some say by a series of bloody conflicts reaching back to the American Civil War.<sup>3</sup> Boettner's unpersuasive argument marked the nadir of a languishing eschatological position, confirming to many its lack of scriptural support. The once popular view known

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<sup>1</sup> The Second Helvetic Confession, 1566, Chapter XI, in Arthur C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 245–46.

<sup>2</sup> George Eldon Ladd, "An Historic Premillennial Response," in Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 143.

<sup>3</sup> Steven R. Pointer, "Seeing the Glory," *Christian History* 61 (1999): 30.



for its optimistic outlook on the future was proclaimed dead.<sup>4</sup> But a new postmillennialism would soon rise from the ashes.

A shorter but more momentous book on eschatology also appeared in 1977, titled *God's Plan for Victory: The Meaning of Postmillennialism*, by R. J. Rushdoony, father of Christian Reconstruction. This 43-page lodestar is now in its third edition.<sup>5</sup> In the glowing foreword, Martin Selbrede admits that the booklet “is not itself an exegetical work.”<sup>6</sup> He writes elsewhere, “It’s actually a pretty poor exposition of postmillennialism, particularly from an exegetical standpoint.”<sup>7</sup> Even so, it proved an inspiring tract, and many were “swept up in the train, writing, teaching, publishing, persuading, being either directly or indirectly influenced by Rushdoony’s (and Chalcedon’s) lead.”<sup>8</sup>

Also in 1977, *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* published a “Symposium on the Millennium” comprising five essays in favor of postmillennialism by Norman Shepherd, Gary North, Greg Bahnsen, James Jordan, and Rushdoony.<sup>9</sup> North, the editor, confesses in the introduction that “this issue of *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* is not deeply exegetical.”<sup>10</sup> The task of this issue, he states, is “to remind contemporary Protestants, especially Calvinistic Protestants, of the heritage which they have lost. If we are successful in this task, then the exegetical work will follow.”<sup>11</sup>

During the remainder of the twentieth century, Rushdoony’s Reconstructionists took the lead in revitalizing postmillennialism with innovative biblical arguments. Although Christian Reconstruction began to wane in the 1990s, the postmillennialism that it revived in 1977 continues to wax.

This article critically examines the hermeneutical idiosyncrasies and exegetical fallacies displayed by leading proponents of postmillennialism. Postmillennialists routinely keep textual details out of focus or interpret them tendentiously, in service of the belief that the prophecies of worldwide righteousness and shalom will reach fulfillment on earth *before* rather than *at* the second coming.

### *1. Postmillennial Distinctives*

Few (if any) postmillennialists still subscribe to the view of which Boettner was one of the final exponents—that the “thousand years” (χίλια ἔτη) mentioned six times in Revelation 20:2–7 will commence sometime in the future and continue until the second coming.<sup>12</sup> Postmillennialism, during

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<sup>4</sup> Robert R. Booth, “Editor’s Preface,” in Greg L. Bahnsen, *Victory in Jesus: The Bright Hope of Postmillennialism*, 3rd ed. (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media, 2020), ix.

<sup>5</sup> R. J. Rushdoony, *God’s Plan for Victory: The Meaning of Postmillennialism*, 3rd ed. (Vallecito, CA: Ross House, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Martin G. Selbrede, foreword to Rushdoony, *God’s Plan for Victory*, vi.

<sup>7</sup> Martin G. Selbrede, “Rushdoony’s Impact on Eschatology,” *Faith for All of Life* (2007): 27.

<sup>8</sup> Selbrede, foreword, vii–viii. Selbrede is the vice president of the Chalcedon Foundation, founded by Rushdoony in 1965.

<sup>9</sup> Gary North, ed., *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 3 (1976–1977): 15–163.

<sup>10</sup> Gary North, “Editor’s Introduction,” *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 3 (1976–1977): 12.

<sup>11</sup> North, “Editor’s Introduction,” 13.

<sup>12</sup> Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing, 1958), 59.

its late-twentieth-century resurgence, shed the belief that the millennium is a future subset of the interadvental period.<sup>13</sup>

Modern postmillennialism agrees with amillennialism that the thousand years extend from the first advent of Christ to the second, covering the entire interadvental era.<sup>14</sup> It agrees with premillennialism that the prophecies of universal righteousness, worship, and shalom (e.g., Pss 22:27; 86:9; 102:15; 138:4–5; Isa 2:2–4; 9:7; 11:5–16; 25:8–9; 26:1–4; 65:17–25; Joel 3:16–21; Mic 4:1–4; Hab 2:14; Zeph 3:9–10) will find fulfillment during the millennium.<sup>15</sup>

Postmillennialism is unique in affirming that the prophecies of universal righteousness, worship, and shalom will reach fulfillment *before* Jesus returns. It is also alone in viewing depictions of the worldwide destruction of God-haters (e.g., Pss 2:1–9; 110:1–2, 5–6; Isa 11:4; 25:10–12; 63:1–6; 1 Cor 15:24–25, 27–28; Rev 19:11–21) as predictions of the Christianization of the nations.

## 2. Pillar Prooftexts

Accusations that postmillennialism relies on OT passages rather than NT evidence are largely unwarranted. In addition to marshaling the texts cited above, postmillennialists invoke the parables about kingdom growth (Matt 13:31–33; Mark 4:26–32; Luke 13:18–21), John's teachings on Christ's victory over Satan and the world (e.g., John 12:31–32; 16:33; 1 John 2:13–14; 3:8; 4:4, 14; 5:4–5), Peter's proclamation of Christ's lordship at Pentecost (esp. Acts 2:32–36), statements about the subjection of everything to Christ (e.g., Heb 1:8–9, 13; 2:5–9), and the vastness of the redeemed in John's Apocalypse (e.g., Rev 7:9–10).<sup>16</sup>

None of these passages creates any unease for the hopeful non-postmillennialist. Affirming the decisive victory of the resurrected and reigning Christ over his enemies and the continuous expansion of his inaugurated kingdom to the end of the world is not peculiar to postmillennialism. In fact, all the texts cited in previous paragraphs (and below) appear without embarrassment in works advocating the other millennial positions. This suggests that fruitful evaluation must begin at the level of underlying hermeneutics and foundational assumptions.

The most basic methodological difference between postmillennialism and all other views boils down to a question of timing: When will earth experience the worldwide peace, piety, and prosperity anticipated in Scripture—before the second coming or after? Postmillennialism answers, “Before.” Every eschatological stance affirms that the kingdom of God will come on earth in fullness (Ps 72:8–11; Isa 11:6–9; 25:8; Hab 2:14; Zech 9:10; Matt 5:5; 6:10; Rev 21:1–5), but only postmillennialism expects a grand-scale earthly manifestation of the kingdom before Christ returns.<sup>17</sup> Postmillennialists maintain

<sup>13</sup> J. Marcellus Kik sowed the seeds of this collective move in *An Eschatology of Victory* (Nutley, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1971), 17, cited in Greg L. Bahnsen, “The *Prima Facie* Acceptability of Postmillennialism,” *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 3 (1976–1977): 86.

<sup>14</sup> Some postmillennialists date the beginning of the millennium to ca. AD 70.

<sup>15</sup> See J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy: The Complete Guide to Scriptural Predictions and Their Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1973), xxi, 268, 286–87, 295–96, 299–300, 319, 411, 428, 439.

<sup>16</sup> Bahnsen, “*Prima Facie* Acceptability,” 77.

<sup>17</sup> Some postmillennialists suppose, on account of the temporal references to the sun and moon throughout Psalm 72 (e.g., in v. 5: “as long as the sun and moon endure”; cf. vv. 7, 17), that the prophecy of Messiah's universal dominion in 72:8–11 must come to fulfillment on earth before the heavenly bodies of the first creation pass away

that the coming of the kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven” will materialize substantially in this world, on the unregenerated earth.<sup>18</sup> Their burden, then, is to show from Scripture that the promised time of universal godliness and well-being must come to fruition on earth *before* rather than *at* the parousia (second coming).

Postmillennialism’s expectations for the interadvental period rest mainly on distinctive readings of two NT passages: Matthew 28:18–20 (which purportedly guarantees a time before the parousia when most people on earth will give allegiance to Christ) and 1 Cor 15:24–28 (which purportedly foresees that Christ will vanquish all his enemies except death before the parousia). Let us consider whether these two pillars can bear the load that the postmillennialists in Rushdoony’s train have placed on them.

### 2.1. Matthew 28:18–20: The Greatness of the Great Commission

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus commands his followers to “disciple all the nations” (μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη). The mission’s success is guaranteed both because the one giving the commission possesses all authority in heaven and on earth (28:18) and because he promises to be with his church to the end as she carries out her marching orders (28:20). King Jesus did not give his people an assignment they will fail to complete.

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(Isa 60:19; 2 Pet 3:10–12; Rev 21:1, 23; 22:5). But these poetic temporal references in Psalm 72 actually communicate eternity—notably, v. 17 puts “as long as the sun continues” in parallelism with “forever”—and therefore encompass Christ’s everlasting reign on the new earth, where all the prophecies of universal righteousness and peace in this song will be fully realized. See Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 15 (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 274–75.

Some postmillennialists suggest that the universal peace prophesied in Isa 2:4 and Mic 4:3–4 must be fulfilled before the second coming, since these passages predict events that will occur “in the last days [בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים]” (Isa 2:2; Mic 4:1), a term that these interpreters tie strictly to the interadvental period. But Gary V. Smith (*Isaiah 1–39*, NAC 15A [Nashville: B&H, 2007], 129) rightly cautions against overreaching interpretations that closely identify this phrase “with the millennium or with the church age,” for “such concepts were not known to the prophet.” J. A. Motyer (*The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996], 54) says this phrase “is also known as ‘the day of the Lord’ bringing both judgment (2:12–21) and victory leading to peace (9:1–7); the consummation and enjoyment of God’s rule (Ho. 3:5).” The scope of “the last days” encompasses the initial advent of Messiah and everything thereafter, including what later revelation calls his “second” appearance or coming (Heb 9:28).

A related argument revolves around the synonymous phrase “in that day [בְּיוֹם הַהוּא]” in Isa 11:10, a verse that began to be fulfilled at the first coming of Christ (Rom 15:12). Some postmillennialists limit the referent of “in that day” to the time before the second coming and then point out that this temporal reference applies to the preceding verses, Isa 11:6–9, “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb.... For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” It is true that “in that day” applies to 11:6–9. However, limiting the referent of “in that day” to the time before the Lord’s return is arbitrary; it is certainly not required by Rom 15:12. Neither “the last days” nor “that day” excludes from its compass the concomitants of the second coming.

For a convincing rebuttal of the view, shared by postmillennialists and premillennialists, that Isa 65:17–25 speaks of a time when sin and death will still be present on earth, see G. K. Beale, “An Amillennial Response to a Premillennial View of Isaiah 65:20,” *JETS* 61 (2018): 461–92.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999), 87–88.

Every eschatological view concurs with the previous paragraph. Still, postmillennialists insist that their eschatology alone does justice to the Great Commission's greatness.<sup>19</sup> Bahnsen writes, "The thing that distinguishes the biblical postmillennialist, then, from amillennialism and premillennialism is his belief that Scripture teaches *the success of the great commission*."<sup>20</sup> The postmillennialist believes that the Great Commission will have been a failure if the earth is not "full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isa 11:9) before Christ returns. The argument centers on the supposed meaning of the imperative clause "disciple all the nations" (Matt 28:19). Postmillennialists hold that this phrase envisages the conversion of entire people groups, the Christianization of all nations *as nations*.

This construal enjoys *prima facie* plausibility. After all, "the nations" (τὰ ἔθνη) describes people groups.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, "all the nations" (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) follows the verb "disciple" (μαθητεύσατε) as its direct object. So, infer postmillennialists, Jesus does not merely command his church to disciple individuals within the nations; he more specifically directs us to disciple the nations qua nations.<sup>22</sup> Says Bahnsen, "The church goes forth, not simply to battle (with periodic or spotted conversions from place to place), but to incredible victory (namely, the discipling of *the nations as such*)."<sup>23</sup> And a nation whose Christian contingent composes only 50 percent of the population, for example, is not yet discipled. For the postmillennialist, Matthew 28:18–20 requires both nationwide and worldwide comprehensiveness: Jesus will convert the vast majority of every people group on earth before he returns.

However, neither the Great Commission as a whole nor the phrase "disciple all the nations" in particular supports the supposition that the prophecies of universal allegiance to Christ must be fulfilled before he returns.

First, "disciple all the nations" does not imply *nationwide* comprehensiveness. The same construction occurs in Acts 8:40, where the direct object "all the cities" (τὰς πόλεις πάσας) follows the verb "he preached the gospel to" (εὐηγγελίζετο) in the clause "he preached the gospel to all the cities."<sup>24</sup> Luke does not mean that Philip preached to the majority of citizens in each city during the course of his stay there. "Preached the gospel to all the cities" does not imply citywide comprehensiveness; it simply describes preaching to people in all the cities (AV: "he preached in all the cities"). Likewise, "disciple all the nations" does not imply nationwide comprehensiveness; it simply describes discipling people in or from all the nations.

Second, "all the nations" does not imply *worldwide* comprehensiveness. Postmillennialists recognize this intuitively in Matthew 24:14, which uses the same phrase: "This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed in the whole world as a testimony to *all the nations* [πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν]." Postmillennialists rightly understand that this prophecy was fulfilled during the generation of the apostles (24:34). However, they do not imagine that the gospel literally went to every nation in the world—and they certainly do not suggest that it was proclaimed throughout the totality of every nation—during the apostolic era.

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *The Greatness of the Great Commission: The Christian Enterprise in a Fallen World* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Bahnsen, "Prima Facie Acceptability," 89 (emphasis original).

<sup>21</sup> BDAG 276 (s.v. "ἔθνος," entry 1); Moisés Silva, "ἔθνος," *NIDNTTE* 2:89–91.

<sup>22</sup> On 21 November 2022, Canon Press sent a promotional email whose subject line announced, "The Great Commission isn't to make disciples." It quoted Doug Wilson as saying, "Our task is to disciple China and Taiwan and Brazil and Germany and the United States."

<sup>23</sup> Bahnsen, "Prima Facie Acceptability," 97 (emphasis original).

<sup>24</sup> D. A. Carson, *Matthew 13–28*, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 596.

They ascribe neither worldwide nor nationwide comprehensiveness to the proclamation of the gospel to “all the nations” predicted in 24:14.

Third, Jesus did not command his followers to disciple the nations qua nations (the nations as such). The clause “disciple all the nations” implicitly contains a reference to individuals; it means “disciple individuals from all the nations.”<sup>25</sup>

Isaiah provides the framework for understanding the eschatological influx of “all the nations.” The prophet predicts in 2:2 that in the last days “all the nations” (כָּל-הַגּוֹיִם; LXX: πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) will stream to God’s high and holy mountain, and 66:18 uses the same Hebrew and Greek to speak of the ingathering of “all the nations.” Does Isaiah mean that the nations will come in *as nations*? No. His clarifying prophecy in 66:19–20 indicates that the nations themselves will stay put while individual converts “from all the nations” (מִכָּל-הַגּוֹיִם; LXX: ἐκ πάντων τῶν ἐθνῶν) flow out of the nations and into God’s holy mountain-city as the result of “missionary efforts.”<sup>26</sup> Isaiah’s prophecies here have found fulfillment in the new covenant in the “vast multitude” of individual converts “from [ἐκ] every nation [παντὸς ἔθνους]” (Rev 7:9).<sup>27</sup>

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus uses Isaiah’s language of “all the nations” to mandate the fulfillment of the prophet’s missional vision. And the rest of the Great Commission confirms that the church’s disciple-making mission, like the one described in Isaiah 66:19–20, targets persons rather than political units. Immediately after our Lord issues his directive to “disciple all the nations,” he expands on what he means: “baptizing them ... teaching them” (Matt 28:19–20). “Them” (αὐτούς) is a masculine personal pronoun that refers not to the nations as such, since ἔθνη (“nations”) is a neuter noun, but to individuals from the nations.<sup>28</sup> If the author had wanted to describe “the collective conversion of national groups,” then “αὐτά,” the neuter plural pronoun, would be expected rather than αὐτούς.<sup>29</sup> The antecedent of “them,” persons, is contained implicitly in the clause “disciple all the nations.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the objects of the discipling that Jesus has in mind are persons qua persons, those who can be baptized into the Triune name and be taught to obey, for “baptism and instruction in obedience belong to discipleship.”<sup>31</sup> A nation qua nation cannot experience the personal discipleship in view any more than it can receive Trinitarian baptism. The point is not that there can be no such thing as a genuinely Christian nation in this age. The point is

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<sup>25</sup> Acts 8:40 is again illustrative. Philip did not preach to cities qua cities. The clause “he preached the gospel to all the cities” implicitly contains a reference to the individuals to whom Philip actually preached.

<sup>26</sup> Gary V. Smith (*Isaiah 40–66*, NAC 15B [Nashville: B&H, 2009], 750) writes, commenting on 66:20, “Because of these missionary efforts, ‘all nations will stream’ (2:2) to God in Zion. Those who go out to the distant foreign nations will return to Jerusalem, bringing with them many people from all over the world (cf. 60:3–11). These foreign people, who will become fellow ‘brothers’ in the faith, are described as an ‘offering to Yahweh.’” See also Motyer, *Isaiah*, 541–42.

<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, the nations of the earth, which are outside the beloved city of the saints, will be deceived by Satan and devoured by fire forever (Rev 20:7–10; cf. Isa 60:12; 66:24). See section 3.1 below.

<sup>28</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 719.

<sup>29</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC 33B (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 887.

<sup>30</sup> See the section on omitted antecedents in Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 339–442. Thanks to Greg Thornberg for this reference.

<sup>31</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols., ICC (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 3:686.

that Matthew 28:18–20 envisions no such thing. The aim of the Great Commission, concludes Carson, “is to make disciples of all men everywhere, without distinction.”<sup>32</sup>

Fourth, the apostolic era saw the success of the Great Commission. When John wrote the Apocalypse, Christ had already “redeemed” “a vast multitude that no one could number” “from *every* [πάσης] tribe and language and people and *nation* [ἔθνους]” (Rev 5:9; 7:9). Moreover, the apostle to the gentiles declared toward the end of his life not only that the gospel had been “*proclaimed* in all creation” (Col 1:23) but also that “in all the world *it is bearing fruit and increasing*” (1:6).<sup>33</sup> The gospel had “gone out to all the earth ... to the ends of the world” (Rom 10:18), bearing the fruit of discipleship everywhere it went. Gaffin says, “Paul sees the spreading, worldwide triumph of the Gospel as already fulfilled in his own day.”<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Luke presents the same narrative in Acts, which “tells a *complete* story; it documents the actual realization of the sweeping promise of 1:8—the universal spread of the Gospel through the *apostles* ... from Jerusalem (the Jews) to ‘the ends of the earth’ (Rome representing the world center of the Gentiles).”<sup>35</sup> The antecedent of “you” in Acts 1:8 is “the apostles” in 1:2–3. Thus, the apostles themselves became “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, *and to the end of the earth*” (1:8). “In other words,” Gaffin concludes, “the universal circumference of the Gospel’s triumph has been drawn by the ministry of the apostles. So far as God has revealed his purposes, the subsequent process of filling in that circle could have been and can be terminated at any time.”<sup>36</sup>

The Great Commission, together with the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven, engenders confidence that “the Kingdom of God increases, stage upon stage, to the end of the world.”<sup>37</sup> But neither Matthew 28:18–20 nor any other Scripture stipulates the degree to which “the universal circumference of the Gospel’s triumph,” fully inscribed by the apostles, must be filled in before Jesus can return.

## 2.2. 1 Corinthians 15:24–28: The End

Gentry writes, “Along with the kingdom parables and the Great Commission, Paul’s resurrection discourse in 1 Corinthians 15 provides us with strong New Testament evidence for the postmillennial hope. Here Paul speaks forthrightly of Christ’s present enthronement and insists he is confidently ruling with a view to subordinating his enemies in history.”<sup>38</sup> Seeing “evidence for the postmillennial hope” in 1 Corinthians 15 turns on an unconventional reading of vv. 24–28. Gentry, who has done the bulk of the interpretive heavy lifting for postmillennialists, argues that Christ will not return “until he conquers his earthly enemies (1Co 15:24). He will conquer his last enemy, death, at his return when we arise from the

<sup>32</sup> Carson, *Matthew 13–28*, 596.

<sup>33</sup> Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “Theonomy and Eschatology: Reflections on Postmillennialism,” in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, eds. William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 218.

<sup>34</sup> Gaffin, “Theonomy and Eschatology,” 218.

<sup>35</sup> Gaffin, “Theonomy and Eschatology,” 219 (emphasis original).

<sup>36</sup> Gaffin, “Theonomy and Eschatology,” 219.

<sup>37</sup> John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. A. W. Morrison, Calvin’s New Testament Commentary 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 208. I discovered this quote, translated differently (“the kingdom of God is continually growing and advancing to the end of the world”), in Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), 90.

<sup>38</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., “Postmillennialism,” in Darrell L. Bock, ed., *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 48.

dead (1Co 15:26).<sup>39</sup> As for 15:25, he argues, “Clearly, Paul expects Christ’s conquering of all opposition before history ends. The last enemy he will subdue is death itself—at the eschatological resurrection. But the subduing of his other enemies occurs before this, before the resurrection and during the outworking of history.”<sup>40</sup> Wilson concurs:

In the common assumption shared by many Christians, at the Lord’s return the *first* enemy to be destroyed is death. But the apostle here says that it is the last enemy to be destroyed. The Lord will rule from heaven, progressively subduing all His enemies through the power of the gospel, brought to the nations by His Church. And then, when it would be easy to believe that it just couldn’t get any better, the Lord will come and deliver the kingdom to His Father.<sup>41</sup>

If it did not figure so prominently in defenses of postmillennialism, 1 Corinthians 15:24–28 would undoubtedly belong in the section below on “Problem Passages,” for this text presents insuperable challenges to that system of eschatology.

### 2.2.1. *The Destruction Happens at the End (1 Cor 15:24)*

Verse 24 contains the first insurmountable obstacle for postmillennialism. Paul writes, “Then the end will come, when he shall deliver the kingdom to God the Father, when he shall destroy every rule and every authority and power” (εἴτα τὸ τέλος, ὅταν παραδιδῶ τὴν βασιλείαν τῷ θεῷ καὶ πατρί, ὅταν καταργήσῃ πᾶσαν ἀρχὴν καὶ πᾶσαν ἐξουσίαν καὶ δύναμιν). The destruction of Christ’s enemies here occurs not “progressively” (Wilson) or “during the outworking of history” (Gentry) but all at once at “the end” (τὸ τέλος). I will address shortly the peculiar assumption that “destroy” in this verse refers to the converting grace of the gospel. For now, though, I will respond to the assertion that this verb describes an *ongoing* interadvental activity rather than a one-time event at the end.

Paul temporally locates the action of “he shall destroy” at “the end.” Note that τὸ τέλος (“the end”) is modified by two adjacent temporal clauses, each one beginning with ὅταν (“when”) followed by a subjunctive verb: ὅταν παραδιδῶ ... ὅταν καταργήσῃ (“when he shall deliver ... when he shall destroy”). Both actions of this double-sided event—the destruction of every rule, authority, and power and the delivery of the kingdom to the Father—will take place “when” “the end” arrives.<sup>42</sup> The aorist subjunctive καταργήσῃ (“he shall destroy”), whose aspect is perfective, describes an event that will occur as a whole, in its entirety, from beginning to end, “when” “the end” comes.<sup>43</sup> Note well the perfective aspect of the aorist verbs in 15:24–28.

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<sup>39</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology*, 3rd ed. (Chesnee, SC: Victorious Hope, 2021), 523.

<sup>40</sup> Gentry, “Postmillennialism,” 50.

<sup>41</sup> Douglas Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced: Christ’s Kingdom on Earth* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2008), 15.

<sup>42</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 833; Paul Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 678; Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, NAC 28 (Nashville: B&H, 2014), 388.

<sup>43</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle and Robert L. Plummer, *Beginning with New Testament Greek: An Introductory Study of the Grammar and Syntax of the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2020), 118.

Gentry defies the straightforward syntax in 15:24 with the critical help of a common grammatical fallacy related to the aorist tense.<sup>44</sup> He posits that the subjunctive verb καταργήσῃ (“he shall destroy”), because it is in the aorist tense, refers to past time and thus describes an action that precedes the end. He declares, “Such a construction indicates that the action of the subordinate clause (‘he has destroyed’) *precedes* that of the main clause (‘the end will come’).”<sup>45</sup> Gentry appears unaware that “tenses in the subjunctive ... involve only *aspect* (kind of action), not time,” and therefore “time is not a feature of the aorist” in the subjunctive mood.<sup>46</sup> One Greek grammar states that “subjunctive verbs do not inherently communicate time” and that “the indefinite nature of subjunctives usually places the possible action in the future.”<sup>47</sup> Fee wisely notes that making time an inherent feature of the aorist subjunctive “runs aground grammatically.”<sup>48</sup>

Postmillennialism depends on deviating from standard grammatical accounts in the next verse as well.

### 2.2.2. *The Subjugation and Subjections Happen at the End (1 Cor 15:25, 27–28)*

Postmillennialists lean hard on v. 25, “For he must reign until the time when he shall put all his enemies under his feet” (δεῖ γὰρ αὐτὸν βασιλεῦειν ἄχρι οὗ θῇ πάντας τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ὑπὸ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ), a paraphrase of Psalm 110:1. Postmillennialists conclude from this statement that Christ will subdue “all his enemies” except death during his interadvental reign. Recall Gentry’s earlier comment on 1 Corinthians 15:25: “Paul expects Christ’s conquering of all opposition before history ends.”

<sup>44</sup> See D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 67–70.

<sup>45</sup> Gentry, “Postmillennialism,” 49 (emphasis original).

<sup>46</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 463, 555; cf. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 67. Gentry is led astray by outdated syntactic claims in BDAG 730 (s.v. “ὅταν,” entry 1.a), though the examples there do not support his claim of a discrete anterior timeframe for the action of an aorist subjunctive relative to that of the main verb.

<sup>47</sup> Merkle and Plummer, *New Testament Greek*, 254. They conclude, “In most cases, it is neither possible nor necessary to differentiate present subjunctives and aorist subjunctives in English translation” (p. 255).

A textual variant of 15:24 illustrates that those proficient in Greek did not attach past time to aorist subjunctives. The Majority Text of 15:24 carries the aorist subjunctive verb παραδῶ instead of the present subjunctive verb παραδιδῶ (each means “he shall deliver”). In the MT, then, each temporal clause contains an aorist subjunctive. If Gentry’s syntax were correct, it would render the author of παραδῶ incompetent, for 1 Cor 15:24 MT would predict not only that Christ will destroy every rule, authority, and power before the end but also that he will deliver the kingdom to the Father before the end. Moreover, the verse would begin by saying “Then the end [will come]” but then awkwardly proceed to describe two major events that precede rather than constitute the end.

Wilson subscribes to the Textus Receptus (Douglas Wilson, *Mother Kirk: Essays and Forays in Practical Ecclesiology* [Moscow, ID: Canon, 2001], 53–56). It, like the MT, carries the aorist subjunctive παραδῶ in 15:24. To uphold the coherence of the TR, Wilson must reject Gentry’s grammatical aberration. To do so, however, would force Wilson to admit that Christ will not destroy “every rule and every authority and power” until “the end,” which is also “when he shall deliver the kingdom to God the Father.”

<sup>48</sup> Fee, *First Corinthians*, 833. He is specifically critiquing the idea that the logical order of the two eschatological events (first the destruction of every rule, authority, and power and then the delivery of the kingdom to the Father—which is unquestionably the order in which they will occur at the end) is communicated inherently by the aorist subjunctive verb καταργήσῃ (“he shall destroy”). Fee’s critique applies *a fortiori* to Gentry’s additional claim that the destruction of every rule, authority, and power will precede the end. See the CSB for a translation of 15:24 that does not outrun the Greek.



Postmillennialists hear Paul saying in this verse, “For he must reign, gradually subduing his foes, until all his enemies are under his feet.” But the verse actually says that the subduing of all enemies will take place at the culmination of Christ’s reign and not before.

Paul’s Greek makes this unambiguous. The key phrase ἄχρι οὗ θῆ means “until [ἄχρι] the time when [οὗ] he shall put [θῆ, aorist subjunctive].”<sup>49</sup> It refers to that future “time when” (οὗ) Jesus shall put all his enemies underfoot.<sup>50</sup> The aorist verb θῆ (“he shall put [all his enemies under his feet]”) describes an action that will occur as a whole—in its entirety, from beginning to end (perfective aspect)—at a particular time indicated by the relative pronoun οὗ (“the point at which”). Christ must reign *right up to* (ἄχρι) *that time when* (οὗ) he will vanquish all his enemies. There is no indication in 15:25 that any of Christ’s enemies will be put underfoot before “the point when [οὗ]” *all* of them shall be. This future subjugation, portrayed as destruction in the previous verse, will happen all at once at the end (τὸ τέλος) of Christ’s reign.

The temporal clause ἄχρι οὗ θῆ (“until the time when he shall put”) in 15:25 falls under Wallace’s syntactic category “Subjunctive in Indefinite Temporal Clause” and so “indicates a future contingency from the perspective of the time of the main verb.”<sup>51</sup> In other words, the action of the temporal clause (“until the time when he shall put all his enemies under his feet”) is a *future* event relative to the time of the main verb clause (“he must reign”). The future subduing to which Paul refers is the eschatological capstone of Christ’s reign.

Paul uses the same construction in 11:26, where he says that believers, whenever they practice the Lord’s Supper, proclaim the Lord’s death ἄχρι οὗ ἔλθῃ (“until he comes”).<sup>52</sup> This temporal clause, which falls under the same syntactic category discussed in the previous paragraph, means “until [ἄχρι] the time when [οὗ] he shall come [ἔλθῃ, aorist subjunctive].” It refers to that future “time when” (οὗ) the Lord shall come. The grammatical similitude between 11:26 and 15:25 is instructive, especially since each verse is eschatologically charged. In 11:26, the church continues to proclaim the death of her Lord in anticipation of his coming, and then he comes. He does not come gradually while the church is proclaiming, but rather all at once at the end of the age. In 15:25, Jesus continues to reign in anticipation of putting all his enemies underfoot, and then he puts all of them underfoot. He does not put all of them underfoot gradually while he is reigning but rather all at once at the culmination of his reign.

In 1 Corinthians 15:25, Paul alludes to Psalm 110, which postmillennialists deem “one of the most significant eschatological passages in the Bible.”<sup>53</sup> This psalm opens with the divine promise to make the enemies of Messiah his footstool. While postmillennialists believe this refers to a gradual interadvental process, the psalm tells a different story: “He will shatter kings *on the day of his wrath*” (110:5; cf. v. 3).

Paul paraphrases the end of Psalm 8:6 in 1 Corinthians 15:27 (“he [God] subjected all things under his [mankind’s] feet”). The apostle applies this OT text, which celebrates the subjection of all things to man at the beginning, to the subjection of all things to Christ at the end. In 1 Corinthians 15:28, Paul confirms that the subjection of all things to Christ will happen at the end, contemporaneously

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<sup>49</sup> See Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, 679.

<sup>50</sup> See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 339–442, for how οὗ functions here.

<sup>51</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 479. This rule particularly applies to a subjunctive verb “used after a *temporal adverb* (or *improper preposition*) meaning *until* (e.g., ἕως, ἄχρι, μέχρι).”

<sup>52</sup> Timothy A. Brookins and Bruce W. Longenecker, *1 Corinthians 10–16: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016) 55, 157.

<sup>53</sup> Mathison, *Postmillennialism*, 79.

with the subjection of the Son to the Father: “*When* [ὅταν] all things shall be subjected to him, *at that time* [τότε] the Son himself will also be subjected to him who subjected all things to him.”<sup>54</sup> The aorist verb translated “[all things] shall be subjected [to him]” (ὑποταγῇ) is perfective in aspect: it depicts the subjection of all things to Christ as occurring in its entirety, from beginning to end, at the time of the Son’s subjection to the Father.<sup>55</sup> The two subjections in 15:28 will happen consecutively at the end (cf. the ὅταν ... τότε statement in 15:54). To speak of all things being subjected to Christ is to speak of a one-time event that we will see in “the world to come” (Heb 2:5, 8a). In this world, “we do not yet see all things in subjection to him” (2:8b).

### 2.2.3. καταργέω Means Destroy (1 Cor 15:24, 26)

Postmillennialists hold that Yahweh’s promise to make Christ’s enemies into a footstool (Ps 110:1) is a commitment to save them. However, the psalm prophesies destruction, not salvation: “He will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter *the head* [שִׁיר] over the whole earth” (110:5–6). The image in 110:1–6 of Messiah, with his willing people, crushing the nations’ kings and the earth’s head underfoot (cf. Gen 3:15; Josh 10:24–25; Ps 68:21; Rom 16:20) in battle on the day of Christ’s corpse-making power, wrath, and judgment (cf. Rom 2:5; Rev 19:11–21) is retributive, not redemptive.

Postmillennialists also cite Psalm 2:8–9 (“I will give the nations as your inheritance, and the ends of the earth as your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel”) as a prophecy of the conversion of the nations to Christ.<sup>56</sup> But this text likewise predicts Messiah’s death-dealing destruction of the wicked. Psalm 2 nowhere prophesies redemption. Rather, it emphasizes the rage and vain plotting of the nations, peoples, kings, and rulers against the Messiah (2:1–3); anticipates Christ’s derision, wrath, fury, and shattering violence against them (2:4–9); and warns the impious to repent or “perish” (תִּבְדֹּל) (2:10–12). The Psalter sets up at its outset a contrast between the righteous and the wicked, the latter of whom “will perish” (תִּבְדֹּל) (1:6; cf. 2:12) “in the judgment” (1:5) of “his wrath” (2:5, 12).<sup>57</sup>

The subduing judgment and wrath portrayed in Psalm 110 form the interpretive backdrop to the destruction and subjugation predicted in 1 Corinthians 15:24–28, undermining the presumption that καταργήσῃ (“he shall destroy”) in 15:24 refers to the conversion of every rule, authority, and power “through the power of the gospel” (Wilson). Furthermore, two fatal flaws afflict this assumption.

<sup>54</sup> “When all things shall be subjected to him” (15:28) is a new way of saying “when he shall destroy every rule and every authority and power” (15:24). Each clause refers to “the time when he shall put all his enemies under his feet” (15:25). Likewise, “at that time the Son himself will also be subjected to him who subjected all things to him” (15:28) is a new way of saying “when he shall deliver the kingdom to God the Father” (15:24). See Fee, *First Corinthians*, 841.

<sup>55</sup> The timing of ὑποταγῇ (“shall be subjected”), an aorist subjunctive, is dependent on the main verb, ὑποταγήσεται (“will [also] be subjected”), a future indicative. In the subjunctive, “the timing of the action is dependent on the main verb in the sentence” (Merkle and Plummer, *New Testament Greek*, 254).

<sup>56</sup> See, e.g., David Chilton, *Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion* (Horn Lake, MS: Dominion Press, 2007), 67, 192.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Isa 60:12, “The nation and kingdom that will not serve you *will perish* [תִּבְדֹּל], and those nations will be utterly wasted.”

First, the terms Paul uses here—*ἀρχή* (“rule”), *ἐξουσία* (“authority”), and *δύναμις* (“power”)—appear elsewhere in his writings (e.g., Rom 8:38; Eph 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:16; 2:10, 15) as references to “malevolent, demonic powers” (cf. 1 Pet 3:22).<sup>58</sup> To my knowledge, no lexicon, theological dictionary, commentary, or example from usage suggests that these terms can refer to future converts.

Second, *καταργέω*, the term Paul uses to describe the destruction of the rulers, authorities, and powers in 1 Corinthians 15:24, means “destroy, abolish, wipe out, bring to an end.”<sup>59</sup> To my knowledge, no lexicon, theological dictionary, commentary, or example from usage suggests that this verb can refer to salvation, the opposite of its meaning. Two verses later, in 15:26, this verb describes the destruction of death: “The last enemy *to be destroyed* [*καταργεῖται*] is death” (cf. 2 Tim 1:10; Barn. 5.6). In 2 Thessalonians 2:8, it depicts the abolition of the man of lawlessness, “whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and *will destroy* [*καταργήσῃ*] by the appearance of his coming.” In Hebrews 2:14, it refers to Christ’s destruction of Satan: “that through death *he might destroy* [*καταργήσῃ*] him who has the power of death, that is, the devil.” The rulers, authorities, and powers mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:24 will no more convert to Christ than will death, the man of lawlessness, or the devil.

Wilson states, “This world, the one we live in *now*, will be put to rights, *before* the Second Coming, *before* the end of all things. The only enemy not destroyed through the advance of the gospel will be death itself (1 Cor. 15:26).”<sup>60</sup> While this triumphalist sentiment increasingly finds purchase on hearts that long (not altogether unbiblically) for the upper hand, it gets no traction in the pages of Scripture.

### 3. More Problem Passages

The two main problem passages, both from Revelation, resemble the two ostensible pillar prooftexts. Revelation 20:7–10 (like Matt 28:18–20) features all the nations of the earth. Revelation 19:11–21 (like 1 Cor 15:24–28) pertains to eschatological judgment on God’s enemies.

#### 3.1. Revelation 20:7–10: The Greatness of the Great Deception

Revelation 20:7–10 prophesies the devil’s deception of the nations at the end of the thousand years. When Satan is “released from his prison” (20:7) at the conclusion of the millennium, he will go out “to deceive the nations that are in the four corners of the earth [*πλανῆσαι τὰ ἔθνη τὰ ἐν ταῖς τέσσαρσιν γωνίαις τῆς γῆς*] ... whose number is like the sand of the sea” (20:8). Verses 9–10 confirm that the devil will succeed in his mission to deceive the nations. This means for postmillennialists that Satan will deceive the nations during the final part of the interadvental era, regaining his status as “the deceiver of the whole world” (12:9), so that Jesus will return to an earth that contains deceived (undisciplined) people groups in all four of its corners.

In his book *Dominion and Common Grace*, North acknowledges this predicament as “the exegetical dilemma for the postmillennialist” and “The Postmillennialist’s Problem.”<sup>61</sup> North comes closer to recognizing the true nature of the problem caused by Revelation 20:7–10 than any other

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<sup>58</sup> Fee, *First Corinthians*, 835.

<sup>59</sup> BDAG 525–26 (s.v. “καταργέω,” entry 3); Moisés Silva, “καταργέω,” *NIDNTTE* 2:640–41.

<sup>60</sup> Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced*, 86 (emphasis original).

<sup>61</sup> Gary North, *Dominion and Common Grace: The Biblical Basis of Progress* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987), xiv–xv.

postmillennialist that I am aware of. In his aforementioned book, which is dedicated to this critical issue, he proffers an apologia for the large-scale rebellion at the end of the postmillennialist's millennium. His counterintuitive premises are that "postmillennialism does not require that all or even most people be converts to Christ at that last day" and that "the camp of the saints can and will be filled with people who have the outward signs of faith but not the inward marks. In fact, this is the only way out of the exegetical dilemma for the postmillennialist."<sup>62</sup> North seeks to answer two challenging questions for fellow postmillennialists: "How can unbelievers possess so much power after generations of Christian dominion?" and "How can a world full of reprobates be considered a manifestation of the kingdom of God on earth?"<sup>63</sup> His thesis is that during the interim between the two comings of Jesus, common grace will produce a nominally Christianized world (full of inwardly rebellious people who are "externally obedient to the terms of the covenant, meaning biblical law") that will collapse in apostasy when Satan is released from prison.<sup>64</sup> He concludes, "Their rebellion will grow from the inside out. This is the meaning of the release of Satan. There will be a sudden outworking of the internal covenantal rebellion of untold numbers of previously upright citizens—externally upright."<sup>65</sup> North's refreshing candor on this point is unmatched by any other postmillennialist, but we are left doubting, for example, whether unregenerate law-keepers satisfy the discipleship envisioned in Matthew 28:18–20 and whether a world full of externally upright reprobates would genuinely fulfill prophecies like Isaiah 11:9 and Habakkuk 2:14. Does postmillennialism's optimism go no deeper than culture and covenantal externals?<sup>66</sup>

Other postmillennialists simply gloss over the comprehensive force of the phrase "the nations that are in the four corners of the earth" and divert attention to the qualifier "whose number is like the sand of the sea" (Rev 20:8), pointing out that this qualifying expression by itself does not indicate a certain quantity.<sup>67</sup> This is sheer handwaving. The qualifier intends to accentuate rather than minimize the innumerable vastness of the worldwide horde (cf. Gen 22:17–18; 32:12; Heb 11:12). Only with profound struggle can one deny "the note of universality" in the phrase "the nations that are in the four corners of the earth" (cf. Isa 11:12; Ezek 7:2).<sup>68</sup>

Since postmillennialists anticipate, on the basis of Matthew 28:18–20, a comprehensive discipling of the nations during the millennium, to be consistent they must also anticipate, on the basis of Revelation 20:7–10, a comprehensive deception of the nations at the end of the millennium. For the sake of consistency, they would need to hold that "to deceive the nations that are in the four corners of the

<sup>62</sup> North, *Dominion and Common Grace*, xiv–xv.

<sup>63</sup> North, *Dominion and Common Grace*, xiv–xv, 248.

<sup>64</sup> North, *Dominion and Common Grace*, xv, 249–50.

<sup>65</sup> North, *Dominion and Common Grace*, 250.

<sup>66</sup> One postmillennial interlocutor suggested to me that a nominally Christianized world at the end does not preclude a truly Christianized world at an earlier point. But this would mean that mankind, during its final generations, will gradually decline spiritually (from predominately regenerate to predominately unregenerate) until, at the end, humanity escalates and completes its downward spiral. This narrative strongly resembles the "pessimilennialism" that postmillennialists deride.

<sup>67</sup> See, e.g., Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 514–15; David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Horn Lake, MS: Dominion Press, 2006), 519–24.

<sup>68</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 1022. All interpreters, including postmillennialists, attribute worldwide comprehensiveness to the phrase "the four winds" in Matt 24:31. In Rev 7:1, "the four winds of the earth" map onto "the four corners of the earth."

earth” envisages the deception of all nations *as such*. After all, “the nations” (τὰ ἔθνη) describes people groups. Moreover, “the nations that are in the four corners of the earth” (τὰ ἔθνη τὰ ἐν ταῖς τέσσαρσιν γωνίαις τῆς γῆς) follows the verb “to deceive” (πλανῆσαι) as its direct object. If postmillennialists were to adopt the same method here that they use in Matthew 28:19, they would infer that Revelation 20:8 does not merely describe the deception of individuals within the nations; it more specifically predicts that Satan will deceive the nations *qua* nations. Furthermore, says the consistent postmillennialist, a nation whose non-Christian contingent composes only 50 percent of the population, for example, is not yet deceived.

Postmillennialists believe that the Great Deception will take place right before the second coming. Accordingly, Jesus will return to an earth that is in decline. When the Son of Man comes, he may not find much faith on the earth (Luke 18:8). At the very least, the earth will be littered with deceived nations and an uncountable number of rebels that he must subdue and destroy at his coming. This does not fit with the postmillennial tenet that Christ will subdue and destroy every rule, authority, and power during his heavenly reign, so that death is the only enemy left at his return.

Recall Wilson’s earlier statement that “when it would be easy to believe that it just couldn’t get any better, the Lord will come.” Rather, at best, according to postmillennialism’s placement of the millennium, when conditions on earth seem unimprovable, the devil will “deceive the nations that are in the four corners of the earth” and “gather them for battle” (Rev 20:8). Satan’s growing throng of God-haters will eventually have the saints “surrounded” (20:9a). *Then* the Lord will come to rescue his beleaguered people and consume the rebels with fire (20:9b). This smacks of the “pessimillennialism” of which postmillennialists accuse other views.<sup>69</sup> Postmillennialism undoubtedly requires a gloomier end to the interadvental period than does either historic premillennialism or new-creation millennialism, each of which puts Satan’s grand-scale deception a thousand years after the parousia.<sup>70</sup>

### 3.2. Revelation 19:11–21: Judgment Day

The wide consensus among interpreters throughout the Christian era has been that Revelation 19:11–21 depicts an earth-wide battle in which Jesus, at his second coming, will demolish all unrepentant nations, peoples, kings, and armies in fierce judgment. This interpretation poses a problem to postmillennialists, who believe (Rev 20:7–10 notwithstanding) that the Lord will return to a Christianized earth where the only remaining enemy is death. Postmillennialists escape this difficulty in one of two ways: either they spiritualize the worldwide battle in 19:11–21 and turn it into a soteriological

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<sup>69</sup> See, e.g., the chapter titled “Pessimillennialism” in Gary North, *Millennialism and Social Theory* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), 71–95.

<sup>70</sup> New-creation millennialism is a *via media* between amillennialism and historic premillennialism that temporally co-locates, at the second coming, the beginning of the millennium and the beginning of the consummated new creation. This hybrid view maintains (a) that the millennium (Rev 20:1–15) is simply the first epoch in the never-ending new heaven and new earth (21:1–22:5); (b) that no unbeliever will remain on the new earth during the millennium, since all unbelievers will be slain at the parousia (19:17–21) and no sinner can enter the new Jerusalem (21:27); and (c) that at the end of the thousand years all unbelievers will be raised from the dead, deceived, gathered for battle, judged before the great white throne, and cast into the lake of fire that comes down from heaven and consumes them (20:7–10 || 11–15). See J. Webb Mealy, *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20*, JSNTSup 70 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992); Mealy, *New Creation Millennialism* (Seattle: Amazon, 2019); Eckhard J. Schnabel, “The Viability of Premillennialism and the Text of Revelation,” *JETS* 64 (2021): 785–95; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023).

conquest that spans the time between the two advents of Christ (the idealist or allegorical approach) or they localize it to Jerusalem in AD 70 (the preterist approach). Chilton and Wilson represent each of these approaches respectively in their commentaries on Revelation.

### 3.2.1. Chilton's Idealism

Near the beginning of his exposition of Revelation 19:11–21, Chilton asserts, “St. John is not describing the Second Coming at the end of the world. He is describing the progress of the Gospel throughout the world, the universal proclamation of the message of salvation, which follows the First Advent of Christ.”<sup>71</sup> This idealist scheme must impose itself onto the text with great force, because the gruesome portrayals of judgment, warfare, blood, slaying, smiting, ruling with an iron rod, treading underfoot, fury, wrath, carnage, and scavenger birds eating their fill of flesh in these verses—particularly in their OT allusions—do not surrender easily to being soteriologized. This passage borrows extensively from OT images of punitive destruction (e.g., Ps 2:9; Isa 11:4; 63:1–6; Ezek 39:17–20; Hos 6:5) to describe the judgment of the wicked. John’s descriptions of retribution cannot function as predictions of conversion.

Crucial to Chilton’s thesis is the notion that the “sword” (ῥομφαία) of Jesus that proceeds “from his mouth” (ἐκ τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ) so that “he should smite the nations with it” (Rev 19:15) is salvific. The sword’s smiting, according to Chilton, refers to “the conversion of the nations ... as Christ sends his angels/ministers throughout the world to gather in the elect.”<sup>72</sup> In Revelation 19:21, after the beast and the false prophet are cast into the lake of fire, the remaining unbelievers throughout the earth are “slain” by Jesus “with the sword” (ἐν τῇ ῥομφαίᾳ) that comes “from his mouth” (ἐκ τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ). Chilton says this predicts “the message of the Gospel, the Word-sword of the Spirit,” which “goes out from Christ’s mouth and destroys His enemies by converting them.”<sup>73</sup>

Chilton’s allegorical interpretation contradicts the punitive purpose of the apocalyptic sword. In 2:16 (cf. 2:12; 1:16), Jesus says that if the heretics in Pergamum do not repent, “I will come soon and *I will wage war against them with the sword from my mouth*” (πολεμήσω μετ’ αὐτῶν ἐν τῇ ῥομφαίᾳ τοῦ στόματός μου). Chilton himself recognizes that this refers to “judgment” and “being destroyed.”<sup>74</sup> In 19:15, the sword from Christ’s mouth executes the vengeance prophesied in Psalm 2:9 and Isaiah 11:4. In Revelation 19:21, the same sword slays all the worshipers of the antichrist, whose names are absent from the book of life (13:8; 17:8).<sup>75</sup> Beale comments on Chilton’s interpretation:

To say that the “killing” of the Antichrist’s followers “by the sword proceeding from his [Christ’s] mouth” (19:21) refers to their conversion is to reverse the meaning of 19:11–19, of the punitive OT allusions therein, and especially of the Ps. 2:9 and Isa. 11:4 pictures, both in their original contexts and, above all, in their prior use in Rev. 1:16 and 2:12, 16.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, 481–82.

<sup>72</sup> Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, 485.

<sup>73</sup> Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, 491.

<sup>74</sup> Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, 109.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, “Revelation,” in *Hebrews–Revelation*, ESVEC 12 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 670.

<sup>76</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 971.

Furthermore, a form of the verb πολεμήσω (“I will wage war”) in Revelation 2:16 appears in 19:11 as one of the two verbs in the thematic statement summarizing Christ’s activity throughout the passage: “he judges” and “he wages war” (πολεμεῖ). On what basis does Chilton determine that the warfare in 19:11–21 is salvific rather than punitive? He already acknowledged the sword-wielding warfare threatened in 2:16 as judgment rather than salvation. None of the uses of πολεμέω (“wage war”) in Revelation signifies conversion (2:16; 12:7[2x]; 13:4; 17:14; 19:11). Nor does any instance of πόλεμος (“war”), the cognate noun (9:7, 9; 11:7; 12:7, 17; 13:7; 16:14; 19:19; 20:8).

Chilton forces arbitrary meanings onto words and prophetic pictures to buttress his eschatological edifice. One more example of this should suffice. In Revelation 19:13, Christ is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, an allusion to the bloody clothes of the divine judge of the nations in Isaiah 63:1–3: “crimson garments ... red apparel ... garments like those of the one who treads the winepress ... their blood splattered on my garments.”<sup>77</sup> The scene is one of gory vengeance. In his comments on Revelation 19:13, Chilton initially concedes that “the blood is, clearly, that of Christ’s enemies,” but then he immediately reverts to speculative allegorizing that crescendoes in postmillennial triumph:

There is a sense in which the bloody robe is stained by Christ’s own sacrifice of Himself as well. For the vision is truly an allegory of the Incarnation.... [W]e have not only an allegory of His Incarnation, but of His Atonement, Resurrection, Ascension, and Enthronement as well. This is not “only” the story of the outpouring of wrath on Israel. It is the story of Jesus Christ, the King of kings. We see here the Advent of the Son of Man: The heavens are opened, and He descends to earth to do battle with His enemies; stained with blood, He wins the victory.<sup>78</sup>

Chilton turns Revelation 19:13 into an allegory of salvation, even while stating that the language of this verse tells “the story of the outpouring of wrath.” His final sentence above would be accurate if he had not meant it allegorically. Verse 13 depicts an apocalyptic picture of eschatological vengeance.

### 3.2.2. *Wilson’s Preterism*

Wilson avoids the difficulties that plague the standard postmillennial interpretation of Revelation 19:11–21, but his preterist framework is equally untenable. He writes, “In this passage, Christ is coming to ‘judge and make war.’ It is commonly (and wrongly) assumed that this is a description of the Second Coming, but there are sound reasons for continuing to believe that this is His fierce judgment on Jerusalem in 70 A.D.”<sup>79</sup> On the contrary, this is one of several passages that militate against the possibility that the book of Revelation concerns God’s judgment on Jerusalem in AD 70.

In the opening sentence of his exposition of 19:11–21, Wilson writes, somewhat perplexingly, “Few passages in Revelation enjoy virtually universal agreement from all interpreters—but this is one of them.”<sup>80</sup> His assessment of interpretation history here is spot on. Yet by localizing (to Jerusalem) the worldwide warfare imaged in this passage, Wilson places himself firmly outside the longstanding consensus to which he refers.

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<sup>77</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 957.

<sup>78</sup> Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, 484.

<sup>79</sup> Douglas Wilson, *When the Man Comes Around: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Moscow ID: Canon, 2019), 224.

<sup>80</sup> Wilson, *When the Man Comes Around*, 223.

Wilson overlooks the universal scope of the battle, in which the returning Jesus will smite “the nations” (19:15). Wilson fails to comment on 19:15, which demands his remark, so it remains unclear how τὰ ἔθνη (“the nations”) can refer to Jerusalem. Nor does he justify restricting the referent of “the kings of the earth and their armies” (19:19) to Jerusalem. “All” unbelievers on earth are slain in this battle (19:17–21), not merely those in Jerusalem. By all accounts, including Wilson’s, 16:14 describes the same battle, which involves “the kings of the whole world.” The Apocalypse unyieldingly precludes Wilson’s localization.

The OT passages alluded to in 19:11–21 also do Wilson’s interpretation no favors. Psalm 96:13 (echoed in Rev 19:11) speaks of judgment on “the earth,” “the world,” and “the peoples.”<sup>81</sup> Wilson himself quotes, in successive blocks, Isaiah 11:4, Psalm 2:9, and Isaiah 63:1–6, where, he aptly observes, “this judgment [in Rev 19:11–21] is predicted.”<sup>82</sup> True. But those OT predictions are irreducibly worldwide in nature. In Isaiah 11:4, Christ smites “the earth” with his iron rod.<sup>83</sup> In Psalm 2:9, he dashes into pieces the raging “nations” (LXX: ἔθνη) at “the ends of the earth” (2:8). In Isaiah 63:1–6, he tramples “the peoples,” such as “Edom” and “Bozrah.”

Chilton appreciates the universal scope of this battle but erroneously spiritualizes or soteriologizes it and spreads it over the entire interadvental era. Wilson correctly identifies the macabre warfare as fierce judgment on God’s enemies but mistakenly localizes it to Jerusalem. Neither expositor attends judiciously or thoroughly to the text of Revelation.<sup>84</sup>

What do these strained interpretations of Revelation 19:11–21 achieve in light of the clear implications of 20:7–10? The universal deception prophesied in this latter passage, according to the postmillennial and amillennial placement of the millennium, will create a situation on earth in which Christ at his return will need to subdue a profusion of people who have come under Satan’s spell. A worldwide confrontation between Christ and his countless foes, like what we see in 19:11–21, will be in order at the parousia. In fact, in postmillennialism as well as amillennialism, 20:9 describes just such a worldwide conflict at the second coming.

<sup>81</sup> While אֶרֶץ can mean “the land” or “the ground” in some contexts, its parallelism with תִּבְלָה (“the world”) corroborates that “the earth” is its meaning here.

<sup>82</sup> Wilson, *When the Man Comes Around*, 225.

<sup>83</sup> אֶרֶץ refers to the whole earth no less in Isa 11:4 than in 11:9.

<sup>84</sup> Peter J. Leithart (*Revelation 12–22*, ITC [New York: T&T Clark, 2018], 269–98) takes a preterist-idealist approach to Rev 19:11–21. He spiritualizes the warfare and is unable to pinpoint its historical referent with much “specificity, or confidence” (p. 293). He interprets the battle typologically as the “conquest” that follows the “exodus” of 18:4 (pp. 293–94). He temporally locates the battle somewhere between the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the millennium, whose beginning he dates roughly to the end of the first century. He summarizes, “Rev 19:11–21 is the church moving out from the ruins of Jerusalem and Judea to conquer the entire world” (p. 295). But long before Jerusalem’s fall to Rome in AD 70, the church had already moved out from Jerusalem and Judea and had taken the gospel to the entire world, in fulfillment of Matt 24:14, 28:19–20, and Acts 1:8 (see section 2.1 above). The cross, not Jerusalem’s destruction, launched the church’s victorious mission to the nations. By the time Jerusalem fell, the gospel had been “conquering the entire world,” so to speak, for a whole generation with astonishing success. The events of AD 70, however important otherwise, did not supply any impetus to the church’s missional trajectory, which was fully set at and propelled by the cross of Christ.



#### 4. *This Unresurrected World Is Not My Home*

We unreservedly agree with postmillennialists that death will not be swallowed up in victory until the second coming (1 Cor 15:54). Death will continue to sting until then (15:55). Christ's destruction of death through the gospel (2 Tim 1:10) will remain preliminary and far from being finished in this age. There is a deep disparity between our "already" triumph over death in Christ (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12; 3:1) and the "not yet" absolute victory over death that we will experience at the resurrection.

Death's inexorable persistence to the end of the age bears witness to the colossal ontological chasm that separates this world from the next one. This great divide not only separates the "already" destruction of death from its "not yet" defeat. It also equally separates the "already" disempowerment of the rulers, authorities, and powers through the cross (1 Cor 2:6) from their "not yet" abolition at the end (15:24). "All the enemies" (1 Cor 15:25) of Christ—that is, "every rule and every authority and power" (15:24) and "death" (15:26)—are in the same situation: they have been decisively wounded by the cross, but their total destruction, itself the outworking of that earlier decisive defeat, will not come in this world, not even close.

The ontological chasm between the present age and the one to come will always be as great as that between sinning pilgrims and perfected saints (Gal 5:17; Heb 12:23), between earth and heaven (1 Cor 15:47–49), between our lowly corruptible bodies and our glorious incorruptible ones (15:53; Phil 3:20–21), between mortality and immortality (1 Cor 15:54), between the former things of this groaning creation and the final things of the glorious new heaven and new earth, in which there will be no tears, death, mourning, or pain (Rom 8:19–23; Rev 21:4). The new creation broke into this world at the resurrection of Jesus, and it continues to infiltrate the old creation (2 Cor 5:17), but the present age will never approach the eternal weight of incomparable glory to be revealed on the last day (Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:17). No amount of kingdom expansion or cultural triumphs can narrow the chasm. Spiritual progress only gets us closer to the edge of the precipice, where we can see with greater clarity the immensity of the gulf and the intensity of the splendor on the other side, and where our longing for that incorruptible glory intensifies (Rom 5:2–5; 8:18–30; 2 Cor 4:14–18; 1 Pet 1:3–9).

Sin, suffering, death, and struggle against the rulers, authorities, and powers will characterize creation until God regenerates it and makes it incorruptible at the parousia. Ever since the fall, "the whole creation has been groaning and laboring together in birth pangs" (Rom 8:22). It has been "subjected to futility" (8:20). It is in "bondage to *corruption* [φθοράς]" (8:21; cf. 1 Cor 15:42, 50, 52–54). Such a corruptible creation cannot produce or "inherit" the kingdom of God, which is incorruptible. Indeed, "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Nor does *corruption* [φθορά] inherit *incorruption* [ἀφθαρσίαν]" (1 Cor 15:50). Our eschatological hope lies wholly beyond the timeline of this unresurrected world. Specifically, along with creation, we are "waiting expectantly for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For we were saved in this hope" and "we wait expectantly for it with patience" (Rom 8:23–25; cf. 2 Cor 5:1–5).

The expectation of a time in this corruptible world "when it would be easy to believe that it just couldn't get any better" (Wilson) betrays a hope misplaced. Until Jesus returns, including the minute before he does so, it will be easy to believe that things could get orders of magnitude better. Groaning will endure until the resurrection (Rom 8:23; 2 Cor 5:2, 4). On this side of the second coming, God's people will have tribulations (John 16:33) through which we conquer (Rev 2:9–11; 3:10–12) and enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). We trust that the Lord will "bring [us] safely into his heavenly kingdom"

(2 Tim 4:18) either at death (4:6) or when that heavenly kingdom descends to earth (4:1, 8; Rev 21:2). Neither we nor the rest of creation can inherit the kingdom before then.

### 5. When Comes the Kingdom?

The disciples wondered about the timing of the kingdom. They asked their risen Lord, “Will you at this *time* [χρόνῳ] *restore* [ἀποκαθιστάνεις] the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). They were hopeful that Jesus was about to fulfill the words of the OT prophets by setting Israel over every “nation and kingdom” (Isa 60:12; cf. 14:2; 45:14–17, 25; 49:23–26; 60:3–17; 61:5–6, 9–11) and “high above all the nations in praise, fame, and honor” (Deut 26:19; cf. 28:1–3, 9–10, 13).<sup>85</sup> The prophets spoke of a time when God and the Davidic king would rule all nations from Jerusalem in a spiritually and politically restored Israel (e.g., Pss 2:6–12; 72:8–11; 110:1–7; Isa 9:6–7; 11:1–16; 33:20–21; 62:1–2, 6–8; Jer 3:14–18; 23:5–8; Ezek 37:1–39:29; Hos 3:5; 14:4–7; Amos 9:11–15; Obad 15–21; Mic 4:1–5:15; Zech 1:12–17; 2:1–12; 3:2; 12:1–14:21) and in a new creation (Isa 65:17–25) that will have a new Jerusalem (65:18–19, 25). Jesus had said in Matthew 19:28 that creation’s “rebirth” or “regeneration” (παλιγγενεσία) will coincide with the kingdom’s restoration, “when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne” (in Jerusalem, it was assumed) and the apostles “will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”<sup>86</sup> In Acts 1:6, the Jewish disciples were asking their resurrected Messiah when he planned to usher in the promised new creation in which he and they, while sitting on their thrones in a restored Jerusalem and Israel, will enjoy preeminence over all the nations and kingdoms.<sup>87</sup>

Jesus replied that it was not for them to know the “times [χρόνους] and seasons” of the restoration of the kingdom (Acts 1:7; cf. 1 Thess 5:1). Their task was to receive the Spirit of power and take the gospel to the end of the earth as they waited for the restoration (Acts 1:8). Then Christ ascended to heaven (1:9) and two angels assured the disciples that one day Jesus would return bodily to restore the kingdom on earth (1:10–11).

A short time later, while preaching in Solomon’s Portico, Peter made explicit that when God sends Israel’s Messiah back to earth, the promised restoration of the kingdom will accompany him. Speaking to Jews, Peter proclaimed, “Repent therefore and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the *times* [χρόνων] of the *restoration* [ἀποκαταστάσεως] of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago” (Acts 3:19–21).<sup>88</sup>

In summary, the holy prophets foretold the restoration of the kingdom on earth, and Peter said that those prophecies will be fulfilled at the second coming (Acts 1:6, 11; 3:20–21; cf. Matt 19:28). Can postmillennialists identify the holy prophets that Peter had in mind? Which OT prophecies of kingdom restoration will come to fulfillment at Christ’s bodily return? Postmillennialism deprives itself of a ready answer, insisting as it does that the OT prophecies of a restored kingdom on earth will be fulfilled *before* the parousia rather than *at* it.

<sup>85</sup> Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, 210, 302.

<sup>86</sup> Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, 530.

<sup>87</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Introduction and 1:1–2:47* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 682–84.

<sup>88</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: 3:1–14:28* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 1109–12.

The heavenly kingdom will come to earth when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead (Rev 11:18), at which point the times of the restoration of all things will begin: the kingdom of this world shall become that of God and his Christ, who shall reign forever and ever (11:15).<sup>89</sup> King Jesus, “the root and the descendant of David” (22:16), will rule over the new heaven and new earth from his throne in “New Jerusalem” (21:2), into which will stream “the glory and honor of the nations” (21:26).

### 6. *Summary, Implications, and Conclusion*

Postmillennialism lacks a biblical text to establish its assumption that “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Hab 2:14) *before* the restoration of the kingdom—that is, the restoration of all things—at Christ’s return (Matt 19:28; Acts 1:6–11; 3:20–21). Boettner and Kik tried to keep this view alive during the third quarter of the twentieth century, after the overextended interpretations of the Puritans and the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century postmillennialists had been deservedly marginalized, but the dearth of scriptural support for this position caused many to leave it for dead.<sup>90</sup> In 1977, with rallying calls rather than exegesis, Rushdoony and fellow Reconstructionists revived postmillennialism, and since then some have propped it up with idiosyncratic and often novel arguments beset with methodological missteps. At every turn, postmillennialism runs aground exegetically. It routinely keeps textual details out of focus, or interprets them tendentiously and naively, in service of an appealing but biblically unwarranted “worldview.”

What, then, is the appeal of postmillennialism if it is biblically indefensible? It focuses on this world, to which our hearts are naturally drawn, rather than on the one to come. It promises triumph in this age, and modern postmillennial movement leaders (from Rushdoony to Wilson) inspire their followers to fight for that victory. Postmillennialism rejects retreatism and denounces defeatism, offering a more compelling narrative instead. Nevertheless, postmillennialism’s this-worldly conception of Christ’s kingdom lays the theological and spiritual seedbed for (1) a culture warriorism characterized by carnal warfare and worldly stratagems and (2) the nominal Christianity that North expects to develop worldwide during the interadvental period.<sup>91</sup> The first of these, some form of which has become integral to the task of disciple-making for many postmillennialists, logically paves the way for the second. Cultural engagement, political resistance, and social activism that are deficient in humility, patience, and cruciform piety, and that rely on human ingenuity more so than the work of God’s Spirit (Zech 4:6), have been perennial lures for believers, particularly for those living in spiritually declining societies. But such fleshly endeavors, no matter how clever or empowering, are powerless to save souls, sanctify Christians, or transform cultures. All believers, perhaps postmillennialists especially, must resist the pull to become so earthly minded that we are of no heavenly good (2 Cor 4:18; Col 3:1–4).

The disciples experienced this pull. They wanted to conquer and reign with the Messiah on earth through conventional means, not by way of the cross (Matt 16:21–25; Mark 10:35–45). Peter’s earthly-minded triumphalism led him to “struggle against flesh and blood” (Eph 6:12) and to “wage war according to the flesh” (2 Cor 10:3) in his altercation with Malchus (John 18:10). This heartfelt but

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<sup>89</sup> Beale (*Revelation*, 611–20) eliminates preterist interpretations of Rev 11:15–19.

<sup>90</sup> Murray (*Puritan Hope*, xviii) distinguishes Puritan eschatology from postmillennialism and critiques the exegetical methods of both.

<sup>91</sup> For an insider’s perspective on and critique of (1), see James B. Jordan, “The Dominion Trap,” *Biblical Horizons* 15 (1990), <https://biblicalhorizons.com/biblical-horizons/no-15-the-dominion-trap/>.

misguided engagement with the enemy did not set Peter up for spiritual victory later that night (18:17, 25–27). Nor did it advance Christ’s kingdom on earth. Peter doubtless figured that his mind was set “on things above,” on kingdom matters, but to his dismay it was actually fixed “on earthly things” (Col 3:2; cf. 2 Pet 1:3–11). His prayerlessness in the garden (Mark 14:32–42) led to misplaced zeal and from there naturally to denying Jesus—a cautionary tale for zealous believers who have not yet faced significant temptations to deny Christ (1 Cor 10:12). After Peter’s denials, Jesus told Pilate, “If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting” (John 18:36). This is a timely word for anyone tempted, as Peter was, to bring in the kingdom and “destroy strongholds” using carnal weapons of warfare (2 Cor 10:4) instead of God’s armor (Eph 6:10–18). There are, of course, times to fight, laugh, and feast.<sup>92</sup> But there are also times to wait and weep (Esth 4:3), and God expands his kingdom while we sow and sleep (Mark 4:26–29). We fight, even as our Lord did, fundamentally through prayer and fasting (Matt 4:1–11; 6:13; 26:36–46; Mark 9:29; Luke 18:1–8; 22:31–32; Acts 12:5; Eph 6:18; Col 4:2–4; cf. 2 Chr 20:3–12; Ezra 8:21–23; Neh 1:4–11). A danger of the postmillennial vision, as we see it embraced today, is that it pushes the Christian and the church to a truncated set of strategies and an incomplete set of virtues.

In view of the exegetical implausibility, theological shortcomings, and spiritual hazards of postmillennialism, believers should eschew “Jewish dreams that there will be a golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment” (Second Helvetic Confession XI) and keep a lookout for Christ’s imminent second coming (Matt 24:36–25:13; Luke 12:40; Rom 13:12; Jas 5:8; 1 Pet 4:7; 2 Pet 3:12; 1 John 2:18; Rev 1:1, 3; 2:16; 3:11; 22:6–7, 10, 12, 20), knowing that our eschatological “salvation” is ever “ready to be revealed” (1 Pet 1:5). Triumphalist expectations about what must transpire on earth before Jesus comes back diminish the comfort and motivation to godliness that stem from loving and anticipating his near return (Mark 13:32–37; Phil 3:20; 4:5; 1 Thess 1:10; 4:15–18; 5:6–11; 2 Tim 4:8; Titus 2:11–13; Heb 10:24–25; Jas 5:9; 2 Pet 3:10–12; 1 John 3:2–3). As long as the Father continues to delay (Matt 24:48; 25:5, 19; 2 Pet 3:4) the paradoxically fixed day of the parousia (Matt 24:36; Acts 1:7; 17:31) to allow more time for repentance (2 Pet 3:8–9) and to complete the divinely preset amount of suffering and martyrdom assigned to the church (Col 1:24; Rev 6:11), we must hasten that final day by living godly lives (2 Pet 3:11–12).<sup>93</sup> And we must use the borrowed time to deepen and widen the victory of the Great Commission achieved by the apostles, eagerly anticipating the redemption of our bodies and continually praying, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20; cf. 1 Cor 16:22; Westminster Confession of Faith XXXIII.III).

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<sup>92</sup> I allude here to the postmillennial Fight, Laugh, Feast Network.

<sup>93</sup> Richard J. Bauckham, “The Delay of the Parousia,” *TynBul* 31 (1980): 3–36; David L. Mathewson, *Where Is the Promise of His Coming? The Delay of the Parousia in the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018); Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC 37 (Nashville: B&H, 2003), 389–91.

# Beacons from the Spire: Evangelical Theology and History in Oxford's University Church

— Jason G. Duesing —

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**Abstract:** Thought to be the most visited church in England, the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford has hosted, from its pulpit, figures of note of English church history. This essay applies the metaphor of a signal beacon to trace the development of evangelical history and theology through the examination of significant sermons preached in St. Mary's by Thomas Cranmer in the 16th century, John Owen in the 17th century, John Wesley in the 18th century, the evangelical response to the Anglo-Catholics in the 19th century, and C. S. Lewis in the 20th Century.

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In June 2022, Queen Elizabeth II walked a red carpet at Windsor Castle to ignite a towering tree of light that served as the principal beacon to mark the Platinum Jubilee Anniversary of her reign. Following her lead, her grandson led the lighting at Buckingham Palace and then throughout Britain and the Commonwealth, some 3,500 beacons were lit to honor the occasion.<sup>1</sup> A sequence of beacons connecting across the nation first served as an ancient form of communication to warn of invasion, but in the modern era has come to serve as a symbol of unity to celebrate major anniversaries and events.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I aim to take this beacon image and apply it as a metaphor to make a historical connection instead of a geographic one. Oxford, home of England's oldest university, is known as the city of "dreaming spires"<sup>3</sup> for its skyline marked by dozens of steeples arising like beacons from college chapels and churches. The spire of spires, or the beacon of beacons, if you will, rests atop the University

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<sup>1</sup> Randy Pennell, "The Queen and Prince William Lead Beacon Lightings as Communities in Britain and Beyond Honor Her," *New York Times*, 2 June 2022; William Booth, "Beacon Masters' Light the U.K. on Fire for Queen's Platinum Jubilee," *Washington Post*, 2 June 2022.

<sup>2</sup> "The Queen's Platinum Jubilee Beacons," 19 November 2022, <https://www.queensjubileebeacons.com/about>.

<sup>3</sup> A phrase first used by Matthew Arnold observing Oxford from nearby Boars Hill. See "Thyrsis," in *MacMillan's Magazine* 13.78 (April 1866): 449.

Church of St. Mary the Virgin.<sup>4</sup> The earliest written record of the Church of St. Mary's in Oxford appears in William the Conqueror's 11th century Domesday Book.<sup>5</sup> Thus, from the University's founding in the twelfth century until the seventeenth century, the St. Mary's church and the University were connected, especially in terms of physical property.<sup>6</sup> St. Mary's hosted the meetings of the University's leadership, housed the University's library, and hosted the awarding of degrees.<sup>7</sup> Yet, St. Mary's housed more than academics. Within its corridors, and from its pulpit, stood prominent figures from England's church history, including John Wycliffe, the Marian Martyrs, the Cromwellian Puritans, the Oxford-Movement Tractarians, and 20th century giants D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones and C. S. Lewis. Of course, this does not even begin to recount the many, if not all Monarchs, and global heads of state who have seen St. Mary's as the place to visit whilst in Oxford.<sup>8</sup> These reasons are just part of the reason why St. Mary's is thought to be the most visited church in Britain.<sup>9</sup>

For English speaking evangelicals, whether or not Anglican, the history and theology of Christianity in England is our heritage. When we read an English Bible or worship as Protestants in English, we stand on the shoulders of men and women who preserved that heritage in our language. Therefore, my aim in this essay is small and specific: To review the history and theology of evangelicals in England through select evangelical sermons preached in St. Mary's, Oxford from the 16th century to the 20th. My argument, aside from highlighting a fascinating and helpful part of church history, is that these sermons function as beacons that upheld the light of the gospel from the spire of spires in Oxford. They not only shone as lights in their century, but also transferred the light of the gospel to the next.

In the 21st century, what or who is an evangelical is a question that needs definition given how that term is used and misused. While David Bebbington's quadrilateral presents a tested grid, for this essay, I will use Thomas Kidd's compatible but simplified definition: "Evangelicals are born-again Protestants who cherish the Bible as the Word of God and who emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus Christ

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<sup>4</sup> Not to be confused with Great St. Mary's, the University Church in Cambridge, a comparable site of historic significance where Martin Bucer is buried, that witnessed the Elizabethan Puritan movement, and hosted a Billy Graham Crusade.

<sup>5</sup> Edmund S. Ffoulkes, *A History of the Church of S. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, the University Church: From Domesday to the Installation of the Late Duke of Wellington, Chancellor of the University* (London: Longman's, Green, and Co., 1892), 3. Following the Battle of Hastings, the two volumes of the Domesday Book report the land conquest of the Normans, which points to the church existing at least as early as the 11th century. See Melvyn Bragg, *The Adventure of English* (New York: Arcade, 2003), 37–38.

<sup>6</sup> R. W. Southern, "From Schools to University," and M. B. Hackett, "The University as Corporate Body," in *The History of the University of Oxford*, ed. J. I. Catto (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 28, 62–63.

<sup>7</sup> When touring there, one could give an hour-long lecture on the events of each century from the 14th to 21st, pointing to architecture, which architect Ian Davis describes as "packed with curious features," and its rich history. See Ian Davis, *Experiencing Oxford* (Wheatley: Aveton, 2020), 81. Davis's entire chapter gives a helpful overview of key architectural features of St. Mary's and intended symbolism. As the central feature, St. Mary's spire dates to the 14th century.

<sup>8</sup> A. S. Hargreaves, "Oxford, St Mary the Virgin," in *The Oxford Companion to British History*, ed. Robert Crowcroft and John Cannon, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Davis, *Experiencing Oxford*, 82. And today, the cafe that exists in the original site of the university, serves an exceptional full English Breakfast. See also, Brian Mountford, *The University Church of St Mary the Virgin* (Hampshire: Pitkin, 1992).

through the Holy Spirit.”<sup>10</sup> Thus when I refer to “evangelical theology and history” with respect to sermons preached at St. Mary’s, I mean sermons marked by the three characteristics of conversion, Bible, and life lived in relationship to the divine presence of God.

### *1. A Beacon Morning Star as Medieval Forerunner*

Oxford University was the first European university to focus on the liberal arts. Formed officially in 1214, those gathering to teach and learn on the banks of the Thames in Oxfordshire dates at least a century earlier. By the 14th century, medieval Oxford had a system of colleges that welcomed philosophers and scholars, one of whom was John Wycliffe.<sup>11</sup>

While an Oxford scholar, Wycliffe’s call for the translation of the Bible into English shone like a Morningstar of the Reformation, as it pre-figured William Tyndale’s and Martin Luther’s later bright lights.<sup>12</sup> Wycliffe’s beacon from Oxford challenged Rome and the status quo of church life. In an era where all were required to attend church services, but no one understood the Latin used by the priests, Wycliffe’s push for a new Bible threatened the gate keepers of the Scriptures. Like in all churches in England and Rome, the priests of St. Mary’s alone were allowed to read the Bible. When they reached an important part in the reading they would ring a bell to incite the congregation to respond.<sup>13</sup> This Pavlovian function of Scripture—and the Priests as Emperors wearing New Clothes as it were, is what moved Wycliffe to action. While the Priest’s bells rung in St. Mary’s, down the High Street Wycliffe risked organizing friends to aid him in an underground translation of the Bible from the Latin Vulgate into English.<sup>14</sup> As Melvyn Bragg describes, this enterprise made Oxford “the most dangerous place in

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas S. Kidd, *Who is an Evangelical?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 4. See David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), 2–3: conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism. See other similar definitions in Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 55–56; Douglas A. Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 24.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher A. Snyder, *Gatsby’s Oxford* (New York: Pegasus, 2019), 18–19. Though Wycliffe was seen as “the university’s recognized leading philosopher” and “his dramatic career plunged the university into the hottest controversy she would experience until the reformation,” I have not been able to document an appearance by Wycliffe in the pulpit at St. Mary’s. See J. I. Catto, “Wyclif and Wycliffism at Oxford 1356–1430,” in *The History of the University of Oxford*, ed. J. I. Catto and Ralph Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 2:186–87. Ffoulkes, *A History*, 193, surmises that one sermon he lists “may be thought to have preached” in St. Mary’s.

<sup>12</sup> The reference to Wycliffe as a “morning star” first appeared in John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*, ed. George Townsend (London: G. Seeley, 1870), 2:792, but Daniel Neal coined the phrase “Morning Star of the Reformation” in 1732 in his *The History of the Puritans* (London: R. Hett, 1732), 1:3. See James Crompton, “John Wyclif: A Study in Mythology,” in *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society* 42 (1966–1967): 6–34.

<sup>13</sup> There is some connection between Chaucer and Wycliffe, the former taught by the latter at Oxford and, perhaps, depicted Wycliffe in his *Canterbury Tales* story of the “Parson’s Tale.” See “The Parson,” *Christianity Today*, 19 November 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-3/parson.html>.

<sup>14</sup> There remains some debate and ambiguity as to the certainty of Wycliffe’s direct participation in translation. Anne Hudson and Anthony Kenny conclude that “Whether Wyclif himself participated at an early stage seems irretrievable,” yet, “The association of biblical translation with his followers ... confirms Wyclif’s inspiration as a crucial factor in the collaborative labours,” see “Wyclif [Wycliffe], John [called Doctor Evangelicus] (d. 1384), theologian, philosopher, and religious reformer,” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. David Cannadine [ODNB], 23 September 2004. However, Mary Dove’s extensive linguistic analysis led her to conclude that “Wyclif

England ... which challenged the biggest single force in the land and called into the public court the authority of the revealed language of God.”<sup>15</sup> As challenging as it might be for contemporary evangelicals to comprehend, to question the Bible in Latin in Medieval England was to question the essence and authority of the Church.

Wycliffe also questioned Rome’s practice of “Simony,” in their offer of spiritual benefit for a price, as well as whether the Pope had the authority to appoint bishops and the general pursuit of political power.<sup>16</sup> These agitations resulted in a Papal Bull of excommunication for Wycliffe from Pope Gregory XI. Thus, Wycliffe’s effort would not yet transform the church in England, and it would take another century and a half before the Bible would be read in English from St. Mary’s and other churches. However, that day did come and, thus Wycliffe serves as a fitting preamble, a Morningstar, for later evangelical preaching from St. Mary’s, as, even though he was not honored in Oxford or England, Wycliffe became known as the Evangelical Doctor, *Doctor Evangelicus*, by the followers of John Hus.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. A Beacon Aflame in the 16th Century

William Tyndale, another Oxonian, took up Wycliffe’s mantle in the 16th century. He started preaching the same year (1521) Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, in fear of Luther’s Reformation, burned all “heretical books” outside of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London—including any remaining copies of Wycliffe’s Bible in English.<sup>18</sup> Thus, by 1524, Tyndale left England to translate the Bible in English and to send it back covertly, which he did with success as “the noise of the new Bible echoed throughout the country.”<sup>19</sup> Further, with the arrival of the King’s new Archbishop, Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556), in 1533, the new Church of England insisted on seeing the Bible read by the people of the church, including in Oxford at St. Mary’s. Though Tyndale’s actions led to his execution in 1536, the politician-King, Henry VIII, saw the need for a change of view and allowed, in 1537, the start of official printing of the Bible in English in England.

Henry VIII’s death gave Cranmer architectural freedom when it came to advancing reforms within the Church of England. The nine-year-old Edward VI received guidance by Cranmer and others who produced a *Book of Common Prayer* (1549), a significant liturgical first for the English language that would shape England’s political, social, and religious history.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, C. S. Lewis later noted that

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instigated the project, that the work began in the early 1370s in the Queen’s College, Oxford, and that Wyclif, [Nicholas] Hereford, and [John] Trevisa all played a part in the translation,” *The First English Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Bragg, *Adventure*, 81. See also Catto, “Wyclif and Wyclifism at Oxford 1356–1430,” 2:175–262.

<sup>16</sup> John Wycliffe, *On Simony*, trans. Terrence A. McVeigh (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992). 84. See also Jason G. Duesing, “A Cousin of Catholicism,” in *Shepherding God’s Flock*, ed. Benjamin Merkle and Thomas Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 229.

<sup>17</sup> Hudson and Kenny, “Wyclif.”

<sup>18</sup> Bragg, *Adventure*, 99. See also Sybil M. Jack, “Wolsey, Thomas (1470/71–1530), royal minister, archbishop of York, and cardinal,” in *ODNB*, 23 September 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Bragg, *Adventure*, 104.

<sup>20</sup> Carl Trueman, *Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 111. See also Duesing, “A Cousin of Catholicism,” 232. In 1549, Cranmer appointed Peter Martyr Vermigli as Regius Professor of Divinity in Oxford. A regular preacher at St. Mary’s Vermigli would influence Cranmer’s writing of the *Book of Common Prayer*.



“Cranmer’s great achievements as a translator are sunk in the corporate anonymity of the *Book of Common Prayer*.”<sup>21</sup> However, Edward VI’s death in 1553 brought the return of the influence of Rome via Mary I. More than just influence, Mary I sought eradication of all those who aided her father’s Reformation in England. This led to the imprisonment of Cranmer in Oxford along with bishops Hugh Latimer and Nicolas Ridley. Leslie Williams explains that “Mary had singled out this trio to represent everything the new regime hated.”<sup>22</sup>

Starting in April 1554, the Reformers were tried in St. Mary’s through a series of exhausting disputations that sought to document their heresy against Rome for the day when Roman church authority was reestablished.<sup>23</sup> While the trio were imprisoned the authorities gathered a crowd to receive and worship the Eucharist from a priest outside their window, a visible sign of the end of the Reformation movement.<sup>24</sup> Months of imprisonment continued until Mary I appointed her cousin, Cardinal Pole, as papal legate to restore official connection to Rome and to permit them to execute heretics. Nearly eighteen months from the start of their imprisonment, the trio were tried again in St. Mary’s. Today, there are still holes in the chancel’s wooden stalls thought to have held the nails used to build the platform on which they stood.<sup>25</sup> Refusing to state their allegiance to the pope and recant, Latimer and Ridley were sentenced to death. In October 1555, the two were marched in front of Cranmer’s cell on their way to the place of execution outside Balliol College.<sup>26</sup> Cranmer looked on in anguish as Latimer cried out, “Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God’s grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.” In the months that followed, scholars in sympathy to Rome came to persuade Cranmer to recant. They promised such would save his life as there was no hope for a pardon. Cranmer held his ground until January 1556 when, after months of physical trial and loneliness, he sought to find a way to sign the recantation documents and did. Mary and Pole did not relent, rather they sent other papal commissioners to strip Cranmer of all his dignity, forcing him to recant five more times, taking away all his property and further degrading his health and mental state, all the while counting down the days to his execution on March 21, 1556.

Cranmer made his way to St. Mary’s and a large crowd watched his disheveled and weakened body climb to a new platform installed near the pulpit. The workers who erected the platform in St. Mary’s butchered the stone at the base of one of the columns so as to anchor the wooden structure, and today, the cut stone remains, a monument all its own.<sup>27</sup> Cranmer endured a sermon from Cardinal

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<sup>21</sup> C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century (Excluding Drama)*, reprint ed. (San Francisco: Harper One, 2022), 229. This is fitting with what he terms the Drab Age of English literature (p. 73): “The Drab Age begins before the Late Medieval has ended, towards the end of Henry VIII’s reign, and lasts into the late seventies. *Drab* is not a dyslogistic term. It marks a period, for good or ill, poetry has little richness either of sound or images. The good is neat and temperate, the bad is flat and dry. There is more bad than good.”

<sup>22</sup> Leslie Williams, *Emblem of Faith Untouched* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 129.

<sup>23</sup> For the accounts of the trials and martyrdoms see J. E. Cox, ed., *The Works of Thomas Cranmer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1844–1846), 1:391–427; Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 8:3–100; Lord Houghton, ed. *Bishop Cranmer’s Recantations* (London: n.p., 1885).

<sup>24</sup> Williams, *Emblem*, 131. This paragraph is a summary of Williams, *Emblem*, 129–45. See also Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 554–605.

<sup>25</sup> Davis, *Experiencing Oxford*, 84.

<sup>26</sup> This site is marked today by a cross in the pavement in the middle of Broad Street.

<sup>27</sup> Davis, *Experiencing Oxford*, 84.

Pole that explained to the masses why Cranmer faced execution at the hands of the Queen, even though he recanted. Pole recounted Cranmer's heretical beliefs and made the case for the need for justice. Throughout the sermon Cranmer displayed visible anguish and grief. At the conclusion, Pole invited Cranmer to speak and make his recantation public so that "men may understand that you are a catholic indeed."<sup>28</sup>

Cranmer's address to the crowd is not a sermon in the traditional sense, but there in St. Mary's, Cranmer would recant his recantations and testify to his evangelical Protestant faith to the awe and anger of those gathered. As Cranmer accepted Pole's invitation to respond, he first knelt and prayed aloud. In his prayer, he addressed God the Trinity, and recounted the gospel of the Bible: "You did not give your Son, O heavenly Father, unto death for small sins only, but for all the greatest sins of the world, so that the sinner return to you with his whole heart, as I do here at this present."<sup>29</sup> Concluding with a recitation of the Lord's Prayer from Matthew 6, Cranmer stood and spoke to those gathered stating that he hoped to speak something "whereby God may be glorified, and you edified."<sup>30</sup> Both his prayer and his initial remarks reveal something of his relationship with the divine presence of God—an evangelical distinctive.

Cranmer then gave four exhortations to the crowd for godly living in church and society after his passing. In these exhortations, he cited passages from the Bible conveying his belief that the Bible has authority to guide the Christian life. Cranmer then explained that there was one matter he needed to address that had vexed him, "more than anything I ever did or said in my whole life," that is, a clear word about what he believes.<sup>31</sup> Cranmer recited the Apostle's Creed concluding that he believed "every word and sentence taught by our Saviour Jesus Christ, his apostles and prophets, in the New and Old Testaments."<sup>32</sup> Following his affirmation of the gospel and the Scriptures, Cranmer then listed all the things he renounced explaining that though he had recanted what he had taught, he did so contrary to what was in his heart for fear of death.<sup>33</sup> Thus, afraid no longer, he then repudiated papal authority, referring to the pope as "Christ's enemy, and antichrist, with all his false doctrine."<sup>34</sup> Finally, Cranmer rejected the Roman Catholic view of the sacraments, affirming the Protestant views he had published, stating with boldness that at the day of judgment, the papal view "shall be ashamed to show her face."<sup>35</sup>

At this dramatic turn of events, Cranmer was pulled down from the platform and taken outside to the execution site of Latimer and Ridley. As he prepared for death, Cranmer put his right hand, the one that signed the recantations, into the flame first, and held it there until he died. Cranmer's sermon in St. Mary's represents his life lived for the truth of the Bible, its gospel-message of conversion, and call to a life lived in relationship with God. This beacon aflame from St. Mary's fulfilled the words of Latimer that, like a candle, the truths for which these martyrs died had not been snuffed out.

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<sup>28</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 8:86. This paragraph is a summary of Williams, *Emblem*, 146–51.

<sup>29</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 8:87.

<sup>30</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 8:87.

<sup>31</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 8:88.

<sup>32</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 8:88.

<sup>33</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 8:88.

<sup>34</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 8:88.

<sup>35</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 8:88.

### 3. A Beacon for Piety in the 17th Century

For evangelicals who have learned of the Puritans in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the Puritans are revered more for their doctrinal purity and piety rather than for their engagement in England's Civil War.<sup>36</sup> Yet, to tell of their contribution to the development of England's religious history, one must do so in Cromwellian fashion, that is, "warts and all."<sup>37</sup> Some of the warts include the various ways in which these purifiers participated in the defacing of many longstanding edifices, or what Eamon Duffy calls the "stripping of the altars." With the stabilizing and compromising reign of Elizabeth I, churches renovated their architecture and practice to remove Catholic iconography, sometimes with the violence likened to a modern reciprocating saw. Duffy laments this makeover as he observes that the "Reformation was a stripping away of familiar and beloved observances, the destruction of a vast and resonant world of symbols which [the people] understood and controlled."<sup>38</sup> Regardless of whether the people preferred the Reformation, by the 1570s and 1580s a new generation, steeped in the language of Cranmer, Duffy notes, "believed the Pope to be Antichrist, the Mass a mummary, [and] did not look back to the Catholic past as their own, but another country, another world."<sup>39</sup>

William Laud (1573–1645) served as Chancellor of Oxford during the 1630s, and his actions proved to enhance the anti-Puritan sentiment. Long thought to have "popish sympathies," Laud served Charles I as Archbishop from 1633 and sought to bring ceremonial conformity to all Puritan Nonconformists.<sup>40</sup> At Oxford, Laud led the implementation of a return to Romish ceremony, in part, through architectural enhancements, including St. Mary's. Robin Usher classified it as "a showcase for ecclesiastical innovation."<sup>41</sup> St. Mary's continued to serve as the center of worship at Oxford, a sentiment underscored by James I wherein he issued "a demand that junior members worship in St Mary's rather than the city parishes, wherein Puritan influence was rumored to be strong."<sup>42</sup> These actions, and others<sup>43</sup> including the 1637 expansion of St. Mary's porch, complete with a Madonna and Child statue—the

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<sup>36</sup> As a helpful working definition of Puritanism, B. R. White indicated that it "seems right to define the period of true Puritanism as 1570–1640 and a Puritan as an earnest Protestant, his understanding of the Bible shaped by a theology which was broadly Calvinist in type, who, while remaining a member of the established Church of England, sought its further reformation often, though not always in the direction of Presbyterianism," in "Introduction," in *The English Puritan Tradition* (Nashville: Broadman, 1980), 12. For further discussion of the complexities within the English Puritan movement see David D. Hall, *The Puritans: A Transatlantic History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

<sup>37</sup> Bragg, *Adventure*, 272. This phrase is attributed to the Lord Protector who when, during the interregnum, sat for his portrait by an artist famous for the way he enhanced the features of his subjects, said, "I require you to paint me as I am, warts and all."

<sup>38</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 591.

<sup>39</sup> Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 593.

<sup>40</sup> Anthony Milton, "Laud, William (1573–1645), Archbishop of Canterbury," in *ODNB*, 23 September 2004.

<sup>41</sup> Robin Usher, "William Laud, the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, and Biblical Architecture in Early Stuart Oxford," *The British Art Journal* 16.1 (Summer 2015): 16.

<sup>42</sup> Usher, "William Laud," 17. Further, "Members of the university as a whole were expected to gather in the nave of the church for the weekly Latin sermon," 18.

<sup>43</sup> Laud updated the statutes of the University in 1636 at the request of Charles I to "control religious divisions inside the University." See "Statutes of the University of Oxford, 2020–21," 19 November 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/3bz5ujyc>.

first externally placed sculpture since the Reformation, created tension.<sup>44</sup> Of note, chronicler Anthony Wood, explained that in September 1642, near the start of the English Civil War, the statue endured rifle fire by Parliamentary soldiers, a strong reaction by those who feared the porch signaled a return of papal authority.<sup>45</sup> In response, Laud claimed he did not have knowledge of the statue's origins, though there is credible reason to doubt this claim. As Nathaniel Brent, a Puritan leader in Oxford's Merton College noted, "there were no Altars in [Oxford] Until the Archbishop came to be Chancellor. That of late, crucifixes & Images have been lately set up in colledges."<sup>46</sup> Laud's influence in Oxford and England diminished as the Civil War ensued and the removal of Laud in addition to the removal of the head (literally) of state.<sup>47</sup> Congregations were then permitted to "determine their forms of Christian teaching and worship."<sup>48</sup> This interregnum era, wherein Oliver Cromwell served as Lord Protector, gave rise to Presbyterian discussions of "the settlement of the Government and Liturgy of England" as well as the propagation of Independent Congregationalist and Baptist churches.<sup>49</sup>

Chaplain to Cromwell, Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, Independent minister and theologian, John Owen (1616–1683) is termed the "the leading proponent of high Calvinism in England in the late seventeenth century."<sup>50</sup> John Owen's relationship with Oxford University began during his days as a bachelor's and master's student, starting from the age of twelve in 1628 (which was not uncommon), until 1637. Thus, Owen matured during the Laudian era at Oxford, and Laud's theological and structural changes likely did not sit well with Owen's Puritan upbringing.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Owen's likely first experience in St. Mary's consisted of listening to sermons in Latin.<sup>52</sup> Not long after the time of the monarch's visit in 1636, signaling the high point of Laud's influence, and Laud's publication of the new Statutes in June 1637, Owen left Oxford to serve as a family chaplain.<sup>53</sup> The tumultuous 1640s saw Owen's reputation as a preacher and theologian of Independency grow. Following the execution of Charles I, Owen preached before Parliament, which led Oliver Cromwell to enlist Owen as a personal chaplain. In 1651, Cromwell then appointed Owen as dean of Christ's Church College in Oxford.<sup>54</sup> Owen would serve as dean, receive

<sup>44</sup> Usher, "William Laud," 16.

<sup>45</sup> Usher, "William Laud," 19. See also, T. G. Jackson, *The Church of St. Mary the Virgin* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1897), 163; Anthony Wood, *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood*, ed. Andrew Clark (Oxford: Clarendon, 1891), 1:63, 444. The statue was restored further in 1852. See Davis, *Experiencing Oxford*, 85.

<sup>46</sup> Usher, "William Laud," 20.

<sup>47</sup> One of the evidences cited at Laud's trial for setting up "popery" was the statue atop the new porch at St. Mary's. See Davis, *Experiencing Oxford*, 85.

<sup>48</sup> William P. Haugaard, "From the Reformation to the Eighteenth Century," in *The Study of Anglicanism*, ed. Stephen Sykes and John Booty (London: SPCK, 1988), 20.

<sup>49</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Atlanta: Committee for Christian Education & Publications, 1990), xiv.

<sup>50</sup> Richard L. Greaves, "Owen, John (1616–1683), Theologian and Independent Minister," in *ODNB*, 23 September 2004. Greaves also calls Owen, "A beacon of nonconformity."

<sup>51</sup> Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 30.

<sup>52</sup> Peter Toon, ed. *The Correspondence of John Owen (1616–1683): With an Account of His Life and Work* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1970), 5.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1971), 123.

<sup>54</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pedersen, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2006), 457–58.

an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree (1653), then vice-chancellor until 1657, and during this era had influence over the teaching of undergraduate students.

Owen and his colleague, fellow Independent Puritan and President of Magdalen College, Thomas Goodwin, would each preach in the local colleges on Sunday morning and then preach a regular schedule of Sunday afternoon sermons to undergraduate students in St. Mary's from 1652 until 1657. Crawford Gribben notes, "These sermons, directed at the undergraduate population of the city, combined the theological mode with the devotional."<sup>55</sup> Owen's propensity to challenge formality, no doubt, gained following among the students. He wore large ribbons around his knees with Spanish leather boots, and atop his powdered hair, he wore a hat cocked to one side.<sup>56</sup> Yet, it was Owen's homiletical approach that had a lasting effect. Anthony Wood recounted that Owen's "graceful behaviour in the pulpit ... could, by the persuasion of his oratory ... move ... the affections of his admiring auditory almost as he pleased."<sup>57</sup> Following the death of Oliver Cromwell, Owen and Goodwin were replaced by Presbyterian leaders, having fallen out of favor with Cromwell's son, and no longer preached in St. Mary's.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, Owen's St. Mary's sermons, while not extant, served as the basis for Owen's later works including *Of the Mortification of Sin* (1656), *Of Communion with God* (1657), and *Of Temptation* (1658).<sup>59</sup>

Owen's sermons on communion with God serve as a prime example of Owen as an evangelical beacon preaching from the St. Mary's pulpit for piety, especially as they emphasized the believer's relationship with the Triune God.<sup>60</sup> This practical emphasis was done for edification, in contrast to the politicization of theology in the world around Owen and the pressures he felt "to govern a restless and uneasy university community and to manage its affairs under a government in political turmoil."<sup>61</sup> As Gribben explains, Owen saw that "the scholastic bent of much mid-seventeenth century preaching and writing was not producing the godliness that [he] believed it should."<sup>62</sup> Thus, as Beeke and Jones explain, in his sermons "Owen embraced the idea of enjoying the Trinity and amplified it through the concept of distinct communion with each divine person," though two-thirds of the material focuses on communion with the Son, "for without Christ no communion between God and man can exist."<sup>63</sup> This is seen right at the start of *Of Communion with God* where Owen cited 1 John 1:3 to show his student audience that fellowship of believers is with God himself.<sup>64</sup> Owen continued to show how "this distinct

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<sup>55</sup> Gribben, *John Owen*, 130.

<sup>56</sup> Anthony Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses* (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1820), 4:738.

<sup>57</sup> Toon, *God's Statesman*, 55; Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, 4:741.

<sup>58</sup> Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 459.

<sup>59</sup> Toon, *Correspondence*, 47.

<sup>60</sup> Philip Henry (1631–1696), father of the Presbyterian leader, Matthew Henry, was a student at this time and reflected on the helps he had "not only for learning, but for religion and piety." Of the latter, he mentioned the sermons by Owen and Goodwin "on the Lord's day, in the afternoon." See Matthew Henry, *Life and Times of Rev. Philip Henry, M.A.* (London: Thomas Nelson Paternoster Row, 1848), 60.

<sup>61</sup> Gribben, *John Owen*, 172.

<sup>62</sup> Gribben, *John Owen*, 173.

<sup>63</sup> Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2012), 103, 105, 111.

<sup>64</sup> John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, reprint ed. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 2:5.

communion, then, of the saints with the Father, Son, and Spirit, is very plain in the Scripture.”<sup>65</sup> This is remarkable, for Owen explained that “since the entrance of sin, no man hath any communion with God,” yet, through the “manifestation of grace and pardoning mercy ... in Christ we have boldness and access with confidence to God.”<sup>66</sup> Owen explained in a later sermon that “Because Christ was God and man in one person, he was able to suffer and to bear whatever punishment was due to us.... There was room enough in Christ’s breast to receive the points of all the swords that were sharpened by the law against us. And there was strength enough in Christ’s shoulders to bear the burden of that curse that was due us.”<sup>67</sup> In response Owen exhorted,

Let us, then, receive Christ in all his excellences and glories as he gives himself to us. Frequently think of him by faith, comparing him with other beloveds, such as sin, the world and legal righteousness. Then you will more and more prefer him above them all, and you will count them as all rubbish in comparison to him.<sup>68</sup>

Communion with God, then, is both “perfect and complete” and “initial and incomplete.” It is perfect and complete, Owen explained, “in the full fruition of his glory,” and initial and incomplete “in the first fruits and dawns of that perfection which we have here in grace.”<sup>69</sup>

Owen’s sermons from St. Mary’s functioned as beacons of piety during an era of confusion and distraction for students living in Oxford during the interregnum. His emphasis on the relationship a believer can have with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit is just one example of his evangelical preaching, and pointed to a way of living in an era of uncertainty.<sup>70</sup>

#### *4. A Beacon Warning in the 18th Century*

John Wesley studied at Oxford first in 1720. As the primary output of graduates from Oxford at that time was ministry in the Church of England, Wesley prepared for a ministry career. Following his education at Oxford, Wesley served as a tutor from 1729 and there joined with his brother, Charles, and three others, to meet to pursue a methodical form of piety. Their self-discipline earned the name the Holy Club, at first, and eventually the Methodists.<sup>71</sup> George Whitefield joined the Holy Club not long after he matriculated and heard John Wesley preach in St. Mary’s on “The Circumcision of the Heart.”

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<sup>65</sup> Owen, *Works*, 2:11.

<sup>66</sup> Owen, *Works*, 2:6–7.

<sup>67</sup> This text taken from John Owen, *Communion with God*, abridged by J. K. Law (London: Banner of Truth, 1991), 66. See original in Owen, *Works*, 2:67.

<sup>68</sup> This text taken from Owen, *Communion with God*, 60. See original in Owen, *Works*, 2:59.

<sup>69</sup> Owen, *Works*, 2:9.

<sup>70</sup> During the reign of Charles II, Baptists in Oxford were forced to hear a sermon at St. Mary’s as punishment for gathering illegally. See Larry J. Kreitzer, “Religion and Dissent in 17th Century Oxford: A Walking Tour,” *Angus Library and Archive*, 19 November 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/krwkcyem>.

<sup>71</sup> Douglas A. Sweeney, *American Evangelical*, 37. As Heather Ellis notes, by the 1760s the “Holy Club succeeded in establishing small groups of supporters in no less than nine colleges including some of the larger societies like Christ Church,” Heather Ellis, *Generational Conflict and University Reform: Oxford in the Age of Revolution* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 48. Ellis lists Christ Church, Lincoln, Queen’s, Brasenose, Merton, Corpus Christi, Magdalen, Pembroke, and Exeter.

Thomas Kidd explains that this sermon showed Whitefield that “true holiness was available through the Holy Spirit,” which would aid in his own conversion in the months that followed.<sup>72</sup> Yet, though a leader in the Oxford “Holy Club,” and a preacher at St. Mary’s, Wesley’s impact on the history of Christianity in England did not land with full force until his conversion, which took place *after* a missionary journey to America. Iain Murray explains that “despite his high ambitions for work among the Indians, [Wesley] was inwardly a dissatisfied man ... he had sought inward holiness of life and not found it.”<sup>73</sup>

Wesley wrestled with assurance until reading Martin Luther on Galatians in 1738, wherein he felt his heart “strangely warmed.” From that moment, Wesley preached a warm-hearted gospel all over Britain and, often, in the face of opposition and ridicule. This served to light a fire that Mark Noll marks as a turning point in the history of Christianity. Noll states, “The Wesleys’ work of [gospel] revitalization, in effect, created modern evangelicalism out of the legacy of Reformation Protestantism.”<sup>74</sup> Thus, when given the opportunity to return to Oxford to preach at St. Mary’s, Wesley focused on the gospel and the state of Christianity in the city. He preached in St. Mary’s in 1738 giving a sermon from Ephesians 2 that explained salvation “implies a deliverance from guilt and punishment, by the atonement of Christ.... So that he who is thus justified, or saved by faith, is indeed *born again*.”<sup>75</sup> Increasingly, Wesley grew uneasy with the status quo he observed in the church and concluded that many preachers were not born again.

Preaching on a Friday and St. Bartholomew’s Day, Wesley entered St. Mary’s with a procession that included, in full regalia, the Vice-Chancellor, Proctors, and the Doctors of Divinity.<sup>76</sup> Given Wesley’s new-found zeal since 1738, Jim Coleman observes that Wesley entered the pulpit not “as a foe, rather as an interventionist.”<sup>77</sup> Using Acts 4:31, “And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost,” Wesley introduced his topic slowly and then began to raise his voice.<sup>78</sup> His brother, Charles, later noted, “Never have I seen a more attentive congregation. They did not let a word slip.”<sup>79</sup>

Wesley accelerated to his main points and explained that he would use the word, Christianity, not as a “system of doctrines, but as it refers to men’s hearts and lives.”<sup>80</sup> In three parts, Wesley considered the beginning of Christianity, its spread from one to another, and then to the ends of the earth. He concluded with practical application, asking where does this Christianity now exist, and then “in tender love,” asked “Is this a Christian city? Is Christianity, scriptural Christianity, found here? ... Are all the Magistrates, all Heads and Governors of Colleges and Halls ... of one heart and soul?”<sup>81</sup> Probing further,

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<sup>72</sup> Thomas S. Kidd, *George Whitefield: America’s Spiritual Founding Father* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 27. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Conference, 1872; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 5:202

<sup>73</sup> Iain H. Murray, *Wesley and Men Who Followed* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 5.

<sup>74</sup> Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 219–22. Wesley, *Works*, 1:103.

<sup>75</sup> See Edward H. Sugden, ed. *Wesley’s Standard Sermons* (London: Epworth, 1920), 1:35–36, and Wesley, *Works*, 3:7, 12.

<sup>76</sup> Sugden, *Wesley’s Standard Sermons*, 1:87.

<sup>77</sup> Jim R. Coleman, “Text and Performance in John Wesley’s Final Oxford Sermon: Anthesis and Appeal in Scriptural Christianity,” paper presented at the Conference on Sermon Studies (West Virginia, 2018), 3.

<sup>78</sup> Sugden, *Wesley’s Standard Sermons*, 1:89.

<sup>79</sup> Sugden, *Wesley’s Standard Sermons*, 1:88.

<sup>80</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 3:38.

<sup>81</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 3:48.

he asked the professors tasked to “form the tender minds of the youth ... are you filled with the Holy Ghost? ... Do you continually remind those under your care, that the one rational end of all our studies is to know, love, and serve ‘the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent?’”<sup>82</sup> To these rhetorical questions, Wesley responded that he fears this is not the case and that the University’s leaders were rather characterized by pride, sloth, and “even a proverbial uselessness.”<sup>83</sup> To the students, Wesley asked the same types of questions, implying their commiserate unfaithfulness. He attested that, at one time, he too swore “to observe all those customs which I then knew nothing of” and concluded that it was nothing less than perjury.<sup>84</sup> To question those who had taken oaths of lying caused significant unease, and if that were not enough, he chided his audience for “Even the talk of Christianity, ye cannot, will not bear.”<sup>85</sup>

A student in attendance, Benjamin Kennicott, later wrote that Wesley’s sermon “gave a universal shock.”<sup>86</sup> Wesley knew his sermon had its intended effect and later wrote in his journal, “I preached, I suppose the last time, at St. Mary’s [Oxford]. Be it so. I am now clear of the blood of these men. I have fully delivered my own soul.”<sup>87</sup> He noted that the Vice-Chancellor asked for his notes, which meant likely that “every man of eminence in the University” would read it—a thought that caused Wesley to admire “the wise providence of God.”<sup>88</sup> Wesley set out to use the Methodists within the Church of England to combat apathy. Yet, increased criticism, theological differences, and limited access to the churches, led him to an increasing separation of the Methodists.<sup>89</sup> Wesley’s sermon at St. Mary’s started this exodus and functioned as a beacon of evangelical preaching in that, from the Bible, it called his listeners to pursue genuine conversion that resulted in a true relationship with God.

### 5. *A Beacon Underground in the 19th Century*

Throughout the 19th century, evangelicals flourished within the Church of England under the preaching influence of Charles Simeon in Cambridge and in Liverpool with J. C. Ryle.<sup>90</sup> However, despite a strong evangelical presence, Oxford grew consumed by what would become the Anglo-Catholic

<sup>82</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 3:49.

<sup>83</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 3:50.

<sup>84</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 3:51.

<sup>85</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 3:52.

<sup>86</sup> Sugden, *Wesley’s Standard Sermons*, 1:90. See also Richard Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 165–67.

<sup>87</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 1:470.

<sup>88</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 1:470.

<sup>89</sup> Albert C. Outler, ed. *John Wesley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 20–22. See also Duesing, “A Cousin of Catholicism,” 241, and Henry D. Rack, “Wesley, John (1703–1791), in *ODNB*, 23 September 2004. Wesley and Whitefield were excluded from many pulpits and took to preaching outdoors, Murray, *Wesley*, 9–10. Though Wesley did receive an invitation to return to St. Mary’s in Oxford to preach a sermon titled, “Scriptural Christianity” in August 1744.

<sup>90</sup> For more on the Evangelical Anglicans see Perry Butler, “From the Early Eighteenth Century to the Present Day,” in *The Study of Anglicanism*, ed. Stephen Sykes and John Booty (London: SPCK, 1988), 33; G. R. Balleine, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908); and Duesing, “A Cousin of Catholicism,” 260–61.



movement, the debate over Darwin's theories, the advancement of socialism and, overall, a wrestling with a crisis of faith.<sup>91</sup> Simply put, the Bible was questioned and jettisoned in this era by the likes of Darwin, and in Oxford, the agnostic T. H. Huxley.<sup>92</sup> As one quip goes, referencing the passage of the south-to-north Turl Street from High Street and St. Mary's to Broad Street near Jesus College:

"How is the Anglican Church like the Turl?"

Answer: "Because it goes from High to Broad, passing by Jesus."<sup>93</sup>

In addition, the Oxford poet in this era, Percy Shelley, and his friend, John Keats, along with the literary critic Matthew Arnold, colored the university with Romantic hues, and desired to point back to a medieval aesthetic. Listen to Arnold's praise for Oxford:

Beautiful city! so venerable, so lovely, so unravaged by the fierce intellectual life of our century, so serene! ... And yet, steeped in sentiment as she lies, spreading her gardens to the moonlight, and whispering from her towns the last enchantments of the Middle Ages, who will deny Oxford, by her ineffable charm, keeps ever calling us nearer to the true goal of all of us, to the ideal, to perfection,—to beauty.<sup>94</sup>

This emphasis on beauty did not contradict evangelical theology, but in its day, and in Oxford, it distracted. The call to return to a romanticized view of the Middle Ages paired well with a new movement that arose among leading Anglican clerics in Oxford—Tractarianism. John Henry Newman, the popular vicar of St. Mary's, along with John Keble, Edward Pusey, and others, formed what Christopher Snyder called, "a spiritual counterpart to the Romantic movement ... that questioned whether any real and significant theological differences divided Anglicanism and Catholicism and called for a return of medieval liturgical elements."<sup>95</sup> The Oxford Movement, as it came to be known, also took on the name Tractarianism following their publication of ninety controversial documents or Tracts from 1833 to 1841.<sup>96</sup>

The fear of a return of popery existed (and exists) as an ongoing tension for Anglicans. Eamon Duffy observed that, given the history of Roman Catholicism in England the liturgy and architecture function like *Jurassic Park's* amber, "vestiges of that past which were to prove astonishingly potent in reshaping

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<sup>91</sup> Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 8. Evangelicals in the early 19th century were strengthened by leaders such as Daniel Watson (1778–1858) at St Edmund Hall and who preached, on occasion, at St. Mary's. See Sir Marcus Loane, *Oxford and the Evangelical Succession* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2007). In addition, dissenting evangelicals in Oxford were led by James Hinton (1761–1823) at the now named New Road Baptist Church. See Chance Faulkner, ed., *The Diary of James Hinton (1761–1823)* (Peterborough: H&E Publishing, 2020).

<sup>92</sup> Timothy Larsen, *A People of One Book: The Bible and Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>93</sup> Personal correspondence with David Bebbington, September 2022.

<sup>94</sup> Snyder, *Gatsby's Oxford*, 30. Matthew Arnold, *Essays in Criticism* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1865), xiv-xv.

<sup>95</sup> Snyder, *Gatsby's Oxford*, 33.

<sup>96</sup> The movement began with John Keble's sermon "National Apostasy," preached in St. Mary's on 14 July 1833. See Keble, *National Apostasy Considered in a Sermon* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1931). Further, see *Tracts for the Times*, 6 vols. (London: Rivingtons, 1834–1841).

the Church of England's future."<sup>97</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch anchors the source of the tension in Elizabeth I's via media of "a Protestant theological system and Protestant programme for national salvation sheltering within a largely pre-Reformation Catholic church structure."<sup>98</sup> One of the reasons there was a nation-wide response to the Tractarians is the traction it gained among students. Heather Ellis explains that the Oxford Movement came "to be feared as the locus of a revolutionary youth movement engaging in crypto-Catholic theological speculations as dangerous to the Anglican establishment as any inspired by the ideology of the French Revolution."<sup>99</sup> Thus, as critique mounted toward the Oxford leaders, many panicked that there would be a fleet of students crossing the Tiber to Rome.

Beyond the scope of this essay is an analysis of the work and theology of Newman, Pusey, and Keble, but needless to say, their movement generated widespread interest and critique.<sup>100</sup> At one level, the critique is theological. Wherein the Tractarians stated their emphasis was in the *adiaphora* of liturgy and ceremonial experience, it became clear there were significant doctrinal modifications.<sup>101</sup> As Carl Trueman notes, the theological drift in the Church of England "is, by and large, a history of failure to apply the Thirty-Nine Articles and to carry forward the theology they contain."<sup>102</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the London Baptist pastor, Charles Spurgeon, monitored the Oxford Movement and voiced concern in a series of four sermons beginning with "Baptismal Regeneration" in June 1864. Spurgeon stated, "I see this coming up everywhere—a belief in ceremony, a resting in ceremony, a veneration for altars, fonts, and Churches.... Here is the essence and soul of Popery, peeping up under the garb of a decent respect for sacred things."<sup>103</sup> Geoffrey Chang explains, "Spurgeon's concern was not merely for the growth in ceremony and ritual, but for what those things represented, namely, a 'resting in ceremony' rather than a resting in Christ."<sup>104</sup>

Nevertheless, Oxford also saw the positive effect these challenges had in strengthening the faith of many, and even seeing skeptics return to faith after seeing the faith of their parents diminished, evidence

<sup>97</sup> Eamon Duffy, "The Shock of Change: Continuity and Discontinuity in the Elizabethan Church of England," in *Anglicanism and the Western Christian Tradition*, ed. Stephen Platten (London: Canterbury, 2003), 63–64. See also Duesing, "A Cousin of Catholicism," 224.

<sup>98</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Later Reformation in England, 1547–1603* (New York: St. Martin's, 1990), 78. See also Duesing, "A Cousin of Catholicism," 243.

<sup>99</sup> Heather Ellis, *Generational Conflict*, 187.

<sup>100</sup> Kenneth J. Stewart, "John Henry Newman (1801–1890) in His Second Century," *Themelios* 39.2 (2014): 268–80. See also J. I. Packer, "The Oxford Evangelicals in Theology," in J. S. Reynolds, *The Evangelicals at Oxford, 1735–1871: A Record of an Unchronicled Movement with the Record Extended to 1905* (Oxford: Marcham Manor, 1975), 82–94.

<sup>101</sup> For a summary see Geoffrey Chang, "Spurgeon's Use of Luther against the Oxford Movement," *Themelios* 43.1 (2018): 53.

<sup>102</sup> Trueman, *Creedal Imperative*, 115. The phrase 'by and large' cited here is not meant by this author to overlook the faithfulness of many Evangelical Anglicans who seek to follow the Thirty-Nine Articles. See Richard Turnbull's helpful *Anglican and Evangelical?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007) and Duesing, "A Cousin of Catholicism," 244–46.

<sup>103</sup> *MTP* 10:323.

<sup>104</sup> Chang, "Spurgeon's Use of Luther," 54.

of what Timothy Larsen called, “the Victorian crisis of doubt.”<sup>105</sup> Christianity in the Victorian era, and thus in Oxford, is complex for, on the one hand as Larsen says, “the Bible was a dominant presence in Victorian thought and culture” and functioned at the center of dialogue, preaching, and missionary advance.<sup>106</sup> Yet, on the other, nascent modernism, Romanticism, and Tractarianism combined, in Oxford, needless to say, to the minimization of the types of preaching exemplified by Owen and Wesley in previous centuries. To put it another way, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelical preaching at St. Mary’s went underground, even while, in Oxford, there arose a specific and coordinated response to the Oxford Movement.

Kenneth Stewart observes that the rise of Tractarianism “had the unintended effect of generating tremendous renewed interest across the English-speaking world in the leading personalities and writings of the Reformation.”<sup>107</sup> In 1843, nearly 300 years after the martyrdom of Latimer, Ridley, and Cranmer, the Anglican Low Church erected a memorial spire near the site of their execution in direct response to the Tractarian Movement to remind the nation that these bore “witness to the sacred truths which they had affirmed and maintained against the errors of the Church of Rome.”<sup>108</sup> While a response to a movement within Oxford, the monument represented the widespread views of the rest of the Church of England that Andrew Atherstone argues was as much anti-Catholic as it was anti-Tractarian.<sup>109</sup> Edmund Ffoulkes (1819–1894), the vicar and historian of St. Mary’s and one who left Anglicanism for Rome in the 1850s, only to return after a change of heart in the 1870s, remarked how the nation applauded the Martyr’s Memorial, “For England still feels at her core that the Reformation, whatever its blemishes when it was seething, at length set her free to develop steadily through the three hundred years that are past since then, and to become what she now is.”<sup>110</sup>

As the memorial resembles a grounded spire without a church building, there is a legend that some Oxford tour guides will tell guests that the spire is the top to a church building buried beneath the ground, only to point them down adjacent stairs that lead to public bathrooms. Thus, for the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is fitting to say that evangelical preaching in Oxford did not take place with regularity, if at

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<sup>105</sup> Timothy Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>106</sup> Larsen, *A People of One Book*, 1.

<sup>107</sup> Kenneth J. Stewart, “The Oxford Movement and Evangelicalism: Initial Encounters,” *Themelios* 44.3 (2019): 509.

<sup>108</sup> The full inscription reads, “To the Glory of God, and in grateful commemoration of His servants, Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley, Hugh Latimer, Prelates of the Church of England, who near this spot yielded their bodies to be burned, bearing witness to the sacred truths which they had affirmed and maintained against the errors of the Church of Rome, and rejoicing that to them it was given not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for His sake; this monument was erected by public subscription in the year of our Lord God, MDCCCXLI.” See “Martyr’s Memorial,” 19 November 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/bdh99fdj>.

<sup>109</sup> Andrew Atherstone, “The Martyr’s Memorial at Oxford,” in *JEH* 54 (2003): 278–301. In fact, Owen Chadwick shares that “Newman and Keble refused to have anything to do with the plan [for the memorial]. They thought that they would appear to repudiate [Richard] Froude. They shared his hostility to Reformers.” See Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church: Part One 1829–1859*, 3rd ed. (London: SCM, 1987), 177.

<sup>110</sup> Ffoulkes, *A History*, 219. For more on Ffoulkes, see “Edmund Salusbury Ffoulkes,” Jesus College Oxford, 19 November 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/4jsr2by7>. The principles to which the Church of England was set free by the Reformation, according to Ffoulkes, are (1) the Scripture is the standard to which the church should conform and (2) the church is free to change ceremonies so long as it does not depart from the commands of Christ.

all, in St. Mary's, but though underground, and represented by a new memorial to evangelical martyrs, it would resurface.<sup>111</sup>

## 6. *A Beacon of Hope in the 20th Century*

The early 20th century also endured the fruit born by the rise of higher criticism of the Bible in the 19th century. Faced with that challenge, as well as the pull of the claims of science from without, evangelicals were divided within on eschatology and cultural engagement. David Bebbington describes evangelicalism in this period as “walking apart,” for by “the Second World War, Evangelicalism had become much more fragmented than it had a century before.”<sup>112</sup> Further, Diarmaid MacCulloch argues that the advent of the World Wars of the 20th century brought to death Christendom itself. He says, “By the end of the 1960s, the alliance between emperors and bishops which Constantine had first generated was a ghost; a fifteen-hundred-year-old adventure was at an end.”<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, throughout the tumultuous 20th century evangelicalism thrived in many churches and a new generation of students were looking for answers. As one example, the influential London former medical doctor, now evangelical pastor, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, preached to a full congregation of students on a Sunday evening at St. Mary's in 1941.<sup>114</sup> Yet, in Oxford, more influence for evangelicals would come through Lloyd-Jones's lunch partner during that visit, C. S. Lewis.

During World War II, Lewis remained busy, if not more than usual. His efforts to complete his survey of 16th century English Literature remained on the back burner as he spoke to several Royal Air Force bases and recorded “Right and Wrong: A Clue to Meaning in the Universe,” a series of four radio addresses for the BBC in London. Received to wide acclaim, Lewis's talks became *Mere Christianity*. Prior to this in June 1941, Lewis preached a Sunday evening sermon at St. Mary's titled, “The Weight of Glory.”<sup>115</sup> Justin Taylor documents that in the months leading up to Lewis's sermon: “British cities were on the receiving end of 100 tons of explosives dropped during air raids, including 71 attacks upon London, some 60 miles to the southeast.”<sup>116</sup> Yet, despite the war, one of the largest crowds in St. Mary's

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<sup>111</sup> This was due, in part, to a consistent evangelical presence in Oxford through St Ebbe's Church and St Edmund Hall. See J. S. Reynolds, *The Evangelicals at Oxford*.

<sup>112</sup> David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 228.

<sup>113</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2010), 915.

<sup>114</sup> Iain Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 52, 76.

<sup>115</sup> Harry Lee Poe, *The Making of C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 251. The Sunday evening services were set aside for well-known preachers to address students. A tradition started in 1898 by then vicar, Henry Lewis Thompson, evening services were the first to use the new electric light and were established to ensure St. Mary's retained “its ancient and traditional power as the true centre of Christian Oxford.” See Marjorie Reeves, *St Mary the Virgin University Church Oxford* (Oxford: Norham, 2003), 2.

<sup>116</sup> Justin Taylor, “75 Years Ago Tonight: C. S. Lewis Delivers a Sermon in Oxford on ‘The Weight of Glory,’” *The Gospel Coalition*, 19 November 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2snzyzcy>.

history gathered that evening.<sup>117</sup> Lewis gained a hearing in the war years, in part, because of his clarity.<sup>118</sup> As Jason Baxter notes, “one of Lewis’s chief concerns was finding ways to transpose, translate, and re-create the atmosphere of the ancient world in a modern vernacular.”<sup>119</sup> Alister McGrath comments on the reasonableness of faith that Lewis conveys in his sermon. He states, “The starting point for Lewis’s approach is an experience—a longing for something undefined and possibly undefinable, that is as insatiable as it is elusive.... The university sermon ‘The Weight of Glory’ ... is the most elegant statement of [this] argument.”<sup>120</sup> Though considered a sermon, Lewis did not follow common homiletical practice. The referenced text is from Revelation 2, but he does not address it directly and only at the end. Instead, Lewis’s sermon is more like an address, but nevertheless it resonated then as it still does today in the way it inspires hope in and knowledge of God.

The opening section of “The Weight of Glory,” is, perhaps, the most familiar when he suggests to his student audience, living in war time, that self-denial is not the highest of virtues, but rather love. He then admonished that “it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak.... We are ... like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.”<sup>121</sup> Lewis proceeded to paint a hopeful picture of heaven with Jesus Christ based upon the authority of Scripture, that is a “transtemporal, transfinite good” and, thus any desire of ours placed on anything other than God will not satisfy. Yet, we are far too easily pleased and are asleep under the evil enchantment of worldliness—the modern philosophies that promise satisfaction from things on earth. On this point George Marsden notes, “In weaving his various spells to break the blinding enchantment of modern disenchantment, Lewis does not denigrate the role of reason. Rather, he uses all his rational powers to expand his audience’s abilities to recognize other dimensions of reality beyond those known by instrumental reason alone.”<sup>122</sup>

To break this enchantment, to see what is true reality Lewis argues that the use of story, or fantastical imagery, is useful “to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness” that keeps us from hearing the “news from a country we have never yet visited.” These symbols do not have, nor are meant to have, the authority of Scripture, Lewis said, but can be helpful to awaken us and put us on the path of searching Scripture.<sup>123</sup> As Kevin Vanhoozer comments, “Lewis’s imagination is not the opiate of the people but a

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<sup>117</sup> Taylor, “75 Years Ago Tonight.” Vicar T. R. Milford enlisted Lewis to aid in ministering to “many bereaved and distressed people” by first starting “a question-time session after the morning service in which C. S. Lewis, author of *The Problem of Pain*, assisted.” See Reeves, *St Mary the Virgin*, 8.

<sup>118</sup> Sarah Clarkson assesses that “Lewis practised what he preached in his sermon ... and ‘conducted all his dealings’ in such a way that his life was the slow becoming of ‘everlasting splendor.’” See Sarah Clarkson, “The Best Tale Lewis Ever Told,” in *C. S. Lewis at Poet’s Corner*, ed. Michael Ward and Peter Williams (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2017), 106.

<sup>119</sup> Jason M. Baxter, *The Medieval Mind of C. S. Lewis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 14.

<sup>120</sup> Alister McGrath, “Telling Truth Through Rational Argument,” in *C. S. Lewis at Poet’s Corner*, ed. Michael Ward and Peter Williams (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2017), 8–9.

<sup>121</sup> C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, reprint ed. (San Francisco: Harper One, 2001), 26.

<sup>122</sup> George M. Marsden, *C. S. Lewis’s Mere Christianity: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 174.

<sup>123</sup> Further, Lewis explains the aesthetic value of Christian theology in his essay, “Is Theology Poetry?” when addressing the “confusion between imaginative enjoyment and intellectual assent.” As to the specific use of ancient pagan imagery, Lewis explains, “We should, therefore, expect to find in the imagination of great Pagan teachers

dose of caffeine that snaps us awake.”<sup>124</sup> Lewis explained that our conception of heaven is symbolic, but the difference between that and what we might conceive on our own, is that it comes to us via scriptural authority and promises that we will be with Christ and be like him.

Lewis was doing far more in his sermon, but for our purposes, he was tying his argument to the Bible and using biblical arguments to show his audience that not only is knowing God in relationship possible, but also it is to be desired above any other thing. This idea, when one considers it in full, is burdensome and carries a weight of glory “which our thoughts can hardly sustain.” Baxter argues that “it was Dante more than any other author who taught Lewis about how to ‘build’ images of weight that could allude to the dynamic truth of spiritual realities.”<sup>125</sup> This is the case here, as Baxter shows that Lewis has in mind Dante’s illustration of a poet gazing at nearby mountains, “which do not just seem high, but dizzying, as if they were exerting weight merely by being so high.”<sup>126</sup> This idea of weight connects to 2 Corinthians 4:17, of course, and conveys, as Dante did, the idea of a “‘heavy’ holiness, as weighty as the mass of mountains.”<sup>127</sup> Yet, despite the weight, Lewis showed that following 1 Corinthians 8:3, those who love God will know God, and be known by him. This is the upward hope to which he pointed his audience in the midst of an uncertain earthly future during the days of the Second World War and the destructive effects of modernity on Christian theology and biblical truth.

Thanks to Lewis, and others at Oxford in the later part of the 20th century, pockets of evangelicalism began to fill and the effects of two World Wars drew many to find answers from evangelical theology. One student, James Packer, converted to Christ in 1943, and the next year was invited to serve as the junior librarian at Oxford’s Christian Union student organization. An octogenarian clergyman had recently donated his library and Packer was given the job of sorting through them in the basement of North Gate Hall. Situated in Oxford, the basement sat just a few yards from the site where Cranmer was imprisoned, and not far from where Wesley ministered, Packer discovered a set of the works of John Owen. At the time of this discovery, Packer would later relate his life “was all over the place” emotionally and thus “God used [Owen] to save my sanity.”<sup>128</sup> More than just sorting out Packer, his literal “recovery” of the Puritans, a few blocks away from St. Mary’s, would start a new movement that not only would bring great and good revived interest in these evangelical forebears, but also would help provide an anchor to the Word of God during the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s in the United Kingdom and abroad.<sup>129</sup>

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and myth makers some glimpse of that theme which we believe to be the very plot of the whole cosmic story--the theme of incarnation, death, and rebirth.... It is not the difference between falsehood and truth. It is the difference between a real event on the one hand and dim dreams or premonitions of that same event on the other.” See C. S. Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, 128–29.

<sup>124</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, “In Bright Shadow,” in *The Romantic Rationalist*, ed. John Piper and David Mathis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 96.

<sup>125</sup> Baxter, *Medieval Mind*, 88.

<sup>126</sup> Baxter, *Medieval Mind*, 92.

<sup>127</sup> Baxter, *Medieval Mind*, 92.

<sup>128</sup> Leland Ryken, *J. I. Packer: An Evangelical Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 265–67.

<sup>129</sup> One could argue, that had not Packer discovered that box of books, his tremendously influential and life altering works, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (1958) and *Knowing God* (1973), may never have appeared—not to mention the republishing of the works of John Owen themselves as well as many other volumes in the Puritan canon readily available today. See also Kenneth J. Stewart, “The Young J. I. Packer as a ‘New Warfield’? A Chapter in the Post-1930 Revival of Reformed Theology,” *Themelios* 47.3 (2022): 516.

### *7. Conclusion: Beacons from the Spire*

When visiting the University Church of St. Mary, perhaps the best vantage point the church gives is looking out from the spire to Oxford. After ascending several flights of stairs, the tourist nears the summit only after 60 final spiral stone steps. The arduous climb is rewarded by postcard worthy views of the entirety of the core of the University. For all of the history and theology that has transpired within St. Mary's, it is the from the spire that one can see to where the beacon shines.

The evangelical sermons reviewed in this essay shone, like beacons, from St. Mary's. They were preached by evangelicals to specific contexts in the history of Christianity in Oxford and England and they articulated evangelical theology, in most cases, to an audience of students. Returning to Thomas Kidd's definition, we see that they all share common belief in the need for believers to be born-again following the preaching of the gospel recovered in the Protestant Reformation. Further, they all stand upon the belief that the Bible is the Word of God and are preached from confidence in its authority. Finally, they are aimed to inspire or challenge growth in a personal relationship with God, recognizing the vital nature of his divine presence in living the Christian life.

When Queen Elizabeth II set alight the jubilee beacons, she captivated a nation and caused them to pause their busy and distracted lives and look upward toward the burning and shining lights for a time of celebration. Similarly, the examination of evangelical theology and history through sermons preached in Oxford's university church serves to point the reader to discover the shared message of gospel hope for a new century from these beacons from the spire.

# Cultural Mandate and the Image of God: Human Vocation under Creation, Fall, and Redemption

— N. Gray Sutanto —

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**Abstract:** While the term “cultural mandate” is well-recognized as a way of understanding the relationship between Christianity, culture, and human vocation, its origins from within the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition are less known. Drawing from this tradition, then, this essay sketches the logic of a neo-Calvinistic account of the cultural mandate through the states of creation, fall, and redemption.

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The responsibility of humanity to obey the “cultural mandate” is well-recognized in evangelical discourse as a way of understanding the relationship between Christianity and culture. But perhaps what is less known is the textual origins of this discussion, in the tradition of neo-Calvinism, and the relationship of that mandate to the metaphysical make-up of human beings. This tradition was birthed out of the theological and public labors of Abraham Kuyper (1834–1920) and Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) from within the Dutch Reformed tradition.<sup>1</sup> Both theologians sought to retrieve Reformed orthodoxy for the sake of engaging modernity. Drawing from the Scriptures, they sketched a theology that encouraged Christians to work for the common good precisely by standing on their own revelation. Hence, a dialogue on how best to connect the Christian faith with culture and its biblical contours thrived from within this trajectory.

On this topic, they asked questions about the intrinsic connection between humanity’s ontology and their vocation. Humanity’s organic character means that the whole individual is the image of God. But would a single individual suffice to image God? How does our status as image-bearers relate to the cultural mandate that God gives in the garden?

If God is infinite, then only a diversity of finite creatures can truly reflect his glory, and if human beings are God’s image bearers then only a humanity, considered as a corporate entity, can more fully reflect that image. Bavinck describes the dogmatic logic here:

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<sup>1</sup> Cory Brock and N. Gray Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2023); Nathaniel Gray Sutanto and Cory Brock, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook of Neo-Calvinism* (London: T&T Clark, 2024).



[The *Imago Dei*] can only be somewhat unfolded in its depth and riches in a humanity counting billions of members. Just as the traces of God [*vestigia Dei*] are spread over many, many works, in both space and time, so also the image of God can only be displayed in all its dimensions and characteristic features in a humanity whose members exist both successively ... and contemporaneously side by side.<sup>2</sup>

The mandate given to humanity to be fruitful and multiply calls for humanity to spread out across the earth. A proper, God-given dominion is intrinsic to who humans are as image-bearers. As human beings disperse throughout the globe, God's image is represented throughout as well. As Bavinck has argued, the creation of humanity, then, invokes a telos—a diverse humanity dispersed yet united by a single representative, a federal head in Adam. Further, just as the Trinity comprises an absolute unity-in-diversity, humanity too, will manifest an analogical and organic unity-in-diversity, not only in their individual make up (in body and soul, and original righteousness), but also as a corporate whole.<sup>3</sup> I explore this vocation and calling to be “fruitful and multiply” and to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1: 28) from a theological perspective, addressing the relationship between creation and culture, and the cultural mandate after the fall and the gospel. Along the way, I address Klaas Schilder (1890–1952), a second-generation neo-Calvinist, and his objections to “common grace,” as he sought to utilize the cultural mandate precisely as an alternative to that doctrine.

### 1. “Fruitful and Multiply”: Cultural Mandate and the Image of God

There are two aspects to the cultural mandate in the state of innocence: the task of begetting and the organic multiplication of people and the task of forming a diversity of cultures. Embedded in the creation of humanity therefore is a teleological orientation—humanity was meant to spread and cultivate creation in obedience to their God, and no one community can possibly reflect the richness of the image: “the image of God is much too rich for it to be realized in a single race, ethnic group, or culture.”<sup>4</sup>

The call of the cultural mandate therefore fittingly corresponds to the proper dominion image bearers of God are supposed to have over creation, and is recognized by more contemporary thinkers as the “vocational” aspect of the image of God.<sup>5</sup> God gave the tasks of work and cultivation before the fall, showing the inherent goodness of human labor in culture-making. To be ‘fruitful and multiply’ refers to the natural multiplication of human beings and the work that cultivates nature for their own good, in accordance with God’s command.

As image-bearers labor in obedience to the mandate, William Edgar aptly describes this work as an exercise of “analogous power” that was given to human beings from God:

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<sup>2</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 577.

<sup>3</sup> See Nathaniel Sutanto, “Herman Bavinck on the Image of God and Original Sin,” *IJST* 18 (2016): 174–90; Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, “Egocentricity, Organism, and Metaphysics: Sin and Renewal in Bavinck’s Ethics,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 34 (2021): 223–40.

<sup>4</sup> Irwyn Ince, *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 57.

<sup>5</sup> This aspect is recognized well by the vocational perspective on the image of God in contemporary theology. Cf. Lucy Peppiatt, *The Imago Dei: Humanity Made in the Image of God* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), 27–45.

Embedded in this human activity is (at least in germ form) the development of agriculture, the arts, economics, family dynamics, and everything that contributes to human flourishing, to the glory of God. This management is of course in imitation of God's greater stewardship over his creation. The so-called nature psalms attest to the overarching sovereignty of God over his creation, and yet to his delegating analogous power to human beings.<sup>6</sup>

As Edgar notes, nature psalms like Psalm 104:14–15 situate human work in parallel with and yet dependent on God's work. God causes the "livestock" and "plants" to grow, so that humanity might make "wine" and "bread" to gladden his heart. To put it in theological terms: God creates *ex nihilo* while humans create *ex naturam*. God speaks and nature comes to be, but humanity, in an analogous fashion, creates out of the pre-existing natural material that God creates. Dominion, therefore, refers to this human cultivation of the natural world, going with the grain of God's design. Human dominion is thus one of stewardship, displaying simultaneously both humanity's dignity and servitude before God. J. H. Bavinck says it this way:

We, the human race, are predestined to fulfil a distinctive calling in that history; as humanity, we are assigned an exceptional place in the greater context of the kingdom from the very first. We are simultaneously *subjects* and to some extent *co-rulers*, viceroys over certain regions. Not everything is subjected to us: we are not given authority over the course of the stars and the planets or the tides of the never-resting seas. But the earth and its plants and animals have been assigned to us, given for us to rule over and to use for God's service, to fathom and understand creation's hidden powers, and so to bring to full development the innate possibilities of creation. That is the meaning of the cultural calling allotted to us immediately after creation (Gen. 1:28–29).<sup>7</sup>

This sense of culture-making as the interplay between nature and human cultivation, as humanity images God analogously, corresponds well with Henry van Til's classic work on *The Calvinistic Conception of Culture*. There, he defines culture as the "secondary environment" that humanity builds out of the primary environment of God's creation: "In this book I use the term [culture] to designate that activity of human, the image-bearer of God, by which he fulfills the creation mandate to cultivate the earth, to have dominion over it and to subdue it. The term is also applied to the result of that activity, namely, *the secondary environment which has been superimposed upon nature by man's creative effort*."<sup>8</sup>

To cultivate creation well therefore involves discerning God's design for creation—culture-making can easily deform into hubris and abuse when we determine for ourselves what we ought to make out of the natural world. Herman Bavinck thus warns that any fulfilling of the earthly vocation should be situated within the context of obedience to the word of God. This is signified by the conjunction of the

<sup>6</sup> William Edgar, *Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 168. Bavinck says it this way: "And this dominion of the earth includes not only the most ancient callings of men, such as hunting and fishing, agriculture and stock-raising, but also the trade and commerce, finance and credit, the exploitation of mines and mountains, science and art." *Wonderful Works of God*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), 189.

<sup>7</sup> J. H. Bavinck, *Between the Beginning and the End: A Radical Kingdom Vision*, trans. Bert Hielema (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 29–30. Emphasis original.

<sup>8</sup> Henry R. van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing, 1972), 7. Emphasis mine.

command to be fruitful and multiply with the prohibition against eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If the former denotes humanity's responsibility toward earth, the latter towards heaven—but both together are needed for humanity to accomplish either task well. He argues that these two tasks are really one:

The first task defines his relationship to the earth, the second his relationship to heaven. Adam had to subdue to earth and have dominion over it, and this he must do in a twofold sense: he must cultivate it, open it up, and so cause to come up out of it all the treasures which God has stored there for man's use; and he must also watch over it, safeguard it, protect it against all evil that may threaten it, must, in short, secure it against the service of corruption in which the whole of creation now groans.

But man can fulfill this calling over against the earth only if he does not break the bond of connection which unites him with heaven, only if he continues to believe God at his word and to obey his commandment. The twofold task is essentially therefore one task. Adam must have dominion over the earth, not by idleness and passivity but through the work of his head and heart and hand.<sup>9</sup>

To put it another way, cultivating earth is a great good, but without obedience to God's word, humans would not only abuse their proper viceregency, but they will also lose the highest good, which is God himself. Proper earthly dominion requires and presupposes true religion. Earthly and heavenly vocations comprise a singular holistic calling:

But in order to rule, he must serve; he must serve God who is his Creator and Lawgiver. Work and rest, rule and service, earthly and heavenly vocation, civilization and religion, culture and *cultus*, these pairs go together from the very beginning. They belong together and together they comprise in one vocation the great and holy and glorious purpose of man. All culture, that is, all work which man undertakes in order to subdue the earth, whether agriculture, stock breeding, commerce, industry, science, or the rest, is all the fulfilment of a single Divine calling. But if man is really to be and remain such he must proceed in dependence on and in obedience to the Word of God. Religion must be the principle which animates the whole of life and which sanctifies it into a service of God.<sup>10</sup>

If religion should animate humanity's work, then the dominion that image-bearers have over creation is not merely kingly, but priestly—the cultural mandate is at once also a heavenly mandate, as that vertical relation with God determines how humans represent God on earth. Joshua Farris sums this up well: "As priests of creation, humanity has the function and privilege to assist the creation to realize and evidence its rational order and beauty and thus to express God's beauty and being back to God."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bavinck, *Wonderful Works of God*, 169. As Francis Turretin tersely puts it, "Man was made by God to acknowledge and worship his Creator and to exercise dominion over the other creatures." *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, *First through Tenth Topics*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 468.

<sup>10</sup> Bavinck, *Wonderful Works of God*, 169.

<sup>11</sup> Joshua Ryan Farris, *An Introduction To Theological Anthropology: Humans, Both Creaturely and Divine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 196.

The obedience to the word of God and Adam's responsibility to convey that word to Eve and his progeny also testifies to humanity's prophetic role.

## *2. Cultural Mandate, the Fall, and Common Grace*

Despite the fall, humanity continues to cultivate creation organically and by nature, but the true religion that is meant to animate that work is no longer present. To use a neo-Calvinistic distinction, human structures continue to develop but the directions that animate them are no longer for God.<sup>12</sup> Because human beings are made in the image of God, fallen image-bearers will continue unwittingly to represent him as they form families, farm and develop technology, raise shelter and inhabit cities, and so on. The fall, however, means that this earthly task is now divorced from the heavenly, and so we misuse and misunderstand our place in the created order, and dwell in cultures that are in principle against God. Further, the created order now resists that work, such that human labor is often difficult, fatiguing, and even seemingly futile, as the book of Ecclesiastes indicates.

The presence and development of culture presupposes that fallen image-bearers continue to retain some relative virtue, as culture-making requires a measure of peace, truth-telling, cooperation, trust, and so on. As such, the production of culture in the postlapsarian order is indicative of the presence of God's common grace: his delayed judgment of sinners, his commitment to the goodness of creation and human work, and his refusal to give sinners over to their deepest impulses (Rom 1:24, 26, 28), and his gifting of epistemic, moral, and life-giving goods to sinful creatures. Bavinck refers to James 1:17 and describes the gifts of common grace as quite all-encompassing, including all human culture and the stability of the natural world:

For God did not abandon his creation after the entrance of sin, but in Christ redeemed and restored it. He has not only blessed it with special grace, but he has also extended his common grace over the whole of creation's length and breadth: for the continued existence of the world and man; the glory of God's name over the whole earth; the revelation of his eternal power and divinity in the works of his hands (Rom. 1:19); the labor of man and the fertility of woman (Gen. 3:19–20); the beginning of culture (Gen. 4:20–22); following the judgment of the flood, the Noahic covenant (Gen. 8:21–22); for the stability of the natural order (Gen. 8:22, Jer. 33:20, 25, etc.); the restoration of the blessing of creation (Gen. 9:1, 7); dominion over the animal world (Gen. 9:2); the prohibition against the murder of man (Gen. 9:5–6); for the spread of humanity over all the earth (Gen. 11:8, Deut. 32:8; Isa. 45:18; Acts 17:26); the fruitfulness of nature with food and the mirth of the heart (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:16–17); and religion and morality (Rom. 1:19–20; 2:14–15). All these are due to common grace in connection and in service of special grace. In a word, “every good gift and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change (James 1:17).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation: A New Annotated Edition*, eds. Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2018), 201; Al Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Guidebook for the Instruction in the Christian Religion*, trans. Cameron Clausing and Gregory Parker Jr. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2022), 25.

After the fall, common grace is the pre-condition for the stability of society, allowing for image-bearers to enjoy peace temporally with varying degrees, for them to perceive the moral order and the character of God that is requisite for that peace, to labor and make families, which form the seeds of culture, and to exercise proper cultivation over nature despite the consequences of the fall.

It helps, therefore, to see the cultural mandate as the objective side that corresponds to the proper dominion given to humanity as constitutive of who it is as an image-bearer. In other words, despite the fall, because human beings remain ontologically image-bearers, they continue to form families, labor, and thus culture. As Augustine argued, unregenerate sinners thus form fallen civilizations which form the earthly manifestation of the city of man, and this is the default situation of every person: “When these two cities began to run their course by a series of deaths and births, the citizen of this world was the first-born, and after him the stranger in this world, the citizen of the city of God, predestinated by grace, elected by grace, by grace a stranger below, and by grace a citizen above.”<sup>14</sup> The citizen of the city of God, therefore, who lives her earthly life and labors under the principle of her heavenly citizenship, is made such by grace:

By grace, for so far as regards himself he is sprung from the same mass, all of which is condemned in its origin; but God, like a potter (for this comparison is introduced by the apostle judiciously, and not without thought), of the same lump made one vessel to honor, another to dishonor. But first the vessel to dishonor was made, and after it another to honor. For in each individual, as I have already said, there is first of all that which is reprobate, that from which we must begin, but in which we need not necessarily remain afterwards is that which is well approved, to which we may be advancing attain, and in which, when we have reached it, we may abide. Not indeed, that every wicked man shall be good, but that no one will be good who was not first of all wicked; but the sooner any one becomes a good man, the more speedily does he receive this title, and abolish the old name in the new.<sup>15</sup>

To put it in more Bavinckian parlance, by common grace, unregenerate culture is sustained, but by special grace, that is, the proclamation of the gospel, the sanctifying work of the Spirit, and the communion of the church, the elect are regenerated unto a new culture, and is thus animated by the vision of the kingdom of God.

### *3. Common Grace and Cultural Mandate: Complementary or Alternatives?*

At this point, we do well to pause and consider a potential objection from a second-generation neo-Calvinist, Klaas Schilder. Schilder is often credited as the author who coined the term “cultural mandate” to refer to Adam’s vocation in the garden.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Schilder describes Adam as an office-bearer, “God’s

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<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1993), 15.1.

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *City of God* 15.1.

<sup>16</sup> Klaas Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, trans. Williem Helder and Albert H. Oosterhoff (Hamilton, ON: Lucerna, 2016), 78. Although, as we saw, Herman Bavinck has already spoken of a “mandate” given to Adam in Genesis, to have dominion and to obtain heaven. In another place, Bavinck argued “The Reformation restores to culture its freedom and independence. The right of cultures is expressed in the mandate [in Gen 1:28].... Culture exists because God bestowed on us the power to exercise rule over the earth.” “The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good,” trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *The Bavinck Review* 2 (2011): 161. For more on Schilder, see Marinus de

fellow-worker,” whose cultural labors were so integrated with his worship of God such that it could be “immediately and constantly be called ‘liturgy,’ i.e. ministry in and for the kingdom.”<sup>17</sup> Like Herman and Johan Bavinck, Schilder also continues the emphasis that humans are to image God by way of making “productive the ‘possibilities’ that were put into the created world and that were later to be discovered by humanity and respected according to their ‘kind’—they would take out of the world all that it has in it.”<sup>18</sup> He connects this creational imperative to Jesus’s parable of the talents (Matt 25:14–30), and the responsibility of the laborers to steward them well.

As laborers are called in the covenant of works to fill and multiply, they are advancing creation toward its telos:

When God created the world, this was God’s wise intent. It did not please him to create the world ready-made. He only created it good. The world, then, as it came forth from God’s hands, was a world-in-promise, a world-in-hope; and as long as it was good, this hope could not be called vain.... The world of Paradise was a beginning. And in the beginning was given, in principle, everything that had to be there potentially in order to let it develop into a completed world of perfect order, the *polis*, the *civitas*, the “city” (state) of God, as it was paradissally designed and would later be built.”<sup>19</sup>

This trajectory depicts a consummate world under the Lordship of God, and as such, it would be a mistake to wedge a separation between “culture” and “religion”—the earthly and heavenly, for the liturgical and the “secular” were one task.

The entrance of sin separates the work of culture from religion, and the trajectory of unity-in-diversity that would have characterized culture as humanity multiplies devolves into cacophony, because fallen individuals are motivated not by love of God and neighbor but of self. While culture should preserve a natural multiformity, “Satan makes use of these distinctions to bring about separation.”<sup>20</sup> The moral law might restrain human rebellion, but left to themselves sinners would eradicate that law for the sake of autonomy.

Given all of these neo-Calvinistic and positive views on culture, then, it is perhaps surprising to see that Schilder explicitly rejects the doctrine of common grace, especially when one considers that common grace is usually *the* doctrine that Kuyper and Bavinck point to in order to ground an uncompromisingly theological engagement with culture post-fall.

Schilder objects to common grace for at least three reasons. Firstly, he argues that theologians mistakenly attribute to common grace what should properly be attributed to nature. The restraint of sin, and the enjoyment of culture and life-giving goods are intrinsic to nature and time. If humanity bears the image of God, and they are creatures of time, then they will naturally develop culture and enjoy its fruits:

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Jong, “The Church is the Means, the World is the End: The Development of Klaas Schilder’s Thought on the Relationship Between the Church and the World” (PhD thesis, Kampen Theological University, 2019), and Marinus de Jong, “Klaas Schilder” in Nathaniel Gray Sutanto and Cory Brock (eds.), *T&T Clark Handbook of Neo-Calvinism* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2024), 223–35.

<sup>17</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 59–60.

<sup>18</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 68. See also p. 77.

<sup>19</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 74–75.

<sup>20</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 82.

Consequently, the fact that the gifts of creation blossom and expand is a matter not of grace but of nature. Within things and within people something is in motion. Since they are themselves in a state of becoming, of developing, there is in human beings the passionate urge of those who seek to wrest grain and wine from the developing earth, to be engaged in *colere*, to till the garden.<sup>21</sup>

The fall, then, does not mean that humans would cease to form culture—for they are time-bound and naturally culture-makers, and “continuation of time after the Fall.. is not grace.”<sup>22</sup> Rather, the fall merely produces cultures that are no longer considered “religious labor,” but as acts “of egoism, of self-preservation, of zest for living ... not service to God but self-service.”<sup>23</sup>

Secondly, Schilder argues that describing the enjoyment of culture post-fall as “grace” is a misnomer, for he argues that the postlapsarian situation could well be described as a period of common judgment—as the grace of regeneration is not poured out without limit. So, if the postlapsarian situation in general is “grace,” then it is as much “judgment”: “Whoever calls the restraining of the curse ‘grace’ should at least call the ‘restraining’ of the blessing ‘judgment.’”<sup>24</sup> As such, it is unhelpful to call the universal condition of life after the fall a matter of “grace” or “judgment,” Schilder argues—they are uninformative at best and misleading at worst. It’s better, instead, simply to argue that sinners will continue to build culture, but a culture that is divorced from service of God.

The natural development of culture is thus not a matter of grace or judgment, but is the *pre-condition* of grace and judgment, the canvas on which the antithesis between regenerate and unregenerate is lived out, as it were. Grace refers to regeneration, and the regenerate will produce religious, God-directed culture. Judgment refers to the ungodly, as those under the curse who create cultures against God. Schilder adjudicates tersely: “there is no universal (or general) grace for all people. Therefore Abraham Kuyper’s construct was erroneous.”<sup>25</sup>

Finally, in a later chapter, Schilder distinguishes between common grace and the cultural mandate, preferring the latter over the former in order to motivate Christian cultural activity. In his judgment, “common grace” is an “anthropocentric” doctrine, for it focuses on what is *permissible* for Christians to partake in after the fall, and also on the remnants of goodness after sin.<sup>26</sup> Instead, by focusing on a “common command” and a “common mandate,” one takes the point of departure from God, focusing on his intention in creation itself prior to the fall, thus motivating Christian activity without bestowing

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<sup>21</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 89.

<sup>22</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 90.

<sup>23</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 89.

<sup>24</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 88. There is also the important issue of whether, argues Schilder, God can be considered wrathful *and* gracious simultaneously toward non-elect sinners.

<sup>25</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 92. Hence, Jochem Douma observes that for Schilder “Only when something promotes eternal salvation can we truly speak of grace.” *Common Grace in Kuyper, Schilder, and Calvin: Exposition, Composition, and Evaluation*, trans. Albert H. Oosterhoff, ed. William Helder (Hamilton, ON: Lucerna 2017), xi.

<sup>26</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 145.

undue optimism toward non-Christian culture.<sup>27</sup> In effect, Schilder is setting up the cultural mandate as an alternative to the doctrine of common grace.<sup>28</sup>

Schilder's *Christ and Culture* is a penetrating biblical theology of culture, but his critique of common grace is unpersuasive, for his three arguments here overlook certain questions that the doctrine of common grace seeks to address. First, though we may grant that sinners will continue to build culture naturally, it is surely a matter of God's general benevolence that sinners would continue to enjoy the fruits of their labor, will not be successful in their attempts at eradicating the moral law known in their hearts, and will, even in their tendency toward egoist self-preservation, relatively enjoy friendships with their neighbor. So long as this is the time of God's patience (2 Pet 3:9), which delays the final judgment, and so long as God is not in wrath giving us "over" to our natural desires at every point (Rom 1:24, 26, 28), we are enjoying God's active benevolence in gifting us with moral, epistemic, and life-giving goods such that a temporal, relative peace can be enjoyed.<sup>29</sup> Common grace is thus juxtaposed not against nature but sin: it is that which grounds and accounts for the relative access that sinful humanity has with the true, good, and beautiful. "From the fall onward, human life and humanity itself is not simply grounded in the order of creation.... The fruit of common grace—being allowed to retain something of what we by nature possessed by Adam, is a gift of grace."<sup>30</sup>

Second, though I agree that nature and culture form the backdrop for the antithesis, common grace addresses the question of why it is that, despite the antithesis, regenerate and unregenerate alike can still enjoy relative peace with one another. Surely, this is because the regenerate are not as sanctified as they could be (as we imperfectly obey God and still wrestle with the presence of sin), and it is because the unregenerate are not as evil as they could be, and often still exhibit virtue (albeit by borrowed capital, for "the Holy Spirit is the author of life, of every power and virtue").<sup>31</sup> In the last day, the antithesis will be eschatologically realized, such that the elect and non-elect will no longer inhabit the same culture together.<sup>32</sup> In other words, while we can concede that nature is the canvas for the antithesis, common grace explains why it is that antithesis often exists merely in principle, and not in practice. Schilder himself articulates these emphases using different terms, as "common temperance," and *sunousia* "a being together" that still characterizes elect and non-elect alike in the present redemptive-historical order.<sup>33</sup> Hence, though he rejects "common grace" as a term, he still accepts it conceptually.

<sup>27</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 145.

<sup>28</sup> In a milder earlier treatment, Schilder posits the alternatives this way: "it is better to choose one's position, one's point of view in the discussion [of Christian engagement with culture], *not in the idea of common grace, but in the Reformed idea of office*." Klaas Schilder, "Culture and Common Grace," in *The Klaas Schilder Reader: The Essential Theological Writings*, ed. George Harinck, Marinus de Jong, and Richard Mouw, trans. Albert Gootjes and Albert Oosterhoff (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2022), 151. Emphasis original.

<sup>29</sup> For more on common grace in Kuyper and Bavinck, see Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism*, ch. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1: *Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. and trans. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 149.

<sup>31</sup> Herman Bavinck, "Common Grace," trans. Raymond van Leeuwen, *CTJ* 24 (1989): 41.

<sup>32</sup> In an earlier essay, Schilder noted that he did not reject common grace in itself, but that, on the question of Christian engagement with culture, common grace was the wrong doctrine from which to "take our point of departure." "Culture and Common Grace," 152.

<sup>33</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 109–12.



Far from downplaying the antithesis between belief and unbelief, then, common grace actually *presupposes* the antithesis, and does not make sense without it. Without the antithesis, common grace is a superfluous doctrine, hanging in the air, as it were. As Kuyper argued, common grace corresponds to the Reformed emphasis on the radical doctrine of sin that Calvinism has taught:

If we see in sin a cause of spiritual and physical weakening, but not a deadly quick-acting poison that if unrestrained immediately leads to spiritual, temporal, and eternal death, then there is certainly no restraining of sin—a conclusion to which Calvin was the first to point, and on which the entire doctrine of common grace is built. This is why the Reformed confession has continuously placed full emphasis on the deadly character of sin and has seriously combated any weakening of the concept of sin.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, the doctrine of common grace allows Kuyper to (1) sketch a world-and-life-view that pushes the church outward to participate within every sphere of life (2) without compromising the radical confession that the unregenerate world is totally depraved apart from grace.<sup>35</sup> Thus, I suggest that common grace and the cultural mandate ought not to be seen as alternatives but as complementary: common grace is the ground for the possibility of the cultural mandate, and the reason why Christian and non-Christian culture can co-exist relatively before the final judgment. Further, common grace is not anthropocentric, nor does it give undue optimism toward non-Christian culture. Rather, given that common grace presupposes the antithesis and the radical depravity of the sinner, the doctrine highlights that unbelieving cultures always live on borrowed capital, as it is the Spirit of God himself that enables them to enjoy gifts, truth, and goodness—the very Spirit of God that unbelieving cultures deny.

#### *4. The Gospel and the Cultural Mandate*

Schilder's warning recognizes that cultural activity in itself, if divorced from God, is not pleasing to God and thus could not be considered an end in itself. To love the world and worldly culture as an end is to misplace it as an idol. To have the right order of loves means that God must come first. "So this world is nowadays destroyed not by sports, the cinema, etc., but by their being isolated as goods in themselves."<sup>36</sup> Thus, Schilder recognizes that cultural engagement that matters must be *mediated and subordinated* by the preaching of the Gospel, that is, by the church's evangelism and her obedience to the great commission. Two points are worth reflecting on here: (a) the centrality of the Gospel as grace restores nature and (b) the resurrection as a witness to the death and restoration of the cosmos, such that the consummation of creation after the fall requires not an incremental and linear advancement toward the eschaton by way of Christian labor, but a judgment and apocalyptic act of God that resurrects and purifies creatures and creation.

First, then, made alive in Jesus through the word of God, sinners are called to put on their new nature, which is patterned after the image of God (Col 3:10; Eph 4:24). In other words, the great commission is the means by which the narrow image of God is restored to humanity, as sinners receive renewed

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<sup>34</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World*, vol. 1: *The Historical Section*, eds. Jordan Ballor and Stephen Grabill, trans Nelson D. Kloosterman and Ed M. van der Maas (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), 299–300.

<sup>35</sup> This line is drawn from Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism*, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 119.

knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. The grace of regeneration that accompanies the preaching of the gospel to sinners reconciles them to God as they place their faith in Jesus Christ. By justification, they can approach God as they are considered righteous, and by the sanctification of the Spirit, they are given the qualities necessary to redirect their culture-making efforts to God, as they, in principle, are now able to accept and act on the moral law.

Before the fall, the multiplying and dispersal of the image of God was a natural process by way of pro-creation and culture-making. After the fall, pro-creation multiplies the image of God in the broad sense, but the preaching of the Gospel is necessary to multiply the image of God in the narrow sense—and that narrow sense is precisely the qualities of right knowledge, righteousness, and holiness necessary for God-glorifying cultures to exist: cultures exhibited by godliness and submission to the kingship of Christ, love of neighbor, and proper cultivation of creation. Indeed, Christ comes as the second Adam so that post-fall humanity could once again “fulfill this original service of God and, by rights as well as in fact, to give back to God his world and his work-community” by appeasing the divine wrath, reconciling God’s people back to God, giving them eternal life, and judge the world such that it would become consummate under his kingship.<sup>37</sup> Schilder’s reference to the “work-community” also signals the importance of the institutional church for culture-making, as the church is the mother of all believers and is the means by which the Spirit disciplines and nurture God’s children.

Bavinck argues that the second commandment entails a positive imperative to look to Christ and his image bearers, in creation and redemption. Indeed, we ought not raise and venerate images of God, because we are created in his image, and as we imitate the humanity of Christ as the second Adam, we advance in conformity to the image of God:

Therefore, God says: You will find no image of me in any creature; that would dishonor me. But if you want to image, take a look at Adam, at human beings, who are created in my likeness. Above all, look at the Son, the image of the Invisible God, God’s One and Only Firstborn, God’s other *I*, the expression of his self-sufficiency. Whoever sees him sees the Father. As Christ is, so is God. He is the perfect likeness, the adequate Image. Let us be satisfied with that. God may be venerated with no other image than the Son. Beholding him and venerating him, we are changed into his likeness (2 Cor. 3:18). God wants, as it were, to multiply images of himself, to see nothing but images, likenesses, portraits of himself. Human beings themselves must be god’s image, and not make pieces of wood or stone into God’s image. The new humanity in Christ, from all sides and everyone in their own way, reflects and mirrors God. God is mirrored in us; we are mirrored in God. “When [Christ] appears, we shall be like him [and like the Father] because we shall see him as he is.” (1 John 3:2). God makes images of himself in us. But not we of God. God photographs himself.<sup>38</sup>

In short: we are not to form images of God because we are the ones who are called to represent God on earth. Without the grace of sanctification which conforms us to Christ, however, that representation

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<sup>37</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 2: *The Duties of the Christian Life*, trans. and ed. John Bolt, Jessica Joustra, Nelson D. Kloosterman, Antoine Theron, and Dirk van Keulen (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 174–5. Emphasis original. For Bavinck’s Christological doctrine of the beatific vision, see Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, “Herman Bavinck on the Beatific Vision,” *IJST* (Online First: 2022): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12610>.

is distorted and broken, as we choose to worship idols and tend to resemble and image those idols instead of God. The great commission, therefore, does not negate the cultural mandate, but is rather the necessary means by which we fulfill it. Only as we are transformed by the Gospel could we again image and represent God properly:

the kingdom of heaven, while a pearl of grace price is also a leaven which permeates the whole of the meal; godliness is profitable unto all things.... The gospel gives us a standard by which we can judge phenomena and events; it is an absolute measure which enables us to determine the value of the present life; it is a guide to show us the way in the labyrinth of the present world; it raises us above time and teaches us to view all things from the standpoint of eternity ... it is opposed to nothing that is pure and good and lovely. It condemns sin always and everywhere; but it cherishes marriage and family, society and the state, nature and history, science and art.<sup>39</sup>

Second, however, our culture-making now does not advance the kingdom of God incrementally, as if that kingdom is established by human hands. Rather, because the whole world is living under the curse of God and is tainted by sin, the world needs to be created and consummated anew by God himself. The resurrection sets the pattern for the rest of the world:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom 8:20–21).

As death is the path toward glorified consummation, so would creation be consumed and purified by fire, only to emerge as a new, perfected cosmos (2 Pet 3:11–13). That world is not a replacement of this world but is a consummation, but it's a consummation by way of divine intervention, death and resurrection, not by way of progressive human advancement or Christian cultural cultivation. Bavinck sums this up well: "The resurrection is the fundamental restoration of all culture."<sup>40</sup>

Hence, because divine intervention alone, in the work of final judgment and re-creation, can bring about that new world, Christian culture-making today is not an advancement of the kingdom of God physically and temporally, for the kingdom of God is not of this world, that is, not achieved from the ground-up but from the top-down. As renewed image-bearers cultivate culture and love their neighbors, then, they are merely *witnessing* to the direction of the next world, and it is a merely veiled witness to a world that does not welcome it. We are promised not linear success but persecution and resistance. The neo-Calvinistic teachings on the cultural mandate that I outlined above thus does not lead to transformationalism with a triumphalist tinge, but rather to a kind of *chastened transformational witness*, as Christianity leavens families and cultures just as grace restores nature.<sup>41</sup> As Kuyper himself argued, it is not as if our cultural efforts will survive the final judgment and be transposed to the new

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<sup>39</sup> Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 211–12.

<sup>40</sup> Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 211.

<sup>41</sup> For the ways in which the entrance of Christianity in the second century leavened Greco-Roman culture, see Larry Hurtado, *The Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).

world in a univocal fashion; rather all we can hope for is that they would provide some seed, some faint witness, to the new world order.<sup>42</sup>

Herman Bavinck reminds Christians that this hope for the final consummation of culture ought not eclipse the Christian's ultimate hope and desire: to behold God and to dwell in his presence through Jesus Christ. Christ is not a mere restorer of culture, but he is the pinnacle of culture himself, as the federal head of all of renewed humanity, he brings it before the face of God:

He created all things, reconciled all things, and renews all things. Because all things have in him their source, their being, and their unity, he also gathers in one all things under himself as Head, both those which are in heaven and those on earth. He is Prophet and Priest but also King, who does not cease his work until he has delivered the kingdom perfect and complete to God the Father.<sup>43</sup>

In Bavinck's perspective, Christian cultural labor is thus not a triumphalistic act but a hopeful one. Christian cultural labor is a sign that points to what God alone will bring about in the last day. A chastened transformational witness allows believers to be patient when the world resists that witness, and affords believers with the theological vision necessary to resist despair, persevere, and set their eyes to the coming king.

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<sup>42</sup> See Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism*, ch. 6.

<sup>43</sup> Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 241. My thanks to Michael Allen, Marinus de Jong, and the anonymous reviewers for their feedback and engagement with an earlier draft.

# Is the One God of the Old Testament and Judaism Exactly the Same God as the Trinitarian God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—of the New Testament and Christian Creeds?

— John Jefferson Davis —

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**Abstract:** This article argues that the One God of the Old Testament and Judaism is exactly the same God as the Trinitarian God of the New Testament and Christian creeds. The standpoint presupposed is that of the orthodox biblical teachings on the Trinity expressed in the Nicene and Athanasian creeds. The paper presents new arguments supporting the unity and coherence of Old and New Testament revelation, employing (1) new analogies from modern physics, and (2) new philosophical insights concerning the properties of objects *nested* in a larger whole, and how those objects are to be properly counted in relation to the larger whole.

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Modern Old Testament scholarship has increasingly recognized and documented the uniqueness of Israel's monotheism—the one true God of Old Testament revelation—against the background of the polytheistic religions of the Ancient Near East.<sup>1</sup> During this same period, the renaissance of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity since the seminal work of Karl Barth and Karl

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, John H. Walton and Andrew E. Hill, *Old Testament Today: A Journey from Ancient Context to Contemporary Relevance*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), pp. 110–16, “Contrast: Religious Beliefs in the Ancient World.” Walton and Hill compare and contrast Israel's understanding of God with the polytheistic religions of the Ancient Near East in six areas: ultimate power; manifestations of deity; dispositions of the deity; autonomy of the deity; requirements of the deity; and human responses to the deity. From the perspective of systematic theology, see Fred Sanders, *The Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), pp. 212–14, “The Trinity in the Old Testament.”

Rahner, has caused Christian theologians and philosophers of religion to wrestle more deeply with the distinctive claims of ecumenical creeds such as the Athanasian Creed, which assert that “the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods, but only one God.”<sup>2</sup> How can it be logically and theologically coherent to affirm both that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each fully and equally God, and yet there be only one true God?

It is the purpose of this paper to argue for an affirmative answer to the question posed in the paper’s title: “Is the One God of the Old Testament and Judaism *Exactly* the Same God as the Trinitarian God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—of the New Testament and Christian Creeds?” Alternatively, the question could be stated, “Is the Yahweh who spoke to Moses from the burning bush exactly the same God later revealed as the Father of Jesus Christ, the eternal Logos and Son of God, and the Holy Spirit?”

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss recent controversies on the Trinity, either, for example, as to whether so-called social models of the Trinity can be used to support certain social and political agendas; or, whether a supposed “eternal subordination of the Son” supports male headship in the family and the church. The standpoint presupposed in this paper is that of historic Trinitarian orthodoxy as held by the Cappadocian fathers of the East and the Latin fathers of the West, and expressed in the historic Nicene and Athanasian creeds: three distinct, coeternal and fully coequal Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—subsisting in one undivided divine substance, equal in power, substance, and glory.<sup>3</sup>

The paper will present new arguments supporting the unity and coherence of Old and New Testament revelations concerning the nature of God, using new analogies from modern physics (the principle of wave-particle complementarity; the structure of the proton constituted by three quarks), and new philosophical insights concerning the properties of objects *nested* in a larger whole (e.g., three distinct branches of government contained in the larger whole of one federal government; two identical twins nested in the womb of one pregnant woman; the human nature of Jesus nested or contained within the divine nature of the Logos and eternal Son), and how those objects are to be properly counted in relation to the larger whole.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For a survey of developments in modern Trinitarian theology, see Fred Sanders, “The Trinity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Ian Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 35–53. For a review of recent discussions of the Trinity by theologians and philosophers of religion, see Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins, eds., *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on The Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Thomas McCall and Michael C. Rea, eds., *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Thomas H. McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity: An Introduction*, Short Studies in Systematic Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020); and Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> As argued earlier in John Jefferson Davis, review of *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?* by Millard J. Erickson, *Priscilla Papers* 25.4 (2011): 28–30.

<sup>4</sup> This paper builds upon and develops two of my previous articles on the Trinity: “Lessons from the Proton for Trinitarian Theology?” *Science and Christian Belief* 34.2 (2022): 130–41; and “Updating Cappadocian Answers to the One and Threeness Problem of the Trinity: With Analogies from Modern Physics,” *Doon Theological Journal* 19.1–2 (2022): 5–25

By way of introduction, biblical and theological justifications need to be offered for the use of analogies from the natural world for the Trinity.<sup>5</sup> The idea that vestiges of the Trinity (*vestigium trinitatis*) could be discerned in the natural order is an ancient Christian belief, being found in the church fathers. In book six of his treatise on the Trinity, Augustine stated:

So, then, as we direct our gaze at the creator by understanding the things that are made [Rom 1:20], we should understand him as a triad, whose traces [*vestigium*] appear in creation in a way that is fitting.<sup>6</sup>

Augustine found traces of the Trinity in the psychological powers of the human soul, e.g., being, knowing, willing; memory, understanding, and will; lover, the beloved, and their mutual love.<sup>7</sup> Prior to Augustine, Tertullian had found in the natural order several images of God's triadic nature: root, tree, and fruit; fountain, river, and stream; sun, sun's ray, and the highest point of the ray.<sup>8</sup> Other popular illustrations have included ice, water, and steam; the three dimensions of space; past, present, and future; egg shell, egg white, and egg yolk; a three-leaf clover, and so forth. Gregory of Nazianzus used a famous illustration of light from three superimposed suns:

We have one God because there is a single Godhead. Though there are three objects of belief [Father, Son, Spirit].... They are not sundered in will or divided in power.... It is as if there was a single intermingling of light, which existed in three mutually connected suns.<sup>9</sup>

Martin Luther believed that "in all creatures there is and may be seen an intimation of the Holy Trinity," citing examples from sun, water, and plants. "God is present in all creatures, even in the tiniest leaf and poppy seedlet."<sup>10</sup>

These church fathers and later Christian writers saw biblical justification for such comparisons, especially in Paul's statement in Romans 1:19–20:

What may be known about God (τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ) is plain to them [the Gentiles], because God has made it plain (ἐφανερώσεν) to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities (τὰ ... ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ)—his eternal power (ἀίδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις)

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<sup>5</sup> For the following section, see John Jefferson Davis, "Lessons from the Proton," 131–33. For a helpful overview of issues raised by the use of analogy in theology see Philip A. Rolnick, "Analogy," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Ian A. McFarland, David A. S. Ferguson, Karen Kilby, and Ian R. Torrance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 10–12, and David B. Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974). Also by Burrell, on analogy in Aquinas, see *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 55–77, "Analogical Predication."

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate* 6.12, cited in Andrew Robinson, *God in the World of Signs* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), "Vestiges of the Trinity in Creation," 259. Augustine's notion of the *vestigium trinitatis* is affirmed by Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* 1a, 45, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate* 6.5; 14.7; 15.17.

<sup>8</sup> Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 9 (ANF 3:602–3).

<sup>9</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Fifth Theological Oration* 14, in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward Rochie Hardy, LCC 3 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 202.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936, 1975), I.1:336. Barth presents an extensive (though not appreciative) survey of the history of the *Vestigium Trinitatis* on pp. 333–47.

and divine nature (θειότης)<sup>11</sup> have been clearly seen (καθορᾶται), being understood (νοούμενα) from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

Paul is not asserting what in later Western theology from the thirteenth century came to be known as “natural theology.” Paul is not teaching that unaided human reason, examining the features of the natural world, can know that there is a wise, powerful, and benevolent deity (though this is in fact the case). The starting point is God’s revelation—what God has made plain (ἐφανερώσεν). Human reason is the receptive instrument, not the ground and foundation of proper knowledge of God.<sup>12</sup>

In his second missionary journey, Paul declared to his Gentile listeners in Iconium and Derbe (Acts 14:15, 17) that the God who

made heaven and earth and everything in them (πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς) has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons: he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.

The kindness and generosity of the one true God, the God of Israel, is demonstrated in the regularity of seasons and weather that provides humanity with food and enjoyment. Such a view of God’s general revelation in nature was not original with Paul, of course. He stood in the ancient tradition of Israel’s wisdom literature, reflected in texts such as Psalm 19:1 (“the heavens declare the glory of God”), or Proverbs 8:27, 30, where the personified Wisdom declares that “I was there when he set the heavens in place.... Then I was the craftsman at his side.” The fingerprints of Wisdom, so to speak, have left their traces on the things God has made.<sup>13</sup>

Admittedly, these biblical texts do not speak explicitly of God’s *triune* nature being revealed in the natural order. Nevertheless, they do teach that some partial yet true knowledge of the true God can be discerned. In the later history of redemption—after Christ and the Spirit have been more fully revealed, it was to be expected that New Covenant believers would look for such hints of the Trinity.

A further caveat is in order before addressing the main topic of this paper—the thesis that the one God of the Old Testament is the same God as the Trinitarian God of the New Testament. The church fathers and later commentators have recognized that no analogy from the created order can be fully adequate for understanding the nature of the Triune God. The infinite God cannot be contained or circumscribed by any finite entity or concept. Furthermore, Christian theologians have long recognized that such illustrations of the Trinity from the natural order can, taken in isolation and apart from the canonical teachings of Scripture, seem to better illustrate the heresies of tritheism, modalism, or subordinationism than the church doctrine of the Trinity.

<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive review of the history of interpretation of the term θειότης (Rom 1:20) and the similar term (θεότης) in Colossians 2:9, see the classic article of H. S. Nash, “*theioteis—theoteis*, Rom 1.20; Col 2:9,” *JBL* 18 (1899): 1–34. Nash concludes that the two terms are basically synonyms, without a clear distinction between “divinity” (Rom 1:20) and “deity” (Col 2:9) as came to be commonly supposed in the history of interpretation.

<sup>12</sup> Romans 1:19–20 is a statement about God’s *general revelation* in nature, not a statement of “natural theology” as such. On general revelation, see Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> The doctrine of God’s general revelation in nature is not limited to these specific texts. More broadly, the nature of God is revealed in Scripture through many images and metaphors. God is described in terms of light, water, wind, fire, bread, shepherd, father, and so on. These images from the created order provide further foundation for the knowledge of God by *analogy*—the insight that things of the created order communicate (partial) truths of God with both elements of similarity and difference.



In his discussion of the persons of the Trinity, Augustine famously said that he made his proposals “not in order to give a complete explanation of it, but that we might not be obliged to remain silent.”<sup>14</sup> The current proposal is being made in the same spirit.

### *1. The Proper Counting of Objects Nested in a Larger Whole*

This section of the paper explains and illustrates a *Nested Counting Rule* (NCR), a rule for properly counting objects that are nested or contained in a larger whole. Several examples could be considered: two identical twins nested within the womb of a pregnant woman sitting in the doctor’s waiting room; three branches of government (executive, legislative, judicial) nested within one federal government; the human nature of Jesus nested within the divine nature of the Logos and eternal Son; the three Person of the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) nested within the one divine nature equally shared by all three.

In a nested relation, the objects that are nested within a larger whole are not merely contained in something larger in an accidental or temporary manner, but are organically and more integrally connected to the larger, containing whole. For example, if I carry my pet cat Ginger to the vet in a carrying cage, Ginger is spatially contained or “nested” (in a weaker sense), but this containment is only temporary and accidental. Ginger is not essential to the identity of the cage, and the cage is not essential or integral to the identity of Ginger. On the other hand, the human nature of Jesus was (and still is) truly nested or contained within the Logos. The Logos is essential to the true identity of Jesus. The Jesus of the Gospels is not just any “Jesus”—whether the Jesus of Dan Brown and the *Da Vinci Code* or of the gnostic Gospel of Thomas, or even the Jesus as understood today by Orthodox Jews, but the Jesus of Nazareth who was truly and fully indwelt by the Logos, the eternal Son and second person of the Trinity. Likewise, the Word who became flesh is not the impersonal Logos of Stoicism or Tao of Taoism, but the personal Word, the second person of the eternal Trinity who truly dwelt in the body of Jesus (John 1:14; cf. Col 2:9).

In a true nested relation, the relation between the nested objects and the larger, nested whole is one of reciprocal identity conferral. The identity of the whole is connected to the identity of the parts, and the identity of the parts is integrally connected to the identity of the whole.

The Nested Counting Rule will be stated in two forms, the first (NCR<sup>1</sup>) informal, and the second (NCR<sup>2</sup>) more detailed and technical.<sup>15</sup> The rule will then be applied to three examples: (1) three branches of government in the American federal government; (2) the mystical union of Jesus and the Logos in the incarnation to constitute Jesus as the Mediator and God-Man; and (3) Father, Son, and Holy Spirit nested in the one undivided divine essence to constitute the Trinity.

NCR<sup>1</sup>: Two or more parts connected in a nested relation constitute an integrated whole that is properly counted as numerically one.

NCR<sup>2</sup>: In a whole-part relation in which  $n$  parts are nested in a larger whole (where  $n$  is a whole number), the whole and the parts are *separately* counted, such that the whole so constituted ( $N$ , the “Nester”) is properly counted as one ( $N = 1$ ), while the constituent parts ( $n_1, n_2, n_3 \dots n_n$ , the “nested”) are properly counted as  $n$ .

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<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.9.

<sup>15</sup> For the following section on the Nested Counting Rule, see Davis, “Updating Cappadocian Answers,” 14–17.

First, consider the example the American federal government, containing and constituted by the three branches: the executive, the legislative, and the judicial. Each branch is considered to be co-equal in authority, and distinct (though neither autonomous nor disconnected) from the others. The branches (“parts”) are nested within a larger whole, the federal government. The parts are properly counted as three, while the larger whole—the American federal government, is properly counted as one. There are three branches of government, not one; and there is one federal government, not three. The parts and the whole are counted separately, not summatively, such that it is not the case that there are either four parts of government or four whole federal governments.

Second, in the case of the incarnation and hypostatic union, the divine Person of the Logos creates and is united with (from the first instant of conception) the fully human Jesus, so as to constitute the one Mediator, the God-Man, Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup> There is only one God-Man, only one Christ, not two Christs or two God-Men. The two constituting individuals, divine and human, can be distinguished but not separated or divided, and so the integrated whole so constituted is properly counted as one. There are two individuals in a nested relation —Jesus and the Logos—and one and only one whole: the Christ, the God-Man.

The concept of a nested relation has not been extensively developed in the field of mereology, in either the modern or pre-modern periods.<sup>17</sup> However, we can recognize that the notion of one thing being contained in another is found in patristic discussions of the Trinity. Augustine had stated that with respect to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, “one is as much as the three together ... each are *in* each, and all *in* each, and each *in* all.”<sup>18</sup> For Hilary, the persons of the Trinity “reciprocally contain one another, so that one should permanently envelop, and also be permanently enveloped by the other.”<sup>19</sup> John of Damascus spoke of the persons “abiding and resting in one another,” inasmuch as “the Son is in the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit is in the Father and the Son, and the Father is in the Son and the Spirit.”<sup>20</sup> While these patristic authors do not employ the technical terminology of nested relation, the basic concept of one thing containing another is clearly present.

When applied to the Trinity, the Nested Counting Rule allows us to recognize Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as numerically three persons, co-equal and co-eternal instantiations of the one undivided divine essence. At the same time, as a consequence of their reciprocal *nesting*, they jointly constitute the one true Triune God. There is one and only one Triune God, not two or three or more triune gods. The Trinity is properly countable as one inasmuch as the constituting persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, though distinguishable, cannot be separated or partitioned, remaining necessarily, reciprocally,

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<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of the Nested Counting Rule as applied to the Hypostatic Union, see John Jefferson Davis, “Chalcedon Contemporized: Jesus as Fully Person—without Nestorianism; the Hypostatic Union as Nested Relation,” *Philosophia Christi* 22 (2020): 269–84, esp. 277–83.

<sup>17</sup> For this section, see Davis, “Updating Cappadocian Answers,” 10. For a concise overview of the history of the discipline of mereology, see Achille Varzi, “Mereology,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mereology/>. For the medieval period, see Andrew Arlig, “Medieval Mereology,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2023), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mereology-medieval/>. For modern developments, see Peter Simons, *Parts: A Study in Ontology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), and N. Rescher and P. Oppenheim, “Logical Analysis of Gestalt Concepts,” *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 6 (1955): 89–106.

<sup>18</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate* 6.10.12.

<sup>19</sup> Hilary, *De Trinitate* 3.1.

<sup>20</sup> John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa* 1.14.11–18.

fully, and congruently nested in one another and in the one and the same divine essence to constitute the one Triune God.

The Trinity, the fullest and most explicit identity concept for the Christian God—the “Nester” in this case—is properly counted as one. There is only one God, not three Gods; only one Trinity, not three Trinities; only three persons, not four persons. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the three distinct, co-equal and co-eternal persons nested within the one Trinity and one divine essence. Nester (God; the Trinity) and the nested (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) are counted separately, not summatively.

God = Trinity = 1;

Father, Son, Holy Spirit = Persons = 3.

When the Athanasian Creed states that “the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God”—and yet there are not three Gods—the copulative “is” should be taken not as a statement of strict identity, but rather as a statement of predication.<sup>21</sup> Each person of the Trinity is fully and completely *of the nature of God*, i.e., fully instantiating the one divine substance shared by all three. Each of the three persons is *wholly* of the nature of God, but any one person is not identical to the *whole* of God.<sup>22</sup> The one and only “whole” God is identical only to the one divine substance fully and equally instantiated, necessarily, eternally, and simultaneously by all three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit ( $n_1, n_2, n_3 = 3$ ) reciprocally and congruently nested in the one and only one God and divine nature ( $N = 1$ ).

## 2. Analogies from Modern Physics: One Proton, Three Quarks and Complementarity

An important perspective on the one and threeness problem is provided by this analogy from modern physics: the proton constituted by three quarks.<sup>23</sup> The existence of quarks was first hypothesized by the physicists Murray Gell-Mann and George Zweig in 1964, and then later confirmed in 1968 by experiments at the Stanford Linear Accelerator in California.<sup>24</sup> The whimsical name “quark” was chosen

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<sup>21</sup> On the predicative use of the copulative, compare John 1:1: “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God.” Here θεός is used in two distinct senses. The Word was with *God*—with God the Father; and the Word was “God”—i.e., of the nature of God. On John 1:1 see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 269, on a qualitative or predicative sense of θεός: “The idea ... here is that the Word had all the attributes or qualities that ‘the God’ of 1:1b had ... he shared the essence of the Father, though they differed in person.”

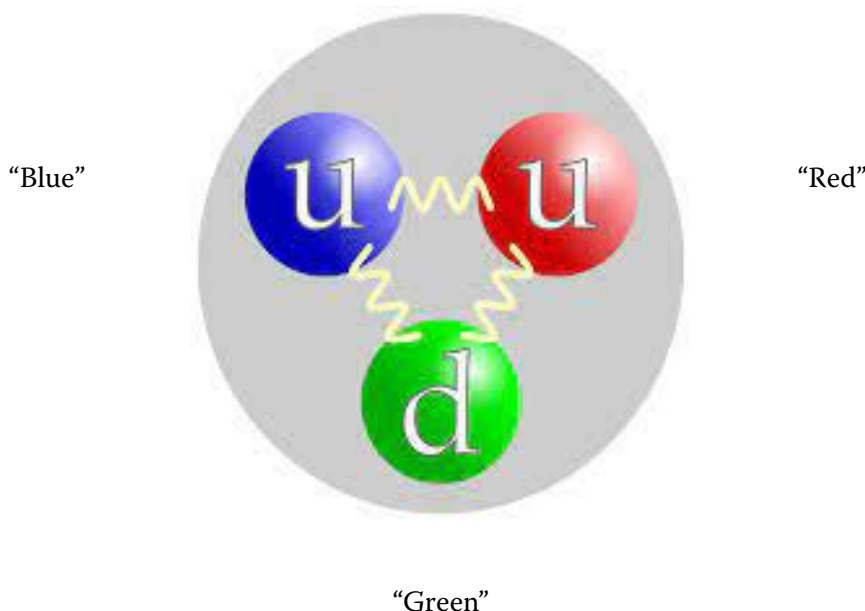
<sup>22</sup> This point has been very helpfully stated by William Hasker: “*Each Person is wholly God, but each Person is not the Whole of God*,” in *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 250, italics original.

<sup>23</sup> For the following section, see my earlier article, “Lessons from the Proton, 130–41.

<sup>24</sup> For the history of the discovery of quarks and their physical properties, see Timothy Paul Smith, *Hidden Worlds: Hunting for Quarks in Ordinary Matter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 90–108, “Particle Taxonomy,” and 131–47, “Three Quarks Plus”; and Frank Close, *The New Cosmic Onion: Quarks and the Nature of the Universe* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2007), 75–106. See also James Dodd and Ben Gripaios, *The Ideas of Particle Physics*, 4th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 143–64, “Quantum Chromodynamics—the Theory of Quarks.”

by Gell-Mann after a perusal of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, with its phrase "Three quarks for Muster Mark."<sup>25</sup> According to Gell-Mann, the number three fitted perfectly with the way quarks occur in nature.

Heretofore, the proton had been considered (along with the neutron) the fundamental particle of the atomic nucleus. The name "proton," meaning "first" in Greek, had been given to it by the English physicist Ernest Rutherford in 1920 after his experiments on the hydrogen nucleus.<sup>26</sup> In the current Standard Model of particle physics, the proton is now understood to be composed of three quarks tightly bound together by the strong nuclear force—two up quarks (u), and one down quark (d), as in the diagram below:



The quarks are so tightly bound together that they never appear in isolation in nature. The three quarks have the properties of mass, energy, electrical charge, and spin, properties shared by the proton which they constitute. But in addition, they have a distinctive quantum mechanical property known as "color charge," a property which does not characterize the proton. The "colors" (red, green, blue) of the quarks are arbitrary and have no connection to the colors of light as we experience them. The colors of the quark, however, are intrinsic properties that serve to distinguish one quark from the others.

When interacting to form the one proton, the color charges of the three quarks are not conserved, such that the proton has no "color." The distinctive color charges of the three quarks are ontologically present in the one proton, but phenomenologically absent, so to speak. Color is not attributed to the proton, even though it is a distinguishing property of the constituent quarks.

This "disappearance" or non-appearance of the color of the quarks in the proton is an example of another aspect of the nested relation, viz. the Non-Attribution of Distinctive Properties (NADP). This aspect means that when one or more objects are nested within a larger whole, one or more of the

<sup>25</sup> Gell-Mann gives his account of his naming of the quark in Murray Gell-Mann, *The Quark and the Jaguar: Adventures in the Simple and the Complex* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1994), 180–81.

<sup>26</sup> A. Romer, "Proton or Prouton? Rutherford and the Depths of the Atom," *American Journal of Physics* 65.8 (1997): 707–16.

distinctive properties of the nested objects may not be necessary to the identity of the larger nesting whole. Those properties may be ontologically present in the larger whole, but not phenomenologically apparent. For example, consider a pregnant mother, Mary, carrying two identical twins in her womb at seven months gestational age. Mary is the only pregnant woman in the doctor's waiting area at this time. In order for the doctor's administrative assistant to pick out Mary from other (non-pregnant) women in the waiting area, it is not necessary for the assistant to know the gender of the twins, or their weight, color of eyes, etc. Those properties are ontologically present, but not phenomenologically apparent. It is apparent that Mary is pregnant, and the description "Mary, the woman who is seventh months pregnant" is sufficient to identify her.

In the case of the proton, the proton's electric charge, mass, and spin are the properties that are sufficient to identify the proton as a proton (rather than as a neutron or electron). The "color" of the quarks is ontologically present within the proton, but is neither phenomenologically apparent nor epistemically necessary to identify the proton as a proton.

Now consider the case of Yahweh speaking to Moses from the midst of the burning bush. From the perspective of the New Testament and Christian faith, we believe that the Trinity was present in the burning bush. "Yahweh" and the "Trinity" are words that have different senses or connotations, but they have the same ontological reference: the one true God of Israel, the Creator and Judge of all things. The distinctive personal marks of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the three Persons of the Trinity, were ontologically present, but were (like the colors of the quarks) at that time not phenomenologically apparent. At that stage of redemptive history, it was necessary for the oneness of God, of Yahweh, to be apparent—not the triune inner complexity of God's being. Just as the proton has aspects of both oneness and threeness, so God has aspects of both oneness and threeness, but in neither case is it necessary for both oneness and threeness to be equally apparent at the same time and in the same context of redemptive history or experimental observation.

The principle of wave/particle complementarity in modern physics<sup>27</sup> can provide another analogy relevant to the oneness and threeness problem of the Trinity. As the electron passes through a screen with two slits, it exhibits the properties of a wave. When the electron strikes the detector behind the screen, it impacts a definite location, and exhibits the properties of a particle. Although "wave" and "particle" have different senses and evoke different mental images, both have the same reference: the electron in the experiment. "Wave" and "particle" are complementary, not contradictory, ways of conceptualizing the electron. Both are legitimate categories, given the particular context in which they are used. In similar fashion, we can recognize that Yahweh, the one God of Israel that Moses encountered at the burning bush (Exod 3:1–6), is in fact the same Triune God revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River (Luke 3:21–22). God was revealed as one in the Old Covenant, and as three in the New. God can be recognized as both one and three, depending on the context of revelation.

From one point of view—that of ordinary chemistry and the periodic chart of the elements, the proton is one stable and indivisible particle. From the point of view of the Standard Model of particle

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<sup>27</sup> On the epistemic issues raised by complementarity in quantum physics, see Jan Faye, "Copenhagen Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2019), §4 ("Complementarity"), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/qm-copenhagen/>. For the scientific and historical background, see R. Eisberg and R. Resnick, *Quantum Physics of Atoms, Molecules, Solids Nuclei, and Particles*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1985), 59–60.

physics, the proton is three quarks tightly bound by the strong nuclear force. Both descriptions are true and complementary, being relative to the context and purpose of the speakers. Similarly, both the “oneness” of Yahweh and “threeness” of the Trinity are truly predicated of the Christian God, in their respective contexts and purposes. They are complementary descriptions of the same God.

### *3. Summary and Conclusion*

This article has argued that the answer to the question “Is the one God of the Old Testament and Judaism exactly the same God as the Trinitarian God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—of the New Testament and Christian creeds” is definitely and confidently “Yes.” New arguments and analogies in support of the logical and theological coherence of Old and New Testament revelation were drawn from modern physics and philosophy. The concept of wave-particle complementarity in physics was applied to the structure of the proton, i.e., one proton constituted by three quarks. Both statements are true: the proton can be viewed as one particle; the proton can be viewed as three quarks. The aspects of oneness and threeness are complementary aspects of the same particle, viewed from different frames of reference. Analogously, the Triune God can be conceptualized from the distinctive but complementary perspectives of oneness of essence and threeness of Persons. In both cases, neither oneness nor threeness are in themselves complete descriptions of the object in question, and yet both are essential for a more conceptually adequate understanding.

The Nested Counting Rule (NCR) for properly counting the components of a larger whole containing parts nested within it was illustrated and applied to the Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the divine persons nested within the one divine nature are properly counted as three, whereas the one divine nature nesting them is properly counted as one: one and only one divine essence; one and only one true God. There is only one true God, not three; there are truly three and only three divine persons, not four persons or four gods. The one God Yahweh of the Old Testament is the same God as the Triune God of the New Testament, revealed in complementary and not contradictory fashion, in the different contexts and circumstances of Old and New Testament redemptive history.

# Do Companies Have Social Responsibilities?

— Gary J. Cundill —

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**Abstract:** Business and Christianity do not always enjoy the most comfortable of relationships. One approach Christians have taken when considering business's place in the world is to describe it in terms of corporate responsibility, i.e., that business has a responsibility not merely to deliver financial returns but to offer broader societal benefits. This article surveys the biblical evidence for such a view and finds it unconvincing. Rather, it is evident that Christians, not businesses, have social responsibilities and can and should discharge these in the world of business. Practical suggestions are offered in conclusion.

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What are companies for? This is an important question given their ubiquity and impact upon the world. Questions of purpose can be difficult to answer, however, and we're all familiar with how mixed our own individual motives can be at times. In 2019 the Business Roundtable, an association of CEOs of leading US companies, released to some fanfare a statement that business's purpose is to deliver value to its stakeholders: customers, employees, suppliers, communities, and shareholders.<sup>1</sup> Some praised the organization's seeming Damascene moment, going so far as to say that after decades of shareholder primacy,<sup>2</sup> "Today, that changes."<sup>3</sup> Others were a little more skeptical of the substance of this conversion experience, and even as to whether it was a good idea in the first place.<sup>4</sup>

Those concerned with business's inappropriate focus on financial performance commonly point to the work of Milton Friedman. In a famous essay more than half a century ago for the *New York Times*

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<sup>1</sup> Business Roundtable, "Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation," 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/2p8fpmnt>.

<sup>2</sup> The idea that managers' and directors' primary duty is to make decisions that are in the interests of the company's shareholders (see N. Craig Smith and David Ronnegard, "Shareholder Primacy, Corporate Social Responsibility and the Role of Business Schools," *Journal of Business Ethics* 134 (2016): 463–78).

<sup>3</sup> Rick Wartzman, "Top CEO Group Business Roundtable Drops Shareholder Primacy," *Fast Company*, 19 August 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/5x2nsnej>.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Winston, "Is the Business Roundtable Statement Just Empty Rhetoric," *Harvard Business Review*, 30 August 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/mrxwsywa>; Karl Smith, "Roundtable's Epiphany Is Wrong-Headed," *Bloomberg*, 25 August 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/apuzxt3r>.

*Magazine*, he quoted from a book he'd written earlier: "there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits."<sup>5</sup> The single-minded way in which many executives have adopted this approach may well not have been what he would have been pleased to see as a legacy, not least when they ignored the nuances of his arguments.<sup>6</sup> He certainly conceded in later years that company executives might owe duties to the public that could take precedence over duties to their shareholders.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, a Friedmanesque foundation can certainly serve as a starting point to ask the question: "Other than the pursuit of profits, what responsibilities might business owe to society"? And, as thinking Christians (cf. 1 Cor 2:16), what biblical evidence can we offer to warrant whatever answer we come up with?

Now, it would be helpful if a clear definition for corporate responsibility could be pulled directly from the Scriptures, perhaps along the lines of "greed is idolatry" (Col 3:5; cf. Eph 5:5) or Paul's rather fuller unpacking of the concept of love (1 Cor 13). The concept of the corporation, however, only came into being many centuries after the completion of the canon.<sup>8</sup> The Bible is therefore unsurprisingly silent on the idea and its implications. Instead, we must first turn to the world's definition of the concept of corporate responsibility, "anxious to understand it,"<sup>9</sup> before returning to the Scriptures.

The term "corporate responsibility" has been used in various, frequently contradictory ways, and has substantial overlaps with several other related terms. It is sometimes used interchangeably with "corporate social responsibility" or CSR and is almost a synonym for the older term "corporate citizenship," underlain by the idea of thinking of a company as a person.<sup>10</sup> More recently its meaning has been at least partially transferred to the term "corporate sustainability," and it is closely linked to "ESG" terminology.

One of the doyens of the field, Archie Carroll, has provided a helpful history of the term's use in his 1999 article for the journal *Business & Society*.<sup>11</sup> While acknowledging that the concept predates this, he picks up the story in mid-twentieth century North America when there arose increasing recognition that business leaders carried certain social responsibilities. These responsibilities included acting in ways "desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society."<sup>12</sup> In the ensuing years academics became increasingly involved in the burgeoning field and related definitions began emerging.

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<sup>5</sup> Milton Friedman, "The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits," *New York Times Magazine*, 13 September 1970, <https://tinyurl.com/msmphmyu>.

<sup>6</sup> For example, staying within "the rules of the game" (Friedman, "The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits").

<sup>7</sup> Thomas L. Carson, "My Correspondence with Milton Friedman about the Social Responsibilities of Business," *Business & Society Review* 123:2 (2018): 217–42.

<sup>8</sup> "Chartered Company," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, n.d., <https://www.britannica.com/topic/chartered-company>.

<sup>9</sup> John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 28.

<sup>10</sup> Carmen Valor, "Corporate Social Responsibility and Corporate Citizenship: Towards Corporate Accountability," *Business and Society Review* 110:2 (2005): 191–212.

<sup>11</sup> Archie Carroll, "Corporate Social Responsibility: Evolution of a Definitional Construct," *Business & Society* 38.3 (1999): 268–95.

<sup>12</sup> Carroll, "Corporate Social Responsibility," 270, quoting Howard R. Bowen, *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), 6.



The “responsibility” side of the term became linked to “public responsibility,” which might issue in “public service”; “social responsibility” might lead to “social responsiveness” and/or “social action”; and environmental issues are frequently included under the “social” label in the terminology.<sup>13</sup> In a metrics-obsessed culture it is not surprising that corporate social performance became a way of talking about how companies were actually doing when it came to discharging any social responsibilities that they might be deemed to have.<sup>14</sup>

Two more related terms are ESG and sustainability. ESG stands for “environmental, social and governance,” an arguably unhelpful conflation of very different aspects of company processes and performance.<sup>15</sup> Problematic as the acronym is, ESG has become almost ubiquitous in investment circles, and is widely used to describe companies with superior environmental and social performance.<sup>16</sup> Sustainability is another duffel bag-like term into which all kinds of things can be stuffed. While the Brundtland definition of it probably can’t be bettered,<sup>17</sup> Carroll, in a recent essay, astutely observed that businesspeople seem to see it as a synonym for CSR, since many CSR reports have now been renamed sustainability reports, with no material change to their contents.<sup>18</sup>

Our interest is not primarily historical, nor is it definitional for its own sake. For our purposes an awareness that there is supplementary and overlapping terminology is sufficient; and for a working definition of corporate responsibility we can lean for now on that formulated by Herman Aguinis: “the context-specific organisational actions and policies that take into account stakeholders’ expectations and the triple bottom line of economic, social and environmental performance.”<sup>19</sup> Here he expresses responsibility in terms of the things that companies do and say that they do, in response to what actors such as communities and employees want. He also acknowledges that the results of company actions are not limited to the financial arena.

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<sup>13</sup> Sandra A. Waddock and Samuel B. Graves, “The Corporate Social Performance-Financial Performance Link,” *Strategic Management Journal* 18.4 (1997): 303–19; for the sake of brevity, I will usually in this article refer to social responsibilities in this way.

<sup>14</sup> José M. Agudo-Valiente, Concepción Garcés-Ayerbe and Manuel Salvador-Figueras, “Corporate Social Performance and Stakeholder Dialogue Management,” *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management* 22 (2015): 13–31.

<sup>15</sup> Gary Cundill and Hugh Wilson, “ESG? A Framework for Corporate Governance and its Environmental and Social Outcomes,” *Academy of Management Proceedings* (2020), <https://tinyurl.com/3jn48r3s>.

<sup>16</sup> *The Economist*, “ESG Should Be Boiled Down to One Simple Measure: Emissions,” 21 July 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/mspzmsxz>.

<sup>17</sup> Gro Brundtland, “Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future (1987),” United Nations General Assembly, A/42/427, <https://tinyurl.com/zr4dxfe9>.

<sup>18</sup> Archie Carroll, “Corporate Social Responsibility: Perspectives on the CSR Construct’s Development and Future,” *Business & Society* 60.6 (2021): 1258–78.

<sup>19</sup> Herman Aguinis, “Organisational Responsibility: Doing Good and Doing Well,” in *APA Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, ed. Sheldon Zedeck (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009), 3:855–79.

## 1. Biblical Warranting for Corporate Responsibility

Something should be said about the “why” of corporate responsibility: Why should companies behave in a socially and environmentally responsible manner? At the individual, Christian level such questions are comparatively easy to answer. The environment matters because in the beginning God created it—the earth we live on and the heavens we live beneath (Gen 1:1; Acts 4:24). Not only that but having declared his creation “good” (Gen 1:10, 12, 24, 31) we may surmise that actions that damage this good creation he is likely to regard as “bad” (particularly since it would seem that creating in some sense cost God effort (Gen 2:2–3), and perhaps also since it seems that God, at least at one point, appears to have enjoyed spending time in his creation).<sup>20</sup> God also created humankind who make up the society that we live in today; made as we are in his likeness (Gen 1:27) we may presume that actions that harm society evince a certain lack of respect for the person of God, at least to the extent that his existence is reflected in the people of this planet (cf. Gen 9:6). We do not even need to leave the first chapter of the first book of the Bible to find that God also places responsibilities upon humans: to reproduce and populate the earth, and to manage life on that earth.<sup>21</sup>

So, an argument can swiftly be made that Christians should be socially and environmentally responsible. But companies? The obvious challenge to be faced is that the concept of a company is, by and large, absent from the pages of the Scriptures. Limited liability companies as we know them today did not exist in biblical times, although there were structures such as the *peculium*, whereby assets could be transferred by a master to a slave, or a father to his son.<sup>22</sup> Encouragingly, however, issues relating to commercial enterprise certainly appear in the Bible, and we will rely on these for much of what follows.

A second challenge lies in the extent to which biblical teaching can be applied to the modern (Western) corporate context. This is not to question the Bible’s relevance to today’s world, nor to take issue with Kuyper’s famous lines from his inauguration speech at the Free University in 1880: “there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human life of which Christ, Who is Sovereign of all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”<sup>23</sup> At issue here is how guidance and instruction provided by God to his people can be deployed in the public sphere, and more particularly what this guidance and instruction means for directors and executives, of whatever or no faith, running the corporations of today. I will return to this after considering the biblical evidence.

One collection of insights may be gleaned from employer-employee relations, a topic usually seen as a part of corporate responsibility.<sup>24</sup> The book of Exodus relates how Egyptian taskmasters<sup>25</sup> deliberately created harsh working conditions for Israelite laborers (Exod 1:11, 13–14; 5:6–9). The intended result

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<sup>20</sup> Gen 3:8. Gen 6:6–7 indicates that such enjoyment is now alloyed with regret.

<sup>21</sup> Gen 1:28–30; cf. Gen 2:15. Gen 7:1–5 and 8:15–19 provides an example of obedience to God’s command in this regard.

<sup>22</sup> Robert W. Hillman, “Limited Liability in Historical Perspective,” *Washington and Lee Law Review* 54.2 (1997): 613–27.

<sup>23</sup> Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” lecture at the Free University, 20 October 1880, translated by George Kamps, <https://tinyurl.com/yapub3t9>.

<sup>24</sup> Herman Aguinis and Ante Glavas, “What We Know and Don’t Know about Corporate Social Responsibility: A Review and Research Agenda,” *Journal of Management* 38 (2012): 932–68.

<sup>25</sup> While the employer here was the government rather than a company, this does not change the principles involved.

was achieved: psychological brokenness (Exod 6:9). By way of contrast, God subsequently laid down a structure of work and rest that he expected to be applied not only to his people, but by his people to those working for them, even if the employee was not an Israelite (Exod 20:8–11; 23:12; 31:12–17; Deut 5:12–15). The Sabbath pattern is extended to the way in which agricultural activities are to be carried out, for the sake of the poor and even for wild animals.<sup>26</sup> There is also a clear understanding that some employees are more vulnerable to abuse than others, and so regulations are provided for their protection.<sup>27</sup> A power differential between employers and the employed exists, but this does not justify the oppression of workers (Isa 58:3, 6–7; Jer 22:13; Eph 5:9; Col 4:1).

There is also a range of instructions that God has given to his people that have direct implications for how they conduct business. “You shall not steal” (Exod 20:16; cf. 23:4) precludes fraudulent business practices, and bribe-induced corruption is explicitly forbidden.<sup>28</sup> “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod 20:16) prohibits untruthful comparative advertising.<sup>29</sup> Taxes are to be paid as due (Matt 22:15–22; Rom 13:6–7). More broadly, all governing structures are to be respected and their requirements complied with (Rom 13:1–5; 1 Pet 2:13–17). Other instructions are provided to protect the public against undue risk of bodily or financial harm as a result of the irresponsible carrying out of agricultural and other activities (Exod 21:28–32, 33–36; 22:5; Deut 22:8). Standards of hygiene are expected with respect to the disposal of human excrement (Deut 23:12–14). There is also a recognition that irresponsible plundering of the earth’s resources is wrong, and that they should be exploited in a sustainable manner (Deut 22:6–7). Loans that are extended, and particularly those that are extended to the poor, are not to be managed in an extortionate and oppressive manner (Deut 24:10–13). Harsh and abusive business practices are roundly condemned (Amos 2:6–8; 8:4–6; Mic 2:1–2; Hab 2:12; Mal 3:5).

An argument can also be made for corporate philanthropy, based on the apparently permanent presence of poverty, and the requirement to be generous with available resources and to exercise such gifts as one has been given.<sup>30</sup> Such philanthropy need not take the form of hand-outs but may involve merely avoiding ruthless efficiency in profit maximization, thereby creating opportunities for the poor to survive.<sup>31</sup> There are indications in Scripture that such philanthropy should be informed by an understanding of need and worthiness (1 Tim 5:9–16). In practice, such philanthropy has long been coupled with an aggressive public relations or publicity campaign in order for the company to be seen

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<sup>26</sup> Exod 23:10–11; cf. Deut 25:4, where the welfare of domesticated animals is also considered.

<sup>27</sup> Exod 21:7; perhaps also 23:9; Deut 10:19; 24:14–15.

<sup>28</sup> Exod 23:8; Prov 17:23; Eccl 7:7; Isa 1:23 (in the context of government); cf. Deut 25:13–16 and Prov 11:1; 20:23, where it is evident that sharp practices were known to be present in commercial transactions; see also Deut 27:17 and Prov 22:28; 23:10–11, in the context of property.

<sup>29</sup> While a competing company may or may not meet the definition of a neighbor, presumably those working for it do.

<sup>30</sup> Deut 15:7–11; Matt 25:34–36; Rom 12:8; Gal 2:10. This is not to say that whatever applies to individual Christians can be simply applied to companies—by way of example, the latter presumably don’t get the benefit of treasure in heaven (Mark 10:21) as a consequence of corporate action on earth; philanthropy focused on Christians (Rom 12:13) is likely to throw up some ethical dilemmas. An avenue that might bear pursuing, however, is the extent to which companies may be thought of as having neighbors (cf. Luke 10:29).

<sup>31</sup> Deut 24:19–22; the well-known story of Ruth provides an example of such responsibility in action, taken even further to protect the safety of the gleaner (Ruth 2:2, 9, 15–16, 22). The story of David and Nabal, fraught as it is with overtones of a protection racket, deals with overlapping business interests, rather than distinct philanthropy.

in a good light,<sup>32</sup> rather contradicting the approach Jesus insisted on, at least in one's personal capacity (Matt 6:1–4). Greed is not good, the Bible tells us (Prov 1:18–19; Eccl 5:10–12; Isa 5:8). Indeed, as we noted above, Paul equates greed with idolatry, “the ultimate expression of unfaithfulness to God.”<sup>33</sup> Sharp business practice may result in short term gain, but not in the long term (Prov 20:17; 21:6–7). Generosity is likely to be rewarded (Prov 19:17; cf. 31:20). Ill-gotten wealth may not provide the hoped-for results (Prov 10:2). Reputations are damaged by evil deeds (Prov 10:9), no matter how much spin is applied (cf. Prov 10:19).

So, what we have is a body of biblical teaching that could, in principle, be applied in a corporate context. Human resources departments could adjust company policies to bring them into line with biblical expectations. The internal audit function could be focused on rooting out bribery and corruption. The Corporate Social Investment Officer could be allocated funds to alleviate human suffering. The question we must now consider is therefore not whether this biblical teaching *could* be applied, but rather the extent to which it *should* be applied in corporate contexts.

## 2. The Case Against Corporate Social Responsibility

There's an obvious problem here, and it presents itself when we attempt to apply this teaching to a corporate situation where the shots are not being called by Christians. It's easy to issue a call to Christian business leaders to conform to God's revealed views on responsibility: God clearly expects obedience from his people (Deut 10:12–13; John 14:15, 21) and, after all, God is the primary owner of all.<sup>34</sup> As part of the motivation for such leaders, there are indications that such obedience will result in rewards, perhaps in this world as well as the next<sup>35</sup>—doing well by doing good<sup>36</sup>—and disobedience will lead to loss (Job 20:19). Ultimately, of course, Christian business leaders' behavior should be determined by their fear of God, rather than the unrestrained pursuit of financial rewards (cf. Neh 5:1–13).

Where a company is owned by *and* managed by a Christian, or Christians, the guidance from the Scriptures that we've surveyed above would seem to be broadly applicable. There are indeed companies, past and present, that could be assigned to such a category.<sup>37</sup> In this post-Eden world, however, such situations are unusual. In the absence of any conveniently available hard data, I would suggest that

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<sup>32</sup> Timothy S. Mescon and Donn Tilson, “Corporate Philanthropy: A Strategic Approach to the Bottom Line,” *California Management Review* 29.2 (1987): 49–61.

<sup>33</sup> Brian Rosner, “The Concept of Idolatry,” *Themelios* 24.3 (1999): 21–30.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Chr 29:11–18; Ps 100:3; cf. Eccl 5:18–20 and 6:1–6 for the implication for work.

<sup>35</sup> Deut 11:13–16; Ps 107:35–38; Ps 112. cf. Dan Slater, Robert Holbrook and Joseph Xu, “Do Christian CEOs Make a Difference? Empirical Evidence from the S&P 500,” *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business* 25.1 (2022): 74–82.

<sup>36</sup> By way of support: Oliver Falck and Stephan Hebllich, “Corporate Social Responsibility: Doing Well by Doing Good,” *Business Horizons* 50.3 (2007): 247–54. cf., however, Aneel Karnani “Doing Well by Doing Good: The Grand Illusion,” *California Management Review* 53.2 (2011): 69–86. (Not to say, of course, that material prosperity is a guide to godliness—cf. Isa 2:7; not all gain is honest gain: Ezek 22:13, 27; Hab 2:9).

<sup>37</sup> For example, John Lovatt, “Christian Banking and the New Quaker Bank,” *Faith in Business Quarterly* 16.2 (2014): 9–16; Michael Zigarelli, *Christian-Owned Companies* (Hildesheim, Germany: 9 to 5 Media, 2019)

few would disagree that most businesses around the world are led by non-Christians, and that most businesses are not owned by Christians.<sup>38</sup>

How then are decisions to be made with respect to corporate responsibility when a company's decision-makers do not share the same faith?<sup>39</sup> And even in the wonderful situation where the executive and the board are both populated by Christians, what will non-Christian and institutional shareholders think of this executive and board if they started giving "their" money to the poor? Could such shareholders not rightly accuse these Christians of attempting to serve two conflicting beneficiaries?<sup>40</sup> A typical situation is that a company is owned by a range of individual and institutional shareholders and is managed by mostly non-Christian executives and governed by a board of mostly non-Christian directors—does the Bible have anything to say about the extent and nature of the company's responsibility to the environment and society?

I have argued elsewhere<sup>41</sup> that simplistically making normative statements such as "companies should do more CSR" does not provide a helpful platform for engaging with business leaders. In the same article I offered some preliminary thoughts as to what arguments Christians could deploy in a bid to influence company leaders, faithful or faithless, to lead their companies in a more responsible manner. These arguments had pragmatic underpinnings and were largely aimed at suggesting to leaders that taking the company's non-financial performance into account might just have a positive effect on its financial performance.

Such thoughts, however, do not address a fundamental question: from our Christian perspective, do companies bear any responsibility to society? Some certainly would answer "yes" to this: "A corporation that exploits the environment is one that is not acting according to the God-given responsibility to care for creation."<sup>42</sup> But at the risk of being deafened by well-meaning cries of correction, if not of heresy, I would like to suggest that the answer is "no." Companies have no such responsibility.

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<sup>38</sup> For it to be useful for our current purpose, researchers would probably need to somehow focus on some definition of Christianity which would include belief in the Bible. Some warranting can, however, be drawn from publications such as the Pew Centre's report on the size of the world's Christian population, which shows Christians as a 32% minority of the world's population (The Pew Centre, "Global Christianity," December 2011, <https://tinyurl.com/ye28nvmm>). It would therefore be surprising should such a minority turn out to own the majority of owner-led businesses. More pertinently, a discussion of corporate responsibility usually takes place in the context of large businesses, many of which are listed on the world's stock exchanges. The ownership of these companies is frequently spread across a range of other entities such as pension funds and index investment companies, and it would be unusual and almost certainly inappropriate to describe the majority of these as Christian in nature.

<sup>39</sup> Decision making in the perhaps simpler context of a marriage is difficult when only one partner is a Christian, which presumably was at least part of Paul's motivation when he warned the Corinthians (2 Cor 6:14–18). It's beyond the scope of this article to debate the application of this verse to Christians co-owning and co-managing businesses with non-Christians.

<sup>40</sup> cf. Matt 6:24; Luke 16:13; as pointed out by Stephen N. Bretsen, "The Faithful Business as a Publicly Traded Corporation: Testing the Outer Limits of Corporate Law," *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business* 11.3 (2006): 42–80.

<sup>41</sup> Gary Cundill, "A Response to David Parrish on Corporate Social Responsibility," *Faith in Business Quarterly* 17.4 (2016): 27–30.

<sup>42</sup> Mark Benjamin Spence and Lee Warren Brown, "Theology and Corporate Environmental Responsibility: A Biblical Literalism Approach to Creation Care," *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business* 21.1 (2018): 45–54.

The biblical case for individual Christians' responsibility to society has been made above and is, I believe, unequivocal. But what is a company? It is "a body of persons combined for common (esp. commercial) object."<sup>43</sup> Now it is true that the Bible has much to say about the social responsibilities of one particular body of persons who have been combined for common object. But this body is called the church,<sup>44</sup> and is in no way to be equated or confused with the companies that we are concerned with here.

It is also true that there have been times when God judged bodies of persons en masse for their social irresponsibility. One example is that of Edom. In the prophecy of Obadiah (vv. 1–9) we read how some really bad things were going to happen to the nation. The cause of these calamities was the nation's seriously anti-social behavior (vv. 10–14). An argument could perhaps be made that, just as God has held and will hold national bodies of people to account for irresponsible behavior, so too will he hold to account the bodies of people that constitute companies.

Possibly. But allow me to make two observations that would weaken such an argument. First, the responsibilities of political leaders are different to those of business leaders. It's included in the job description of the former that they should govern society (Rom 13:1–6; cf. 1 Chr 18:14). When political leaders fail to discharge their God-given mandate (Rom 13:1–7) societies may indeed carry the consequences of this. While enterprises such as the East India Company may have carried mandates that included the governing of societies,<sup>45</sup> and one may of course debate whether such mandates were appropriate, they are a vanishingly small minority today.

Second, one may also discern a difference in kind between the concepts of "nation" and "company." The idea of a nation contains several elements, one being land—nations are thought of as having borders, and we can depict them in atlases. Another element is that it is a legal entity—nations can and do enter contractual arrangements with other nations, with individuals, and with companies. But when we think about a nation it is primarily the people that come to mind. When we pray that God's saving health might be known among all nations<sup>46</sup> it is not legal entities or tracts of land that we are referring to, but people. When Jesus was accused of perverting a nation (Luke 23:2), it was the Jewish people that the leaders were referring to.

And while a company is indeed, as we have noted, made up of people, in the West at least when we think of a company, we think first of it as a legal entity<sup>47</sup> before we think of it as made up of individuals. If we speak, say, of the way companies are damaging the environment we do not usually think of the faces of those who are doing the damaging.<sup>48</sup> It's even clearer when we make statements such as

<sup>43</sup> J. B. Sykes, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>44</sup> And, in a rather nice touch, it is even likened to a human body (1 Cor 12:12–27).

<sup>45</sup> "The Company that Ruled the Waves," *The Economist*, 17 December 2011, <https://tinyurl.com/mr2zajdx>.

<sup>46</sup> Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979).

<sup>47</sup> Even if this entity may be defined as a legal fiction, a term explained below.

<sup>48</sup> For example, Matthew Taylor and Jonathan Watts, "Revealed: The 20 Firms behind a Third of All Carbon Emissions," *The Guardian*, 9 October 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/3pt6jh75>.

“companies should be fairer to their employees,” drawing a distinction between the company itself and the individuals working for it.<sup>49</sup>

Companies don’t get to go to heaven—or hell (despite what some activists might wish).<sup>50</sup> And much as many of us might desire to assign them social responsibilities, this just doesn’t make good sense. We may and should speak of the social and environmental responsibilities of company directors and managers. “The development, strengthening and multiplication of socially minded business men is the central problem of business.” These aren’t the words of a recent left-wing commentator but appeared in 1927 in the pages of the hard-nosed *Harvard Business Review*.<sup>51</sup> The words that we choose matter. Speaking of the non-existent social responsibilities of a company detracts from our ability to understand and influence the mechanisms that impact on company social performance.

We have a natural tendency to anthropomorphize companies. At least part of the reason for this is that, for the purposes of the legal system,<sup>52</sup> companies are deemed to be persons.<sup>53</sup> By doing this, the courts have created what is known as a legal fiction. This does not mean that, as far as the legal system is concerned, companies do not exist. Legal fictions are very real.<sup>54</sup> They are created to attain desired legal consequences while avoiding undesirable ones.<sup>55</sup> These fictions are useful in law not least because those using them are not supposed to fall into the trap of believing them to be true.<sup>56</sup> It is when a legal fiction is taken too seriously that it can become dangerous.<sup>57</sup> This is what all too often happens when we use anthropomorphic language about companies. Forgetting that the personhood of companies is merely a convenient legal fiction, we start equating that personhood with humanity.<sup>58</sup> Humans have social responsibilities; surely companies, “persons,” after all, do too? But to speak of the social responsibility of companies is to speak of a fictional concept far less helpful than the legal fiction of the company itself.

This doesn’t mean, however, that companies have no responsibilities at all. Companies are governed by the law. This is entirely appropriate, since it is the legal system that creates these companies in the first place. Companies may therefore be prohibited from engaging in nefarious activities as diverse as employing child laborers and providing payday loans at eyewatering interest rates.<sup>59</sup> These prohibitions

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<sup>49</sup> For example, “How to Ensure That the Future of Work Is Fair for All,” *The Economist*, 8 November 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/bdzk3unp>.

<sup>50</sup> Tembile Sgcolana, “Shell Can Go to Hell: Petition against Wild Coast Shale Gas Exploration Grows,” *Daily Maverick*, 15 November 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/mvw99xxz>.

<sup>51</sup> Wallace B. Donham, “The Social Significance of Business,” *Harvard Business Review* (1927): 406–19.

<sup>52</sup> For the sake of brevity, I will confine what follows to the US legal system.

<sup>53</sup> Sanford A. Schane, “The Corporation Is a Person: the Language of a Legal Fiction,” *Tulane Law Review* 61.3 (1987), <https://tinyurl.com/p8sp9jeb>.

<sup>54</sup> John D. Stanley, “Fictions: Legal and Organizational,” *Academy of Management Journal* 9.2 (1966): 12–126.

<sup>55</sup> Chunlin Leonhard, “Dangerous or Benign Legal Fictions, Cognitive Biases, and Consent in Contract Law,” *St. John’s Law Review* 91 (2017): 385–426.

<sup>56</sup> Stanley, “Fictions: Legal and Organizational.”

<sup>57</sup> Leonhard, “Dangerous or Benign Legal Fictions.”

<sup>58</sup> Dave Fagundes, “What We Talk about when We Talk about Persons: The Language of Legal Fiction,” *Harvard Law Review* 114.6 (2001): 1745–68.

<sup>59</sup> For example, “The Birth of the New Deal,” *The Economist*, 17 March 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/3wa5xcnv>; “An Assessment of the White House’s Progress on Deregulation,” *The Economist*, 14 October 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/9syszp88>.

may be enforced by the threat of sanctions such as fines or the loss of a license to operate. But this is not corporate social responsibility; this is a matter of corporate legal compliance (or non-compliance).<sup>60</sup>

What is there to stop jurisdictions from legislating responsibility? Nothing at all. Some countries such as India have done just that.<sup>61</sup> But this is the political and regulatory authorities exercising responsibility, not the companies. For the companies, it is then merely a question of compliance with the law, not a noble and potentially PR-worthy exercise in social beneficence. Companies are not human persons that have social and environmental responsibilities; they are legal entities that have legal responsibilities. There can therefore be no useful theology of corporate social and environmental responsibility.

### 3. Conclusion

At first blush this might seem a bleak conclusion at which to arrive. Does this mean that it is not realistic and indeed not even appropriate to hold companies to account for their non-financial performance, for their impacts upon the environment and society? By no means!<sup>62</sup>

It would seem rather obvious that if we wish to change a certain behavior, we should first ascertain what factors determine this behavior. Stridently asserting that companies *should* behave in particular ways begs the question “why?” All too often the reply is “because companies have social and environmental responsibilities.” And since we have shown that this is not the case (except when we mean by such responsibilities mere compliance with the law) we should not be surprised when companies behave in what appear to be irresponsible ways. An incorrect diagnosis is likely to result in inappropriate interventions, leading to suboptimal outcomes.

Political leaders have social responsibilities—it’s what they’re there for. Paul is insistent that God has put the governing authorities in place, and that they are there for our good (Rom 13:1–4). In writing this he would presumably have had in mind an earlier instruction that stresses that kings’ powers should not be deployed for their own gratification (Deut 17:16–20), and the various proverbs that point to the positive impact a good king can have on his subjects (for example, Prov 29:4). It is certainly the case that all too often political leaders do not discharge their social responsibilities. From the oppressive policies of a long-deceased Egyptian leader (Exod 1:18–22) to the wastelands of modern Syria,<sup>63</sup> the road of political social irresponsibility is well-trodden. Yet a poor track record doesn’t negate the original purpose. Consider the US constitution: “Its first three words—‘We The People’—affirm that the government of the United States exists to serve its citizens.”<sup>64</sup>

If we wish to see the social performance of companies changing, then a crucial lever to pull is that of influencing political leaders to change the rules of the game within which these companies are operating. Exactly how we exert that influence may depend on the political system at the national

<sup>60</sup> I am aware that there are those such as Carroll who include legal compliance as an aspect of CSR. This seems to me to be a stretch. Imagine, if you will, a company manager explaining to an outraged community meeting, “Of course we’re a socially responsible company—we haven’t broken the law!”

<sup>61</sup> Kirthana Singh Khurana, “Mandatory CSR in India—A Trailblazer from the East,” *BRICS Law Journal* 9.4 (2022): 81–107.

<sup>62</sup> As an apostle once wrote, railing against the idea of ongoing sin (Rom 6:2).

<sup>63</sup> cf. “The Rehabilitation of Syria’s Dictator Raises Awkward Questions for the West,” *The Economist*, 11 May 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/33am9t4k>.

<sup>64</sup> United States Senate, “Constitution of the United States,” n.d., <https://tinyurl.com/2p9bmnzx>.



or supranational level that is appropriate to the case in point. Nevertheless, it is these leaders who determine and enforce the laws with which we expect companies to comply.

It is certainly also possible to change companies' social performance by direct and indirect acts of activism, a topic I have written of elsewhere.<sup>65</sup> But such activism should not be predicated on any sense of a company carrying social responsibilities. It is simply a question as to how influence may be exerted over its board of directors and managers, who are making the decisions that determine the company's social performance. In those special cases when companies are led and/or owned by Christians one way of exerting such influence is to remind such leaders and owners of their own social responsibilities, aspects of which we have already considered. In other cases, appeals are likely to be made on the basis of self-interest, even if not couched in such terms.

As Christians, we ought to care about the created order and the created human beings who live in and enjoy it. This means that we should care when we see companies damaging society and the environment. Some of us may hear God's call to do something about it. But our efforts are likely to be thwarted if we base our actions on a myth, that companies themselves have social responsibilities. One crucial point of engagement is at the political level, where these social responsibilities certainly do exist. Companies should be regulated for the benefit of society, and compliance with such regulations should be enforced. A second point of engagement is at the level of company directors and managers, where we may seek to persuade them that it may benefit them and the companies they serve to go beyond legal compliance in reducing societal harm and providing societal benefits.

A theology of personal social responsibility is possible, and I hope that I have shone some light on the steps that could be taken along that path. Theologies of political responsibility and civic engagement are likewise possible, although this article is not the place for them. But since companies do not have such responsibilities to society a theology of corporate social responsibility is neither possible nor desirable. This conclusion directs us to acknowledge where such responsibility actually lies, and not waste our time chasing a will o' the wisp through the swamp.

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<sup>65</sup> Gary Cundill, Palie Smart and Hugh Wilson, "Non-financial Shareholder Activism: A Process Model for Influencing Corporate Environmental and Social Performance," *International Journal of Management Reviews* 20 (2018): 606–26.

# A Biblical Framework for Deciding Workplace Moments of Conscience

— Jonathan D. Christman —

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**Abstract:** A well-known Christian intellectual and cultural commentator, John Stonestreet, has often publicly spoken of the need for Christians to develop a theology of “getting fired.” This call is not one for mass exodus of Christians from the workplace. Rather, this call recognizes that more and more Christians are facing moments of conscience in their workplace, when the obligations of a job—one’s current calling or vocation—come into conflict with one’s beliefs or convictions. Grounding both calling and convictions in Scripture, this article proposes an overarching framework and practical guide for analyzing, assessing, navigating, and deciding those workplace moments of conscience. Doing so entails both individual and corporate dimensions that are grounded in wisdom, humility, the means of grace, and life-giving community in the body of Christ.

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For several years, as stories of Christians facing certain cultural pressures and demands in their workplaces have multiplied (especially with regard to issues of marriage, gender and sexuality), and many of those stories have both captured significant public attention and entailed ongoing litigation in courts, a well-known Christian intellectual and cultural commentator, John Stonestreet, President of the Colson Center, has often asked, and even implored, Christians to develop a theology of “getting fired” or “being fired” that answers questions such as, “When am I called upon to take a stand and get fired?”<sup>1</sup> We know or have heard of these stories: the baker who surrendered a substantial portion of his business after refusing to make specially-designed custom cakes celebrating both a same-sex couple’s commitment ceremony and a purported gender transition; the fire chief who lost his job for publishing a book for his church expressing biblical views on marriage and sexuality; the Uber driver

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Nick Eicher, “A Theology of Getting Fired?,” *World Magazine*, 19 August 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/5f3anrch> (quoting Stonestreet). See also “We Need a Theology of When to Get Fired,” *Illinois Family Action*, 15 May 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/mw7sz548>; John Stonestreet, “The Point: Another Case for the Theology of Getting Fired,” *Breakpoint*, 26 August 2019, <https://www.breakpoint.org/the-point-another-case-for-the-theology-of-getting-fired/>; John Stonestreet, “Woke Capitalism Targets Religious Freedom,” *Breakpoint*, 4 September 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/48mdhesn>; John Stonestreet and Kasey Leander, “Canadian Teacher Faces Discipline for Questioning Gender Ideology,” *Breakpoint*, 14 February 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/278tdpu8>.

who was removed from this car service for refusing to take a woman to an abortion clinic; the county clerk who was jailed after refusing to sign marriage licenses for same-sex couples; the college philosophy professor who faced employee discipline for refusing to use a coed's preferred pronouns; and on and on these stories go.<sup>2</sup>

To be clear, Stonestreet, in exhorting Christians to develop a theology of getting fired, is not saying that Christians should seek or desire to lose their employment; rather, he is recognizing that, more and more in this cultural moment, what one believes as a follower of Christ may come into conflict with what one is required or compelled to do (or say or affirm) as an employee. In fact, this kind of conflict was rendered “inevitable,” as one Supreme Court Justice put it, by the 2015 opinion finding a constitutional right to same-sex “marriage” in *Obergefell v. Hodges*.<sup>3</sup> While this conflict is not new territory for the people of God in Scripture,<sup>4</sup> the church in history,<sup>5</sup> or Christians globally now,<sup>6</sup> it is new territory for many American Christians.

This article is a humble response to Stonestreet's call for building and constructing a theology of getting fired. It is only a beginning, but it proposes a framework and guide for analyzing, assessing,

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., “Colorado and Masterpiece Cakeshop Baker Jack Phillips End Legal Battle,” *CBS News*, 5 March 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/4drbn4cs>; Jenny Jarvie, “Atlanta Fire Chief Fired after Calling Gays ‘Vile’ Claims Religious Bias,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 January 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/4zremv6c>; Kerry Justich, “20-Year-Old College Student Says Uber Driver Left Her on Side of the Road when He Found Out She Was Getting an Abortion,” *Yahoo News*, 19 April 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/4up9kkpf>; “Kentucky Clerk Kim Davis Denied Marriage Licenses for Her Friends,” *ABC News*, 22 September 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/48u9j3au>; Matt Laviates, “Professor Who Wouldn't Use Trans Student's Pronouns Wins \$400K Settlement,” *NBC News*, 19 April 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/yj3sasn>.

<sup>3</sup> See *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 644 (2015) (Thomas, J., dissenting, “warning of the ‘inevitable’ conflict as individuals “are confronted with demands to participate in and endorse civil marriages between same-sex couples”).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Exod 1:15–22 (Shiphrah and Puah, midwives who “feared God” and “did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live”); 1 Kgs 18:1–19 (Obadiah, household servant of King Ahab who “feared the Lord greatly” and hid and cared for 100 prophets to protect them from Queen Jezebel); Esth 3:7–5:2 (Esther, the Hebrew queen, spoke up to the king not knowing whether she would perish in order to save the Hebrew people from a death sentence); Dan 1:8–21 (Daniel and his companions, officials in the king's court, resolving not to eat the king's diet to avoid defiling themselves); Dan 3:1–30 (Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, officials of the king, refusing to bow and worship King Nebuchadnezzar's golden image); Dan 6:1–28 (Daniel, high governmental official of the king, refusing to obey law that prohibited him from praying for thirty days to anyone except the king).

<sup>5</sup> See Mark Water, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Martyrs* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001) (compiling stories of Christian martyrdom throughout history); see also, e.g., John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (sixteenth century work recounting the stories of Christian martyrs in history); G. W. Bowerstock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) (discussing the earliest Christian martyrs within the Roman empire).

<sup>6</sup> In many countries, the threats and difficulty faced by Christians for holding to their convictions far exceed job loss or strain. See “Stories,” Open Doors, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/> (detailing stories of Christian persecution around the world, including physical abuse, torture, destruction of churches, and even death); “Stories,” The Voice of the Martyrs, <https://www.persecution.com/stories/> (detailing modern-day stories of Christian martyrs).

and deciding these “workplace moments of conscience”<sup>7</sup> that are already here and likely to increase in the present cultural moment. Thus, the theology of getting fired is a theology of cultural engagement, wherein doctrine meets life and practice. To develop this theology, the first part of this article summarizes the theology of calling (or vocation) and the second part of this article summarizes the theology of convictions, for these theologies crash into each other in these workplace moments of conscience. But relying upon the Protestant Reformed tradition, *both* calling *and* convictions should be grounded in Scripture for any Christian to faithfully encounter and engage these workplace moments of conscience. The third part of this article provides a framework for analyzing and assessing workplace moments of conscience as contextualized instances wherein one’s calling and one’s convictions are simultaneously weighed and tested by employment demands and requirements. In these moments, a Christian will either keep or surrender their calling and either keep or surrender their convictions, but not every choice is permissible nor, in the instances envisioned herein, is any choice absolutely or necessarily mandated. In short, in these workplace moments of conscience there is often (though not always) room for disagreement and dispute among believers. This is why the fourth part of this article provides an equipping guide and various tools for preparing to handle and actually navigating these workplace moments of conscience. As will be seen, the way forward in thinking through these moments involves both individual and corporate (family and church) dimensions grounded in, *inter alia*, wisdom, humility, the means of grace (prayer and reading Scripture), and life-giving community in the body of Christ.

### *1. A Theology of Calling*

Followers of Christ are called to do all things as unto the Lord and for his glory (Col 3:23; 1 Cor 10:31) in the “allotted periods” and the “boundaries” of their “dwelling place” (Acts 17:26)—that is, the particular cultural moment in which they live and reside by God’s sovereign design and providence. As a fulfillment of the cultural mandate and great commission, Christians are called by God into all spheres of life (Gen 1:26–31; Matt 28:18–20), and God does both the calling and the equipping (1 Cor 7:17–24; Eph 2:8–10; 2 Tim 3:14–17; Heb 13:20–21)—often calling his children to serve people and institutions wherein their God-supplied gifts and passions intersect, and then equipping his children through talents, training, experiences, and opportunities to serve at that joyful point of missional intersection. An understanding of calling is, according to theologian and apologist William Edgar, among “the most pressing issues of our day,”<sup>8</sup> and it significantly affects workplace moments of conscience because, as further described below, Christians are called to their particular employment contexts.

Well-known Christian apologist and social critic, Os Guinness, has written extensively on the idea of Christian calling, defining it as “the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion, dynamism, and

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<sup>7</sup> This is a term of art used and relied upon throughout this article and refers particularly to any employment situation, requirement, duty, or mandate faced by a Christian in the workplace or business setting wherein the obligations of their job or business—that is, their current calling—come into conflict with their Christian beliefs or convictions.

<sup>8</sup> William Edgar, *Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 151, 154, 161, 212–15, 217.

direction lived out as a response to his summons and service.”<sup>9</sup> Guinness separates this notion of calling into “primary” and “secondary” callings, as follows: “Our primary calling as followers of Christ is by him, to him, and for him,” and it must be kept preeminent, while “Our secondary calling, considering who God is as sovereign, is that everyone, everywhere, and in everything should think, speak, live, and act entirely for him.”<sup>10</sup> This secondary calling includes one’s work, labor, or job, and for all Christians, whatever they do for employment, it is to be entirely for God. As the great reformer John Calvin put it, the Lord “bids each one of us in all life’s actions to look to his calling” and “the Lord’s calling is in everything the beginning and foundation of well-doing.”<sup>11</sup> This calling is part of an individual’s “sentry post” assigned to him by the Lord.<sup>12</sup>

For a period of church history, the idea of calling (or vocation) was limited exclusively to those who were called into ministry positions within the church, serving as priests, monks, and nuns.<sup>13</sup> This created a divide between spiritual, heavenly, or divine callings for work (those in the church), and everything else. This dichotomy was shattered by the Reformation which, in its return to Scripture alone as authority for the life of a Christian, elevated the importance of everyone’s work because all—including every type of work—was to be done unto the glory of God. This dramatic shift began the development of a broad theology of calling.

For instance, early in the Reformation, the great reformer Martin Luther wrote:

The works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they may be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but that all works are measured before God by faith alone.... Indeed, the menial housework of a manservant or maidservant is often more acceptable to God than all the fastings and other works of a monk or priest, because the monk or priest lacks faith.<sup>14</sup>

It was not the particular office occupied by a person that made the work something to which one was called; rather, it was the work itself to which the person was called by God in faith. Nearly one hundred years later, the great Puritan theologian, William Perkins, similarly wrote this on calling: “The action of a shepherd in keeping sheep, performed as I have said in his kind, is as good a work before God as is the action of a judge in giving sentence, or of a Magistrate in ruling, or a Minister in preaching.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, whether preaching a sermon, plowing a field, or pushing a broom, everyone has a vocational calling and all is to be done for the glory of God.

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<sup>9</sup> Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 29.

<sup>10</sup> Guinness, *The Call*, 31.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 3.10.6.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 3.10.6.

<sup>13</sup> William Edgar, *The Christian Mind* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2018), 84–85; Guinness, *The Call*, 31–35.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520: The Annotated Luther Study Edition, Vol. 3*, eds. Erik H. Herrmann and Paul W. Robinson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016); see also Martin Luther, *On Christian Liberty, 1520*, trans. W. A. Lambert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 29–30.

<sup>15</sup> William Perkins, *A Treatise of the Vocations or Callings of Men* (London: John Legat, 1605), 39.

In addition to seeing all of one's work as being done unto the glory of God, regardless of one's station in life, a theology of calling specifically includes notions of preparedness or giftedness for that calling. In other words, a person was made with the gifts to perform the work to which he or she is called. As Perkins wrote in his great treatise on vocations: "Every calling must be fitted to the man and every man fitted to his calling."<sup>16</sup> Guinness, relying upon another Puritan, identified three criteria for picking a job: (1) it should "be a warrantable calling, wherein we may not only aim at our own, but at the public good"; (2) one should have the appropriate gifting for the job; and (3) one should be guided toward it by the Lord.<sup>17</sup> With this in view, Guinness concludes: "God normally calls us along the line of our giftedness, but the purpose of giftedness is stewardship and service, not selfishness."<sup>18</sup> As Calvin put it, people "were created for the express purpose of being employed in labor of various kinds, and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God, than when every person applies diligently to his own calling, and endeavors to live in such a manner as to contribute to the general advantage."<sup>19</sup> Thus, one's calling extends beyond one's self, to be a servant and steward used by God for the sake of others.

This broader purpose is critical to an understanding of the theology of calling, particularly as it relates to one's individual employment setting and context. While a theology of calling necessarily requires one who is called, the emphasis is not on the one called but on the Caller (the Lord) and his purposes in that calling. Thus, not every calling is one that is necessarily chosen by the one called. For instance, Daniel did not choose to become part of the Babylonian king's court (Dan 1:1–7), nor did Esther choose to become queen of a Persian king (Esth 2:5–9, 15–17). Moreover, because the calling is ultimately the Caller's, the one called must be willing to lay down that calling for the Caller. According to Guinness, this is how Puritan minister John Cotton put it in his great sermon on Christian calling:

The last work which faith puts forth about a man's calling is this: faith with boldness resigns up his calling into the hands of God or man; whenever God calls a man to lay down his calling when his work is finished, herein the sons of God far exceed the sons of men. Another man when his calling comes to be removed from him, he is much ashamed and much afraid; but if a Christian man is to forego his calling, he lays it down with comfort and boldness in the sight of God.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, for the Christian, one's calling must be informed and shaped by Scripture, at its outset and until that calling ends by God's sovereign design and decree, whether through death or otherwise.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Perkins, *Treatise of the Vocations*, 41.

<sup>17</sup> Guinness, *The Call*, 46–47 (quoting John Cotton's 1633 sermon entitled "Christian Calling"). In saying this, we should not overlook or discount the very structures, systems, and institutions that must exist within a society, culture, and economy so that persons may "pick" among jobs as they consider their calling. For many Christians in history, and in other places in the world today, no significant or meaningful choice among jobs existed (or exists). Such Christians merely aim for and accept any gainful employment unto the glory of God. These believers are no less called than Christians living with more vocational opportunities.

<sup>18</sup> Guinness, *The Call*, 45.

<sup>19</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 2:143.

<sup>20</sup> See Guinness, *The Call*, 230 (quoting John Cotton's 1633 sermon entitled "Christian Calling").

<sup>21</sup> There is a broader notion of a theology of work or labor as a creational ordinance (Gen 1:28, 2:1–3, 2:15–17) that encompasses *how* a Christian is to work, including but not limited to, with excellence (Prov 22:29), honesty and integrity (Prov 10:9, 11:3, 12:17, 24:26; 2 Cor 8:21), diligence (Prov 12:11, 12:24; Acts 20:35; Rom 12:11; 2 Tim

## 2. *A Theology of Convictions*

Followers of Christ also confess and hold certain beliefs to be true, not only as to matters of salvation but life itself.<sup>22</sup> Scripture, though not merely a set of propositions to be held, consists of propositional truths.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the ancient Christian creeds (e.g., Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, Chalcedonian Creed) consist of statements of belief and conviction that continue to be professed by Christians today. Reformation-era confessions likewise consist of statements of belief and conviction that continue to be held and professed among congregations and denominations as doctrinal standards.<sup>24</sup> Individual believers (as well as churches and denominations) also affirm these confessions and other public statements on matters affecting the Christian life, including such topics as marriage, gender, and sexuality,<sup>25</sup> as well as considerations of religious liberty and freedom of conscience, the role of government and the civil magistrate, and civil disobedience (to name a few), as Christians seek to bring the "whole counsel of God" to bear on faith and life (Acts 20:27).<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Christians' convictions mandate certain actions (e.g., be fruitful and multiply, leave and cleave, pray, worship, give, love, forgive, teach, make disciples, meditate on God's word, repent, baptize, commune, honor parents, serve, obey, meet together, follow) and prohibit others (e.g., sin, idolatry, sexual immorality, lust, lying, murder, drunkenness, coveting, disobedience, blasphemy, judging, stealing, fits of anger and rage, sorcery, jealousy, calling evil 'good' and good 'evil'). The Christian religion is therefore a religion of confession (Rom 10:9–10; 2 Cor 9:13; Heb 4:14, 10:23).

Foundationally and fundamentally, the creeds, confessions, and other doctrinal statements are grounded upon the word of God, and the authority and truth of the convictions set forth therein ultimately rest upon the authority of Scripture itself.<sup>27</sup> The truth revealed by God in his word binds the

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2:6), respect for and submission to authorities (Rom 13:1–7; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13–18), and a good conscience (1 Tim 1:19), and bearing the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23). A deeper discussion of the theology of work is presumed here, and thus beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>22</sup> See J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 16–18, 23–25, 39–45.

<sup>23</sup> See Vern S. Poythress, "Truth and Fullness of Meaning: Fullness Versus Reductionist Semantics in Biblical Interpretation," *WTJ* 67 (2005): 213.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms (1647); Second London Baptist Confession (1689); Three Forms of Unity (collective name for the Belgic Confession of Faith, Canons of Dort, and Heidelberg Catechism).

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., The Danvers Statement, Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 1987, <https://cbmw.org/about/danvers-statement>; The Nashville Statement, Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 2017, <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement#articles>.

<sup>26</sup> These areas—freedom of conscience, the role of government, and civil resistance or disobedience—are additional topics beyond the scope of this article, each of which is ripe for further consideration in developing a broader theology of getting fired, particularly as that theology relates to governmental workplace moments of conscience, private employers' enforcement of laws and other governmental mandates, or litigation in American courts.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., Augsburg Confession (1530); Genevan Confession (1536); First Helvetic Confession (1536); French Confession (1559); Scots Confession (1560); Belgic Confession (1561); 39 Articles of Religion in the Church of England (1563); Second Helvetic Confession (1566); Irish Articles of Religion (1615); Westminster Confession of Faith (1647). In fact, such grounding became a hallmark of Reformation-era confessions.

conscience<sup>28</sup> of the believer to hear and adhere to such truth in belief and practice—as Luther put it at the Diet of Worms, “my conscience is captive to the Word of God.”<sup>29</sup> With similar emphasis, Perkins explained that one’s conscience can be bound either properly or improperly, and the only proper binder of conscience is the word of God:

Proper is that thing, which has absolute and sovereign power in itself to bind the conscience. And that is the word of God, written in the books of the Old and New Testament.... He which is the Lord of conscience, by his word and laws binds conscience: but God is the only Lord of conscience because he once created it, and he alone governs it, and none but he knows it. Therefore, his word and laws only bind conscience properly.<sup>30</sup>

Through the Spirit of the Lord, the word of God by its absolute and sovereign power binds the conscience.<sup>31</sup> Thus, a Christian’s beliefs and convictions are not held lightly or tacitly, and when the word of God comes into conflict with the dictates of man in his employment or otherwise, the Christian has no choice but to obey God’s word and Spirit: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Obedience to man must never “lead us away from obedience to [God]” for the Lord is “the King of Kings, who, when he has opened his sacred mouth, must alone be heard, before all and above all men; next to him we are subject to those men who are in authority over us, but only in him.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, obedience to one’s employer is subject to obedience unto the Lord.

In light of the foregoing, a critical aspect in the theology of convictions is distinguishing between those matters which are mandatory for all believers, and those matters rightfully left to each Christian’s conscience.<sup>33</sup> In Christian history, those matters left to each individual’s conscience as neither inherently

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<sup>28</sup> The “conscience” has been a subject of great debate and consideration throughout Christian history. This article, with its more limited scope, does not attempt to wade into those lengthy and important waters. Scripture speaks to the role of the conscience in humanity, communicated in man as one created in the image of God, which is defiled and seared by rebellion against God but is redeemed for those in Christ (see Acts 23:1, 24:16; Rom 2:14–15, 9:1, 13:5; 1 Cor 8:1–13, 10:23–31; 2 Cor 1:12, 4:2, 5:11; 1 Tim 1:5, 1:18–19, 3:9, 4:1–2; 2 Tim 1:3, Titus 1:15; Heb 9:8–10, 9:14, 10:2, 10:22, 13:18; 1 Pet 2:19, 3:16, 3:21; 1 John 3:20). Here, I simply adopt the definition and understanding of conscience set forth by the Puritan William Ames in the opening line of his treatise on the conscience, who himself follows Thomas Aquinas, stating that conscience is “man’s judgment of himself, according to the judgment of God of him” (citing Isa 5:3; 1 Cor 11:31). See, e.g., William Ames, *Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof* (London: 1639). Adoption of this understanding of conscience hopefully will not cause too much quibble at this junction. To be sure, a deeper dive and broader exploration on the nature of conscience would be a worthy endeavor in developing a more robust theology of getting fired.

<sup>29</sup> See Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 3rd ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), 314 (citing Martin Luther, *LW* 32:112–13).

<sup>30</sup> William Perkins, *A Discourse of Conscience* (1596), in *William Perkins, 1558–1602, English Puritanist*, ed. Thomas F. Merrill (Nieuwkoop: de Graaf, 1966), 10.

<sup>31</sup> Perkins, *A Discourse of Conscience*, 10.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 4.20.3.

<sup>33</sup> This matter, too, is also beyond the scope of this article for it does not seek to address whether certain convictions qualify themselves as matters on which all Christians must agree or as matters on which Christians are permitted to disagree. To be sure, a broader discussion of these matters would also be an appropriate endeavor in further development of the theology of getting fired. Rather than seek to answer all of those questions, this article instead accepts as given the Christian’s “workplace moment of conscience” as a rub between one’s current calling and one’s convictions, and proposes a framework for working through those moments with certain tools.



right nor inherently wrong have been classified as *adiaphora* or “indifferent things” or theologically “disputable matters.”<sup>34</sup> The specific disputable matters that engender conflict between one’s calling and one’s convictions have and will vary by cultural moment and employment setting. To be sure, no exhaustive or comprehensive undertaking of those disputable matters in this cultural moment can be entertained here. But, whether a particular workplace moment of conscience raises an issue that is indisputable or disputable as a theological matter, the Christian conscience is bound by the word of God. Thus, for the Christian, both one’s calling and one’s convictions must be informed and shaped by Scripture as one encounters, engages, and decides a workplace moment of conscience.

### 3. A Framework: The Table of Conscience

As indicated above, neither cases of conscience, nor proposals for how to resolve them, are new for the Christian church.<sup>35</sup> In this cultural moment, the workplace moments of conscience can appear in various ways, such as: compelling Christian employees to advocate views of marriage and sexuality with which they disagree or wear symbols representing the same; forcing believers to attend, participate, or fund events and programs that support choices contrary to Scripture; coercing Christians to use certain preferred pronouns or changed names of co-workers; mandating Christians to satisfy certain training or educational requirements that call evil good and good evil in order to obtain necessary licensing or certification in a professional field; or punishing believers for either holding or speaking their convictions or being part of a church or organization that clings to “old beliefs.”<sup>36</sup> The foregoing instances are merely illustrative of such conscience-pressing moments in the workplace for Christians.

The table and descriptions below analyze and assess the four different categorical choices placed before a Christian when evaluating a workplace moment of conscience. In those moments, a Christian can either keep or surrender their calling, and they can also either keep or surrender their convictions. As shown on the accompanying table (Exhibit 1), the horizontal axis represents one’s calling and the vertical axis represents one’s convictions. As argued herein, neither of the two lower quadrants are acceptable choices for the Christian in the workplace moment of conscience because in each instance the believer has surrendered their biblical convictions. However, depending upon context and situation, the two upper quadrants are acceptable choices for the Christian in the workplace moment of conscience because in each instance the believer has kept their biblical convictions and either remained in their current job, or resigned that one in pursuit of another, for the glory of God.

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<sup>34</sup> D. A. Carson, “On Disputable Matters,” *Themelios* 40 (2015): 383.

<sup>35</sup> The Puritans were especially interested in considering pressing cases of conscience, the application of God’s word and truth to the circumstances and situations of life to determine the rightness or wrongness of certain actions. See, e.g., Ames, *Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof*; Perkins, *A Discourse of Conscience*; Perkins, *The Whole Treatise of Cases of Conscience*; see also J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 107–22.

<sup>36</sup> Justice Samuel Alito, in another dissenting opinion from the 2015 same-sex “marriage” case, wrote in pre-scient language: “Today’s decision [the majority opinion in *Obergefell v. Hodges*] ... will be used to vilify Americans who are unwilling to assent to the new orthodoxy.... I assume that those who cling to old beliefs will be able to whisper their thoughts in the recesses of their homes, but if they repeat those views in public, they will risk being labeled as bigots and treated as such by governments, employers, and schools.” See *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 644 (2015) (Alito, J., dissenting). Justice Alito further noted that the implications of the reasoning in the majority’s decision “will be exploited by those who are determined to stamp out every vestige of dissent.”

### 3.1. Surrender Calling and Surrender Convictions

In this choice (represented by the lower left quadrant in Exhibit 1), the Christian has surrendered both their calling and their convictions. This category consists of persons who followed God's calling into specifically Christian vocations, such as Christian artists and musicians, teachers and professors at Christian schools, adoption and foster care workers at Christian agencies, biblical counselors and pastors, as well as anyone else employed by a Christian organization or institution, but, when faced with the pressure of adhering to Christian beliefs within the antagonism and hostility of the contemporary cultural environment, they abandon not only those beliefs but the Christian jobs in which they proclaimed such beliefs. In doing so, they have quit on their faith and God, publicly renouncing their professed conversion and confession.

Individuals who fall into this category may describe themselves in the current cultural moment as "deconstructing" their previously-professed Christian faith and many are now classified as "exvangelicals." They have essentially apostatized, outright rejecting not only their vocation unto the glory of God but also their beliefs as well. This is not an acceptable option for Christians facing workplace moments of conscience, but these stories represent both a deep sadness and a cautionary tale reminding Christians of the quote often attributed to sixteenth century English Reformer John Bradford: "There but for the grace of God, go I."

### 3.2. Keep Calling and Surrender Convictions

This is a tantalizing and tempting option for many believers in their workplaces, because it allows the Christian to seemingly avoid, or at the very least delay, the workplace moment of conscience. However, this option, like the preceding one, is not an acceptable choice for Christians. In this choice (represented by the lower right quadrant in Exhibit 1), the Christian has appeared to keep their calling but surrendered their convictions in the process. In doing so, they have simply kept their job and preserved their own sense of calling that is no longer tethered to either their convictions or vocationally working for the glory of God. They have remained in their employment post or profession in the near term, but they have sacrificed their beliefs for the sake of maintaining that position and/or retaining opportunities for future advancement in that field. In short, they have chosen their perception of calling over the Caller. They have promoted their own presence in that workplace or their desired career path and trajectory as being superior to the convictions they previously held. Perhaps they still maintain those convictions during weekend worship services and other religious activities, but those convictions are now hermetically sealed from their perceived vocational calling. In truth, however, they have not really kept their calling but surrendered it. In most instances they have undergone some attempt at rationalization in order to excuse or justify their change or departure from their prior-confessed beliefs.

Those Christians considering this route should heed these words often attributed to a great Reformer: "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point."<sup>37</sup> Christians must bring the whole counsel of God to bear on their lives, including

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<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (1968), in Francis Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, reprint ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1985), 1:11 (attributing quotation to Martin Luther).

their vocational calling. They must not shrink from the unchanging truth of God's word—including precisely where God's word is being challenged within their sphere of vocational influence, the sentry post to which they were assigned. Some Christians assume they will stand for what they believe in without preparing to make that stand or by making small sacrifices along the way with the idea that they will stand when matters become serious and significant; however, by the time matters reach that level of magnitude (with its corresponding cost), they are not prepared to sacrifice anything, let alone everything. So, they surrender their convictions in order to keep their job. They have succumbed to the yeast of convictional compromise that has worked its way through their doctrinal dough (1 Cor 5:6; Gal 5:9).

### **3.3. Surrender Calling and Keep Convictions**

In this choice (represented by the upper left quadrant in Exhibit 1), the Christian has forgone their current job but kept their convictions when facing a workplace moment of conscience. They have voluntarily left or resigned their current position in order to keep their beliefs intact and not violate their conscience bound by the word of God. In leaving their position, the grounds for such resignation may or may not have been disclosed to others, including their employer—that is, in resigning, the Christian may want to explain why their convictions prevent them from continuing in the job and participating in the job's requirements.

In a sense, by resigning from their job, they have surrendered their calling, but, in fact, the person has left one calling to pursue a different one unto the glory of God, as in when a Christian transitions from the call of singleness to the call of marriage. In the employment context, this choice to resign comes at a great cost for the one resigning (as well as their family) – often financially, with corresponding limitations on future job prospects in that same field, or having to forgo any jobs in that field at all, perhaps after significant time and investment of expenses were incurred pursuing that field. The choice to resign may also come with corresponding social alienation. Yet, the resignation of a job from one field may be used in God's providence to spur a person into an entirely new field and endeavor that would not have happened but for the prior workplace moment of conscience that led to their resignation. In certain, indeed many, employment contexts and situations, this is an acceptable and faithful option but not mandatory choice for Christians.

Examples of those who chose this option include owners of a bakery forced to close in Oregon after being fined for refusing to make a wedding cake for a same-sex couple (the owners have since reopened another bakery in Montana), a soccer player who refused to play for the United States women's soccer team when it was announced that the team would wear rainbow-themed jerseys to honor LGBT Pride Month, and a New York town clerk who refused to participate in the issuance of same-sex "marriage" licenses.<sup>38</sup>

### **3.4. Keep Calling and Keep Convictions**

In this choice (represented by the upper right quadrant in Exhibit 1), the Christian has kept both their current job and their convictions. They are intentionally choosing not to leave their current position

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<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., Christopher Wiggins, "Oregon Baker's LGBTQ+ Discrimination Fine Reduced by Over \$100k," *Yahoo News*, 14 July 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/kc247f9p>; "Jaelene Hinkle: Defender Refused to Play for US because of LGBT Shirt," *BBC*, 1 June 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/44315031>; Dan Wiessner, "New York Town Clerk Quits over Gay Marriage Licenses," *Reuters*, 12 July 2011, <https://tinyurl.com/3s8vfc6x>.

but to stay and also stand for those convictions in that position—not knowing the final outcome of that stand. So, in whatever avenues are available to them in their workplace they continue to contend for their ability (and by it the ability of others like them or under them in employment responsibility) to hold and exercise their beliefs within their current position. In running afoul of an employment mandate, they face potential adverse employment action, including discipline, suspension, or even termination, and possibly related litigation. As with the resignation option, this choice likewise often entails financial difficulty or limited, future prospects in that same field if the job requirement is pervasive across a certain industry.<sup>39</sup> Similar social alienation and sharply-decreased reputational standing may also attach to this decision.

Faithfulness does not demand this option every time this choice is presented in an employment context or situation, because there are often many possible resolutions (such as deferral, exemption, exception, objection, religious accommodation, or otherwise) that can be explored and pursued in a workplace that do not necessitate direct confrontation and also maintain consistency in one's convictions. Moreover, as discussed above, the resignation option is also an acceptable and faithful choice for Christians in many employment contexts and situations. Importantly, a Christian's choice of one option among these alternatives neither demands nor requires another Christian to make the same choice in a similar situation. Christian liberty must be understood broadly enough to avoid prescriptive determinations of fact-intensive, individualized employment contexts.

Examples of those who chose this option include a former executive of CrossFit who was terminated after posting a tweet in support of a gym that cancelled an LGBT event in support of Pride Month, and a Kentucky county clerk who was jailed for six days after refusing to sign marriage licenses for same-sex couples.<sup>40</sup>

This section of the article has summarized the four categorical choices placed before a Christian when evaluating a workplace moment of conscience, concluding that only two of them are acceptable options for Christians. This is where a theology of getting fired moves from doctrine to application and practice. A Christian facing a workplace moment of conscience needs to be equipped, biblically and pastorally, to decide how to proceed in those particular moments. How is a Christian to respond to these employment situations? As Stonestreet asks, when is a Christian called upon to take a stand and get fired? When is a Christian called upon to resign? The following section proposes several tools for helping Christians decide any workplace moment of conscience.

#### *4. A Guide: Tools for Deciding Workplace Moments of Conscience*

Called to be queen and holding convictions to preserve the lives of God's chosen people, Esther was asked by her cousin Mordecai this question: "And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esth 4:14). This is the dilemma of every Christian facing a workplace moment of conscience as they consider and evaluate what they should decide in a particular moment which God has sovereignly ordained and providentially orchestrated in their lives. While one may desire

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<sup>39</sup> To be sure, not every believer who decides to keep their calling and convictions in a workplace moment of conscience will, in fact, be terminated. Indeed, some are ultimately promoted after making their stand (e.g., Esther and Daniel). However, that positive outcome is by no means foreseen, let alone known, at the time.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., Chris Perez, "CrossFit Exec Fired after Calling LGBT Community 'Sinners,'" *New York Post*, 7 June 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/2rfatfcw>; D. A. Carson, "The Woman from Kentucky," *Themelios* 41.2 (2016): 209–13.

the answer in the strong wind, earthquake, or fire, one should listen instead for the “sound of a low whisper” (1 Kgs 19:11–13) as the indwelling Spirit of the Lord guides and directs a believer, and instills a peace that surpasses all understanding (Phil 4:6–7). Because not every choice is either permissible or mandatory in the workplace moments of conscience envisioned herein, a critical aspect of the theology of getting fired is supplying the tools to help Christians navigate, evaluate, and ultimately decide how to proceed when facing such moments. In considering such tools, there are both individual and corporate dimensions at work. To face those workplace moments of conscience with gospel clarity and courage, a person should pursue wisdom, humility, and the means of grace (both prayer and Scripture reading). A person should also be part of a loving community of believers who provide counsel, discipleship, and support in the midst of those workplace moments of conscience.

### 4.1. The Individual Dimension

The first tool important for making any decision in the workplace moment of conscience is: *wisdom*. Wisdom, according to Scripture, is not so much intellectual acumen or being smart or knowledgeable.<sup>41</sup> Instead, rooted in the fear of the Lord, it is a practical and goal-oriented competency that displays “the art of living well.”<sup>42</sup> Wisdom applies God’s law in different contexts and particular situations of life. It knows when to apply which proverb. It is not a form, rulebook, or script to follow. It is how to make decisions based on the application of divinely-given principles and guidelines (as revealed in God’s word and God’s world) as one sifts the cultural moment and understands the times like the men of Issachar (1 Chr 12:32). It is doing the right thing in a particular circumstance, knowing that not everything in life is black-and-white and that people have different sensitivities, experiences, and theological nuances. It is “broadly speaking, the knowledge of God’s world and the knack of fitting oneself into it.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, wisdom orders one’s life according to God’s creational pattern in every area of culture, including one’s employment. In short, it is how to live well in God’s world, on his terms, for his glory. Wisdom is acquired and cultivated by prayer and practice over the course of a lifetime—that is, asking God for it, learning the Scriptures and one’s surroundings, and then making decisions based on them and learning from those decisions. By way of example, King Solomon was a culturally-engaged person who prayed for wisdom and received it—in fact, his wisdom gained him fame beyond his borders (1 Kgs 3:3–28; 2 Chr 9:1–9; Luke 11:31). The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (Prov 1:7, 9:10) and Jesus Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of wisdom (see Matt 12:42; 1 Cor 1:24, 1:30; Col 2:3). As such, any true wisdom is ultimately a gift of God’s grace, to be pursued and treasured, in no matter what job or profession in which one is called by God.

Biblical wisdom is necessary, critical, and essential for thinking about how believers engage with culture in workplace moments of conscience. It is not an optional extra in the Christian life, or a capstone achievement for the truly spiritual life; instead, it is indispensable throughout the life of the believer, including as he or she works, and it is intended to be passed down from one generation to the next (Pss 78:4–8, 105:1–11). For without it, Christians are like a kayak without paddles in moving water. With it, believers can steer, turn, paddle, and resist, as needed, to avoid rocky shoals and move through rapids or still water. Wisdom helps a believer apply gospel principles to different situations

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<sup>41</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, reprint ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 90.

<sup>42</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 2:203.

<sup>43</sup> See Cornelius Plantinga Jr., “The Sinner and the Fool,” *First Things* 46 (October 1994): 24.

and contexts. In workplace moments of conscience, the search for wisdom may yield the heretofore unknown “third way” or “middle way”—that allows one to avoid the workplace moment of conscience altogether, without rationalizing and without sacrificing either one’s calling or one’s convictions and still keeping one’s current job. Therefore, Christians should search the Scriptures and their surroundings, both special and general revelation, for wisdom, and cry out to God for such wisdom in prayer (Col 1:9; Jas 1:5; see also 1 Kgs 3:9–12).

The prayer for wisdom leads to the second tool important for making any decision in the workplace moment of conscience: *prayer*. These moments of conscience and cultural engagement in the workplace must be bathed in prayer, as one prays earnestly for, *inter alia*, wisdom, courage, and peace when facing the conflict (1 Thess 5:17). Daniel and Esther prayed in the midst of their consequential moments (Dan 6:10). The apostles also regularly and consistently prayed, and encouraged Christians to do likewise.<sup>44</sup> Jesus himself prayed, including during his darkest hour of need in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion.<sup>45</sup> Prayer is an absolutely essential tool for deciding workplace moments of conscience for the fervent and earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and achieves much (Jas 5:16).

The third tool, also related to wisdom, important for making any decision in the workplace moment of conscience is: *reading Scripture*. For a Christian to know and remain firm on one’s convictions, these moments must be bathed in God’s word. Believers should be meditating on Scripture daily, and cherishing it, for it is a lamp unto one’s feet and a light unto one’s path (Josh 1:8; Pss 19:7–11, 119:105). In the midst of these moments, Scripture is useful for teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness, and equipping for every good work (2 Tim 3:16–17). As indicated above, Scripture is full of stories of the people of God facing moments of conscience and these stories have an illustrative, exemplary, and redemptive character to them which can encourage and edify believers in twenty-first century workplace moments of conscience.

The fourth tool important for making any decision in the workplace moment of conscience is: *humility*. Among all other attributes, humility serves to embody Christ’s character as he walked on this earth. He did not come to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45). He was gentle and lowly (Matt 11:29–30). Though deserving of everything, he put others before himself and he gave up what he had (Phil 2:5–8). He counted the cost of faithfulness, and he bid his disciples to do the same (Luke 9:23, 14:25–33, 22:42, 23:26–46).

Humility also demonstrates a commitment to truth that is packaged with gentleness and clothed in love and respect (1 Pet 3:15–16) as one’s speech is seasoned with salt (Col 4:6). Humility also seeks to live at peace with everyone so far as possible (Prov 15:18, 16:28, 28:25, 29:22; Rom 12:18; Heb 12:14); in other words, Christians should seek peace rather than stirring-up confrontation, recognizing that conflict and confrontation in corporate environments hostile to Christian convictions are sometimes unavoidable or even inevitable in a post-Genesis 3 world. Yet, in doing so, Christians are gentle and innocent as doves but wise as serpents (Matt 10:16).

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<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., Acts 1:14, 1:24, 4:24–31, 6:6, 12:12, 13:1–3, 14:23, 16:25, 21:5, 28:8; see also Acts 6:4, 8:15, 10:9; 20:36; Eph 1:16, 3:14, 6:18; Phil 1:3–11, 4:6; Col 1:3–14; 1 Thess 1:2–3, 5:17, 5:25; 2 Thess 1:11–12, 3:1; 1 Tim 2:1–2; Phlm 4–7; Heb 13:18; Jas 5:16; 1 Pet 4:7.

<sup>45</sup> See Matt 6:5–15, 11:25–27, 14:23, 19:13, 26:36–45; Mark 1:35, 6:46, 14:32–41, 15:34; Luke 3:21, 5:16, 6:12, 9:18, 9:28, 10:21–22, 11:1–4, 22:32, 22:39–46, 23:34, 23:46, 24:30; John 11:41–42, 12:27–28, 17:1–26; Heb 5:7.

Humility further recognizes that others may make different choices when faced with similar situations in employment arenas. In other words, in good conscience some are able to eat food sacrificed to idols, while others cannot (1 Cor 8:1–13). For some, resignation is the appropriate choice when facing a particular moment of conscience; for others, staying and standing is the appropriate choice. Critically, Paul implores believers to consider others without requiring them to make the same choices, all lived before the Lord and unto the Lord in accordance with Scripture (Rom 14:1–12; 1 Cor 10:19–30). Humility does not demand the same outcome or decision for every individual facing a similar workplace moment of conscience. Instead, humility demands doing all things, whether eating or drinking, whether resigning or staying and standing, or anything else for that matter, to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31).

#### 4.2. The Corporate Dimension

While many American Christians are culturally-conditioned to focus principally, if not exclusively, on the individual dimension of their faith – including during workplace moments of conscience – there are several important aspects of the corporate dimension of the Christian faith that provide further tools in the midst of such moments.

First, related again to wisdom, a Christian facing a workplace moment of conscience should seek the counsel of others (Prov 11:14, 15:22, 24:6; see also Prov 12:15, 19:20, 20:18). Not only is there safety and success to be found in such counsel, but this process can also have the effect of iron sharpening iron, counting the cost, and spurring each other on to good deeds in the Lord (Prov 27:27; Luke 14:28–30; Heb 10:24–25).

Second, Christians in such moments should see those moments as opportunities to display God's power for other believers. One's workplace struggle can be an exemplary illustration, teaching moment, and discipleship opportunity for not only one's self (and family) but the entire congregation. The Apostle Paul saw a divine purpose in his trials and thorns in the flesh, both for himself and for service to others (2 Cor 1:4, 12:7–10). Moreover, if one member of the body suffers, they all suffer together (1 Cor 11:26). These moments impact the church as a whole.

Third, the church needs to be prepared and mobilized to assist financially and otherwise individuals (and their families) whose stand for gospel truth in their workplace results in job loss, business collapse, financial difficulty, or economic ruin.<sup>46</sup> As recorded in Acts, the early church shared their possessions and regularly provided for those Christian brothers and sisters who were in need so that there “was not a needy person among them” (Acts 2:44–45, 4:32, 4:34–37). Diaconate and mercy ministries should be organized to care for certain situations, and small groups and entire churches need to come alongside individuals and families in their church to provide extraordinary care and financial support as particular sacrifices are especially felt by a select few in their congregation. This is like the red blood cells traveling and mobilizing to coagulate the blood at a particular wound site. Beyond financial support, the church needs to surround and cover the individual and family with prayer in the midst of workplace moments of conscience.

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<sup>46</sup> The early church dealt with a comparable issue when first century Christians chose not to offer sacrifices to Roman gods or participate in idolatrous trade guilds or political and religious celebrations. See Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 23–26, 31–32, 34–36, 48–62, 150–54; Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter*, SNTSMS 110 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 89–99.

Fourth, a Christian facing a workplace moment of conscience needs to remember the considerable value of the conscience of “weaker” Christian brothers and sisters (see Rom 14:1–23; 1 Cor 8:1–13). While the conscience of a person himself or herself may be able to bear a particular moral challenge in the workplace, their decision to do so or their association with that particular moral challenge may cause another believer who is “weak” and within their fellowship to sin. In love our actions and choices, even if permissible, are not to lead another brother or sister to stumble in sin. In these instances, for the sake of peace and mutual edification of the church, the Apostle Paul encourages Christians to set aside their rights and freedoms, and humbly defer to the “weak” believer in order to seek the other’s advantage rather than their own. This is not to say that the one who is “weak” exercises veto power over the freedom of their Christian brother or sister facing a workplace moment of conscience, especially when the choice involves another’s economic livelihood. However, cutting against the grain of the individualistic culture, this biblical, corporate consideration, at the very least, provokes Christians to contemplate the impact and influence of their free choices on others in the church.

This section of the article has proposed several tools grounded in Scripture to equip Christians in their hour of need, in their workplace moments of conscience when a conflict exists between their calling and their convictions. Intentionally, it has not sought to answer any specific workplace moments of conscience for it seeks not to be the binder of conscience—that is left to the Spirit of the Lord through the word of God alone. But, as set forth above, in those workplace moments of conscience, there are both individual and corporate dimensions to the application and practice of a theology of getting fired. To be sure, there are other worthy considerations beyond those set forth herein, but this article has sought to hone in on the most important tools to prepare and equip Christians to decide these often intractable and paralyzing workplace moments of conscience.

### *5. Conclusion*

The aim of this article, while modest, is nevertheless urgent for every working believer in America, especially those called to work within non-Christian employment settings—which represents most American Christians at this time. This article has sought to begin the establishment of a framework for such Christians analyzing, assessing, and deciding those workplace moments of conscience that believers are rapidly facing at increasing rates, and to lay certain theological groundwork for Christians to encounter, engage, and resolve those moments faithfully for the glory of God. To do so, a Christian’s calling and convictions must both be informed and shaped by Scripture, and every Christian should pursue wisdom, prayer, Scripture reading, and humility in the midst of those moments. But no Christian should face these workplace moments of conscience alone for, as members of the corporate body of the church, they should seek the counsel of others, see their potential suffering as a help for others, and be assured that the church will support and uphold them (and their family) when standing up for the Lord in one’s workplace causes financial strain, job loss, or worse.

While the presenting scene and circumstances of conflict are in one’s workplace, Christians should remember that the battle in this cultural moment is not against flesh and blood as they encounter these moments of conscience (Eph 6:12). In fact, Christians should not be surprised if they are hated, reviled, insulted, or face suffering and persecution on account of their convictions in their calling, for the same thing happened to the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt 5:11–12; 1 Pet 4:14–16; see also John 15:18–20). Indeed, following Christ may cost a Christian everything or that most important thing which the believer holds



dear (Matt 8:18–22, 10:37–39, 16:24–27, 19:16–22; Mark 8:34–38, 10:17–27; Luke 9:23–26, 9:57–62, 14:25–33, 18:18–30; John 12:25; Phil 3:7–8). But believers can take heart in these moments for the Lord has overcome the world (John 16:33) and believers need not be afraid for, by grace through faith, they are more than conquerors in Christ (Isa 41:10; Rom 8:35–39). Fixing their eyes on Jesus (Heb 12:1–2), believers can profess along with the Apostle Paul that they “count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil 3:8–9). They can rest in the comfort of the Lord’s promise that for “everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God” (Luke 12:8). Indeed, the one who called us has kept us, is keeping us, and will keep us (John 6:44, 17:12; 1 Cor 1:9; Jude 24) as we face fiery trials of many kinds in our workplaces and various employment settings to which we have been called as Christians (Jas 1:2; 1 Pet 4:7).

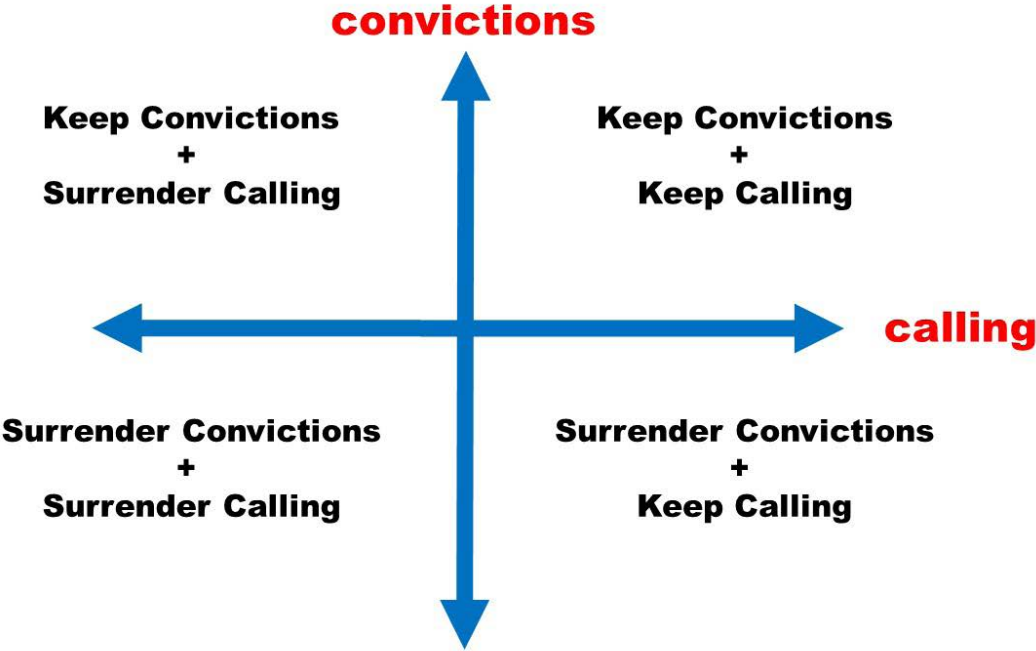


Exhibit 1: Table of Conscience

# Pentecost: Not Really Our Story Afterall? A Reply to Ekaputra Tupamahu

— Robert P. Menzies —

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*Robert Menzies has lived in East Asia for most of the past three decades and serves as the Director of the Asian Center for Pentecostal Theology.*

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**Abstract:** Menzies responds to Tupamahu’s post-colonial critique of the Pentecostal reading of Acts and the missionary enterprise. According to Tupamahu, the disciples are marginalized Galileans who move from the periphery to the center of the Roman world. Thus, white American Pentecostals need to rethink their vision of the expansionist mission. Menzies argues Tupamahu’s racially colored, post-colonial reading of Acts distorts Luke’s intended meaning, reflects a diminished view of the gospel, and betrays the legacy of Pentecostal leaders like William Seymour. In Acts the disciples are commissioned by Jesus (Luke 24:46–49; Acts 1:4–8). Their mission centers on the Spirit-inspired proclamation of the gospel. Luke emphasizes that their mission is our mission (Luke 10:1–16; Acts 2:17–18). Thus, to reject our mission is to repudiate the significance of our message and to resist the leading of the Spirit.

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I have always emphasized that the Pentecostal gift of the Spirit (Acts 1:8; 2:4) is an empowering for ministry potentially available to *every* follower of Jesus (Acts 2:17–18; cf. Luke 10:1–16).<sup>1</sup> This message inspired the title of one of my books, *Pentecost: This Story Is Our Story*.<sup>2</sup> In this book I argue that Luke’s record of a second, larger sending of disciples (Luke 10:1–16) that follows on the heels of Jesus’s sending of the Twelve (Luke 9:1–6) should be read against the backdrop of Numbers 11:24–30, and in particular, Moses’s wish, “that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!” (Num 11:29). This wish begins to find fulfillment on the Day of Pentecost as Jesus pours out the Spirit of prophecy on his disciples (Acts 2:17–21; Joel 2:28–32). The movement in Luke-Acts is from the One (Jesus, Luke 3–4) to the Twelve (Luke 9), then to the Seventy (Luke 10), and ultimately to all of God’s people (Acts 2). Thus, “the church in ‘these last days,’ Luke declares, is to be a community of

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Robert Menzies, *Empowered for Witness: The Spirit in Luke-Acts*, JPTSUP 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), *Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), *Pentecost: This Story Is Our Story* (Springfield, MO: GPH, 2013), and “The Spirit in Luke-Acts: Empowering Prophetic Witness,” in *The Spirit throughout the Canon: Pentecostal Pneumatology*, ed. Craig Keener and L. William Oliverio, Jr., JPTSUP 48 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 75–105.

<sup>2</sup> Menzies, *Pentecost: This Story Is Our Story*.

prophets—prophets who are called to bring the message of ‘salvation to the ends of the earth’ (Isa 49:6; Acts 1:8).”<sup>3</sup>

### *1. Introduction: Another Language?*

In view of this understanding of the Pentecostal gift as potentially available to *every follower of Christ*, you can imagine my surprise when, in a plenary session at the 2023 annual meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS),<sup>4</sup> I heard Ekaptura Tupamahu describe me as the chief representative of “white Pentecostalism’s” colonial theology. (Yes, I was present for Tupamahu’s presentation!) Others such as Craig Keener, James Shelton, and John Penney were named as co-conspirators as well, but I was the main target of Tupamahu’s critique, “Can Pentecostals Decouple Tongues from the Expansionist Mission?” While the scholars listed above are all white, I am the lone missionary in the group. Perhaps this explains, in part, why the cross-hairs were trained on me.

Although Tupamahu’s paper took me by surprise, it shouldn’t have. Tupamahu’s post-colonial reading of the book of Acts and the modern Pentecostal movement is not without precedent, even among Pentecostal scholars. Note, for example, Allan Anderson’s widely-influential book, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*.<sup>5</sup> Anderson cites missionary letters and writings, which often reflect a deep sense of urgency for their evangelistic efforts due to widespread spiritual “darkness” and the fact that so many they encounter are “lost.” Anderson presents these statements as evidence of “religious intolerance” and “bigoted ignorance.”<sup>6</sup> One wonders how Anderson would assess the Apostle Paul? To the Ephesians Paul declares, “you were once *darkness*, but now you are light in the Lord” (Eph 5:8).<sup>7</sup> We might also ask Anderson what he would make of the words of Jesus: “the Son of Man came to seek and to save *the lost*” (Luke 19:10)?<sup>8</sup>

A more recent example of a “Pentecostal” appropriation of the post-colonial hermeneutic can be found in Amos Yong’s *Mission After Pentecost*.<sup>9</sup> Yong also adopts a post-colonial hermeneutic and all of the negative assumptions about the past 200 years of missionary endeavor that come with it. According to Yong, the modern missions movement is dead. We now live in a post-colonial, post-modern, and post-Christian era. There is no looking back and thus we should probably even abandon the term “Christian missions” altogether. Additionally, from Yong’s perspective, we need not wait for the door to

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Menzies, “The Spirit in Luke-Acts: Empowering Prophetic Witness,” *Pneuma* 43 (2021): 436.

<sup>4</sup> The 2023 annual meeting of the SPS convened from March 16–18 on the campus of Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, OK.

<sup>5</sup> Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*, 179. See Joseph L. Castleberry’s fine book review, “History from Below Should be Fair to Missionaries Also,” *Pneuma* 28 (2006): 271–74.

<sup>7</sup> For “darkness” with reference to judgment: Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; Jude 13. For references to spiritual “darkness”: Matt 6:23; Luke 1:79; 11:34; John 1:5; 3:9; 8:12; 12:35, 46; Acts 26:18; Rom 13:12; 2 Cor 6:14; Eph 5:8, 11; 6:12; Col 1:13; 1 Thess 5:4; 1 Peter 2:9; 1 John 2:8, 11. All English quotations from the Bible are from the NIV (2011) unless otherwise stated.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Matt 10:6; 15:24; Luke 15:4, 6, 24, 32; 19:10.

<sup>9</sup> Amos Yong, *Mission After Pentecost: The Witness of the Spirit from Genesis to Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

slam shut before we exit the failed project that has been called “Christian missions.” It was tainted by all the negative aspects of colonialism and modernity, including arrogance, self-serving motives, and racist attitudes. So, we live in a post-Christian world and we had better get used to it.<sup>10</sup>

Taking his cues from contemporary American culture, Yong’s diatribe against the missionary enterprise is infused with charges of racism. He speaks negatively about “whiteness” (p. 3), reading the Bible from a perspective of “white dominance” (p. 184), and “white normativity” (p. 226).<sup>11</sup> Yong contrasts his own vision of the church’s mission with the former, flawed approach of the modern missions movement by declaring, “Gone are the pretensions of a modernized version of a ‘white’ gospel” (p. 283). It all adds up to a stinging indictment of the modern missions movement—an indictment that features contemporary leftist tropes articulated with a distinctively post-colonial accent.

I have elsewhere critiqued Yong’s approach, which largely rejects a traditional reading of the Bible that centers on historical meaning.<sup>12</sup> Yong’s post-colonial hermeneutic is the fundamental flaw, the original sin that mars his work. Unfortunately, Tupamahu follows Yong (and Anderson) and adopts this Marxist-inspired hermeneutical stance.<sup>13</sup> While, as we shall see, Tupamahu gives lip-service to a historical, grammatical reading of the biblical text, his approach is not really rooted in the historical meaning of the text. Tupamahu would undoubtedly reject the notion of historical meaning (i.e., authorial intent) as a product of the modernist and colonial mind. So, Tupamahu intentionally reads Acts in light of the narrative, ubiquitous in our age, of “oppressor versus oppressed.” Nevertheless, Tupamahu charges me and other Pentecostal scholars with the crime that he himself commits: uncritically reading our context and biases into the text. Tupamahu asserts, “American Pentecostals ... project themselves into the text of Acts 2 and see the phenomenon of tongues as empowerment (i.e., permission) for them to go to every corner of the earth, speak different languages, and evangelize others.” He charges Pentecostal missionaries with establishing “white American churches” in other parts of the world. Thus, Pentecostals today must “decouple tongues from this American expansionist paradigm.” This task, Tupamahu admonishes, may be accomplished by adopting a different reading of Acts. We must see that, “the disciples are people on the periphery of Roman imperial power.” Unlike the white American missionaries “who go from the center of global power to the periphery,” Acts describes the movement of migrants who flee political violence and social instability and move from “their land to Rome.”<sup>14</sup>

Although I fear we are speaking different languages, in the pages that follow I will evaluate Tupamahu’s thesis in light of the book of Acts, Luke’s understanding of the gospel, and the nature and history of the modern Pentecostal movement.

<sup>10</sup> See Yong, *Mission After Pentecost*, 2–22.

<sup>11</sup> Yong asks, “If the postcolonial moment is in quest of the end of whiteness, does that not also mean that a mission paradigm facilitated by whiteness is coming to an end, if not already finished?” (*Mission After Pentecost*, 3).

<sup>12</sup> Robert Menzies, “A Tale of Two Stories: Amos Yong’s *Mission After Pentecost* and T’ien Ju-K’ang’s *Peaks of Faith*,” *Themelios* 46.2 (2021): 391–401.

<sup>13</sup> On the Marxist origins of intertextuality, the ideological foundation of the post-colonial hermeneutic, see Robby Waddell, *The Spirit of the Book of Revelation*, JPTSUP 30 (Dorset, UK: Deo, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> All quotes are from the lengthy abstract of Tupamahu’s paper in the program of the 2023 SPS annual meeting. A complete written version of Tupamahu’s oral presentation is currently unavailable.

## 2. *Not Luke's Story, Another Story*

There is no church without the mission. There is no mission without obedience.

Tupamahu presents the disciples in Acts as poor, marginalized Galileans who move from the periphery of the Roman world to its center, Rome itself. This movement is, of course, analogous to the migrants of our world seeking to move to the centers of western power in America and Europe. In essence, Tupamahu attempts to replace the white missionary that he says I read into Acts with himself or other non-whites much like him.<sup>15</sup> This creative, racially colored, post-colonial reading of Acts gives lip-service to Luke's intended meaning with its description of the disciples as poor, marginalized Galileans moving from the periphery of the Roman world to Rome. Yet, Tupamahu's reading misses four crucial points.

First, the disciples are *commissioned and sent out* on their mission by Jesus (Luke 24:46–49; Acts 1:4–8). The second volume of Luke's two-volume work begins with an important, programmatic introduction. This introduction serves to connect the Acts of the Apostles, perhaps more accurately titled by Chrysostom, "The Gospel of the Holy Spirit,"<sup>16</sup> to Luke's Gospel of Jesus.<sup>17</sup> However, it also highlights crucial themes that will dominate the rest of Luke's narrative: the promise and necessity of the disciples' baptism in the Holy Spirit; and their commission to carry on, in the power of the Spirit, the mission that Jesus began and which now centers on the proclamation of his gospel.<sup>18</sup> Luke beautifully summarizes the content of this "good news" at the end of his Gospel: as a result of Jesus's death and resurrection, forgiveness of sins is now available "in his name" through repentance, which involves a reorienting of one's life in order to follow him (Luke 24:46–47).<sup>19</sup> The Twelve, as witnesses of Jesus's resurrection (1:3), and the future church they represent are commissioned to proclaim this gospel in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (1:8; cf. Luke 24:47). This mission, which commences in earnest with the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit after Jesus's ascension, extends until his return (1:11).<sup>20</sup> The introduction concludes, as does Luke's gospel, with the disciples waiting expectantly and praying together for the gift of the Spirit of prophecy (Luke 24:52–53; Acts 1:12–14; cf. 2:17–21). The introduction of Acts, then, describes Jesus's call to his disciples to take up their prophetic vocation to be "a light to the nations" (Acts 1:8; Isa 49:6) and his promise to provide all they will need to fulfil this call.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Tupamahu was born and raised in Indonesia.

<sup>16</sup> Hom. 1.5, cited in Craig Keener, *Acts*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 71. Apart from Peter, the Apostles do not play dominant roles in Acts.

<sup>17</sup> Note how Acts 1:1–14 rehearses material found in Luke 24:36–53. This repetition highlights its importance.

<sup>18</sup> In the Travel Narrative of Luke's Gospel (Luke 9:51–19:27), Luke "presents Jesus as the prophet like Moses, on a journey to Jerusalem to effect a new Exodus for the people of God" (Greg W. Forbes, *The God of Old: the Role of the Lukan Parables in the Purpose of Luke's Gospel*, JSNTSup 198 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000], 329). Thus, the mission of Jesus, although in many respects unique, serves as a model for the disciples.

<sup>19</sup> Brian J. Tabb, *After Emmaus: How the Church Fulfills the Mission of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Key summary statements in Acts chronicle the progress of the mission: Acts 2:47; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30–31.

<sup>21</sup> This "overlap" section (Luke 24:36–53; Acts 1:1–14), then, centers on (1) the content of the gospel; (2) the priority of the mission; and (3) the urgency of the task.

Second, this mission is not only commissioned by Jesus, it is *led and inspired by the Holy Spirit*.<sup>22</sup> The disciples are scattered beyond Jerusalem due to *the persecution* resulting from their Spirit-inspired, bold witness for Jesus (Acts 8:1). Note how the persecution builds with Peter and John warned (4:18–21), the apostles beaten (5:40–41), and finally Stephen martyred (7:59–60). The disciples are not simply forced from their home areas due to political unrest and social instability; they are sent out by the Spirit to proclaim the gospel (1:8; 4:31). As a result, they are persecuted and ultimately scattered. The point cannot be missed: the movement of the disciples from Jerusalem, the Jewish center, to the ends of the earth is ordained by God and the result of their obedience (5:29, 32).

Third, the inception (i.e., commissioning and empowerment for) and beginning stages of the church's mission all take place *in Jerusalem and the temple courts*, the very center of the Jewish faith.<sup>23</sup> The movement is not from the margins of Rome to the center; rather, it is from the center of Judaism to the “ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). This is Luke's perspective, if not Tupamahu's.

Peter's first sermon after Pentecost (Acts 3:11–26) highlights this point. The restoration Peter describes (3:21) is not a restoration of the nation, or even the people of Israel, it is a “restoration of all things.” This eschatological restoration is anticipated and made possible by the arrival of the Prophet like Moses and the establishment of his community of prophets. Repentance and faith are the means by which one may be included in this restoration (Acts 2:38, 40; 3:19, 23; 4:12). Through Jesus, the servant whom God has “raised up,” God is fulfilling his promises, proclaimed by the prophets, that Abraham's descendants (Israel) would bless the nations. Jesus is now calling and enabling Israel, the heirs of the prophets, to take up their prophetic vocation.

Peter's sermon thus explains why restoring the kingdom to Israel is “too small a thing” (Isa 49:6; cf. Acts 1:6–8). God's plan is much larger than this. It all begins in the temple in Jerusalem with a group of Jews who proclaim the arrival, death, and resurrection of the Messiah, the Author of Life. But it quickly moves beyond Israel as a faithful remnant fulfill their calling to be a light to the nations. This is the story that Luke tells. This gospel message, at the end of Acts, goes to both Jews (28:24) and Gentiles (28:28). The phrase, “they will listen,” in Acts 28:28 is important, for it parallels the words of Acts 3:22–23. Those among the Jews and the Gentiles *who listen to* the Prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15) and his servant-prophets will participate in God's restoration of all things. This is what it means for God's kingdom to come and this is how his people will be restored (Luke 11:3; Acts 1:6–8). While the book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome, it is intentionally open-ended.

Finally, although the beginning of the outward movement of the Christian witnesses (from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth) is the result of a scattering generated by persecution, the early church is quickly directed by the Holy Spirit *to send out missionaries* more formally. So, the church at Antioch commissions and sends out Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1–3).

Tupamahu makes much of my use of the term, “missionary,” in *Empowered for Witness*, which he states never appears in the biblical text. This is misleading because the term “apostle” and its verb form, ἀποστέλλω (“to send”), along with terms like “witness” appear frequently in Acts.<sup>24</sup> The word, “missionary,” comes from the Latin, *missi sunt* (“they were sent”) and *missio* (“mission”). The terms

<sup>22</sup> Acts 1:5, 8; 2:4, 17–18, 33, 38; 4:8, 31; 5:32; 6:3, 5, 10; 7:55.

<sup>23</sup> For “Jerusalem,” see Acts 1:4, 8, 12, 19; 2:5, 14; 4:5, 16; 5:16, 28; 6:7; 8:1. For “temple courts,” see Acts 2:46; 3:1–3, 8, 10; 4:1; 5:20–21, 24–25, 42.

<sup>24</sup> The term, ἀπόστολος (“apostle”), occurs 28x in Acts; ἀποστέλλω (“to send”), 24x; μάρτυς (“witness”), 13x; and μαρτυρέω (“to witness”), 11x.

ἀποστέλλω (“to send”) and ἀπόστολος (“apostle”) are the Greek equivalents that speak of “the sending out” of a person on a mission and “the one who is sent” (i.e., a missionary; Latin, *missionarius*). However, I do not often describe the disciples sent out in mission as “apostles” because this term is used with reference to “the Twelve” as well as others who are “sent out” (Paul and Barnabas, Acts 14:14). So, the use of this term can be confusing (which kind of apostle are we talking about?). I do use the term “witness” and “prophet” often, actually more frequently than “missionary” and “missionaries,” as a search of my PhD thesis reveals.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, I generally use the term “missionary” in a broad sense to refer to those called and empowered to proclaim the gospel, which, as I have noted, is true potentially of every Christian (Luke 10:1–16; Acts 1–2), not simply those (like myself) engaged in cross-cultural mission, although it certainly includes this group as well.

These four points establish that in Luke’s view the disciples are not simply poor migrants fleeing political and economic instability without any clear motive other than fleeing oppression. They are sent out by Jesus, directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and, like Jesus (Luke 4:16–21; 9:51–19:27), they have a clear mission (i.e., to proclaim the gospel; Luke 24:46–49; Acts 1:8). It is also important to note that Luke does not describe this mission as the movement of those on the political margins to the center of political power, Rome. Although the disciples are generally not rich and certainly powerless in political terms, this is not Luke’s focus. Luke emphasizes that the movement is from the center of Judaism, Jerusalem and the temple, to the “ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The story may end in Rome, but it ends intentionally unfinished. With Paul’s words ringing in our ears, “God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles and they will listen!” (Acts 28:28), Luke’s second volume ends with the declaration that Paul continued to teach “with all boldness and without hindrance” (28:31). The point should not be missed: we are called to carry out this unfinished mission.

### *3. Not the Gospel, Another Gospel*

There is no unity without Christ. There is no Christ without the gospel.

There is an even more serious weakness to Tupamahu’s reading of Acts. His reading is not simply a repudiation of the missionary enterprise, it actually reveals a diminished view of the gospel. Once again Tupamahu appears to follow in the footsteps of Amos Yong, who consistently downplays the New Testament’s emphasis on the content of the gospel and verbal witness.<sup>26</sup> Tupamahu’s diminished view of the gospel is reflected in his inability to define its content. The closest he gets to offering a definition is not reassuring: “The phenomenon of tongues,” we are told, is not about empowerment for mission, not about proclaiming a message; rather, it is about “the opening of social space for difference.”

Luke’s emphasis is decidedly different. In Acts 2:4 we read that those present were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to “speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” This phenomenon creates

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<sup>25</sup> Although I was not able to do a digital search of terms in my *Empowered for Witness*, this book is based largely on my Aberdeen PhD dissertation, “The Development of Early Christian Pneumatology with Special Reference to Luke-Acts.” A search of this work reveals the following word counts: prophet, 76x; prophets, 58x; witness, 34x; witnesses, 23x; missionary, 44x; missionaries, 2x. In my short chapter, “The Spirit in Luke-Acts: Empowering Prophetic Witness,” the word counts are also telling: “missionary” (6x; plural 0x); “prophet” (7x) and “prophets” (16x); “witness” (4x) and “witnesses” (28x).

<sup>26</sup> See *Mission After Pentecost*, 178, 217, 225, 257–59, 264, 279 and Menzies, “A Tale of Two Stories,” 394–95.

confusion among the Jews of the crowd who, we are told, represent “every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). The crowd gathered in astonishment because “each one heard them speaking in his own language” (Acts 2:6). These details are repeated as Luke narrates the response of the astonished group: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language” (Acts 2:7–8)? After the crowd lists in amazement the various nations represented by those present, they exclaim, “we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues” (Acts 2:11)! The disciples are enabled by the Spirit to declare “the wonders of God” in human languages they had not previously learned.

This language miracle at Pentecost is not a reversal of Babel. The disciples of Jesus who were “filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues” (Acts 2:4) did not speak a single tongue that all understood. Rather, they spoke in *the multiple mother-tongues* of each individual present. The cultural distinctives were not obliterated. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit enabled his disciples to embrace them and to minister through them. There were many languages, but *only one message*: Jesus is the resurrected and exalted Lord (Acts 2:33–36).

The rest of the narrative of Acts is filled with the disciples’ bold, Spirit-inspired witness for Jesus. A particularly powerful example is found in Acts 4:10–12. Peter, addressing “the rulers and elders of the people,” declares that it is by “the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” that this crippled man, who now “*stands* before you whole,” was healed (4:10). Peter’s declaration is directed to the Jewish leaders (literally, “to you all”) and to “all the people of Israel.” Jesus is once again described as the one “whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead” (4:10; cf. 3:13–16). This pattern of Spirit-inspired witness that proclaims Jesus’s death, resurrection/exaltation, and forgiveness of sins through repentance and faith in Jesus’s name was anticipated in Luke 24:46–49/Acts 1:3–8, initiated in Acts 2:32–39 (cf. 2:4), and now continues with Peter and John’s bold witness (3:13–21; 4:8–12).

When Peter and John are later confronted with the command “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (4:18), their response is noteworthy. They declare, “we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (4:20). This is the response of a Spirit-inspired witness, one who has been called and empowered to proclaim a message. It reminds me of the words I heard proclaimed in a recent church service: “Missionaries are not heroes, they are simply obedient.” The mission is rooted in a call, but it centers on the proclamation of the message. To reject our mission is to repudiate or, at the very least, to diminish the significance of, our message. This is no small thing, for this message, the gospel, connects us to Christ, the source of our fellowship with God (Acts 3:19–21; Rom 1:16–17; 8:15–17) and our life together (Acts 2:42–47; Eph 2:14–22).

#### *4. Not a Pentecostal Voice, Another Voice*

There is no life without the Spirit. There is no gift of the Spirit without Christ.

The theme for the 2023 annual meeting of the SPS was, “In Our Own Tongues’: Amplifying Pentecostalism’s Minoritized Voices.” However, neither of the two plenary sessions offered “Pentecostal” voices.<sup>27</sup> Tupamahu has roots in the Pentecostal movement, but he appears to have jettisoned his earlier

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<sup>27</sup> Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Ekaptura Tupamahu both attend Presbyterian USA churches and teach at Quaker institutions.



held Pentecostal beliefs. Perhaps this lack of contemporary connection with the Pentecostal movement might help explain two other difficulties with his thesis, both historical in nature.

First, it is an established fact that the early Pentecostals who fanned out from Azusa Street to impact the world were not the wealthy, the famous, or the powerful. The world ignored the small band of Pentecostals that gathered together in Chicago's Stone Church over 100 years ago. The occasion was the 2nd General Council of the newly formed Assemblies of God (November 1914). I am sure that at least some outside observers must have laughed when they heard the group's bold declaration. This small band of "ordinary" people committed themselves to a remarkable goal: "the greatest evangelism the world has ever seen."<sup>28</sup> I find it ironic that Tupamahu lumps this group together with the powerful colonialists.<sup>29</sup>

For criticism of this inaccurate "coupling" of the missionaries with the colonial economic lords and political elite, see Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s essay, "The Missionary Enterprise and Theories of Imperialism,"<sup>30</sup> and Paul A. Varg's refutation of the imperialist charge. Varg concludes that "there is no evidence to support any general thesis that the missionary enterprise was merely a tool of the middle class to prepare the way for the exploitation of China."<sup>31</sup> It appears that it is Tupamahu's linkage of Pentecostal missionaries with colonial power that needs to be decoupled!

Secondly, it should be noted that, even if we understand the term "missionary" in the narrow sense of cross-cultural evangelists, today the vast majority of missionaries, like those first missionaries Luke describes, are not "white" nor do they come from North America or Europe (not that I have ever implied this). Rather, most Christian missionaries today come from Latin America, Africa, and Asia. I suspect that the single largest missionary-sending country in the world is now South Korea. What is absolutely clear is that the vast majority of missionaries today come from the Majority world. Does Tupamahu maintain that these churches should cease the Spirit-inspired practice, rooted in Acts 1:8, of sending out missionaries to "the ends of the earth"? Or is it just the "white missionaries" that need to stay home?

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<sup>28</sup> Combined Minutes of the General Council of the Assemblies of God in the United States, Canada, and Foreign Lands Held at Hot Springs, Ark. April 2–12, 1914 and at the Stone Church, Chicago, Ill. Nov. 15–29, 1914, 12, <https://archives.ifphc.org/>.

<sup>29</sup> In an insightful article, Heather Curtis compares two 1910 missionary conventions: the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland and the much smaller Pentecostal convention that convened at the Stone Church. Curtis contrasts the missions strategy of the mainline churches on display in Edinburgh, which largely equated Christianization with Westernization, with the strategy of the early Pentecostals, which rejected this approach and opted for the radical strategy of highlighting the need for a transformative encounter with God. See Heather D. Curtis, "Pentecostal Missions and the Changing Character of Global Christianity," *AG Heritage* (Springfield, MO: Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, 2013), 62–68, 75, <https://ifphc.org/Publications/AG-Heritage>.

<sup>30</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Missionary Enterprise and Theories of Imperialism," in *The Missionary Enterprise in China and America*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 336–73. Schlesinger examines the charge that Protestant missionaries in China were imperialists through three specific lenses (or theories of imperialism): economic; political; and cultural. He concludes that the missionaries were not economic or political imperialists: "...the missionaries themselves remained a force independent of, and often at odds with, both the white trader and even more the white settler" (p. 346). Schlesinger then argues that the missionaries were, however, cultural imperialists, a charge which tells us more about Schlesinger's theology than it does about the missionaries' actual practice.

<sup>31</sup> Paul A. Varg, *Missionaries, Chinese, and Diplomats* (New York: Octagon, 1977), 85.

There is a very un-Christlike racism implicit in Tupamahu's paper. The road from William Seymour to Frantz Fanon, a source of inspiration for Tupamahu, is long and treacherous. Seymour described the inter-racial Azusa Street revival as "a melting time. The people are all melted together.... The sweetest thing is the loving harmony."<sup>32</sup> Fanon maintained, "For the colonized, life can only materialize from the rotting cadaver of the colonist."<sup>33</sup> Tupamahu, following Fanon, presents a view of the world that Pentecost seeks to obliterate (Acts 2:1–12) and from which Christ, through the Holy Spirit, offers redemption (Eph 2:14–22). Christ has torn down the "the dividing wall of hostility" and enables us together to "become a dwelling [a holy temple] in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph 2:14, 22). Let us not follow in the ways of the world and try to rebuild that wall.

### 5. Conclusion: Another Place?

In addition to Tupamahu's paper, the other plenary session, presented by Grace Ji-Sun Kim and entitled, "Reimagining Spirit," was sub-Christian in that she refused to distinguish between the Spirit as a life-principle (Gen 2:7) and the Spirit as the source of spiritual life (regeneration) given by Christ (John 3:5).<sup>34</sup> She also followed Yong's faulty reading of Acts 2:17–21 by suggesting that this text teaches the Spirit is given to all people regardless of religious belief or commitment to Christ.<sup>35</sup>

It is popular these days, even in some (academic) Pentecostal circles, for people to speak of the Holy Spirit's salvific work in and through other religions. Peter's quotation of Joel is often cited in support of this view. This text, "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh" (Acts 2:17, quoting Joel 2:28), is said to refer to the work of the Spirit among people who are not followers of Jesus. In fact, the point Peter makes here is quite the opposite: faith in the message of Jesus enables people from every nation to enter the kingdom of God and to experience the Spirit's power, which marks them as members of Joel's end-time band of prophets.

In Acts 2 tongues speech serves as a sign that both validates the disciples' claim that Jesus is Lord and confirms their status as members of Joel's end-time prophetic band. So, when Peter, quoting Joel, speaks of the Spirit being poured out "on all people" (Acts 2:17), this phrase *does not refer* to the work of the Spirit beyond the boundaries of a specific and particular group of people, the people of God. Rather, with this passage, Luke (following Peter and Jesus) redefines the concept, "the people of God." This group, the people of God, is no longer limited to Israel, but now includes those of every nation who believe in Jesus and receive "forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:43; Acts 10 makes explicit what Acts 2 anticipates).

In fact, throughout the New Testament the salvific work of the Spirit is associated with *a special gift of the Spirit* (as opposed to the general operation of the Spirit in creation that gives physical life) and is always related to the proclamation, imitation, or worship of Christ. The key point to note is that

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<sup>32</sup> William Seymour, *The Apostolic Faith* (Nov/Dec, 1906).

<sup>33</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 1963), 50.

<sup>34</sup> This became evident in the "Question and Answer" period. This universalistic-panteistic view is also clearly voiced in her article, Grace Si-Jun [sic] Kim, "A Global Understanding of the Spirit," *Dialogue & Alliance* 21.2 (2007): 17–31.

<sup>35</sup> Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 131. See also Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 195–202.

the measuring stick for determining whether an experience, action, or event is inspired by the Spirit is its relationship to Christ. This is true for Luke (Acts 1:8; 2:33), for Paul (1 Cor 12:3), and for John (John 3:5–8; 20:22). The New Testament presents a uniform witness: we know that something is of the Spirit if it exalts Christ. Apart from this Christological test, we have no way of knowing whether what is being evaluated is a work of the Spirit or not. To speak, then, of the work of the Spirit in salvific ways in other religions is, at best, pure speculation.

The SPS was established a little over 50 years ago by my father, along with Vinson Synan and Horace Ward.<sup>36</sup> It was established in order to bless the Pentecostal movement by providing biblically informed, historically vetted, theological foundations for its message and mission. I cannot help but think that all three of these notable Pentecostal leaders would have been saddened had they attended the plenary sessions on display in the March 16–18, 2023 annual meeting. The voices we heard, and this is now becoming an expected trend, were neither Pentecostal nor Evangelical.<sup>37</sup> Some will argue that this is what academic freedom demands. However, I worry that our “hearts have become hardened” and we “have closed [our] eyes.” I fear that unless we change course, the Spirit will depart from our gatherings and go elsewhere where “they will listen!” (Acts 28:27–28).

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<sup>36</sup> On the history of the SPS see Glen Menzies, “The First Fifty Years of the Society for Pentecostal Studies,” *Pneuma* 42 (2020): 335–69.

<sup>37</sup> On Pentecostal identity, see my book, *Christ-Centered: The Evangelical Nature of Pentecostal Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020).

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— OLD TESTAMENT —

Andrew T. Abernethy. *Discovering Isaiah: Content, Interpretation, Reception*. Discovering Biblical Texts. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021. x + 197 pp. £26.00/\$24.99.

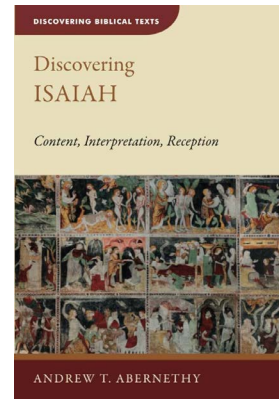
*Discovering Isaiah* aims to introduce students and pastors to the majestic book of Isaiah and its long history of scholarship. Andrew Abernethy, who has written several other monographs on Isaiah, successfully and concisely accomplishes this end. In *The Book of Isaiah and God's Kingdom*, NSBT 40 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), Abernethy explored the prophet's work thematically, showing how "kingdom" is one of the unifying theological themes of Isaiah. In contrast, *Discovering Isaiah* combines the historical, literary, and reception history approaches (p. 4).

After an introductory chapter, chapters 2–3 explore the reception history of Isaiah. Chapter 2 covers pre-modern readings of Isaiah, including inner-biblical interpretation, apocryphal texts, the Qumran community, the early church, the Middle Ages (including Jewish rabbinics), and the Reformation period. Of particular interest is how Abernethy opens up the Christological hermeneutic employed by the pre-modern church. He claims that, for Eusebius, a "plain" or "literal" reading of the text includes following "the plain sense of the text across the entire sweep of redemptive history" (p. 16). Calvin, though focusing carefully on the meaning of the text for its eighth-century audience, also "reads forward" to Christ and the church (p. 23).

In chapter 3, Abernethy succinctly summarizes modern scholarship and its dissection of Isaiah into different authors and texts. He also deals fairly with conservative scholars who see a single author for Isaiah. Ultimately, it is not clear exactly what Abernethy himself believes about different authors and historical settings, but he focuses on the canonical, final form of the book (p. 37).

In chapter 4, Abernethy takes a historical approach to the study of Isaiah. He does not trace the history of the *text*, but the history that Isaiah presents. Abernethy claims that Isaiah is a theological history, presenting God as simultaneously a God of judgment and salvation. This theme can be seen in Isaiah 1–12, the opening section of the book. The author then argues for four "phases" in this history of Israel: judgment from Assyria and Babylon; the rebuilding under Cyrus; the redemption through the Suffering Servant; and the final consummation of judgment and salvation. Each of these phases contains instances of both judgment and salvation, a pattern that repeats until the escalation at the end of time.

In chapters 5–9, Abernethy uses a mainly literary approach to studying Isaiah. That is, he looks at various themes throughout the book. The key themes he examines are holiness, Zion, the Davidic Messiah, the Suffering Servant, and justice. In these chapters the reader can see how Abernethy combines approaches. After some time examining each theme across the book of Isaiah, he applies each theme to each of the aforementioned four historical "phases." Then he sifts each theme through its reception history, showing how various scholars and theologians across the ages have interpreted them. He ably demonstrates how Isaiah portrays holiness as the most important attribute of God in the book and how Zion is the most important motif of the book (p. 75). Chapter 8, on the Servant, is excellent, describing the passage as dream-like, with the audience hardly able to comprehend how God could provide such a Servant (pp. 132–33). Chapter 9 provides an interesting discussion of justice. Abernethy acknowledges that the term today is rife with political overtones (p. 144), but in this chapter he defines



“social justice” simply as “God’s concern for justice at a social level, particularly God’s concern that the socially vulnerable receive just treatment within society” (p. 144). Although much debate today centers on how this is to be evaluated and applied, especially in Western society, Abernethy (largely) steers clear of political controversy in this book. Lastly, a brief concluding chapter (chapter ten) shows how Isaiah’s ultimate goal is for readers to worship YHWH.

The book has no glaring weaknesses, but a few small deficiencies can be noted. In chapter 7, the author primarily focused on Isaiah 7 but could have used that space to examine more closely other passages related to kingship. Also, it is debatable if “justice” should be included as one of the top five themes of Isaiah. Why not choose, say, the nations as a theme?

A few features make *Discovering Isaiah* stand out. First, the work is simple and brief without sacrificing scholarly depth. Second, Abernethy writes from an evangelical perspective that is charitable to conservative views on Isaiah. Third, Abernethy focuses on the final form of the book of Isaiah. Although an understanding of the scholarly discussion of Isaiah is necessary for students, such study misses the great Isaianic forest for the historical-critical trees. Thus, if a reader wants knowledge both of the scholarly reception of Isaiah and also wants to understand what Isaiah proclaims theologically, this book is the one to consult. Other works such as the T&T Clark Study Guides to the Old Testament do not present a final-form theological look at Isaiah. *Discovering Isaiah* is more like a chapter in an introductory OT textbook, except that, being a monograph, it has the benefit of exploring ideas in more depth.

In sum, *Discovering Isaiah* is worth reading because Abernethy will help you know Isaiah better, whose book, in turn, will direct you to “behold your God” (Isa 40:9).

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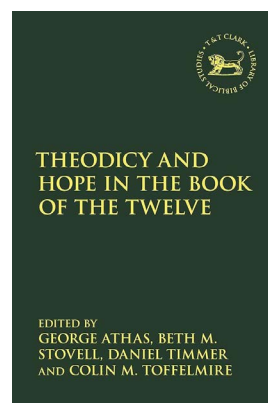
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George Athas, Beth M. Stovell, Daniel C. Timmer, and Colin M. Toffelmire, eds. *Theodicy and Hope in the Book of the Twelve*. The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 705. London: T&T Clark, 2021. 300 pp. £28.99/\$39.95.

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The Book of the Twelve has been the subject of numerous books, articles, and presentations over the past thirty years. Thematic approaches to the Book of the Twelve have been a significant focus of recent scholarship. This book is a collection of essays by thirteen scholars, addressing the themes of theodicy and hope within the Twelve. The first two essays by Grace Ko and Anthony R. Petterson and the final two by Mark J. Boda and George Athas explore themes in the entire Twelve, while the remaining seven examine individual books within the Twelve. These essays offer a fresh perspective on the interpretation and reading of the Twelve.

In the introduction, Beth M. Stovell and Daniel C. Timmer outline the approach and method for the volume. The issue of theme features prominently among their concerns. They recognize that theodicy appears as an implicit theme, whereas hope is explicit in the Twelve. This interplay between the anachronistic theme of theodicy and the explicit





theme of hope also features prominently in many of the essays. The Introduction also addresses other issues, including synchronic/diachronic concerns for interpretation, epistemology and the limits of human knowledge, and theology as it relates to theodicy.

Grace Ko begins her essay with a broader approach to theodicy in the Twelve. She uses a two-fold method. The first part of her method explores how the prophets justify divine judgment and justice with the concept of *vox populi* (i.e., the voice of the people). She notes: “Most of the classical prophets engage in justifying God by disputing with the *vox populi* which questions God’s justice” (p. 23). Ko cites numerous examples of this concept throughout the Twelve. The second part of her method turns toward prophetic complaints and whether the prophets share any of the same sentiments with the populace. She discerns two categories of prophetic complaints. The first category contains complaints by the prophets against the broken covenant and questions about the lack of YHWH’s protection. This calls into question YHWH’s justice (e.g., Jonah and Habakkuk). The second category concerns complaints against YHWH. Jonah and Habakkuk represent the two primary examples of complaints against YHWH. Ko concludes with a systematic look at the portrayal of hope in each book of The Twelve.

Anthony R. Petterson investigates the significance of exile and re-exile. The use of the Hebrew terms גלה (“go into exile”) and שבה (“take captive”) and eleven other secondary terms contain the concepts of exile and re-exile, which he uses to trace the theme of exile through the Twelve. He recognizes that it goes beyond the return from Babylonian captivity. In his study of Zechariah 9–14, the idea of re-exile suggests that complete restoration did not take place after the first exile. For complete restoration, a second exile was required, according to Petterson (pp. 64–65).

Brittany Kim’s essay on Hosea explores the claim that Hosea contains no prophetic complaint against YHWH about Israel’s judgment. Instead, the book of Hosea depicts YHWH’s justifiable acts of judgment through the metaphors of the resentful husband and the rejected parent. These metaphors distinguish Hosea from the rest of the Twelve. YHWH’s judgment against Israel is a form of discipline that should lead to repentance and restoration. Kim divides Hosea’s presentations of YHWH’s judgments into two categories: passive judgment/rejection and active judgment. She also describes Israel’s sins outlined in Hosea and how YHWH’s judgment corresponds to Israel’s crimes. Finally, Kim observes that Hosea’s treatment of theodicy establishes the course for the rest of the Twelve.

The essay by Heath A. Thomas discusses Joel 4:4–8 as a representation of poetic justice and theodicy in the form of human trafficking. In other words, Tyre and Sidon’s punishment for selling Judah’s people into slavery will be their own slavery in Judah. Thomas emphasizes how this retributive type of justice relates to theodicy and hope. Joel 4:4, 6–8 present the theodicy and poetic justice of retribution, while verse 5 offers the people of Judah a postponed hope of temple restoration (p. 109).

According to Chelsea D. Mak, the leonine metaphor of Amos 1:2 (“YHWH roars from Zion”) establishes the tone of Amos for its Judean audience. As a lion, YHWH operates outside of the law, acting as either a predator or a protector of Judah. Israel’s experience with the voracious lion’s appetite serves as a warning to the people of Judah: stand in front of the lion and be devoured, or stand behind the lion and be protected. As a result, theodicy is not the primary concern in Amos. The primary concern, according to Mak, is the people’s relationship with YHWH.

Rainer Kessler’s essay centers on the idea that the book of Micah reflects on Judah’s destruction by the Babylonians after the exile. The poor and innocent people of Judah suffered as a result of the sins of the rich and powerful. To address the issue of the justification of YHWH in the midst of this destruction

and seeming injustice, the prophet takes a pragmatic approach. Micah uses a juxtaposition of judgment and future hope to justify YHWH's actions. Furthermore, the purification of the people necessitates the people's repentance. Micah offers these pragmatic justifications in response to YHWH's judgment of his people.

Daniel C. Timmer explores violence in Nahum, concluding that all humans sin and only YHWH's divine mercy stays punishment. The main question he poses regards the justification that YHWH can punish violence with more violence. He argues that YHWH's mercy can be given in varying degrees and that YHWH's actions and ways are beyond human understanding.

David J. Fuller and Michael H. Floyd offer two distinct approaches to Habakkuk. Fuller's essay highlights Habakkuk 3:18 as unique among the Twelve, as it highlights hope and steadfastness in the midst of famine. No reversal of the famine is indicated, yet Hab 3:18 still calls for rejoicing. This is the only passage presenting such a perspective. Floyd's novel essay explores the contemporary Anthropocene Age and Habakkuk's theophany, focusing on its connection to the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, which was at its peak at the time of writing.

Mark J. Boda examines the Babylonian gap in the Twelve, which highlights the Assyrian threat but skips the Babylonian period of exile until the Persian Period. He argues that the final form of the Twelve contains a rhetorical strategy to invoke theodicy and hope, with three calls to silence (Hab 2:20; Zeph 1:7; Zech 2:17) and three calls to joy (Zeph 3:14; Zech 2:14; 9:9). The silence represents mourning over Jerusalem and the exile of Judah's people, while the joy represents the return and restoration of YHWH's people to the land.

George Athas emphasizes the failure to reestablish the Davidic monarchy after exile, which influenced the prophetic message. The failures of post-exilic leaders like Zerubbabel and Joshua diminished this hope. The diminished hope of the Davidic monarchy eventually led to the apocalyptic and eschatological messianic hope of the Second Temple period.

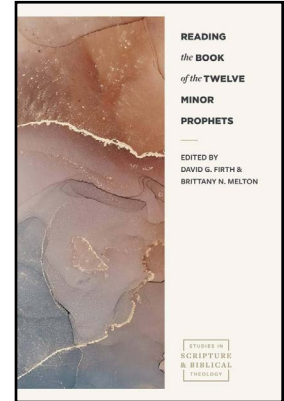
The multiple perspectives and approaches of these essays give readers new perspectives on the Twelve. By centering the essays around the themes of theodicy and hope, the multiple voices of the authors seem to echo the disparate but concordant voices of the Twelve. These essays not only shed light on the historical context of the Twelve but also highlight the theological significance of their messages. The exploration of theodicy and hope allows readers to understand how these themes were intricately woven into the prophetic message, providing a deeper understanding of the complexities within the text.

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David G. Firth and Brittany N. Melton, eds. *Reading the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets*. Studies in Scripture and Biblical Theology. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022. 232 pp. £25.99/\$29.99.

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At the crux of the problem in the scholarship of the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets in the past thirty years is whether these twelve books should be read as distinct texts or as a unified book. This edited volume, guided by two experienced Old Testament scholars, is one of the most recent forays into the research on the Book of the Twelve. Notwithstanding this crux in the Twelve, this book delves into a surprisingly rich and diverse range of topics. It is striking to find discussions of insects alongside theodicy and of Martin Luther alongside technology within this volume.



The first chapter, “On Reading the Twelve Minor Prophets,” sets out the editors’ vision for the book. They trace the recent scholarship on this corpus and highlight the hermeneutical issue of unity and diversity in reading these books. The editors believe that the two extreme positions of reading the Twelve—as distinct units or as a unity—are to be held in tension. They posit that “no final answers are given to the question of how we are to read the Minor Prophets/Book of the Twelve” (p. 6).

The second chapter by Isabelle M. Hamley seeks a rereading of the marriage metaphor. Hamley argues that the marriage metaphor must consider the family and social aspects associated with marriage. She argues that the best way to read the violence in the text is as a form of God’s lament over his people. Tchavdar S. Hadjiev’s essay offers several readings of Joel with and without the context of the Twelve. Hadjiev rejects that the Twelve “were composed, or meant to be read, together” (p. 31), and argues that such readings should not be “be allowed to dominate contemporary readings of the Minor Prophets” (p. 40) nor be the “primary mode of reading” (p. 45).

The following chapter, by Heath A. Thomas, is an interesting exploration of fishing and the building of cities in the book of Habakkuk (1:15–17; 2:12–14). Thomas points out that Habakkuk uses advanced techniques (technology), exemplified in these texts as implementations of human destruction. Thomas’s piece is intended to help us reflect on our invention of technology and its application in the modern world.

Thomas Renz’s essay shows us how Luther exegeted a text as an involved and interested “participant” rather than an “outside observer” who can ignore any theological commitments to the texts. Renz sees that Luther’s exegesis and application are closely integrated, and Luther was not afraid to be labeled as someone “controlled and determined by prior theological commitment” (p. 87), as modern scholars would be concerned with today.

In the following essay, S. D. (Fanie) Snyman argues that questions of theodicy remain unanswered in the Old Testament. When the issue is raised, God responded differently in different contexts. In Job, the emphasis is on “the incomprehensibility of the way in which God directs events” (p. 101), in Habakkuk, the emphasis is “the encouragement to the people to keep faithful,” and in Malachi, it is “the future that will bring a decisive turn of events with a complete reversal of the situation” (p. 102).

Anthony Petterson defines the scope of “New Covenant concepts,” traces them across the Twelve, and examines their significance. These concepts are defined using four criteria: (1) a divine initiative to internalize the law; (2) a new result of faithfulness to God; (3) a new basis of forgiveness; and (4) a new

scope of inclusion (pp. 104–5). Petterson points out that these concepts are parallel to the claims of the New Testament about what Jesus has accomplished through his death, resurrection, and ascension.

Next, Beth M. Stovell traces how the two concepts of the “divine spirit” and presence are connected for literary purposes in the Twelve. She uses the metaphor theories of Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner with other theories on text cohesion and she argues that the use of such metaphors “frequently highlight expectations for renewal and transformation for specific rhetorical purposes” (p. 125).

In an interesting essay, Julie Woods examines (exhaustively) all the animals, birds, fishes, and insects that appear in the Twelve. She argues that these creatures are used in a variety of ways in their relationship with humans. They can be used actively as the tools of God’s judgment or passively to depict the effects of the judgment. Nonetheless, Woods points out that “rarely, though significantly, animals are shown to have a relationship with God, and in one instance God makes a covenant with them” (p. 170).

In the final chapter, John Goldingay raises the question of theology in the Twelve. He examines four motifs: (1) Yahweh’s self-description in Exodus 34:6–7 (grace formula); (2) Yahweh’s attachment to Israel and as God of all the nations; (3) the Day of Yahweh; and (4) the Davidic promises (p. 172). He argues that the Twelve has an “overlapping theology” with Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel due to a process of redaction.

This book curates some of the finest scholars in the field, who have written top-class commentaries and are veterans in this field. Not all the books of the Twelve are addressed at chapter length, but the topics discussed in this volume are surprisingly rich and diverse. Several essays deal with the use of metaphors, and rightly so, as they are well-featured in the Twelve (e.g., marriage, technology, animals). A number of essays discuss various attributes of God that appear across the entirety of the Twelve. For instance, the topics of the New Covenant (Petterson and Goldingay), theodicy (Synman), and divine spirit and presence (Stovell) are studied longitudinally.

The contributors, however, do not seem to interact with each other. And it is surprising that out of the nine essays (excluding the editors’), only two address the crux in the Twelve that the editors raised in their opening chapter (Hadjiev and Goldingay). A contributing reason for this discrepancy may be the selection of contributors. Based on my understanding, it seems that only two of them (Petterson and Thomas) are more sympathetic to a unified reading of the Twelve. As far as I am aware, neither Renz nor Goldingay (and evidently, Hadjiev) is inclined to such readings. By their choice of contributors, the editors have sought a broader and more neutral ground for this edited volume.

This book is a good addition to the scholarship library of the Book of the Twelve. However, it does not seek to answer definitively the (perhaps unanswerable) question of whether the Twelve should be read as distinct individual texts or as a unified book.

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Dominick S. Hernández. *Engaging the Old Testament: How to Read Biblical Narrative, Poetry, and Prophecy Well*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023. 320 pp. £23.99/\$29.99.

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Dominick Hernández has delivered up this book as his introduction to the Old Testament. He wants people to be able to read the whole of the Scriptures as the word of God and to read it well (p. ix). He wants people to understand the way real authors wrote to real people in real circumstances in real times in real history. His book attempts this task through two interweaving approaches: instruction and demonstration. Chapters 1–6, 14–15, 17–18 focus on instruction, while the remaining chapters (7–13, 16, 19) demonstrate what it is to read well.

From the outset of this book, I really appreciated the personal tone. Readers are gifted an insight into Hernández's life through his education, childhood, and other experiences, and how they all worked together to grow his love for reading well and his appreciation of the artistry of how the biblical authors went about their task. Preeminent from the very beginning is how highly Hernández values Scripture and his pastoral concern for others to do the same.

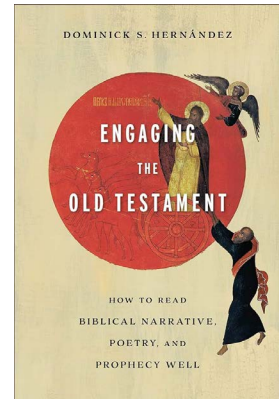
In these opening chapters, Hernández attempts to cover multiple bases, including the difficulty of translation but drawing from the humorous difficulties in communicating across different Spanish dialects. This is important, because the Scriptures are both fully divine (so we need to heed God's words) as well as fully human (so we need to be attuned to all that it means to be a human author). In both chapters 4 and 5, I would have appreciated a reference to Paul Ricoeur, who helps make sense of the ideas in chapter 4, but also because he coined the terminology appropriated in chapter 5. (For an accessible entry to Paul Ricoeur, see Kevin J Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990]).

Chapter 6 is the final chapter before the book changes course, and it explains what narratives do to readers. The ideas clearly presented here were insightful and are helpful references for readers to consider, as Hernández explains how narratives withhold information, present an omniscient narrator, and guide readers through their recount to consider the implications of narratives.

With chapter 7 a new phase of the book begins, which changes the character from the first part. The first six chapters used personal illustrations and explained hermeneutics and genre, while from chapter 7 the pattern is to use quotes from classic books to illustrate his biblical theological tour of the Old Testament. Hernández takes his readers through the exodus to the exile, demonstrating how his principles of reading narrative well bears fruit. It might be more accurate to call the book at this point an Old Testament *survey* rather than an Old Testament *introduction*.

Through these chapters, valuable insights were presented into the text. For example, they demonstrate how Christians can learn to love the law (by reading in the wider narrative), the importance of the Passover (Pharaoh's fears of an Israelite army were unfounded; God defeated him all on his own), Rahab as the hero (with a wonderful aside explaining Moses's disobedience), the weirdness of Judges (with Samson as the key), and so on through to the exile. Hernández shows the connections attentive readers might make, while suggesting that his readings are not necessarily final; anyone reading closely is encouraged to disagree by providing a "more reasonable interpretation" (see esp. p. 279).

In chapters 14–15, Hernández returns to the question of genre, with a focus on poetry, drawing heavily on the important work of Adele Berlin. In chapter 15, Hernández delves into technical aspects,



explaining the language of source and target domains in terms of how to move from the metaphor to understand the argument. It would seem there are two purposes here: the smaller one is to help correct those with overly literal readings of texts to embrace metaphor, while the larger issue is to help surface readers delve deeper into texts, to read more slowly, and to be able to trace and recognize the reuse of metaphors across the Bible. Chapter 16 demonstrates this approach to metaphor with reference to Hernández's previous work on Job, explaining how "light" and "dark" unlock the argumentation of the book.

Chapters 17–18 look at prophecy, beginning with the prophets themselves. These chapters try to distinguish (or at least, explain the distinction) between the prophets and their writings. I would have liked a little more clarity in the explanations and implications here, as Hernández considers the progression from speaking to writing to editing to addition to compilation. The rough outline is helpful: he explains that "select accounts of the prophets' lives and words were recounted and crafted into compositions by the biblical authors for the purpose of illustrating their theological purposes" and that "all accounts of words and deeds that were written down were necessarily stylized" (p. 234). However, a fuller account anticipating readers' questions would benefit an introductory work such as this. Hernández then goes on to use the oracles against the nations to explain some of the poetry of prophecy, highlighting the presence of alliteration and assonance. I was not convinced by his assessment of the evangelistic purpose of the oracles (as audiences heard them, "they were moved to be a prophetic voice to those around them"; p. 255); as I understand them, they function more as an encouragement and rebuke to their native hearers. Nevertheless, I am open to being convinced otherwise.

In the final chapter, Hernández takes readers through Isaiah's Suffering Servant Songs to help Christian readers wrestle with the servant's identity and to show again how reading well bears fruit. This chapter offers pointers to understanding the move from proximate to long-term prophecy, although readers might benefit from longer treatments on reading prophecy effectively, such as Steven McKenzie's *How to Read the Bible: History, Prophecy, Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), which provides a nuanced approach to prophecy beyond the popular assumption of long-range predictive prophecy.

Hernández is clearly passionate about helping people read well, through all the genres of the Old Testament. However, this stated purpose is slightly at odds with the proportions of his book, as the majority of the content is focused on narrative, with only two chapters of theory and one chapter of illustration for each of poetry and prophecy. I thought the six chapters of illustration for narrative was a little excessive, turning this into a different book from that point (again, *survey* rather than *introduction*). There was also a loss of the personal tone which drew me in at the beginning, such that it began to feel formulaic (book quote, explanation, link to the Bible, explanation, illustration). It was still effective, but the character of the book did certainly change.

Readers will finish this book wanting to read more of Adele Berlin on poetry and would benefit from engaging with Paul Ricoeur. Additionally, more precise examination of how prophecy works would be welcomed. Nonetheless, all will be enriched by Hernández's careful readings of Scripture and will do well to heed his exhortations to slow down our reading. His attention to the fine details of the Old Testament will challenge all readers to approach the text with fresh eyes, attuned to the artistry and personality of these divine and human writings.

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Catherine L. McDowell and Philip H. Towner. *The Rewards of Learning Greek and Hebrew: Discovering the Richness of the Bible in Its Original Languages*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2021. xvii + 156 pp. £15.95/\$14.95.

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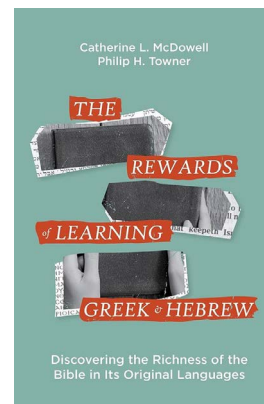
In the past, many teachers of biblical languages relied (at least partly) for the motivation of their more complacent students on the passionate article of John Piper, “Brothers, Bitzer Was a Banker,” in *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2002), ch. 12. Piper persuasively provides examples from church history of people who prized the biblical languages and “contended” with them (e.g., Heinrich Bitzer, Martin Luther, John Newton, George Müller). The writers of this book go in a different direction in their attempt to motivate and encourage students of biblical languages. They give concrete examples, in practical and dynamic ways, to illustrate the benefits and rewards of reading the Bible in its original languages.

The book is divided into nineteen chapters. Catherine L. McDowell writes the first ten with the goal of showing the benefits of learning biblical Hebrew, and Philip H. Towner writes the final nine to argue for the rewards of learning biblical Greek. The authors bookend each chapter, opening with a useful supporting quotation from a language scholar and closing with an inspiring testimony usually from a relatively new student of the biblical languages. These quotations and examples further the argument of the book.

In the first chapter, opened by Bruce Waltke’s call to engage in theology only after the purging “fire of careful exegesis,” McDowell focuses on the Hebrew of Genesis 1:26–28 to explain the difference between Adam and אָדָם. Her point is that the Hebrew term אָדָם “refers both to ‘humanity’ and to the individual man, Adam” (p. 5), depending on the context. She gives relevant examples from other passages to make her point and ends by reminding readers that every translation involves interpretation. Moreover, Hebrew helps to “plumb the depths of God’s self-revelation in ways that are simply inaccessible in translation” (p. 6). The motivating continues by her insisting that learning Hebrew “brings you closer to God’s word and to God himself” (p. 7). The chapter closes with a very useful quotation from Professor Ethan Jones in which he points out that reading the Bible in Hebrew forces you to slow down and helps savor the Scriptures. He concludes, “I’m forever grateful to have constant access to a de-accelerant in a hurried world” (p. 7).

The second chapter opens with a supporting quotation from Philip Melancthon: “The Scripture cannot be understood theologically unless it be first understood grammatically” (p. 9). The chapter focuses on the importance of reading well the “imperfect consecutive preterite” for feeling the swiftness and pathos of a sequence of actions. At the end of the chapter, a student confesses that her study of biblical languages made “Scripture come alive” (p. 12).

In the third chapter, the correlation between the task given to Adam in the garden of Eden (Gen 2:15) and the subsequent duties of the priests in the tabernacle is explained through an exploration of how the Hebrew wordplay עֲבַד and שָׁמַר (work/serve and keep/guard) helps connect the task given to Adam in the garden of Eden (Gen 2:15). Unfortunately, this connection is generally “lost in translation.” In chapter four, “When God Uses Italics,” the author points out how Hebrew emphasizes the subject by including the pronoun in contexts where it is not grammatically necessary. Parts of McDowell’s conclusion are worth reproducing: “We should be aware that translators’ attempts to provide a smooth





... translation can, at times, conceal rather than reveal an author's emphasis.... When the subject is God himself, noticing an emphatic personal pronoun can even lead you to worship!" (p. 20).

The following chapters explain the importance of fronting for emphasis (ch. 5), understanding Hebrew euphemisms and idioms (ch. 6), prophetic sarcasm and insults (ch. 7), various puns which "are fun" (ch. 8), the usefulness of catching the alliteration and/or assonance to perceive a poem's full sense or dramatic intensity (ch. 9), and how catching allusions (ch. 10) from Genesis 1 (תהו וְבִהוּ) helps with the understanding of Isaiah 34:11.

After studying the Hebrew section of this book, every careful reader should agree with McDowell's conclusion that by "reading and studying the Old Testament in Hebrew, you will have greater access to the connectedness of Scripture and a better sense of how the parts fit together" (p. 53). There is no doubt that there are "hidden treasures" in wrestling with the biblical text in its original languages.

Towner starts the Greek section by admitting that even though he is convinced about the benefits of learning how to read the NT in Greek, it is much harder to demonstrate. I think that is correct. You have to be "already on the inside of the language" (p. 57) as the finer points of grammar are usually taken up only in more advanced Greek exegesis courses.

Chapter 11 shows how reading the NT in Greek brings one closer to original audiences (proximity) but can also disorient and disrupt, thus teaching one the highly useful art of reading closely and slowly (pp. 61–62).

Chapter 12 makes a very powerful argument for the importance of the Septuagint (LXX) for NT studies. The following chapters show the importance of Greek for understanding intertextuality (ch. 13) and for hearing the original text because it was written to be read aloud (ch. 14), the use of wordplay and repetition (ch. 15), the importance of the εὐσέβεια (piety) word group for 1 Timothy (ch. 16), some examples of the ambiguities in the original text (chapter 17), the "poetics of divine wrath" (chapter 18), and ends with a useful preview of "coming attractions" (ch. 19). For those who are willing to get a hold of the "master key" (Greek), it will unlock many more doors to the discipline of New Testament studies, including textual criticism.

In an age when many seminaries are cutting back on courses in the biblical languages, there is an urgent need for a book like this—one which demonstrates so convincingly the rewards of the original languages of the Bible. The expertise of both writers in their fields, along with their passion and obvious love for the subject, significantly enhance the value of the book.

While I found myself disagreeing on occasions on minor points and found a few arguments questionable, I highly recommend this book to all teachers who need additional help to motivate their students of biblical languages, as well as to any student who is not yet convinced about the rich rewards of learning Hebrew and Greek.

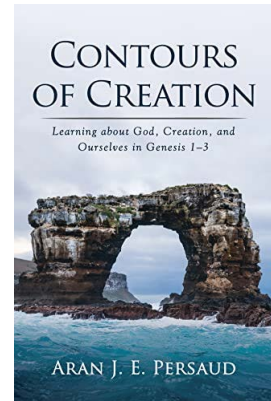
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Aran J. E. Persaud. *Contours of Creation: Learning About God, Creation, and Ourselves in Genesis 1–3*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022. 130 pp. £19.00/\$21.00.

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Although the author wrote this book primarily for a general readership confronted with uncertainties about the Bible's historical reliability, the book's purpose extends to include the question of human identity and its role in light of the Genesis creation story. The main argument of the book answers the reliability and teleological challenge by advocating a faith-based historical reading of Genesis, that is, "When people live in response to God in love, obedience, and worship regardless of their circumstances, they are living in faith" (p. 2). In this respect, the book is not an apologetic argument against the science of evolution nor does it attempt to harmonize faith and science. It calls the reader to re-evaluate naturalistic ideology and espouse a tradition-based view of history and to see the central role of Genesis 1–2 as a description of humanity's moral condition, of the causes of that condition, and as a preview of the redemption that God offers in Christ, enabling individuals to fulfil the mandate for which God created them.



The book is divided into twelve short chapters with the introduction being the longest, comprising a quarter of the book. The author argues in the introduction that the ideology of a Kantian closed-world system is limited and subjective and is unable to adequately explain human morality and its metaphysical curiosity. However, the Genesis story read from a faith-centered perspective satisfactorily explains the recorded events and is able to account for these human features since it assumes the existence of an underlying historical reality and an authorial ideology characterized by a moral and spiritual basis of the universe. As a result, a faith-centered reading helps us understand the meaning of God's acts in history as they relate to readers today.

Chapter 2 discusses the nature of the connection between creation and God its creator in terms of its bond, duration, universal relevance, and the revelation of God's "tri-personal nature" (p. 36), whose dimensions are expanded in redemption and restoration. Chapter 3 relates the functional ontology of ancient Near Eastern myths to readers' perception of the Genesis creation story and therefore argues that, on the basis of God's creative word, chaos was subjected, and creation, with its purpose, must be seen in relation to the source of its existence. This is why, in chapter 4, the use of poetry and prose are able to describe God in creation, "a holistic spiritual and physical world together" (p. 51), beyond the scope of the closed world methodology of modern science. Chapters 5–7 respectively discuss the intentionality, personalness, and communication of God's creative speech, the attribute of God's glory as light overflowing to the work of his creation, and the sustaining activity or continuance of God's creative decrees. In chapter 8, the author reminds readers that, according to God, his creation was good, which is an expression of his sustaining providence to be enjoyed by humans. Continuing these thoughts, chapter 9 argues that the goodness in the creation of Adam and Eve is that humans are image bearers of God with the mandate to reflect God's qualities as revealed in creation, that is, to rule, as God is king and ruler over creation. Unfortunately, as chapter 10 relates, sin has corrupted human nature and produced a distorted understanding of creation such that humankind's moral autonomy has sullied the God-given mandate. The force of the book culminates in chapter 11, which argues for the restoration of creation and the restoration of the image of God in humankind by the triune God. Chapter 12 is a very brief recapitulation with some final thoughts.

The brevity of this book is countered with the density of thought-provoking information presented in a readable and colloquial manner. As a consequence, the book could have benefited from added chapter structure to guide the reader, and at certain points further explanations tying together ideas with better precision would have been welcome. The book is a good complement to other works advocating for a tradition-based reading of Genesis since it highlights the inescapable moral and spiritual dimensions of creation.

The content of the book is relevant, and the main thoughts flow together from beginning to end. A noteworthy criticism, however, is the unclear implication of the inference in chapter 3, that in the beginning of creation God organized chaos with humanity in mind (pp. 46–47). This idea of organization, that God established order in creation, which reveals his glory, is not clearly carried through to the idea of justice in the mandate of humanity (p. 97) since only social justice is discussed (pp. 90, 99) and not the resultant overall justice that includes the environment of creation. The earth cries out precisely because we are not being our brother's keeper as the organization of God intends in creation. This therefore raises the question, "What exactly does reflecting God's image and ruling over creation mean?" Notwithstanding these queries, the book admirably marshals a biblical-theological/redemptive-historical understanding of Genesis 1–2, suited for readers in a variety of contexts.

In short, the grounding of the author's thought in the historicity of the Genesis creation story, in the living God as the architect/sustainer of creation, which has relevant metaphysical implications for contemporary humanity, and the combining of these with an accessible dialogue, with the philosophical moorings and ideological inadequacies about creation in a post-Christian society, has allowed the author's message to find a strong re-voicing of the creation account's significance and a redolent calling of individuals to reconcile with the Creator God in Christ Jesus.

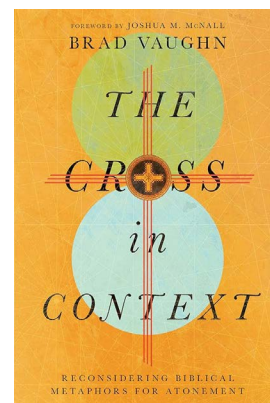
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Brad Vaughn. *The Cross in Context: Reconsidering Biblical Metaphors for Atonement*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022. xii + 260 pp. £20.99/\$25.00.

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Understanding atonement is as important as it is vexed. The history of Christianity exhibits numerous flash points, including contemporary discussion in North America. While many factors shape the current debate, one crucial element has been a growing recognition of definitional reductionism with respect to sacrifice and atonement. A flattened and partial grasp of these crucial concepts, however arrived at, quickly comes unstuck when applied to biblical texts. Brad Vaughn, theologian in residence with Global Training Network, steps into the fray with a clear purpose: to understand the cross of Christ in context. Vaughn has three subsidiary aims: (1) to promote Christian unity by resisting theological factionalism; (2) to uncover how biblical authors harmonize atonement metaphors; and (3) to contextualize the Bible's teaching on atonement for diverse cultures (pp. 1–2). Vaughn eschews theological syncretism—the attempt to silence parts of the Bible to preserve a theological subculture (p. 6). Instead, setting systematic categories aside, he privileges an inductive approach to discern what atonement



does and does not mean based on a contextual reading of the primary texts. Nevertheless, Vaughn is cognizant of the fraught nature of this task, poignantly surmising, “I will lose friends” (p. 1).

*The Cross in Context* has three main sections. Part 1 explores atonement in its biblical and cultural contexts. In the opening chapter, Vaughn suggests that many books start at the wrong place: reconciling atonement theories whose validity is simply assumed (p. 11). Yet, he cautions, “Theology is not equivalent to biblical truth” (p. 14); rather, theological abstractions are highly contextual, indelibly shaped by historical situatedness and subculture. Accordingly, the following four chapters investigate atonement in the Old Testament to construct a broader framework for interpreting Christ’s ministry. The result is a helpful distillation of concepts and scholarship for an audience who may well be unfamiliar with them. Throughout, common oversimplifications are challenged; for example, the absence of God’s anger in atoning for ritual impurity indicates that appeasing divine wrath is not intrinsic to atonement (pp. 69–70). Vaughn identifies three core impediments to a right relationship with God that atonement removes—impurity, debt, and burden (pp. 70, 101). In part 2, four interpretative questions apply insights generated in part 1 to Jesus: What does Christ purify? (pp. 105–22); Who bears the burden of sin? (pp. 123–38); Does God want recompense or retribution? (pp. 139–57); and Does the Father punish the Son? (pp. 158–77). Part 3 provides responses to anticipated questions and objections as well as supplying further analysis of key passages. A central theme in the book is summed up in the title of Appendix B: “Affirming Penal Substitution but Not Its Logic” (p. 217). Vaughn takes issue, not with the category per se, but with the assumptions which underlie simplistic notions of penal substitution along with universalizing tendencies which promote the metaphor to the exclusion of others. Instead, building on recent work on atonement (e.g., James A. Greenberg, *A New Look at Atonement in Leviticus: The Meaning and Purpose of Kipper Revisited*, BBRSup 23 [University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2019]), Vaughn demands a more careful articulation.

Vaughn’s deconstructive endeavor is well executed. He rightly exposes various unexplored assumptions, confections, and misinterpretations that obscure contemporary debate. Moreover, a real strength of this volume is its ability to bring back to the table aspects of atonement that often remain underacknowledged. For instance, drawing on extensive experience in East Asia, Vaughn addresses the relationship between atonement and honor/shame (pp. 87–101). This kind of input is invaluable for definitions of atonement which rarely move beyond legal conceptualizations. Thus, Vaughn makes a compelling case for a richer and more multifaceted understanding. His conclusion is spot on: “If we want a robust view of the atonement, we must embrace nuance, not merely tolerate it.... It requires humility to temporarily set aside our atonement theories and embrace the messiness of the biblical text” (p. 209).

However, the plausibility of Vaughn’s constructive effort is weakened by conceptual slippage. His use of “impurity” illustrates this. While, as noted above, Vaughn acknowledges that impurity does not provoke God’s ire (p. 70), he later suggests that impure people need protection from the divine anger that would otherwise fall on them (p. 74). Failing to distinguish carefully between “ritual” and “moral” impurity (or equivalent descriptors) leads to problems elsewhere. Vaughn claims the rite of Leviticus 14:19–20 atones for sin (p. 97) even though the context is the purification of major ritual impurity. He also avers that sacrifice is obligated to remove the debt of pollution (p. 148) even though most ritual impurity is ameliorated without sacrifice (i.e., by washing and/or waiting), and the impurity generated by grievous immoral acts like idolatry had no sacrificial remedy. Other themes and proposed connections similarly require more careful articulation for his proposal to be compelling.

*The Cross in Context* indicates the kind of work required to construct a robust doctrine of Christ's atonement which remains faithful to the conceptual landscape of the biblical texts. It is not an easy task. While I do not agree with all the conclusions he proposes, I hope that the generous spirit Vaughn calls for and models can set the benchmark for a more sensible discussion.

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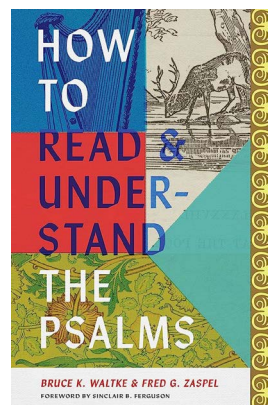
Bruce K. Waltke and Fred G. Zaspel. *How to Read and Understand the Psalms*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023. 608 pp. £34.99/\$49.99.

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*How to Read and Understand the Psalms* is essentially the content of Waltke's lectures on the Psalms at BiblicalTraining.org written up by Zaspel (p. xvii), although there is a substantial amount of additional material (p. xviii). The book offers a broad introduction to the Psalms in chapters 1–2. Chapters 3–14 first engage in various aspects of studying the Psalms and then work through the prominent genres of psalms. The final chapter (ch. 15) addresses the most recent development in Psalms scholarship: canonical shape. It is the gleanings of Waltke's teaching on the Psalms across his career presented by Zaspel. My expectations were high.

Initially, I was slightly underwhelmed. First, although clearly based on a lifetime of serious study in the Scriptures, *How to Read and Understand the Psalms* does not evidence such by way of footnotes. Despite an impressive bibliography, references are sparse throughout. If the book in its entirety evidenced its research as it does in the final chapter, its usefulness would have been much enhanced. Second, at first glance it looks like a comprehensive introduction or handbook on the psalms. But on reading the content it feels more like a pseudo-commentary. Almost half the psalms are addressed with some form of commentary, but the commentary is necessarily restricted. Equally, just over half of the psalms have no commentary. Third, I fear *How to Read and Understand the Psalms* will not receive the wide readership it deserves. It is evidently written in a way to make scholarship accessible at the lay level, but the lay people I know are not going to read a 600-page book.

Nevertheless, I thoroughly enjoyed *How to Read and Understand the Psalms*. Moreover, many features commend this book. To begin, Waltke offers a wonderful defense of Davidic authorship of the Psalms (pp. 38–46). Chapter 4's emphasis on the royal orientation of the Psalter lays "a firm foundation for a Christological interpretation of the Psalms" (p. 81). The material on Hebrew poetry, and particularly parallelism, is excellent (pp. 133–43). Two of the appendices are useful reprints of material Waltke has published elsewhere. I was particularly pleased to find "A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms" reprinted here as it can be difficult to source in its original publication. It was equally helpful to see so much of the biblical text reproduced in the discussion—and while this inevitably added to the book's length, it ensured the reader engaged with more than merely Waltke and Zaspel's words. Above all, the example of how to move from the Psalms to Christ was instructive and enriching. Commenting on Psalm 15, for example, the reader is pointed to Christ in this way:



But it has a canonical function also, pointing ahead to David's greater Son who alone has perfectly satisfied these covenant requirements. He is the one in whom God is well pleased (Matt. 3:17). Nothing less than his perfect obedience and sacrifice for his people can secure the eternal inviolability in God's presence this psalm envisions, and this perfect obedience is just what we have in union with Christ. Yet this psalm reminds us that in Christ we have not only justification, acceptance, but also transformation of life, apart from which our worship is unacceptable. (p. 429)

Praise YHWH!

For whom, then, is this book most useful? In the first instance, I think it best serves educators as it provides a rich array of examples to employ in class when teaching on various aspects of the Psalms. I will certainly refer to it in preparation for my teaching. Two further groups of people may also benefit from it: pastors and scholars. For pastors, *How to Read and Understand the Psalms* may prove beneficial in preparation for a sermon series on the Psalms. Similar information, however, can be gleaned in far fewer pages from Geoffrey Grogan's *Prayer, Praise and Prophecy: A Theology of the Psalms* (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2009) or Mark Futato's *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook*, ed. David M. Howard (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2007), for example. Furthermore, commentaries on the Psalms will offer more depth than the commentary contained here. For scholars who desire to read something that is personally stimulating and robustly researched, this book is most suitable.

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## — NEW TESTAMENT —

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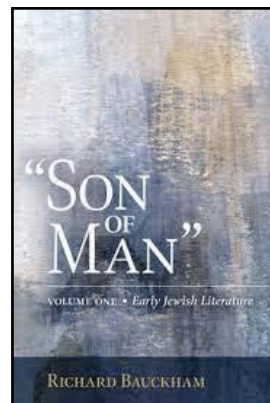
Richard Bauckham. *"Son of Man": Volume 1: Early Jewish Literature*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023. xiii + 433 pp. £35.99/\$44.99.

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Richard Bauckham, professor emeritus at St Andrews and well-known New Testament scholar, offers the reader the first volume of a two-volume work exploring the significance of the phrase "Son of Man." In this first volume, he explores early Jewish literature pertaining to the phrase in question.

In the introduction, Bauckham notes the connections commonly drawn by scholars between the use of the phrase "son of man" in the Gospels and its use in Dan 7:13 and the Parables of Enoch. Given that "a few of the sayings of Jesus undoubtedly allude to [Dan 7:13]," and "in the whole of Second Temple Jewish literature the phrase 'son of man' is used with reference to a messianic figure only in [the Parables of Enoch]" (p. 2), it is apropos for Bauckham to focus on the Parables of Enoch (part 1) and the Jewish reception of Daniel 7 in the Second Temple Period (part 2).

Bauckham addresses introductory matters surrounding the Parables of Enoch (hereafter, Parables) in the first section of part 1. Some highlights from the trenchant discussions in part 1 and 2 will give the





reader a sense of Bauckham's work. The Parables are part of larger collection of books written in Ethiopic and translated from Greek with a possible Aramaic or Hebrew origin known in English scholarship as "Ethiopic Enoch or 1 Enoch" (p. 7). Bauckham makes the case that, of the books contained in 1 Enoch, the Parables have the closest connection to "the Book of Watchers," which he sees as "a new version" (p. 14) of this earlier work.

The second section of part 1 addresses the role of the "Son of Man" in the Parables. Here, Bauckham retracts his earlier position that the Parables represent an exception in early Jewish literature by portraying the Son of Man as receiving the same worship that God receives. Additionally, Bauckham sees this volume as answering Fletcher-Louis's challenge for New Testament scholars to engage more thoroughly with "the findings of the Enoch Seminar" (p. 25). Turning to the content of the Parables, he argues, based on the grammar of the Parables, that the phrase "Son of Man" is not a title but rather equivalent in meaning to "'man' or 'human'" (p. 35).

Later, in section three (part 1), he makes the case that the Parables present the messianic figure as judging "the kings and mighty" (p. 68) on an earthly throne that is distinct from the heavenly throne from which God judges. Regarding the question of the preexistence of the messianic figure, Bauckham argues that there is not a hint of something beyond a human origin for the figure. Rather, the figure is identified as Enoch. In summary, based on his reading of the Parables, the "Son of Man" (= man) is thoroughly human and thus any appearance of worship is merely "obeisance ... before a person of superior status" (p. 111).

With the second part, Bauckham's goal is not to offer an exegesis of Daniel 7, since this "could too easily prejudice the study of later Jewish interpretations of the text," which would also fail to recognize the ways in which "ancient interpreters... diverge considerably from the approach of modern scholars" (p. 135). Here, Bauckham gives attention to such ancient interpretations as the Greek versions of Daniel 7 (§2.2), 4QAramaic Apocalypse (a.k.a., 4Q246; §2.3), 4 Ezra (§2.5), as well as the absence of Daniel 7 in the works of Josephus (a.k.a., 4Q246; §2.10).

Some of the interpretations of Daniel 7 in this literary corpus that are surveyed within this section include: (1) connecting the figure of Dan 7:13–14 with "the leader of the people in the new exodus" (p. 187, 4Q246); (2) seeing "the future Davidic king" as "the key actor (besides God)" (p. 191) in the eschatological scenario of 4Q246; (3) joining the Messiah with Enoch and Elijah as exalted to heaven while being thoroughly human and later performing an "eschatological role" (p. 253; 4 Ezra); and, distinct from these views, the return of David himself (not a descendant) as the Messiah (p. 319; Rabbi Aqiva).

Bauckham's study in part 2 can be summarized thus: the "Son of Man" in the majority of Jewish interpretation of Daniel 7 was thoroughly human, though dwelling in heaven only to return to execute his messianic role, usually in connection with the "Davidic hope" (p. 374). Strikingly, based on his findings, he writes, "It is hard to believe that anyone in late Second Temple times could have recognized the phrase 'Son of Man' as an allusion to Daniel 7:13" (p. 374).

To conclude, a short review simply cannot do justice to this book. Bauckham offers a penetrating exploration of early Jewish literature pertaining to the "Son of Man" phrase that furthers our understanding both of Jewish messianism and the Parables of Enoch. One minor stylistic quibble can be mentioned: why, in such a large work, did he divide it into sections rather than chapters? While one can anticipate some ways that he will apply his findings to the Gospels, this reader is very much interested

in seeing what insights we will find from Bauckham's pen in volume 2 and in what ways he will challenge and refine earlier scholarship on the phrase in question.

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Jonathan Bernier. *Rethinking the Dates of the New Testament: The Evidence for Early Composition*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022. xvii + 318 pp. £20.99/\$29.99.

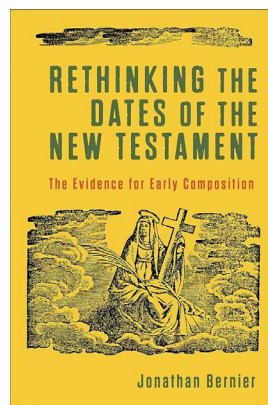
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Few issues are as germane to the historical study of the New Testament as the question, "When was this written?" Yet perhaps no other issue is so irreducibly complex and fraught with controversy in the modern scholarly guild. Answering the question with integrity requires careful evaluation of both internal and external evidence and involves nailing one's colors to the mast on a whole range of historical matters. For precisely this reason, overly ambitious PhD students are frequently advised by their (much wiser) supervisors not to even think about touching issues of dating as a dissertation topic. But later in their careers, many scholars—both conservative and critical—still simply parrot dates gleaned from a New Testament introduction. Not since J. A. T. Robinson's *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976), almost fifty years ago, has there been a full-length, comprehensive treatment of the dates of the NT writings.

In this bombshell of a book, Jonathan Bernier aims both to fill the gap in the secondary literature and, more generally, to overturn the scholarly apple cart. In an improvement on Robinson, Bernier offers a methodologically rigorous synthetic assessment of the relevant evidence for each NT book and four early Christian writings (1 Clement, Didache, Shepherd of Hermas, and the Epistle of Barnabas), and strikingly, like Robinson so many decades before, he argues that the balance of evidence suggests most of the NT texts were composed between 40 and 70 CE.

In a substantial introduction, Bernier surveys his methodology, organizing data according to authorial biography (situating a book in relation to relevant details known about the author's life), synchronization (positioning a text relative to other texts or events—e.g., the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE), and contextualization (the tricky task of fitting a writing within a particular developmental framework of early Christianity). Bernier then arranges the book into five sections by corpus: 1) the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, 2) the Johannine writings, 3) the Pauline corpus, 4) Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles, and 5) early extracanonical writings. As Bernier progresses through the relevant data, he frequently summarizes his conclusions and offers steadily more detailed timelines (the number of summarizing charts, however, is excessive and could have been scaled back). Bernier concludes with a comprehensive timeline and a few suggestions where further work needs to be done.

Positively, Bernier writes with clarity, charity, and balance. While the cumulative force of his argument is nothing less than iconoclastic, his individual judgments are typically judicious and restrained. He rarely makes extreme or illogical claims, and he nearly always provides a range of dates for composition. Indeed, one of my biggest takeaways was coming to grips with just how little probative evidence is



actually available. If nothing else, Bernier has categorically demonstrated that many assertions about dating are based upon slender shreds of evidence.

At the same time, the controversial nature of the subject matter ensures that a book like this will stir up no little discussion (a good thing!). In what follows, I will interact with just a couple of Bernier's conclusions where they touch on my own interests.

In his chapters on the Synoptic Gospels, Bernier concludes that the most likely relative compositional sequence consists of Mark (42–45 CE), followed by Matthew (45–59 CE), then Luke (59 CE). If indeed the sequence of Mark–Matthew–Luke is accurate, one wonders whether these timescales are sufficient (on the Farrer Hypothesis) to allow for the transmission of Mark to the Matthean Evangelist, the composition of Matthew, and its subsequent transmission and incorporation into the Gospel of Luke. And despite the potential implications for chronology, Bernier appears to dismiss the possibility of Matthean posteriority in just one sentence on pp. 37–38, though he does soften that conclusion with some equivocation on p. 80 (“it could have been written as late as 70”). More importantly, Bernier's very early dating of Mark requires him to reinterpret or write off patristic testimony which appears to link Mark's Gospel to Peter's (and Paul's) “departure,” a term which most naturally refers to death (see pp. 76–77). While his attempt to construct a plausible case in this section is often intriguing, at times his conclusions feel forced.

Likewise, in his chapters on the General Epistles Bernier makes several curious judgment calls. Two examples will suffice. First, he refuses to adjudicate the relation of James to the Synoptic Gospels (p. 197), despite the near-universal recognition in recent scholarship of James's widespread use of Jesus traditions. This reluctance is nigh-inexcusable given his early dating of Matthew. If Matthew was composed ca. 47 CE, it could quite plausibly serve as a literary source of Jesus traditions for James (which Bernier argues was composed prior to 62 CE). This solution would elegantly resolve a longstanding conundrum in Jamesian studies. In contrast to his earlier reticence, in the very next chapter Bernier (unexpectedly?) relies on a single study by Ora Foster (“The Literary Relations of ‘the First Epistle of Peter’: With Their Bearing on Date and Place of Authorship,” *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 17 [1913]: 363–538) to posit the literary dependence of 1 Peter on Romans and Ephesians (pp. 214–15). Not only does Bernier not acknowledge that significant arguments were raised by John Elliott and others later in the twentieth century for 1 Peter's independence from “Pauline bondage” (cf. Elliott, “The Rehabilitation of an Exegetical Step-Child: 1 Peter in Recent Research,” *JBL* 95 [1976]: 243–54) but he also overlooks the much more recent work of David Horrell (*Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity*, LNTS 394 [London: T&T Clark, 2013]) and Travis Williams (“Intertextuality and Methodological Bias: Prolegomena to the Evaluation of Source Materials in 1 Peter,” *JSNT* 39 [2016]: 1–19), who offer a renewed case for Petrine dependence on Paul.

These critiques aside, there is no doubt that Bernier has done the academic guild a service by mounting a consistent and thorough-going defense of a low/early chronology for the composition of the NT. Future scholarly treatments of dating will have to engage this work and give its arguments due consideration.

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Caleb T. Friedeman. *The Revelation of the Messiah: The Christological Mystery of Luke 1–2 and its Unveiling in Luke-Acts*. Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 181. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. xvii + 273 pp. £75.00/\$99.99.

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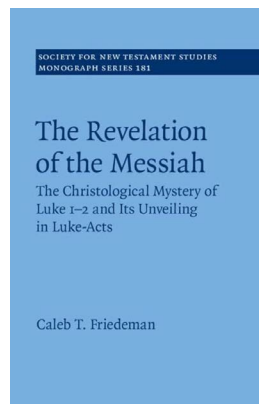
After surveying the four ways that the Christology of Luke 1–2 has been related to the rest of Luke-Acts (p. 11), such as a nondivine Christology or divine Christology, the author's thesis is that "Luke presents the first two chapters of his Gospel as a christological mystery" (p. 11) which is unveiled both for the reader and the human characters in the narrative as the story unfolds. In the first, introductory chapter, Friedeman discusses various methodological convictions that drive his study, including his views regarding the unity of Luke-Acts, Luke's Christology, and, drawing from Richard B. Hays's work, the nature of Luke's use of Scripture.

The second chapter gives a literary glance at Luke 1–2 and, from this discussion, the author concludes that "Luke presents his first two chapters as an account of divinely inspired speech... by angels and human revelatory agents" (p. 26), with such speech entailing more than the speakers realized. The third chapter builds on the tentative conclusion of the second chapter by giving special attention to Luke's use of OT Scriptures and an exegesis of Luke's narrational account in Luke 1–2, arguing that Luke offers a "veiled divine Christology" (p. 91).

With chapter four, Friedeman focuses on Luke's use of Daniel and argues that Daniel provides a framework for understanding the significance of "the inspired words and surrounding events of Luke 1–2" (p. 126) as initially partially hidden but later revealed. The aim of chapter five is to further substantiate the book's thesis by turning to Luke 2:19 and 2:51 as key texts, exploring further Danielic allusions along the way. Chapter six applies Friedeman's findings to the remainder of Luke-Acts. Of special note here is the author's argument that Jesus's divine identity is fully unveiled in Luke 24:45. Chapter seven concludes the book by summarizing Friedeman's findings and offering possible implications of his study for New Testament studies in general and specific items such as Luke's relationship to Matthew, Luke's historiographical integrity, and the origins of divine Christology.

Beyond the fact that Friedeman, in our view, persuasively demonstrates his thesis, building on previous scholarship and thus contributing to our overall understanding of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, there are a number of hermeneutical and exegetical insights that characterize this work. Friedeman avoids the pitfalls of earlier approaches to the Christology of Luke 1–2, especially an oversimplified reading of Luke's intentions, by paying sufficient attention to the literary and narrative features of Luke 1–2 and the authorial intent of Luke in his portrayal of the shape of Luke's gospel and Luke's use of the OT.

In his discussion, for instance, of Zechariah's prophecy in Luke 1:69–79, he makes note of the interpretative tension expressed by Bock, Marshall, and Fitzmyer, who are "caught between the rock of Luke's narrative," which is pointing toward "the Lord" as "both divine and Jesus," and the "hard place of historical verisimilitude" (p. 74) which deems Zechariah's perception of Jesus's divine lordship as historically anachronistic. Friedeman's solution is that, from the side of God's intention, "John ...



precedes the divine Lord Jesus” (p. 74), whereas from Zechariah’s perspective, John goes before the Davidic Messiah who is representative of God as his agent.

Moreover, Friedeman’s description of Mary’s role in Luke-Acts is fascinating. To begin with, upon noting the various and conflicting ways that interpreters have understood Luke 2:19 and 2:51, he argues that the plural form of ῥῆμα in these verses combined with the fact that, in 2:19, Mary preserved (συντηρέω) them—language which Friedeman takes as an allusion to Dan 7:28—points to Mary’s unique role in Luke 1–2 as preserving “the divine revelation in the preceding narrative” and, by implication, “the content of the entire preceding narrative” (p. 173). Further, he makes the intriguing case that, even though Mary’s role diminishes throughout the remainder of the Luke-Acts, initially she is portrayed as “a paradigmatic Israelite” (p. 210) and, although in light of such texts as Luke 2:48–50 and 8:19–21 she has to wrestle with the revelation of Christ like everyone else, Friedeman interprets Acts 1:14 as placing Mary “in an ideal position to communicate openly the revelation that she has for so long preserved in secret” (p. 224).

To conclude, by peeling back the various interpretive layers underlying Luke 1–2 and, by implication, Luke-Acts as a whole, Friedeman offers penetrating insight into Luke’s two-part work, which will prove exemplary for students of Luke-Acts as Friedeman navigates complex hermeneutic and exegetical issues, and will contribute to scholarly discussion and understanding as he effectively clears away ways that earlier interpreters have missed the mark.

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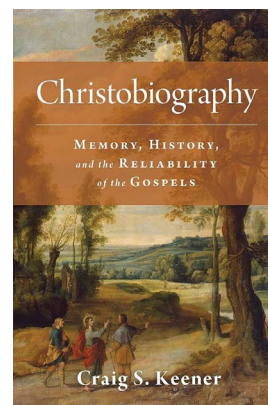
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Craig S. Keener. *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019. xxix + 713 pp. \$61.99.

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Few books have been as exciting to receive as *Christobiography*, whose contents might best be described as staking out a middling position between Michael R. Licona’s *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), and Robert K. McIver’s *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011). Keener brings together the related issues of oral Jesus tradition, memory, and the Gospels as biographies. The only other study I am aware of that might be comparable to this is Michael F. Bird’s *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), which, rather than focusing on Jesus tradition and the Gospels as biographies, focused more on Jesus tradition and the Synoptic problem. But both are concerned with pre-Gospel tradition and how memory and orality shaped Jesus traditions in the Gospels, and they do so in complementary ways.

*Christobiography* is not Keener’s first foray into ancient *bioi*. Together with Edward T. Wright, Keener edited and contributed to the book *Biographies and Jesus: What Does It Mean for the Gospels to Be Biographies?* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2016). Keener also supervised a 2018 dissertation by Youngju Kwon, in which the author carefully examined Jesus traditions and Greco-Roman biographies.



What sets *Christobiography* apart from existing studies on ancient biography, memory, or orality in New Testament studies is its scope and depth. In traditional Keener style, pages 27–364 exhaustively review and update recent discussion of the Gospels as ancient biographies, tackling new concerns not previously emphasized, such as an audience’s expectations (pp. 121–49). While some of this material on ancient biographies may be more familiar to students of the New Testament, Keener’s later section provides one of the more integrative and thorough treatments of personal memory, social memory, and oral Jesus tradition presently available (pp. 365–496). For example, while Samuel Byrskog (*Story as History, History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History*, WUNT 123 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000]) or Richard Bauckham (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017]) have focused heavily on personal memory, and James D. G. Dunn on communal memory (*Jesus Remembered* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003]), Keener’s approach is more integrative, discussing both at once. He discusses “the collective memory of the eyewitnesses,” noting that “their memories [the eyewitnesses] ... would interact and would be pooled in the community’s shared memory” (pp. 409). Keener’s work in this regard may be seen as similar to that of McIver (noted above) or Eric Eve (*Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014]; *Writing the Gospels: Compositions and Memory* [London: SPCK, 2016]), but McIver and Eve only treated these topics in a serial manner (Eve does, however, provide a chapter on memory and ancient writing that integrates the two), and existing studies have not yet included treatment of ancient biography.

In a day of mass academic publishing routinely leading to the usual repetition of existing ideas, Keener still manages to provide readers with fresh and creative insights such as the following: (a) giving ancient testimony about memory and orality a place at the table in their present discussions (pp. 387–88, 390–92, 402–7, 414, 417–20, 422–37, 438–44); (b) providing an extensive examination of ancient Jewish memory and memory in ancient Greco-Roman education (pp. 423–32); and (c) contouring the concern for illiteracy through the prism of ancient memory (pp. 437–44). Keener further provides clear and positive definitions for many of the discussion pieces, such as explaining the kinds of memories that are often preserved (pp. 393–97) or characterizing the shape of genuine memories (pp. 444–48).

Keener’s ability to situate these discussions within their ancient context is provided in a manner that only a careful scholar of ancient history like Keener can manage. Additionally, Keener is very good at balancing studies that tend toward one pole or another, which in memory discussion typically centers on the reliability question. Keener is careful not to over-estimate the reliability of memory (pp. 373–83, 370–71, 407–9), while also reluctant to chase examples of memory distortion toward nihilist conclusions (pp. 411–12). This results in some hesitation about verbatim agreement (pp. 385–90) and some preference for gist memory (pp. 378–79, 386–87, 400, 465–69).

The only faults remotely intimated in an otherwise perfect book are Keener’s neglect of Travis M. Derico’s book, *Oral Tradition and Synoptic Verbal Agreement: Evaluating the Empirical Evidence for Literary Dependence* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2017), in his discussion of verbatim agreement, and the many supporting examples and studies Derico provides, challenging accepted views on the degree of verbal agreement achievable among oral tradents. Second and last, Keener does not clearly explain why he treats biography together with pre-Gospel considerations, nor does he explain their relationship with one another. However, Keener does state that he aims to provide a foundation for future considerations of these topics (pp. 20–21), and in this regard *Christobiography* is decidedly successful.

As is always the case, Keener’s work portrays the ideal qualities for any researcher, including a remarkably objective and personally unobtrusive discourse that only ever invites trust from the reader,

as well as the marks of a sobering and genuine humility. Although Keener has much to boast of, what one always finds in his work is a gentleness akin to Augustine's *Confessions*.

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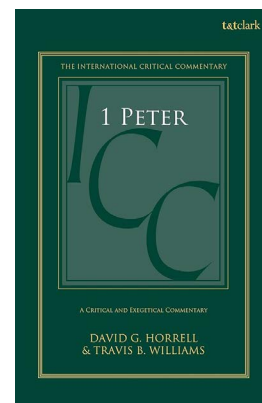
Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell. *1 Peter Volume 1: Chapters 1–2*. International Critical Commentary. London: T&T Clark, 2023. 853 pp. £80.00/\$110.00.

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Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell. *1 Peter Volume 2: Chapters 3–5*. International Critical Commentary. London: T&T Clark, 2023. 816 pp. £80.00/\$110.00.

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Travis Williams and David Horrell are perhaps the two most qualified individuals to write a critical exegetical commentary on 1 Peter. Horrell was Williams's *Doktorvater* at the University of Exeter and the two collaborated for a full decade to write this commentary. During that time, Horrell has supervised many other doctoral students (some of whom have gone on to revise their theses for publication in such prestigious series as LNTS and SNTSMS), and both he and Williams have published numerous peer-reviewed articles and monographs on 1 Peter. In this commentary, the authors built on the foundation of these studies and conducted robust research in relevant scholarly literature in English, French, German, and Spanish. This comprehensive commentary on 1 Peter thus deserves a wide welcome, especially among Primopetrine scholars but also among New Testament scholars in general.



The introduction alone is monograph-length and exhaustive on its covered topics (1:1–297). From the beginning, the scholarly value of this commentary is apparent. Williams and Horrell first survey cutting-edge text criticism to establish their method for determining the text of 1 Peter for their commentary (1:2–20). They adopt the recent Coherent-Based Genealogical Method (CGBM) of text criticism, and they critically engage the *Editio Critica Maior* (based on the CGBM), which distinguishes this 1 Peter commentary from others. Indeed, one of the many strengths of this commentary is its lengthy discussion of text critical matters in each text unit of 1 Peter. This commentary is the most thorough resource for people conducting text criticism of 1 Peter to consult.

Williams and Horrell also devote significant space in the introduction to “sources, traditions, and affinities” of 1 Peter (1:37–85). They follow a robust methodology for identifying “literary dependence in 1 Peter,” based on explicit reference; external plausibility; authorial tendency; recurrence; verbal agreement; and level, number, and type of similarities (1:40–42). Williams and Horrell agree with most scholars that 1 Peter is dependent on many passages of the Old Testament, and they affirm that 1 Peter is also dependent on Jesus Tradition. Against most modern scholars, they also find that dependence on some Pauline literature is likely. Regarding the affinities between James and 1 Peter, they conclude that most likely, “the letter of James borrowed from 1 Peter” (1:80). Finally, they consider Hebrews and 1 Peter not to have “a literary connection” (1:83).

For most of the introduction, Williams and Horrell construct an argument for the historical setting of 1 Peter, covering the date of writing, authorship, and recipients (1:100–265). In these sections of

the introduction, their social-scientific critical standpoint is evident. External evidence for the date of 1 Peter precedes discussion of internal (and external) evidence for the authorship of 1 Peter. Williams and Horrell conclude that 70 CE is “the earliest possible date at which 1 Peter could be written,” with 70–95 CE “as the approximate period” of composition (1:115). With Peter’s death dated to Nero’s persecution of Christians in the 60s CE, apostolic authorship of this letter seems impossible even before Williams and Horrell evaluate the evidence in its favor. Readers, then, should not be surprised when Williams and Horrell conclude, “the epistle seems to be a pseudonymous work written sometime after the death of the apostle, which someone attempted to pass off as an actual letter from Peter” (1:162). They “tentatively incline to origins in Asia Minor” as the provenance of 1 Peter itself, “with the letter *depicted* as originating in Rome” (1:196). With most modern scholars, they consider the recipients of 1 Peter to be mostly Gentile Christians. Consistent with previously published scholarship on the nature of the audience’s suffering, Williams and Horrell maintain that this suffering spanned the spectrum of possibilities: from informal “verbal accusation from outsiders” and “physical punishment and abuse, especially from slaveowners and husbands” to formal “judicial punishments, including torture and potentially execution” (1:265).

Throughout the commentary on 1 Peter itself, the authors prove themselves to be even-handed, erudite exegetes. Williams and Horrell repeatedly follow the evidence for making exegetical decisions, even if they must be against current scholarly consensus. They interpret ἀγαλλιᾶσθε in 1 Pet 1:6, 8 as a present indicative in form that functions as a future indicative (1:377–85, 407–9). Regarding the interpretive cruxes in 1 Pet 3:18–4:6, Williams and Horrell make a monograph-length case that Jesus preached the gospel to dead people sometime between His death and His ascension to the right hand of God (2:185–357, esp. 235–41, 344–55). They defend the majority position that Διὰ Σιλουανοῦ... ἔγραψα (1 Pet 5:12) portrays Silvanus as the letter’s courier, not the author’s amanuensis (2:612–26), in part against Craig Keener’s counter-arguments in his 2021 commentary (2:619 n. 47). Though no one will agree with Williams and Horrell’s exegesis of 1 Peter at every point, their exegesis is robust and will require thorough counterarguments to overturn.

Though this commentary is overall coherent and comprehensive, it is nevertheless imperfect, like any other publication. The many years over which this commentary was written and its collaborative nature are occasionally, unfortunately apparent. Williams and Horrell initially interpret τίνα in 1 Pet 1:11 “as a substantival interrogative pronoun (‘what person’)” (1:420). However, they later interpret τίνα as “function[ing] like an attributive adjective modifying καιρόν” (1:427). Williams and Horrell acknowledge, “This stands in contrast to a previous publication in which the ‘two-question’ hypothesis was espoused,” but they now “conclude that ... the ‘time-only’ view appears to have slightly more to commend it” (1:427 n. 375). More than in a previous publication, though, Williams and Horrell endorse the “two-question” view merely seven pages before rejecting it! They are also inconsistent in their interpretation of the noun πρόγνωσις in 1 Pet 1:2 and its cognate verb, προγινώσκω, in 1:20. The topic—whether in nominal or verbal form—is God’s foreknowledge. Williams and Horrell conclude that God’s foreknowledge implies foreordination in 1:2 (1:320–21) but that it does not in 1:20 (1:523–25).

Certain critical aspects of this commentary will be more concerning to conservative evangelical scholars. Williams and Horrell deny that their rejection of the apostolic authorship of 1 Peter is based on a predisposition toward pseudonymity (1:162 n. 571). However, their discussion of the date of 1 Peter before the letter’s authorship and their identification of 2 Thessalonians as another “likely ... pseudepigraphon”—an increasingly uncommon claim among even some critical Pauline scholars—



suggest otherwise (1:177). They also stand over (rather than under) the biblical text at various points in 1 Peter, especially in their comments on 1 Pet 3:1–7 (2:64–65, 75, 77) and on 1 Pet 5:1–5 (2:553). As noted above, Williams and Horrell exhibit a willingness to go against modern scholarship at some points, but when discussing hierarchical relationships, they adopt the spirit of the age and consider it impossible that certain hierarchies may be divinely ordained or even good for people cross-culturally. Finally, the authors caution readers not to find teaching regarding God’s final judgment of unrepentant sinners from within 1 Peter (2:115, 357, 493).

Despite these rare inconsistencies in interpretation and a critical perspective that produces some objectionable conclusions, Williams and Horrell have done all Primopetrine scholars a great service by writing this two-volume commentary on 1 Peter. It is most comprehensive and will set the standard for scholarly study in 1 Peter for years to come. Every library of theological higher education should procure it for students’ and faculties’ use. New Testament scholars, as able, should also prioritize purchasing this treasure trove of scholarship. The high price of each volume unfortunately makes this work inaccessible to most pastors, but if paperback or electronic versions are released, even pastors should avail themselves of this resource for the way its authors mine the original meaning of 1 Peter. Understandably lacking indices, this commentary would be even more useful in Bible software format, for scholars and pastors alike.

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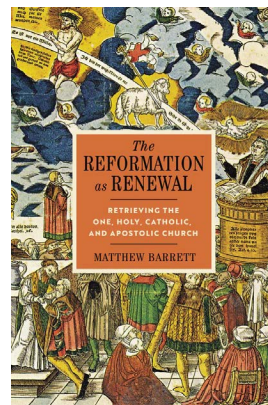
## — HISTORY AND HISTORICAL THEOLOGY —

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Matthew Barrett. *The Reformation as Renewal: Retrieving the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023. 1,008 pp. £25.99/\$59.99.

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In this impressive volume, Matthew Barrett has done readers a great service. He has summarized massive amounts of Reformation and early modern research with the goals of combating stereotypes and negative assessments of the Reformation, as well as demonstrating that the sixteenth-century reformers were not trying to start a new church but were self-consciously claiming a connection and inspiration, from the early church, the ecumenical creeds, and the best of medieval thought. Barrett has scoured numerous sources, doing the heavy lifting that most of us do not have time for. But this book is not just a summary of other research—in many instances, Barrett charts his own path, correcting or disagreeing with various scholars and interpretations. While Barrett does not claim to do original research, he connects many themes and figures across time periods and even theological disciplines, producing a volume that should be helpful for a wide readership.



Barrett is a professor of Christian theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and has distinguished himself as an interpreter of classical Christian theology, especially in the area of Trinitarian theology (with his *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* [Grand

Rapids: Baker Books, 2021], among other volumes). Now, he takes that same concern to retrieve the best of church history and the Great Tradition and demonstrates that this was a key concern of the sixteenth-century Reformers as well.

A subtitle of the book is “An Intellectual and Theological History.” It spans the Medieval period to the Counter (or Catholic) Reformation. Barrett begins with a deep dive into Medieval theology. This is important for several reasons. First, he engages with the theological creativity of the supposedly “dark ages” and highlights the high level of theological development and sophistication that was achieved in this period. Secondly, he explains how the Reformers, especially Martin Luther, were reacting to late medieval developments in a certain type of Scholasticism, namely the *via moderna* movement. So, when Luther and other Reformers rejected the “scholastics,” they were really rejecting a narrow school of scholastic thought, which was not representative of the best of medieval thought. Thirdly, Barrett concludes that the Reformers were indebted to medieval theology in many respects. This helps us see the Reformation as a logical and perhaps necessary development in church history rather than an abrupt rejection of everything that came before it. Barrett supplies ample proof that the Reformers saw themselves as reclaiming the catholicity of the church, a catholicity founded on the Bible but in conformity and continuity with the earlier creeds, councils, and teachings of the church fathers.

To his credit, Barrett does a superb job of letting each thinker and theologian speak for themselves. Even when he clearly disagrees with someone (like Gabriel Biel), he articulates Biel’s position carefully and saves his analysis for later. When reading his summary of Luther, I thought Barrett might secretly be a Lutheran, and likewise for his treatment of other theologians. This objectivity and letting sources speak for themselves is something more scholars should strive for.

In a book this size, there are bound to be shortcomings. The text was, unfortunately, marred by quite a few typos, although they were minor and did not affect any of the book’s main points. Additionally, at times, the narrative was too focused on the details of individual lives and events. For instance, it was not clear if it was necessary to recount so many details about the life of St. Anselm in order to summarize the main points of his theology. Sometimes, the book turned into a historical theology, dwelling on the details and nuances of various theologies and thinkers, only to return back to the main point of arguing for the catholicity of the Reformation. It gave the impression that Barrett was writing two books at the same time: one, a historical theology, and the other, a more focused argument for the catholicity of the Reformation. However, given the general historical amnesia of contemporary American evangelicals, I appreciate his attempt to tell the story of medieval theology in particular and show its continuities with Reformation theology.

Overall, this is a superb accomplishment and a labor of love. This book will be useful for students, interested readers, and even for established scholars. Barrett loves the Reformation and the Reformers while honestly admitting the shortcomings of both. This book should energize a new generation of scholars to take up the task of renewing the church by retrieving the legacy of the truly catholic tradition, thereby continuing and extending the legacy of the sixteenth-century Reformers.

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Joel R. Beeke and Michael Reeves, *Following God Fully: An Introduction to the Puritans*. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2019. 168 pp. £22.99/\$20.00.

Beeke and Reeves's *Following God Fully* was not written to create fresh interest in the Puritans: that interest has already existed since the 1950s when evangelical leaders such as D. M. Lloyd Jones (d. 1981) and his then-collaborator, J. I. Packer (d. 2020), began to draw attention to the neglected resources the Puritans had left us. There had been a similar Puritan resurgence in the first half of the nineteenth century. Even though that wave of renewed interest crested around 1870, it left as its legacy many of the editions which today appear in reprint. Avid readers in Southeast Asia and Africa are now hurrying to collect the Puritans just as British and American readers have been doing for decades. This now trans-national movement needs sober guidance and direction.

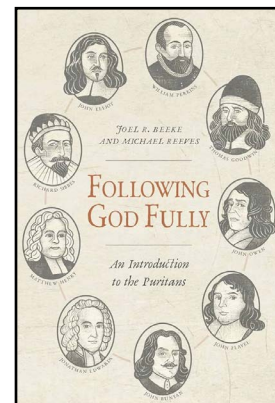
Beeke and Reeves aim to provide both a justification for this continuing attention to the Puritan movement and a kind of topography that introduces readers to Puritan leaders (spread across a century and a half) and the themes they preached. They are aware that other Puritan enthusiasts (Leland Ryken, J. I. Packer, Peter Lewis, and Errol Hulse) have attempted something like *Following God Fully* within recent memory. How distinctive is their new attempt? We can note a strength as well as a weakness.

The strength of *Following God Fully* is the sure-footedness of its theological summary, which is based on very extensive use of the Puritans' own writings. In part 2, we find helpful sketches of nine Puritan leaders (from William Perkins to Jonathan Edwards). In the following parts 3 through 6, we find succinct summaries of Puritan theological thought on all the main topics of Christian doctrine, Christian ethics, and Christian living. The book closes with part 7, which asks some worthwhile questions about a few possible extremes found in the Puritan movement and the proper application of Puritan teaching today. Regarding all this, we can commend the authors for achieving so much and so compactly.

But there is also a weakness in *Following God Fully*. It is an introduction to the theology of the Puritan era but can hardly claim to be an introduction to Puritanism as a movement. This shortcoming is evident especially in introductory part 1, "Who Were the Puritans?," which shows a lack of familiarity with the ongoing historical study of Puritanism. The reader will find occasional use of historians William Haller and Edmund S. Morgan, yet both writers (Americans) wrote pre-1950. The reviewer found one reference to Alan Carden (1990). The analysis provided is, therefore, dated when it need not have been.

Patrick Collinson, David D. Hall, Christopher Hill, Peter Lake, D. G. Mullan, and Dewey Wallace are just some of the major academic historians who have specialized in Puritan research in recent decades. None are mentioned in *Following God Fully*. Similarly, contemporary historians of Puritanism such as Chad Van Dixhoorn, John Coffey, Stephen Hampton, Kelly Kapic, Paul Lim, David P. Field, Graham Beynon, Crawford Gribben, and Robert Strivens—known for their openly Christian stance—are just as invisible. No writer of either type is included in the list of recommended authors provided at volume-end. Thus, in consequence, the historical section of *Following God Fully* represents a reiteration of what might be called "conventional wisdom" about Puritanism. But conventional wisdom frequently needs revision, and that is the reason for the ongoing research of the past half-century.

This book is a helpful introduction to Puritan theology and piety. But how can a curious reader begin to investigate the complex historical setting in which Puritanism arose and the conflicts in state





and church that shaped and eventually fragmented it? The reviewer can think of no better doorway into that parallel field of inquiry than the readily-available *Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), edited by John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim. The reader who will take up these two books in tandem will gain a valuable introduction both to Puritan theology and the movement which—having produced it—suffered fragmentation and eclipse.

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Jeremiah Coogan. *Eusebius the Evangelist: Rewriting the Fourfold Gospel in Late Antiquity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. 256 pp. £56.00/\$110.00.

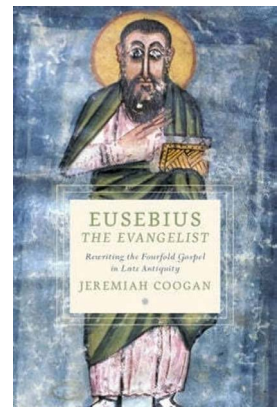
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An interesting recent development in the study of early Gospel scholarship is a renewed focus on the cross-reference system that fourth-century historian Eusebius innovated. This paratextual apparatus was designed to enable the close study of Gospel parallels (“horizontal reading”) while maintaining the narrative coherence of each individual account (“vertical reading”). In past generations, the significance of Eusebius’s reading aid would have been relegated to studies of historical theology. However, several helpful works have recently been published that provide a thorough orientation to the significance and reception of Eusebius’s canon tables.

For example, in *The Fourfold Gospel: A Theological Reading of the New Testament Portraits of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), Francis Watson briefly introduces the canon tables and shows their significance for navigating the unity and diversity of the canonical Gospels. In *The Eusebian Canon Tables: Ordering Textual Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), Matthew Crawford contextualizes Eusebius’s textual innovation and traces the reception history of the tables in several different manuscript traditions. In *Eusebius the Evangelist*, Jeremiah Coogan works in this stream of research but also interrogates several assumptions in previous studies.

Noting that the Eusebian apparatus quickly became “a standard feature of Gospel manuscripts and transformed subsequent Gospel reading,” Coogan observes that this cross-reference system “offers an invaluable window into the emergence of a fourfold Gospel and the late ancient transformation of textuality” (p. 3). Accordingly, Coogan structures his study around the publication technology that enabled the Eusebian apparatus (ch. 2, “Technology”), the social world of Gospel production in early Christianity (ch. 3, “Gospel Writing”), and the various effects of this paratextual device (chs. 4–5, “Creative Juxtaposition” and “Reading Eusebius’ Gospels”).

A key strength of Coogan’s work is its careful attention to the experience of readers who encounter the fourfold Gospel that bears the marks of Eusebius’s system. As Coogan notes, the design of numbered sections of text with corresponding columns that mark out textual parallels effectively guides readers “to discover similarity and difference in the fourfold Gospel” (p. 21; cf. pp. 97–114). Codex manuscripts that employ the Gospel apparatus also usually included a paratextual preface that disclosed Eusebius’s primary purpose in constructing his system (see Eusebius’s *Epistle to Carpianus*, pp. xiii–xvi). In this



preface, Eusebius conveys his aim to showcase parallels among Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, while also allowing a reader to maintain focus on an individual narrative at any given point.

Coogan thoroughly examines these features but also broadens the scope of his analysis to include the varied possibilities that the Eusebian system allowed. Drawing on the concept of “affordances,” Coogan notes that a material feature like the Gospel apparatus serves a particular purpose but is also open to further creative innovations among those who encounter and appropriate it in their reading of these biblical texts (see pp. 4–8, 28–42, 56–58). The possibilities that the canon tables afford can align with the original intention of the system but can also enable unanticipated functions (e.g., the use of the tables in artistic manuscript illuminations or as a general strategy for segmenting the text).

In this vein, Coogan considers some of the obvious connections that Eusebius makes in his tabular arrangement (e.g., the feeding of the five thousand) but also some of the surprising readings that are generated by juxtaposition within the same grouping. Coogan shows that in Eusebius’s thinking, these parallels are based on the notion of “similar things” (τὰ παραπλήσια) rather than “exact equivalence” or a perfect correspondence among the granular details of an event (pp. 100–2). This means that some of the parallels noted in the apparatus are based on conceptual resemblance or theological similarity in addition to verbal overlap.

For example, in Luke 22:32, Jesus tells Peter to strengthen his brothers after he returns from his betrayal of Jesus. In John 21, Jesus restores Peter and commands him to “feed [his] sheep” after his departure. Eusebius juxtaposes these passages and thus implicitly connects Peter’s threefold denial before the crucifixion in Luke’s account with Jesus’s threefold command after the resurrection. Interestingly, in this particular textual connection, Eusebius “shares an insight with modern scholars but articulates it differently” (p. 113 n. 63). Moreover, because the apparatus omits any kind of commentary, much textual analysis is still required in order to discern the significance of the paralleled passages. In these entries, Eusebius “juxtaposes similar material and lets the reader take it from there” (p. 107).

In this volume, Coogan draws upon and advances prior scholarship on the Eusebian canon tables. In doing so, Coogan successfully refutes two related positions of previous generations of scholarship: 1) that the canon tables are an unsophisticated primitive reference system and 2) that Eusebius devised them for the apologetic purpose of resolving historical contradictions in the Gospel narratives. Coogan’s work shows, on the contrary, that the Eusebian apparatus is a complex and coherent technological innovation and that Eusebius often prioritized thematic and theological correspondence in his textual groupings. Though his system did assist apologists defending the faith, it was primarily aimed at helping readers navigate the fourfold Gospel.

Some aspects of Coogan’s central thesis need further interrogation (primarily his contention that, in developing his cross-reference system, Eusebius is engaging in an act of Gospel [re]writing rather than Gospel reception). However, this pushback would entail considering further not the historical and interpretive value of this volume but rather the host of historiographical commitments currently being re-negotiated in the wake of the material turn in the study of early Christianity (which goes beyond the scope of this brief review!). Overall, this is an interesting and instructive volume that confirms the continuing vitality of scholarship on the Eusebian canon tables. Coogan’s work demonstrates through

meticulous analysis that Eusebius's apparatus had a formative effect on the reading of the fourfold Gospel in the fourth century and can still inform Gospel studies for anyone willing to put it to use.

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Collin Hansen. *Timothy Keller: His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023. 320 pp. £14.99/\$25.00.

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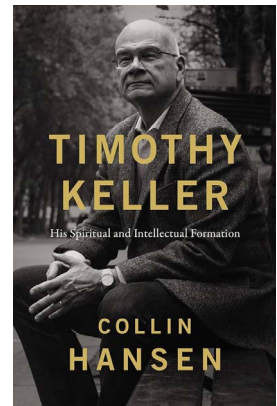
Collin Hansen's *Timothy Keller: His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation* is a book that defies comparison. Rather than a traditional biography, it is an attempt to explore the influences that shaped the well-known author, evangelist, and late pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. To accomplish this ambitious task, Hansen draws on his experience as a journalist, distilling dozens of interviews, deep background research, and hundreds of sources into an insightful introduction to one of the greatest preachers of his generation.

Organized in eighteen chapters divided chronologically into four parts (pre-seminary, seminary, early ministry, and Manhattan), Hansen introduces readers to Keller's childhood in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and his experiences as an undergraduate at Bucknell University and as a seminary faculty at Gordon-Conwell. Throughout, Hansen ably outlines the thoughts and writings of thinkers as diverse as J. R. R. Tolkien, Meredith Kline, and Richard Lovelace, as encountered by Keller during his formative years.

Those familiar only with Keller's ministry in Manhattan will doubtless be most surprised that three-quarters of the book deals with Keller's life before planting Redeemer. While many may be more interested in Hansen's analysis of recent events, the book has another purpose: not to evaluate Keller's influence but to examine Keller's influences. As Hansen notes at the book's conclusion, "Future generations will honor Keller better by reading his library than by quoting him" (p. 266). Hansen's book is thus an attempt not just to introduce readers to Keller but to the people who shaped him.

The greatest surprise of Keller's influences may be that his exposure to some of the modern authors most associated with him came relatively late in life. It was not until he was in his fifties that Keller began reading Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Philip Rieff, and Robert Bellah (p. 238). In fact, Keller never mentioned Charles Taylor in a sermon until 2013! However indelible their impact, their influence came later. Thus, discussion of them is reserved for the penultimate chapter of Hansen's book.

What other influences profoundly shaped Keller's early pastoral and theological development? Hansen mentions many, including the growing InterVarsity movement, the woman who introduced him to the inductive Bible-study method, and his stellar faculty at Gordon-Conwell. But the chief place must be reserved for the Puritans. Early on, Hansen documents what he calls Keller's "Puritan immersion" as a young pastor in Hopewell, Virginia, where he voraciously poured over Banner of Truth titles, including a careful line-by-line study through both volumes of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*. Keller read Thomas Brooks, Richard Sibbes, John Flavel, George Whitefield, Thomas Charnock, and John Owen (p. 123). In Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Keller saw a model of embodying the doctrinal richness of the Reformed tradition for the modern age (pp. 124–25).



The subtle but resounding implication of Hansen's study of Keller's theological influences is this: You do not become Timothy J. Keller by just reading sociological studies of postmodernity. These books certainly helped Keller make better sense of our age and how to better present the gospel to nonbelievers. But for Keller, these writers were always supplements, not substitutes, for the doctrinal foundations dug deep into his bones during his twenties and thirties.

Those looking to learn from Keller's success would do well to follow Keller's example. They should read Hansen's excellent book about Keller, but they should not stop there. They should read deeply in Calvin, Edwards, Owen, and the great foundations of the Reformed tradition. They should read widely in history, sociology, and literature, gleaning common-grace insights into our cultural conditions. And they should bring all of these influences to bear in freshly articulating the unchanging truths of Christianity for a modern age.

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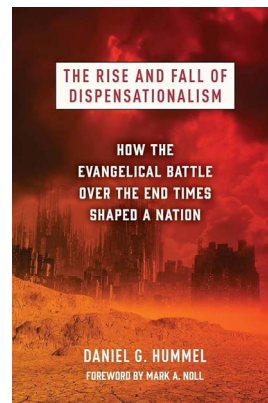
Daniel G. Hummel. *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle over the End Times Shaped a Nation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023. 400 pp. £24.99/\$29.99.

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It is gratifying for a reviewer to find that the volume in hand sheds light on his/her lived experience. The evangelical setting in which the reviewer was reared embodied a "soft," rather undogmatic expression of dispensationalism, the incessant themes of which were the any-moment return of Christ, the priority of foreign missions, and the futility of efforts to improve global affairs. Why look to the United Nations to achieve what only Christ's return could accomplish? Yet the term, "dispensationalism," was almost never uttered, and Scofield Bibles were rarely seen.

In the impressive landscape sketched by Daniel Hummel, certain things from a century ago become much clearer. Nineteenth-century evangelicals held no unified understanding of the Christian "last things" beyond an expectation of Christ's personal return to raise the dead and judge the world. But in post-Civil War America, one of the existing opinions (the historical premillennial view, which understood the book of Revelation to describe events occurring throughout church history preliminary to the second advent) was challenged by the importation of a variant premillennialism associated with the Irish clergyman, J. N. Darby, and the Exclusive Brethren. This variant, a "futurist" premillennialism, saw the book of Revelation as describing still-future events. It made a clear distinction between the kingdom of God (which remains still future on account of the Jewish rejection of Jesus as Messiah) and the kingdom of Heaven, which opens its gates in the here and now to all who believe. It maintained belief in a secret return of Christ from heaven to remove believers from this world prior to the troubles of a coming tribulation period.

This second view gradually won over a large proportion of those who held the older view, but not without a fight that divided fundamentalist ranks by the 1920s. Originally diffused from the American Upper Midwest, it came to be associated with Christian leaders in St. Louis, Chicago, and Minneapolis. In a popularized form, it was endorsed by figures such as D. L. Moody, who taught its main features



as he sought to unite post-Civil War evangelicals for the cause of evangelism and missions. But a more intricate and systematic form of this new premillennialism was codified and circulated through the publication of the Scofield Bible of 1909; in time, it came to be most closely associated with new seminaries set up in Dallas, Winona Lake, and Los Angeles. All the while, the less-doctrinaire version of this “futurism” was permeating a wide expanse of North American evangelicalism; it also permeated Pentecostalism. Social progress was an illusion; evangelism and foreign missions were said to be the *raison d'être* of the church, higher education became suspect, and bible schools/institutes were declared more trustworthy. The early Billy Graham exhibited all these traits.

But it was inevitable that pushback would come. Futuristic premillennialism had open opponents since before 1900. Those named by Hummel as “nationalist fundamentalists” fought back in the 1920s not because they were necessarily averse to premillennialism itself but because they rejected the social pessimism that had no appetite for opposing social evils and resisting error in the churches (leaving all remedies to the second advent). Christians in the Reformed and Lutheran traditions also generally opposed the new premillennialism because of its dogged insistence on a wooden literal interpretation (even when this was unhelpful) and because it undermined confidence in a continuous divine plan of salvation across both Testaments. Notably, J. Gresham Machen had identified these dangers in his *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923).

Futurist premillennialists who tried to straddle this divide generally paid dearly. While the “covenantal” pushback from the 1930s onward continued, the forces of those opposing futurist premillennialism expanded when George Eldon Ladd of the young Fuller Theological Seminary published *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952). Already determining to steer clear of their “covenantalist” critics, the learned advocates of futurist premillennialism (Hummel continually refers to them as “scholastics”) now also had to cope with critics, like Ladd, who eventually abandoned their earlier, mediating position as unsustainable and biblically irresponsible. The quiescence of dispensationalism in the face of societal inequity and institutionalized wrong was telling against it, just as were the arguments based on principles of biblical interpretation. The 1950s and 60s were, therefore, a period in which the futuristic premillennialism associated with Dallas, Winona Lake, and Los Angeles was put on the defensive. The loss of dominance was on clear display at the 1971 Jerusalem Conference on Prophecy. Scholarly insiders in the movement were soon advocating a revisionist “progressive dispensationalism,” which gave ground to longstanding criticisms.

But that same Cold War era simultaneously generated a fresh challenge to the dispensationalist system from the grassroots. Authors schooled in classic dispensationalism (Hal Lindsay, Tim LaHaye) could not resist the urge to preach and write in the virtual certainty that the threats of nuclear war, the events of the six-day Arab-Israeli conflict, and the growing threat posed by secular humanism were of prophetic significance. Christian pop music took up the themes of the rapture and nuclear destruction. And the drum-beating about secular humanism, in particular, moved the needle (so to speak) in urging dispensationalists who earlier had been socially quiescent (pinning all hopes for society on the Lord’s return) to become socially and politically active so as to stop the drift. At this point, the stage was dominated by a “pop dispensationalism,” untethered from whatever restraints existed in the movement’s flagship seminaries. This “pop dispensationalism”—now taking secularized form—was embraced by the Christian nationalist political movements that aimed to “take back America.” In sum, Hummell has described a movement which, while in the steady process of disintegration (considered theologically), was steadily expanding as a now-secularized ideology that has embraced domestic

conflict, political confrontation, and Armageddon language in defense of a “Christian America.” The flag carriers of this secularized dispensationalism may or may not be Christian believers, but thanks to pop dispensationalism, they have come to conceive of contemporary America in apocalyptic terms.

Hummel’s book is breathtaking in its scope, written as much as a history of American culture as a work of historical theology. It is based on very wide reading, and it is clear that he has had access to libraries and archives of a number of the major institutions that he holds most responsible for unleashing this ideology upon the evangelical world. While acknowledging (in the Epilogue) that this movement forms the backdrop to his own Christian upbringing, the reader can at the same time observe something akin to the author’s raised eyebrows as the narrative captures statements and details that border on the bizarre.

Three main weaknesses can be acknowledged. The first is that though the volume provides a most valuable extended Bibliographic Essay at its close (pp. 349–67), summarizing the wide reading behind each chapter, the book itself suffers from significant under-documentation. There will be numerous other writers in this field who, on reading Hummel’s account, will find their research echoed in his pages but never directly acknowledged in his footnotes. The Bibliographic Essay may be an honest recollection, but more of these literary debts ought to have found their way into reference notes.

The second is that this is an overwhelmingly American book for American readers. Who can fault that? The reviewer raises the issue primarily because the nineteenth-century British origins of futuristic premillennialism go seriously under-reported in this volume. The social pessimism that Hummel associates with post-Civil War America was alive and well in late Georgian England. That earlier social pessimism was stoked by seemingly limitless immigration (from Catholic Ireland), by the unwelcome aspirations after popular democracy unleashed by the Napoleonic Era, and by the ending of religious “tests” for those seeking university admission or elected office.

The third is that this volume includes far too many minor historical errors of fact. Donald Grey Barnhouse attended but did not graduate from Princeton Seminary (p. 165). Westminster Theological Seminary was not, at first, situated in Glenside, Pennsylvania (p. 192). Amsterdam’s Free University did not offer a PhD in theology in 1931 (p. 193). William Hendriksen was not yet on the faculty of Calvin Seminary when he released his *More Than Conquerors* in 1939 (p. 197). Chuck Swindoll was at first president and only subsequently chancellor of Dallas Seminary (p. 293). Bruce Waltke departed Dallas Seminary initially for Regent College, Vancouver, rather than Westminster Seminary (p. 307). Biographical dictionaries are available, which could have caught these flaws.

*The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism* is a monument to Hummel’s industry, spread across years and miles travelled. In light of it, the reviewer can make much better sense of the influences that shaped, first, his parents’ generation and then his own.

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Pui Him Ip. *Origen and the Emergence of Divine Simplicity Before Nicaea*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022. xx + 276 pp. £76.00/\$85.00.

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Pui Him Ip, director of tutorial programmes at the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, affiliated lecturer at the Faculty of Divinity, and research associate at St Edmund's College, has, with this substantial revision of his doctoral dissertation, offered us an intriguing exploration of the doctrine of divine simplicity before Nicaea.

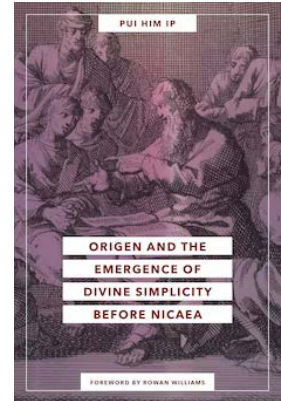
Ip states that the intention of this book is to retrieve “the intelligibility of divine simplicity by tracing the doctrine’s historical emergence and developments before Nicaea” (p. 1) in the face of modern contention that simplicity is in conflict with the Trinity *ad intra* and *ad extra*. This is based on the author’s conviction that the “ante-Nicene sources” are both “distinctive and illuminating” (p. 1).

In the introduction, Ip sets up the body of the book with two notable observations about the modern reception of divine simplicity: (1) it is oversimplified since it does not give adequate account of the Platonic background to the doctrine in the patristic period, and (2) it fails to attend to the “ante-Nicene polemical contexts” (p. 6), especially the concern with Monarchianism. Thus for Ip, “doctrinal history” (p. 7) will shed the light necessary to substantiate the doctrine of divine simplicity against modern detractors.

The introduction is followed by seven chapters. The first two chapters develop an account of the philosophical background of simplicity. In the first chapter, Ip focuses on Plato’s *Republic*, especially sections 380d through 383c, concluding that this passage is a “locus classicus” (p. 25) of divine simplicity. In the second chapter, he gives attention to two thinkers in the Middle Platonic period, namely, “the Middle Platonist Alcinous (c. mid–second century CE) and the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (c. 20–15 BCE to 45–50 CE)” (p. 30), arguing that these thinkers coherently “synthesize the simple deity and the simple first principle” (p. 30).

The third chapter gives attention to Irenaeus’s use of divine simplicity in his opposition to Valentinian theology. The fourth chapter surveys the concerns surrounding the “Monarchian controversy” or, rather, “controversies” (p. 70), which prepares the way for Ip’s discussion of the contours of Origen’s thought in light of the two polemical contexts of Valentinianism and Monarchianism in the three remaining chapters. Ip ends the book with an epilogue discussing possible historiographical implications of his study.

This is simply a stunning work. To begin with, by focusing on Plato’s *Republic* and what is, according to Ip, the first occurrence of divine simplicity, Ip demonstrates that it was employed “as a second-order rule of speech” (p. 25) to protect divine immutability and truthfulness, thus bridging the metaphysical and ethical implications of simplicity, namely, that the divine does not change and “is true in word and deed” (p. 24). Middle Platonism further develops this use of simplicity by identifying “God as the highest first principle” (p. 34) and, as such, the source of all forms, effectively requiring God, as the source of goodness, beauty, etc., to be simple and without parts. Some consequences of Ip’s findings at this juncture are that the pre-Christian origin of simplicity and its later reception and development points to a nuanced use of divine simplicity, which safeguards key Christian understandings of God such as his immutability, truthfulness, and aseity. Ip’s findings also remove the charge that simplicity is



but a piece of theological obfuscation beholden to Aristotelian categories and in conflict with orthodox Trinitarian theology. In turn, it pushes against the reduction of simplicity to metaphysical categories solely: for God to be true, he must be metaphysically simple.

These consequences are substantiated by his discussion of Irenaeus and Origen in light of their distinct contexts and concerns. Here, Ip sees these two theologians as addressing the larger “ante-Nicene Trinitarian problematic” (p. 49). Ip compellingly argues that, for Irenaeus, simplicity protects the unity of God with his attributes, thus pushing against the Valentinian concept of generation that would posit the divine attributes as emissions and thus separated from the Father. Upon turning to Monarchianism, Ip makes clear that, in the ante-Nicene context, a third way was needed to avoid the two errors of unduly separating the Father from the Son, following Valentinian implications, and completely identifying the Son with the Father, as with Monarchianism. Ip persuasively argues, then, that simplicity established the grammar for Origen to avoid falling into either ditch.

As is clear from Ip’s historical exposition, not only was divine simplicity understood to protect attributes that are integral to God, but it also, by combating two errors in the ante-Nicene context which undermined proto-Trinitarian formulations, effectively proved complementary to later orthodox developments regarding the Trinity, contra modern detractors. Beyond this, as Ip himself rightfully suggests, his return to an ante-Nicene context demonstrates the historical viability of returning to earlier periods in order to understand the developments in doctrine rather than merely interjecting later orthodoxy into earlier formulations. Moreover, with his nuanced reading of Origen, Ip effectively rehabilitates Origen as a proto-Trinitarian thinker, albeit not one who has fully worked out an orthodox position. Finally, with his genealogical approach to divine simplicity in the ante-Nicene period, he demonstrates the significant connection that was made between ethical and metaphysical aspects of divine simplicity.

In sum, this is a very competent, well-argued work on historical theology that significantly moves the discussion forward regarding the teaching on divine simplicity in the patristic period and ought to be consulted by any serious student of this period.

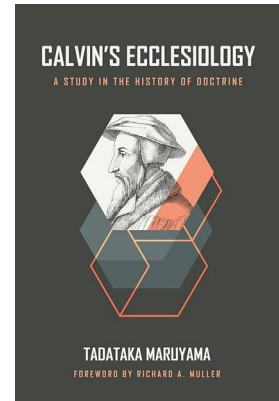
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Tadataka Maruyama. *Calvin's Ecclesiology: A Study in the History of Doctrine*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022. xx + 473 pp. £52.99/ \$65.00.

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Tadataka Maruyama was formerly president and professor of Church History at Tokyo Christian University. His interest in ecclesiology formed the bookends of his academic career. At the beginning, he wrote his dissertation on Beza's ecclesiology, later published as *The Ecclesiology of Theodore Beza: The Reform of the True Church*, Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance 166 (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1978). Now, in retirement, he has turned his attention to Calvin's ecclesiology. This book is highly praised by Richard Muller in the Foreword, where he says that "Maruyama's work is a masterful account of the early Reformation context and its impact on Calvin as well as Calvin's impact on the shaping of a Reformation ecclesiology in Geneva and beyond." That commendation alone should make it clear that this is not a light read for the casual student but rather a substantial volume that scholars of the Reformation, in general, and of Calvin, in particular, will find illuminating and instructive. It stands in marked contrast to those who have sought to expound Calvin's ecclesiology simply by stringing together quotations from *The Institutes* (with no historical or theological context) or those who have approached the subject to prove some point or other, for example, that Calvin's view is identical to that of the writer's own particular confessional position.



The subtitle of Maruyama's book is "A Study in the History of Doctrine," and it is this historical approach that makes the book so valuable. The author is a master of both primary and secondary sources, not only in Calvin studies but also in the wider fields of historical, philosophical, and sociological studies of 16th-century Europe. For this reason, he is able to set Calvin's teaching in its context and, for the same reason, is able to identify development in Calvin's thinking, from what he calls his "Catholic" ecclesiology to a "Reformed" ecclesiology and then finally to a "Reformational" ecclesiology.

Despite the length of the book (473 pages), it consists of only four chapters. In chapter 1, "Academic Formation and Catholic Ecclesiology," Maruyama describes the earliest period in Calvin's life and thought, including his studies in humanities, law, and the classics, leading to the publication of his commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*. Calvin's "sudden conversion" is described and analyzed, as is his involvement with the different strands of French evangelical humanism, leading to the Placards Affair and his exile in Basel. It is fascinating to see how these events and others impacted Calvin's writing, not least his ecclesiology. Maruyama identifies the writing of the first version of *The Institutes* as significant in forming what he calls Calvin's Catholic ecclesiology. He notes, "His Catholic ecclesiology comprehended the church as the people of God or Christ in the entire scope of salvation history, from God's creation, the fall and redemption, the gospel and to the end of times" (p. 48). The remainder of the chapter is spent in a detailed analysis of what *The Institutes* has to say in relation to ecclesiology and related subjects while always bringing other Reformational documents to bear on the analysis.

In chapter 2, "The Early Genevan Reformation and Practice of Catholic Ecclesiology," the author shows how Calvin put into practice the ecclesiology that he had been developing through his study and writing. One of the strengths of this chapter is the detailed study of both Lefèvre and his disciple, Farel. Maruyama believes that Farel's significance in Geneva, while noted, has often been underestimated. Indeed, he argues persuasively that two of the three key documents in the Genevan Reformation (the

*Confession* and the *Articles*) were written by Farel rather than by Calvin, to whom they are normally ascribed. He concludes that “[Calvin’s] first Genevan period was a testing time for his biblicism and activism as well as a formative period upon which the future formation of his Reformed ecclesiology and Reformation ecclesiology was made possible” (p. 224).

Chapter 3, “The Strasbourg Period and a Transition to New Ecclesiologies,” deals with Calvin’s exile from Geneva and his three-year stay in Strasbourg. This was an instructive and productive period in Calvin’s life and work, the main achievements being the revised second edition of *The Institutes*, his *Commentary on Romans* (1540), and the 1541 French edition of *The Institutes*. As Maruyama notes, Calvin’s work as a pastor to French exiles was greatly assisted by the Bible, catechisms, hymnals, other religious literature, and *The Institutes*, all being available in the French language. One strength of this chapter is its analysis of the theology and practice of Martin Bucer, the great Reformer of Strasbourg. It describes his relationship with Erasmus and the Anabaptists, and it discusses his work in writing the *XVI Articles*, the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, and the *Disciplinary Ordinances*. As well as providing a basis for the life of the church in Strasbourg, these documents also help us understand Bucer’s ecclesiology. In this regard, Marayuma offers a significant pushback on the “Bucer’s influence” theory, namely, that Bucer’s influence on Calvin was the most significant element in determining Calvin’s ecclesiology. Various evidence and examples are given to undermine this theory, affirming that Calvin was his own man.

The fourth and final chapter, “Reformed ecclesiology and Reformation ecclesiology,” describes Calvin’s “Reformed ecclesiology” and his “Reformation ecclesiology” in the context of his work as the Reformer of Geneva and his wider influence on the Reformed church and Reformed theology. “Reformed ecclesiology” means the “form” of the Protestant church as contrasted with the Roman Catholic Church, as formulated in the 1543 version of *The Institutes* and expounded in Calvin’s *First Corinthians Commentary*. “Reformation ecclesiology” is the final form of Calvin’s ecclesiology, which was developed in the latter part of his time in Geneva but also through the wider context of the French Reformation and his involvement in the Reformation throughout Europe. In order to demonstrate this “Reformation ecclesiology,” Marayuma engages in a detailed study of Calvin’s exegetical works, indicating the changes and developments in Calvin’s ecclesiology between 1543 and the final 1559 edition of *The Institutes*.

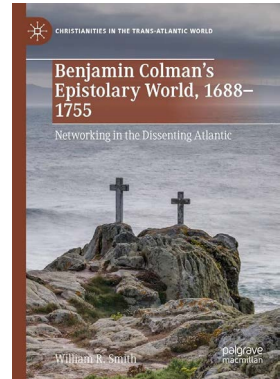
This book is not only an essential tool for Calvin scholars but also a methodological primer on how to study theology by setting any theology in its context, observing the development of that theology over time, and taking account of circumstances, events, and the work of other scholars. It highlights the importance of engaging with all available literature.

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William R. Smith. *Benjamin Colman's Epistolary World, 1688–1755: Networking in the Dissenting Atlantic*. Christianities in the Trans-Atlantic World. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 300 pp. £89.99/\$119.99.

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The historian's challenge is to let their subject speak on their own terms. William R. Smith attempts that task in the life of Benjamin Colman, one of New England's most influential pastors in the early 18th century. Smith argues "that the history of Protestant Dissent is fundamentally a transatlantic story, one shaped as much by agents and brokers on the provincial edges of the British Empire as by those at its center" (p. 3). Colman was one such agent on the British Empire's edge who, through his epistolary network, was a central figure in transatlantic Protestant Dissent. The Bostonian pastor's vast body of correspondence makes a strong case for Smith's thesis as the author demonstrates how the Dissenting Atlantic was created, extended to the ends of the Empire, and ultimately, by the end of Colman's life, showed clear signs of dissolution. *Benjamin Colman's Epistolary World* is a global history told through the eyes of an individual, filled with fascinating details such as pirates, a kidnapping, chance meetings, and letters and libraries traded across the Atlantic.



The British Empire was changed by the Toleration Act of 1689, which legalized dissenting protestants. In the ensuing years, dissenters wrote histories of their own movement, which Smith exploits to show the movement's changing self-perception. Colman was at the intersection of two of these major histories in the early 1700s—Daniel Neal's *History of New-England* (1720) and Robert Woodrow's *History of the Sufferings of the Church of Scotland* (1721–1722). Smith's analysis of these works reveals a tradition that was consolidating around a changed identity. Dissenters were once persecuted protestants, but the Toleration Act turned them into a people for religious freedom. Colman's participation in reviewing these histories ahead of time and corresponding with the authors aptly illustrates Smith's point that dissenting interest was shaped and established by all corners of the empire since Colman was in Boston, Woodrow in Scotland, and Neal in London.

Letters, especially those sent or received by Colman, were the "technology" that united and expanded the dissenting movement. Books and libraries were at the center of the expansion. Smith points out that the Navigation Acts in 1696 helped to open the book trade across the Atlantic, which enabled dissenting Protestants greater ability to trade books and libraries both to train ministers for Christian ministry and convert Native peoples into "loyal British subjects" (p. 122). This was both a missionary and an imperial expansion. Smith shows from Colman's letters that the Bostonian pastor was a significant agent of this extension, with connections to the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, the New England Company, and others, whose goals included spreading both the gospel and education across the British empire. Through his transatlantic epistolary network, Colman helped to distribute books and raise funds through these organizations. He mediated for Londoner Thomas Hollis III, who sent trunks of books to be used for Harvard's library, and corresponded with Isaac Watts, who did much to establish the book holdings at Yale College.

Smith charts how the expansion of the movement turned to dissolution, beginning with the 1707 Act of Union that established a "principle of local religious establishment" to the edges of the British Empire (p. 177). Such local focus foreshadowed a splintering of dissenting interest across the Atlantic as a younger generation turned their attention toward local concerns at the expense of the transatlantic

collective identity established in Colman's earlier years. The years of the Great Awakening also proved disintegrating for the movement. Relying on Colman's correspondence, Smith shows the Bostonian's eager support of revivals and revivalists like George Whitefield. But the same letters reveal Colman's British counterparts to be less enthusiastic. A changing British Empire, a controversial Whitefield, and complicated social and political dynamics caused by war were all leading to a disintegration among dissenters. That growing gap between New England and the British Isles was sealed by Colman's death (1747).

Smith's treatment of Colman's correspondence is a stout defense for his claim that the provincial dissenter was an active agent in the creation and extension of transatlantic Protestant Dissent and a disappointed bystander as the movement dissolved. If there is anything to question in Smith's work, it is his claim that the "central purpose" of Colman's letters was the creation and sustaining of Protestant Dissent (p. 14). While that purpose is clear in the correspondence Smith analyzes, I wonder if any of Colman's letters exist that do not touch on the dissenting interest and how that might color our understanding of the purpose of the pastor's writing. The existence of such letters is not spoken of in the work. Regardless, Smith lets Colman's letters speak throughout and has therefore built a strong case for the transatlantic creation, extension, and detachment of Protestant Dissent that was shaped by those like Benjamin Colman who, though they lay on the edges of the Empire, played a central role in the movement. This work will be both fascinating and valuable for scholars and students of the 18th century, historians of the relationship between the British Empire and the American colonies, and those interested in the history of English Protestantism.

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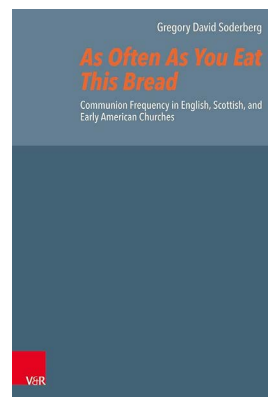
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Gregory David Soderberg. *As Often as You Eat This Bread: Communion Frequency in English, Scottish, and Early American Churches*. Reformed Historical Theology 74. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022. 280 pp. £113.71/\$138.00.

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*As Often as You Eat This Bread* is the result of Gregory Soderberg's doctoral work and is a historical evaluation of communion frequency within the Reformed tradition. He argues that there was never one "Reformed" pattern of communion frequency because the desire to celebrate the supper was often "tempered" by issues of church discipline and preparation (p. 251). Soderberg justifies these claims with an extensive summary and concise analysis of primary documents, most acutely expressed in his examination of trans-Atlantic debates in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The issue of the Lord's Supper is well-trodden ground in the Reformation period. Being that the Mass was the center of medieval Christian worship, the question of the Eucharist in the Reformation was heated and tedious. The secondary literature on the Reformed tradition and their views of the Supper is, therefore, extensive, leading Soderberg to rely consciously on previous scholarship to situate the historical background of his own time period of focus. From the beginning of Reformed Christianity, a variety of practices is evident in communion frequency. Soderberg illustrates that Huldrych Zwingli, Martin Bucer, and John Calvin



all held that the Supper should be celebrated more than was common in the medieval period, and yet each was tempered in varying degrees by both the desire for preparation and sociopolitical factors.

Soderberg's focus is on the English expressions of Reformed Christianity. "Communion seasons" developed in late 16th century Scotland, in which the Reformed churches celebrated the Supper only a few times a year, with each season lasting a few days or more to ensure that parishioners were sufficiently instructed and prepared through celebration, fasting, confession, and church discipline. Administratively, the Scots could not afford to commune more often. As the Puritan tradition developed in England and America, men like Stephen Charnock, Matthew Henry, Samuel Willard, and Cotton Mather emphasized preparation by prescribing a strict self-examination. As a result, many in Puritan congregations attended the Supper infrequently for immense fear of coming in an unworthy manner. Yet the book makes clear that pastors and theologians felt a tension between practicing communion frequently and adequate preparation. Soderberg shows that Solomon Stoddard, an American Puritan pastor in the late 17th and early 18th century, lowered his expectations of preparation for the sake of a more open and attended communion, while many Puritans, including Stoddard's grandson Jonathan Edwards, opposed Stoddard and asserted anew the priority of preparation.

The issue of communion frequency came to a head in the 18th century, especially in the intercontinental Scottish Reformed churches. Soderberg illustrates that John Willison and John Erskine were the "instigators" of frequency debates and advocated a more frequent celebration of the Supper (p. 198). They argued that passages in Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 10–11 necessitated more frequent celebration of the Supper, that communion seasons were lavish and licentious, and that church history and the Reformed tradition supported a Supper celebrated more often. Soderberg points to others, such as Thomas Randall and John Thomson, who argued that there was no prescribed frequency in the Bible and that the Supper should be modeled on feasts like the Passover in the Old Testament, which were practiced infrequently. While the issue continued to be polarizing, a clear position of "careful frequency" developed over time, which admitted the Bible commanded no specific frequency yet sought to practice the supper as often as possible without neglecting proper and solemn preparation. Soderberg examines the literature from this period with care, showing clearly that from within the Scottish Reformed tradition, on both sides of the Atlantic, debaters expressed different hermeneutical priorities, diverse attitudes toward history, and ultimately varying convictions regarding communion frequency.

Communion seasons eventually disappeared among the Scots Reformed churches in favor of more frequent communion. This did not happen because the infrequent practice of the Supper was "un-Reformed." Instead, Soderberg attributes the decline of communion seasons to a greater number of people arguing for frequency, the fact that American revivalism and seasons of preaching took the place of communion seasons and that these seasons had a distinct Scottish identity that did not resonate with the many American Reformed who were not themselves Scottish. This final point strengthens Soderberg's main argument, showing that frequent practice of the Supper did not "replace" communion seasons as if it was "more Reformed."

*As Often as You Eat This Bread* is an excellent survey of debates over the frequency of communion within the Reformed tradition as they developed after the Reformation. Especially as the English-speaking world took up the debate, Soderberg deals in detail with primary sources in summary and punctuates his surveys with analysis of exegetical, theological, and other contextual factors at play. The underlying question driving Soderberg's study is what level of frequency has characterized Reformed

churches in the tradition's past. Looking at this past should, he hopes, undergird ecclesiological debates and practices for today. There was never any one stance from Reformed Christians, who varied in their frequency of communion, as well as in approaches to Scripture and history that undergirded their position. A fair treatment of primary sources, as well as reflection on the significance of debates for today, make this an insightful work for students of the Reformed tradition and a fruitful dialogue for Christians and pastors wrestling with the question of frequency for their own churches today.

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### — SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY —

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Matthew Barrett. *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021. £18.99/\$24.99.

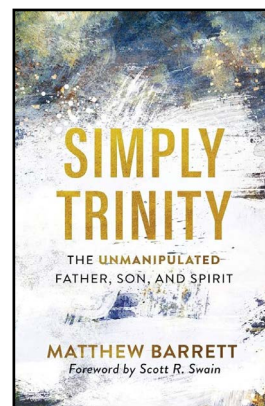
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Matthew Barrett's *Simply Trinity* is his attempt to correct what he sees as perilous misunderstandings of the Trinity present in evangelicalism (p. 21). In particular, there has been a loss or rejection of the "eternal relationships of origin," the ideas that the Son was eternally begotten and the Spirit eternally spirated (pp. 24–25). What is more, Barrett believes that evangelicalism has gone astray through accommodating the Trinity to social projects (pp. 28–31). Barrett's solution is a return to the Nicene Creed and the "Great Tradition" as he calls it, and, in particular, a return to the doctrine of simplicity.

In part 1, Barrett details how we drifted away. Chapter 2 charts the ancient trinitarian debates and how they were solved. Chapter 3, then, explores modern trinitarian issues—liberalism, social trinitarianism, and what he describes as the historicizing tradition. But evangelicals, too, assert Barrett, have distorted the Trinity, making persons "distinct centers of consciousness," sometimes with distinct wills, cooperating as distinct agents (pp. 90–91).

In part 2, Barrett seeks to chart a "way home." Chapter 4 details the classic idea that "the temporal missions reveal the eternal relations" (p. 106). Chapter 5 moves onto the doctrine of simplicity. Chapter 6 helpfully gives nine marks of a defective view of generation: division of nature, multiplication of essence, priority and posterity, motion, mutation, alteration, corruption, diminution, and cessation from operation. Chapter 7 makes a compelling biblical case for eternal generation.

Chapter 8 investigates what seems to be Barrett's most pressing concern, whether the Son is "subordinate" to the Father. It would be fair to say that Barrett unleashes a barrage of criticism in this chapter, targeted mainly against Bruce Ware, but also against others who hold to the eternal functional subordination of the Son (EFS). Some of the criticism, it seems to me, is not unwarranted. Many of the quotations or summaries of views that Barrett gives, especially from Ware, are deeply disturbing. For example, "For, although the Father is supreme, though he has in the trinitarian order the place of highest authority, the place of highest honor, yet he chooses to do his work in many cases through the Son and through the Spirit rather than unilaterally" (p. 219).





Chapter 9, then, reflects on the Holy Spirit and argues that what distinguishes the Spirit from the Father and the Son is spiration. That is his unique property. Finally, chapter 10 considers inseparable operations—when the Trinity acts, all persons act together; not by cooperating, but because they are, in fact, one.

In a sense, Barrett provides in *Simply Trinity* an introduction to the classical, orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. By and large, he has succeeded. He covers the main topics and does so skillfully. Nevertheless, one is left with the distinct feeling that the persons are not really *persons* at all, in any meaningful sense, but merely “modes of subsistence,” “eternal relations of origin,” and “personal properties” (p. 60). All of which do not sound particularly *personal*, except perhaps for the last, which turns out to be simply another way of saying the other two. In other words, the personal Father, Son, and Spirit that we meet in the pages of the Scriptures end up sounding rather more like static philosophical concepts. Barrett claims that simplicity here rescues us since the modes of subsistence are not *impersonal*, as in Sabellianism, but *personal*. But he does not explain how “paternity,” “filiation,” and “spiration” are personal (p. 146).

To put flesh on the bones, Jesus tells us that the Father loves the Son (John 5:20). But how does that work out in Barrett’s schema, since the only personal property that the Father possesses is paternity? Moreover, love, presumably along with will, glory, power, and authority, are attributes of the essence. Barrett may have an answer. But if he does, he does not say what it is. That is not to suggest that *personal* means three separate wills or a Social Trinity. Barrett is right in his critique of Social Trinitarianism. Rather, it is to suggest that in his efforts to maintain an orthodox definition of the Trinity, he flattens the persons that we meet in the pages of the Scriptures.

In a similar vein, one of Barrett’s central contentions is that EFS has distorted the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity by abandoning or distorting key orthodox doctrines: simplicity, eternal generation, and inseparable operations. By and large, he makes his case that at least some have done so. But one cannot help but feel that Barrett is blind to some implications of his statements. He rightly affirms, for example, that there is no hierarchy and priority among the persons. He also affirms that “they are not sundered in will or divided in power” (p. 172). But he also affirms that the Son is *from* the Father and the Spirit is *from* the Father and the Son. In fact, he affirms, quoting Augustine, that the Father “bestow[s] being on the Son [albeit] without any beginning in time, without any changeableness of nature” (p. 61).

Later, regarding inseparable operations, Barrett rightly affirms, following Gregory of Nyssa, “Every operation which extends from God to the Creation ... has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit” (p. 299). He then continues, “As the unbegotten one, the principle without a principle in the Godhead, the Father is the ‘beginning’ and ‘fountain’ of all operations” (p. 299). Of course, Barrett is here referring to operations of God in creation, not God within himself. Nevertheless, the reason that we can make distinctions in the works of God, he says, is that the modes of working reflect the modes of subsistence. Barrett then affirms, “How God acts toward the world (*ad extra*) mirrors who he is in himself (*ad intra*), and that rule of thumb applies not only to his united essence but his distinct ordering in personhood” (p. 299).

That is to say, God’s external operations in the world are from the Father and through the Son since within the Godhead the essence is from the Father and through the Son. But if the will is a property of the essence, not the person, as Barrett maintains (p. 149), then it is not clear why the will (and love) cannot then be said to be *from* the Father and *through* the Son. And if so, one cannot help but suspect that such a dynamic will look suspiciously like how Jesus describes his relationship with the

Father: “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does” (John 5:19 NIV). While the language of “subordination” and “obedience” applied to the eternal Son may be profoundly unhelpful (not to mention the abandonment of inseparable operations), nevertheless, an understanding of the “from-ness” of the Son helpfully clarifies how the persons can be said to relate meaningfully, without abandoning classical Nicæan trinitarianism and ending up with social trinitarianism.

Barrett’s book is a helpful introduction to some of the key ideas of classical trinitarianism. He also highlights some profoundly unhelpful statements by some evangelicals about the Trinity. But one cannot help but wonder if, in his attempt to correct some distortions, he has introduced some distortions of his own.

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Robert Letham. *The Holy Spirit*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2023. xxii + 343 pp. £29.99/\$29.99.

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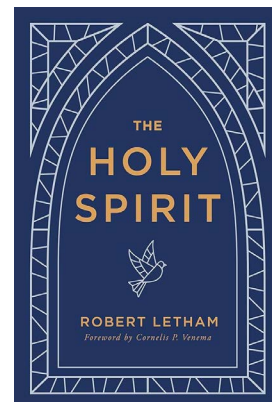
Robert Letham, professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at the Union School of Theology in England, is the author of numerous books, including his recent *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019). *The Holy Spirit* is the first book in a series of three that will explore the persons of the Trinity. The volume is divided into two parts: each chapter is followed by key terms and review questions to assist the student, and a glossary is provided with definitions to bold terms that are sprinkled throughout the body of the text.

The first part contains four chapters dedicated to the historical-theological developments of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Chapter 1 traces the development from the time of Irenaeus to the First Council of Constantinople. The second chapter begins with Augustine and concludes with the Filioque Controversy. The third chapter moves from Thomas Aquinas to Karl Barth. And the final chapter provides an exposition of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.

The second part (chs. 5–11) focuses on the biblical teaching on the Holy Spirit. Chapter 5 focuses on the teaching of the Old Testament. Chapter 6 surveys the Holy Spirit’s role in Jesus’s life and ministry. In chapter 7, the author extends their analysis of the Holy Spirit’s involvement in Jesus’s resurrection and ascension, at Pentecost, and in other parts of the book of Acts. The remaining chapters (8–11) are more theological and practical in nature, addressing such topics as the Holy Spirit’s function in the church, salvation, eschatology, the nature and role of spiritual gifts, and how we can discern the work of the Spirit.

Readers familiar with Letham’s works will expect his exposition to be biblically informed, historically sensitive, theologically nuanced, and pastorally relevant. They will not be disappointed with this addition to Letham’s *corpus*.

It will appear odd to some that, unlike his book on the Trinity, he starts with historical theology. Letham argues, however, that this pedagogical choice serves to establish the divinity of the Spirit and the Spirit’s inseparable operations from the work of creation and salvation executed by the Father and





the Son and to avoid “chronological snobbery” by resisting the tendency to ignore “the cumulative wisdom of the people of God down through the ages,” which only serves “to reinvent the wheel and frequently regurgitates old errors and heresies” (p. xx).

Letham is to be commended for pushing against a biblicism that would seek to bypass the voices of the church through the ages that have wrestled with questions surrounding the Holy Spirit. However, this does not mean that the author slavishly follows the formulations of esteemed orthodox theologians, seen, for instance, in his criticism of John Owen’s formulation of Christ’s human dependency on the Holy Spirit, arguing that said formulation opens the door “to Nestorianism” (p. 98).

Furthermore, Letham provides a nuanced discussion of the filioque clause wherein he meticulously leads the reader through the details concerning the rejection of the clause by the Eastern Church and the confirmation and counterargument in favor of it by the Western Church. While discounting the Eastern perspective’s argument that the West undermines the Father’s role as the sole source of Holy Spirit, Letham concurs in that the filioque appears to confuse the Father and the Son and defends the Eastern view against charges that it unduly separates the Son from the Spirit and thus is decidedly lacking in Christocentrism. Ultimately, Letham leans towards the Eastern view of the filioque, affirming the formulation that the Holy Spirit proceeds “from the Father through the Son” (p. 56). Not all will agree with Letham’s assessment, which is of special interest as it comes from the pen of a Reformed (and so Western) theologian. Those with a more Western approach can agree that the filioque clause does not adequately express the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father and Son and so, at a minimum, needs to be supplemented by further theological formulation.

Letham, rightly recognizing the influence of Pentecostalism and Charismatic theology, discusses this phenomenon throughout the book, addressing such issues as the nature of the Spirit’s baptism, and the role and function of the spiritual gifts as described in the New Testament and in the Pentecostal/Charismatic movements.

Letham argues for a cessationist position, namely, that “extraordinary gifts of the Spirit ... ceased with the passing of the apostles” (p. 296), although he sees the label “cessationist” as unhelpful because it “implies that these gifts were ... normally present in the covenant community on an ongoing basis but suddenly stopped” (p. 296). Rather, he argues that the supernatural gifts were never normative for the church but merely accompanied unique and decisive points in redemptive history (e.g., Jesus and the apostles’ ministries) and thus are no longer needed as we await the *parousia*. Therefore, for Letham, the movements attached to Pentecostalism “cannot ... be judged to be in harmony with the biblical gospel and the Christian tradition” (p. 297) since they are based on experience rather than the Bible and the historical orthodoxy of the church.

One wishes at this point that the author would have more deeply engaged with the work of Vern Poythress on this question since it could have facilitated a more sympathetic approach to these movements rather than one that sees them as opposed to the very foundation of the Christian faith. However, it is our hope that non-cessationist brethren will profit from Letham’s criticisms and perhaps see it as motivation to shore up their theology so that it will not give way to Letham’s very concern.

In sum, Letham's treatment of the Holy Spirit would be helpful to the undergraduate student or busy pastor. It contributes to the ever-growing literature on the third person of the Trinity and provides an orthodox, Reformed perspective that is much needed in these discussions.

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Thomas H. McCall, Caleb T. Friedeman, and Matt T. Friedeman. *The Doctrine of Good Works: Reclaiming a Neglected Protestant Teaching*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023. £23.99/\$27.99.

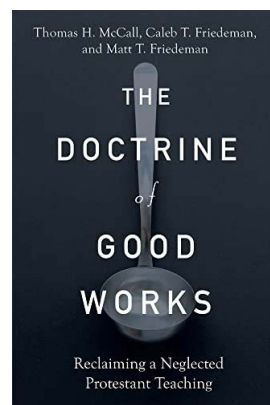
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Cheap grace has led to “a crisis of credibility” for Christianity (p. xi). In response, three Wesleyan theologians bring their insights about the nature of salvation in their book, *The Doctrine of Good Works: Reclaiming a Neglected Protestant Teaching*. Thomas McCall is professor of Theology at Asbury Theological Seminary. Caleb Friedeman is associate professor of New Testament at Ohio Christian University. Matt Friedeman is professor of Evangelism and Discipleship at Wesley Biblical Seminary. One of the key arguments of the book is that, “We can and should conclude that good works are a means and even causes of salvation” (p. 119).

The introduction sketches the background of the credibility problem of Christians. There are pastors and evangelists teaching people that good works are not part of the Christian life, leading to people who claim to be Christians because they have prayed a prayer while exhibiting little or no effort to conform to Christlikeness. In contrast, the book's goal is to present a vision of Christianity that “celebrates God's gracious work on our behalf while also taking seriously the importance of genuine, faithful obedience and love” (p. xvi).

Chapter 1 presents a historical case for a broader understanding of the necessity of good works for salvation than many evangelicals in the reformed tradition affirm. The authors present voices from among Lutherans, Anglicans, and the Reformed orthodox, leading to their argument that “good works are nothing less than necessary for salvation” is a thoroughly Protestant sentiment (p. 24). The breadth of this statement, especially the inclusion of the Reformed orthodox stream of Protestantism, depends largely on Francis Turretin's statement that good works are a necessary consequence of justification. As the authors point out, what Turretin means differs vastly from the understanding of Johann Gerhard or John Davenant. This discussion highlights the varied means the words *necessary* and *salvation* have in different strains of Protestant theology. The second chapter offers a biblical survey of passages in the Old Testament where good works on the part of believers are affirmed. Chapter 3 continues that survey with the New Testament. In the conclusion of this chapter, they propose a thought experiment where the Pauline letters are removed from Scripture. The end result, they argue, is a clear message “that good works were considered necessary [by the biblical authors], such that no Jesus-follower should expect to be saved without them” (p. 98).

The fourth chapter moves to develop an outline of a theology of good works, where they seek to set their understanding of good works, sanctification, and, more broadly, salvation within a broad Protestant tradition. This chapter is primarily about the importance of sanctification in the life of a



spiritually healthy believer. Chapter 5 shifts dramatically from abstract theological arguments to case studies on churches that have made works of mercy and evangelistic outreach a central part of their mission. The focus jumps from salvation of the individual to the life of the communal church, with little consideration of ecclesiology, particularly debates about the mission of the church. The four case studies provide powerful examples of local churches blessing their surrounding communities through a wide range of programs. Chapter 6 offers nine leadership techniques to inspire deeper congregational participation in church programs. The conclusion brings the book briefly back to the theological discussion, emphasizing the importance of the doctrine of good works within Christian theology.

From the very beginning of the book, the authors critique several evangelical theologians for an improper definition of *salvation*. Given the references to Milliard Erickson and Michael Bird in the introduction, it seems odd that Bird is only cited in the footnotes, and Erickson makes only the briefest appearance in the body of the text. Throughout the book, there are few rebutting arguments presented against the authors' views. While the critique of Erickson's conflation of the terms *justification* and *salvation* may be valid, further investigation reveals that he does discuss good works in relationship to sanctification in his systematic theology. The reader would not know that from this text. Minimal discussion is given to places where Scripture itself seems to use terms related to salvation as a reference to *justification*. Furthermore, if we grant "error carried forward" (as the math teachers say) to Erickson's simplification, then his consideration of good works being required for sanctification in a chapter called "The Continuation of Salvation" might dampen the accusation that Erickson's perspective is "diametrically opposed to important strands of classical Reformed doctrine" (p. 111).

If ambiguity of terminology is to be offered as a critique, then this book will not escape unscathed. The book repeatedly critiques too simplistic a definition of *salvation*, but the authors are not entirely clear about what they mean by the term until near the end of the volume; they rely primarily on negative definitions of *salvation* as "more than justification." Additionally, the term *necessary* would have benefitted from a more precise definition from the authors early on; it is not always clear what they mean by the term. Because they mainly locate the definitions of these vital terms within interactions with diverse primary sources, it is sometimes challenging to determine what the authors really mean without making assumptions based on their biographies. Theologians from different eras and traditions use similar terminology in radically different ways. Therefore, it is difficult to know whether the authors are, for example, affirming the potential for eternal damnation of the regenerate or simply summarizing a historical view (pp. 9–11).

There is much to be commended about *The Doctrine of Good Works*. The authors directly attack a real problem of failed discipleship among many self-identified Christians. They also rightly identify the dangers of simplistic understandings of the gospel that present justification as a one-time consumer transaction without ongoing life transformation. The authors are unambiguous that our works do not merit our salvation and that "we are saved by grace from first to last" (p. 192). This book offers a powerful call for Christians of various theological persuasions to get more engaged in seeking the good of the city (Jer 29:7) and demonstrating the reality of their faith by their works (Jas 2:18). The authors are correct: much more discussion on the nature and purpose of good works is required among faithful Protestants. It may be that this book will catalyze a healthy discussion in the future.

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Thomas R. Schreiner. *Justification: An Introduction*. Short Studies in Systematic Theology. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023. 177 pp. £18.99/\$19.99.

Thomas Schreiner is James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has written numerous books and articles on Paul's theology. This book is a classic Reformed formulation of justification, sketching the topic from historical, biblical, and systematic perspectives.

Chapter 1 is dedicated to the historical survey of the doctrine throughout the church age. The sketch of the doctrine in the patristics is rather brief, with a heavy emphasis on the Reformers. The Finish interpretation of Luther in terms of deification receives a critical take. Schreiner claims that Luther espoused Melancthon's judicial view and later developed a more forensic perspective in comparison to an early perspective (pp. 15–16). Luther's rejection of Osiander's view seems incompatible with the Finnish research. Likewise, Calvin taught infused and forensic justification, not transformative and intrinsic. The Roman Catholic response at the Council of Trent was to maintain the Augustinian view that mingles justification and sanctification and presupposes human and divine cooperation in salvation.

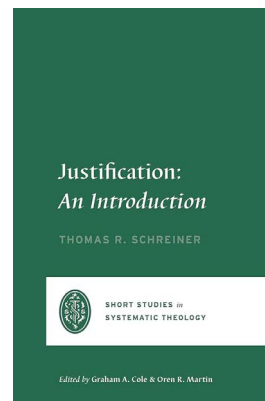
In chapter 2, the author focuses on justification in the Old Testament, touching on several paradigmatic passages—such as Gen 15:6 and Hab 2:4—though not exclusively. Schreiner concludes that God's righteousness in the OT relates to his just judgment of the unrighteous and his saving mercy toward sinning Israel (e.g., Ps 98:2–3; Isa 40–66; Job 40:8).

In the chapter on Jesus and justification, the author claims that Paul did not invent the doctrine, but received it from the Lord, even though Jesus did not use the term a lot. Jesus's unconditioned welcoming of a prodigal son, sinners, and tax collectors expresses his loving righteousness and their justification by grace. Healing and forgiving sins are also the result of saving faith and justification. In John, the language of "life" and "belief" corresponds to Paul's language of "justification."

Schreiner concedes that the term "justification" does not appear in every Pauline epistle, but the theme is nonetheless present. Wherever the apostle talks of salvation, forgiveness of sins, Christ's death and resurrection, and the final judgment, justification is in view. Schreiner is against the position adopted by those in the new perspective on Paul camp who believe that "the works of the law" are ethnic boundary markers (p. 61). Instead, moral failure and slavery to sin make everyone guilty before the righteous God. In the debate on the translation of the Greek expression πίστις Χριστοῦ, Schreiner favors interpreting it as an objective genitive (i.e., faith *in* Christ, pp. 72–73). Justification has a forensic, declarative, and imputative meaning based on the OT usages of "righteousness" and Paul's use of "count" or "reckon" (Rom 5:12–19; 2 Cor 5:21).

Justification is less prominent in the rest of the NT writers, but the concept is assumed in the context of saving faith, forgiveness of sins, and sanctification. Then goes a detailed discussion of apparent contradiction between Paul's preaching on justification by faith without works and James teaching that faith without works is dead.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to contemporary challenges to the classic Reformed understanding of justification from the apocalyptic view of Paul and the new perspective on Paul. Schreiner defends the forensic view of righteousness against the transformative reading of the apocalyptic approach. Similarly,



he confirms that justification presumes vertical salvific relations with God rather than horizontal ecclesiological.

The last chapter is dedicated to the systematic overview of the relationship between justification and other soteriological concepts, including the discussion of justification by works. Schreiner commendably asserts that union with Christ is an overarching topic that includes other topics like justification. Although works do not by themselves justify, they are “necessary evidence” of justification because they are a product of the Spirit’s work of renewal (pp. 134–39). Salvation is by faith; the final judgment is by works.

The nature of the series assumes an introductory level and brevity of presentation. This, however, does not preclude the author from touching the main features of the current discussion. Notably, the focus is dedicated to Pauline material, where justification takes a predominant role in such letters as Galatians, Romans, and Philippians. Other books of the Old and New Testaments are less abundant in justification language, though not in the conceptual idea, as Schreiner believes. On the one hand, it is commendable to go beyond the word study and reflect on the thematic orbit of justification. On the other hand, these connections are at times unclear (e.g., how do divine judgment, punishment, and saving activities in the Old Testament relate to the justification of the unrighteous in the New Testament?).

This book is essentially a defense of a Reformed view on justification with expected support of the judicial dimension of the doctrine. This assumption somewhat minimizes the participation-in-Christ dimension of salvation. Union with Christ for Schreiner is “the overarching category” (p. 3) and one of the “salvific realities” (p. 126), not the fundamental root or center of all soteriological concepts as Calvin believed (p. 127). In my view, it is more biblical to confirm with Calvin that by receiving Christ we receive all his blessings, including justification (*Institutes* 3.2.24) and that the connection between justification and sanctification creates “an indissoluble bond” (*Institutes* 3.16.1).

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## — ETHICS AND PASTORALIA —

Chris Anderson. *Theology That Sticks: The Life-Changing Power of Exceptional Hymns*. Grayson, GA: Church Works Media, 2022. 355 pp. £16.00/\$19.99.

One of the many developments that has caused our engagement with Christian hymns and songs to change over recent decades is the demise of the hymn book. The hymn book in the pew was the one source of a congregation's singing repertoire. It reflected not only its compiler's editorial priorities but the doctrinal distinctives of a particular church, with as much angst involved in updating it as there was in deciding to adopt a new Bible translation, if not more!

For many churches today, however, the internet is their hymn book, and the task of curating the church's song list sits in the hands of the church itself, meaning either the pastor, a committee, or the musicians. With this responsibility resting with those who may lack sufficient theological or musical expertise to make such decisions, Chris Anderson's *Theology That Sticks* is a welcome tool for this vital task.

Anderson writes warmly and persuasively about singing as one of the most important things we do as churches, as families, and as Christians. "Our church wants to feast on the very best Christ-centered songs, regardless of their age or authors. And we're doing this because we believe our church and its members will be the better for it" (p. 3).

The book is in two parts: the first explores what the Bible has to say about Christian singing; the second provides a guide to making intentional and objectively good song choices. It is, therefore, not so much a book about how to lead and accompany congregational singing as it is about what songs a church should be singing. In part 1, the author uses key texts from Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5 to argue that the songs we sing should be biblical, doctrinal, trinitarian, congregational, and unifying. Part 2 moves to the Psalms, where Anderson proposes we find the biblical model of a good song or hymn. These will be songs that are inspired, diverse, emotive, experiential, and beautiful.

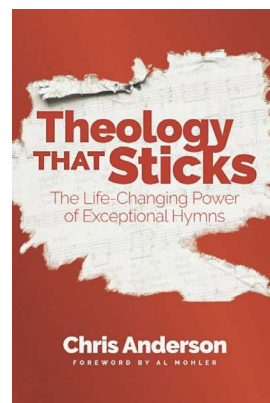
Underlying his whole argument, however, is a doxological call to arms. "Because sacred music has such tremendous power, we need to use songs that are exceptional" (p. 14). He continues:

*We need to sing great hymns because hymns teach people how to think about God. The songs you sing in church teach—for better or for worse. Some teach doctrinal truth. Some teach doctrinal error. Some teach that we value nostalgia. Some teach that we value tradition.* (p. 14, emphasis original)

In short, Anderson argues that what we sing not only *shows* our theology but, more importantly, *shapes* our theology.

Rightly, he considers Paul's key verses on why the church sings, particularly Colossians 3:16, and emphasizes that our singing is a ministry of the word. He contends that a revelation-and-response theme pervades all of our corporate worship:

We read the Word in our public worship services.  
We pray the Word in our public prayers.  
We preach the Word in our sermons.



We support the Word with our offerings.

We visualize the Word with the two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Table.

We sing the Word with our psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. (pp. 29–30)

All of our singing, therefore, should be about the Bible and from the Bible. "Colossians 3:16 describes a delightful, Word-filled cycle: We think on the Word, we speak the Word, and we sing the Word—causing us to think on the Word yet again!" (p. 31).

A helpful following section reminds us of the importance of the congregation in our singing:

To exalt elite performers over the congregation actually rolls back the Reformation. And yet, there is a trend in much of evangelicalism to turn the congregation back into an audience and to turn worshipers back into observers. The staging, atmosphere, complexity, and volume of the musical portions of many worship services are marginalizing the congregation. (p. 89)

However, there are other issues that detract from good congregational singing. Pastors themselves must take the lead in modeling participation and should teach on singing as an essential element of church life. Similarly, congregations should learn to value singing with an active engagement.

But returning to the main theme of choosing good songs, Anderson asks us to look to the book of Psalms:

As a hymnbook, the Psalms give the church songs to sing and pray; as a handbook, the Psalms teach the church how to think and feel. But I would add one more descriptor, as well. As a sketchbook, the Psalms point the church to Jesus Christ. (p. 122)

From here we are encouraged to consider singing songs that are not just biblical but that cover a breadth of doctrinal themes: confessions, songs that confront sin, laments, and songs that teach us to pray. "In order to serve the church a 'well-balanced diet' of hymns—indeed, in order to teach 'the whole counsel of God' (Acts 20:27)—we need to be intentional about addressing the many themes we find in the Scriptures" (p. 148).

Finally, Anderson addresses the area of emotion and doxology, arguing that godly emotion must grow out of our understanding of biblical truth (p. 167). Though much of the contemporary church has prioritized experience over theology—focusing on God's immanence (nearness) to the neglect of His transcendence (loftiness), Christians have every reason to respond to God's saving work with deep, thoughtful emotion (p. 168).

Anderson's thesis is compelling not only because of its strong scriptural warrant but also due to its faithful application of biblical wisdom to the sorts of songs we should sing. But he goes further to include many examples of hymns and songs in his different categories for churches to use.

However, while this is a very helpful and practical book, it is not without its flaws. Three are worthy of mention. The first relates to the previous point. Particularly where the author is commending contemporary songs (and, arguably, from a fairly narrow slice of the evangelical pie), I wonder if these will not date fairly quickly, in the same way that most songs (and hymns) tend to, apart from the most exceptional.

Secondly, although clearly a matter of preferred personal style, Anderson's text is heavily laden with quotations from other authors. While these are generally valuable thoughts from respected writers, at



times it feels like this book is a compilation of other people's ideas assembled in support of Anderson's argument. Rarely does he engage with those quotes other than to agree with them.

Thirdly, I would have liked Anderson to explore some of the biblical material in greater depth, particularly in part 1 of the book. For example, he rightly states that Colossians and Ephesians are books written to local churches. Yet the ecclesiology of these books is not "local," in the same way that, say, 1 Corinthians is, but has a more universal focus. Therefore, the ministry of the word of Christ in Colossians 3, while applicable to congregational singing, is not just to my mind discussing the Colossian church service but describing the fruit of our union with Christ. As a consequence, Anderson does not quite draw out the full richness of these verses as he might have done if he considered them in their broader doctrinal context.

These reservations aside, this is a marvelously encouraging and practical book that ably helps us to think through what is, without doubt, an essential element of our gatherings.

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Graham Beynon and Jane Tooher. *Embracing Complementarianism: Turning Biblical Convictions into Positive Church Culture*. Washington, D.C: The Good Book Company, 2022. 176 pp. £9.99/\$17.99.

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Breaking the mould when it comes to standard treatises on men and women in the church, *Embracing Complementarianism*, by Graham Beynon and Jane Tooher, deals lightly with the proof passages and theological arguments in order to focus on the 'what now?'. It does this by assuming that the reader is already of complementarian conviction, and sets about to apply the doctrine: widely, deeply, and above all, positively (pp. 12–13). While the authors acknowledge upfront that the ministry roles of men and women is not a salvation issue (p. 20), they argue that it is good and right to spend time reflecting on something that is so important to Christians in our current cultural moment (p. 9). Furthermore, they recognise that 'if God has spoken about gender... And if his ways are always good and freeing for us; we will do well to consider them seriously (p. 12).

Beynon and Tooher begin by isolating the common proclivities of the church in implementing complementarian beliefs. These include the tendency towards separatism (i.e., men's and women's ministry running in parallel); a focus on boundaries rather than dynamics; discussion removed from the church context; and expressive individualism—the current cultural belief that everything in us must be expressed for us to be whole (pp. 14–16). These concerns are addressed and developed throughout the remainder of the book.

Chapter 2 provides a fascinating and accessible overview of the history and definitions of equity feminism versus gender feminism (pp. 26–27). The authors reject the latter, affirming that while men and women are equal in dignity, worth, and propensity to sin, the Bible and biological research supports the differences between men and women. The two sexes are neither indistinguishable nor interchangeable. It is here that Beynon and Tooher narrow in on their focus: complementarian churches. They consider that while complementarian churches may not struggle with the fact that males and females are distinct





in themselves, there are differing views as to how to apply their distinct gender roles. A complementarian with a narrow view of gender may say that ‘God only specifies gender roles for certain areas of life, namely marriage and church leadership,’ while a complementarian with a broad view of gender views these teachings as paradigmatic for all of life (p. 32). These different views are weighed up, and readers are wisely left to judge for themselves—although this will no doubt frustrate some.

In chapter 3, the authors transform the requisite examination of Genesis 1–2 into a helpful primer for walking in the other gender’s shoes (p. 47). They note that those who believe men and women are truly created equal will work hard at noticing and addressing their unconscious assumptions and will honour, rather than discount, differences (p. 48). This section is sensitive both to the dangers of excessive cynicism and naive optimism. Readers are reminded that it’s important to examine what one labels ‘normal’ behaviour: is it simply the behaviour of your own sex? If so, is that really fair (pp. 47–48)?

Godliness is the calling of both sexes, and since the Spirit is given to both, complementarian churches must make sure that the archetype of godliness is not manliness or womanliness but Christlikeness (pp. 54–57). This is the argument of chapter 4, and again, it’s addressed with nuance and biblical clarity. The authors note that in Jesus and Paul’s interactions with women, there is no embarrassment or suspicion. Yet they also point out that godliness *is* expressed through gender and gender roles. Pressing towards application, they pose questions to the church, such as:

But when setting up a theology reading group at a church, who is invited? What are the topics on the agenda at men’s and women’s groups? Are women’s conferences aimed at ‘lighter’ areas or serious teaching? Who do we consider for deeper theological education?... We must beware in case we subtly show that we think it is only men and their ministry which really counts. (p. 63)

While the chapter on male leadership in the church (ch. 5) is a solid but unsurprising offering, the following chapters seek to break new ground. As discerned above, the authors are interested in context, arguing that ‘many discussions of complementarianism have assumed an understanding of the church, or at worst, ignored it’ (p. 83). Consequently, chapter 6 is appropriately titled ‘Understanding Church.’ In addressing the oft-quoted Galatians 3:28, Beynon and Tooher observe that ‘becoming a Christian does not eliminate... differences. But it does eliminate the divisions caused by such differences’ (p. 85). While different facets of church life are discussed, the underlying thesis is that if church is family, then ‘you can only see if a church is growing by looking at the quality of relationships’ (p. 89). They argue, both biblically and helpfully, that inefficiency, difficulty or the danger of temptation are never reasons to steer clear of relationships within the church (pp. 87, 92). At the same time, the potential for authority to be abused is also highlighted, not as a reason to reject it, but to ensure that it is exercised biblically (p. 94).

Chapter 7 discusses the scope of ministry, for ‘if preaching is the ministry that really counts, then ministry done by women is already in second place’ (p. 97). It encourages readers to ask whether they truly believe ‘that the contribution of women is essential for the advance of the kingdom,’ because how one feels about the role will impact the decisions one makes (pp. 102–3). The authors conclude the chapter with a list of ways they believe women can complement men within church ministry, from small groups to input into preaching and eldership discussions. Not only are these helpful ideas but they also demonstrate how to practise complementarianism, for ‘rightly understood, complementarianism is an argument for how essential the contribution of women is’ (p. 105).

This emphasis on praxis continues in the final two chapters, which look at the decisions church leaders need to make and how to go about implementing changes. While chapter 8 lays out biblical and

complementarian convictions and guides leaders through a mapping exercise, the identification of two ‘common temptations’ provides a helpful lens through which to do so. By isolating and identifying the lure of ‘traditionalism’ (doing what has always been done) and ‘pragmatism’ (doing what works best) the authors provide a way to critique as well as create culture (p. 113). Chapter 9 then walks leaders through the process of implementation: from how to have good conversations to examining why women might decline when asked to serve in certain ways. They conclude by affirming that after due consideration has been given to convictions, ‘it’s a good idea for elders to be willing to experiment and give things a try’ (pp. 138–39).

The conclusion provides a refreshing stance and a good summation of the book as a whole. This is a book which is seeking to step forward beyond (but never away from) biblical convictions into the joy and flourishing which come from implementation. Each chapter concludes with questions for individuals and groups, and the book’s four appendixes address specific topics (‘Can Only Elders Preach?’; ‘Common Grey Areas’; ‘Women on Staff Teams’; ‘Writing a Position Paper’) with clarity. Throughout there is an attentiveness to nuance and debate, yet the authors never lose sight of their main argument. There is a strong focus not only on what Christians believe but also on how they act and feel, and what these actions and feelings convey to their brothers and sisters in Christ.

While this book is marketed to Christians in general, much of its application is directed toward church leaders. While the authors acknowledge this, I was left with the impression that the main application for a layperson would be to give the book to their pastor (p. 14). A sentence or two addressing (if not correcting) this impression would have enriched the work further. Strangely, the book lacks a conclusion, and while it achieves its self-stated goal of rejoicing in complementarianism at various point throughout, I wonder if a conclusion depicting a historical scenario where men and women have fruitfully worked together for God’s kingdom might have served well to end on a deserved note of practical joy.

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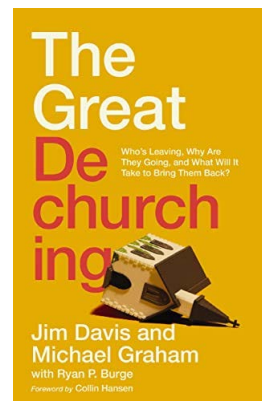
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Jim Davis and Michael Graham with Ryan P. Burge. *The Great Dechurching: Who’s Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2023. xxiv + 272 pp. £18.99/\$29.99.

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Are there any advantages to growing up in a family that did not attend church? A life spent pursuing the fleeting pleasures of sin, the flashiness of the world, and the vanity of attempting to make a name for oneself often brings shame and guilt when I think about my own past. I wish I’d never known a day when I was not attending church, hearing the gospel, and living for Christ. Imagine the dual culture shock I experienced when I was converted a month before turning 25 and moved from California to Mississippi. By God’s grace, he gave me a hunger for his Word and a natural insight into the mind of someone far from God.

I grew up in unchurched California but now serve in what Flannery O’Conner called the Christ-haunted South. In Mississippi, church buildings line



the landscape but are rarely full. Church members are often discouraged and wonder when their church will experience the glory days of the past. So, when I heard about *The Great Dechurching* by Jim Davis and Michael Graham with Ryan P. Burge, I was eager to read their assessment of this momentous shift in the religious history of the United States.

Jim Davis is a teaching pastor at Orlando Grace Church and hosts the *As in Heaven* podcast. Michael Graham is the program director for the Keller Center of Cultural Apologetics and executive producer of the *As in Heaven* podcast. Ryan P. Burge is a pastor, an assistant professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University, and author of *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2021). Their book analyzes the current religious landscape, offers tips for preventing more from leaving the church, and provides helpful suggestions to reach the countless family members, friends, and neighbors who are now dechurched.

The need for this book arises in the context of American religious history. There have been three periods of rapid growth in church attendance in the United States—the First Great Awakening (1730s–1740s), the Second Great Awakening (1790–1840), and the four decades after the Civil War (1870–1906). As important as these increases were, the most significant shift has occurred over the last 25 years. Forty million people in America have stopped attending church. 15.5 percent of American adults have dechurched. Shockingly, “more people have left the church in the last twenty-five years than all the new people who became Christians from the First Great Awakening, Second Great Awakening, and Billy Graham crusades combined” (p. 5, emphasis original). *The Great Dechurching* identifies who is leaving the church in the United States, where they are going, and what it will take to bring them back to church.

After a brief foreword by Collin Hansen and an introduction, the book divides into four sections. The authors indicate their research methodology in the introduction. Davis and Graham enlist the expertise of sociologists Ryan Burge and Paul Djupe, who conduct their research in three phases. In phase 1, researchers seek to discern how big the problem of dechurching is. A dechurched person is “someone who used to go to church at least once per month but now goes less than once a year” (p. xxi). Phase 2 surveys dechurched people from all religious traditions and finds “no theological tradition, age group, ethnicity, political affiliation, education level, geographic location, or income bracket escaped the dechurching in America” (p. xxiii). Phase 3 focuses on people who dechurched from evangelical churches.

“Part 1: Meet the Dechurched” introduces the reader to America’s forty million dechurched people. The authors give historical context and reasons for the shift beginning in the 1990s, including the link forged between the words American and Christian during the Cold War, the fallout from a polarized religious right, and the advent of the internet. While dechurching is happening everywhere, surveys indicate that not everyone is leaving for the same reasons. Surprisingly, their research reveals that “in every tradition, the more education people have, the more likely they are to stay in church” (p. 25), and those making less money are likelier to dechurch than those who make more (p. 26).

Davis and Graham offer descriptions of the dechurched in “Part 2: Profiles of the Dechurched.” They provide a sketch of five groups discerned from their research: (1) *Cultural Christians*—the largest group showing little evidence of conversion; (2) *Dechurched Mainstream Evangelicals*—a group high in orthodoxy, but who stopped attending due to a move or change of habit; (3) *Exvangelicals*—a group who have consciously and permanently left evangelical churches; (4) *Dechurched BIPOC*—a group describing

those who are black, indigenous, and people of color who dechurched; and (5) *Dechurched Mainline Protestants and Catholics*—those who dechurched from mainline denominations or Catholicism.

In “Part 3: Engaging the Dechurched,” the book moves from description to prescription. While realizing the magnitude of American adults who have dechurched in the last 25 years is devastating, Davis and Graham believe there are ways to win them back. The church must appropriately apply its doctrines to see the 51 percent of dechurched evangelicals who state they are open to coming back (p. 120). The authors advocate an engagement that exhibits a quiet, calm curiosity and embodies an ever-increasing awareness of God, self, others, emotions, relations, and culture (p. 145). Christians should work to improve their relational intelligence and understand that generational hand-offs of the faith are more likely to be missed during certain life stages. Crucial transitions include entering high school, college, and young adulthood. Readers are also encouraged to follow Paul’s model in Acts 17 of comprehending, commending, and critiquing in order to engage the dechurched helpfully.

“Part 4: Lessons for the Church” provides a way forward for the church. Davis and Graham discuss the necessity of spiritual formation and the need to monitor our information diets so that we will not be more influenced by artificial intelligence and algorithms than by Christian teaching. The way forward will include being confessional and missional; that is, churches must grow theologically and grow in their desire to see the people led to Christ. The book concludes with a general encouragement for believers to get used to living at the cultural margins and with five exhortations to church leaders.

Not all readers will be equally persuaded by everything the authors describe or suggest in their book. For instance, I found the sketch of the exvangelical a bit sensational for an average illustration of someone in this category. I also thought the Two-Chapter vs. Four-Chapter Gospel section could do with more explanation and argumentation (pp. 190–92).

With that said, I commend *The Great Dechurching* for three reasons. First, I appreciate the authors calling those who can meet in person but only worship online *dechurched*. They write: “We have enough data now to see that streaming fuels consumeristic church, enables laziness, and fools people into thinking they’re being nourished and built up. Online church is the CliffsNotes of worship. It’s a cheap substitute” (p. 172).

Second, there is great benefit to having research that backs up impressions and anecdotes about people who are no longer attending church. Moreover, the authors make the research accessible and understandable with plenty of graphs and charts. The surveys help Christians and churches understand *why* people left and *what* it will take to see them return. The stories further help to put names and faces on the statistics.

Third, while being research-oriented, the authors offer numerous practical suggestions throughout the book. For example:

If there is one single application from our research that you walk away with, please let it be this: invite your dechurched friends back to a healthy church with you. But unlike a simple nudge to go back to the gym, we would do well to open the doors to our homes and chairs at our table. We aren’t just telling them they should go back to church; we are inviting them into our lives, which includes church. (p. 123)

I plan to guide our church leaders through a discussion of this book. Not only is its analysis insightful, but its suggestions are helpful, and most are simple to implement. But this book is not only for those in leadership. Its clarity and practicality make it suitable for use in a small group or as a discipleship tool.

*The Great Dechurching* is a timely and hopeful book that will help us to re-church the dechurched from California to Mississippi.

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Louise Perry. *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution: A New Guide to Sex in the 21st Century*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022. 200 pp. £14.99/\$19.95.

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Mary Harrington. *Feminism Against Progress*. Chicago: Regenery, 2023. 254 pp. £16.99/\$29.99.

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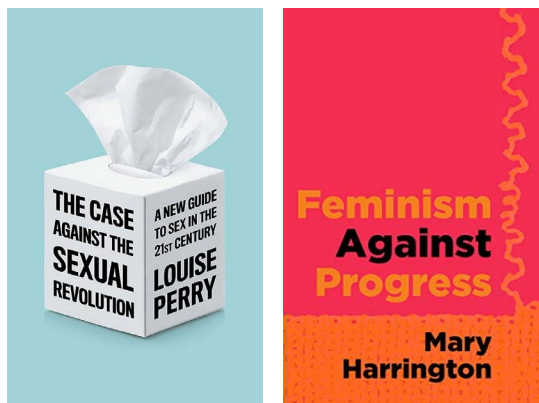
The two books under consideration in this review are symptomatic of the struggle for cultural leadership in the changing Western world. As such they are important signposts for Christians in our engagement with the world.

It is usually the symptoms of malady that drive us to the doctor. The work of the doctor goes beyond treating the symptoms to diagnosing the disease that gave rise to the symptoms. From that diagnosis comes the doctor's prognosis of the outcome of the disease if untreated and the prescription of medicine or surgery that could cure or arrest the disease. But if the diagnosis is wrong, then the prognosis will also be wrong and, worse still, the prescriptions may well do more damage than the disease itself.

Diagnosing physical ailments requires a highly trained physician because of our physiological complexity. However, diagnosing social ailments is considerably more difficult. Society and culture are so complex that no amount of research and analysis can be definitive. The Enlightenment dream of decision making on the basis of scientifically demonstrable facts and a utilitarian maximisation of happiness has often failed to materialise, especially in the long term. (Easing symptoms in the short term is quite different to curing disease in the long term.) Moreover, as history painfully demonstrates, top-down social change usually results in some form of collateral damage.

Bottom-up social change, on the other hand, normally happens more incrementally and usually as a consequence of innumerable factors and causes. But even then, pinpointing one or even a few major components of the resulting shift is very difficult. General observations are therefore easily dismissed as failing to consider or weigh accurately some particular factor that has helped to produce social change.

Two related areas of massive social change occurred last century and the effects of both continue to be felt today: the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the feminist revolution in the 1970s. Both movements appeared to be addressing problems in Western culture with an alternative way of life that would lead to social improvement. Both were grass roots movements that have now garnered a high degree of institutional and even governmental support. Both have now been running long enough to evaluate their success.



Louise Perry's *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution* and Mary Harrington's *Feminism Against Progress* are attempts to weigh the result of these revolutions. Given the scope of their concerns, they both speak in broad generalisations that pedants and opponents can always challenge at the level of detail. But their arguments open up very valuable debates and their general theses have much to commend them.

Neither book is written from outside the movements they critique. Rather, they are written by women of the second generation of these revolutions, women who have been raised to accept the (supposed) goods that these social changes have promised. Both books have weighed these changes and found them wanting. They both, in different ways, argue that instead of improving the human condition, the changes wrought by these revolutions have further damaged it—especially for women.

Both books highlight the significance of the technological developments that lie behind so much of what they are seeking to evaluate, especially the advent of the contraceptive pill. The ability of women to control their fertility through the pill was, in their analysis, a significant game changer. The pill gave women the right and power to control their sexual and relational lives. It encouraged women to engage in casual sex in the same way as many men. It also separated gender from biology, removing considerations of sex difference from social policy or lifestyle decisions.

To a large extent, both books have grown out of the authors' life experiences of motherhood. For the birth of their firstborn children not only led them to a re-evaluation of life's purpose and the importance of biological reality but freed them from many of the lies they had inherited from the feminist and sexual revolutions.

Neither book is Christian, however, and (notwithstanding Perry's admission that she is deeply drawn to Christianity) neither author would claim to be Christian. Likewise, although Harrington occasionally uses theological language, neither book appeals to Christian understanding to make its case. They are both utilitarian evaluations of the failure of the sexual revolution and the feminist movement. Nevertheless, they accurately recount some of the very negative consequences of the false prescriptions that flowed out of the false diagnoses—negative consequences especially suffered by women.

Part of their critique of the life they inherited is based on their criticism of the shift from Enlightenment Modernism to Deconstructed Post-Modernism. Consequently, both are advocates of the modernist worldview that, despite having spawned post-modernism, now wants to call society back to the Enlightenment. This struggle between the rationality of modernism and the a-rationality, if not irrationality, of post-modernism is a familiar feature of today's culture wars. Perry and Harrington are on the side of the struggle that supports non-censored rational debate, scientific methodology and settled Enlightenment morality. There is a sad irony here in that many traditional feminists, having spent half a century trying to get rid of any connection between gender roles and biological sex, are now appalled by the rise of gender self-determination and in some instances have found themselves cancelled (and worse!) for insisting on the reality of sex differences.

Interestingly, both books conclude that monogamous marriage, which the authors acknowledge comes from Christianity, is by far and away the best thing for women. Neither feminism nor the sexual revolution has protected and cared for women as much as does monogamous marriage. Considering the feminist and sexual revolutions' critique, restructuring and, in many cases, demonising of marriage, these chapters on the value of marriage may (and, indeed, have) come as a surprise to many readers.

The Bible's teaching on the right conduct of relationships between men and women—which simultaneously reveals the goodness of our creation, the damage caused by sin, the reality of God's

judgement and our desperate need for redemption—gives us a diagnosis that makes infinitely more sense than does even the best analysis of the failed dreams of the 1960s and 70s. Still, it is refreshing that even some non-Christians can see this and books like *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution* and *Feminism Against Progress* are now documenting the great cost of false diagnosis.

Therefore, while these books will teach Christians little at one level, they will confirm what we already know to be true from Scripture. More than that, they helpfully provide us with empirical arguments that will assist those of us who have felt browbeaten into the silence of self-censorship to re-engage in public debate. They are thus useful books to share with non-Christian friends to show them that the world's answers are manifestly failing. They are evidence that we should not weaken our opposition to either feminism or the sexual revolution but rather teach God's standards as the right ones for the twenty-first century.

Christians should never have fallen for the false diagnoses of these revolutions. Our pre-modern diagnosis comes from the Scriptures and teaches the value of both men and women created with the relational potential for marriage and the reproductive potential to produce godly offspring. Many Christians have tried to accommodate the Bible's teaching to the sexual revolution in the serialised polygamy of divorce and remarriage. Others have tried to adapt the Bible to a feminist reading that pathologises all power and patriarchy—forgetting that our God is the all-powerful Father from whom all fatherhood is named. Such accommodations were never right and are now seen, even by non-Christian authors like Perry and Harrington, to be failures.

The Bible's diagnosis of our plight must not be ignored or compromised. Its prognosis of the outcome of human autonomy makes perfect sense of the state of our present society. The Bible's prescription of repentance, forgiveness and holiness, made possible by God's redeeming work in Jesus's death, resurrection and ascension, and the pouring out of his Spirit, is our only hope. We must keep living it and proclaiming it.

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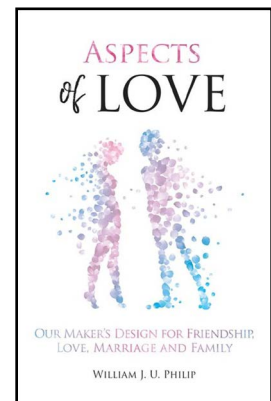
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William J. U. Philip. *Aspects of Love: Our Maker's Design for Friendship, Love, Marriage and Family*. Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2019. 192 pp. £9.99/\$12.99.

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In the world of Christian literature, monographs on friendship, love, sex, marriage, singleness, divorce, remarriage, and parenthood are easy enough to find. Harder to find are books that tackle all of these themes together and do so without being either intimidatingly long or unsatisfyingly superficial. But that is precisely what William Philip, minister of the Tron Church in Glasgow, has managed to produce. In less than 200 pages, *Aspects of Love: Our Maker's Design for Friendship, Love, Marriage and Family* provides “the basics we all need to know” for “a healthy and a wholesome approach to all our relationships, sexual and otherwise” (p. 11).

In his introduction, Philip discloses that the book's main chapters began as sermons—indeed, sermons that “proved helpful to many (not least in prompting



quite a rash of marriages, and a subsequent baby-boom in our church!)" (p. 11). This accounts for the book's (often) conversational tone and (general) homiletical flavor, evidenced by numerous instances of alliteration: e.g., real friendship demands "constancy, candour and Christlikeness" (p. 27) and, in searching for a spouse, "Don't be too cautious," "Don't be too cavalier," and "Don't be too conspicuous" (pp. 72–73). But for all its rhetorical features, the book is no less theological and, in many of its chapters, is strongly exegetical.

Chapter 1 (on friendship) lays the foundation for the rest of the book. This is because "God's primary answer" to our need for love is the "friendship of his own family" (p. 15). The chapter is vital (especially for men who, as Philip notes, often struggle to form deep friendships) and brims with salient insights—many taken from C. S. Lewis's *The Four Loves* (London: Collins, 1960, 2012). Friendships matter, as much for the married as for the unmarried. So, while the author warns couples "not to confuse their bedroom door with their front door" (p. 23), keeping the former closed to others and the latter open, he rightly insists that marriage "is not designed to meet all our needs for this aspect of love, for friendship" (p. 20).

What then is the purpose of marriage? In answering this question, chapter 2 begins by pointing out that marriage is not "just a social convention" or "cultural custom" but a divine gift and "part of God's universal order for all humanity" (p. 40). This explains why attempts to overturn this order are both sinful and foolish, and why the sexual revolution of the last half century or so has not delivered "the glorious nirvana it promised" (p. 40). But marriage is not only *from* God, it is also *for* God; it has a missionary purpose "to serve His eternal kingdom" (p. 43). While it does this through "partnership, procreation and protection" (p. 43), the "'face-to-face,' romantic, erotic love of marriage is there for the 'side-by-side' task of kingdom service" (p. 49).

Chapter 3 turns to the question of "how we go about finding our way into marriage—if that is to be God's gift to us" (p. 57). Answering this question provides Philip with an opportunity not only to advise couples as to how to navigate this path in a godly manner but also to address our culture's idolization of sex and the way this has impacted the church. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the fact that "the gospel is *the* romance which all other true romance reflects" (p. 75, emphasis original). This then naturally leads into chapter 4 ("The Relationship of Marriage"), which consists of a winsome and convincing complementarian exposition of Ephesians 5:21–33. On the basis of verses 30 and 31, Philip concludes that the ultimate purpose of marriage is "so that people might see something on earth so beautiful that it speaks eloquently of the greatness of God's love and the joyful purpose of his grace in winning a bride for his Son" (p. 95).

Chapter 5 opens up the painful subject of "The Rupture of Marriage" and, through a sensitive exposition of 1 Corinthians 7 (with side-glances at Matthew 5 and 19), addresses the realities of marital tension and dysfunction, separation and reconciliation, divorce and remarriage. The chapter ends on a welcome note of grace, reminding readers that although "we must live with many consequences of things we cannot undo" (p. 114), the gospel assures that "there is restoring grace for *every* sin" (p. 115, emphasis original).

Unpacking additional elements of 1 Corinthians 7, chapter 6 turns to "The Refusal, Removal & Renouncing of Marriage." Here Philip explores the various reasons for singleness (including the experience of same-sex attraction), the goodness and advantages of remaining unmarried, and the need for godly contentment, whatever our circumstances. The chapter also includes a valuable section on how to restore gently those who have fallen into sexual sin.



Chapters 7 and 8 tackle the *purpose* and the *pursuit* of parenthood, respectively. Philip begins by challenging both the contemporary secular view that a couple's decision to have children is "a personal lifestyle choice," and the Roman Catholic view that "the primary purpose of marriage is procreation" (p. 140). That said, Philip is convinced that while there may be legitimate reasons (e.g., medical) why some couples should not have children, as well as a valid use of ethical forms of contraception in family planning, "a marriage that is closed in principle to all hope of children is in rebellion against God's stated purpose for us" (p. 153).

Of course, many couples desire to have children but find themselves unable to do so. This leads Philip to a consideration of "the right (and wrong) ways Christians may pursue the parenthood that they long for" (p. 161). In doing so, he not only taps into his own pastoral experience and medical training but, by drawing on the wisdom in John Wyatt's *Matters of Life and Death: Human Dilemmas in the Light of the Christian Faith* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2009), he helpfully distinguishes between ethical and unethical uses of medical technology. He also discusses the option (and challenges) of adoption, as well as the need for some couples to accept, without bitterness and resentment, that childlessness is God's good will for them (pp. 176–77).

A book of this size cannot hope to cover everything that readers (or indeed the author) desire. Nevertheless, there were two matters that, in my view, warranted a brief comment but did not receive one. The first concerns the ugly reality of domestic abuse, particularly when it occurs in Christian marriages, and how the Bible's teaching on divorce might apply to it. The second concerns the falling away of children raised in Christian homes and the fact that the only explanation for this tragic phenomenon mentioned in the book is that of legalistic parenting (p. 147). Doubtless, Philip does not mean to imply that this is *always* the reason. But given the false guilt that many faithful parents carry, a clarifying sentence would not have gone astray.

These omissions aside, for those looking for a clear and compelling introduction to biblical relational and sexual ethics, *Aspect of Love* is something of a one-stop-shop. Completed by suggestions for further reading and "Think it Through Discussion Questions," I struggle to think of a better place to start.

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Matthew Ichihashi Potts. *Forgiveness: An Alternative Account*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. 288 pp. £20/\$30.

Nothing can be more perplexing than the phenomenon of forgiveness. While many theologians have sought to articulate a Christian view of forgiveness, Matthew Ichihashi Potts's volume is a unique addition to the discussion, as he refuses to affirm traditional theological presuppositions and aspires to construct a new Christian view of forgiveness.

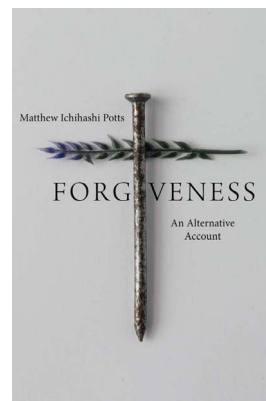
The book opens with the voice of Reverend Waltrina Middleton, a cousin of Depayne Middleton, a victim of the 2015 Charleston shooting. To "insist upon a narrative of forgiveness is dehumanizing and violent, and it goes against the very nature of lament" (p. 12). This frames the central question of Potts's book: how can forgiveness wrestle with lament? He endeavors to answer it by laying out a "modest theological defense of forgiveness" (p. 18) in which the victim's grief and legitimate anger are not brushed aside by a triumphant narrative of cheap forgiveness.

The first chapter explores how forgiveness can keep perpetrators accountable for their sins. Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Buried Giant* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015) is used to frame the conversation, while Vladimir Jankélévitch, Jacques Derrida, and Hannah Arendt serve as philosophical interlocutors. Historically, retribution has been the default reaction against wrongdoing, often institutionalized by a violent sovereign. Yet such attempts at "bookkeeping" inevitably lead to a never-ending cycle of violence. Hence Potts argues that what we need is Arendt's "new beginning," which is only accomplished by accepting loss as irrevocable and abandoning any compensatory means of righting the past.

The second chapter turns to the issue of confession. Following an analysis of Michel Foucault and Martha Nussbaum, Potts demonstrates how confession of sin has functioned as "currency" for transactional models of punishment and forgiveness. Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004), with its narration of intergenerational patterns of unforgiveness, is used to point to the dangers of self-articulation as a means of self-justification. Developing the insights of Judith Butler, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Tanabe Hajime, Potts argues for the impossibility of self-narration and the necessity of persistent penitence. Instead of confession functioning as a "price paid for absolution" (p. 111), it may serve as a giving over of the self to foster common memory.

The third chapter deals with the theology of atonement. Traditional accounts have articulated forgiveness in terms of the foreswearing of anger, whether divine or human. Potts rejects the inclusion of affective change in his definition of forgiveness. This also leads him to deny substitutionary models of the atonement, as forgiveness "upsets the entire compensatory economy of loss" (p. 210). Borrowing from Julian of Norwich and Hans von Balthasar, Potts proposes we view atonement not as sin's erasure, but as God sending away Christ, who "crosses the distance of sin" (p. 243). Christ's estrangement from God allows the span of divine embrace to reach the lost. Louise Erdrich's *LaRose* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016) is then used to illustrate both the impossibility of substitutionary atonement and also to point to an alternative. As the gift of *LaRose* served as a bridge between the two families in ending the cycle of revenge, so Christ serves as our bridge to forgiveness, not as a substitute for our sins but because our love for him compels us to forswear retribution.

The fourth chapter questions the relationship between memory, forgiveness, and resurrection. Potts criticizes triumphant portrayals of the resurrection that eclipse the tragedy of the cross. The empty



tomb was first and foremost a loss for the disciples, which gave rise to the Gospel narratives in their attempts to make meaning out of loss. When our vision of forgiveness is too preoccupied with the “happy ending” of the resurrection or eschatological vindication (a tendency Potts sees in Miroslav Volf), the risk is a dangerous erasure of the past. This danger is vividly illustrated by Potts’s fresh interpretation of Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987). To avoid such a pitfall, Potts builds upon Rowan Williams and M. Shawn Copeland to develop a view of the resurrection imagined as loss, which essentially leads to mourning and narration.

Potts’s volume makes a valuable contribution to the discussion about forgiveness. The sheer breadth of interlocutors he invites to the table makes it a must-read for anyone interested in the subject. As an exercise in moral theology, it not only attempts to revise traditional accounts of forgiveness but, in redefining sin, love, atonement, and resurrection, turns several key doctrines upside-down. Potts is thus highly innovative in his approach. Moreover, he is right to challenge the tendency of the tradition to portray forgiveness as a transaction, for the past can never be exchanged by retribution or confession. Indeed, a model of forgiveness which does not grapple with the impossibility of undoing the past risks suppressing painful memories for the sake of premature “reconciliation.” Viewing forgiveness as a form of mourning, then, is a necessary corrective, as it does not eclipse but includes legitimate anger and lament as constitutive of forgiveness.

Another important element in Potts’s work is his analysis of forgiveness in relation to systemic violence. He asks the salient question: “Why is it so often people of color and people already marginalized by systemic violence upon whom this forgiving responsibility falls?” (p. 12). While forgiveness has often been discussed in terms of the relationship between the wrongdoer and the victim, Pott’s volume is exceptional in addressing systemic and generational evil. The social and intergenerational elements are evident in the four novels with which he interacts, expanding the reader’s insight into the scope of forgiveness.

However, the book’s attempt at reconstruing Christian forgiveness encounters serious challenges. Although the reconfiguration of sin as distance is a helpful concept, this spatial imagery encounters difficulty when love, too, is defined in terms of keeping a distance for the sake of the other. Perhaps most questionable is his idea that, because of love, God is infinitely other to himself in his triune economy, and “love within God admits space for the distance of sin” (p. 241). This bifurcation between the immanent and economic trinities would seem to fly in the face of orthodox trinitarian affirmations of God’s unity. Furthermore, although the critique of traditional models of atonement merits consideration, the alternative proposed by Potts offers too little as a remedy for sin. When the atonement is narrated as Christ crossing the distance of sin, it is unclear how Christ also delivers us from the *effects* of sin. Similarly, while Potts’s depiction of the resurrection as mourning is intriguing, it contradicts numerous New Testament texts, where the resurrection is proclaimed as the victory of God (e.g., 1 Cor 15). Finally, his radically revisionist “alternative account” of forgiveness risks rendering the theology of forgiveness unintelligible to ordinary Christians, particularly the voiceless and the marginalized. This is ironic, since Potts truly intends to speak on behalf of those who are most likely to suffer from the excess burdens of forgiveness.

If traditional models have erred in demanding too much of forgiveness, I worry that Potts is asking too little. His rejection of any affective dimension to forgiveness, his isolation of forgiveness from reconciliation, and his minimalistic definition of forgiveness as a foreswearing of revenge, reveal that what Potts describes as “forgiveness” is far removed from what is normally understood by the term. In

his zeal to escape “cheap forgiveness,” he may have wandered into the realm of “costly despair.” Although traditional models have tended to deny victims their right to lament and feel legitimate anger, Potts’s account risks depriving them of the healing and reconciliation they need.

*Forgiveness: An Alternative Account* is a truly original work that will benefit anyone wrestling with the dilemma of forgiveness. While its main thesis cannot be endorsed, it provides a helpful corrective in a world where forgiveness is too often replaced by cheap grace.

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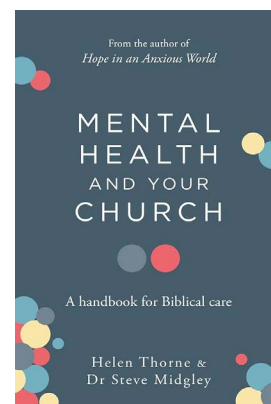
Helen Thorne and Steve Midgley. *Mental Health and Your Church: A Handbook for Biblical Care*. Washington, D.C.: The Good Book Company, 2023. 144 pp. £9.99/\$16.99.

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Mental health (hereafter, MH) has come into the spotlight in our post-covid world, and rightly so. One in six people experience a significant MH struggle each week. And while MH does exist on a spectrum, according to Helen Thorne and Steve Midgley (Director of Training and Resources and Executive Director, respectively, at Biblical Counselling UK), everyone is somewhere on that spectrum (p. 27). This reality is key to understanding the thesis of *Mental Health and Your Church*, which is that by acknowledging that we are all ‘much more alike than different’ (p. 27) and resisting ‘the idea that mental-health disorders place people into such a distinct category that Scripture no longer has a voice’ (p. 29), any believer can offer a helping hand to someone struggling with their MH. Such an argument does not mean that professionals are unhelpful or that medication has no place, as Thorne and Midgley are quick to point out, but it does mean that supporting, equipping and accepting our mentally ill brothers and sisters lies within the grasp of all of us. It is certainly within the purview of the church, for following the teachings of Jesus means that ‘those who struggle today don’t have an invitation to belong merely as second-class citizens; the church is still designed to be a first-class home for everyone who puts their trust in Jesus’ (p. 16).

This expansive view of the church is described in some detail in the opening chapter and continues to shine through on every page. Thorne and Midgley’s book is not a theoretical treatise but a handbook concerned with the messy, the practical and the long-term care of suffering Christians. Case-studies are introduced and addressed throughout, representative of church members many of us will most likely have met before. While illustrative, the studies are specific enough to engage interest and helpfully reminds the reader that MH in the church is not about resources or even knowledge but about people and relationships.

The book is split into three sections. Section 1 is titled ‘Understanding Mental Illness’ and addresses the pros and cons of diagnosis and labels; the complex, interlocking realities which can affect someone’s MH alongside a biblical view of personhood; medication, what is known and unknown; and lastly, an overview of various talking therapies. This section, the smallest in the book, serves as an admirable introduction to the many facets of MH theory and treatment. It is both conventional (it is a survey of



the field, nothing new is presented) and refreshing (the authors scope out the terrain with compassion balanced by realism).

Section 2 asks (and answers!) the question upon which this book is constructed: 'What can we do?' The answer to this is prefaced by the authors' characteristic loving pragmatism and reminds Christians that while 'doing *nothing* is not an option,' 'doing *everything* isn't an option either' (p. 67, emphasis original). What follows are five 'calls' which 'focus on what is achievable for most churches' (p. 69). These are (1) the *call to raise awareness* of MH in the church, bringing hope to those who feel alone; (2) *the call to relate* well and wisely to those with MH struggles and to equip them to relate to the Lord; (3) *the call to help them remember* God's character and their identity in him; (4) *the call to refine*, understanding that realistic growth and change is not only an option but to be expected through the power of the Spirit; and (5) *the call to practically resource* and provide for the needs of those suffering, their carers and the wider church. This section is full of practical gems, and focuses on preserving the dignity and autonomy of those with mental-health struggles, even in severe cases. It goes beyond simple answers and provides helpful advice for loving those whose trauma means they are unable to open the Bible or pray. The expectations proffered in these pages are both reasonable and hopeful, and the options given for building trust and loving well can be applied and practised in a variety of church contexts. There is thus little to contest and much to embrace here. The authors' professional experience in medicine, counselling and pastoral ministry further shines as they address common issues regarding confidentiality and the chronic nature of many MH conditions. While simplistic answers are resisted, complex issues, such as the link between spiritual warfare and MH, are still helpfully explored.

Section 3 is entitled 'Caring in Practice' and consists of several extended case studies which concentrate on anxiety, depression, addiction, psychosis and caregiving. Rather than being a repetition of the strategies outlined above, they are an opportunity to test the suggestions and imagine what they might look like in the local church. A recurring theme is that multi-faceted long-term support need not be overwhelming, if entered into wisely and consciously by all involved. Through the hypothetical stories of Chi, Andy, Siobhan, Ben and Kelly, the authors prove that their strategies are anything but theoretical.

As seems to be the current trend, *Mental Health and Your Church* lacks a conclusion, ending instead with a short afterword where the authors restate their thesis in order to explain why they wrote the book (pp. 187–88). I have a small gripe here, and it is that the chapter title, 'Why We Wrote This Book,' seems more suited to chapter 1, which is rather unimaginatively titled 'Life in the Local Church' and in which they cover much of the same material. Nevertheless, in the afterword, Thorne and Midgley helpfully acknowledge the limitations of their work (mainly its brevity) and conclude with a reminder that they write as those who have received the comfort of Christ (2 Cor 1:3–4). A list of resources follows, one which could easily have included *Together Through the Storm: A Practical Guide to Christian Care* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2016) by Sally Sims, a pastoral care book of a similar, albeit slightly different, ilk.

There is little to dislike about *Mental Health and Your Church*. It achieves exactly what it sets out to do; it provides a 'resource that encourages ordinary church members to see how they can play a part in supporting and helping those struggling with their mental health' (p. 187). The restrained realism of the authors' language and perspective is welcome and refreshing in such a sensitive area. At the same time, they consistently hold out gospel hope with imagination and joy. Mountains and valleys are not planed into simplistic plateaus by minimising complexity, even in the case studies, as would have been

tempting in such a short introduction. My only suggestion (perhaps for a second edition?) would be that, in the conclusion, the authors return to the glorious image of the church that they presented in their introduction: a body filled with individuals who, in learning ‘to reflect the compassion that Christ has for all of us’, are able to ‘truly play our biblical role in welcoming, nurturing, growing and labouring alongside those who struggle—for the glory of God and the good of those around’ (p. 17).

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Nick Tucker. *12 Things God Can't Do... And How They Can Help You Sleep at Night*. Washington, D.C.: The Good Book Company, 2022. 160 pp. £8.99/\$14.99.

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Nick Tucker's *12 Things God Can't Do... And How They Can Help You Sleep at Night* is a pastorally-oriented and theologically astute work exploring the connection between the character of God and the comfort of his people. Specifically, it surveys the aseity of God through the framework of twelve things that, according to Scripture, it is impossible for God to do. It then applies these truths to everyday life with the goal of giving believers a better night's sleep. Tucker previously lectured in Church History and Christian Doctrine at Oak Hill Theological College in London and is currently in church-based ministry in the south of England. So he is well-equipped to write a book that brings together theological and pastoral insight. *12 Things God Can't Do* bears the hallmarks of a pastor-theologian seeking to understand God's character deeply in order to assist the well-being and flourishing of God's people.



The book's thesis is simple: "Knowing God better really should help us to sleep more soundly" (p. 12). The reason for this is that confidence in God's faithfulness will give the reader "a glimpse of God's greatness that will change the way you see the world—and, yes, help you sleep at night" (pp. 13–14). Tucker therefore opens the book with the very theme of sleep, highlighting that because God does not sleep, we can. Acknowledging that "sleep is something we can normally only do when we feel safe," he urges the reader to consider the significance of the fact that God cannot sleep (pp. 13–14). Drawing on the Psalms, he argues, "God will never take his eye off the ball; he will never drift off and fail to watch over and take care of his people. His people can rest, because he won't" (pp. 12–14).

The book's structure is wonderfully clear. It is comprised of twelve main chapters on the twelve things God cannot do: He cannot learn, be surprised, change his mind, be seen, bear to look at evil, change, be lonely, suffer, die, be tempted, lie, and disown himself. This approach serves as an effective and well-utilized hook, for rather than the natural tendency to contemplate what God *can* do, considering what God *can't do* allows readers to consider God's nature and character from a fresh perspective—one "which we can embrace with relief, celebrate with joy, worship with awe" (p. 20). The final chapter masterfully summarises the previous eleven things God can't do and encourages the weary believer with the truth that God cannot disown himself. Examining 2 Timothy 2:11–13, Tucker argues that God will hold true to his promises, despite the strength (or otherwise) of our faith: "If we are faithless, he remains faithful for he cannot disown himself" (2 Tim 2:13, NIV). Because God cannot disown himself, he will

not abandon us or let us fall, for “you could never rest safely in your own strength of faithfulness. But you can rest in his. So sleep well!” (p. 184).

Interspersed between these twelve chapters are five “interludes” that “wrestle with how, in the incarnation, God did the very things he cannot do” (p. 21). For example, God cannot learn, yet Jesus grew in wisdom and knowledge; God cannot be tempted, yet Jesus knew the fullness of temptation; God cannot suffer and die, and yet Jesus experienced suffering and death. The book’s interludes perceptively examine how the incarnate Son’s ability to do what is otherwise impossible for God is central to and essential for our salvation. In these sections in particular, Tucker interacts with a plethora of early Christian thinkers, especially those involved in the Trinitarian and Christological debates.

Continuing with the theme of sleep, the book’s first interlude contemplates how it can be that God incarnate sleeps, particularly in the astounding account recorded in Mark 4 of Jesus sleeping through a storm. This story demonstrates the crucial point that Jesus is truly human, and so, “able to share our limitations, whilst simultaneously being the God who cannot. In this mystery is hidden the depths of the Gospel” (p. 24). After examining how God can’t change, be lonely, suffer, or die, the interlude “God suffered and died alone” explores how the person and work of Jesus helps his people rest: “The Son of God, who by nature can neither be lonely or die, became a man and died alone.... This is the extent of his love. Who, believing that, would not find rest in it?” (p. 148).

*12 Things God Can’t Do* makes two valuable contributions to the church. First, the book addresses the gap that sometimes exists between substantial theological inquiry and sensitive pastoral practice. At times, theological discussion can be devoid of application to God’s people here and now, and pastoral works can sometimes be theologically anemic. This book, however, straddles both categories with theological acumen and pastoral acuity. Furthermore, Tucker adeptly incorporates historical theology, in particular the church fathers, drawing on theologians such as Irenaeus, Hilary of Poitiers, Athanasius, Augustine, and Anselm. He also weaves in philosophical arguments pertinent to the discussion, but always in an understandable way. This combination of theological, historical, and pastoral considerations provides a rich and serious treatment of his theme.

The book’s second contribution lies in its clear articulation of the various ways God is not like his creatures—particularly as we are often tempted to view God as simply a bigger and better version of ourselves. But Tucker is right: in contemplating how God is profoundly unlike us, immense peace and comfort can descend upon God’s people. Accordingly, this book will encourage all believers, weary or not, that it is precisely what God cannot do but in the incarnate Son who willingly takes on flesh does do that makes the gospel such a joy and makes sleep possible. As Tucker summarizes: “we sleep best at night when we know the God who cannot sleep, but did sleep for us” (p. 25).

Despite the book’s weighty theological, historical, and philosophical dimensions, it is engaging for the everyday reader. Tucker’s clear and accessible writing style means that it can be read by a broad audience, theological novice and expert alike. The tone is warm and approachable, and vignettes of stories, personal anecdotes, and engagement with popular culture, music, films, and poetry draw the reader in and carry the book along. Often, the book reads like a good sermon—biblically sound, theologically precise, personally engaging, and pastorally attuned. This is unsurprising, given Tucker’s



week-by-week work in the pulpit. All these elements combine to create the overall character of the book: rich theology applied to real life.

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Christopher Watkin. *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022. 672 pp. £30.00/\$49.99.

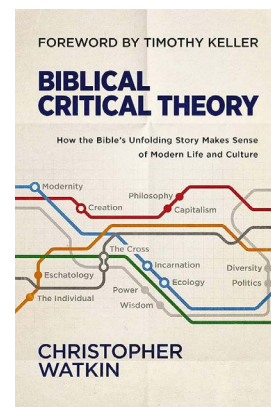
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The summer of 2020 is memorable for many things, none of them particularly positive: Covid, the death of George Floyd, and social turmoil across many western countries, focused particularly on the colonial past of Europe and the United States. And, in the midst of all the chaos, the term ‘Critical Theory’ (CT)—specifically in the form of ‘Critical Race Theory’—entered common parlance. Once a highly specialized phenomenon of little current interest outside postgraduate seminars in the humanities, suddenly everyone—especially those with Twitter accounts and personal blogs—was an expert in the field. Most surprising of all was how many Christians seemed eager to be in on the action. And so, CT moved into the mainstream, becoming a point of conflict at school boards, institutions of higher education, and churches, both locally and at the denominational level. Indeed, it became a shibboleth, a tribal marker with the simple question, ‘Are you for it or against it?’, requiring a simple yes or no answer as a test of orthodoxy on both sides in the discussion.

Yet the problem with such an approach is obvious: CT is not a unified phenomenon, nor is its literature easy to understand. With one stream of CT finding its roots in Hegel and the other in French post-structuralism, the field is rife with rebarbative prose, opaque arguments, and slippery conclusions. And the highly politicized role CT has come to play in current cultural discussions makes it hard to find a reliable guide to the issue and, even more importantly, a sound proposal for a Christian response and alternative. Christopher Watkin seeks to address this lacuna in his major book, *Biblical Critical Theory*.

CT seeks to do two basic things. It strives to expose the contingent nature of the reality we as human subjects experience and in which we participate; and it aims by so doing to alter the way we think and relate to the world around us. Further, at the core of CT, whether of the Marxist variety associated with the Frankfurt School or the post-structuralist variety connected to Michel Foucault, is the notion that power and manipulation lie behind the apparently natural but in reality socially constructed world we inhabit. So understood, CT has clear affinities with Christianity. Christianity claims that the world and our perception of it are distorted by sin, that we live according to lies, and that all human relationships are marked to some degree by selfishness. What Watkin does is build on these and other affinities in order to move beyond knee-jerk and simplistic ‘Boo!’ or ‘Hooray!’ alternatives and to mark a path forward.

The guiding light of Watkin’s project is Augustine, whose *City of God* is arguably the first and greatest example of what a Christian CT might look like. In the course of that work, Augustine debunks the myths Rome told about itself, often by way of what later critical theorists would dub *immanent critique*,





exposing the contradictions of Rome's own narrative as a means of clearing the ground. Augustine also uses the biblical plotline to provide a grand explanatory scheme for his relativization of Rome and his assertion of the superiority of the gospel, something the contemporary theologian John Milbank refers to as 'out-narrating'.

Watkin deploys all of these elements in his own development of Biblical Critical Theory. Using the overarching biblical metanarrative to frame his analysis, he moves deftly from Christian doctrine to critique of some of the most pressing issues of our day. Much of what the book contains will be familiar to *Themelios* readers as it is solid biblical theology. The discussions of creation, fall, redemption and consummation follow familiar lines, along with those of key biblical genres, such as prophecy and wisdom. Indeed, it is in his discussion of the prophets—the great exemplars of Biblical Critical Theory—that Watkin excels. If, as Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* state, the point is not to describe the world but to change it, then the prophetic imagination is surely critical.

So, what is it about Watkin's work that makes it *critical* and not simply a re-presentation of standard biblical theology? The answer lies above all in his deployment of what he calls *diagonalization*. If a broadly covenantal scheme shapes the narrative, it is diagonalization that drives the analysis. This is the idea that many of the things human beings tend to conceptualize as opposites can be overcome when viewed from a biblical perspective that refuses to accept the (humanly constructed) opposition.

In one sense, this is a repackaging of a perennial kind of problem: How does one reconcile the one and the many, being and becoming, freedom and determinism, autonomy and dependence? These questions have preoccupied philosophy since the era of the pre-Socratics. Watkin's approach is to begin with God, in whom things dwell in perfect harmony—despite the fact that we sometimes place these things in opposition to each other (his love and his justice, for example). He then demonstrates how modern culture either demands that we affirm one or the other or adopt a synthesis of the two that produces an unsatisfying compromise—a *tertium quid*, or 'third thing', to use the technical theological term ('neither fish nor fowl', to use the untechnical non-theological expression). Finally, he moves to showing how the truths that exist harmoniously in God are manifested in the gospel, albeit in a way that is unexpected.

The obvious example is, of course, the cross: fallen human beings often place mercy in opposition to justice or develop a synthesis that is neither just nor merciful. The cross binds both together but, as the reactions of Greeks and Jews show, does so in a way that is unexpected and incomprehensible outside of the context of faith. There are, of course, many other places where this can be seen throughout Scripture. Indeed, Watkin ends his book with a discussion of attitudes to culture, noting that the West tends to see itself as normative and superior while others make all cultures equal. The gospel refuses this dichotomy, however, proposing a transcultural message that places all human efforts to make God in man's image under judgment.

This is a rich volume on a complex subject and any complaint that 'the author missed this topic' risks sounding gratuitous. Nevertheless, the book provoked several thoughts in me that the reader might wish to reflect on further. First, it is odd that little to no attention is paid to the Frankfurt School. This is no doubt a function of Watkin's work in French studies and his familiarity with and skill in expounding French critical thought. Further, as there are a number of affinities between the two streams, this is in no way a serious flaw. Yet the Hegelian Marxist stream has much to offer any discussion of CT, and its commitment to the dialectical movement of history is helpful in understanding why, for example, culture changes over time and the oppositions Watkin identifies shift and morph. Redemptive history

has clearly differentiated epochs, each with its own theological logic. But profane history is messier, and analyzing how concepts such as love and justice are understood in different times and places is a historical task. Watkin does cite Terry Eagleton numerous times, and he has certainly drawn positively from the early critical theorists and Frankfurt School associates, particularly Walter Benjamin, but it is odd that there is not more interaction with this stream.

This raises a second area of interest. Diagonalization seems to work best where the categories being 'diagonalized' are both morally equivalent and stable. Yet often neither of these applies. As to equivalence, I wonder, for example, if 'Conservative/Evolutionary Progress' and 'Progressive/Revolutionary Transformation' are really parallel (p. 554), given that the latter has accounted for incalculable suffering and bloodshed compared to the former? Watkin may not intend to indicate moral equivalence, but the reader could be forgiven for drawing that conclusion. As to stability, given that there is often no agreement (and sometimes fierce debate) about how terms such as 'justice' and 'racism' should be understood, the possibility of diagonalization seems to be put into serious question as a practical strategy.

Further, human beings are complicated, inconsistent creatures. Nobody is a pure individual or completely subsumed by the community. All of us live in different realms—family, workplace, geographical location, online. Life does not consist of polarized opposites but often of overlapping identities that sometimes reinforce each other, sometimes contradict each other. Life, in short, is complicated. And that means there is always a danger that a theoretical model can become not merely a helpful heuristic device but a tool for eliminating necessary complexity. For instance, Watkin's reference to Brexit, dividing the sides into those who prioritized the local and the particular over those who prioritized the universal, is far too simplistic (pp. 363–64). Issues of geography (London versus the rest), economy (those who do well out of globalization versus those whose jobs have been eliminated or jeopardized by it), workplace (the so-called 'laptop' class who can work anywhere versus the worker who has to be in a certain location), and those who prize technocracy versus those who value democracy, were all part of the Brexit phenomenon. To simplify it into local versus universal is simply naïve and misleading and not actually very 'critical' at all. The analytical model seems to function here not to illuminate the issue but to demand that a very complicated issue be forced to conform to a Procrustean bed predicated on not very complicated categories. It also left me wondering if a critical theorist of a different stripe might not accuse Watkin's diagonalization of being exactly what he insists it is not: a kind of inoffensive 'third way' that serves primarily to bolster his own kind of evangelicalism (see pp. 19–21).

But none of this is meant to detract from Watkin's remarkable achievement. This is a very learned book, replete with stimulating arguments and ideas. These criticisms are thus intended not to highlight fatal flaws but to indicate, as Watkin himself urges, that the conversation about CT in Christian circles should continue. Indeed, his hope in writing *Biblical Critical Theory* is to make it 'just a little easier for others to come after [him] and do the real labor of deploying a range of biblical figures as they carefully and painstakingly work through complex social questions' (p. 605). And so, as that important task proceeds, we can be grateful that it will now do so enriched by Watkin's graceful volume.

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— MISSION AND CULTURE —

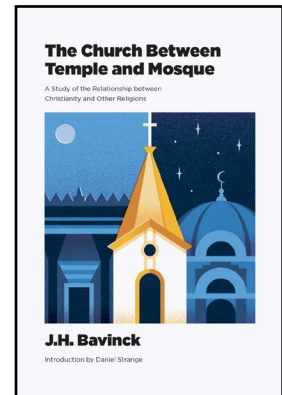
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J. H. Bavinck. *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*. Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2023. xxvii + 208 pp. £27.58/\$32.99.

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Elenctics, the field of practical theology that unmask the true nature of world religions in light of Christianity, may well be one of the most underappreciated and underutilized tools in modern missiology. While most missionaries invariably find themselves responding to the belief systems of other religions, too often a careful theology of religions is left by the wayside. Likewise, a comprehensive evaluation of shared foundations throughout other religions is often overlooked. Yet Scripture is neither silent on the nature of man nor on the universal religious yearnings which compromise the human experience.

In his posthumously published work, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, J. H. Bavinck—Dutch Reformed missionary, pastor, theologian, and twentieth-century apologist—masterfully explores Christianity in confrontation of and connection with global religions. This helpful and accessible study explores and critiques a theology of religion from a Reformed worldview. In addition to the wealth of insight in the work, Daniel Strange’s introduction to the 2023 re-released edition situates Bavinck’s approach within its original context. It highlights the work as important for today through the commendation of a major scholar in the field today.



The central axle that forms Bavinck’s elenctic approach is his fundamental conception of a universal religious consciousness, introduced in Chapter 2. Though somewhat “mysterious” and not “concrete,” this concept refers to man’s common and unified experience as a limited being who grapples with basic questions of his place in the world. Bavinck argues that Scripture understands this religious consciousness as fundamentally idolatrous, revealing a suppressed substitute knowledge of God.

Like spokes connected to this axle, Bavinck evinces five perspectives or commonalities of the religious consciousness that all people and religions experience. Bavinck calls these commonalities “magnetic points” which “demand our attention and which we cannot evade. We cannot help being confronted by them” (p. 26).

Bavinck first outlines each magnetic point in turn, before returning to examine each from a biblical perspective. The first is man’s sense of a cosmic relationship and the universal experience of being connected to the universe and the world around him. Bavinck discusses this in chapters 3 and 11. The second is the universality of a religious norm and mankind’s inescapable thirst for moral rules, outlined in Chapters 4 and 12. The third is the riddle of man’s existence in light of his destiny, explored in Chapters 5 and 13. The fourth is man’s universal need for salvation or redemption, explained in Chapters 6 and 14. Lastly, Bavinck explores man’s inescapable sense that there is a supreme power, shown in Chapters 7 and 15.

Connecting the axle and spokes together across Bavinck’s writing is his unifying conceptualization for how all human religious impulses must be understood principally from God’s perspective. Bavinck most clearly explores this desire in Chapters 9 and 10. Herein, readers should expect to find not so much a *philosophy* of religions (although his writing is certainly theoretical) as a *theology* of religions, a point rightly highlighted in the introduction by Strange. Bavinck’s writing uncovers and exposes common

religious conceptions about God and our existence by framing a true understanding of religious experience through the primacy of God's view on man's religious impulses. For Bavinck, it is not enough to consider what we see about man in response to God; instead, we must consider what God sees about man's response to God. For example, after introducing each of his key areas of religious consciousness, he powerfully writes, "The first thing we must do now is listen. So far we have simply looked around and reflected, but now it is necessary to listen to what God says" (p. 114).

A particular strength of Bavinck's approach is his able use of Scripture. In particular, he employs the paradigm of Romans 1 to frame the discussion of mankind's simultaneous yearning for knowledge and repression of truth. For Bavinck, God's self-revelation is universally evident for all humanity, as shown through the common search for God across religions. Likewise, each magnetic point in the universal religious consciousness is shown to be itself a substitution for God's design of humankind and his revelation of himself.

Yet, this universal tendency of the human heart to simultaneously yearn for knowledge and yet repress the truth is not only applied to the religious other, but also to the church. In his final chapter, Bavinck ends with a note of humility which had already characterized the entire work. He writes,

We have seen that man has always repressed this silent work of God. In this connection we recall the two forces Paul mentions, namely, repression and substitution. They show their pernicious strength everywhere. The Church can confess this quietly and honestly, because it judges *itself* with this confession. It is conscious that it has often been guilty of repression and substitution in the course of its history, and it also knows that its guilt in this respect is much greater than that of the other religions, because it has so often obscured the revealed and clear gospel of Jesus Christ behind all kinds of cunning, human reasonings. In other words, the Church can say these things without any pride. (p. 194)

This insightful study, combined with an invitingly humble candor, makes Bavinck's work a classic in the field. For theologians and practitioners alike, this work will undoubtedly be a helpful resource in meaningfully engaging the religious other. I wholeheartedly recommend *The Church Between Temple and Mosque* to anyone seeking to grow their understanding of the valuable discipline of elenctics. I pray that Westminster Press's re-release of this classic volume will raise it to the attention of a new generation.

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Derek Brotherson. *Contextualization or Syncretism? The Use of Other-Faith Worship Forms in the Bible and in Insider Movements*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021. xviii + 339 pp. £41.00/\$46.00.

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The word “contextualization” has been used in evangelical missiology for nearly fifty years. During this time, missiologists have offered numerous approaches to how one might balance the influence of a context and its culture on expressions of Christian faith while also remaining true to the biblical text and message. Often, however, what one group of missiologists appreciates as good, culturally sensitive contextualization is criticized by another group as syncretistic capitulation to culture. Over the last twenty years, one such approach to contextualization that has created a lot of heated engagement is “the insider movement (IM).”

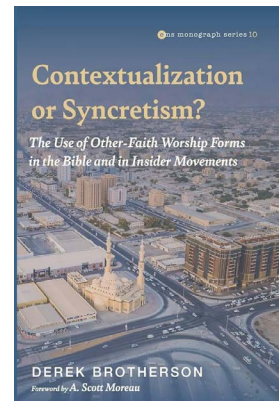
Weighing in on this discussion, Derek Brotherson has inspected the hermeneutical moves and practical conclusions of advocates and critics of IM. Specifically, his book *Contextualization or Syncretism* investigates what he calls appropriation texts, and passages that he calls resistance texts. Appropriation texts are used by IM advocates to argue for biblical precedent, while resistance texts are leveraged by critics to prohibit the use of non-prescribed forms.

His thesis is that missiologists must “draw upon the methods and insights of biblical scholars and the hermeneutical tools of biblical theology to ensure the soundness of interpretations given to key biblical texts, especially those from earlier stages in salvation history” (p. 18). Therefore, throughout his work, Brotherson attempts to address and investigate the key biblical texts undergirding the arguments for IM and inspecting the exegetical and interpretive validity of their use. One of his key conclusions is that each of the texts he investigates is primarily about true worship and not intent on weighing in on the use or prohibition of the use of certain forms (pp. 304–5).

IM advocates commonly appeal to places in the Hebrew Bible that supposedly record Israel’s appropriation of Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) rituals and forms for YHWH worship as justification for similar contemporary appropriation (p. 74). Brotherson’s commitment to the text of Scripture rightly causes him to challenge those who would appeal to hypothetical reconstructions of ANE practices and rituals to interpret and understand the biblical text.

While there may be overlap in some of the practices, Brotherson helpfully outlines five reasons that the Bible likely does not present these accounts as precedent for future replication, as often advocated by IM proponents (pp. 75–78). The first four reasons he gives are related to the tenuous reconstructions of the customs of ANE peoples and the hypothetical nature of proposals related to intentional influence. But the fifth reason is his strongest: there is no indication that the biblical authors intended to promote the use of non-Christian forms nor to set a precedent for future appropriation (p. 78).

As one might expect, Brotherson spends time in the book of Acts considering various passages used by critics and advocates to support their positions. His treatment of Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council pushes back on IM critics who argue that the specific prohibitions levied upon the gentile believers were connected to non-biblical religious cult practices. As Brotherson finds the hypothetical reconstruction of ANE practices untenable, so too does he find such proposals of gentile practices behind the prohibitions listed in Acts 15 unconvincing (pp. 214–15). Instead of a passage focused on



permitted forms, he proposes that the best reading of these judgments involves orderly and proper worship.

While there is much to be commended in this understanding, theologically, a focused consideration of right worship is not something readily apparent in the immediate text. A critical reader might question whether his worship-centered reading—which he rather abruptly defines in the first chapter without reference to supporting biblical texts or much rationale regarding his selection of authors (pp. 48–50)—obscures the focus on specific forms in those passages.

In his conclusion, Brotherson draws together his findings to argue that the Bible cannot be used to endorse appropriation of non-religious forms in the way that IM advocates often interpret it. At the same time, he concludes that the resistance texts he investigates give clear but perhaps limited prohibitions against using some but not all forms. Instead of arguing for one form of contextualization or another, Brotherson concludes that the biblical interpretation of the relevant passages is more concerned with true worship than the forms taken. He concludes, “In each text, the author’s primary concern is to equip God’s people to engage in true worship, or to help them avoid false worship, or both” (p. 291). While appreciating Brotherson’s emphasis on centering the discussion on true worship, a critical reader may remain unsatisfied that he has adequately demonstrated this worship-concern from the investigated texts of Scripture. Likewise, since worship is such a vital component of his conclusion, one would expect a more robust defense of his definition than the one offered in the introduction and simply borrowed without significant rationale from other commentators (pp. 48–50).

Finally, Brotherson offers what he calls an “outcome-focused” evaluation of whether a proposed contextualization approach results in syncretism (p. 300). By this, he means that assessment should be centered around a form’s capacity to promote true worship rather than a structuralist approach that would see certain forms as absolutely inadmissible into Christian worship (p. 300). However, such a proposal does not truly advance the discussion, as such an evaluation is implicitly subjective. Using a given form could be interpreted as true worship by an advocate and dismissed as true compromise by a critic.

In conclusion, Brotherson does an excellent job identifying some errant exegesis that occurs regularly in the IM debate. His investigation of the relevant texts is helpful and illuminating. However, the proposal for a way forward with which he concludes the book is perhaps lacking in effectual progress. Nonetheless, those involved in the contextualization discussion will do well to heed his careful attention to the biblical text, authorial intent, and exegesis as they continue to wrestle with these perennial issues involved in pursuing cultural relevance while avoiding theological syncretism.

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Steven M. Bryan. *Cultural Identity and the Purposes of God: A Biblical Theology of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Race*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022. £14.99/\$19.99.

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As Christians, how should we think about cultural identity? In this book, Bryan shows that far from being a result of the fall or a by-product of Babel, cultural diversity has been an integral part of God's vision for humanity all along. "Although many have thought of Scripture as the story of God's purposes for individuals," he observes, "that is only part of the story." Rather, the Bible "also reveals the purposes of God for peoples" (p. 34).

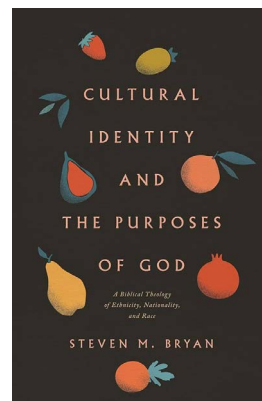
To demonstrate this, Bryan returns to the beginning, asserting that even before sin entered the world, humans were created to scatter, multiply, be fruitful, and fill the earth. The dispersion of diverse image bearers brings him glory by portraying God in his multi-faceted fullness. Chapters 1 through 5 cover the Old Testament, exploring themes of God's vision for cultural identity and how it can be twisted through humanity's rebellions. This section also examines the hope for restoration that will only come through God Himself becoming part of a people in order to redeem a people from all peoples for Himself.

In chapters 6 through 10, Bryan moves on to the New Testament, considering the abundant missional hospitality of the Messiah in the Gospel of Matthew, who invites "Israel in its Messianic form [to become] a host for all peoples—including ethnic Israel itself" (p. 153). Furthermore, Bryan describes the open temple in the Gospel of John and Paul's counsel on the practices of multicultural communities of faith in order to continue to show God's plan for his redeemed people from varied cultural backgrounds to live together in a still-diverse unity. The meaning of cultural renewal through the work of the Holy Spirit is also explored, particularly the idea that "if Babel represented human resistance to the divine purpose of an earth filled with diverse peoples unified in the worship of God, Pentecost represents the fulfillment of them" (p. 172).

The penultimate chapter discusses Revelation's vision of "all peoples as one people" worshipping God (p. 239). The final chapter presents the local church as the hope for a way of living that does not fall into the equally destructive ditches of violent inter-ethnic conflict on the one side and totalizing cultural uniformity on the other (p. 82).

Bryan roots a gospel-empowered third option for dealing with cultural difference—the way of love—in the Trinitarian God himself, who exists in an eternal dance of loving relationship with difference even within his own unity (p. 199). Indeed, if difference is eliminated in favor of the homogeneity of sameness, love is also eliminated, since love requires an "other." Particularity has always been part of God's plan, from his choice of one people, Israel, to Christ's incarnation within a specific culture. God's choice of a particular people was never the end goal. Instead, God intended the particular, chosen people of Israel to be the agents of universal blessing. In Christ, we who are reconciled to God through Christ become ministers of that reconciliation for others, and we get the joy of experiencing the reciprocal relationship of brotherhood with others who worship the Lord with cultural expressions that are different from our own, thus reflecting the multifaceted glory of the God who created cultures.

Instead of cherry-picking prooftexts as low-hanging fruit and calling it a day, Bryan considers Scripture as a whole and systematically exegetes his way through the entire biblical narrative in order to discern overarching themes stretching from Genesis to Revelation, which shed light on God's intentions





for cultural diversity. Thus, he convincingly proves his thesis that “every culture has its own shape that frames the stories of individual lives,” and “those stories come together and find their meaning within the story of God’s creation of a new humanity in Christ” (p. 261).

Bryan’s decades of cross-cultural ministry also give his words resonance and relevance across cultural barriers, because his perspective has been honed in the day-to-day experience of cross-cultural relationships as a long-time theological educator in Ethiopia in the same city where I now live and in the same field where I work. The nuanced presentation of cultural complexities, along with a clear-eyed, whole-Bible argument for cultural diversity as a key part of God’s plan, can serve to provoke thought and jumpstart (hopefully cross-cultural) conversations among Christians seeking to walk in love and mutual appreciation with those from different cultural backgrounds. A robust discussion question section at the back of the book will also benefit readers who desire to implement Bryan’s suggestions into their ministry context.

I recommend this book to anyone who is looking to move beyond a merely individualistic understanding of their faith and who is curious to explore the idea that God’s work in the world has always been focused not only on people but on *peoples*. Students of theology and intercultural studies will find a helpful companion for their own study of Scripture with regard to the purpose of culture as part of God’s eternal plan. Those who are engaged in cross-cultural relationships of any kind will also be edified by reflecting on the riches that each culture possesses as gifts from God, which can be used to glorify Him and can be shared with others across lines of cultural difference for mutual blessing.

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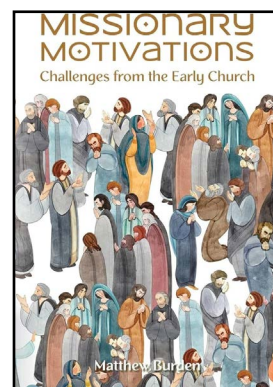
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Matthew Burden. *Missionary Motivations: Challenges from the Early Church*. Littleton, CO: William Carey, 2023. xi + 125 pp. £10.00/\$10.99.

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History shows that Christianity spread exponentially in the first few centuries after Christ’s death and resurrection. In *Missionary Motivations: Challenges from the Early Church*, Matthew Burden urges contemporary Christians to analyze the motivations driving early missionaries to propel such an expansion. Burden argues that “adding the insights of the early Christian period to the wisdom of our own missiology will strengthen the whole and will ready the church for the day when the kingdom comes in all its fullness, and the earth will be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord” (p. 125). He attempts to identify these missionary motivations and demonstrate their potential importance in contemporary missions.

Burden first introduces early Christian missions. He points out “a certain dissonance” between contemporary and early church missionary motivations, claiming that obedience to commands and concern for the lost—two motivations regularly espoused by evangelical Christians—are often absent among early Christians (p. 2). Instead, he argues, “the primary goal was simply to be a Christian, in the fullest possible sense, and to establish communities of worship wherever one went” (p. 14). For Burden, the theological underpinnings of this missionary understanding are explicitly





Christocentric, focusing on the reign of Christ, his role as the priestly king, and his victory over evil as seen in *Christus Victor* soteriology (pp. 115–17). He argues that missionary motivations of the early church flowed from these ideas as Christians viewed themselves as members and priests of Christ's kingdom.

Burden then divides his book into two parts. In part 1, he presents a historical overview of the expansion of Christianity, focusing on five geographic regions: the Roman Empire, the East (including places like India, Syria, and Persia), the South (including places like Arabia and North Africa), Central Europe, and Northern Europe. He introduces key figures, surveys aspects of their mission that potentially aided in Christian expansion, and summarizes their missionary motivations. In part 2, Burden examines the communal and individual aspects of missionary motivation in the early church. Finally, he illustrates how some of these motivations of the early church can augment contemporary mission.

Burden's "History of Expansion" section is worth the price of the book. It shines a light on the history of early church Christian missionaries, movements, and works that some Christians neglect. Burden provides a concise, accessible, and helpful introduction to mission history in this era. He includes well-known and lesser-known missionaries, suggests reasons for expansion in those areas, and introduces evangelicals to overlooked or contested missions movements. Students of mission history can benefit significantly from this helpful introduction to the subject.

Throughout, Burden attempts the challenging feat of highlighting missionary motivations that drove the early church—a goal he admits is fraught with difficulty due to a lack of sources dealing with early church mission (pp. ix, 2). He seems to recognize the tenuous position of his arguments and reconstructions of inner motivations. Therefore, Burden attempts to move through them cautiously. Still, the reader should recognize that this method comes with potential risks of misunderstanding and misrepresenting the reconstruction of unstated individual motivations. While his overarching suggestions about corporate and individual motivations are reasonable hypotheses, his method raises an interesting question: How does someone tease out motivations from various types of writing, when an author might assume unwritten motivations or encourage an important motivation overlooked by people during their time? Motivations are multi-faceted, internal stimuli that are often difficult to identify. In some instances, Burden points to obvious motivations, like Patrick's self-proclaimed concern for the lost, or external motivators, like Gregory sending Augustine to the Anglo-Saxons (pp. 76, 79). Other times, Burden admits that he pieces together motivations based on theological undercurrents and the available sources (p. ix).

Burden claims that he seeks to unearth the response to a critical question: Why did early Christians participate in mission? While he does focus on why early Christians crossed cultural boundaries, sometimes he spends more time on why the gospel was able to cross those boundaries than what prompted the gospel-bearers in the first place. Those are both important considerations, but they are not the same. The unexpected oscillation between the two sometimes brings murkiness to the argument.

In sum, Burden offers a vision of potential missionary motivations while sidestepping potential mission landmines by encouraging contemporary Christians to add these motivations to their existing ones instead of replacing them. He is not arguing that current motivations are incorrect, but that the voices of the early church might encourage and augment Christians' understanding of mission today. *Missionary Motivations* is both informative and, as the subtitle states, challenging, especially when some missiologists question the church's role in missions. Burden calls the contemporary church to see

mission as the early church saw it: the call of the victorious king to his ambassadors to set up outposts of the kingdom as they shine his light on the edges of the darkness.

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