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DESCRIPTION

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EDITORIAL

The Council of Nicaea and Christian Character

— J. V. Fesko —

J. V. Fesko is Harriet Barbour Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, and managing editor of Themelios.

The "Bonfire of the Vanities" is a title historians give to events that unfolded on February 7, 1497, in Florence, Italy. Under the inspiration of Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498), a fiery preacher and moral reformer, people brought thousands of objects of art—luxury items, lewd love poetry, games, and dice—and publicly burned them in a great bonfire. Savonarola sought to reform the lives of the citizens of Florence and rid them of their sensualistic and material cravings.[1] If we were to describe our present day situation, we might say that our culture has undertaken a "Bonfire of the Virtues." Our culture has created a bonfire and continues to toss all sorts of virtues into the fire: patience, wisdom, courage, and humility. The fire rages and the black smoke of malice and anger rises to the heavens. We can understand when the world burns the virtues, but we should be concerned when we see the church joining the riotous celebration. Peruse social media for a few minutes and it will not take long to find the same black smoke emanating from professing Christians.[2] Many self-professed Christians engage in the same online rancor that we see coming from other corners of the world: accusations, insults, sarcasm, and invective. To this I can add anecdotal evidence of serious moral failings among ministerial ranks. In the past year I have witnessed church officers who have been removed from their positions because of grievous sins. To say the least, the bonfire of the virtues within and without the church should not be a regrettable but acceptable norm. What, then, does the Council of Nicaea have to do with the present bonfire of the virtues? What has the council to do with the present disconnect between theology and virtue?

We rightly cherish the theological achievements of the Council of Nicaea (325) and its subsequent conciliar explanations and defenses at Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451). The Nicene Creed has endured for 1700 years and has been echoed or endorsed by various Protestant confessions: the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), Thirty-Nine Articles (1562), Belgic Confession

[1] John D. Woodbridge and Frank A. James III, *From Pre-Reformation to the Present Day*, vol. 2 of *Church History* (Zondervan Academic, 2013), 93–94.

[2] For an example of how Christians have embraced a worldly ethos especially as it relates to technology vis-à-vis human nature, see Carl R. Trueman, *The Desecration of Man: How the Rejection of God Degrades Our Humanity* (Sentinel, 2026).

(1561), French Confession (1559), and Westminster Confession (1646), for example.[3] But have we only looked upon the Nicene creed as a source of theological knowledge? If the creed has stood the test of time and is professed by East and West, Protestant and Roman Catholic, is there something more to the creed?[4] I believe there is more to the Nicene Creed. What type of virtues did the theologians of the Nicene era employ? If we value the doctrine of Nicaea so much, should we not ask about the collective character that the fathers of Nicaea possessed and plied? I argue that the Nicene creed required moral and ethical virtues to produce its theological orthodoxy. In simple terms, to be a good theologian requires godliness. Christian character counts. To explore this claim, I pursue two lines of thought. First, we must briefly document the disjunction between wisdom and knowledge. Second, we can examine the ideas of Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 394), one of the defenders of the Nicene Creed, to see how he explained the relationship between doctrine and Christian character.

1. Wisdom Versus Knowledge

"Some things that should not have been forgotten were lost" are words written by J. R. R. Tolkien that aptly describe the situation regarding wisdom and theology as well as the virtuous nature of theology, and conversely the theological nature of virtue.[5] Ellen Chary has observed: "Sapiential theology waned with modernity. Theology came to be thought of as the intellectual justification of the faith, apart from the practice of the Christian life. The wisdom of God has ceased to function in the church as the foundation of the good life."[6] In other words, in early and pre-modern theology (patristic, medieval, Reformation, and early post-Reformation), theology was chiefly about wisdom, not merely knowledge. A defender of Nicene orthodoxy, Athanasius (ca. 328–373) draws a direct link between purity of heart and right knowledge of God, not merely possessing knowledge about God. God has created all things through Christ and made humans in his image. He has given humans the ability to know him so long as we maintain his image by his grace. If we do this, we can rejoice and converse with God in prayer. We can live a truly idyllic, blessed, and immortal life: "Having no obstacle to the knowledge of the divine, he [the Christian] continuously contemplates by his purity the image of the Father, God the Word, in whose image he was made, and is filled with admiration when he grasps his providence towards the universe."[7] The more we contemplate him, the more we desire God. Athanasius draws a relational dynamic between God and humans from Christ's Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt 5:8). In other words, the purer the heart, the clearer the eyes of faith by which we see God. This is a theme that other Nicene fathers promote, as we will see below.

From within the patristic period, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) also captures the sapiential character of theology. When we find anything in the Scriptures that pertains to wisdom, the Son of God

[3] See James T. Dennison Jr., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, 4 vols. (Reformation Heritage, 2008); Second Helvetic, art. 11 (2:827–31); Thirty-Nine Articles, art. 8 (2:757); Belgic Confession, art. 9 (2:429–30); French Confession, art. 6 (2:143); WCF, art. 8 (4:243–45).

[4] The *filioque*, of course, is a point of contention between East and West. See A. Edward Siecienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

[5] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Morrow, 2013), prologue.

[6] Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

[7] Athanasius, *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, trans. Robert W. Thomson (Clarendon, 1971), §2 (p. 7); Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 88.

is in view, argues Augustine. With the image of God in view, therefore, we must seek God's wisdom in Christ:

> We are enlightened by the light, but He is the light that enlightens. And, therefore, this image is an example for us without itself having an example. For He does not imitate anyone who comes before Him in respect to the Father, from whom He is wholly inseparable, since He has the same essence with Him from whom He is. But by our striving we imitate Him who remains and follow Him who stands; when we walk in Him, we tend towards Him, because by His humility He has been made a road for us in time, in order that by His divinity He might be for us a mansion in eternity.[8]

Augustine appeals to the Nicene truth of the Son's shared essence with the Father. But he also draws this truth into the Christian life—the goal of theology is mirroring Christ. Christ is both the road and the goal of salvation, a life of sanctity and the goal of conformity to Christ. Wisdom is both the road and destination. Christians are supposed to be wise now and will become wiser as the final outcome of their journey of faith. In other words, being like Christ is not merely for the end of the journey but for every single step along the way to the final destination. For Augustine and Athanasius, theology is about wisdom—about living in a dynamic relationship with the triune God here and now, that is, fearing the Lord.

In the modern age, things have dramatically shifted. The seeds of division between virtue and theology, or wisdom and knowledge, were arguably sown in the late-seventeenth century. Building on the tenets of rationalism, John Locke widened the gap between faith and reason.[9] Reason was ascendant and became the foundation in the formation of knowledge. The shift away from wisdom (in the words of Proverbs 9:10, a "fear of the Lord") was pronounced. Knowledge stood on its own. Immanuel Kant added more fuel to the fire, as he argued that the transcendent God could not be known through revelation in the creation. The noumenal realm was beyond the grasp of humans. The transcendent God was domesticated and became all too this-worldly.[10] The title of one of Kant's well-known works is emblematic of the rejection of revelation, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*.[11] With the Kantian turn, theology became utterly mundane as theologians searched for the historical Jesus and dissected the word of God with the scalpel of higher criticism.[12] Or theology became dominated by the subjective under the guise of Friederich Schleiemacher's "feeling of absolute dependence."[13] With Schleiermacher participating in the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810, theology became a scientific discipline like any other—released from church, creed, and conviction.[14] Adrift on a sea of knowledge apart from the anchor of God's authoritative revelation, theology was no longer about wisdom and knowing and loving our triune God; it was a respectable scientific discipline like any other. And

[8] Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna, Fathers of the Church (Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 7.7.2 (pp. 226–27); Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 135.

[9] Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 7.

[10] Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 9.

[11] Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni, rev. ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[12] Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

[13] Friederich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, ed. Richard Crouter (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[14] Thomas Albert Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

under such parameters, why does the character of the theologian matter? So long as the mathematician solves problems accurately, what does it matter if he is arrogant? So long as the linguist can correctly parse and translate a verb, is her marital fidelity relevant? Many would answer these questions in the negative given the divide between wisdom and knowledge.

2. Gregory of Nyssa on Transformative Theology

The Nicene fathers looked at the relationship between knowledge and Christian character much differently. In his work *On Virginity*, Gregory of Nyssa explains that the purpose of his work was to create a desire for a "life of virtue" within his readers.[15] Here we should observe that the book's title, *On Virginity*, does not merely cover sexual purity but rather is about an entire life devoted to moral and ethical purity. How does the Bible describe idolatry and sin but as *adultery*, infidelity to Christ, our bridegroom (e.g., Ezek 23:37; Isa 57:7–8; Jas 4:4). For Gregory, the only way that a person has a "share in the pure mysteries of virginity" is that they "become themselves partakers of the glory of God, who is alone holy and blameless, since they participate in His purity and incorruptibility."[16] Gregory here appeals to the doctrine of participation, namely, that all creatures share in God's existence. This does not mean that they are God, but rather God must sustain the existence of all things. In creation, this is the apostle Paul's "In him we live and move and have our being," and in redemption this is what Peter describes as becoming "partakers of the divine nature" (Acts 17:28; 2 Pet 1:3–4).[17] If we participate in God's holiness in salvation, then God's holiness must shape and change us.

Greogry takes the doctrine of participation and applies it to the nature of how we know God: "[Jesus Christ] wanted to demonstrate through the manner of his becoming man this great mystery, that purity alone is sufficient for receiving the presence and entrance of God, a purity that cannot be otherwise achieved fully, unless one alienates himself entirely from the passions of the flesh."[18] Observe that Gregory rests his observation on Christ's incarnation, but the point is, the more we sin the less we see of God. Thus, we need to disentangle ourselves from earthly things so that we can pursue heavenly things.[19] The purer our sight (the less clouded by sin), the clearer we perceive the beauty of God: "But the man who has purified the eye of his soul is able to look at such things and forget the matter in which the beauty is encased, and he uses what he sees as a kind of basis for his contemplation of intelligible beauty. By a participation in this beauty, the other beautiful things come into being and are identified."[20] Gregory plies a truth that we find in the Psalms: "In your light do we see light" (Ps 36:9). Or likewise, we read: "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple" (Ps 27:4). In other words, when we see the beauty of God, the sin no longer looks appealing—we see it for its ugliness. We instead desire and thirst after God's beauty, both to behold and reflect it.

[15] Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, in *Ascetical Works*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, FC 58 (Catholic University of America Press, 1967), introduction (p. 6).

[16] Gregory, *On Virginity*, §1 (p. 9).

[17] See., e.g., Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[18] Gregory, *On Virginity*, §2 (p. 11).

[19] Gregory, *On Virginity*, §6 (pp. 30–31).

[20] Gregory, *On Virginity*, §11 (p. 39).

Gregory digs deeply into the holiness of God and shows how sin obscures our sight: "The person who removes himself from all hatred and fleshly odor and rises above all earthbound things, having ascended higher than the whole earth in his aforementioned flight, will find the only thing worth longing for, and having come close to beauty, will become beautiful himself. Through his participation in the true light, he will himself be in a state of brightness and illumination."[21] Gregory does not press a moralistic or legalistic approach to godliness. He stresses that conformity to God only comes through a "participation in the true light." That is, only by drawing on the power of Christ do we become more like him: "For, being like the divine is not our function, nor is it the product of human ability, but it is part of the generosity of God who freely, at the birth of the first man, gave our nature a likeness to Himself."[22] Again, Gregory writes: "Uniting yourself with God comes from being crucified with Him and living with Him and sharing His glory and His kingship; offering yourself to God means transforming human nature and worth into the angelic."[23]

Think of Moses atop Sinai and we get an idea of what Gregory means. The longer Moses dwelled in God's presence, the more he reflected God's glory. This is the precise point Gregory presses in his book, *Life of Moses*.[24] In other words, the reading, studying, and meditation upon the word of God is not merely about knowledge. By the gift of faith, we enter the presence of our triune God, and he speaks his word to us by Christ and the Spirit by which he conforms us more and more to the image of Christ. In the words of the Westminster Larger Catechism, "The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation."[25]

3. Conclusion

Do we profess and admire the Nicene Creed but ignore the theology of its authors and defenders? We need to be aware of the present divide in theology between wisdom versus knowledge. As we read books, blogs, and posts, do we merely hunt for knowledge and intellectual capital? Are we merely downloading data that will puff us up? Can we profess the intricacies of creedal orthodoxy and yet walk away unchanged or worse, still marked by unchristian, sinful conduct? Do we contemplate the depths of the Nicene truth as explained by the Chalcedonian definition, "The same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood"?[26] Behind this creedal statement lies one of the greatest doctrinal truths ever revealed to the world, namely, that though Christ "was in the form of God," he "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped." Rather, the eternal Son of God took "the form of a servant" and

[21] Gregory, *On Virginity*, §11 (p. 40).

[22] Gregory, *On Virginity*, §12 (p. 44).

[23] Gregory, *On Virginity*, §23 (p. 74).

[24] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* (Paulist, 1978).

[25] Westminster Larger Catechism, q. 155, in Dennison, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries* 4:340.

[26] Chalcedonian Definition, in *The Creeds of Christendom*, 6th ed., 3 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Baker Book House, 1990), 2:62.

was "obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:5–8). If we seek wisdom, then how can we contemplate the humility of the Son of God in the incarnation and walk away filled with pride? If we behold the glory of Christ in his transcendent and immanent beauty, how can we act in bitterness and anger towards others? Whether we behold Christ through the eyes of faith or on the last day with our bodily eyes, beholding Christ transforms us: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18).

Do we cloud the eyes of our faith with sin, which then obscures the glory and beauty of our triune God in our minds? Do we feed on a steady diet of social media and then think we can instantaneously switch to contemplating the things of God apart from prayer and meditation upon God's holiness? Do we smear the mud of pornography, anger, or sarcasm upon our eyes and think it will not affect our theology and the way we live the Christian life? In our study of God and his word, do we draw near to God in Christ through the Spirit in prayer, before, during, and after? Is theology purely a rational exercise? Or is it seeking heavenly things through the gift of faith and the indwelling presence of Christ through the Spirit? In this way, theological study is as much a sphere of sanctification and conformity to Christ as any other part of the Christian life, if not even more so because we encounter the living Word of God, not merely a repository of knowledge. As John Webster reminds us, "Holy Scripture disturbs. Precisely as the medium of God's holiness, it is a rock thrown in our path, an onslaught which smites our idolatries and us as idolaters. In this text we are arrested and addressed by God."[27] If our thrice holy God addresses us in Scripture, then a "properly ordered reading involves a certain passivity: respect, receptivity, readiness to be confronted, and, above all, humility."[28] How, then, will we engage in the task of theology? Will we sidle next to the bonfire of the virtues that engulfs our culture, or will we cultivate virtue, godliness, and holiness by drawing nigh unto our triune God? If the Nicene fathers are any example, then our prayer and hope should be that the closer we draw to the light of our triune God, the more we will reflect his light in word, thought, and deed. We will not toss our virtues into the bonfire, but rather the refining fires of the Spirit of sanctification will burn up our vices so that only the flames of God's holiness illumine the world around us all to his triune glory.

[27] John Webster, *The Culture of Theology*, ed. Ivor J. Davidson and Alden C. McCray (Baker Academic, 2019), 71.

[28] Webster, *Culture of Theology*, 74.

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STRANGE TIMES

Hiding in Plain Sight

— Daniel Strange —

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> *There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.*[1]

I don't sleep on planes. I don't read on planes. I don't usually work on planes. I watch films on planes, and as many as possible. Five back-to-back is my record. It's a weakness, I know. On a recent filmathon as I flew to the States, I finally caught up on the much-hyped and Oscar-winning horror/mystery film *Weapons*.[2] Through the perspective of multiple characters, the story revolves around a suburban community's reaction to the simultaneous overnight disappearance of all but one child in the class of teacher Justine Gandy.

Now, if I'm being honest, I'm interested intellectually in horror as a genre rather than loving and watching loads of horror films, but I deemed *Weapons* a film I needed to watch.[3] While sitting wedged in the middle-aisle of economy watching on a small screen with tinny earphones on a day flight is suboptimal in terms of creating ambience, the film was still disturbing and unsettling enough to get a few muffled grunts and gasps and for the adrenaline to be pumping (apologies to those on either side of me). What disturbed and unsettled me was (spoiler-alert!) that behind these child disappearances is a parasitic witch, 'Aunt Gladys,' who inveigles her way into the community, using blood magic to turn the children, and various adults, into weaponized 'zombies,' whilst also draining their own vitality to prevent her from ageing. I won't reveal the bloody ending here, although maybe I just have…

It was Aunt Gladys and these supernatural dark occultic elements that gave me the chills and raised the hairs on the back of my neck. And yet, reading review after review and analysis after analysis, maybe my fear was misfocused. Maybe I'd naively missed the point. Apparently, what *should* be disturbing and unsettling me is what the critics tell me the film is *really* about, in the *real world*.[4] Aunt Gladys and

[1] C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters: Letters from a Senior to a Junior Devil*, The C. S. Lewis Signature Classic (Collins, 2012), ix.

[2] Zach Cregger, dir. *Weapons* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2025).

[3] I'm currently halfway through Kutter Callaway's entertaining and informative Christianity Today podcast on horror films, 'Be Afraid,' https://www.christianitytoday.com/podcasts/be-afraid/

[4] Harrison Brocklehurst, 'People are clocking what makes Weapons terrifying, and it's nothing to do with Aunt Gladys,' *Film Shrine*, 18 August 2025, https://tinyurl.com/55cxt8cf.

her dark arts are an allegory, a metaphor and a cipher for a legion of cultural, political and gendered readings: of mass hysteria and grief within a community; of gun ownership and school shootings in America; of the destruction that substance abuse and addiction can cause within the family unit; and of the demonisation, or maybe 'witchification,' of the middle-aged unmarried women within Western society.[5]

While I'm all for allegory, metaphor and ciphers, and while these 'real world' themes are indeed important and need to be reflected upon seriously, my *Weapons* experience prompted again a thought that has been with me for some time. Yes, we may be living through a golden age of horror, not simply in terms of proliferation and quality of output but where, after years of being overlooked, the genre is finally being recognised at major mainstream awards ceremonies. However, we are certainly also living through a curious age of occult demythologisation and which, whether we're Christians or not, should make us unsettled and disturbed.

I had that same feeling as I watched the recent *28 Years later: The Bone Temple*.[6] Set in a United Kingdom still ravaged by the 'infected,' the film follows 12-year-old Spike as he is inducted into a sadistic cult led by Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal. Along the way, Spike encounters the humane and humanistic Dr. Ian Kelso (played by Fiennes), who works from a vast ossuary on a cure for the disease. The film's central cult is explicitly Satanic. Preaching with an inverted cross round his neck, Crystal preaches that the global virus proves God has abandoned the world and now Satan reigns. However, Crystal is manipulative and ultimately fraudulent, his power and authority relying on convincing his followers that he has a direct line to his father 'old Nick.' Not so subtly, the film repeatedly suggests that the occult elements are social control mechanisms rather than evidence of genuine supernatural power. There's even an element of comedic trivialisation as Dr. Kelson is forced to impersonate Satan through pyrotechnics, hallucinogens and 'The Number of the Beast' by *Iron Maiden*, exposing how supernatural and occult symbolism can be manufactured. There are indeed dark demons out there, but they turn out to be human, all too human. It's all immanentised.

Indeed, as I write this, both *Weapons* and *28 Years Later: The Bone Temple* are probably now somewhat passé. It's *Obsession*[7] that everyone is talking about (which I've not yet seen and probably won't (!)) but with the same patterns of hermeneutical demythologisation. Bear, a lonely guy who works in a music store, uses a cursed 'One Wish Willow' to force his co-worker, on whom he has a crush, to fall in love with him. The title of the film gives an indication of what is to follow. Once again, while the framework of the film is supernatural, analyses of the film I've read translate it immediately into themes of coercion, control and domestic abuse. For the Christian cultural apologist who loves their analysis in the key of idolatry, there's ripe low hanging fruit here, exploring and exposing the theme of 'be careful what you wish for.' But does this have to be done by instrumentalising the supernatural and occultish elements?

For the last ten years, there has been a heated debate over the term 'elevated horror' rightly or wrongly associated with the films of the likes of Jordan Peele, Ari Aster, and the production company A24. Possibly as a reaction to the gory, sadistic 'torture porn' films of the early 2000s: [8]

[5] Beatrice Loayza, 'Nothing Is Scarier Than an Unmarried Woman,' *The Atlantic*, 13 August 2025, https://tinyurl.com/snk5wyeu.

[6] Nia DaCosta, dir. *28 Years Later: The Bone Temple* (Sony Pictures, 2026).

[7] Curry Barker, dir. *Obsession* (Universal Pictures, 2025).

[8] Samuel Mortel, 'In Defense of "Elevated Horror": Why Are So Many Fans Against It?' *The Brooklyn College Vanguard*, 29 October 2025, https://tinyurl.com/3udvc7yp.

> Broadly speaking, 'elevated horror' describes horror movies that support multiple readings. Polysemic. Fluid characters and stories you can argue about, because they defy a single interpretation. Movies that set out to explore a concept from different angles, offering hypothesis, antithesis and thesis as well as a fun ride and cheap thrills.[9]

Many within the horror community, both fans and filmmakers, viscerally reject the term for its elitism. As one commentator notes, the term 'writes off many horror films of the past as meaningless, while treating new allegorical horror films as some kind of novelty. The new wave of horror films that receive this label are "allowed" to be taken seriously by critics, while the many older gems of the genre are granted no such privilege.'[10]

Robert S. Cairns, who interestingly is the one critic I've read who thinks *Weapons* and its director Zach Cregger *might* entertain a supernatural reading which takes witchcraft and evil seriously, makes a helpful comment here:

> The term 'elevated Horror' has been discussed to death in recent years. But it's worth noting two initially paradoxical insights from the discussion. The first, that horror films don't always need to be 'message' vehicles. The second, that horror has always contained some deeper anxiety or commentary about something or other. The second point seems to me inescapably true, and the first seems to forget that the 'message' can also be the actual subject of the horror itself. Although multiple readings are always possible, Weapons makes as its centrepiece the de-allegorised possibility of a witch, in the same way that other readings of Jaws (1975) do not detract from the terror of a shark with dead black eyes like a doll.[11]

From my readings, Cairns is in the minority here. Often the way the supernatural and the occult are treated in these films, that is, by being basically ignored, can give off an air of 'elevated' and patronising superiority to the more 'literal' readings which are deemed shallow and superficial. *The Babadook*[12] is not *really* about an evil monster in a top hat, it's about grief and clinical depression; *Sinners*[13] is not *really* about the vampires but racism and the Black experience in America; *It Follows*[14] is not *really* about being stalked by a shadowy shape-shifting entity, it's really about sexually transmitted diseases and the loss of teenage innocence and invincibility.

To reiterate, I believe stories *do* signify beyond themselves.[15] Symbols matter. Metaphor matters. Allegory matters. In the words of Emily Dickinson, it's one the purposes of art and creativity to tell the truth 'but tell it slant.' But we misread cultural artefacts if we assume that the signifier is merely disposable packaging for a more respectable meaning. Sometimes the supernatural in a story is not a

[9] Karina Wilson, 'What is Elevated Horror?' *The Haunted Path*, 24 July 2024, https://karinawilson.substack.com/p/what-is-elevated-horror.

[10] Marty Viltrakis, 'Pretentious but Practical—The Case For and Against "Elevated Horror,"' *Medium*, 29 October 2025, https://tinyurl.com/4bt7cd6v.

[11] Robert S. Cairns, 'What If Witches Are Actually Real? Zach Cregger's Weapons and Witches,' *Horror Homeroom*, 29 September 2025, https://tinyurl.com/bdzkhpc2.

[12] Jennifer Kent, dir. *Babadook* (Umbrella Entertainment, 2014).

[13] Ryan Coogler, dir. *Sinners* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2025).

[14] David Robert Mitchell, dir. *It Follows* (RADiUS-TWC, 2014).

[15] Including stories that contain magic and sorcery. See John Piper, 'Is There Good Magic and Edifying Sorcery?' *Desiring God*, 3 February 2025, https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-there-good-magic-and-edifying-sorcery.

decorative excess to be translated away but the point of the story. It's that which is in front of us that is 'hair-raising' (the etymology of the word 'horror').

Here, though, is an interesting paradox. On the one hand, it's becoming *de rigueur* to note both quantitatively and qualitatively the rising interest in contemporary culture of the supernatural among the 'nones': of demons, witches, hauntings, curses, possessions, and dark forces. Gen Z has been called 'The Witchcraft generation.'[16] Tara Isabella Burton's analysis in *Strange Rites* is seminal in this regard.[17]

On the other hand, these supernatural realities are rarely allowed to remain what they are. I've already mentioned their demythologisation and trivialisation. Let me briefly add two more. First, there is a humanisation. Commenting on Asian pop culture trends, including the global phenomenon's that are *Labubu* toys and the *KPop Demon Hunter*[18] franchise, Isabel Ong notes that

> Instead of the grotesque, one-dimensional caricatures I watched and read about years ago that were most definitely 100 percent wicked—and therefore deserving of destruction—the monsters and demons that are capturing our collective consciousness today are relatable and humorous, anthropomorphized or animal-like in their expressions, body language, and actions. (Don't get me started on Derpy, Jinu's adorable tiger demon sidekick in KPop Demon Hunters; I'd love that plushie!).[19]

Second, there is a therapeutisation. The occult has become a consumer good, *for our good*. 'Occulture' is ubiquitous and appears in forms that feel harmless: lifestyle practices, digital rituals, aesthetic accessories, wellness vocabularies, algorithmic mythologies.[20] I could go on and on.

How do we explain this paradox? More broadly, I think this trend defies the binary of enchantment versus disenchantment narrative, which puts me in the corner of scholars like William Cavanaugh and particularly Jason Josephson-Storm. Josephson Storm's central argument is that modernity never eliminated belief in magic, spirits or occult thinking. Instead, it has repeatedly told itself a story of being 'disenchanted' while occult, paranormal and magical ideas continue to circulate in new forms. He calls this the 'myth of disenchantment.'[21] Applied to the supernatural in horror films, in the same way that Storm traces early sceptical scientists who secretly dabbled in Spiritualist and occultic practices, so today, even when horror films demythologise the occult, they often inadvertently highlight our collective obsession with it. The fact that we keep making these horror films shows that a hunger for the supernatural and the uncanny still haunts even the so-called 'rational' cognoscenti. But to be deemed 'serious' and 'respectable,' these yearnings must be repressed and sublimated at all costs.[22]

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[16] Jessica Rawnsley, 'The witchcraft generation: Gen Z is swapping traditional faiths for magic spells,' *The New Statesmen*, 14 August 2023, https://tinyurl.com/32az5u7u. See also Lauren Abunassar, '"Demonized, called hysterical": the rise of witchcraft retreats where US women go to defy man and church,' *The Guardian*, 10 June 2026, https://tinyurl.com/yj3dwd24.

[17] Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (Public Affairs, 2020).

[18] Maggie Kang and Chris Appelhans, dirs. *KPop Demon Hunters* (Netflix, 2025).

[19] Isabel Ong, 'We're Not Afraid of Monsters and Demons Anymore,' *Christianity Today*, 13 August 2025, https://tinyurl.com/mrzvrh9x.

[20] Again see Burton, *Strange Rites*, here.

[21] Jason A. Josephson Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[22] There are sociological factors in play here. In a 1995 *Newsweek* article, 'Do We Need Satan?' Kenneth L Woodward notes social class is a factor. 'Look at the parking lot outside any church,' suggests Princeton University

What, as evangelical Christians, are we to do with this paradox? We are not to be unaware of Satan's schemes (cf. 2 Cor 2:11). The demythologising, trivialising, humanising, and therapeutising of the occult certainly are all ingenious schemes. Screwtape must be loving that the hidden (which, of course is the meaning of 'occult') is in plain sight.

This calls for careful discernment, and as C. S. Lewis warns us in the quotation with which I opened, the threading of a needle between scepticism on the one hand and sensationalism on the other. Just like those 'elevated' critics, some of us instinctively want to flatten spiritual realities into material and mythical explanations. Although it's over forty years old, Paul Hiebert's famous description of 'the flaw of the excluded middle' remains illuminating here.[23] Some of us in the West have been discipled, often unwittingly, within a tribe of evangelicalism that practically lives in a two-storey universe: at the top, God and ultimate theological truths; at the bottom, the empirical world of technique, management, medicine, politics and psychology. What disappears is the middle level of powers, principalities and spiritual agencies that Scripture simply assumes. Once that middle is excluded, we are left with a practical materialism that is embarrassed by demons and yet strangely fascinated by what they symbolise. Ironically, for those in theological education, we might be trained and on high-alert to the dangers of Rudolph Bultmann's demythologisation of Jesus's miracles and his resurrection, while being more sympathetic to occultic demythologisation. But Satan is no mere cipher, and evil is not exhausted by systems, symptoms or syndromes. We must refuse the naïve confidence that this occultic darkness is unreal. It's all too real. Missiologically and apologetically, whilst we must recognise the cry of the spiritual hunger of those who engage in all this dark stuff,[24] we need to remember that the Bible prohibits these practices in the strongest of terms because they are wicked and dangerous.[25] Practically, I have found this advice by Derek Rishmawy helpful when it comes to dealing with the spiritual challenges within our congregations:

> The threat of syncretism isn't just metaphorical in the West right now.… It's probably time to start reading up on apologetics against new age spirituality, astrology, issuing serious warnings about witchcraft, etc. Yes, you need to push on late-modern, expressive-individualist consumerism, but also how easily that can coexist with checking your star sign, thinking white magic is cool, and trying to find just the right crystal to balance your energy. There is more to it than that, but these modes of thinking fit hand-in-glove. Which is to say, when it comes to preaching out of Colossians or Corinthians, talking about Christ's defeat of the powers, not being captive to empty philosophy, or participating in pagan feasts, you may not need to find "modern", metaphorical analogies for your applications. All of a sudden, Augustine's sections in *The Confessions*

sociologist Robert Wuthnow. 'If you see Lexuses and Cadillacs, you won't hear Satan preached inside. If you see a lot of pickup trucks, you will.' https://www.newsweek.com/do-we-need-satan-181030.

[23] Paul G. Hiebert, 'The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,' *Missiology* 10.1 (1982): 35–47. Available here: https://kingdomupgrowth.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/p-hiebert-flaw-of-excluded-middle.pdf.

[24] For example, see Daniel Strange, 'Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid! Why We Pay to Be Scared' (Keller Center Article, forthcoming).

[25] See Kristi Mair, 'Dark spiritual encounters and hidden dangers: The enduring wisdom of classical theology,' *Cambridge Papers*, 33.4 (2024): 1–8, https://tinyurl.com/5t3xpf9f; Kirsten Birkett, *Spells, Sorcerers and Spirits: Magic and the Occult in the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Latimer Studies, 2025); Conrad Mbewe, 'Please! Don't Meddle with Witchcraft,' *TGC Africa*, 16 April 2016, https://africa.thegospelcoalition.org/article/please-dont-meddle-with-witchcraft/.

> refuting astrology are worth quoting from the pulpit. Maybe, just maybe, we need to start consulting with our brothers and sisters in less 'advanced' countries about how they preach the gospel to their neighbors caught up in the worship of spirits, and so forth.[26]

But there is an equal and opposite danger: we can err not only by disbelief but by unhealthy preoccupation. Some of us in the West have been discipled within a tribe of evangelicalism with an elaborate demonology, a fixation with dark powers, and an approach to spiritual warfare which is sub-biblical, distracting us from the ordinary means of grace in the gospel.[27]

Biblical reality gives us a metaphysic of the Creator-creature distinction which is capacious enough to include the material and the spiritual without confusing them and without divinising them, the blurring of the Creator-creature distinction otherwise known as idolatry. Satan and the demonic are neither autonomous nor ultimate. There is a certain appropriateness to Father Gabrielle Amorth (former Chief Exorcist to the Vatican) who always began his exorcisms by thumbing his nose at the Devil. If the occult is hiding in plain sight, then so too is the gospel's answer to the fascinations and false deliverances that the occult cannot finally satisfy. The task of Christian witness is not to sneer at that hunger, nor to sanctify it, but to recognise it, name it truthfully and expose this present darkness to the light of Christ.

[26] Derek Rishmawy, 'When You Sort of Miss Disenchantment', *Reformedish*, 29 December 2018, https://tinyurl.com/y4ahq565. And talking of preaching, it would be remiss of me not to mention the very well-known quotation of Charles Baudelaire, in his morality tale "Le Joueur Généreux" ("The Generous Gambler") in which he has a conversation with Satan: 'He did not in any way be-moan the bad deputation which he enjoys in all parts of the world, assured me that he himself was the person most interested in the destruction of *superstition*, and confessed that he had never feared for his own power save once, on the day when he had heard a preacher, more subtle than his colleagues, cry from the pulpit: "My dear brethren, never forget, when you hear the progress of wisdom vaunted, that the cleverest ruse of the Devil is to persuade you he does not exist!"'

[27] I still find very helpful here David Powlison's *Power Encounters, Reclaiming Spiritual Warfare* (Baker, 1995).

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Lamb of the Free: A Review Article

— Jay Sklar —

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Abstract: In *Lamb of the Free*, Andrew Rillera argues from both the Old Testament and the New Testament that Penal Substitutionary Atonement (PSA) is an unbiblical idea. This review considers seven key claims Rillera uses to support his arguments. It focuses on whether they successfully undercut the idea of PSA and provides positive support for seeing PSA as a biblical idea.

What took place when Jesus died? The Bible answers that question in more than one way because more than one thing happened at the cross. Theologians have grouped the Bible's answers into different categories that go by different names, for example, Christus Victor, Recapitulation, and Penal Substitutionary Atonement.

The last of these—Penal Substitutionary Atonement (PSA)—receives the most attention in many evangelical traditions today. Briefly defined, PSA teaches that Jesus took the penalty (P) that sinners deserved and did so as their substitute (S), in this way making atonement (A) for them. In his classic, *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott fills out this definition: "Evangelical Christians believe that in and through Christ crucified God substituted himself [S] for us and bore our sins, dying in our place the death we deserved to die [S, P], in order that we might be restored to his favor and adopted into his family [A]."[1] Moreover, PSA is often understood to be foreshadowed in Old Testament sacrifice, where an animal takes the penalty (P) that sinners deserved and does so as their substitute (S), in this way making atonement (A) for them.

Andrew Rillera strongly disagrees. In *Lamb of the Free*, he argues that PSA is a thoroughly unbiblical idea.[2]

1. Introduction to Lamb of the Free

Dr. Andrew Remington Rillera is Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies and Theology at The King's University, which is a Christian university in Edmonton, Alberta. He completed his PhD at Duke University with a major in New Testament and minors in theology and early Judaism and describes himself as a Christian in the Anglican tradition.[3]

[1] John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 20th anniversary ed. (InterVarsity Press, 2006), 13.

[2] Andrew Rillera, *Lamb of the Free: Recovering the Varied Sacrificial Understandings of Jesus's Death* (Cascade, 2024).

[3] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 2 n. 1.

Towards the end of the Introduction, he makes the book's purpose crystal clear: "This study will demonstrate how, from a biblical-studies perspective, penal substitutionary atonement has problems with each one of its key terms—penal, substitutionary, and atonement."[4]

1.1. The Book's Basic Argument

The book may be thought of in two halves: chapters 1–4 and 5–8. The first half focuses on the OT and its understanding of the sacrificial system. The goal is to "clear up common misunderstandings about OT sacrifice and the two forms of (im)purity (ritual vs. moral) in the process of providing an account of the meaning, logic, and limits of the various functions of Levitical sacrifices."[5] Chapter 4 will also "discuss the so-called prophetic critique of sacrifice and the expectation of 'restoration' when utilizing cultic imagery, as well as the fact that forgiveness can and did occur apart from the atoning apparatus of cultic sacrifice."[6] These chapters are foundational since the book's second half will examine several NT passages that are commonly held to support a PSA understanding and argue: In light of the arguments of the first four chapters, a PSA understanding simply doesn't work.

To that end, the book's second half consists of four chapters focused on different aspects of NT teaching and how to understand it. "Chapter 5 explores Jesus's relation to the sacrificial and purity systems in the Gospels" and argues that "the understanding of the Lord's Supper in both the Gospels and 1 Corinthians derives exclusively from the *nonatoning* sacrifices" and that there are no "allusions to sacrificial atonement in the Lord's Supper and the crucifixion accounts in the Gospels."[7]

Chapter 6 then considers how atonement theology is used in 1 John and Hebrews, though with a special focus on Hebrews, arguing that "Hebrews has a thick atonement theology, but it is *not* a *substitutionary* atonement theology. It is a participatory atonement, or solidarity atonement theology."[8]

Chapter 7 looks at "several key NT texts that are commonly misunderstood to be about sacrifice and/or atonement" and argues "they are best comprehended within another conceptual framework."[9] The texts are: 1 Peter 2:24; Mark 10:45//Matthew 20:28; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13; Romans 3:25; 8:3.

Finally, chapter 8 examines the idea of "substitution," arguing,

> The NT authors … all agree on one fundamental point: Jesus's death is a *participatory* phenomenon; it is something all are called to *share in experientially*. The logic is not: Jesus died so we don't have to. Rather it is: Jesus died so that we, together, can follow in his steps and die with him and like him, having full fellowship with his sufferings so that we might share in the likeness of his resurrection….
>
> In short, while Jesus did die *for* us, this does not mean that Jesus died *instead of* us. It means that he died *ahead of* and *with* us.[10]

[4] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 6.
[5] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 6.
[6] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 7.
[7] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 7. In this review, any italics within quotes are those original to the book unless otherwise indicated.
[8] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 7.
[9] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 7.
[10] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 7.

By way of summary: once you understand OT sacrifice and atonement properly (chapters 1–4), this enables you to see that NT texts that speak of Jesus's death are not thinking in terms of PSA but in terms of a participatory phenomenon that we are called to share in (chapters 5–8).

Since the review that follows focuses on areas where I disagree with the author, I want to say up front the area that I found most helpful in reading this book, namely, its emphasis on our union with Christ in his death and resurrection. The rich blessings of that union should be regularly highlighted, and I'm grateful the book has done so. For me, it made union with Christ even more beautiful.

1.2. The Book's Concern

In the Introduction, Rillera explains what he believes is at stake in this discussion: PSA is based on a wrong understanding of justice, and this wrong understanding has negative impacts on society.[11]

The wrong understanding he has in view is known as negative retributive justice. In the book's Foreword, written by Douglas Campbell, Rillera's doctoral supervisor, Campbell describes negative retributive justice as a system that focuses on making the guilty party "pay" for their wrong by experiencing harm equivalent to the wrong.[12]

By this definition, PSA is negative retributive justice—with the added element of substitution—because the sacrificial animal (or Jesus) is experiencing the harm the sinner deserves.[13] To return to Rillera's Introduction: "A sacrifice, so it is thought, is bringing justice by punishing some other blood-filled mammal as a substitutionary death, construed as the just punishment for the sinner."[14] The book clearly holds this understanding of justice to be wrong, speaking later of "warped notions of justice based on penal substitutionary atonement."[15] And while the book will later pick up on problems it sees with the substitutionary nature of PSA, it seems to focus here on the idea of negative retributive justice in particular.[16]

By way of response, it is important to note that negative retributive justice as defined in the book is clearly commanded and commended by the Lord himself. He thus weaves the capital penalty—which is a clear example of negative retributive justice—throughout Israel's legal code (Exod 21:12–17; Lev 20:9–16; Deut 13:5–10; etc.) and also commands it to be carried out in the midst of narratives (Lev 24:10–23). Indeed, when a priest executes two people committing serious sin (Num 25:6–9), the Lord describes it as an act of atonement (Hebrew *kipper*)[17] and rewards the priest with an everlasting priesthood (25:13). That's noteworthy: a priest making atonement by means of negative retributive justice with God's full approval and even commendation.

This is not to say that negative retributive justice is the Bible's only approach to justice,[18] nor is it to deny that negative retributive justice can be abused. But the Lord's commanding and commending

[11] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 2–3.

[12] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, xiv.

[13] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 3.

[14] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 3.

[15] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 8.

[16] Rillera thus introduces the quote above from p. 3 by saying, "For some, justice is retributive and has to do with punishment." See also the remarks of Campbell on pp. xviii–xix.

[17] This review article transliterates Hebrew and Greek terms, following Rillera's practice.

[18] In looking at Deuteronomy 19:18–20 and 25:1–3, Christopher Wright identifies at least five different goals: retribution, purging, deterrence, restoration, compensation. See Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (InterVarsity Press, 2004), 310.

of negative retributive justice in these texts remains a very stubborn fact. He simply does not view it as problematic.

2. Examining the Book's Claims

The above still does not prove, however, that PSA is true, and the book presents multiple arguments for why it is not. I interact with most of them in a longer review (around 55,000 words) I have posted online.[19] In this review, I will consider seven important claims the book makes to support its overarching thesis that PSA is not a biblical concept. For each of them, I begin by identifying what the claim is, how it relates to the book's overall thesis, and the problem(s) that I see in the argument. In most cases, I will consider how the analysis relates to a specific biblical passage and to the doctrine of PSA.

2.1. Claim 1: Sacrifice in the OT Is Not About Death

The goal of the first chapter is to provide arguments that "prove that there is no such thing as a 'substitutionary death' sacrifice in the Torah."[20] One of the main arguments put forward is that sacrifice in the OT is not about death:

> Leviticus gives its readers an ingenious way to reconceptualize the death of the sacrificial animals so that it is no longer conceived of as a "death." It is difficult to capture the ritual reconfiguration happening, but in short, they conceptualized the death of the sacrificial animal as "*not*-a-killing."[21]

If true, this would not only mean that OT sacrifice is not about the animal dying in the place of the offerer but also that it was not a picture of what Jesus came to do by means of his death on the cross, e.g., "The NT authors express the saving significance of Jesus in a variety of ways, but when it comes to Jesus's death as *death*, they do not use sacrificial imagery since, as we learned, sacrifice is not about the concept of death."[22]

To support its claim that the animal's death is reconceptualized as "*not*-a-killing"—which the book grants "at first seems paradoxical and counterintuitive"[23]—the book provides various arguments, of which I will interact here with two.[24]

To begin, Rillera notes that Leviticus 17:3–4 uses the language of "bloodshed" to describe the slaughtering of a sacrificial animal at any place except at the tent of meeting, from which he concludes, "According to Leviticus, *killing a domesticated animal is morally equivalent to murdering a human being*."[25] He then goes on to note, "There is only one circumstance in which killing a domesticated animal is not considered murder and that is when it is offered as a sacrifice *at the right place* and its blood

[19] Jay Sklar, "Lamb of the Free: An Extended Review," *Academia*, https://www.academia.edu/164963413/Lamb_of_the_Free_An_Extended_Review.

[20] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 10.

[21] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 17.

[22] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 165–66; see also 215, 229.

[23] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 17.

[24] Fuller interactions can be found in my longer review cited above in n. 19.

[25] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 19.

is deposited *in the right manner* somewhere on the outer altar (17:5–6, 8–9, 11)."[26] So, unauthorized killing counts as murder but authorized killing does not.

In summarizing the significance of these points, Rillera states: "*This necessarily means that the death of a sacrificial animal is conceptualized in Leviticus as something other than killing or being put to death*."[27]

As a series of numbered points, the argument is:

1. Unauthorized animal killing is viewed as *murder*.
2. Authorized animal killing is not viewed as *murder*.
3. Therefore, authorized animal killing is reconceptualized as something other than *killing* or *death*.

As can be seen, the conclusion does not follow from the premises. Note the change that takes place from the first two phrases ("murder") to the last phrase ("killing or death"). This change undermines the argument for the simple reason that "murder" is not a synonym for "killing" or "death." By way of example, consider the following similar argument:

1. Unauthorized human killing is viewed as *murder*.
2. Authorized human killing (e.g., the capital penalty for idolatry in the OT) is not viewed as *murder*.
3. Therefore, authorized human killing is reconceptualized as something other than *killing* or *death*.

The conclusion is clearly untrue as can be seen by the emphasis on killing and death in passages that require the capital penalty for idolatry (e.g., Deut 17:2–7).

If the conclusion to either of these arguments used the word "murder" in place of "killing or death," they would work perfectly. But because the conclusion shifts from one concept (murder) to another (killing, death), the conclusion does not follow from the premises and the arguments fail.[28]

The second argument in support of understanding that Leviticus is reconceptualizing sacrificial death as something other than a killing of a blood-bearing creature "is the fact that the death of the animal—the slaughter itself—is given no ritual or theological meaning by any biblical text."[29] This claim is supported by noting various ways in which sacrificial texts seem not to emphasize the slaughter of the animal but emphasize instead acts associated with the altar and performed by the priest, like the burning of the sacrificial meat and the presenting of the blood.[30] From these observations it is concluded—quoting Eberhart—"that the slaughter of animals is rather insignificant."[31]

In response, a quick reading of the key sacrificial texts in Leviticus 1–7 shows an interesting pattern: they regularly specify that the animal's slaughter must be done "before the Lord" or "at the entrance of

[26] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 19.

[27] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 22.

[28] In other words, these arguments are guilty of equivocation (inaccurate use of language). A similar equivocation in the language of "murder" and "killing" happens in the argument that goes from the bottom of p. 19 to the top of p. 20 and in the argument on pp. 22–24. See also the last paragraph on p. 21, where "killing" is used for unauthorized slaughter as though it were a synonym for "murder."

[29] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 20.

[30] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 20–21.

[31] Christian Eberhart, "Characteristics of Sacrificial Metaphors in Hebrews," in *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods—New Insights*, ed. Gabriella Gelardini, BibInt 75 (Brill, 2005), 44; quoted in Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 21.

the tent of meeting/before the tent of meeting" where he dwells (Lev 1:5, 11; 3:2, 8, 13; 4:4, 15, 24; 6:25; see further Exod 29:11; Lev 14:13). At the least, such phrases make clear that this action is being carried out in the Lord's presence. But more particularly, the phrase "before the Lord," when used together with a ritual action in tabernacle texts, often indicates that the action is being done unto the Lord and especially that something is being presented to him. Far from being insignificant, such actions are essential expressions of ritual worship.

For example: "You shall put all these [breads] on the palms of Aaron and on the palms of his sons, and wave them for a wave offering *before the Lord*" (Exod 29:24) as a way of dedicating them unto him; "Then you shall take [these breads] from their hands and burn them on the altar on top of the burnt offering, as a pleasing aroma *before the Lord*" (Exod 29:25), unto whom you are offering them (as the rest of the verse makes clear: "It is a food offering to the Lord"); "When Aaron sets up the lamps at twilight, he shall burn it, a regular incense offering *before the Lord*," and thus offer it unto him (Exod 30:8); "And [Moses] arranged the bread on [the golden table] *before the Lord*" (Exod 40:23), unto whom it was being presented.

As applied to the ritual act of slaughtering, to slaughter an animal before the Lord is to slaughter it unto him, meaning *the act of killing itself* was seen as a way to make clear the animal is being presented to the Lord as an expression of worship.[32] To put it differently, the animal was being *killed unto the Lord*, meaning the death itself is being ritually highlighted; the killing of the animal was not an insignificant part of the ritual but an essential expression of giving this sacrifice to the Lord.

This understanding of ritual slaughter is not only in keeping with the other ritual actions done before the Lord mentioned above but also appears to be supported by Leviticus 17, which shows that animals slaughtered somewhere other than before the Lord do *not* count as an offering to him, resulting instead in bloodguilt for the offerer (17:3–4).[33] In other words, there's no option for slaughtering at one place and offering it to the Lord at another.[34] In order to present the animal to the Lord, you cannot

[32] But it is not the whole part of presenting it to him. The sacrificial texts make clear that the atonement is not complete until the priest presents the body and blood on the altar, which some expressions of PSA miss. But atonement is also not less than the act of slaughter, which the book misses. The best articulations of PSA will thus say something like, "In place of the sinner's life, given in death, the Lord will accept this animal's life, given in death through its slaughter before him, its lifeblood being placed on his altar, and its meat being burned up in smoke to him."

[33] Scholars debate whether these verses prohibit all slaughter away from the tabernacle or only slaughter for sacrifice away from the tabernacle (in which case one could slaughter an animal if the goal was simply a meal; for details, see overview in Jay Sklar, *Additional Notes on Leviticus* [Gleanings Press, 2023], 104–6). In either view, however, the only *sacrifices* that count as being offered to the Lord are those slaughtered at the tabernacle.

[34] In some translations, Leviticus 17:3–4a could read as though offerers are not forbidden from slaughtering a sacrifice outside the camp, only from slaughtering it and not bringing it to the tabernacle. But the Hebrew points in a different direction; it can be woodenly translated: "Anyone from the house of Israel who slaughters an ox or a sheep or a goat in the camp, or who slaughters [one of these] outside the camp, but to the entrance of the tent of meeting *has not brought it* to present [as] an offering to the Lord before the dwelling of the Lord…" If the text read that the offerer "does not bring it" to the tent, this could mean either that the offerer "does not bring it to the tent before offering it" or "does not bring it to the tent even after offering it somewhere else," with option two allowing for sacrificial slaughter elsewhere. But as noted by Milgrom, the use of the Hebrew past tense here—"has not brought it"—implies antecedent action, that is, "that a sacrificial animal is not to be slaughtered unless it 'has been brought' to the Tent to be slaughtered there" (Sklar, *Additional Notes on Leviticus*, 106). See further Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3A (Doubleday, 2000), 1455. (Note that this understanding also helps with v. 9, which does say "does not bring it," leading to the possible

simply apply its blood to the tabernacle altar before the Lord and burn its meat there; the animal must also be killed before him, again highlighting how the death of the animal before the Lord is essential to presenting it to him.

One may still ask how this important ritual element relates to atonement (for which, see further below on Lev 17:11), but these observations hopefully make clear that far from seeing the animal's death as insignificant, these ritual texts highlight its importance, connecting the animal's death itself to the presentation of the animal to the Lord.

In light of the above critiques and arguments, I do not think the book has sustained its claim that sacrifice in the OT is not about death. As a result, when we come to NT texts, we should not be surprised to find that the death of Jesus is presented as a sacrificial death and that his death is significant in the sacrificial process. (I will turn to some of these texts in the remaining sections.)

2.2. Claim 2: Sacrificial Atonement (*Kipper*) Is Only About Cleansing Holy Items

To put this argument in perspective, it is helpful to note that in Israel's thought world, certain ritual impurities and certain sins were viewed as defiling not only the person who had the impurity or who had committed the sin but also the tabernacle itself—almost as though the impurities and sins were a mist that the person generated and that landed on the Lord's home. One of the roles of the purification offering—traditionally translated as sin offering—was to remove the impurity or sin from the tabernacle (see Lev 16:14–19).

The overall argument of chapter 4 is that what has just been described is the *only* thing that takes place in atoning sacrifice, that is, "that 'atonement' (*kipper*) has a relatively limited function: it only removes contamination from *sancta* (holy objects within the dwelling place) and only contamination caused by two sources, certain (ritual) impurities and certain (but not all) sins."[35] So, in atoning sacrifices, kipper means to cleanse/decontaminate, the only things that are decontaminated by the sacrifice are holy objects at the tabernacle, and these are cleansed of certain ritual impurities and certain sins. As applied to NT texts later in the book, it will be argued that texts that appear to connect Jesus's sacrificial blood with atoning sacrifice for the cleansing or forgiveness of the sinner—such as 1 John 1:7 (see discussion below)—must therefore be understood differently.

The above argument runs into various challenges. I will highlight one here and one in the next section.

The first challenge is that towards the end of the instructions for the Day of Atonement, we read these words:

> And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you. For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord from all your sins. (Lev 16:29–30)

ambiguity named above; v. 4 resolves the ambiguity, making clear the text is referring to bringing it to the tent to offer it. Such an understanding also makes the most sense of the regular emphasis to this point in Leviticus on the necessity of slaughtering the animal before the Lord: 1:5, 11; 4:4, 15, 24.)

[35] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 88. Note that this claim already does not account for the atoning function of the burnt offering or reparation offering (traditionally translated guilt offering). The book's downplaying of atonement with the burnt offering is especially problematic in light of texts like Leviticus 1:4; 5:10; 9:7; 12:7–8; 14:20; 16:24. See my longer review (cited above, n. 19) for further analysis.

Atonement here clearly leads to the cleansing of sinners themselves from their moral impurity, which goes against the book's thesis. The book counters by arguing that moral impurity is removed from sinners here by rites other than sacrifice, namely, the fasting and Sabbath observance mentioned in 16:29.[36] But in that case, we would expect 16:30 to read, "for it is on this day that you shall make atonement for yourselves." Instead, we read, "atonement shall be made for you,"[37] naturally implying a third party makes atonement on their behalf that day.

Leviticus 16 leaves little doubt who that would be: the high priest. Leading up to our passage, the verb "to atone" (*kipper*) occurs ten different times to describe the actions on that day of the current high priest, Aaron.[38] Following our passage, the verb "to atone" occurs four different times to describe the actions of the future high priest on that day.[39] The most natural conclusion is that the third party in verse 30 who makes atonement for the Israelites on the Day of Atonement is the high priest.

So how do our verses function? On the one hand, they make clear that the people's fasting and sabbath observance are necessary. The Lord is not interested in mere ritual performed on the people's behalf but in their own hearts being turned to him in repentance and faith. On the other hand, being cleansed of their sin happens because "atonement is made for" them by the high priest.[40]

In keeping with this, it is therefore no surprise that 1 John 1:7 uses the Day of Atonement to explain the cleansing of sin that believers experience through Jesus's sacrificial death. The passage reads: "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." The phrase "cleanses us from all sin" uses the same language found in the Septuagint's translation of Leviticus 16:30 to describe the Israelites being "cleansed from all your sin," thus connecting Jesus's blood to the atoning sacrifices of the Day of Atonement.

The book acknowledges that the language of 1 John 1:7 is "a clear parallel" to the Septuagint's translation of Leviticus 16:30,[41] but it then goes through a lengthy explanation for why this cannot mean Jesus was an atoning sacrifice,[42] based in part on its view that the Day of Atonement sacrifices do not cleanse people. Its final conclusion is that Jesus's blood is being conceptualized as water and that "the claim of 1 John 1:7 is conveying something like this: 'The blood of Jesus purifies us of all sin because just as waterwashing purifies, then much more will the blood of Jesus—the purest 'water'—wash us and purify us of all unrighteousness in baptism since baptism is what unites us to Jesus's death.'"[43]

In other words, though 1 John 1:7 invokes the Day of Atonement and speaks of cleansing blood, it is not invoking the idea of sacrificial *kipper*;[44] it is invoking the blood as a symbol of water, which in turn invokes the idea of baptism and our union to Jesus in his death. But since, as I argue above, the Day of

[36] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 138–40.

[37] More woodenly, "he will make atonement for you," though third masculine singulars can have a passive sense in Hebrew, the approach taken by modern translations here (NASV, NIV, ESV, NRSV, NJPS, etc.). See further Jay Sklar, *Leviticus: A Discourse Analysis of the Hebrew Bible*, ZECOT (Zondervan Academic, 2023), 438.

[38] Leviticus 16L6, 10, 11, 16, 17 (2x), 18, 20, 24, 27. For v. 10, cf. vv. 20–22a and comments in Sklar, *Leviticus* (ZECOT), 430.

[39] Leviticus 16:32, 33 (3x). It also occurs once in v. 34 as a summary statement of what happens on the Day of Atonement.

[40] Compare Hebrews 9:11–13, which works with this same conclusion.

[41] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 215.

[42] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 215–18.

[43] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 218.

[44] See especially Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 219–20.

Atonement sacrifices did indeed cleanse the offerer, a far simpler solution presents itself to account for the data, both of this verse and the surrounding context:

- In 1 John 1:7, by describing Jesus's blood as that which "cleanses us from all sin," John alludes to the Day of Atonement (which the book agrees is "a clear parallel"[45]), where the priest makes atonement by means of the sacrificial rites "to cleanse you from all your sins" (Lev 16:30). A sacrificial register is thus activated and used to describe what Jesus does to cleanse us.
- In 1 John 1:9, Jesus's cleansing activity is repeated— "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"—and thus underscores this sacrificial work.
- In 1 John 2:2, which is just three verses later in the Greek and carries on the same flow of thought, Jesus is quite naturally described as a *hilasmos*—an atoning sacrifice—further deepening the sacrificial register. As Shauf observes, "Since 2:2 occurs as a part of the same discussion of sin as 1:7, we should see 2:2 as reflecting the claim about Jesus' sacrificial death in 1:7."[46]

In short, these verses are all of one piece, referring to Jesus as an atoning sacrifice whose sacrificial blood cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7, 9; 2:2; cf. 4:10). And while 1 John 1:7–2:2 does not speak directly to the question of penalty or substitution, it does connect the A of PSA to Jesus's sacrificial blood.

2.3. Claim 3: Sacrificial Atonement (*Kipper*) Is Only Related to Cleansing

Along with arguing that sacrificial atonement (*kipper*) only cleanses holy objects, the book argues that it refers only to cleansing and not to ransom. This would further undermine PSA insofar as the idea of ransom supports the idea that the sacrifice takes the penalty of the sinner to rescue them from the penalty of sin.

Leviticus 17:11 is key to consider here since it is one of the only verses that gives an explicit rationale of how sacrificial atonement works: "For the life of the body is in the blood, and I myself have given it to you on the altar to make atonement (*kipper*) for your lives, for it is the blood that makes atonement (*kipper*) by means of the life" (my translation).

Commenting on this verse,[47] Rillera notes that scholars debate whether the Hebrew word *kipper*—typically translated "to make atonement"—refers here to "ransom" or "decontaminate" or some combination of the two.[48] He argues for "decontaminate," whereas "some combination of the two" appears to me to account best for the data. We begin with the idea of ransom.

I have defined ransom (Heb. *kopher*) elsewhere as follows:

> A [*kopher*] is a legally or ethically legitimate payment that delivers a guilty party from a just punishment that is the right of the offended party to execute or to have executed. The acceptance of this payment is entirely dependent upon the choice of the offended party, is a lesser punishment than was originally expected, and its acceptance serves

[45] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 215.
[46] Scott Shauf, *Jesus the Sacrifice: A Historical and Theological Study* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 154.
[47] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 122–27.
[48] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 122.

> both to rescue the life of the guilty and to appease the offended party, thus restoring peace to the relationship.[49]

Scholars from a wide array of backgrounds understand *kipper* in Leviticus 17:11 to refer to ransom because the exact phrase "to *kipper* for your lives" found in this verse occurs in only two other places (Exod 30:15; Num 31:50), both of which use *kipper* to refer to "ransom."[50]

In response, Rillera cites Feldman, who argues:

> The context of Exod 30 and Num 31 is markedly different than Lev 17:11. In both Exod 30 and Num 31, the context is monetary.… Lev 17:11 lacks the monetary context, and there is nowhere else in the Priestly Narrative where this monetary concept is imported into a sacrificial context.[51]

In other words, if the monetary concept is not there, ransom cannot be in view.

What this misses is that in the biblical world, a "ransom" was not limited to money. A ransom could be the giving of one living being in place of another. For example, Isaiah 43:3–4 reads, "For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give *Egypt* as your *ransom* (*kopher*), *Cush and Seba in exchange for you*. Since you are precious in my sight, since you are honored and I love you, I will give *other men in your place* and *other peoples in exchange for your life*." So, the question is not, "Is this a monetary context?" but "Is this a ransom context?"

To answer that question, it may be noted that the sins and major impurities requiring sacrificial atonement share an important similarity: they both endanger.[52] Sin obviously endangers since sinners were liable to God's punishment and needed ransom. But major impurities also endangered and required ransom since they pollute not only people but also holy items (Lev 16:16), which resulted in death if not

[49] Jay Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions* (Sheffield Phoenix, 2005), 60 (see 48–61 for full study). Cf. more simply Feder: "From its usage in different contexts, we can determine that *kōper* designates a payment that removes the danger of death or some serious harm from the one who pays it, or on whose behalf it is paid" (Yitzhaq Feder, *Blood Expiation in Hittite and Biblical Ritual*, WAWSup [Brill, 2012], 171).

[50] Baruch Levine, *Leviticus*, JPS Torah (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1989), 115; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3 (Doubleday, 1991), 707–8; Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1474; Baruch Schwartz, "The Prohibitions Concerning the 'Eating' of Blood in Leviticus 17," in *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel*, ed. Gary A. Anderson and Saul M. Olyan (JSOT Press, 1991), 55 n. 1; Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1979), 115; Philip J. Budd, *Leviticus*, New Century (Eerdmans, 1996), 248; Feder, *Blood Expiation*, 171; David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, NovTSup 141 (Brill, 2013), 263–64; R. B. Jamieson, *Jesus' Death and Heavenly Offering in Hebrews*, SNTSMS 172 (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 137–38; Christophe Nihan, *From Priestly Torah to Pentateuch: A Study in the Composition of the Book of Leviticus*, FAT 2/25 (Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 420; Nihan further cites: Herbert C. Brichto, "On Slaughter and Sacrifice, Blood and Atonement," *HUCA* 47 (1976): 27–38; Nobuyoshi Kiuchi, *The Purification Offering in the Priestly Literature: Its Meaning and Function* (JSOT Press, 1987), 107; Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 168.

[51] Liane M. Feldman, *The Story of Sacrifice: Ritual and Narrative in the Priestly Source*, FAT 141 (Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 188; quoted in Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 122.

[52] What follows is a very brief summary of a much longer study. See Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*. The main argument has been summarized in Jay Sklar, "Sin and Impurity: Atoned or Purified? Yes!," in *Perspectives on Purity and Purification in the Bible*, ed. Baruch J. Schwartz, David P. Wright, Jeffrey Stackert, and Naphtali S. Meshel, LHBOTS 374 (T&T Clark, 2008), 18–31, and even more briefly in Sklar, *Leviticus* (ZECOT), 28–32, and in Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of the Resurrection*, 259–65. In what follows, I go further and consider how its conclusions can be applied to the idea of PSA.

dealt with properly (Lev 15:31). In either case—sin or impurity—the offerer was endangered, meaning we have a context where ransom is required.

Kipper in Leviticus 17:11 is therefore well understood as relating to ransom in sacrificial contexts since this accounts well for the data. It is in keeping with the use of the phrase elsewhere and in keeping with the situations envisioned for those bringing sacrifice for major impurities and inadvertent sins: their lives are endangered and are ransomed by the life of the sacrifice. Instead of the offerer's lifeblood being given in death, the animal's lifeblood is given in death, serving as the ransom payment. As I have noted elsewhere:

> The question, "How can the offerer ransom their life [*nephesh*]?" is answered: "By the life [*nephesh*] of an animal, represented by its lifeblood, graciously accepted by the Lord as a ransom in place of the offerer's own lifeblood." Levine, citing the acclaimed medieval rabbinic scholar Rashi, expresses it as follows:
>
> > Rashi states: "Blood represents life, and it can therefore expiate for life." Basic to the theory of sacrifice in ancient Israel … was the notion of substitution. The sacrifice substituted for an individual human life or for the lives of the members of the community in situations where God could have exacted the life of the offender.…
> >
> > This explains the specific intent of the Hebrew formula *le-khapper 'al nafshoteikhem*, "for making expiation for your lives." Literally, this formula means "to serve as *kofer* (ransom) for your lives." God accepts the blood of the sacrifices in lieu of human blood.
>
> And he does so as an act of grace: "*I myself* have given it to you on the altar to ransom your lives." He both forgives sin and provides the means of forgiveness.[53]

In short, all the elements of PSA are in place: the animal experiences the death the offerer deserved (their penalty) in the offerer's place (as a substitute) in order to reconcile them to God (atonement).

What about the cleansing aspect? This is where a second similarity exists between the sins and major impurities requiring sacrifice: they both defile. Major impurities obviously defile since the offerer needed cleansing, but sins also defile the sinner and needed cleansing: "For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord from all your sins" (Lev 16:30).

In short, sins and major impurities both endanger (requiring ransom) and pollute (requiring cleansing). It's a two-pronged problem requiring a two-pronged solution: ransom and cleansing. Sacrifice can achieve both because the blood is a dual-function solution: it is both the ultimate ransoming agent (Lev 17:11) and the ultimate cleansing agent (8:15). When sin is the focus, the ransoming function comes to the fore, and the offerer is "forgiven" (4:20, 26, 31). When impurity is the focus, the cleansing function comes to the fore, and the offerer is made "clean" (12:7; 14:20). But both ransom and cleansing are happening in each context because the blood accomplishes both.

In other words, in the context of atoning sacrifices, *kipper* refers to a "purifying ransom" and a "ransoming purification."[54] And because of this ransoming element, PSA is at the heart of sacrificial atonement.

[53] Sklar, *Leviticus* (ZECOT), 459; citing Levine, *Leviticus*, 115.

[54] See Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 182; for further argumentation, see references in n. 52.

2.4. Claim 4: The Day of Atonement Passage in Leviticus 16 Cannot Be the Background of NT Passages That Explain What Happens in Jesus's Death

Romans 3:25–26 is often understood to explain Jesus's death against the backdrop of the Day of Atonement. These verses continue the flow from verse 24—which has just been referring to Jesus—and read as follows:

> whom God put forward as a *hilastērion* by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

While there is more than one question when it comes to the best way to translate these verses, one of the key questions centers around the word *hilastērion* in 3:25. The debate is whether Paul uses this term with the Day of Atonement in mind—in which case it has a cultic/sacrificial referent and should be translated something like propitiation (ESV), expiation (RSV), sacrifice of atonement (NIV, NRSV), or mercy seat (NET)—or whether Paul uses the term with Roman culture in mind, and it should be translated something like "votive gift" or "votive offering."

Many scholars lean towards the first category and increasingly understand that the term *hilastērion* refers specifically to the lid of the ark of the covenant.[55] This is a common usage in the Septuagint (Exod 25:17–22; 31:7; Lev 16:2, 13–15), is its use in the only other NT passage using this term (Heb 9:5), and, occurring together here with the mention of blood in the context of dealing with sins, most naturally evokes a sacrificial register, and in particular, the Day of Atonement, where blood is sprinkled on the atonement lid in order to atone for impurity and sin (Lev 16:11–16).

As applied to Jesus, he is being described as the place where this atonement happens and where it happens by means of his own blood. The flow of thought is that God in his divine forbearance had passed over former sins but demonstrates his righteousness by dealing with them (and sins to come) in and through the sacrificial death of Jesus in place of sinners (P, S) so that they might be justified before him (A). Jesus takes the penalty the sinners deserved, and the justification of sinners is the result.[56]

Rillera takes a very different approach, arguing against the above[57] and then providing a long discussion in which he argues that the term *hilastērion* should be understood in this passage to refer to a "votive gift"—not to God but from God to people.[58] In what follows, I engage with one of the book's arguments against the above approach and then follow with a final comment evaluating the book's own approach.[59]

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[55] Daniel P. Bailey, "Jesus as the Mercy Seat: The Semantics and Theology of Paul's Use of *Hilasterion* in Romans 3:25," *TynBul* 51 (2000): 155–58; Frank Thielman, *Romans*, ZECNT (Zondervan Academic, 2018), 208, 210; Douglas Moo, *Romans*, 2nd ed., NICNT (Eerdmans, 2018), 252–55; Michael F. Bird, *Romans*, SOG (Zondervan, 2016), 117; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., BECNT (Baker Academic, 2018), 201–3; Simon J. Gathercole, "Justified by Faith, Justified by His Blood: The Evidence of Rom 3.21–4.25," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism,* vol. 2 of *The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Marl A. Seifrid, WUNT 2/181 (Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 178 n. 113.

[56] Similarly Thielman, *Romans*, 198, 207–12, 220–21; Moo, *Romans*, 251–64; Schreiner, *Romans*, 198–207; Bird, *Romans*, 117–20; see esp. the very careful treatment in Gathercole, "Justified by Faith," 168–81, esp. 175–81.

[57] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 260–61.

[58] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 262–71.

[59] See my longer review (cited in n. 19) for fuller engagement with other arguments the book puts forward.

One of the arguments the book has against the link to the Day of Atonement (which it refers to as the Day of Decontamination) is that the offering of that day was not for major moral impurities, and, since these have all been discussed in Romans 1–3, "the Day of Decontamination would be a deficient solution to the preceding context in Romans."[60] In other words, if the Day of Atonement sacrifices could not atone for grave sins that defile the land such as bloodshed—and it seems clear those sacrifices do not do so fully, otherwise there would be no need for the inadvertent manslayer to stay in a city of refuge for more than one year even though a Day of Atonement would have taken place (Num 35:32–33)—then these sacrifices cannot serve as the backdrop for describing what Jesus accomplishes in his death.

There is an important problem here. The fact that sacrificial *kipper* cannot atone for the sins that defile the land might be true *with regard to the sacrifices of Leviticus*. But the book goes from here to conclude that sacrificial *kipper* cannot be involved at all for these sins in the NT. Stated propositionally:

1. Levitical *kipper* sacrifices cannot atone for sins that defile the land.
2. Therefore, sacrificial *kipper* cannot be the background of the forgiveness of these sins in the NT.

But the above only works if we grant a huge assumption:

1. Levitical *kipper* sacrifices cannot atone for sins that defile the land.
2. *Jesus's death could not be a sacrifice that is more powerful than the Levitical sacrifices.*
3. Therefore, sacrificial *kipper* cannot be the background of the forgiveness of these sins in the NT.

That middle proposition is very problematic. As the "how much more" of Hebrews 9:14 makes clear, one of the most important points about the sacrificial work of Jesus is that it did what the Levitical sacrifices could not do.

> The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. *How much more*, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Heb 9:13–14)

Indeed, Hebrews will go on to describe the Levitical sacrifices' inability to deal fully and finally with sins and to contrast this with the sacrificial work of Jesus to deal both fully and finally with sins (Heb 10:11–14), so much so that we can do what no Israelite—aside from the high priest, and then only once a year—would dream to do: enter into the holy of holies (10:19–22). In other words, Jesus's sacrifice was unspeakably more powerful than Levitical sacrifices. The above argument thus rests on a false assumption, and the most likely reading—especially in light of the terms *hilastērion* and blood occurring so closely together—is that we are in a sacrificial register and that the Day of Atonement in particular is being evoked.

Rillera summarizes his own understanding of this passage as follows:

> By using *hilastērion*, Paul is primarily activating the conciliatory votive-gift motif in Greco-Roman culture, which itself evokes stories of reconciliation. But unlike the martyrs in 4 Maccabees who are offering themselves as votive gifts *to God*, Paul says

[60] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 261.

> God put forth Jesus as a conciliatory gift *to humanity* to demonstrate God's merciful character of divine justice (*dikaiosynē*, Rom 3:25–26).[61]

In actuality, Paul does not say God put forth Jesus as a conciliatory gift *to humanity*. It's clear that Jesus as *hilastērion* is *for the benefit of humanity*—it is the means of redemption (Rom 3:24)—but the whole context of Romans up to this point is that our sin endangers us *before God*, whose wrath comes against sinners (1:18), who brings judgment upon sinners (2:2), whose day of wrath and judgment is coming against unrepentant sinners (2:5), who will judge the world (3:6), and before whom all the world is accountable (3:19).[62] To say that sinners are the ones being conciliated does violence to the immediate context. Rather, the glory of what happens in Jesus is that God in his mercy provides for sinners the way of dealing with the judgment they deserve by providing Jesus as a *hilastērion*—the place of atonement—for *God's own* righteous wrath that Paul has been detailing.

In short, the simplest explanation of why the words *hilastērion* and blood occur together is that they are meant to call to mind a sacrificial register in general and the Day of Atonement in particular. As such, they associate Jesus with the place where atonement happens and identify his blood as that which accomplishes it. Through his sacrificial death in place of sinners (S), he experiences the penalty for sins that sinners deserve (P). This demonstrates God's justice in dealing with sins, past and present, and addresses God's wrath due for sin, reconciling sinners to God (A). But even more, Jesus's sacrificial death shows God's love in providing this means of atonement to begin with. As Paul will say in just a few chapters, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

2.5. Claim 5: If Jesus's Death Is a Participatory Phenomenon, It Cannot Be Substitutionary

In the Introduction, Rillera indicates that one of his major arguments is as follows:

> The NT authors, whether they make use of sacrificial imagery, or whether they make use of the atoning sacrifices, all agree on one fundamental point: Jesus's death is a participatory phenomenon; it is something all are called to share in experientially. The logic is not: Jesus died so we don't have to. Rather it is: Jesus died so that we, together, can follow in his steps and die with him and like him, having full fellowship with his sufferings so that we might share in the likeness of his resurrection (e.g., Phil 3:10–11; Gal 2:20; 6:14; Rom 6:3–8; 1 Pet 2:21; Mark 8:34–35 with 10:38–29; 1 John 2:6; 3:16–18; etc.).[63]

As developed later in the book, the argument is that the NT describes Jesus's death as something we share in (participatory) rather than something he does in place of us (substitutionary) *and also* that the fact of it being a participatory phenomenon means it *cannot* be a substitutionary phenomenon. Commenting on 1 Peter 2:24, Rillera argues:

> It is obvious that Peter views Jesus as the Suffering Servant *par excellence*, but what prevents me from categorizing this as a "substitution" is that he simultaneously says we are called to share in the same servant lifestyle (2:21). Substitution, by definition, *precludes any sort of participation*, as Simon Gathercole argues in *Defending Substitution*.

[61] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 267.
[62] See esp. Gathercole, "Justified by Faith," 169–75.
[63] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 7.

> Gathercole writes: "I am defining *substitutionary* atonement for the present purposes as Christ's death in our place, instead of us. The 'instead of us' clarifies the point that 'in our place' does not, in substitution at least, mean 'in our place *with us*.'"[64]

A few comments by way of response. First, the above could read as though Gathercole agrees that it must be one or the other when it comes to Jesus's death: substitution or participation. It's therefore important to note that Gathercole sees these as *different but co-existing ways* to describe what is happening in Jesus's death: "It should be emphasized, however, that the argument [I make in this book] … does nothing to undermine the importance of representation and participation. Rather, the point is that substitution can happily coexist with them."[65]

Second, the Bible speaks in two ways when it comes to our participation in Jesus's suffering and death. Sometimes it speaks of us following the example that Jesus left for us in his death, namely, obedience and self-sacrifice as righteous sufferers (Mark 8:34–35; 10:38–39; Heb 13:12–13; 1 Pet 2:18–21). This is something that happens on the physical plain as we live cruciform lives in this world. At other times, the Bible speaks of the union that we have with Christ in his death, which happens on the spiritual plain as we experience the spiritual benefits of all that Christ has done for us (Rom 6:3–11).[66] The initial quote above mixes these together as though they were all the same thing,[67] but it is important to address each of them separately.

With the first category—Jesus's death as a model—Rillera assumes a false disjunction between Jesus's death as substitution and Jesus's death as model by failing to ask the important question: Substitution and model *with reference to what?* In his book, *Six Hours, One Friday*, Max Lucado recounts what happened to a Catholic priest named Maximilian Kolbe, incarcerated at Auschwitz in 1941.[68] One day, a prisoner escaped. In order to discourage other prisoners from doing the same, for every one prisoner that escaped, the prison authorities would select ten prisoners to die. The tenth person selected in this case was a husband and father, who began to sob as he thought of leaving his wife and children behind. All of a sudden, Kolbe steps forward and asks to take the prisoner's place—a request that is granted.

Now did Kolbe's ensuing death serve as a substitute or as a model? Yes. With regard to penalty, a substitute: he died in place of the other prisoner. With regard to sacrificial love in unjust suffering, a model: by his death he modeled unbelievable self-sacrificial love, a model that others do well to participate in. My point is not to try and map every aspect of this story onto the cross but simply to show that a substitutionary death can at the same time be a model for others to follow.

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[64] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 247. Here Rillera cites Simon Gathercole, *Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul* (Baker Academic, 2015), 15.

[65] Gathercole, *Defending Substitution*, 14; see also 30, 111–12.

[66] It is important to note that these spiritual benefits impact us on the physical plain in the here and now, e.g., the power we have to defeat sin (Rom 6:6–11). The point is not that the latter category above is only spiritual, simply that the participation in Christ's death in that category is not speaking to our physical suffering in the way that the first category is.

[67] Note the conflation of verses from the two categories in the following: "Rather it is: Jesus died so that we, together, can follow in his steps and die with him and like him, having full fellowship with his sufferings so that we might share in the likeness of his resurrection (e.g., Phil 3:10–11; Gal 2:20; 6:14; Rom 6:3–8; 1 Pet 2:21; Mark 8:34–35 with 10:38–29; 1 John 2:6; 3:16–18; etc.)" (Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 7). The same happens again on pp. 274, 278.

[68] Max Lucado, *Six Hours, One Friday* (Multnomah, 1989), 66–68.

With the second category—the spiritual union we have with Jesus in his death—two comments are important. The first is that it may legitimately be asked: Are the ideas of substitution and participation in fact exclusive of one another in this context? By emphasizing participation, Rillera's own approach to atonement is closest to the recapitulation understanding of Christ's work that Irenaeus outlined.[69] But others have argued that recapitulation and substitution—including PSA—are both biblical ideas that work together.

For example, Scot McKnight argues that many of the standard metaphors describing atonement—from recapitulation to ransom/Christus Victor to satisfaction to substitution to representation to penal substitution—are all biblical and all grounded in the idea of "identification for incorporation."[70] In a similar vein, Joshua McNall identifies "a particular account of recapitulation" that serves as "the ground and the foundation for the other models of atonement," including PSA.[71] Others arguing for the compatibility of substitution and participation, with varying approaches, could also be cited.[72] What they share in common is that they see these ideas to be biblical and also to be compatible with one another.

Of course, the question remains whether they're *right* to argue for this compatibility and, if so, whether they've described it in the best way, but I note them here to highlight that respected scholars—even those affirming a recapitulation type framework (so McKnight and McNall)—do not see ideas of substitution and participation to be at odds. Rillera undoubtedly disagrees, though he does not interact directly with such scholars in this work to explain why. (One cannot interact with all the literature on such matters, but a lack of interaction on such a crucial point of the book's argument weakens its overall thesis.)

The second comment is to note that the book's approach rests on an important but problematic assumption: if Paul speaks of believers participating in Jesus's death in some contexts, and if participation excludes the idea of substitution by definition, then he cannot speak of Jesus's death in substitutionary ways elsewhere *because he cannot use different ideas that exclude one another when describing spiritual realities.*

This assumption does not hold. For example, when describing the believer's experience of salvation, Paul sometimes uses adoption imagery (Gal 4:5) and at other times the imagery of the dead being brought back to life (Col 2:13). These images exclude one another by definition: one centers on a *living* person being adopted, the other on a *corpse* being made alive. Why does Paul do this? Because there is a richness in our salvation that is best communicated by using multiple images, *even if they are in logical tension with one another*.[73] And if Paul is happy to do this when describing salvation, he can surely do likewise when describing the events that bring our salvation to pass. And that in turn means that arguing against substitution because it excludes the idea of participation is an argument without basis.

[69] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 282.

[70] Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Abingdon, 2007), 107–14.

[71] Joshua M. McNall, *The Mosaic of Atonement: An Integrated Approach to Christ's Work* (Zondervan Academic, 2019), 23; see further his discussion on pp. 101–3.

[72] See further the discussion in Gathercole, *Defending Substitution*, 111–13, for various understandings of how substitution and participation might (or might not) relate to one another.

[73] Nor will it work to try and combine the images by saying, "Well, first he makes us alive and then he adopts us." In the above passages, these images are each meant to describe salvation itself. They are two different ways of looking at the same spiritual reality.

In short, whether participation and substitution are not exclusive to one another or whether Paul is following his practice elsewhere and using images that are exclusive to one another to describe spiritual realities, in either case, the assumption that he cannot be describing Christ's death as substitutionary and participatory is false.

The above has important implications for a text like Romans 5:6–8:

> For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Simon Gathercole has argued that Romans 5:7 is in keeping with classical examples from the literature of the time in which one person dies in place of another.[74] Rillera acknowledges this to be correct—"Granting that Rom 5:7 indeed alludes to classical examples of vicarious deaths…"[75]—but proceeds to state that this understanding does not also apply to the very next verse (5:8) in light of the larger context of Romans 5–8, which speaks of the ways that "Jesus's death not only *identifies with* the current human condition of suffering in death as 'the wages of sin' (6:23; cf. 5:12–21), but it also makes possible for the beneficiaries a co-death (cocrucifixion and co-burial) with Jesus (6:2–11; cf. 7:4; 8:17)."[76] In other words, because Paul speaks of Jesus's death in chapter 6 in terms of participation, he cannot be speaking of it in chapter 5 in terms of substitution because he cannot speak of Jesus's death by using differing images that (the book holds) are in tension with one another.

But since (1) these images are not necessarily in tension with one another, and (2) even if they were, Paul elsewhere speaks of spiritual realities using images in tension with one another (and thus can do so here), then Gathercole's reading is not only possible, it is the simplest explanation of the parallel between verses 7 and 8:

> For one will scarcely die for (= in place of) a righteous person—though perhaps for (= in place of) a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for (= in place of) us.

Paul is clear: Jesus died in place of sinners. He is equally clear that this death reconciles sinners to God (5:10), meaning this is substitutionary atonement. Moreover, in the first half of Romans, "death as the consequence of sin is integral to Paul's thought (1:32; 5:12ff.; 6:23; 7:5, 11),"[77] meaning that by suffering death in place of sinners, Jesus is suffering their penalty.

In short, we have PSA in its fullness: Jesus taking the penalty sinners deserve as their substitute, in this way reconciling them to God.

2.6. Claim 6: The Scapegoat on the Day of Atonement Only Functioned to Remove Contaminations from the Camp

Leviticus 16 describes the Day of Atonement ceremony. At one point in the ceremony, we read these words:

[74] Gathercole, *Defending Substitution*, 85–107, esp. 90–107.
[75] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 280.
[76] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 280.
[77] Gathercole, "Justified by Faith," 175.

> And when [Aaron] has made an end of atoning for the Holy Place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness. (Lev 16:20–22)

It is obvious the goat here is not a sacrifice—it is not offered on an altar—and yet it is central to dealing with the Israelites' sins on this day. Calling it the "tote-goat," the book describes its function as follows:

> It is basically a walking dustpan that carries off the rest of the contaminations from [Lev] 16:16 (that were not mentioned in 16:19) away from the sanctuary.… The function of the tote-goat is to *preemptively* ward off dire conditions that would threaten the community if these contaminants were not removed and then located far enough away from the sanctuary to no longer be a source of contaminating it.[78]

If this is the case, the goat cannot be looked to as a picture of an animal suffering the penalty for others' sins, again undermining a text that is often explained through the lens of PSA.

By way of response, the book's argument cited above is true but incomplete. It's true in that removing the Israelites' sins was something the goat did. It's incomplete in that the specific language used to describe how it removed those sins communicates that it was much more than a dustpan: it bore the responsibility and punishment of those sins. As I note elsewhere, this may be seen in at least two ways.

> First, the Israelites' sins are placed on the goat's head (16:21), and to bear sin on one's head means to be held responsible for it. "Judge between your servants, condemning the guilty and *bringing down on their heads what they have done*," prays Solomon, asking the Lord to hold the guilty responsible for their wrongs (2 Chr 6:23).[79] As applied to our text, the … goat is not simply bearing the Israelites' sins away, it is bearing full responsibility for them.
>
> Second, the goat is said to "bear on itself all their iniquities to a land cut off." The word "cut off " [*gezerah*] occurs only here, though the verb of the same root (*gazar*) is used in many places with a negative connotation to describe a person being "cut off," whether from worshiping at the temple (2 Chr 26:21), from life (Lam 3:54; Isa 53:8; cf. Ezek 37:11), or from the Lord himself (Ps 88:6[5]). In our context, the goat is not only bearing the peoples' sins away from camp, it is bearing responsibility for them and thus is cut off from the Lord's people and exiled—as happens to those laden with sin.[80]

[78] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 129, 131.

[79] Cf. Joshua 2:19–20: "Then if anyone goes out of the doors of your house into the street, his blood shall be on his own head, and we shall be guiltless. But if a hand is laid on anyone who is with you in the house, his blood shall be on our head." See further Judges 9:57; 1 Samuel 25:39; 1 Kings 2:32–33, 44; Esther 9:25; Psalm 7:16; Joel 3:4, 7; Obadiah 1:15.

[80] Sklar, *Leviticus* (ZECOT), 434.

Most simply stated, in place of the people bearing the penalty, the goat does in their place [P, S]. And note especially how verse 10 describes this result: "*to make atonement (kipper) with it* [A] by sending it away … into the wilderness."[81] All the elements of PSA are present and accounted for.

As a final observation, it may be noted that Isaiah 53 picks up on these very verses to explain how the suffering servant bears the sins of others in his substitutionary suffering and death that reconciles people to God. (In the chart below, words in italics are the same in Hebrew or built on the same root.[82])

"Aaron must lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the *iniquities* of the Israelites and all their *transgressions*, with regard to any of their sins." (Lev 16:21)	"But he was pierced for our *transgressions*, he was crushed for our *iniquities*." (Isa 53:5a)
"So the goat will *bear* on itself all their *iniquities* to a *land cut off*." (Lev 16:22)	"He was *cut off* from the *land* of the living.... He will bear their *iniquities*.... He *bore* the sin of many." (Isa 53:8b, 11–12)

Insofar as NT authors use the suffering servant to explain the death of Jesus (see discussion below on Heb 9:28), a PSA understanding of his death in those NT passages would be in direct keeping with these earlier OT passages.

2.7. Claim 7: The NT Writers Did Not Read Isaiah 53 as Being about Atonement or Substitution

In chapter seven, the book argues that Isaiah 53 is not read in the NT as a model of atonement or of one person taking a penalty in the place of another.

> If Isa 53 was received as such an obvious "atonement" prooftext, why didn't the two NT authors who explicitly identify Jesus with *kipper* [i.e., the authors of Hebrews and 1 John] rely on Isa 53 for their proof, especially since making this link was an obvious uphill battle (cf. Heb 7:13–14)? The answer is that Isa 53 was not read by the early Christ-followers as either about atonement or substitution.[83]

In support, it notes NT passages that use Isaiah 53 in contexts that are not about Jesus's death (Matt 8:16–17) or that use his death as a model of righteous suffering (1 Pet 2:21–22) and concludes, "All this confirms that Isa 53 was read as a paradigmatic script for what living righteously in an unrighteous world will entail (suffering, probably martyrdom, but ultimately vindication to resurrected life)."[84]

While the book is correct for some NT passages, its discussion of NT passages looking back to Isaiah 53 is incomplete. Gathercole notes that "Romans 4:25 is the most widely acknowledged parallel to Isaiah 53 [in Romans], with its reference to Jesus 'who was handed over for our transgressions.' This corresponds in particular to the fact that the servant 'was handed over for their sins' (Isa 53:12)."[85] To this he adds Romans 8:32 ("He [God] handed him over for us all"), which has significant overlap with

[81] My translation. More woodenly, "to make atonement on it," the goat "being the place of focus for the atoning actions described in 16:21–22. The idea is conveyed more clearly in English using 'with' instead of 'on'" (Sklar, *Leviticus* [ZECOT], 430 n. 45; so also NJPS).

[82] Sklar, *Leviticus* (ZECOT), 442.

[83] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 245.

[84] Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 246.

[85] Gathercole, *Substitution*, 63–64.

Isaiah 53:6b ("And the Lord has handed him over for our sins"). Neither of these passages are about Jesus as a paradigm; they are about Jesus as the one suffering for our sins.

But perhaps the most significant passage to note is Hebrews 9:28, which reads, "so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him." As noted by David Moffit, a leading Hebrews scholar, the majority position among commentators is that the language of "bear the sins of many" in Hebrews 9:28 is alluding to the suffering servant in Isaiah 53:12, as the overlap in language makes clear.[86]

Not interacting with this text in its discussion of the use of Isaiah 53 in the NT is a serious omission,[87] for Moffitt goes on to explain the significance of the servant in Isaiah 52–54 as follows: "the suffering and death of the servant in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 are part of the means by which the covenant curses are reversed and the relationship is restored to health. The servant's vicarious death contributes to the turning of God's anger to mercy (54:7–8)."[88] Again, in explaining the significance of 53:10: "the point seems to be that God planned to eliminate the guilt of the people that was placed upon the servant by having the servant take the guilt and die in the place of the guilty."[89]

In short, by appealing to the servant of Isaiah 53 in Hebrews 9:28, the author of Hebrews is making clear that the same things are happening in and through the death of Jesus.[90] His death is penal [P] and substitutionary [S][91] and functions as "the means by which the covenant curses are reversed and the relationship is restored to health [A]."[92]

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[86] "The language of 'bearing the sins of many' used in Hebrews … occurs in LXX only in Isaiah 53:12 where the text says that the servant 'bore the sins of many'" (David M. Moffitt, *Rethinking the Atonement: New Perspectives on Jesus's Death, Resurrection, and Ascension* [Baker Academic, 2022], 62). So also Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 2012), 426–27; Thomas Schreiner, *Hebrews*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Lexham, 2020), 287; Jamieson, *Jesus' Death*, 170; and Douglas J. Moo, who notes in *Hebrews*, ZECNT (Zondervan Academic, 2024), 340 n. 121, that "most interpreters identify the allusion (e.g., Cullmann, *Christology*, 91; Lane, *Hebrews*, 2:250; Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, 487)") (Moffitt [*Rethinking the Atonement*, 62 n. 48] adds Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia [Fortress, 1989], 266).

[87] The book's discussion of Isaiah 53 makes no mention of Hebrews 9:28, stating, "The passages that quote from Isa 53 are: Matt 8:17, Luke 22:37, John 12:38, Acts 8:32–33; Rom 10:16, 15:21, 1 Pet 2:24–25; Rev 14:5" (Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 244 n. 5). The first six of these make clear they are citing from the OT; the last two do not, and verses like Hebrews 9:28 (as well as Romans 4:25 and 8:32) have as much (or more) overlap with verses from Isaiah 53 as do 1 Peter 2:24–25 and Revelation 14:5. For Hebrews 9:28 in particular, see the previous note.

[88] Moffitt, *Rethinking the Atonement*, 50. He also sees this idea reflected in 2:9, which states that Jesus "tastes death for everyone": "Jesus's vicarious death is identified in Hebrews 2:9 as the reason that he has been crowned with the glory and honor promised to humanity in Psalm 8. Conceptually, the ideas that Jesus 'tastes death' for all and is subsequently exalted, being 'crowned with glory and honor,' correspond well to the ideas of the servant's vicarious death and exaltation in Isaiah 52:13–53:12" (p. 66).

[89] Moffitt, *Rethinking the Atonement*, 53.

[90] See Moo, *Hebrews*, 340; Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 426–27; Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 287; Jamieson, *Jesus' Death*, 170.

[91] Moffitt uses the language "vicarious" in his book, which can mean "in place of another" (i.e., substitution) but can also mean "for the benefit of another." His comments on 53:10 (cited above), however, make the substitutionary sense clear. In keeping with this, after publishing the book, he was interviewed on it and was asked how his view of the atonement related "to the presentation of atonement we seem to find in the apparently substitutionary (or representational) aspect of the suffering Servant in Isaiah 53?" He responded, "For what it's worth, I think Isaiah 53 presents the death of the Servant figure as substitutionary (and penal)" (B. J. Oropeza, "Rethinking the Atonement: An Interview with David M. Moffitt," *Patheos*, 25 January 2025, https://tinyurl.com/4xezrjhk).

[92] To be sure, Moffitt sees this as an "extra-sacrificial means of dealing with sin" (*Rethinking the Atonement*, 71) since the servant in Isaiah 53 is not a sacrifice *per se*. But as Moffitt also notes, "The term ['atonement'] can

As a final observation, it's worth noting that by using the suffering servant to explain the death of Jesus, the author of Hebrews is following the example of Jesus himself and the earliest preaching in the church. In Luke 22:37, just before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus quotes from Isaiah 53:12 to explain what is about to happen: "For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors.' For what is written about me has its fulfillment." In this way, he invites his followers to read his coming suffering and death through the lens of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53, the one who dies in place of guilty sinners so that they may be forgiven. Similarly, in Acts, when Philip comes upon the Ethiopian eunuch who was reading Isaiah 53:7–8, we read, "And the eunuch said to Philip, 'About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus" (8:34–35). Once more, the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 who takes the penalty that guilty sinners deserve so they might be reconciled to God is presented as the perfect lens through which to explain the mission of Jesus.

3. Conclusion

It bears repeating from the opening paragraphs that PSA is not the only way to describe the significance of Jesus's death. But Rillera's arguments that it is not at all a way to describe the significance of Jesus's death are problematic in various ways, which could be summarized as follows: they miss key relevant texts (see 2.7); they rest on unstated problematic assumptions (see 2.4 and 2.5) or equivocate (see 2.1); they put forward complex explanations of textual data in place of simpler explanations (see 2.2 and 2.4); and they do not attend carefully enough to textual data that points in different directions from their claims (see 2.1, 2.3, and 2.6).[93]

My hope is that the above has shown not only some of the problems with the book's main arguments but also that PSA is indeed one of the ways to describe the significance of Jesus's death—one that is central to the Bible's own description. We find it at the heart of sacrificial atonement (Lev 17:11), see it displayed in the imagery of the scapegoat (16:20–22) and the suffering servant (Isaiah 53), and find NT authors using it as the explanatory framework for what happened in Jesus's death (Rom 3:25–26; 5:7–8; Heb 9:28).

Why does this matter? In summarizing the gospel as proclaimed by the early church, Paul begins, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3). If Christ's death for our sins is where the gospel begins, getting it right matters deeply indeed.

rightly be used outside of sacrificial contexts to refer to reconciliation within a relationship. The servant's death in Isaiah 53 is atoning in this sense" (*Rethinking the Atonement*, 55) even if not in a sacrificial sense. If so, this would not be Penal Substitutionary *Sacrificial* Atonement, but it would be Penal Substitutionary Atonement nonetheless (though it may be noted that others see the sacrificial language of Hebrews 9:28 as indicating that the Servant's work is still presented through a sacrificial lens, which seems persuasive to me, e.g., Jamieson, *Jesus' Death*, 173–75).

[93] Again, for a much longer review I have written that interacts with the large majority of the book's arguments against PSA, see n. 19.

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Sent by a Sending God: Tracing the Verbal Thread of Sending through Luke-Acts

— Samuel Beh —

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Abstract: This article establishes the language of "sending" as a significant verbal thread throughout Luke-Acts. By tracing Luke's use of the sending word group (ἀποστέλλω, πέμπω, ἐκβάλλω, and ἀπολύω), the study demonstrates that Luke frames God's saving purposes as advancing through a succession of divinely sent messengers, culminating in Jesus, the apostles, and the Spirit-empowered church. The insights provide an important interpretive lens for understanding Luke's theology of mission and the church's mandate to participate in the divine mission today.

The theme of sending is well-established as central in the Lukan narrative. As François Bovon succinctly summarizes,

> The history of God, if we dare express it in this way, is marked by the Father's faithfulness to send messengers whose fates resemble one another.… Jesus fits into this series of envoys, and the apostles continue in this movement.[1]

Likewise, James Edwards observes that in Luke-Acts, "the fulfilment of salvation history is a history of divine sending."[2] Accordingly, numerous studies have observed the importance of the language of sending in Luke-Acts, particularly the verb ἀποστέλλω, in the initiation, movement, and continuation of God's divine mission.[3] Few, however, have systematically studied sending as a verbal thread in Luke-Acts, a gap that this paper seeks to address.

A verbal thread or *Leitwort*, according to Robert Alter's translation of Martin Buber, is

> a word or a word-root that recurs significantly in a text, in a continuum of texts, or in a configuration of texts: by following these repetitions, one is able to decipher or grasp a meaning of the text, or at any rate, the meaning will be revealed more strikingly. The

[1] François Bovon, *Luke the Theologian: Fifty-Five Years of Research*, 2nd rev. ed. (Baylor University Press, 2006), 224.

[2] James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 186.

[3] Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 186; Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Zondervan Academic, 2012), 812; Jan van 't Spijker, "God's Acts in Lukan-Acts: God's Active Involvement in the Execution of the Plan of Salvation," *Skriflig* 58.1 (2024): 1–7; John T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, SNTSMS 76 (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 27.

> repetition, as we have said, need not be merely of the word itself but also for the word-root.[4]

The narrative impact of a verbal thread, explains Alter, is thematic development and establishment of connections between seemingly disparate episodes.[5] Robert Tannehill similarly notes that the repetition of keywords and phrases are clear literary signals that bind the author's message to certain controlling images in the text.[6]

In this paper, the study of the sending verbal thread is based on tracing Luke's use of the sending word group, comprising of four words or word-roots: ἀποστέλλω (and cognates), πέμπω (and cognates), ἐκβάλλω, and ἀπολύω.[7] All four words/word-roots have the meaning of "sending" within their semantic ranges[8] and are used interchangeably by Luke to describe the action of sending.[9] After making the case for the sending verbal thread in Luke-Acts, the thread will be traced through the narrative before exegetical implications are discussed.

1. Making the Case for the Sending Verbal Thread

Luke stands out from the other Gospel writers in his strategic usage of the sending word group throughout his narrative, particularly ἀποστέλλω and its cognates.[10] The sending verbal thread in Luke-Acts is evidenced in Luke's strategic usage of the word group in characterisation and narrative structure.

The first way Luke strategically uses the sending word group is in characterisation.[11] Joel Green, in his narrative analysis of Luke-Acts, identifies the narrative's key characters who are used by God to accomplish his aim of bringing salvation to all people. The aim is anticipated by *God's messengers*, made possible by the birth and growth of *John* and *Jesus*, and made probable through the preparatory mission of *John* and the life, death, and exaltation of *Jesus*. Jesus subsequently commissions and promises the empowering of his *followers* by the *Holy Spirit* to extend the message to all people. The subsequent story in Acts narrates the realization of God's purposes, with a particular focus on *Paul* as God directs the Christian mission towards an egalitarian community composed of Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles.[12]

[4] Robert Alter explains how speech and the narrator's statements are used to reveal character. For more details, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. (Basic Books, 2011), 116–17; Steve Walton, "Jesus, Present and/or Absent? The Presence and Presentation of Jesus as a Character in the Book of Acts," in *Characters and Characterization in Luke-Acts*, ed. Frank E. Dicken and Julia A. Snyder, LNTS 548 (T&T Clark, 2018), 125.

[5] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 118; James L Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (: Baker Academic, 2005), 41.

[6] Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (Fortress, 1991), 1:3.

[7] The other cognates of ἐκβάλλω and ἀπολύω do not significantly include "sending" within their semantic range.

[8] BDAG, s.vv. "ἀποστέλλω," "πέμπω," "ἐκβάλλω," "ἀπολύω"; *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek*, s.vv. "ἀποστέλλω," "πέμπω," "ἐκβάλλω," "ἀπολύω"; NIDNTTE, s.vv. "ἀποστέλλω," "πέμπω," "ἐκβάλλω," "ἀπολύω."

[9] For example, Luke 7:3–6, 7:19–20, 10:2–3, 20:10–13; Acts 10:5–20, 11:29–30, 13:3–4, 15:22–27, 33.

[10] The frequency of Luke's usage of the sending word group does not stand out significantly in comparison with the other gospel writers: 4.31 times per 1000 words in Luke's gospel, compared to 4.09, 5.4, and 4.61 in Matthew, Mark, and John, respectively. The frequency in Acts is markedly higher at 6.5, but it is driven mostly by the use of ἀπόστολος.

[11] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 116–17.

[12] Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1997), 8.

Each of the main characters identified above is described by Luke as being sent (ἀποστέλλω) by God, as shown in the table below.[13]

Character	Description
God's messenger Gabriel	• Declares to Zechariah and Mary that he has been sent by/from God (Luke 1:19, 26).[14]
God's messenger John the Baptist	• Described as being God's messenger sent to prepare the way (Luke 7:27).
Jesus	• Describes himself as being sent by God (Luke 4:18, 43; 9:48; 10:16). • Described by Peter as one sent by God (Acts 3:20, 26)
Holy Spirit	• Promised by Jesus to be sent (Luke 24:48–49)
Followers / Apostles	• Jesus selects followers to be his "sent-out ones" (ἀπόστολοι) (Luke 6:13), whom he will in turn send out (9:2; 10:1, 3; 11:49). • The leaders of the apostles are sent. Peter and John are sent by the apostles to Samaria (Acts 8:14). Paul and various companions are sent out to various places (Acts 9:30; 11:29–30; 13:3–4; 15:2, 22–27; 17:10, 14; 22:21; 25:21–27; 26:17). • Apostles are not the only ones sent by God. For example, Ananias is sent by God to Paul (Acts 9:17), while two servants and a soldier are sent by God to Joppa (Acts 10:1–11:18).

In addition to the main characters in the narrative, the characters described in the speeches in Luke-Acts are also frequently characterized as having been sent by God. Speeches are a prominent narrative device in Luke-Acts, used by Luke to reflect his perspective and enhance narrative unity.[15] In Jesus's first Galilean ministry speech, he compares himself with Elijah, who was sent (πέμπω) by God (Luke 4:18, 26, 43).[16] In Peter's temple sermon, used by Luke to "make his audience certain of the proper interpretation of the foundational events,"[17] Jesus is again described as having been sent (ἀποστέλλω) by God (Acts 3:20, 26). Stephen's speech, the longest in the book of Acts, describes Moses as having been sent (ἀποστέλλω) by God (7:34, 35, 39; cf. Exod 3:10).

The second way Luke strategically uses the sending word group is at the narrative seams of Luke and Acts. In Luke's gospel, Luke forms an *inclusio* by using ἀποστέλλω at the Gospel's opening and closing

[13] Much of the material cited is uniquely Lukan, with the exceptions of Luke 6:13 and 9:2 (Matthew 10:1–5 and Mark 3:14 and 6:7), and Luke 7:27 (Matthew 11:10 and Mark 1:2–3).

[14] The twofold sending of the messenger Gabriel is consistent with Luke placing the birth narratives of John and Jesus in parallel with each other. Philip L. Shuler, "The Rhetorical Character of Luke 1–2," in *Literary Studies in Luke-Acts: Essays in Honour of Joseph B. Tyson*, ed. Thomas E. Phillips and Richard P. Thompson (Mercer University Press, 1998), 188.

[15] Luke Timothy Johnson, *Luke*, Sacra Pagina (Liturgical Press, 1991), 13; Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Baker Academic, 2007), 20–21; Douglas S. Huffman, *The Story of Jesus Continues: A Survey of the Acts of the Apostles* (Zondervan Academic, 2025), 64.

[16] As mentioned above, Jesus also describes John as being sent (ἀποστέλλω) in his second Galilean speech (Luke 7:27).

[17] Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1998), 177.

(Luke 1:19 and 24:49).[18] Luke also uses sending terminology at the beginning of each main section of the Gospel as part of his pattern of providing "a particular direction and interpretation to the narration"[19] (see table below). While most of the passages have parallels in the other Gospels, Luke differs from the other evangelists by placing the material and sending terminology at the seams of the Gospel narrative.

Section[20]	Verse
Anticipation and preparation for Jesus (1:1–4:13)	And the angel (ἄγγελος) answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was **sent (ἀποστέλλω)** to speak to you and to bring you this good news. (Luke 1:19) In the sixth month the angel (ἄγγελος) Gabriel was **sent (ἀποστέλλω)** from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth. (Luke 1:26)
Revelation of Jesus (4:14–9:50)	He has **sent (ἀποστέλλω)** me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed. (Luke 4:18b)
Following Jesus on the way to Jerusalem (9:51–19:48)[21]	And he **sent (ἀποστέλλω)** messengers (ἄγγελος) ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. (Luke 9:52)[22]
The rejection, suffering, death, and exaltation of Jesus (20:1–24:53)	When the time came, he **sent (ἀποστέλλω)** a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and **sent him away (ἐξαποστέλλω)** empty-handed. And he **sent** (πέμπω) another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and **sent him away (ἐξαποστέλλω)** empty-handed. And he sent (πέμπω) yet a third. This one also they wounded and **cast out (ἐκβάλλω)**. Then the owner of the vineyard said, "What shall I do? I will send (πέμπω) my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him." (Luke 20:10–13) And behold, I am **sending (ἀποστέλλω)** the promise of my Father upon you. (Luke 24:48–49)

[18] Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament*, 57; John Nolland, *Luke 18:35–24:53*, , WBC 35C (Zondervan, 1993), 1220.

[19] François Bovon, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. Christine M. Thomas, Hermenia (Fortress, 2002), 3.

[20] Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*; Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*; Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd ed. (Broadman & Holman, 2009); Green, *The Gospel of Luke*; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, BECNT (Baker, 1994); I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Eerdmans, 1978).

[21] Numerous commentators place the structural break at Luke 19:44 or even 19:28. However, regardless of the exact placement of the structural break, the broad themes of each section still stand. For example, David E. Garland, *Luke*, ZECNT (Zondervan, 2011); Leon Morris, *Luke*, Rev. ed., TNTC (Inter-Varsity Press, 1988); Bovon, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*.

[22] Luke 9:51–52, widely seen as opening the second half of Luke's narrative, contains the same descriptions of the sending of messengers (ἄγγελος).

Luke 4:18 warrants further comment as it forms the centrepiece of Luke 4:16–30, which in turn is programmatic for the interpretation of Luke-Acts as a whole.[23] Compared with its parallels in Mark 6:1–6 and Matthew 13:54–58, Luke significantly repositions and expands the material in accordance with the programmatic significance he accords it in the narrative.[24] In citing Isaiah 61:1–2, Jesus is positioned as Israel's Spirit-filled redeemer, bringing God's new age of salvation.[25] John Nolland notes the significance of the Isaiah 61 figure in not merely heralding but bringing salvation, an expectation true in the Isaianic context, carried on in the tradition of Palestinian Judaism, and underscored by Luke in the insertion of Isaiah 58:6.[26] Isaiah's anticipation of the Gentile mission will be made more explicit later on in the narrative (Acts 13:47).[27]

By retaining the essential structure of the Isaiah passage in Luke 4:18, Luke frames the redeemer's ministry in terms of being "anointed" and "sent,"[28] as shown in the following diagram,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.[29]
He has sent me
to proclaim
liberty to the captives and
recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

The description of Jesus being sent, reiterated in Luke 4:43, emphasizes the biblical perspective of Jesus as the divine missionary commissioned by God the Father.[30] The infinitives modifying the verb "sent" explicate the details of Jesus's mission as the Isaianic Spirit-filled redeemer, thus providing a crucial interpretive lens for the reader to understand the mission of Jesus and his disciples for the rest of the narrative. In the Lukan narrative, Jesus's mission will have a special emphasis on proclaiming good news to the poor (Luke 14:13, 16:20, 21:3) and outsiders (5:12–16, 27–32; 7:36–50; 8:1–3), as well as bringing physical and spiritual healing to the blind (7:21–22; 18:35; Acts 13:11).[31] Luke 4:25–27 develops this emphasis by positioning Jesus as the typological counterpart to Elijah and Elisha (alluding

[23] F. Neirynck, "Luke 4,16–30 and the Unity of Luke-Acts," in *The Unity of Luke-Acts*, ed. J. Verheyden, BETL 142 (Peeters, 1999), 357; John Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, WBC 35A (Zondervan, 1989), 195.

[24] Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 134.

[25] Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 136; Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 407.

[26] Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, 196.

[27] Brian A. Devries, *You Will Be My Witnesses: Theology for God's Church Serving in God's Mission* (Crossway, 2024), 33.

[28] Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 136.

[29] Nolland suggests that "to proclaim good news to the poor" should instead be linked with the following "he has sent me." Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, 191.

[30] Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 408; Devries, *You Will Be My Witnesses*, 51.

[31] Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 211; Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 409.

specifically to their roles as agents of healing to outsiders in 1 Kgs 17:8–24 and 2 Kgs 5:1–19).[32] This is further developed in Luke 7:1–17 through allusions to the same passages in 1 and 2 Kings,[33] and referenced by Jesus in Luke 7:22 when asked by John's disciples about the veracity of his ministry. Critically, Luke 4:18 sets the stage to understand the ministry of Jesus's disciples as well. In continuation of Jesus's Spirit-empowered ministry, the disciples will also be sent to proclaim and heal (9:2; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 8:5; 10:42; 13:38; 26:18) beyond Jerusalem to all outsiders at the very ends of the earth (2:8; 28:31).[34] Commenting on the end of Acts, Patrick Schreiner notes the multiple intertextual links between Acts 28:28 and Luke 3:4–6, thus "bringing the Lukan Isaianic fulfillment narrative full circle."[35]

Turning to the book of Acts, similar to Luke's gospel, sending is prominent in the opening and closing of the narrative. Luke opens Acts by picking up on Jesus's promise in Luke 24:48–49 to send the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4, 8),[36] thus framing the events of Acts as being driven by the power of the Spirit: God has sent his Spirit to send out his witnesses to the ends of the earth.[37] Luke uses the sending word group in the book's closing too, underscoring the Spirit's sending role and emphasising God's ultimate agency in the movement of the gospel through the use of the divine passive (28:28).[38] Sending terminology is also prominent at the narrative seams, as shown in the table below:

[32] Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 217; Mark Strauss, *The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts*, JSNTSup 110 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 223; Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 178.

[33] John Shelton, "The Healing of Naaman (2 Kings 5:1–19) as a Central Component for the Healing of the Centurion's Slave (Luke 7:1–10)," in *The Elijah-Elisha Narrative in the Composition of Luke*, ed. John S. Kloppenborg and J. Verheyden, LNTS (T&T Clark, 2004); Thomas L Brodie, "Towards Unravelling Luke's Use of the Old Testament: Luke 7.11–17 as an *Imitatio* of 1 Kings 17.17–24," *NTS* 32 (1986): 247–67; Craig A. Evans, "Luke's Use of the Elijah/Elisha Narratives and the Ethic of Election," *JBL* 106 (1987): 75; David W. Pao and Ekhard J. Schnabel, "Luke," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Baker Academic, 2007), 289–99.

[34] Huffman, *The Story of Jesus Continues: A Survey of the Acts of the Apostles*, xxi–xxii.

[35] Patrick Schreiner, *Acts*, CSC (Holman, 2022), 673.

[36] Having referenced the gospel as the "first book" in Acts 1:1, Luke picks up on Luke 24:48–49's lexical trifecta of promise (ἐπαγγελία), power (δύναμις), and witness (μάρτυς).

[37] John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC (Broadman, 1992), 65; Craig S Keener, "The Spirit and the Mission of the Church in Acts 1–2," *JETS* 62 (2019): 25–45.

[38] Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*.

Section[39]	Verse
Jerusalem (Acts 1–7)	You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am **sending (ἀποστέλλω)** the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:48–49) And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father.… "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:4, 8)
Judea and Samaria (Acts 8–12)	Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they **sent (ἀποστέλλω)** to them Peter and John (Acts 8:14).
To the ends of the earth (Acts 13–28)	Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and **sent (ἀπολύω)** them off. So, being **sent out (ἐκπέμπω)** by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus (Acts 13:3–4). Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been **sent (ἀποστέλλω)** to the Gentiles; they will listen (Acts 28:28).

In addition to the abovementioned narrative seams, Luke employs sending language at three key turning points in the Acts narrative, each of which is described by F. F. Bruce as "epoch-making" events.[40] While the narrative seams of Acts *mark* the geographical movement of the gospel to the Gentiles, these three turning points *facilitate* the movement of the gospel. Each of the turning points exhibits a high frequency of the sending word group,[41] enhancing the sending verbal thread and underscoring God's providential hand behind the gospel movement.[42]

The first turning point is Saul's conversion in Acts 9:1–31. Saul's conversion in Acts 9:1–31 is significant as his ministry will be the focus of Acts 13–28.[43] Having been introduced as one approving Stephen's execution (8:1), Saul's conversion and preparation for mission is woven throughout Acts 9–12. Sending language is prominent in Saul's conversion. The episode hinges on Ananias's response to God's command to send (ἀποστέλλω) him to Paul, despite his reservations (9:11, 17). Paul is subsequently sent (ἐξαποστέλλω) to Tarsus (9:30). In Paul's subsequent ministry, he will recognize that the message of salvation he preaches was first sent (ἐξαποστέλλω) to him (13:26). Paul will also be repeatedly described (by himself and others) as one sent (ἐκπέμπω, ἐξαποστέλλω, ἀποστέλλω, ἀπολύω) by God to spearhead gospel proclamation to the Gentiles (13:3, 4; 22:21; 26:17; 28:28).

[39] Polhill, Acts, 72; Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, 65; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Liturgical, 1992), 10; Brian J. Tabb, "Sharing the Servant's Mission: Isaiah 49:6 in Luke-Acts," *JETS* 65 (2022): 509–22.

[40] F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, revised ed., NICNT (Eerdmans, 1988), 282.

[41] The sending word group appears at a frequency of 7.1, 13.2, and 25.0 times per 1000 words in Acts 9:1–31, 10:1–11:30, and 15:1–35 respectively. For reference, the average frequency across the whole book of Acts is 6.50 times per 1000 words.

[42] Stephen J. Strauss, "The Purpose of Acts and the Mission of God," *BSac* 169 (2012): 443–64.

[43] Polhill, *Acts*, 72; Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, 65; Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 10.

The second turning point is the account of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10–11. This turning point is significant as it "represents the decisive step forward in the spread of Christianity to the Gentiles."[44] It paves the way for the church to sanction and commission Paul's ministry to the Gentiles (11:18) and is cited by Peter in the subsequent Jerusalem Council (15:7–8). This episode is replete with sending terminology (10:5, 8, 17, 20, 22, 29, 32, 33, 36; 11:11, 13). Of equal significance is the identities of those who are sent and do the sending. Cornelius, a Gentile centurion, is a central character in the pericope and used by God to send (πέμπω, ἀποστέλλω) two servants and a soldier to Peter (10:5, 20). The episode ends with Peter's conclusion that the word of God that was sent to Israel (ἀποστέλλω), and the Spirit of God that was sent on Pentecost, are also for the Gentiles (10:36; 11:15–18).

The third turning point is the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:1–35. Even though Acts 10–11 was a seminal turning point in the Gentile mission, the Jerusalem Council was instrumental in consolidating the turn by garnering the agreement of the whole church.[45] Thus, Acts 15:1–35 is central in the development of the narrative, which will subsequently shift to be dominated by Paul and his mission.[46] Sending language is frequently used here (15:3, 22, 25, 27, 30, 33 [x2]) to describe the sending of Paul and various envoys.

2. Tracing the Sending Verbal Thread

This section traces the sending verbal thread in detail through Luke and Acts. The approach follows the footsteps of Robert C. Tannehill by focusing on a particular thread in the narrative to uncover what Luke appears to be highlighting through the literary design of the work.[47]

2.1. God Sends Messengers to Prepare the Way in the Power of the Spirit (Luke 1:5–3:22; 7:27)

God sends the angel (ἄγγελος) Gabriel to Zechariah and Mary to bring the good news of the births of John and Jesus (1:5–25, 26–37). John will be filled with the Spirit and sent as a messenger (ἄγγελος) to prepare the way (ὁδός) of the Lord and guide people to the way (ὁδός) of peace (1:76, 79; 3:4; 7:27). God's Spirit (πνεῦμα) is prominent in these chapters (1:15, 17, 35, 41, 67, 80; 2:25, 26, 27; 3:16, 22).

2.2. Jesus Revealed as the One sent in the Power of the Spirit (Luke 3:23–4:44)

After John the Baptist's imprisonment, Jesus is anointed by the Spirit (3:22; 4:1, 14, 18) and reveals himself as the fulfilment of the Isaianic promise, the one upon whom God's Spirit rests and who has been sent by God to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God and set captives free (4:16–21, 43). The mission to the Gentiles, hinted at in Luke 2:32, is reiterated by Jesus as he cites the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, who had also been sent to the Gentiles (4:24–30).[48]

[44] Clinton E. Arnold, *Acts*, ZIBBC (Zondervan, 2019), 301.
[45] Polhill, *Acts*, 320.
[46] Polhill, *Acts*, 320; Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 286; Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 282.
[47] Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*.
[48] Devries, *You Will Be My Witnesses*, 33.

2.3. Jesus Prepares His Apostles to Be Sent Out (Luke 6:12–49)

Jesus chooses twelve individuals from his disciples to be his apostles (ἀπόστολος) (Luke 6:13).[49] Luke places significantly more emphasis on ἀπόστολος than the other gospel writers, using the term six times in Luke and twenty-nine times in Acts as compared to Matthew and Mark, who use it only once and twice respectively.[50] John Nolland suggests that Luke gives greater prominence to ἀπόστολος in his gospel to prepare his readers for the central role the apostles will play in Acts:

> Important for Luke is the role of the Twelve in connecting together in their own persons the period of the ministry of Jesus and the time of the church, and for this he uses the term ἀπόστολος, "apostle." The apostles serve to guarantee the transfer into the life of the church of the full significance of the ministry of Jesus, and for this Jesus himself made provision: the apostles are his fully authorized representatives in this task.[51]

Luke's emphasis on ἀπόστολος is also significant because of the term's lexical and thematic coherence with Luke's sending verbal thread that we have observed so far. Edwards observes that the derivation of ἀπόστολος from the cognate ἀποστέλλω signifies that the sending nature of God is instituted in the mission of the Twelve.[52] Furthermore, as Brian Devries observes, Jesus's keynote sermon in Luke 4:18 has already positioned Jesus as God's apostle, thus connecting the ministry of the apostles with his own.[53]

Having selected the apostles in Luke 6:13, Luke 6:17–49 describes Jesus preparing them to be sent out. While Matthew places the account of Jesus choosing the apostles *after* the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 10:1), Luke places the choosing of the apostles *before* the Sermon on the Plain, thus positioning Luke 6:17–49 as Jesus's preparation of his apostles to be sent out in Luke 9:1–17. As will be shown in the next section, Jesus's teaching in Luke 6:12–49 on how to respond to and endure inevitable suffering and persecution bears close correspondence with Luke 9:1–17.

2.4. Jesus Sends out His Apostles on the Way (Luke 9:1–17)

After calling and preparing his apostles, Jesus sends them out with power and authority to proclaim the kingdom of God and heal (Luke 9:1–2). Having spent much time teaching them the importance of hearing the word of God (6:49; 8:4–21), Jesus commissions them to proclaim the word of God (9:2, 6). Luke constructs Luke 9:1–17 to explicitly connect the apostles' ministry with the ministries of Jesus and the prophets.[54] The combination of power (δύναμις) and authority (ἐξουσία) that Jesus gives the Twelve in Luke 9:1 echoes the start of Jesus's ministry in Luke 4:36, while the combination of proclamation (κηρύσσω) and healing (ἰάομαι) in Luke 9:2 parallels Jesus's ministry in Luke 9:11 (also see 3:3; 4:18–19;

[49] James Edwards observes that the call of the twelve apostles by Jesus in Luke 6:13 is paralleled by the account of Paul and the twelve disciples in Acts 19:7. See James R. Edwards, "Parallels and Patterns between Luke and Acts," *BBR* 27 (2017): 485–501.

[50] Given the prominence of the apostles in the establishment of the early church, "it is remarkable that the noun ἀπόστολος appears rarely in the other three gospels." *NIDNTTE*, s.v. "ἀποστέλλω."

[51] Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, 269.

[52] Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 186.

[53] Devries, *You Will Be My Witnesses*, 51.

[54] Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 359; Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 1:215; Johnson, *Luke*, 17.

5:17; 6:18; and 8:1). These terms also foreshadow the future empowerment of the Spirit for the apostles to preach and heal in Acts.[55]

The mission for which Jesus sends out his apostles in Luke 9:1–17 bears significant parallels with his preparation of his apostles in Luke 6:12–49. Darrell Bock describes Luke 9:1–6 as a fulfilment of Luke 6:12–16, "depict[ing] the expansion of ministry to those who will be Jesus' witnesses in the Book of Acts."[56] The table below summarizes the other parallels between the passages:

Theme	Luke 6:12–49	Luke 9:1–17
Hunger and poverty[57]	6:20–21, 24–25, 29	9:3 (cf 3:11)
Rejection	6:21–23	9:5
Suffering and persecution	6:27–36	9:7–9
Future satisfaction (χορτάζω) through divine provision	6:20–21	9:0–17 (cf 22:35)
Reference to the prophets	6:2, 26	9:8

2.5. Jesus Prepares and Sends His Followers on the Way (Luke 9:18–10:37)

After the apostles return, Jesus teaches his followers what it means to follow him as he prepares to make his way to the cross from Luke 9:51. The language of following (ἀκολουθέω) appears more frequently in these verses than anywhere else in Luke-Acts.Luke 9:51 marks a significant turning point in the narrative as Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem.[58] Jesus sends people out to prepare his way in Luke 9:51 and Luke 10:1. The sending of messengers to prepare the way is consistent with the pattern established throughout the Lukan narrative with the sending of the angel Gabriel, John the Baptist, and the apostles, sharing numerous lexical and thematic parallels.[59]

	Angel Gabriel	John the Baptist	Apostles	Messengers	Seventy-two
Messenger (ἄγγελος)	1:19, 26	7:27		9:52	
Sent (ἀποστέλλω)	1:19, 26	7:27	9:1	9:52	10:1
Ahead of Jesus (πρὸ προσώπου)		7:27		9:52	10:1

[55] Acts 1:8; 3:12; 4:7, 33; 6:8; 8:5, 10, 13, 19; 9:20, 34; 10:38, 42; 19:11; 20:25; 28:8, 27, 31.

[56] Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 809.

[57] Notably, while Matthew refers to the poor *in spirit* and those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness* (Matt 5:3–6), Luke's description of the poor and hungry coheres more closely with Luke 9:1–17.

[58] Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 403; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 295.

[59] When comparing the messengers in 9:52 with John the Baptist, Green also observes the parallel misconstrual of Jesus's mission as one of bringing the fire of judgment (3:9, 17; 7:19–20). Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 402.

	Angel Gabriel	John the Baptist	Apostles	Messengers	Seventy-two
To proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God (εὐαγγελίζω/ κηρύσσω)	1:19	3:3	9:2, 6		10:9
To prepare the way (ἑτοιμάζω)		1:17, 76		9:52	

While Matthew and Mark also describe the sending out of the Twelve (Matt 10:5 and Mark 3:14), Luke is unique in providing accounts of the angel Gabriel, messengers, and the seventy-two. These additional accounts are significant. As mentioned above, Luke is unique in the emphasis and prominence he accords the apostles. Edwards notes that the apostles retain a position of eminence in the Lukan narrative, as demonstrated in Luke 9:1, where the power and authority granted to the apostles are not repeated in the commissioning of the messengers or the seventy-two.[60] However, Luke is also unique in recording the missions of the messengers and seventy-two. By positioning the messengers and seventy-two as extending the apostle's prior mission, Luke marks them out "as full participants in the divine mission, as John was."[61]

The pattern of extending the mission from the apostles to a wider group will be repeated in Acts. While the earlier chapters of Acts focus on the activity of the apostles, in the later chapters the people sent by God on divine mission increase in both number and diversity. These people include the scattered church (Acts 8:1), Philip (Acts 8:4), Ananias (Acts 9:17), and the two servants and a soldier are sent by God to Joppa (Acts 10:1–11:18). As Green concludes, "the appointment of the seventy-two can be understood as prefiguring universal mission in Acts."[62]

2.6. Jesus (the Sent One) Is Rejected, Crucified, and Resurrected (Luke 20:1–24:12)

Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, where he will eventually be crucified. Amidst escalating tension with the religious leaders, Jesus tells a parable that the religious leaders perceive to be about them (Luke 20:19). Sending is a core theme of the parable, appearing eight times in six verses (ἀποστέλλω, ἐξαποστέλλω, πέμπω, ἐκβάλλω). The tenants beat and ill-treat each of the servants that the owner of the vineyard sends to them, reflecting the prophets of God who were rejected and ill-treated by Israel (4:24; 6:23). Ultimately, the tenants kill the owner's son when he is sent to them, reflecting Jesus who is the son sent by the Father (20:13; cf. 4:18) and rejected (ἀποδοκιμάζω; Luke 20:17; cf. 9:22 and 17:25). Thus, Luke uses the parable to pick up the sending verbal thread and provide a hermeneutical lens for the rest of the section: Jesus, the sent son of God, will be rejected and killed.

[60] Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 356.
[61] Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 404.
[62] Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 412.

2.7. Jesus Joins Disciples on the Way (Luke 24:13–35)

The famous account of the road to Emmaus is unique to Luke's Gospel (24:13–35). After Jesus's resurrection, he draws near to and accompanies two disciples on the road from Jerusalem. The direction of the travel is key, just as it has been for much of Luke's narrative so far. The way (ὁδός) of the Lord led to the cross in Jerusalem (1:76; 7:27; 9:57; 19:36; 20:21). However, the way does not end at the cross in Jerusalem as the divine mission will soon go out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (24:48; Acts 1:8). Saul himself will meet Jesus on the way (ὁδός) as God chose and commissioned him for the Gentile mission (Acts 9:17 and 27). Thus, Luke 24:13–35 foreshadows the divine mission to come, a mission carried out by those who will be known as belonging to the way (ὁδός; Acts 9:2). Jesus had not sent out these two disciples, but he would soon be sending all his disciples out on mission. Thus, Luke 24:13–35 provides a subtle encouragement that Jesus will not leave his followers alone to carry out the mission he sends them on.

2.8. Jesus Promises to Send the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:36–53)

The Gospel of Luke ends with echoes of its beginning. Just as Luke's first book opened with a messenger sent (ἀποστέλλω) by God (1:19, 26), it closes with God's promise to send (ἀποστέλλω) his Spirit to empower his disciples to become his messengers (24:49). While Zechariah's unbelief froze his tongue (γλῶσσα) and rendered him unable to speak (1:20, 64), Luke's sequel recounts how the Spirit empowers the disciples to preach in other tongues (γλῶσσα) and with power and authority (Acts 2:3, 11, 26; 10:46; 19:6).

2.9. The Promised Holy Spirit Is Sent and Establishes the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 1–7)

Acts begins where the Gospel of Luke ends. Following his ascension, the exalted Lord Jesus sends the promised Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (2:1–13, 33; cf. Luke 24:49), and Luke carefully words these early chapters to make clear that it is the Spirit that guides and empowers the apostles to establish and consolidate the early church in Jerusalem (3:12; 4:7, 31, 33; 5:3, 9, 29, 32).

2.10. God Prepares His Apostle to Be Sent out on the Way (Acts 8–12)

The section opens with the introduction of Saul and his approval of Stephen's execution in Acts 8:1 and closes with Saul ready to be commissioned for his first missionary journey (12:25). Saul's conversion and preparation for mission are rich with language from the sending word group. Ananias is sent (ἀποστέλλω) to Saul (9:17) and Saul is subsequently sent (ἐξαποστέλλω) to Tarsus (9:30) where he meets Barnabas. Barnabas had been sent (ἐξαποστέλλω) to Antioch (11:22) and made his way to Tarsus to look for Saul. Together they are sent (πέμπω, ἀποστέλλω) to bring relief to Judea (11:29–30) before eventually returning to Antioch to be sent out. Notably, Luke continues employing language of the "way" (ὁδός). Saul actively persecuted any belonging to the Way (ὁδός; 9:2; 22:4), is met by Jesus while on the road (ὁδός; 9:17, 27; 26:13), and subsequently describes himself as belonging to the Way (ὁδός; 24:14).[63]

Throughout this section, other details of the church's expansion are interspersed with Saul's story. While the Gentile mission does not significantly pick up until Acts 13 and 15, these details set the stage for the Gentile mission. From Acts 8:1, the church begins its expansion beyond Jerusalem to the Gentiles amidst persecution. The apostles send (ἀποστέλλω) Peter and John to Samaria (8:14) while

[63] Also see Acts 16:17; 18:25, 26; 19:9, 23; 24:22; 25:3.

the Lord sends Philip to cross paths with an Ethiopian eunuch (8:26). After the events of Peter's vision and Cornelius's conversion in Acts 10–11, James is killed and Peter is imprisoned amidst persecution from Herod. Acts 12:1–25 may be seen as foreshadowing the persecution and suffering to come for God's servants.[64] God sends (ἐξαποστέλλω) an angel (ἄγγελος) to rescue Peter from prison (12:11), and an angel subsequently strikes Herod down (12:23). These events echo Luke's earlier narrative where messengers/angels (ἄγγελος) are sent by God (Luke 1:18, 26; 7:27; 9:52) while also foreshadowing the anguish and persecution that Paul will go through, and the angel that God will send to reassure and protect him (Acts 27:23). As Green observes, "Jesus' way of suffering continues in Acts,"[65] and God continues to send angels to protect his envoys during trial and suffering (Luke 22:43; Acts 5:19; 7:30, 35, 38).[66]

2.11. God Sends out His Apostle on the Way (Acts 13–28)

Much of the gospel expansion in Acts 13–28 will be driven under Paul's leadership and focus on his ministry.[67] However, Luke is careful to repeatedly describe Paul as being sent by both God (13:4, 26; 22:21; 26:17; 28:28) and the church (13:3; 15:3, 22, 25; 17:14). While Paul carries out the mission, it is ultimately the Lord who sends, as Paul himself repeatedly reiterates (22:21; 26:17; 28:28). Notably, in the later chapters of Acts, it is not the apostles or members of the church but the Roman governor Festus who sends (πέμπω, ἀναπέμπω) Paul on to Rome (25:21, 25, 27), perhaps underscoring God's agency in using even foreign rulers for his divine purposes.

3. Exegetical Implications and Conclusion

This paper has sought to establish a sending verbal thread in Luke-Acts. Luke consistently and systematically uses the sending word group in the characterisation of key characters and at narrative seams and key turning points to frame the events in the narrative.

Tracing the sending verbal thread has implications for our understanding of the structure of Luke-Acts. The dominant view of the underlying structure of Luke-Acts is geographically based, moving *to* Jerusalem in Luke's Gospel and out *from* Jerusalem in Acts.[68] The sending verbal thread complements this view through its prominence at narrative seams and characterisation of main characters, thus driving the movement of the narrative as envoys are sent to Jerusalem and then out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth to carry out God's divine mission.

Reading Luke-Acts in light of the sending verbal thread also has several key implications for Christian life, theology, and mission. Firstly, the thread adds to our understanding of Luke's Trinitarian theology.[69] All three persons of the Trinity are subjects of the sending verbs in the Lukan narrative and are used interchangeably. God sends angels (Luke 1:19, 26; Acts 12:11), Jesus (Luke 4:18, 43; 9:48; 10:16;

[64] David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Eerdmans, 2009), 359.

[65] Edwards, "Parallels and Patterns between Luke and Acts."

[66] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 217.

[67] Huffman, *The Story of Jesus Continues*, 33.

[68] Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 160–61; Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 20; Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 36; Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 26; Johnson, *Luke*, 14; Kenneth R Wolfe, "The Chiastic Structure of Luke-Acts and Some Implications for Worship," *SwJT* 22 (1980): 60–71.

[69] For a more in-depth treatment, see C. Kavin Rowe, "Luke and the Trinity: An Essay in Ecclesial Biblical Theology," *SJT* 56.1 (2003): 1–26; Devries, *You Will Be My Witnesses*, 7–11.

20:13; Acts 3:20, 26), John the Baptist (Luke 7:27), the apostles and prophets (Luke 11:49; Acts 22:21), and the Spirit (Acts 5:32). Jesus sends out the apostles, messengers, and the seventy-two (Luke 9:2, 52; 10:1; 19:29), and the Spirit (Luke 24:49). And the Spirit sends out the apostles and envoys (Acts 10:20; 13:4).

Second, the church is reminded of our divine mission from God to be sent out. As shown throughout Luke-Acts, God has and continues to use his people to send out the gospel message (Luke 9:1; 10:1; Acts 13:26).[70] However, Luke is careful to root the mission in the Old Testament Scriptures (Luke 24:27, 44–49; Acts 15:16–18).[71] Likewise, Christians today must situate ourselves in the broader historical context of the mission we are all called to. We are not the first people to be sent out, for we are the beneficiaries of those who obeyed the call to be sent out and who in turn are part of a rich heritage of envoys sent by God, a heritage that can be traced way back to the prophets of old (Luke 11:49). The church is also reminded of the direction and purpose God has given us to be sent out and to preach the gospel (Luke 4:43; Acts 26:16).[72] Consequently, a church that fails to heed our God-given direction and purpose has reneged on its divine mission.[73] Just as Ananias's obedience when Christ sent him to Paul was central to Paul's conversion, so our obedience to God's call to send us is important in the furtherance of God's divine mission. Churches must therefore be more intentional and even systematic in discipling and preparing our members for mission.[74]

Third, the verbal thread underscores the role of the church in sending its members out. In individualistic cultures today, too often we unilaterally decide for ourselves what we are gifted for and where we feel called to go in the name of the divine mission. Luke-Acts teaches that we cannot (and should not) carry out the divine mission on our own. In Luke's gospel, Jesus intentionally raised up, trained up, sent out, and followed up with the disciples he sent out on mission. Similarly, in Acts, the church was regularly involved in sending people out (Acts 8:14; 9:30; 13:3; 15:3, 33). Acts 13:3–4 is particularly salient as it shows the church to be the agent through whom God commissions Saul and Barnabas for mission. Likewise, the church today must be actively involved in helping members process a call from God to be sent out. However, the church's role must go further than simply sending people out. When Jesus's disciples returned, they would tell him what they had done, and Jesus would continue to teach and help them process what they had learnt (Luke 9:10; 10:17). Likewise, churches need to be intentional in following up with those we have sent out by checking in on how they are doing, helping them process their experience, ensuring they have opportunities to rest and grow, and holding them accountable to the purpose of their mission. Likewise those sent also need to be proactive in maintaining connections with their sending churches and supporters.[75] Given the complexity and number of different missions organizations and parachurches, part of the intentionality of sending churches should involve investing in strong relationships with other organizations in the missions network.[76]

[70] Huffman, *The Story of Jesus Continues*, 35.

[71] See Brian J. Tabb, *After Emmaus: How the Church Fulfills the Mission of Christ* (Crossway, 2021), 83–105, 135–65; Devries, *You Will Be My Witnesses*, 28.

[72] Devries, *You Will Be My Witnesses*, 45, 51.

[73] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 2011), 392–98.

[74] Devries, *You Will Be My Witnesses*, 143–45.

[75] David R. Dunaetz, "A Missionary's Relationship to Sending Churches: Communal and Exchange Dimensions," in *Churches on Mission: God's Grace Abounding to the Nations*, ed. Geoffrey D. Hartt, Christopher R. Little, and John Wang (William Carey Library, 2017), 303–23.

[76] Devries, *You Will Be My Witnesses*, 140–42.

Lastly, Luke-Acts teaches us to expect difficulty and persecution when being sent out.[77] As explained in the previous section on Luke 6:12–49 and 9:1–17, given the "necessity" (δεῖ) of suffering for the proclamation of the gospel message (Luke 9:22; 17:25; 24:7, 26, 44–46; Acts 9:16, 17:3),[78] Jesus intentionally and extensively prepared his envoys for suffering and opposition before he sent them out (Luke 6:22; 10:3; 11:49; 13:34; 20:10–13). Scott Cunningham posits that not only does Luke's Gospel provide details of persecution, the church in Luke's time was aware of Christians in the past who had been persecuted and were themselves experiencing persecution.[79] Cunningham explains that the theology of persecution in Luke-Acts positions persecution as an indispensable part of the divine mission, as it is part of God's plan for his people, and legitimizes Luke's community as being on God's side.[80] Therefore, disciples of Jesus today should continue to expect suffering and persecution in the name of God's mission, because the way of the cross continues to be the way of suffering and persecution. However, as Luke reminds and reassures us, God does not send us out on our own. He sends us out in the power of his Spirit and the promise of his presence, provision, and future reward (Luke 6:20–23; 22:35).

[77] Brian J. Tabb, "Salvation, Spreading, and Suffering: God's Unfolding Plan in Luke-Acts," *JETS* 58 (2015): 43–61.

[78] In addressing questions on the Old Testament basis for a suffering Messiah in Luke 24:44–46, Joshua Jipp helpfully highlights Luke's use of the Psalms "as the autobiographical speech of the suffering Davidic Messiah, now climactically embodied by Jesus himself." Joshua W Jipp, "Luke's Scriptural Suffering Messiah: A Search for Precedent, a Search for Identity," *CBQ* 72 (2010): 255–74.

[79] Scott Cunningham, *Through Many Tribulations: The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts*, JSNTSup 142 (: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 328.

[80] Cunningham, *Through Many Tribulations*, 335; Brian J. Tabb, *Suffering in Ancient Worldview: Luke, Seneca, and 4 Maccabees in Dialogue*, LNTS 569 (Bloomsbury, 2017), 171–73.

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The Heart Knows but Will Not Yield: Affective Suppression and the Noetic Effects of Sin in Romans 1:32

— Paul S. Jeon —

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Abstract: This article argues that Romans 1:32 offers a crucial entry point for understanding the affective dimensions of the noetic effects of sin in Pauline theology. Rather than depicting unbelief as a mere failure of knowledge, Paul presents it as a morally culpable resistance to a truth that is already intuited. Drawing on N. Gray Sutanto's retrieval of the affective model of general revelation, this study reinterprets the sensus divinitatis as a dispositional awareness rooted in dependence and shaped by affective response. The analysis of Romans 1:32—especially its use of ἐπιγνόντες and συνευδοκοέσιν—shows that Paul's concern is not ignorance but a willful suppression motivated by fear, shame, and disordered desire. This reframing challenges dominant rationalist interpretations of the noetic effects of sin and aligns with the broader Reformed tradition. The article concludes by exploring the implications of this affective reading for theological anthropology, apologetics, and Christian witness, arguing that the remedy to such suppression lies not merely in argumentation but in the proclamation of the gospel—a message that convicts the heart and heals through grace.

Paul's striking claim in Romans 1:32 serves as a pivotal summary and a profound paradox within his argument: "Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them."[1] This verse compels theological inquiry: How can human beings possess a clear awareness of God's moral will and yet persist not only in violating it but also in celebrating its transgression? Paul's statement presses into the heart of a tension that runs throughout Romans 1:18–32—a tension between divine revelation and human suppression, between knowing and resisting, and ultimately between moral accountability and entrenched rebellion.

Traditional Reformed treatments of the noetic effects of sin have rightly emphasized how the fall has devastated human cognition. From John Calvin's sober diagnosis of the mind as both illumined and "smothered" by sin to Abraham Kuyper's insight that all human faculties are shaped by spiritual orientation, this tradition has underscored the intellectual consequences of moral corruption. In the

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

twentieth century, Alvin Plantinga furthered the discussion by proposing that belief in God can be properly basic, rooted in a divinely implanted *sensus divinitatis*—a cognitive faculty nevertheless impaired by sin. Each of these contributions remains invaluable, particularly in defending the rationality of theistic belief and affirming the epistemic consequences of the fall.

Yet such accounts often frame unbelief as primarily a matter of impaired reasoning—a malfunction of the intellect to draw right conclusions from creation or retain sound theological knowledge. While intellectually coherent, this approach risks reducing Paul's anthropology to a question of cognitive capacity, potentially overlooking the deeply moral and affective character of human resistance. Paul does not merely lament flawed reasoning; he exposes a deeper disorder—one in which known truth is not only misunderstood but actively resisted because it is unwelcome.

This article contends that Romans 1:32 points beyond cognitive distortion to what Gray Sutanto, drawing from the neo-Calvinist tradition, describes as affective suppression. Paul's language indicates not ignorance but an emotionally charged refusal to love and submit to what is known. The argument developed here reframes suppression as a dispositional posture marked by fear, shame, pride, and love of autonomy. By retrieving this affective model of general revelation, the study not only offers a fresh theological reading of Romans 1 but also draws out its broader implications for anthropology, apologetics, and pastoral ministry—insisting that gospel witness must speak not only to distorted minds but also to wounded and resistant hearts.

1. The Noetic Effects of Sin: From Reformed Epistemology to Pauline Theology

The Reformed tradition has long affirmed that sin distorts not only the will and affections but also the intellect. Known as the doctrine of the noetic effects of sin, this teaching holds that human reasoning is darkened and unreliable due to the fall. Calvin underscores this point in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, observing that, although some understanding of God remains, it is overwhelmed by sin and rendered untrustworthy. As he laments, "But though experience testifies that a seed of religion is divinely sown in all, scarcely one in a hundred is found who cherishes it in his heart, and not one in whom it grows to maturity…."[2] Though God's glory is evident in creation, Calvin insists that the human mind is so blunted by sin that it fails to receive or retain divine truth, resulting in an ignorance that is both profound and culpable. For this reason, true knowledge of God is impossible apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.[3]

Kuyper, building on Calvin's foundation, expanded this doctrine by arguing that all human faculties, including rationality, are profoundly shaped by one's spiritual orientation—either regenerate or unregenerate.[4] For Kuyper, the effects of sin are total, permeating every aspect of human existence and thought. He contended that true knowledge, especially of God, is not a neutral intellectual exercise but is inextricably linked to one's disposition and relationship to the Creator. An unregenerate mind, while capable of certain forms of truth, fundamentally distorts ultimate realities because its starting point is a rejection of God.

[2] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (1845; repr., Eerdmans, 1989), 1.4.1.

[3] Edward A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Eerdmans, 1994), 106–24.

[4] Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (1931; repr., Eerdmans, 1999). In particular, Kuyper's lecture, "Calvinism and Science," makes this point explicit: all human faculties, including reason, are shaped by one's spiritual condition. The regenerate mind, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, perceives and interprets the world differently than the unregenerate, whose understanding is guided by an opposing spiritual orientation; see pp. 137–38.

In the twentieth century, Plantinga significantly advanced the conversation by proposing that belief in God can be "properly basic," grounded in a divinely implanted cognitive faculty, the *sensus divinitatis*, that is nevertheless severely impaired by sin.[5] For Plantinga, the noetic effects of sin are primarily epistemic in nature: sin causes the malfunction of the cognitive mechanisms that would otherwise lead a person to true belief in God. He suggests that the *sensus divinitatis* is a natural human capacity, analogous to sight or memory, designed to produce belief in God under certain conditions (e.g., perceiving the beauty of creation or feeling guilt), but it is "damaged or impeded" by sin, leading to a failure to form the intended beliefs. While this model preserves important insights about epistemic limitation and culpability, it also tends to frame suppression in largely intellectual terms. Unbelief is interpreted as a failure to reason correctly or as the result of a broken belief-forming mechanism.

Sutanto offers an important corrective to the predominantly cognitive emphasis of many traditional models by retrieving a more affective understanding of general revelation. Drawing on the neo-Calvinist tradition—especially the thought of Herman and Johan Bavinck—Sutanto argues that the *sensus divinitatis* is not best understood as a faculty of inference or propositional belief-formation. Rather, it is a deep, intuitive awareness of and dependence upon God. Johan Bavinck refers to this as the *sensus numinis*—a pre-reflective, existential consciousness of the divine, woven into the fabric of human life. This sense arises not from abstract reasoning but from God's ongoing self-revelation in creation and conscience, and is rooted in the human heart's affective orientation.[6]

Sutanto contends that sin's primary effect on this sense is not simply cognitive distortion but affective resistance. The fall disorients human desire, corrupts emotional responses to truth, and produces a kind of existential flight from the God we already know. As Paul writes in Romans 1:18–21, suppression is not due to ignorance but to unrighteousness—it is a refusal to welcome what is plainly revealed. Sutanto's model—developed with support from Heidegger's phenomenology and neo-Calvinist anthropology—thus reframes suppression as an emotionally charged, willful rejection rather than a mere intellectual failure. This perspective better accounts for Paul's paradoxical claim that humanity "knows God" while simultaneously exchanging his glory for lesser things (Rom 1:21, 23). It also helps clarify why humans are "unknowing knowers": not blank slates but fugitives from the truth they already perceive.

2. Exegeting Romans 1:32 in Context

Romans 1:32 functions as the climactic summary of Paul's theological argument in 1:18–31, serving as the logical and moral apex of humanity's rebellion. The preceding section opens with the stark announcement that "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and

[5] Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 184: "For now, we note only that the knowledge of God provided by the *sensus divinitatis*, prior to faith and regeneration, is both narrowed in scope and partially suppressed. Due to one cause or another, the faculty itself may be *diseased* and thus partly or wholly disabled. There is such a thing as cognitive disease; there is blindness, deafness, inability to tell right from wrong, insanity; and there are analogues of these conditions with respect to the operation of the *sensus divinitatis*." For a fuller treatment, see chapter 7, "Sin and Its Cognitive Consequences."

[6] N. Gray Sutanto, *A Sense of the Divine: An Affective Model of General Revelation from the Reformed Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 8: "While the older Reformed tradition had already emphasized that God implanted notions that precede reasoned inferences from creation to God, these thinkers [Herman Bavinck and Johan Bavinck] … located the effects of general revelation as further sedimented underneath notions, ideas, or propositions, that is, in affects, feelings, and intuitions."

unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (1:18). This fundamental act of suppression occurs despite the fact that "what can be known about God is plain to them" (1:19), and that "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" (1:20). Paul's emphasis in verses 18–21 is thus not on ignorance or a lack of revelation but squarely on recognition—a knowledge of God that is universally present yet actively rejected and suppressed.

This foundational suppression leads to a profound downward spiral of moral and spiritual degradation. In verses 22–31, Paul meticulously traces the consequences of this initial refusal to honor God: humanity, "claiming to be wise, became fools" (1:22), exchanging the glory of the immortal God for idolatrous images (1:23). This misdirection of worship is then followed by God's giving them over to dishonorable passions (1:24), the exchange of the truth about God for a lie (1:25), and a descent into shameful sexual desires (1:26–27). The culmination is a "debased mind" (1:28) and a litany of unrighteous behaviors, from envy and murder to insolence and disobedience to parents (1:29–31). Importantly, this pervasive deterioration does not stem from a cognitive deficit or a lack of information about God but from a deliberate refusal to acknowledge and glorify him as God (1:21). Paul powerfully uses the language of "exchange" (ἤλλαξαν, 1:23; μετήλλαξαν, 1:25) to describe this substitution of truth for falsehood, of Creator for creature—a theologically rich diagnosis of idolatry as fundamentally misdirected worship rather than mere philosophical confusion. This chain of events demonstrates that the suppression of truth cannot be explained solely in terms of impaired cognitive faculties. Rather, it arises from a deep-seated spiritual and moral rebellion that progressively manifests itself in increasingly depraved actions.

Romans 1:32 then concludes this devastating argument with a pointed and damning assertion: "Though they *know* God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but also approve of those who practice them."[7] This verse is striking not merely for its content but for its precise grammar and lexical detail, which powerfully reinforce the claim that Paul views unbelief and immorality as flowing from affective resistance, not mere ignorance.

First, Paul uses the participle ἐπιγνόντες, which means "to know exactly, completely, through and through."[8] This is not the language of vague impressions, fleeting intuitions, or uncertain conjecture. Paul insists that his subjects are not just vaguely aware of a moral standard but are deeply and experientially familiar with it. They possess not only a general awareness of right and wrong but a conscious, undeniable recognition of the just judgment of God concerning their actions. The use of this strong verb underscores that their subsequent disobedience is performed with clear, undeniable comprehension.

Second, the word ἄξιος (translated "deserving" or "worthy of punishment") underscores the moral clarity of this recognition.[9] Paul's audience knows that those who engage in such behavior are indeed worthy of divine judgment. The notion of ἄξιος is inherently judicial and ethical; it assumes a grasp of objective moral consequences, not simply emotional discomfort or cultural disapproval. This highlights the inherent justice of God's judgment against their actions, as their own conscience, in tandem with God's revelation, confirms their culpability.

[7] Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2nd ed., NICNT (Eerdmans, 2018), 132 n. 165: "The participle ἐπιγνόντες has a concessive force ('although they know') …."

[8] BDAG, s.v. "ἐπιγινώσκω."

[9] BDAG, s.v. "ἄξιος." The term frequently denotes worthiness of punishment in legal and ethical contexts.

Third, Paul uses the participle πράσσοντες to describe those who engage in such behavior. The verb often denotes morally significant actions and, in many contexts, carries a negative connotation. While not inherently distinct from ποιέω, πράσσω is frequently used for deeds that are ethically blameworthy or judicially indictable.[10] In Romans 1:32, the present participle form conveys an ongoing pattern of behavior, not merely isolated infractions. Paul's point is that their transgression is not born of ignorance but performed with sustained and willful defiance of what they know to be just.

Finally, and perhaps most revealingly for the affective argument, Paul adds that they approve of others who do the same (συνευδοκοῦσιν τοῖς πράσσουσιν). This compound verb συνευδοκέω is particularly significant. It suggests more than passive tolerance or simple acquiescence; it indicates shared delight, active endorsement, emotional agreement, or even a conspiratorial pleasure in unrighteousness.[11] The moral degradation described in the preceding verses reaches its apex not merely in private disobedience but in public affirmation and communal celebration of unrighteousness. This approval is not a consequence of rationalized ignorance but of deep-seated affective complicity, where the heart aligns itself with wickedness. It reveals a communal dimension to sin, where individuals not only commit evil but also derive satisfaction and solidarity from others participating in the same acts, thereby reinforcing their own rebellion.

Taken together, these terms offer a powerful portrait of universal and persistent human rebellion that is both epistemically aware and profoundly affectively corrupted.[12] These are not people who lack access to truth; they are people who actively reject, deny, and emotionally distance themselves from what they know to be right, finding perverse pleasure in their defiance.

This reading coheres exceptionally well with Sutanto's affective model of general revelation. As Sutanto emphasizes, suppression is not merely a failure of cognition but a profound resistance of the heart—an aversion to dependence, vulnerability, and divine accountability.[13] The *sensus divinitatis* is present not as a mere faculty for forming accurate propositions but as a dispositional awareness of God's power and judgment, stirring deep discomfort and actively prompting suppression. Paul's use of συνευδοκέω underscores this: the heart aligns itself with unrighteousness, not in spite of knowledge but precisely because that knowledge demands a submission and a turning away from sin that sinful affections fiercely resist. Thus, Romans 1:32 does not present a paradox of intellectual capacity but a devastating theological diagnosis: people "know," yet they fundamentally refuse to acknowledge, worship, and submit to the God they know. Suppression cannot be reduced to epistemic blindness; it is the whole person's moral, volitional, and affective resistance to God. This is the heart of Paul's indictment and reveals the profoundly holistic character of his anthropology.[14]

[10] Moo, *Romans*, 132 n. 169: "The Greek verb here is πράσσω; in the immediately previous clause Paul uses ποιέω. Some posit a slight difference in meaning between them … but it is unlikely that any distinction exists …."

[11] BDAG, s.v. "συνευδοκέω." The compound verb carries a sense of strong approval, shared delight, or active complicity. Compare its use in Luke 11:48; Acts 8:1; 22:20.

[12] Moo, *Romans*, 132, who observes that "the present tenses in this verse show that Paul is speaking not only of what has been true in the past or of what will be true in the future. People generally, Paul claims, have some degree of awareness that the moral outrages they commit are wrong and hence deserve to be punished by God."

[13] Sutanto, *Sense of the Divine*, 42.

[14] Moo's interpretation provides partial support for the view advanced here, though his emphasis remains more aligned with a cognitive model. He affirms that all people possess some true knowledge of God through general revelation (v. 19) and that they subjectively perceive this knowledge (v. 20)—suggesting that it is not merely external or abstract but internally registered. However, Moo explicitly argues that due to human sinfulness, people

3. Suppression as Affective, Not Merely Cognitive

Paul's theological anthropology in Romans 1 assumes that human beings are not primarily ignorant of God but fundamentally unwilling to acknowledge him. As Romans 1:21 makes plain, "they knew God, but they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him." This framing significantly qualifies how one should understand the nature of unbelief and the dynamics of suppression. Paul does not suggest that the truth about God is unclear, inaccessible, or intellectually elusive. Instead, he portrays a humanity that is deeply aware of God's righteous decree (1:32) yet obstinately refuses to submit to its implications. The crisis, therefore, lies not primarily in the intellect's capacity to comprehend or correctly infer but in the will and, more deeply, in the affections, which recoil from the implications of divine truth.

This stands in contrast to approaches that emphasize a damaged cognitive faculty as the primary locus of the noetic effects of sin, such as Plantinga's view, which, while valuable, may overemphasize the purely epistemic malfunction of the *sensus divinitatis*.[15] While Plantinga meticulously argues that belief in God can be properly basic—that is, rationally warranted without being inferred from other beliefs—he often describes the suppression of this belief as a failure of a cognitive mechanism or a malaise warping one's cognitive faculties, leading to an inability to form or sustain true beliefs about God. Our argument, drawing on Paul's affective emphasis, suggests a deeper, more profound resistance at the level of desire and disposition.[16]

This refusal is profoundly affective. It is driven not by a lack of intellectual conviction but by powerful emotional and moral dynamics such as deep-seated fear, pervasive guilt, rebellious pride, and an insatiable desire for autonomy. Humans resist God not because they are unconvinced by the evidence for his existence or his moral demands but because the acknowledgment of God entails the recognition of moral accountability and personal vulnerability. To honor God as God is to yield ultimate authority, confess personal sin, and accept complete dependence—realities that sinful affections fiercely reject. As in the narrative of Genesis 3, the instinct following transgression is not only to disobey but immediately

are "unable to respond appropriately to whatever knowledge of God they may possess" (*Romans*, 134), implying that the primary obstacle lies in impaired cognitive faculties. In this respect, his view echoes Plantinga's model of epistemic dysfunction. While Moo does not entirely rule out affective elements, his framing tends to underplay them. Thus, although his reading affirms the presence of divine knowledge, it construes suppression primarily as a result of cognitive incapacity rather than affective resistance—offering a more rationalist account than that presented in the affective model developed above.

[15] Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 199–240, esp. 205: "The most serious noetic effects of sin have to do with our knowledge of God. Were it not for sin and its effects, God's presence and glory would be as obvious and uncontroversial to us all as the presence of other minds, physical objects, and the past. Like any cognitive process, however, the *sensus divinitatis* can malfunction; as a result of sin, it has indeed been damaged. Our original knowledge of God and his glory is muffled and impaired; it has been replaced (by virtue of sin) by stupidity, dullness, blindness, inability to perceive God or to perceive him in his handiwork. Our knowledge of his character and his love toward us can be smothered: it can even be transformed into a resentful thought that God is to be feared and mistrusted; we may see him as indifferent or even malignant."

[16] But we do not want to overstate our critique or misrepresent Plantinga. While his framework is primarily epistemological, he clearly recognizes that the effects of sin extend to the affections. As he explains, "But sin is also and perhaps primarily an affective disorder or malfunction. Our affections are skewed, directed to the wrong objects; we love and hate the wrong things" (*Warranted Christian Belief*, 208). For Plantinga, then, the failure of the *sensus divinitatis* does not appear to be merely intellectual but also moral and dispositional—what he calls "a sort of madness of the will." In this way, his account allows for a more holistic view of suppression than is sometimes acknowledged, overlapping meaningfully with the affective emphases of our argument.

to hide from God's presence. This pattern of evasion is deeply rooted in the fear of exposure and the shame of guilt before divine holiness. These emotional dynamics align perfectly with Paul's progression in Romans 1:21, 24, and 32, where the initial rejection of truth leads to futile thinking (1:21), a giving over to dishonorable passions (1:24), and ultimately a willing delight in unrighteousness (1:32).

Sutanto's retrieval of the *sensus divinitatis* as a dispositional awareness rather than merely a cognitive faculty aligns closely with this interpretation. The knowledge of God is not suppressed because it is intellectually inaccessible but because it is existentially unbearable to sinful hearts. Suppression, in this view, is not a failure of comprehension but a reaction of aversion and avoidance. Quoting Johan Bavinck, Sutanto explains: "Suppression need not be understood as a conscious action. It can develop in total silence in the human heart. I am inclined to understand this in the sense of repression, as the concept of repression has been developed in recent psychology. As a rule, repression occurs 'unconsciously,' but that makes it no less real."[17] This affective suppression does not annihilate the knowledge of God but submerges it beneath the surface of consciousness, where it continues to generate moral discomfort and inward tension.

Paul's language of emotional consent in Romans 1:32 vividly underscores this dimension. Humans not only act against what they know to be true; they actively take pleasure in it. The problem is not merely intellectual misalignment but a profound moral inversion—what ought to produce repentance and fear instead produces celebration and solidarity in defiance. This is not because the truth has failed to reach the mind but because the heart has declared war on the implications of knowing God. This distinction is crucial for a proper understanding of the noetic effects of sin: the issue is not merely that the human mind is clouded or impaired but that the human heart is disordered and actively resists the known truth.

To put it plainly, people do not suppress the truth because it is absent; they suppress it because it is unwelcome. The *sensus divinitatis*, rightly understood in Sutanto's affective model, is not an abstract or neutral faculty of inference but a persistent, unavoidable awareness of God's reality that stirs unease, confrontation, and guilt in the fallen human condition. Suppression, then, is the act of resisting divine presence, not from a place of ignorance but from a posture of active avoidance.

This understanding of suppression as primarily affective, not merely cognitive, offers a more biblically faithful and pastorally insightful model for understanding unbelief. It better explains why Paul speaks with such force about culpability in Romans 1:18–32, grounding divine wrath in willful resistance rather than simple lack of access or intellectual capacity. It also opens the door to a reimagined approach to gospel witness and biblical counseling, which must now take into account not only the mind's need for truth but the heart's desperate need for grace to confront its deeply entrenched fears and disordered desires.

4. Magnetic Points and the Plurality of Belief

If the *sensus divinitatis* is indeed a dispositional, affective awareness of God—as Sutanto, following the Bavincks, contends—then the wide-ranging plurality of religious and irreligious expressions across

[17] J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, ed. John Bolt, James D. Bratt and Paul J. Visser (Eerdmans, 2013), 284, as quoted in Sutanto, *A Sense of the Divine*, 10–11.

cultures is not evidence *against* general revelation but precisely *how* it manifests under suppression.[18] In Romans 1, Paul does not deny that humanity is inherently religious. On the contrary, he assumes it, diagnosing the misdirection of that religious impulse. The knowledge of God is powerfully present (1:19–21), but the human heart, unwilling to submit to the Creator, actively substitutes him with created things (1:22–23). Suppression, then, does not erase the fundamental human need to worship; rather, it merely redirects it. As Paul vividly describes, human beings "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things" (1:23); they "exchanged the truth about God for a lie" and ultimately "worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (1:25). This dynamic shows that the religious impulse is inherent, but its object is warped by sin.

This inherent religious orientation, even in its distorted forms, leads directly to Johan Bavinck's concept of "magnetic points," which Sutanto draws upon to illustrate how general revelation operates beneath the surface of religious diversity and human suppression. These "magnetic points" refer to universal existential concerns embedded deeply in every human heart. They represent the fundamental human search for meaning, purpose, and ultimate reality. These include the longing for destiny beyond death, the intrinsic search for moral order and justice, the deep-seated need for belonging and ultimate community, the pervasive fear of death and meaninglessness, and the innate desire for transcendence beyond the immanent world.[19] Though these concerns take countless and often contradictory forms across diverse cultures and worldviews, they arise from the same fundamental reality: that God has made himself known, and that humans, even in their profound suppression of that knowledge, cannot entirely escape his pervasive presence or the demands of their created nature. These "points" are not neutral; they are areas where God's general revelation continues to press upon the human consciousness, stirring unease and longing.

Rather than demonstrating the failure of general revelation, religious pluralism confirms its persistence. The widespread elevation of creaturely realities—be they ancestors, nature, political power, material success, or the deified self—as objects of ultimate concern precisely reflects Paul's claim that human beings are worshipers by nature. When the true object of worship is rejected, the worship impulse does not disappear; it simply finds a substitute. Johan Bavinck aptly terms this a "parasitic substitution," wherein the sense of the divine (*sensus divinitatis*) is displaced and projected onto a created entity.[20] People continue to respond to God's self-manifestation, but they do so in distorted, displaced, and ultimately idolatrous ways. This explains the human tendency to seek ultimate security, identity, and hope in finite things, which are incapable of bearing such weight.

This insight has significant implications for how Romans 1 is read in theological and missiological contexts. Paul's anthropology presupposes that all people are already engaged with divine revelation,

[18] Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 53: "The explanation of these undertones of our existence—the servile fear of God and the troubled conscience—is found in a quality of the internal revelation which is … much more adequate as a basis for understanding the universality of religion, than the intellectual perception of God…. The 'knowledge' or 'persuasion' that God exists, which man receives internally by 'natural instinct,' causes him to react religiously. In it the glory and majesty of God, by which he inspires fear and worship, are given directly to the mind. This powerful persuasion penetrates even the benumbed receptivity of sinful man so forcefully that it breaks down his usual self-exaltation."

[19] Sutanto, *A Sense of the Divine*, 12.

[20] J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque: A Study of the Relationship between Christianity and the Other Religions* (Westminster Seminary Press, 2023), 117–18, as quoted in Sutanto, *A Sense of the Divine*, 12.

whether or not they consciously acknowledge it. The human condition is thus not a state of religious neutrality or epistemic blankness, but rather one of misdirected worship, of "knowing yet not knowing." The *sensus divinitatis* remains actively present—repressed, redirected, distorted, but never entirely absent. As a result, every worldview and religious system, no matter how divergent from biblical truth, can be understood, at least in part, as a response—however twisted and unrighteous—to God's ongoing revelation.

This is precisely why Paul's language in Romans 1 is not primarily philosophical but profoundly liturgical. He does not describe humanity's fall as a mere mistake in logic or an intellectual error but as a fundamental failure in worship. The accusation, "They did not honor him as God or give thanks to him" (1:21), strikes at the heart of humanity's rebellion, revealing the core of suppression not as the absence of truth but as the willful refusal to glorify and thank God for it. When gratitude towards the Creator is absent, idolatry inevitably fills the void. Hence, the numerous religious substitutes that pervade human history and culture are not true alternatives to divine revelation; they are its distorted echoes, testifying implicitly to the reality they desperately seek to suppress or replace.

Sutanto's retrieval of this affective, phenomenological model thoroughly recovers the existential weight of Paul's argument. He highlights that "while the older Reformed tradition had already emphasized that God implanted notions that precede reasoned inferences from creation to God, these [Dutch neo-Calvinist] thinkers … located the effects of general revelation as further sedimented underneath notions, ideas, or propositions, that is, in affects, feelings, and intuitions."[21] This perspective makes profound sense of how diverse religious expressions, even those that appear to deny theism altogether or embrace outright secularism, are still fundamentally entangled with a suppressed awareness of God. The affective impact of general revelation—manifesting through universal human longings, a sense of awe, pervasive anxiety, undeniable guilt, and an inherent moral intuition—finds culturally shaped outlets, even as it continues to press powerfully on the conscience.

In light of this, Christian witness must be profoundly attentive to these "magnetic points"—not as neutral starting places for dispassionate argumentation but as compelling evidence of the deep imprint of general revelation upon every human soul. These universal longings are not just—or even primarily—direct paths *to* God in themselves but rather undeniable signs that God has already made himself known and that the human heart, though vehemently suppressing the truth, remains haunted by its echoes and restless until it finds its true object of worship.

5. Apologetic, Pastoral, and Preaching Implications

The affective model of general revelation fundamentally reshapes how theologians and practitioners should understand and approach the complex condition of unbelief. If suppression is fundamentally affective—driven by deep-seated fear, guilt, rebellious pride, and an insatiable desire for autonomy—then the appropriate response cannot be limited to purely intellectual argumentation or detached propositional instruction. Instead, both apologetics and preaching must consciously engage the whole person: not merely the mind's intellectual assent but also the heart's desires, emotions, and existential posture before God. Hence, especially in apologetics, pastoral counseling, and gospel proclamation, the most revealing and transformative question may not solely be "What do you think?" but rather, more

[21] Sutanto, *Sense of the Divine*, 8.

piercingly, "What is it that you want, and what are you afraid of?"[22] This shift calls for a more holistic and compassionate approach to engaging the unchurched and discipling believers.

5.1. Apologetic Implications: Engaging Suppressed Awareness

Traditional apologetics often centers on offering robust rational proofs for God's existence, the historical reliability of Scripture, or the historicity of the resurrection.[23] While such arguments are undoubtedly valuable and indeed necessary for addressing intellectual obstacles, Paul's diagnosis in Romans 1—and the affective model grounded in it—suggests that unbelief is not primarily the result of intellectual deficiency, a mere lack of information, or an inability to grasp logical propositions. Instead, it is, at its core, a morally charged and existentially motivated rejection of a truth that is already known and yet unwanted. As Romans 1:32 makes clear, the knowledge of God's moral decree is undeniably *present*, intuitively perceived by all, but it is actively repressed and resisted in favor of unrighteousness and self-autonomy.

This perspective profoundly transforms the task of apologetics. The apologist is not merely introducing something entirely foreign or brand new to a blank slate but rather seeking to awaken what has been suppressed and reorient what has been misdirected. The goal is not merely to persuade with irrefutable logic but, more broadly, to expose the affective dimensions of unbelief—its hidden fears, deep-seated evasions, and cherished false allegiances. This aligns significantly with what Reformed apologetics, especially in the Cornelius Van Til tradition, has long emphasized: that no one is truly neutral in their posture toward God, and that every unbeliever already knows God but suppresses this knowledge in unrighteousness.[24] However, Sutanto's affective model nuances this insight by emphasizing that this suppression often operates beneath conscious awareness, deeply embedded in one's disposition and loves.[25] The apologist, then, must be patient and perceptive, seeking not only to challenge faulty reasoning or provide logical answers but also to lovingly uncover the hidden fears and disordered desires that fiercely resist divine truth. Arguments alone may not suffice to break through this affective barrier. What is often needed is a form of apologetics that functions much like compassionate pastoral counseling—inviting honest self-reflection, drawing out suppressed guilt and shame, and, most importantly, pointing decisively toward the liberating grace of the gospel as the only true remedy for a restless and rebellious heart.[26]

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[22] See, for example, Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change*, Resources for Changed Lives (P&R, 2002).

[23] Representative works include William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Crossway, 2008); Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (IVP Academic, 2007); N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 3 (Fortress, 2003); Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* (Ignatius, 2017).

[24] Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd ed. (P&R, 1967), 194–208.

[25] Sutanto, *Sense of the Divine*, 15–16.

[26] See, e.g., Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (Dutton, 2009), which masterfully links intellectual doubts to underlying emotional and relational barriers to belief; Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (Kneeland & Green, 1746), a classic work that argues true faith must be rooted in transformed desires and spiritual delight, not just intellectual assent; and Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith* (Crown & Covenant, 2012), a personal testimony illustrating how relational hospitality can uncover and lovingly confront the hidden fears and identities that resist the truth.

5.2. Pastoral Implications: Ministering to the Restless Heart

For pastors, this understanding of affective suppression offers both profound clarity and compassionate insight into the human condition. It reminds us that beneath the surface of skepticism, cynicism, or overt resistance often lies a deeply wounded, fearful, and restless heart. If general revelation continues to press in upon every human soul—even in unconscious or repressed ways—then even the hardest-hearted skeptic is never truly beyond the reach of God's persistent voice. People are not blank slates, nor are they merely rebellious intellects; they are conflicted souls who carry within themselves a buried, often anxiety-producing, awareness of their Creator and Judge.

This understanding should produce both a profound boldness and a deep tenderness in pastoral care. Boldness, because the gospel addresses what is already implicitly present and suppressed—the inescapable truth of God's holiness, righteousness, and power, which their conscience affirms. But tenderness, too, because suppression is not only willful but often deeply fear-driven. People resist God not simply because they hate him but because they are terrified of what it would mean to stand exposed, vulnerable, and accountable before his holy presence. As Paul writes, they "knew" God but ultimately "did not honor him as God or give thanks to him" (Rom 1:21)—a fundamental failure rooted as much in a visceral aversion to dependence as in outright rebellion.

Pastoral ministry, then, must attend not just to beliefs but equally to affections. Such ministry disciples people not only in sound doctrine but crucially in reordered desire—teaching them to love what is true, good, and beautiful according to God's nature, and to honestly confess their innate resistance to it. The affective model also underscores the transformative importance of presence: a faithful, consistent, and compassionate Christian community can act as a kind of "gospel pressure," gently surfacing buried convictions and longings that people may not even know how to express. This living out of the gospel among people creates a relational context where the truth can be received by hearts that might otherwise close off to mere propositional arguments.

This vision of pastoral ministry also serves as a quiet but firm indictment of pastors who reduce their calling to preaching and administration alone. While these are essential duties, the affective model of suppression reveals that ministry must also be profoundly relational and formational. If the deepest resistance to God is not just intellectual but emotional and moral—rooted in disordered loves, hidden fears, and ingrained habits of autonomy—then pastors cannot simply inform from the pulpit or manage from the office. They must actively engage the actual emotional and spiritual lives of their people, patiently discipling their hearts and desires.

5.3. Preaching Implications: Proclaiming to Suppressed Knowers

The pulpit, too, is a powerful place where suppressed knowledge can be brought to the surface. Paul's theology in Romans 1 assumes that his audience already possesses a fundamental awareness of God, his righteousness, and his impending judgment. The primary task of preaching, therefore, is not simply to inform but to confront, awaken, and draw out that suppressed knowledge. Preaching that faithfully reflects Romans 1 must do more than merely convey propositional truth; it must expose the insidious mechanisms of suppression and call hearers to repentance not only for what they do but for how they willfully evade the truth they already know and feel.

This understanding changes both the tone and content of preaching. Preachers must learn to lovingly name and challenge the hidden idols people cling to in place of God—comfort, control, autonomy, success, self-actualization—revealing them as the counterfeit objects of worship that they are. They

must preach not just against abstract unbelief but against the false worship that often masquerades as secular neutrality or even genuine spirituality. At the same time, they must do so with the gospel clearly and consistently in view: not as a mere add-on after judgment has been declared but as the very means by which the affective suppression is healed and the heart is liberated. As Johan Bavinck powerfully notes, it is precisely the gospel that "illuminates" the sinner, enabling them to recognize that they have always known God and have long resisted him, now seeing this truth in the light of Christ's grace.[27]

Good preaching, then, does not merely seek to win arguments or secure intellectual assent. It seeks to unmask the deep-seated suppression and invite people into the transformative grace that alone can deal with the pervasive shame and crippling fear that suppression attempts to hide.[28] It calls forth not just cognitive belief but wholehearted worship of the true God.

The affective model also offers profound hope for preaching to those often overlooked in discussions of natural theology—especially those with severe intellectual or cognitive impairments. If knowledge of God depended solely on one's ability to reason through creation or grasp complex propositional truths, then many individuals would be left outside the reach of general revelation. But the affective model insists that God's revelation presses on all people, not primarily as an abstract argument but as a deep, intuitive awareness of his presence and power. This means that even those unable to articulate belief or construct sophisticated theological arguments still bear within them a God-given *sensus divinitatis*. Preaching, in this light, becomes a ministry not just of explanation but of presence—offering beauty, tone, rhythm, and love that speak powerfully to the heart and spirit, even when the rational mind cannot fully engage or comprehend the intricacies of doctrine.

In sum, the affective model of general revelation comprehensively reframes how Christians understand unbelief, how they present the truth of the gospel, and how they engage with those who resist it. It reminds us that every heart, no matter how closed, resistant, or even impaired, is already being addressed by God. And it calls the church—apologists, pastors, and preachers alike—to speak not only to the mind but also profoundly to the heart that knows yet stubbornly refuses to know, until the sovereign grace of God breaks through its defenses.

6. Conclusion

Romans 1:32 offers a profound and often overlooked window into Paul's theological anthropology and his understanding of human culpability. Far from presenting ignorance as the root of unbelief, Paul depicts a humanity that possesses an undeniable knowledge of God's righteous decree yet persistently engages in rebellion and even finds perverse solidarity in the approval of unrighteousness. This deeply moral and affective posture is best explained not through cognitive failure alone but through a willful and emotionally charged suppression of divine truth. Suppression, in this view, is not the mere absence of

[27] J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, trans. J. A. De Jong, ed. John Bolt, James D. Bratt, and Paul J. Visser (Eerdmans, 2013), 285.

[28] Sutanto, *Sense of the Divine*, 45: "If the genesis of failure to believe in God is affective as much as it may be intellectual, as sinners are incentivized to resist God due to our vulnerability in culpability, then the Christian witness must be presented with and shaped by the gospel from the outset. Exposure of culpability is painful and heart-wrenching, and only the gospel of grace can salve the fear that keeps one from freely confessing one's guilt or shame before God. A Christian witness should keep in view that the same truth that exposes sinners is also a proclamation of a grace that offers forgiveness and reconciliation (Jn. 1:17)."

knowledge but its active rejection; it is not a lack of evidence but a visceral aversion to its uncomfortable implications and demands for submission.

By integrating Sutanto's affective model of general revelation with a close exegetical reading of Romans 1, this article has sought to recover an account of the noetic effects of sin that is both biblically grounded and theologically rich. Rather than locating the effects of sin solely in broken intellectual faculties, this model highlights the disordered affections—such as fear of judgment, pervasive guilt, rebellious pride, and an overarching love of autonomy—that lead the human heart to resist the truth it already inherently knows. Sutanto's recovery of the *sensus divinitatis* as a deep, intuitive feeling of dependence—rather than a detached rational faculty—clarifies precisely how Paul can speak so confidently about human culpability in the face of God's clear revelation. This affective resistance is what renders humanity without excuse.

Further research might fruitfully explore how this affective model illuminates the inner tension described elsewhere in Paul, particularly in Romans 7. Paul's visceral portrayal of the divided self—"I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (7:15)—reveals a heart caught between moral recognition and profound volitional failure. This struggle is not merely cognitive; it profoundly resonates with the affective suppression described in Romans 1. The "I" of Romans 7 knows the good and even, on some level, desires it, yet is simultaneously overpowered by sin's inward pull—a dynamic that deeply mirrors the affective model's account of suppression as a complex conflict of loves and desires, not simply a failure of logic. Studying this pivotal passage through the lens of the affective model may deepen our understanding of the noetic effects of sin and indeed the universal human condition of knowing, yet tragically resisting, the God who continuously reveals himself.

This reframing of unbelief has far-reaching implications for Christian theology and practice. For apologetics, it shifts the primary focus from merely proving what is conceptually unknown to compassionately awakening what has been actively suppressed within the human heart. For pastoral care, it serves as a vital reminder to ministers that resistance to God often stems not primarily from intellectual confusion or doubt but from deeply rooted fears, shame, and disordered affections that demand tender yet firm engagement. And for preaching, it reinforces the crucial task of not merely informing the mind with propositions but profoundly exposing the heart, challenging its false loyalties, and calling forth true worship where active suppression has long taken root. In each of these vital ministry areas, the glorious gospel of grace must remain central and non-negotiable, for only divine grace can unmask the depths of human suppression without utterly crushing the soul, offering not condemnation but the possibility of healing and reconciliation.

Ultimately, Paul's powerful declaration in Romans 1:32—that sinners "know" God's righteous decree and yet deliberately "approve" unrighteousness—presses the church to engage the world not as one primarily proclaiming brand new, never-before-heard information. Instead, the church is called to announce a long-repressed, profoundly uncomfortable truth: the truth that God is indeed known by all, that his glory has been tragically exchanged for idols, and that only in the transformative face of Jesus Christ, encountered through the power of the gospel, can deep-seated suppression finally give way to saving sight, authentic knowledge, and true worship.

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Echoes of Cain in James 3:7–5:9 and the Problem of James 4:5

— Kenneth Berding —

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Abstract: James undergirds his exhortations in the middle portion of his letter (3:7–5:9) with a narrative subtext—namely, the early chapters of Genesis, and, in particular, the person and story of Cain as it would have been understood in James's interpretive environment. An acknowledgment of this subtext resolves most of the interpretive and translational difficulties associated with James 4:5, which should read: "The [human] spirit which he [God] made to dwell in us desires with envy."

James 4:5 launches with one of the strongest citation formulae in all the New Testament: "Or do you think that in vain the Scripture says…" (ἢ δοκεῖτε ὅτι κενῶς ἡ γραφὴ λέγει…). Unfortunately, it follows this apparent signaling of a quotation with one of the most puzzling clauses in all the Bible: πρὸς φθόνον ἐπιποθεῖ τὸ πνεῦμα ὃ κατῴκισεν ἐν ἡμῖν.[1] Modern translations reflect various understandings of this clause. Words in brackets are included for clarity:

1. "He [God] yearns jealously over the [human] spirit that he has made to dwell in us" (ESV; cf. NIV, NRSV).
2. "He [God] jealously desires the [divine] Spirit whom He has made to dwell in us" (NASB).
3. "The [divine] Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously" (NKJV).
4. "The [human] spirit he made to dwell in us envies intensely" (CSB; cf. NET, KJV).

The central claim of this article is that James undergirds his exhortations in the middle portion of his letter (3:7–5:9) with a narrative subtext—namely, the early chapters of Genesis, and, in particular, the person and story of Cain as it would have been understood in James's interpretive environment; and furthermore, that the acknowledgment of this subtext resolves most of the interpretive difficulties associated with James 4:5. James assumes throughout his letter that his readers know the Old Testament—

[1] Note that a few interpreters think we should move the question mark from the end of 4:5 ("…which he made to dwell in us") to the end of the clause that begins 4:6 ("But he gives a greater grace"). This might allow an interpreter to turn the supposed quotation of 4:5 into "a paraphrased adaptation of Prov. 3:34 in James 4:5–6a." So, Douglas S. Huffman, *Understanding the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Forms, Features, Framings, and Functions* (Baker Academic, 2024), 177–78, following to some degree Craig B. Carpenter and Scot McKnight, NA28, and UBS5. One advantage of this option is that James actually quotes Proverbs 3:34 in 4:6. One disadvantage is that the words and ideas are quite dissimilar between James 4:5 and Proverbs 3:34, regardless of which of the disputed translational options is adopted.

as demonstrated by quoting Scripture and alluding to scriptural examples in the rest of the letter—so the suggestion of a narrative subtext should not be viewed as remarkable. If in fact James draws upon Cain's evil envy to warn his readers against the danger of envy in 3:7–5:9, this observation may at the same time resolve the problem of locating the source of the "quotation" in James 4:5 and guide readers into how to translate and interpret this perplexing verse.

1. Echoes of Cain (and Early Genesis) in James 3:7–5:9

In one sense, arguing that James draws upon the story of Cain and Abel is not a new suggestion to scholars of James. Many recent scholars already affirm at least an echo in the cries of the harvesters in James 5:4 (cf. Gen 4:10).[2]

I agree that James 5:4 echoes the Cain and Abel story but want to argue that the author begins nodding toward early Genesis in James 3:7, increasingly sharpening the focus on Cain as a negative exemplar, and continues to draw upon early Genesis and the Cain-Abel story all the way up to James 5:9. James is not exegeting Genesis 4, nor even directly commenting upon it in James 3:7–5:9. Rather, he is like a preacher who repeatedly alludes to a negative archetype so well known that naming the evil person is unnecessary to draw from his negative example.

At the end of chapter 3, James pulls his readers into the broader narrative of early Genesis and then begins to draw more specifically from the story of Cain. I am certainly not claiming that everything James says in this section is intended to connect with the Cain exemplar, but I will argue that there are many points of contact between Genesis 4 in its broader context and James 3:7–5:9 (some stronger and some weaker). The stronger allusions and echoes, of course, buttress the weaker. But reading this middle section of James with the story of Cain hovering in the back of one's mind will illuminate many aspects of this section, a few of which are opaque until one affirms the link with early Genesis and the person and story of Cain.

I will begin in chapter 3 by observing a list of possible connections with early Genesis, then focus more specifically on the story and character of Cain in James 4 and early 5. After drawing up this list of allusions to and echoes of early Genesis, especially Genesis 4, I will show how this narrative substructure can resolve the difficult question of the original source and proper interpretation (and, thus, appropriate translation) of James 4:5.

1.1. James 3

3:7: James triggers his use of the early parts of Genesis in the middle of his discussion about the tongue. He writes: "For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind…"[3] James's list of living creatures echoes the fifth and sixth days of the creation narrative (Gen 1:20–25), including God's command to Adam and Eve to "have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen

[2] E.g. Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*, AB 37 (Doubleday, 1964), 51; Patrick J. Hartin, "'Come Now, You Rich, Weep and Wail...' (James 5:1–6)," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 84 (1993): 60; John Byron, "Living in the Shadow of Cain: Echoes of a Developing Tradition in James 5:1–6," *NovT* 48 (2006): 262, though Byron thinks that in James 5:1–6, Abel should be viewed as paradigmatic of unjust suffering and Cain of envy and evil oppression.

[3] Unless otherwise indicated, English citations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

1:28).[4] David Allen refers to James's "taming" in 3:7 as a formal allusion to the dominion comments of Genesis 1:26 and 28.[5] James's list may further echo the command for Noah to bring two "of every living thing … the birds … the animals … every creeping thing of the ground…" into the ark (Gen 6:19–20; cf. 7:2–3, 8, 14, 21–23; 8:17–18), along with God's statement after the flood: "The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea" (Gen 9:2; cf. 9:10, 12, 15).[6] Readers at this point in James's letter have now been pulled into the Genesis narrative, and James effectively capitalizes upon it.

3:8: James continues his discussion of the tongue with a comparison: "It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." Allen writes, "The serpent portrayal returns in Jas 3:8, and in more suggestive fashion, its description of the tongue as both poisonous and death-bearing transporting the intertextual reader back to Gen. 3:1-19 and the catastrophic effects of the serpent's tongue."[7] Serpents, of course, are known for their long forked (double) tongues—which may help to lead into the following four verses about using our tongues in contradictory (or, we could say, double-tongued) ways.[8] Once again, we find ourselves in early Genesis.

3:9: "With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God." This sentence is a clear allusion to the early Genesis narrative—clear both because of James's use of the word "curse" (the lesser allusion) and because James employs the language of "likeness of God" (the stronger allusion). Genesis 1:26–27 reads: "God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Dan McCartney comments, "The word for 'likeness' (ὁμοίωσις, *homoiōsis*) is found only here in the NT and is rare even in the LXX, making the allusion to Gen. 1:26 almost certain."[9] James's words about cursing people also evoke God's words after the flood, words that themselves would have prepared James's readers for his upcoming connection to Cain and his murder of his brother: "And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image" (Gen 9:5–6).

3:14, 16: "But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth" (3:14). "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice" (3:16). The twice repetition of "jealousy and selfish ambition" in these verses is the first in a

[4] "Just as Genesis 1 divides creatures into four groups—water creatures, birds, livestock, and creeping things (Heb. *Remeś,* "small animal, reptile")—so James follows the same pattern of nature's order—beast and birds, reptiles and sea creatures." Thomas R. Shepherd, "Creation in the General Epistles," in *The Genesis Creation Account and Its Reverberations in the New Testament,* ed. Thomas R. Shepherd (Andrews University Press, 2022), 378. Also Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James,* 2nd ed., PNTC (Eerdmans, 2021), 171.

[5] David M. Allen, "Genesis in James, 1 and 2 Peter and Jude," in *Genesis in the New Testament,* ed. Maarten J. J. Menken and Steve Moyise, LNTS 466 (Bloomsbury, 2012), 153.

[6] Genesis 9 follows up this final list with the requirement that lifeblood be reckoned for murder, because God made man in his own image (9:5–6), which is relevant for our later discussion.

[7] Allen, "Genesis in James, 1 and 2 Peter and Jude," 153. Also Dale C. Allison, *The Epistle of James,* ICC (Bloomsbury, 2013), 547–48.

[8] Allen, "Genesis in James, 1 and 2 Peter and Jude," 153, notes "the serpent, famed for its duplicitous tongue."

[9] Dan G. McCartney, *James,* BECNT (Baker Academic, 2009), 192 n. 25.

series of descriptions that James will incorporate into the early parts of James 4 to evoke Cain, his heart, and his actions. More on this below.

3:15: "This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic." Regardless of the exact connotations of the first two adjectives, the third adjective "demonic" (δαιμονιώδης) reinforces the idea that the devil is involved in some way. Second-temple (and beyond) interpreters regularly included the devil in the Cain story, even though it isn't explicit in Genesis 4. This use of the adjective "demonic" casts a backward glance to James 3:6, "set on fire by hell," to the deadly-poisoning-tongue just referenced in 3:8 and anticipates James's exhortation to "resist the devil" in 4:7.[10]

3:17–18: Contrasting with the "jealousy and selfish ambition" and "disorder and every vile practice" of 3:16, "the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." The dual mention of "good fruits" in 3:17 and "a harvest of righteousness … sown in peace" in 3:18 may prepare readers for more Cain connections through an implicit contrast of the unaccepted gift Cain brought to the Lord with fruits that are good and a peaceful harvest of righteousness. Genesis 4:3 reads: "Cain brought an offering to the Lord of the fruit of the ground." Later in the Pentateuch we learn that grain offerings are acceptable to the Lord (e.g., Lev 2), which suggests that it wasn't the gift itself that occasioned God's rejection, but, as many later ancient interpreters suggest, the inferior quality of what Cain brought in comparison to Abel, who "brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions" (Gen 4:4).[11] Once we have looked at the first paragraph of James 4, we are likely to view these last verses of James 3 as anticipatory of the story of Cain and Abel.

1.2. James 4

4:1–5: Having already evoked the early chapters of Genesis in James 3:7–12 (most prominently in James's list of creatures to be tamed and his reference to the image of God in humans), including early hints of Cain's jealousy and selfish ambition in the final paragraph of chapter 3, James now narrows his Old Testament focus to Cain as a negative model of what he is warning against in James 4.[12] The list of vices described in James 4 are particularly apropos to Cain, notably: "quarrels" (4:1), "fights" (4:1), "passions" (or "pleasures," 4:1, 3), "[evil] desire" (4:2), "covet" (4:2), "cannot obtain" (4:2), "fight and quarrel" (4:2), "enmity" (4:4) and especially "desires with envy" (4:5). (I have already referenced the "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition" that appear in 3:14 and 3:16.) For readers familiar with Genesis 4, the descriptions of quarrels, fighting, and enmity are easily connected mentally to the Cain and Abel story. But what of all the descriptions of coveting, desiring, not being able to obtain, and envy? Though we may not hear it in our heads, limited as we are to our knowledge of Cain via Genesis 4, these descriptions would stand out to a first-century interpreter of Cain for two reasons:

First, later interpreters, both Jewish and Christian, described Cain's sin as being one of envy and grasping. John Byron has assembled an impressive list of examples of ancient interpreters who

[10] Darian Lockett, "'Unstained by the World': Purity and Pollution as an Indicator of Cultural Interaction in the Letter of James" in *Reading James with New Eyes: Methodological Reassessments of the Letter of James*, ed. Robert L. Webb and John S. Koppenborg, LNTS 342 (T&T Clark, 2007), 61–62.

[11] Gordon John Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* WBC 1 (Zondervan, 1987), 104.

[12] Luke Timothy Johnson, "James 3:13-4:10 and the *Topos* ΠΕΡΙ ΦΘΟΝΟΥ," *NovT* 25 (1983): 328–32 reminds us that the impulse to parcel up James into separate paraenetic sections under the influence of Dibelius has had an undue influence, which in practice, has separated the end of James 3 from James 4. Johnson offers a helpful list of thematic parallels between the last paragraph of James 3 and the first of James 4 that pull them together.

understood Cain to be the paragon of envy. Josephus, for example, claimed that Cain was only "looking to gain" because he was a "covetous man," and after the murder of Abel swindled people out of their possessions.[13] Philo said that Cain was a "lover of self" "who refers everything to himself" and constantly took things in unjust directions for his own benefit.[14] Clement explicitly connected jealousy and envy (ζήλος καί φθόνος) with Cain's murder of Abel, drawing a causative relationship between the two (1 Clement 4:7).[15]

Second, even Cain's name was thought to have a connection to envy. Philo claimed that his name meant "possession."[16] In this regard, Angela Kim notes: "The suggestion that Cain was governed by envy is a natural association from an etymological interpretation of Cain's name, קין, which was thought to derive from the root for קנא ('envy') or קנה ('acquire')."[17] Byron comments:

> With Cain in particular, the connection of his name with greed became a peg on which later exegetes could hang interpretive traditions about him. Not only was his origin attributed to an evil being, but his disposition, as revealed by his name, communicated what kind of individual he would grow up to be. The accusation that Cain was a greedy grasper is repeated often in conjunction with the details surrounding his crime of fratricide and his subsequent life following his expulsion.[18]

There are many more examples. Since James was breathing the air of first-century interpretive traditions, it is more than likely that he was both familiar with and influenced by the association of Cain with envy and evil desire. Keep that in mind as we look at the next verses.

4:2: After writing about quarrels and conflicts, James adds: "You desire and do not have, so you murder." Are we to think that the Jewish Christians to whom James wrote were committing murder? Even if these words were mediated by Jesus's teaching that anger was tantamount to murder (Matt 5:21–22; cf. 15:19) or anticipated James's later discussion of killing (by removing wages, James 5:4–6), this is still a provocative accusation for James to make. But it is slightly less provocative if James is intentionally alluding to the well-known relationship between envy and murder in the story of Cain and drawing upon the illustrative potential of that story. Why emphasize murder? A narrative subtext of Cain's murder of Abel would help to explain it.

4:4: James provocatively addresses his readers as: "You adulterous people!" Granted, this is not the clearest connection to the Cain story, but it may include yet another echo that our ears are probably not attuned to hearing. Many ancient interpreters of Cain either suggested or outrightly claimed that Cain

[13] Josephus, Jewish *Antiquities* 1.53–55, 60–61.

[14] Philo, *Worse* 10, 19, 21, 32–34.

[15] These examples are cited in Byron, "Living in the Shadow of Cain," 265–68.

[16] Philo, *Worse* 10. More generally, Philo treats Abel as an exemplar of "the human capacity for good" and Cain as "the human capacity for evil." See Hindy Najman, "Cain and Abel as Character Traits: A Study in the Allegorical Typology of Philo of Alexandria," *Eve's Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuizen (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 107-118.

[17] Angela Y. Kim, "Cain and Abel in the Light of Envy: A Study in the History of the Interpretation of Envy in Genesis 4.1–16," *JSP* 12 (2001): 71. Also Karolien Vermeulen, "Mind the Gap: Ambiguity in the Story of Cain and Abel," *JBL* 133 (2014): 34; Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 101. Kim (p. 77) suggests that the *getting* in Eve's comment, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord" could have been part of the impetus for later interpreters reading envy as the source of Cain's fratricide.

[18] John Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition: Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the First Sibling Rivalry*, ThBN 14 (Brill, 2011), 32.

was born of adultery; that is, the devil or an evil angel had sex with Eve.[19] Of course, the idea that Cain's "father" was somehow the devil (or a fallen angel) could be a reason James includes some of his allusions to the devil. It could also be a (the?) reason James chose to lead this sentence with the provocative accusation that his readers were adulterous.[20]

4:5: There are three allusions to the Genesis narrative in 4:5: in the words "desires with envy," "spirit," and "made to dwell."[21] Since one of the central problems I hope to resolve in this article is the proper interpretation of this verse, I will return to it after highlighting the various other echoes of the Genesis narrative in 3:7–5:9.

4:7: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." Though the devil is not explicitly mentioned in Genesis 4, a case can be made that the recipients of James's letter would have been prone to read the devil into Genesis 4, for the following three reasons: (1) As just mentioned, some Jewish interpreters viewed Cain, not as the offspring of Adam and Eve, but rather as the offspring of the devil and Eve. (2) The story of Cain and Abel is the earliest biblical example of what Schnittjer and Harmon refer to as an "extended echo effect," where the second story (Cain and Abel) displays literary parallels with the first story (the fall of Adam and Eve), wherein the serpent plays a central role.[22] (3) The personification of sin in Genesis 4:7b may not simply be a literary device, but may itself suggest a personal power lying behind the sin: "And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."

4:8: "Cleanse your *hands*, you sinners" evokes Genesis 4:11: "And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive *your brother's blood from your hand*." Furthermore, δίψυχος in James 4:8, which is usually translated as "double-minded" (here in the plural δίψυχοι) may

[19] Note in this regard, perhaps, 1 John 3:12, "We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one (ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ) and murdered his brother." Other examples cited by Byron in *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 16–20 include: Tertullian, *Patience* 5:15; *Gospel of Philip* 61.5–15 [Isenberg]; Targum Pseudo-Jonathan Gen 4:1; *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer* 21 [Frielander]. Marcel Porthuis, "Eve's Demonic Offspring: A Jewish Motif in German Literature," in *Eve's Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuizen, TBNJCT 5 (Brill, 2003), 57–61 shows that in Jewish writings the adultery with demons was not only attributed to Eve, it also was sometimes attributed to Adam.

[20] There is a split in manuscripts that include the feminine only, μοιχαλίδες, and those that include both the masculine and feminine, μοιχοὶ καὶ μοιχαλίδες, making the original text uncertain. I register my awareness that many commentators understand James to be drawing upon the comparison of Israel's unfaithfulness to adultery, such as appears in texts like Hosea 1–5 and Jer 2:23–5:19. But note that interpreters who hold that God is the implied subject of ἐπιποθεῖ in the disputed quotation in James 4:5 (which I do not, see below) are likely drawn to this explanation to support the view that James 4:5 is about God being righteously jealous (which it is not; it is about φθόνος, "envy," a word never used in relation to God).

[21] Chris A. Vlachos, *James,* EGGNT (B&H Academic), 136, comments, "the rel[ative] clause ὃ κατῴκισεν ἐν ἡμῖν, which modifies τὸ πνεῦμα, likely reflects the OT doctrine of God's inbreathing of the spirit into humans at creation (cf. Gen 2:7; Eccl 12:7)."

[22] "Extended echo effect refers to the recurrence of similar elements from an earlier context in a later context usually in the same sequence (a-b-c, a-b-c)…. For example, the narrative of Cain's sin uses an extended echo effect from the sin in the garden: e.g., desire/rule (Gen 3:16; 4:7); Where are you/is your brother? (3:9; 4:9); ground cursed (3:17; 4:11, 14); and banished to the east (3:23–24; 4:16). These parallels load Cain's sin with Adam-and-Eve-like connotations for literary and theological outcomes." Gary Edward Schnittjer and Matthew S. Harmon, *How to Study the Bible's Use of the Bible: Seven Hermeneutical Choices for the Old and New Testaments* (Zondervan Academic, 2024), 208.

have been a word coined by James himself, as Stanley Porter argues.[23] If it was, can we suggest that James was influenced in his use (and perhaps creation) of this adjective (δύο + ψυχή) via the Greek translation of early Genesis, where the word ψυχή appears thirteen times in the first nine chapters, most notably for our discussion in LXX Genesis 2:7, "man became a living soul" (ψυχὴν ζῶσαν) (cf. James 4:5 "the spirit which he made to dwell in us") and LXX Genesis 9:5 where God says regarding the life-blood: "and from the hand of the man's brother I will earnestly seek out the soul/life of the man" (τὴν ψυχὴν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου). "Hand" and "brother" are words that appear in the Greek text of Genesis 9:5, both of which are important words for understanding the narrative of Cain and Abel, and both words that are used by James. On the *concept* of double-mindedness, a connection to Cain could have arisen in James's mind by his reading of LXX Genesis 4:7 where God speaks, "Have you not sinned if you have brought it [the sacrifice] rightly, *but not rightly divided it* (δὲ μὴ διέλῃς)?" If James is evoking double-mindedness in Cain, he isn't alone in it, since other interpreters viewed Cain as double-minded, including Philo and Augustine, though often employing different words.[24]

4:9: "Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom" could evoke Cain's miserable outcry in Genesis 4:13–14 after he has been confronted by God, though this obviously is not the loudest echo of the Cain story in James.

4:8, 10: The suggestion of the presence of God in the words, "Draw near to God" (4:8), and in "Humble yourselves *before the Lord*" (4:10) could echo Genesis 4:16 if the other suggested echoes hold: "Then Cain went away from *the presence of the Lord*…"

4:11: "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers" may echo the words Cain spoke to Abel just before he murdered him in Genesis 4:8: "Cain *spoke to Abel his brother*. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him." Notice not only the mention of *speaking* in Genesis 4:8 but also the emphasis on him being his *brother* in this and the following verse. James's overall use of "brothers" does not seem to increase or decrease in 3:7–5:9 as compared to the rest of his letter, but some of the moments he addresses his readers as "brothers" may echo the Genesis narrative (3:9–10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9). I only draw attention to James's mentions of brothers because of how important the word "brother" is in Genesis (4:2, 8–10), most memorably in Genesis 4:9: "Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is Abel your brother?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?'"

4:12: "There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy." This could echo the judgment passed onto Cain by the Lord, to which Cain responded, "My punishment is greater than I can bear" (Gen 4:13). The Lord then placed a mark on Cain to protect him (4:15). That is to say, in the words of James in this verse, God has the power to save and to destroy.

4:13: The plans to go to a *city*, and spend a year there, and *make a profit* in James 4:13 may evoke the building of a city by Cain's son, Enoch (Gen 4:17), and the beginning of commerce, as represented especially by Tubal-cain, "the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron" (Gen 4:22). Contemporary readers of Genesis should remind themselves that the Cain narrative does not end after the murder

[23] Stanley E. Porter, "Is *dipsuchos* (James 1,8; 4,8) a 'Christian' Word?," *Bib* 71 (1990): 469–98. Porter acknowledges that double-mindedness as a concept was widespread.

[24] Philo attributed a type of double-mindedness to the way Cain gave his offering. Byron argues that Philo's approach to Cain became influential: "Philo's mode of interpretation was particularly popular among Christian exegetes like Augustine who used the LXX to condemn Cain as a person whose mind was divided against God." See Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 1.64 and Augustine, *City of God* 15.7.1, cited in Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition,* 50. For more on double-mindedness in James, see Darian Lockett, "Structure or Communicative Strategy? The 'Two Ways' Motif in James' Theological Instruction," *Neot* 42 (2008): 269–87.

of Abel; it continues to the end of Genesis 4, as the continuing mention of Cain in the latter verses of Genesis 4 makes clear (4:17, 24, 25).

4:14: "What is your *life*? For you are a *mist* that appears for a little time and then vanishes." I see this as a stronger allusion to Genesis 4, even though it hasn't heretofore been called out. Eve's name means "life." Abel's name means "mist."[25] The idea of life suddenly vanishing is precisely what happened to Abel in his unexpected death. That the mist refers to living and dying (rather than some less-specific ephemerality) is supported by the following verse 15 where James writes, "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live…'" The combination of mist and the living/dying idea in these verses in my mind makes an allusion to Abel's name and death more likely than not.[26]

4:16: "As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." This could echo Lamech's boast to his wives about killing two people, claiming it was worse than what Cain did (Gen 4:23–24).[27]

4:17: "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." This sentence of James shares similarities to God's words to Cain: "You will be accepted *if you do what is right*. But if you *refuse to do what is right*, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master" (Gen 4:7 NLT).

1.3. James 5

As we move into chapter 5, it is worth noting that Byron has (effectively in my opinion) argued that James 5:1–6 should be read against the background of Abel as an exemplar of unjust suffering and Cain as the envious and grasping oppressor.[28]

5:4: After castigating the rich for three verses running, James turns his attention to the way wealthy landowners have treated their workers: "Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts." Here the allusion is to God's words to Cain: "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground" (Gen 4:10). The allusion is secured by: (1) the use of personification in both contexts, (2) the "crying out" in both contexts (of "blood" in Genesis, and "wages" in James), and (3) the ground/fields/harvest.

5:5: "You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter." It is not immediately obvious from the grammar whether this sentence asserts that rich people are slaughtering the poor or, alternatively, that a judgment (slaughter) on the rich for what they have done is coming. But when read together with the following verse, it seems more likely that James is saying that the rich are slaughtering the poor. Since the Cain and Abel narrative by this point has already been flowing as a subtext for many paragraphs,

[25] "The term הבל has been used to indicate a variety of concepts such as 'vanity,' 'nothingness,' 'incomprehensibility,' 'ephemerality,' 'absurdity,' and 'breath' or 'vapor,' of which the last is considered the literal meaning." Vermeulen, "Mind the Gap," 35.

[26] There is even a consonance in 4:13–14 that may be intentional: the repetition of eight unvoiced labials π and two φ—perhaps a literary version of the "puff" of a temporary mist. (Sleeper does not draw this out the way I did, but the idea for looking into this came from a comment by C. Freeman Sleeper, *James,* ANTC [Abington, 1998], 118–19: "In verse 13 three of the Greek words begin with the letter 'p,' giving us assimilation that cannot be conveyed in English.")

[27] "Perhaps, then, what Lamech is saying (quite barbarically) is that not only has he killed a man for wounding him, he has not hesitated to kill a mere boy for hurting him." Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (Norton, 1996), 20.

[28] Byron, "Living in the Shadow of Cain," 261–74.

perhaps we should view the expression "day of slaughter" as a double-reference to what the rich are doing to the poor (perhaps by starving them through withholding their wages[29]), while also alluding to the murder of Abel by Cain.

5:6: "You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you." If any of the other allusions to Cain hold, the mention of *murdering* one *righteous* would seem patently to be an allusion to Cain's murder of righteous Abel (cf. Matt 23:35 and Heb 11:4 for the use of the word "righteous" [δίκαιος] to describe Abel).

5:7: "See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains." The agricultural metaphor could evoke the offering brought to the Lord by Cain.

5:9: "Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged, behold, the Judge is standing at the door." The first part of this verse may echo the grumbling of Cain against his brother (Gen 4:5–9). But the language of "standing at the door," should suggest to the attentive reader another connection with Genesis 4:7: "And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door." Even if the door metaphor gets applied differently in the two passages, the word "door" is unusual in the New Testament and, when used figuratively, almost always has positive connotations (e.g., John 10:1–9; Acts 14:27; 1 Cor 16:9; 2 Cor 2:12; Col 4:3; Rev 3:8, 20). The common positive use of "door" contrasts to the ominous way James uses it here in 5:9—perhaps picking up the ominous theme of Genesis 4. And, of course, God is Judge both in Genesis and James.

1.4. Other Old Testament Persons

James appeals to four other Old Testament persons as positive exemplars in his letter—but none of the four appear in the section of the letter we are studying. Prior to the section of the letter under consideration (3:7–5:9), James explicitly calls out two other Old Testament narrative models: Abraham (2:21–23) and Rahab (2:25). Following our section of concern are two other narrative ideals: Job (5:11) and Elijah (5:17–18). But in this middle section of the letter, James draws upon no other such models. The presence of these other exemplars demonstrates James's tendency to draw upon Old Testament persons; whereas their absence in the middle section (3:7–5:9) opens the door for us to identify another, that is, Cain, who, unlike the others, is a negative example and perhaps for that reason not explicitly named.

1.5. Conclusion

To conclude the first part of this article, let me note that even if some of the suggested echoes of Cain appear less convincing on their own, this section of the letter from 3:7–5:9 contains nine stronger allusions to early Genesis that buttress the other suggested echoes. These nine include: (1) the creatures list (3:7); (2) "made in the likeness of God" (3:9); (3) the direct references to murder (4:2; cf. 5:6); (4) the "spirit which he has made to dwell in us" and "desires with envy" (4:5); (5) "cleanse your hands, you sinners" (4:8); (6) "What is your life [Eve's name]? For you are a mist [Abel's name] that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (Abel's fate; 4:14); (7) "the wages of the laborers … are crying out against you … reached the ears of the Lord of hosts" (5:4); (8) "You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you" (5:6); and (9) "the Judge is standing at the door" (5:9). These

[29] Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith Without Works Is Dead* (Crossroad, 1990), 20. Cf. Sir 34:26, "To take away a neighbor's living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood."

stronger allusions strengthen the case of the numerous other echoes suggested above.[30] Furthermore, the difficulty in drawing up intertextual connections with prediluvian Genesis and the story of Cain before James 3:7 and after 5:9 and the ease with which such connections are produced within this middle section supports the case so far presented.

2. Resolving the Difficulties of James 4:5

Identifying the story of Cain and Abel as James's primary narrative subtext in 3:7–5:9 may help resolve the main problems of 4:5. These problems include the following:

1. What is the source of James's quotation? James leads with one of the clearest citation formulae in the New Testament: ἢ δοκεῖτε ὅτι κενῶς ἡ γραφὴ λέγει· ("Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says…"). But where is he quoting from?
2. Is τὸ πνεῦμα a reference to God's Spirit ("the Spirit"), or is it a reference to the human spirit ("the spirit")?
3. What is the *subject* of the sentence James cites when he writes πρὸς φθόνον ἐπιποθεῖ τὸ πνεῦμα ὃ κατῴκισεν ἐν ἡμῖν?[31] Is the subject an implied "He"? Thus: "He (God) jealously desires the s/Spirit which he caused to dwell in us." Or is the subject τὸ πνεῦμα (The s/Spirit)? Thus: "The s/Spirit which he caused to dwell in us desires with envy."

If in fact James is using Cain—as described in Genesis 4 and mediated through subsequent Jewish interpretation—as an archetype for the dangers of envy and evil desires, each of these questions is readily answered. Anticipating a conclusion, the correct interpretation of the quoted section of the verse should be: "The spirit [small "s"] which he caused to dwell in us desires with envy."

In other words, the "Scripture" (γραφή) James cites is a combination of the reference to God putting a spirit in humans (Gen 2:7; echoed in 4:1) plus the evil envious desires potentially found in the hearts of God's people as illustrated by Cain in Genesis 4.[32] Even though God had given Cain his life/soul, Cain's motivating sin was envious desire, which led to the murder of his brother Abel.

In addition to the general observation that James connects to Genesis 4 (and surrounding chapters) in James 3:7–5:9, here are some other reasons for supporting this understanding of James 4:5.

1. James has already highlighted envious human desire as a primary concern in this section of James (3:14, 16; 4:1–2), so reading 4:5 as the envious desires of the human spirit (as exemplified in Cain) simply continues the conversation that James has already begun in the preceding verses. In contrast, the idea of God desiring jealously, or the Spirit desiring jealously, would introduce a new idea.[33] From an interpretive standpoint, in areas of

[30] As Travis B. Williams, "Intertextuality and Methodological Bias: Prolegomena to the Evaluation of Source Materials in I Peter," *JSNT* 39 (2016): 180, notes, "As the number of similarities are multiplied, the likelihood of a literary connection also increases." Of course, it isn't simply the number, but the weight of the similarities must be factored in, as Williams himself notes.

[31] In other words, is τὸ πνεῦμα nominative or accusative?

[32] Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James,* 2nd ed. (Macmillan, 1897), 136, reminds us that "we have other instances of quotations in the N.T. which remind us rather of the general sense of several passages, than of the actual words of any one particular passage in the O.T."

[33] Notice also the possible aural resonance between ἐπιθυμέω in v. 2 and ἐπιποθέω in v. 5.

dispute, it is better to draw upon ideas already present in the flow of thought than to introduce something new.

2. The word "desire" plays an important role in Genesis 4: "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its *desire* is for you, but you must rule over it" (Gen 4:7; cf. 3:16). In the Genesis narrative, the desire motif is intensified through the meaning of Cain's name, and drawn out by later ancient interpreters, as discussed above. So, not only is James drawing a connection with Genesis 4, he seems particularly influenced by the theme of evil desire that is so important in Genesis 4, a theme that influenced the way later Jewish and Christian writers interpreted Genesis 4. This links with the *desire* of James 4:5.
3. "Envy" (φθόνος) is always used negatively in the Septuagint. The word is never used in contexts regarding God's jealousy. Even among Hellenistic authors, both Jewish and non-Jewish, as Luke Timothy Johnson has so forcefully argued, φθόνος is uniformly used in a negative sense.[34] This is a stronger argument than some commentators seem to have been willing to acknowledge.
4. This approach to 4:5 accounts for the unusual mention of murdering in James 4:2 (cf. 5:6). Are we to think that James is directly responding to reports that his readers have been murdering people?[35]
5. Finally, this approach to 4:5 resolves the problem of locating the source of the quotation, a quotation that is introduced by a citation formula, but which has been contentious among interpreters. The quotation, thus, should be viewed as being drawn from Genesis 4 (in connection with 2:7) and should be understood as a condensation of two themes appearing in the early chapters of Genesis: a) the theme of God putting a spirit into a human body[36] and b) the theme of envious desire connected with Cain that surrounds James's interpretive climate. In other words, James's comment about "the spirit which he has made to dwell in us" is from Eve's words in 4:1, "I have gotten a man with [the help of] the Lord," which itself echoes 2:7 (cf. 7:22), "then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." The second part of the quotation, "desires with envy" is a combination of the meaning of Cain's name ("get," as in 4:1 "I have gotten") and God's words in Genesis

[34] Johnson, "James 3:13–4:10," 334–46. Though in many contexts ζήλος (jealousy) and φθόνος (envy) might be viewed as synonyms, the point to be made is that although the word ζήλος is sometimes employed as a description for God, φθόνος is a word never associated with him, unless I have somehow missed a reference. Allison, *The Epistle of James,* 611, opines, "Had James (or his source) wanted to refer to the positive quality of divine zeal, he almost certainly would have used ζήλος."

[35] Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans, 1982), 158, comments, "How does murder fit into this series? Many would answer: 'It does not fit!' Erasmus's conjecture that instead of φονεύετε an original φθονεῖτε stood in the text has found wide acceptance…" However, among other observations, Davids disagrees, adding that "one has the biblical tradition stemming from the Cain-Abel, Ahab-Naboth pairings to influence such a connection." I would contend that the connection to Cain and Abel is a *primary* reason murder is mentioned here.

[36] Sophie Laws, *The Epistle of James,* BNTC (Hendrickson, 1980), 174–75, writes about James 4:5, "this 'spirit' indwelling men may be understood as the spirit given at creation (Gen. ii. 7, vi. 3 LXX, cf. Job xxvii. 3, xxxii. 8; 1 QH iv. 31)…"

> 4:7: "And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."

In other words, to draw upon Huffman's recent taxonomy for understanding the use of the OT in the NT, James's "quotation," is actually a "historical reminiscence" that includes two "thematic echoes"[37] from Genesis: the putting of a spirit into humans and evil envious desires as modeled by Cain. James warns his readers against such envious desire in themselves.

One additional interpretive problem in 4:5 remains unresolved. Is πρὸς φθόνον being used adjectively (as I have so far treated it), that is, "with envy" or "enviously"? Thus: "The spirit which he made to dwell in us desires with envy/enviously." Or, is James's use of this prepositional phrase pointing toward the result or end of the desire? Thus: "The spirit which he made to dwell in us has desires that lead to envy?" I am uncertain which is correct, but both options fit the story of Cain well enough.

3. Conclusion

A subtext runs like a subterranean flow of magma beneath James 3:7–5:9, particularly the envious desire of Cain (as located more generally in the early chapters of Genesis and mediated through pre- and post-Jamesian Jewish interpretations of evil desire and envy). Cain is an exemplar of envy, and his negative example functions as a warning of what might happen if desire is permitted to run its course. An acknowledgment of James's connection to the narrative of Cain and Abel resolves both the source of James's quotation in 4:5 and ought to lead readers to understand the "quotation" (a compression of ideas appearing in early Genesis) as: "The [human] spirit which he made to dwell in us desires with envy."[38]

[37] Huffman, *Understanding the New Testament Use of the Old Testament,* 35.

[38] Thanks are due my colleague, Darian Lockett, for interacting with me on this article and for offering many helpful suggestions and cautions.

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The Word's Transforming Work: Sanctification by Scripture in 1 Peter 1:22–2:3

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Abstract: In 1 Peter 1:22–2:3, Peter presents the word of God as the divinely appointed instrument of both regeneration and ongoing sanctification. Souls are purified by obedience to the truth, born again through the living and abiding word, and sustained by an infant-like craving for its pure spiritual milk. Read alongside Calvin, Owen, and Watson, the passage locates the word's sanctifying power in the union with Christ that Scripture mediates by the Spirit, correcting therapeutic, contemplative, and pragmatic alternatives that displace Scripture from its formative work.Contemporary evangelicalism faces a quiet but urgent crisis of sanctification. While many churches remain committed to justification by faith alone, their approaches to spiritual growth increasingly drift from Scripture's own design. Therapeutic spirituality, with its focus on emotional healing, and contemplative practices drawn from medieval mysticism now shape much of the discipleship landscape. These trends, though often well-intentioned, mark a subtle departure from the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*—not only as the church's epistemological foundation, but as God's appointed means for ongoing transformation.

The apostle Peter offers a bracing corrective in 1 Peter 1:22–2:3. Here, he anchors both regeneration and sanctification in "the living and abiding word of God" (1:23). For Peter, Scripture is not merely informative, it is operative. Believers are born again by the word, purified through obedience to its truth, and sustained by a craving for its spiritual nourishment. The word is not a supplement to sanctification; it is itself the engine of sanctification.

This study explores a central question: How does the apostle Peter understand the transformative power of the word, and what impact should that have on how we approach spiritual formation today?

Through close exegesis of 1 Peter 1:22–2:3, I draw from Reformed theological voices and engage contemporary formation models that, at times, risk drifting from the anchor of Holy Scripture. The central claim is that only Scripture carries the divine power to effect true spiritual transformation. When the church maintains (or regains) her confidence in the word's inherent power to shape the heart, she also renews her communion with Christ. Rather than seeking spiritual growth through adjacent methods, the church must recover confidence in the word's power to form and, in doing so, recover Christ himself.

1. Context: Holiness Grounded in Hope (1 Pet 1:13-21)

Before Peter speaks of new birth and growth through and by the word, he first frames the Christian life as one of holiness driven by hope (1 Pet 1:13–21): minds prepared for action, a sober-minded hope fixed fully on future grace, and conduct that is shaped by the holiness of God himself. This vision of reverent fear and grace-filled anticipation sets the tone for what follows in 1 Peter 1:22–2:3. The same God who calls his people to be holy also provides the means to what he commands: the living and enduring word. Peter's discussion of sanctification by Scripture emerges from his broader exhortation to holiness in 1:13–21. The apostle grounds the imperative for holy living in the indicative of redemption: "Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:13). The Christian's sanctification is motivated by eschatological hope and enabled by redemptive grace.

Significantly, Peter roots this call to holiness in the character of God himself: "but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1:15–16). This quotation from Leviticus 11:44 establishes continuity between Old and New Testament sanctification while highlighting its christocentric focus. Christians are called to reflect God's holiness because they have been "ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers" through "the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet 1:18–19).

2. Exegetical Foundation: The Word's Transforming Power in 1 Peter 1:22–2:3

This redemptive foundation is crucial for understanding Peter's subsequent emphasis on the word's role in sanctification. Christian holiness is not achieved through human effort or technique but flows from the transforming power of the gospel applied by Scripture.

2.1. Soul Purification through Truth (1 Pet 1:22)

Peter begins his word-centered sanctification theology with a striking claim: "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart" (1 Pet 1:22). The perfect participle ἡγνικότες ("purified") indicates a completed action with ongoing results—the believers' souls have been purified and remain in that state. Yet this purification occurred "by obedience to the truth" (τῇ ὑπακοῇ τῆς ἀληθείας).

The phrase "obedience to the truth" merits careful attention. The word ὑπακοή carries connotations of attentive hearing that results in compliance—precisely the dynamic Peter will develop in 2:2 with the metaphor of spiritual milk. Truth (ἀλήθεια) in Peter's context refers to the gospel message, as confirmed by his use of "the word of the Lord" (ῥῆμα κυρίου) in 1:25.

Peter understands soul purification as the result of hearing and heeding the gospel word. This aligns with the broader biblical pattern where God's word accomplishes his purposes—as Isaiah declares, "so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose" (Isa 55:11).

This purification is not merely positional but transformational, evidenced by its fruit: "sincere brotherly love" (φιλαδελφία ἀνυπόκριτος). The gospel word that purifies the soul simultaneously creates authentic community love. Peter thus establishes the pattern that will characterize his entire discussion: the word affects both individual transformation and corporate reformation.

2.2. Regeneration through the Living and Abiding Word (1 Pet 1:23)

Peter grounds his exhortation to love in the reality of Christian regeneration: "since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet 1:23). The perfect passive participle ἀναγεγεννημένοι emphasizes both the completed nature of regeneration and its divine origin—believers have been born again by God's action, not their own.

In 1 Peter 1:23, the phrase "through the living and abiding word of God" (διὰ λόγου ζῶντος θεοῦ καὶ μένοντος) names God's chosen means of this new birth. Peter's "seed" (σπορά) image is simple and effective: what comes by human parentage fades, and what comes by God's parentage does not. The stress falls on divine origin and durability, not on biology. Isaiah 40:6–8 confirms the point: God's word "stands forever" (1 Pet 1:24–25). Thus, God gives life by his enduring word, and the Spirit makes that preached word effective. The emphasis is on what the word does, not on what the word is. Any "union with Christ" implications are better developed in 2:4–5, where Peter uses temple/priesthood imagery.

The word brings about regeneration through the Holy Spirit as God's appointed means. As Calvin wrote,

> For the Lord has so knit together the certainty of his word and his Spirit, that our minds are duly imbued with reverence for the word when the Spirit shining upon it enables us there to behold the face of God; and, on the other hand, we embrace the Spirit with no danger of delusion when we recognize him in his image, that is, in his word.[1]

This new birth through the word grounds Peter's entire discussion of sanctification. The word conveys truth and, by the Spirit, mediates God's transforming power, sustaining believers as they grow in maturity. When believers are "born again" through the word, they receive new life from God.

In the broader witness of the New Testament, including Peter's own imagery of the temple (2:4–5), new birth is to be incorporated into Christ. Here Peter emphasizes the divine vitality of the word; the union dimension is a canonical implication rather than an explicit lexical point.

The participles "living" (ζῶντος) and "abiding" (μένοντος) emphasize the power and permanence of God's word in bringing about regeneration (1:23–25).

Peter's metaphor of "seed" (σπορά) affirms the imperishable, God-given source of new life. The contrast between the perishable and the imperishable underscores the distinction between perishable human begetting and imperishable divine begetting; Peter's immediate point is the word's divine vitality, not a biological analogy. Because the gospel proclaims Christ and is made effectual by the Holy Spirit, new birth by the word brings believers into God-given life.

The contrast between "perishable" and "imperishable" seed emphasizes that word-wrought transformation endures because its source is God's imperishable work.

By contrast, human attempts at spiritual transformation are temporary and cannot produce new life.

2.3. The Permanence of the Word (1 Pet 1:24–25)

Peter supports his claim about the word's regenerating power by quoting Isaiah 40:6–8: "for 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but

[1] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, LCC (Westminster, 1960), 1.9.3.

the word of the Lord remains forever.' And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Pet 1:24–25).

This quotation serves multiple functions in Peter's argument and connects Peter's vision to Scripture's broader testimony about the word's power. First, it asserts the eternal nature of God's word in contrast to human frailty; all human attempts at renewal fade.[2] Second, it identifies "the word of the Lord" with "the good news that was preached to you" (τοῦτο δέ ἐστιν τὸ ῥῆμα τὸ εὐαγγελισθὲν εἰς ὑμᾶς), confirming that Peter has the gospel message in view throughout this passage.

Most significantly, the quotation reinforces the word's inherent power. Isaiah's prophecy emerges from a context where human efforts at reformation have failed utterly. Only the word of the Lord possesses the power to accomplish God's purposes and effect lasting transformation (Isa 55:10–11).

This broader biblical pattern underscores a crucial truth: God's word is not merely informational but operational. As the author of Hebrews confirms, "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit" (Heb 4:12). The word accomplishes what it announces, accomplishes what it describes, and transforms those who receive it.

Peter reanimates this prophetic conviction and applies it to the Christian life: just as the word creates, so it re-creates. The gospel that raises the dead continues to sanctify the living. Its endurance is not inert but active—it abides not as a monument but as a means.

2.4. Sustained Growth through the Word: Growing into Christ (1 Pet 2:1–3)

Peter's application in 1 Peter 2:1–3 shows how word-centered sanctification operates in Christian experience. The apostle begins with a call to moral reformation: "So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander" (2:1). The aorist imperative ἀπόθεσθε (put away) demands decisive action, while the comprehensive list of vices addresses both internal attitudes (malice, envy) and external behaviors (deceit, hypocrisy, slander).

Significantly, Peter does not provide detailed strategies for overcoming these sins. Instead, he immediately directs believers to the word: "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good" (2:2–3).

The comparison to "newborn infants" (ἀρτιγέννητα βρέφη) connects directly to the new birth of 1 Peter 1:23 and highlights ongoing dependence on the same word for growth. Those born again through the living word remain dependent on that same word for continued growth. Elsewhere the New Testament speaks of growth "into Christ" (cf. Eph 4:15), but here, Peter's focus is on believers' craving for the word itself as God's means of growth. The verb ἐπιποθέω ("long for") indicates intense desire—the same word Paul uses for his longing to see the Roman believers (Rom 1:11). Peter envisions believers craving Scripture with the same intensity that newborn babies crave milk.

This craving is more than a desire for biblical information: Scripture bears authoritative witness to Christ (Luke 24:27; John 5:39), so longing for the word rightly points to desire for deeper knowledge of, and confidence in, the Lord it proclaims.

The phrase "pure spiritual milk" (τὸ λογικὸν ἄδολον γάλα) highlights the word's life-giving character and suitability to nurture growth. The adjective λογικόν can be rendered as "spiritual" or "reasonable" and ἄδολον ("pure") marks it as unmixed and trustworthy nourishment. Peter's emphasis remains simple: God grows his people by his word.

[2] Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*, TNTC (InterVarsity Press, 1988), 102–3.

Peter's purpose clause, "that by it you may grow up into salvation" (ἵνα ἐν αὐτῷ αὐξηθῆτε εἰς σωτηρίαν), keeps the means clear and forward-looking. The preposition εἰς signals movement toward a goal; believers grow toward the fullness of salvation, ultimately conformity to Christ (cf. Rom 8:29; Eph 4:15) without turning 1 Peter 2:2 into a technical statement about participation. Elsewhere Scripture speaks of growth "into Christ" (Eph 4:15), but here Peter's emphasis is simply growth by the word.

The conditional clause "if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good" (εἰ ἐγεύσασθε ὅτι χρηστὸς ὁ κύριος) provides experiential motivation for craving the word: those who have genuinely experienced Christ's goodness naturally desire deeper nourishment that fosters further growth and communion with him through the word.

This explains why Peter can simultaneously emphasize engagement with the word and confidence in Christ. Scripture is the divinely appointed means by which the Spirit nourishes believers in the grace that is in Christ (cf. John 16:14–15).

3. Historical Reformed Perspective: Scripture's Sanctifying Power

The Reformed tradition has consistently emphasized Scripture's unique role in sanctification, providing rich theological resources for understanding Peter's word-centered spirituality.

3.1. Calvin on Union with Christ and the Word's Mediating Function

John Calvin understood the word's transforming power in terms of the Spirit's efficacious operation through Scripture, but more fundamentally, in terms of the union with Christ that the word mediates. In his commentary on 1 Peter 1:23, Calvin writes:

> The word of God is not a dead letter but has a living power to change us. When we are said to be born again of the word, it means that the word is the instrument of our regeneration; but the efficient cause is the Spirit of God. The word, however, is not ineffectual, for the Lord accompanies it with the power of his Spirit.[3]

Calvin's pneumatology is crucial here: the Spirit operates through the word because the Spirit authored the word. In his *Institutes*, Calvin explains that "the same Spirit who spoke through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded."[4] The Spirit does not work independently of Scripture but through Scripture as his own appointed instrument.

Yet Calvin's deeper insight concerns the union with Christ that underlies all spiritual transformation. As he famously declared, "In short, since rich store of every kind of good abounds in him, let us drink our fill from this fountain, and from no other."[5] Reformed theologians emphasize that the word effects transformation not merely by conveying information about Christ but by mediating union with Christ himself. Through the Spirit's operation, the word unites believers to Christ as the fountain of all spiritual life.

[3] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen (Calvin Translation Society, 1849; repr., Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 56–57.

[4] Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.4.

[5] Calvin, *Institutes* 2.16.19.

This union-based understanding explains why Scripture possesses unique transforming power. The word sanctifies because it deepens believers' union with Christ, the source of all holiness. Alternative approaches to spiritual formation fail not merely because they lack the Spirit's power but because they cannot affect or deepen the vital union that serves as the foundation of all spiritual transformation.

Calvin's understanding also explains why supplementing Scripture with other formative practices proves unnecessary and potentially harmful. If believers are united to Christ through the word and grow through deeper communion with him mediated by the word, additional methods at best provide redundant help and at worst distract from the union-deepening encounter that Scripture provides.

This Spirit-word nexus in service of union with Christ explains why contemplative practices that seek mystical encounter with the Spirit apart from the word fundamentally misunderstand pneumatology. Any attempt to seek the Spirit apart from the word dislocates the Spirit from his own instrument. The Spirit is not an autonomous mystical force but the divine agent who inspired and now applies the word to effect and deepen union with Christ. To neglect the word in spiritual formation is to cut off the very breath by which the Spirit unites believers to Christ and causes them to grow in him.

3.2. Owen on Mortification through Union with Christ

John Owen's *Overcoming Sin and Temptation* demonstrates how Scripture affects progressive sanctification through believers' union with Christ, perfectly illustrating Peter's vision of word-centered transformation. Owen argues that believers must actively engage with Scripture to mortify remaining sin:

> He works in us and with us, not against us or without us; so that his assistance is an encouragement to the facilitating of the work, and no occasion of neglect as to the work itself.[6]

Owen's emphasis on believers' active cooperation with God's work aligns with Peter's call for intense craving of the word. General exposure to Scripture proves insufficient; believers must actively appropriate biblical truth with the same intensity newborns seek milk—not passively waiting for God to work "against us or without us," but engaging Scripture as those who recognize God works "in us and with us." Yet Owen's deeper insight concerns the union-based foundation of all sanctification.

Crucially, Owen recognizes that mortification occurs through the word's revelation of Christ and believers' vital union with him: "Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin. His blood is the great sovereign remedy for sin-sick souls. Live in this, and thou wilt die a conqueror; yea, thou wilt, through the good providence of God, live to see thy lust dead at thy feet."[7]

For Owen, mortification flows from union with Christ in his death and resurrection. The word effects transformation not merely by providing moral instruction but by deepening believers' experiential knowledge of their union with Christ. As Owen explains elsewhere, "The saint's communion with God consists in his communication of himself unto them, with their return unto him of that which he requireth and accepteth."[8]

This union-based understanding explains Peter's reference to tasting "that the Lord is good" (1 Pet 2:3). Sanctification occurs not through abstract moral effort but through fresh encounters with Christ

[6] John Owen, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor (Crossway, 2006), 71.
[7] Owen, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, 131.
[8] John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor (Crossway, 2007), 94.

that deepen believers' communion with him. The word transforms because it reveals Christ's beauty and applies his benefits to those united to him. To mortify sin through Scripture is to behold Christ's excellence with such clarity that competing affections lose their power.

Owen's theology of union with Christ illuminates Peter's infant metaphor. Just as newborns instinctively crave the milk that sustains their physical life, believers united to Christ instinctively crave the word that deepens their communion with him and applies the benefits of that union. The craving is not merely for biblical information but for Christ himself as he communicates his life to those joined to him.

3.3. Watson on Scripture as Means of Grace

Thomas Watson's *The Godly Man's Picture* illustrates how Scripture functions as a means of grace in progressive sanctification. Watson emphasizes the word's comprehensive sufficiency but, more fundamentally, its sacramental function as a means of grace.

> When you read the Bible, think thus: "God is speaking to me." … The Scripture is the touchstone for the trial of doctrines, it is the polestar to guide us to heaven, it is the field in which the pearl of great price is hidden. It is a rock of diamonds, a chain of pearls; … take every word as spoken to yourselves: when the word thunders against sin, think thus—"God means my sins!" When it presents any duty, "God intends me in this." … Many put off Scripture from themselves, as if it only concerned those who lived in the time when it was written; but if you intend to profit by the word, bring it home to yourselves.[9]

Watson's metaphors capture more than Scripture's informational value—they reveal its grace-communicating function. The word does not merely point to Christ but actually conveys Christ's transforming presence through the Spirit's operation.

According to classic Reformed theology, the word functions as a means of grace in classic Reformed usage. The Westminster Larger Catechism defines the word as a means "whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption."[10] This view aligns perfectly with Peter's description of the word as "living and abiding" (1 Pet 1:23), not only regenerating but progressively sanctifying the soul.

Watson particularly emphasizes Scripture's grace-conveying power in heart transformation: "The Scripture is both a glass to show us the spots of our soul, and a laver to wash them away."[11]

This transformation occurs not through moral persuasion but through sacramental communication of sanctifying grace as the Spirit accompanies his word.

Watson's emphasis on Scripture as both revealing ("a glass to show us the spots") and cleansing ("a laver to wash them away") demonstrates the gracious working of the word. This gracious working corresponds to Peter's metaphor of spiritual milk. Just as physical milk nourishes naturally and pleasantly, Scripture's transforming work flows from its inherent suitability to human spiritual needs. But more than natural suitability, the word possesses supernatural efficacy as the Spirit's appointed vehicle for conveying transforming grace.

[9] Thomas Watson, *The Godly Man's Picture* (1666; repr., Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 15–16.
[10] *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. 154.
[11] Watson, *The Godly Man's Picture*, 22.

The Westminster Larger Catechism further explains that "the Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort."[12] The word functions as means of grace precisely because the Spirit employs it as his instrument for communicating Christ's sanctifying benefits to believers.

4. Contemporary Applications: Recovering Word-Centered Sanctification

Peter's theology of word-centered sanctification provides crucial correctives to contemporary evangelical spiritual formation practices.

4.1. The Therapeutic Spirituality Challenge

Over the past generation, evangelical churches have increasingly absorbed therapeutic paradigms that prioritize emotional healing over doctrinally grounded transformation. This trend is evident in the proliferation of what Klaus Issler calls "formation-focused" approaches that draw heavily from psychology and recovery culture.[13] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton's research on "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" documents how therapeutic categories have reshaped not just methodology but fundamental assumptions about spiritual growth.[14]

Spiritual growth is often pursued through counseling models that blend Scripture with psychological theory, or through formation programs shaped more by recovery culture than by apostolic doctrine. While these approaches may offer temporary comfort or emotional clarity, they cannot perform the deeper, supernatural work that Peter describes when he speaks of soul purification through "obedience to the truth" (1 Pet 1:22).

Ruth Haley Barton's *Sacred Rhythms* exemplifies this therapeutic drift, advocating spiritual practices that "honor the body" and "pay attention to what is happening emotionally and spiritually."[15] While such attention to human experience is not inherently problematic, when it becomes the primary lens for spiritual formation, it subtly displaces Scripture's unique formative role.

Therapeutic strategies can help diagnose behavioral patterns or provide coping tools—but they are powerless to produce genuine holiness, because they lack the regenerative force of the gospel. Peter's insistence on the word's "living" and "abiding" nature (1:23) underscores this contrast. Therapeutic methods rely on natural principles of emotional regulation; Scripture operates through divine power that unites the believer to the risen Christ.

The distinction is not simply one of degree (as if therapy helps a little and the Bible helps more) but of kind: only the word, attended by the Holy Spirit, communicates the benefits of Christ. This does not deny the reality of psychological disorders or the pastoral necessity of addressing trauma. Rather, it insists that spiritual formation—the process of becoming holy—is not a function of emotional adjustment but of supernatural transformation.

[12] Westminster Assembly, *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. 155.

[13] Klaus Issler, *Wasting Time with God: A Christian Spirituality of Friendship with God* (InterVarsity Press, 2001), 44–67.

[14] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 162–71.

[15] Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (InterVarsity Press, 2006), 27.

When churches lean heavily on therapy as a vehicle for sanctification, they risk unintentionally communicating that Scripture is spiritually helpful but not spiritually sufficient.

4.2. The Contemplative Spirituality Challenge

In a parallel development, many evangelicals disillusioned with the shallowness of contemporary worship have turned to contemplative practices drawn from medieval mysticism and Eastern spirituality. The influence of writers like Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, and Henri Nouwen has introduced practices such as *lectio divina*, centering prayer, and contemplative prayer into mainstream evangelical churches.[16]

Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* and Willard's *The Spirit of the Disciplines* argue that evangelicals have neglected crucial spiritual disciplines, creating a "gap" that contemplative practices can fill.[17] More recently, Ruth Haley Barton's *Sacred Rhythms* promotes "sacred practices that transform" through non-cognitive encounters with God.[18]

These approaches are often promoted as ways of encountering God beyond the limitations of propositional truth. Peter's theology resists this dichotomy between doctrine and experience. His vision is not less experiential than contemplative spirituality—it is more so, because it anchors spiritual experience in the living word that actually conveys Christ himself.

Believers do not merely learn *about* God through Scripture; they "taste that the Lord is good" (1 Pet 2:3). But the tasting is word-mediated, not word-transcending. The deeper theological problem with contemplative spirituality is its dislocation of the Spirit from the instrument he inspired.

If the Spirit works *through* the word (as Reformed pneumatology has always insisted), then practices that bypass or marginalize Scripture in favor of non-cognitive experience disconnect the Spirit from his chosen means of grace. This is not a benign oversight; it represents a category error in how sanctification works.

Peter's image of "pure spiritual milk" (λογικὸν ἄδολον γάλα, 2:2) becomes particularly relevant here. The nourishment believers require must be free from adulteration. When spiritual practices are imported from traditions that do not share the gospel's assumptions—or were designed to access the divine apart from Christ—they introduce impurities that obscure the very Christ they claim to seek.

Furthermore, contemplative practices that elevate experience over truth risk detaching spiritual formation from the word altogether. Once the connection between revealed truth and personal transformation is broken, the path is open not to deeper union with Christ but to spiritual confusion—or worse, to encounter with counterfeit spirits.

4.3. The Pragmatic Spirituality Challenge

Perhaps the most pervasive contemporary challenge to word-centered sanctification is the pragmatic approach that judges spiritual practices by their apparent effectiveness rather than their biblical warrant. Churches adopt programs, methodologies, and techniques based on measurable outcomes—increased attendance, improved relationships, reduced anxiety—without careful theological evaluation.

[16] Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (Harper & Row, 1978); Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (Harper & Row, 1988); Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Collins, 1981).

[17] Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 1–7; Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 156–75.

[18] Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 15–30.

Peter's theology provides a fundamentally different assessment criterion. The word's effectiveness lies not in its ability to produce immediate behavioral changes but in its power to effect deep heart transformation. The apostle's emphasis on growth "into salvation" (1 Pet 2:2) suggests a long-term process that may not produce immediately visible results.

This temporal perspective challenges contemporary expectations for rapid spiritual progress. Just as physical growth requires time and consistent nourishment, spiritual growth occurs gradually through sustained word-intake. Churches that frequently change spiritual formation approaches in search of more effective methods may inadvertently prevent the word from completing its transforming work.

Peter's infant metaphor also suggests that word-centered sanctification requires simplicity rather than sophistication. Newborns thrive on milk alone, not complex nutritional programs. Similarly, believers grow through consistent engagement with Scripture itself, not elaborate spiritual formation curricula that may obscure the word's inherent power.

5. Practical Implementation of Word-Centered Sanctification

Recovering word-centered sanctification requires specific changes in church practice and individual discipleship.

5.1. Preaching That Forms Rather than Merely Informs

Peter's theology demands preaching that presents Scripture as a transforming agent, not merely an information source. Expository preaching that carefully explains biblical texts while demonstrating their sanctifying power best serves this function. Preachers must help congregations understand how specific passages affect the heart transformation Peter describes.

This requires moving beyond moralistic applications that reduce Scripture to behavioral guidelines. Instead, preachers must show how biblical texts reveal Christ's goodness in ways that create spiritual appetite for continued word-consumption. The goal is not compliance with biblical principles but transformation through biblical encounter.

5.2. Discipleship That Prioritizes Scripture Engagement

Church discipleship programs must prioritize direct Scripture engagement over curriculum-based approaches that may minimize biblical text interaction. Peter's infant metaphor suggests that believers need sustained contact with Scripture itself, not merely teaching about Scripture.

Small group Bible studies that focus on careful text observation, interpretation, and application serve this function better than topical studies that use Scripture primarily for proof-texting. The goal is to help believers develop the intense word-craving Peter describes in 2:2.

5.3. Counseling That Employs Scripture's Transforming Power

Biblical counseling approaches that employ Scripture as the primary instrument of heart change align with Peter's theology better than integrative methods that supplement biblical truth with secular techniques. This does not require dismissing all insights from psychology or medicine, but it does require maintaining confidence in Scripture's unique sanctifying power.

Counselors must help counselees engage with specific biblical texts that address their particular struggles, trusting the word's inherent power to effect transformation. The process may require time and patience, but it works with divine rather than merely human power.

6. Objections and Responses

Several objections commonly arise against word-centered sanctification that require careful response.

6.1. Objection 1: "Scripture alone proves insufficient for complex psychological and emotional issues."

Peter teaches that true sanctification is a work of "purifying your souls by obedience to the truth" (1 Pet 1:22), accomplished through the "living and abiding word of God" (1:23). Grudem notes that this spiritual transformation addresses the heart's deepest needs, not just surface conditions.[19] The Westminster Confession of Faith affirms that "the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture."[20] While some psychological disorders may need medical care, Scripture remains sufficient for all spiritual matters, including emotional distress, relational conflict, and psychological struggle (cf. 2 Tim 3:16; Ps 19:7–11).

6.2. Objection 2: "Exclusive emphasis on Scripture neglects the role of community, experience, and tradition in spiritual formation."

Peter includes "sincere brotherly love" (1 Pet 1:22) as evidence of word-driven sanctification. Grudem emphasizes that Christian community is formed by the word's transforming work, not apart from it. Experience also plays a role: Peter calls believers to "taste that the Lord is good" (2:3)—yet this tasting is word-mediated, as Sproul notes in his *1 Peter* commentary.[21] The Westminster Confession instructs that all controversies of religion must be "determined … by the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture,"[22] establishing Scripture's primacy while recognizing the ministerial role of community and tradition.

6.3. Objection 3: "This approach promotes intellectualism and neglects affective dimensions of faith."

Peter's metaphor of "tasting" Christ's goodness (1 Pet 2:3) instead models a sanctification that engages both intellect and affection. Grudem emphasizes that Peter's vision is not merely cognitive mastery but a transforming "encounter" with Christ through the word. The Westminster Confession of Faith describes the word's efficacy and spiritual sweetness as self-evident proof of its divine origin—and

[19] Grudem, *1 Peter*, 103.
[20] Westminster Confession of Faith, ch. I, sec. VI.
[21] R. C. Sproul, *1–2 Peter: An Expositional Commentary* (Crossway, 2011), 44–45.
[22] *Westminster Confession of Faith*, ch. 1, sec. 10.

insists that assurance is mediated by the Spirit speaking inwardly with the word.[23] Sproul similarly highlights that word-centered faith renews both mind and heart.[24]

7. Conclusion: The Word's Sufficient Transforming Work and the Christ We Crave

Peter's theology of word-centered sanctification speaks with surprising precision to the spiritual disorientation of the modern church. Far from offering a thin biblicism, Peter presents the word of God as living, enduring, and divinely efficacious—capable not only of initiating regeneration but of sustaining growth into the fullness of salvation. Believers are purified through their obedient reception of the truth, born again by the imperishable seed of the word, and nourished by its spiritual milk. Scripture is not ancillary to sanctification; it is the instrument of it.

But Peter's vision goes deeper than a defense of Scripture's functional power—it unveils its christocentric nature. To hunger for the word, Peter suggests, is to hunger for deeper fellowship with Christ himself. The word does not just speak about Christ; it leads believers into ever-deepening communion with him by the work of the Spirit. Through the written word, believers encounter the living Word (John 5:39; Luke 24:27). Spiritual maturity, then, is not the result of mastering biblical content but of growing into union with the One the Scriptures reveal. Sanctification happens not by abstract moral effort but by communion with Christ mediated by the Spirit through the word.

This vision aligns with Scripture's consistent testimony to the word's transforming power. From Isaiah's confidence that God's word "shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose" (Isa 55:11) to the author of Hebrews declaring that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb 4:12), the biblical witness is unanimous: God's word does not merely inform—it transforms.

This christological center exposes the shared flaw of many contemporary approaches to spiritual formation—whether therapeutic, contemplative, or pragmatic. While often sincere in motive, these methods typically attempt transformation apart from the Christ revealed and conveyed through Scripture. They may offer relief, insight, or momentary change, but they cannot effect the kind of deep, enduring heart transformation that reflects Christ's image. They lack what only the word provides: Spirit-wrought sanctification through the gospel.

The Reformed tradition has long understood this dynamic. Calvin taught that the Spirit never works apart from the word he inspired and that Christ is not merely the subject of Scripture but its ever-present center. Owen insisted that mortification must flow from communion with Christ made real through the word. Watson viewed Scripture not only as a rule of life but as the very field where Christ, the Pearl of great price, is found. Together, these voices affirm what Peter assumes: craving the word is inseparable from craving the Christ it gives.

To recover word-centered sanctification is to re-center the church around Scripture—not as an accessory to formation programs but as the essential means by which the Spirit applies Christ to the soul. It means prioritizing biblical engagement over content delivery, trusting the word's enduring power over the pressure to produce visible results, and cultivating a community where Scripture is not merely taught but tasted.

[23] *Westminster Confession of Faith*, ch. 1, sec. 5.

[24] Sproul, *1–2 Peter: An Expositional Commentary*, 44–45.

Ultimately, Peter calls believers to rediscover a simple, profound truth: that the Christ who saves is the Christ who sanctifies, and he does so through his word. To "long for the pure spiritual milk" (1 Pet 2:2) is to long for Christ himself—Christ as nourishment, Christ as life, Christ as the one who transforms. In an age overwhelmed by spiritual options, Peter's counsel stands firm: return to the word, and there, find the living Christ who alone makes us holy.

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Will Total Depravity Fall from Grace? A Defense of the Reformed View

— Daniel Kirkpatrick —

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Abstract: The doctrines of grace found in Reformed soteriology are predicated upon an understanding of humanity's total depravity stemming from original sin. This doctrine is under reevaluation by a group of pastors and scholars concerned about the resurgence of Calvinism in the Southern Baptist Convention and broader evangelical community. This perspective initially gained attention with the 2012 release of *A Statement on the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God's Plan of Salvation* and has been advanced through subsequent writings from Adam Harwood. By redeveloping this foundational doctrine of sin, this perspective seeks to dismantle the Reformed understandings of election, atonement, and overcoming grace. This article critiques Harwood's perspective of original sin and seeks to defend the Reformed doctrine of total depravity against this alternative viewpoint.

Unforgettable stories are built on a powerful foundation: a seemingly insurmountable obstacle and a hero bold enough to face it. By overcoming the problem, the true character of the hero is revealed and the actions are viewed as exemplary. Smaller problems require smaller heroes. In the Christian faith, redemption is viewed as great and glorious because Jesus Christ vanquished an enemy no other human could. Sin left humanity in such a condition that no one but the Son of God could conquer it. As Augustine of Hippo powerfully articulated, and as affirmed by the Councils of Carthage and Ephesus alongside numerous historic confessions, humanity is born into sin and spiritual ruin. Adam's sin was not isolated to him alone, as all his descendants inherit a fallen nature. This dark backdrop sets the stage for humanity's rescue, commonly summarized by the doctrines of grace and referred to by the T.U.L.I.P. acronym. Because sin renders humanity incapable of earning God's favor, divine election must be unconditional. Because sin brings forth God's wrath, the atonement must be both particular and effective. Because human hearts are naturally hostile to God, grace must be effectual and overcoming. Every aspect of salvation is anchored in the reality of humanity's total depravity, their utter inability and unworthiness before God. Without it, there would be no need for sovereign grace, and the gospel story would fade into obscurity.

Recently, a group of pastors and scholars have argued that much of the Christian church's understanding and teaching on depravity is fundamentally flawed and insufficient. Led by Adam Harwood, who holds the McFarland Chair of Theology at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, and supported by proponents of the so-called "Traditional" view (which claims to represent the historic

majority within the Southern Baptist Convention), this movement contends that Augustine's doctrine of original sin, emphasizing inherited guilt and corruption, rests on a misreading of Romans 5 and warped anthropology. As critics of Calvinism, this movement seeks to critique and potentially dismantle the Reformed understanding of total depravity, thereby deconstructing the Reformed doctrines of grace.

The idea that modern Reformed theology is based upon faults from Augustine's doctrine of original sin can be traced back at least as early as 1929 when Norman Powell Williams, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, gave that year's Bampton Lectures.[1] Other scholars, since that time, have argued that Augustine's doctrine of original sin has been read into, not out of, Paul, particularly in Romans 5:12.[2] In recent years, a growing number of Southern Baptists, led by Harwood, have revived this argument, alarmed by what they describe as the growing influence of "New Calvinism" within their denomination and broader evangelical communities. This group of pastors and theologians issued *A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God's Plan of Salvation* in May 2012, authored by Eric Hankins (now pastor of First Baptist Church in Fairhope, Alabama).[3] The statement, commonly known as the Traditional Statement, explicitly denies that Adam's sin rendered humanity guilty or incapacitated in the will prior to personal sin.[4] The document sparked widespread debate, drawing criticism from both Calvinists like Albert Mohler and Arminians like Roger Olson, who saw in it shades of Semi-Pelagianism.[5]

Although debates surrounding the Traditional Statement have largely subsided, advocates of this viewpoint continue to critique the Reformed doctrine of original sin on these grounds. Since his 2007 doctoral dissertation on the spiritual condition of infants and continuing through his 2024 lectures at the South African Theological Seminary Symposia, Harwood has consistently argued that contemporary Reformed theology misrepresents both the meaning and implications of original sin. He maintains that humans do not inherit guilt from Adam, all sinners are capable of repentance and faith apart from any preceding act of regenerating grace, and the Reformed (or Calvinist) position, though an orthodox option, is misguided. Most recently, Harwood has moved away from saying humanity inherits a sinful nature and instead prefers to say they inherit consequences (like sinful inclinations, mortality, and a fallen world) from Adam. This article contends that Harwood's critique of total depravity is fundamentally flawed, that his biblical and logical argumentation is insufficient, and that the Reformed understanding of total depravity remains the more coherent and biblically grounded position.

[1] Norman Powell Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin* (Longmans, Green and Co: 1929), xxv–xxvi, 321–22, 425, 430–37. See Zi Wang, "The Transformation of Hamartiology in Early Christianity: On Augustine's Interpretation of *Romans* 5:12," *Religions* 15.1 (2024): 100.

[2] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, AYB 33 (Yale University Press, 1993), 407–11. Ken Wilson, "A Theological and Historical Investigation," in *A Defense of Free Grace Theology*, ed. Fred Chay (Grace Theology, 2017), 33–65.

[3] The Traditional Statement was originally posted on the now defunct SBC Today website. However, a copy of the Statement may be found in Adam Harwood, *Born Guilty? A Southern Baptist View of Original Sin* (Free Church, 2013), 33–35.

[4] Traditional Statement, Article 2. The statement also says, in Article 8: The Free Will of Man, "We deny that the decision of faith is an act of God rather than a response of the person. We deny that there is an 'effectual call' for certain people that is different from a 'general call' to any person who hears and understands the Gospel."

[5] R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "Southern Baptists and Salvation: It's Time to Talk," 6 June 2012, https://tinyurl.com/mrypvap8; Roger E. Olson, "Thoughts About 'A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God's Plan of Salvation," 4 June 2012, https://tinyurl.com/46mdyb6f.

1. Harwood on Original Sin

Harwood's view on original sin, which he claims to be "traditional," has undergone significant modifications in recent years. While some aspects of his views remain unchanged, there has been a softening of what he states original sin does to a person.

1.1. Earlier Views

While all of Harwood's writings deny that human beings inherit Adam's guilt, his earliest writings affirmed humans inherit a sinful nature.[6] Infants, he claimed, "are *not* innocent because they have inherited a sinful nature,"[7] and "the option of infant sinlessness must be rejected and consideration must be given to *how* sin affects infants."[8] While it is unclear how infants can be "not innocent" while also not guilty, Harwood's position, at the time, was to affirm that infants (all people) inherit effects from Adam's sin which include a sinful nature without a transmission of his guilt. The reason people do not inherit guilt is because infants lack the moral knowledge to distinguish between good and evil, and God only judges people for sinful actions, not sinful natures.[9] He states elsewhere that infants may be sin-stained in their nature by Adam, but people only become guilty when they transgress God's law.[10]

What did Harwood believe an inherited sinful nature was when he argued for that view? Readers of his work are left scouring for an answer. In all his writings on the matter prior to 2022, Harwood merely reiterates that humans inherit a sinful nature without inheriting guilt; however, he never fully develops what an inherited sinful nature means or does to humanity.[11]

A few glimpses of his understanding can be gleaned, however. First, infants are not sinless in his view, and they inherit a sinful nature while later acquiring their own guilt after they are cognizant of their own willful sin.[12] Elsewhere, he says: "Infants have inherited a seed or stain or corruption of sin from Adam. However, the present thesis argues that there is a difference between *inheriting sin*, or *a sinful nature*, and inheriting guilt."[13] Thus, it appears that Harwood's view of an inherited sinful nature is that humans inherit sin itself but are not culpable for it. Second, Harwood states, "This view that people inherit from Adam *a sinful nature only* (or *inclination to sin*) appears to be more consistent with the plain reading of the Bible than the view that people inherit Adam's guilt."[14] Here, Harwood seems to

[6] Harwood's views on inherited sinful nature seem to have changed between 2017, with the publication of Adam Harwood and Kevin Lawson, eds., *Infants and Children in the Church: Five Views on Theology and Ministry* (B&H Academic, 2017), and 2022, with the publication of Harwood, *Christian Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Systematic* (Lexham Academic), 2022. From the decade of 2007 (with the publication of his doctoral dissertation) to 2017, he affirmed inherited sinful natures.

[7] Harwood, *The Spiritual Condition of Infants: A Biblical-Historical Survey and Systematic Proposal* (Wipf & Stock, 2011), 156, emphasis original. This work is a revision of his doctoral thesis.

[8] Harwood, "The Spiritual Condition of Infants: A Biblical-Historical Survey and Systematic Proposal" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007), 199, emphasis original; cf. xv.

[9] Harwood, *The Spiritual Condition of Infants*, 156–57.

[10] Harwood, *Born Guilty?* 11, 17.

[11] Harwood, *The Spiritual Condition of Infants*, 37–40; *Born Guilty?* 7–11; "A Baptist View," in *Infants and Children in the Church*, 162–66; "Commentary on Article 2: The Sinfulness of Man," in *Anyone Can Be Saved: A Defense of 'Traditional' Southern Baptist Soteriology*, ed. David L. Allen, Eric Hankins, and Adam Harwood (Wipf & Stock, 2016), 40–43; "The Spiritual Condition of Infants," xii–xiii, 46, 54, 63, 84, 100, 200, 203–7.

[12] Harwood, *The Spiritual Condition of Infants*, 9.

[13] Harwood, "The Spiritual Condition of Infants," 203, emphasis added.

[14] Harwood, "Commentary on Article 2," 40, parenthesis original, emphasis added.

equate a sinful nature with inclination to sin, which seems to correlate with his view of the inevitability of people sinning.[15] Third, a person with an inherited sinful nature can still resist God's saving grace or freely respond to God's invitation to be saved in Christ without being regenerated first by God.[16] While this is not a definition of what an inherited sinful nature is, it does helpfully explain his view of what an inherited sinful nature does. Regardless of whatever an inherited sinful nature means to Harwood, it does not compel someone to resist God's saving grace or prohibit someone from freely responding to the gospel invitation in his view. In summary, for Harwood, an inherited sinful nature means people are born with sin from Adam and are inclined to sin themselves, but they do not inherit guilt or an inability to embrace Christ by faith for their salvation.

1.2. Latter Views

Recently, however, Harwood has changed his stance on inherited sinful nature, as reflected by the 2022 publication of his *Christian Theology* and his chapter on *Calvinism: A Biblical and Theological Critique*. Despite being two distinct works, his chapters dealing with original sin and total depravity are virtually identical with only minor differences between the two. In both books, he provides this quote:

> In previous writings, I argued for an 'inherited sinful nature,' the view that all people inherit from Adam a sinful nature, not his guilt. Though I am in general agreement with the method and finding of those studies, I no longer refer to inheriting a *sinful nature* and prefer instead to refer to inherited *consequences*.[17]

Harwood's preferred terminology is now *inherited consequences*, "the view that all people inherit from Adam sinful inclinations and mortality, not the guilt of his sin."[18] Said another way, the view affirms people inherit sinful inclinations, mortality, and a corrupt environment in which to live, but it denies inherited guilt. Harwood explains his view through historical survey, highlighting early church fathers such as Tertullian, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom as examples who would reject Augustine's view of inherited guilt. He shows, further, that Anselm, Ulrich Zwingli, John Miley, and many Baptists have rejected inherited guilt. He concludes his case for inherited consequences by saying one can affirm imputed righteousness while denying imputed guilt because there is a unique condition to be met for justification, namely faith. Thus, he rejects inherited and imputed guilt while affirming imputed righteousness by faith.[19]

Before critiquing Harwood's views, it is worth noting that Harwood's positions are not isolated to himself but are reflective of prominent Christian pastors and scholars and, it is claimed, the majority of Southern Baptists. Eric Hankins continually refers to the Traditional Statement he authored (with its emphasis that Adam's sin does not incapacitate a person's free will or render anyone guilty before God) as the traditional, standard, and even majority view of Southern Baptists, the largest

[15] Harwood, "The Spiritual Condition of Infants," 207. See also "A Baptist View," 164–65.

[16] Harwood, "Commentary on Article 2," 38, 51.

[17] Harwood, "A Critique of Total Depravity," 38, and *Christian Theology*, 382, italics original.

[18] Harwood, "A Critique of Total Depravity," 17.

[19] Harwood, *Christian Theology*, 374–84. His approach is the same in his video lecture on "South African Theological Seminary Symposia: The Doctrine of Sin: Inherited Guilt?" *Youtube*, 18 July 2024, 52:51, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Qw_Z7-zyEo.

Protestant denomination in the world.[20] While Hankins's claims of majority have been questioned,[21] it is unquestionable that many influential Southern Baptists (including, at the time, two seminary presidents, five state executive directors, six former Southern Baptist presidents, university and seminary professors, and a considerable number of pastors and lay-leaders) embrace the view.[22] Thus, Harwood articulates a theological position widely held by an influential body. Additionally, Harwood has co-authored works and received endorsements by notable scholars both inside and outside the Southern Baptist Convention. The views continue to be circulated as evidenced by the publications cited here. Clearly, the Reformed doctrine on total depravity is under significant scrutiny with no signs of stopping soon, and a response from the Reformed tradition is warranted.

2. A Critical Evaluation

With Harwood's view of original sin defined, it may now be evaluated in light of a Reformed perspective. This essay finds four primary faults in the view, namely: it does not reflect the biblical portrayal of a sinful human condition, it neglects the biblical teaching of overcoming grace, it lacks adequate biblical exegesis, and it is based upon faulty logic.

2.1. Faulty View on the Human Condition

The context for some, not all, of Harwood's writings (both in his earlier and latter views on inherited sin) is in response to a concern over the rise of Calvinism.[23] Viewing the "New Calvinism" movement as problematic, Harwood and others who co-author writings alongside him seek to criticize and dismantle the Reformed system of soteriology. Readers familiar with the doctrine of original sin and total depravity will immediately observe, however, that there is nothing uniquely Calvinistic about inheriting sin and guilt from Adam. Even Jacobus Arminius held both to inherited sin and guilt from Adam.[24] In Arminius's *Nine Questions*, Question 3 asks if original sin makes mankind obnoxious to eternal death or if the guilt of original sin is taken away by Christ. Arminius's answer is *both*. He states: "For original sin can render man obnoxious to eternal death, and its guilt can be taken away from all men by Christ. Indeed, in order

[20] Michael Foust, "Statement on Calvinism Draws Approval, Criticism," *Baptist Press*, 31 May 2012, https://tinyurl.com/4upvkzjh..

[21] See Daniel Kirkpatrick, review of *Anyone Can Be Saved,* by Adam Harwood, *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 14.1 (2017): 80–81.

[22] Foust, "Statement on Calvinism Draws Approval, Criticism." Article III of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 states that humanity fell from original innocence and inherits "a nature and environment inclined toward sin." See SBC, "Baptist Faith and Message 2000," https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/#iii. This statement is agreeable to all Southern Baptists. It does not, however, develop the effects of the fall upon human nature. As such, the Traditionalists stay aligned with their statement of faith yet use the lack of clarity in the Baptist Faith and Message to articulate the view expressed and critiqued here.

[23] His article on original sin in *Anyone Can Be Saved* is a defense of the Traditional Statement, which is a reaction against New Calvinism in the Southern Baptist Convention. His latest contribution, "A Critique of Total Depravity," is in a book whose focus is on their "concerns about some doctrines of Calvinism, particularly those related to soteriology," in *Calvinism: A Biblical and Theological Critique*, ed. David L. Allen and Steve W. Lemke (B&H Academic, 2022), 9.

[24] Harwood claims otherwise, saying Arminius's view was consistent with inherited corruption, not inherited guilt, in "A Critique of Total Depravity," 33. He provides one sentence to this effect with no citation from Arminius on this point. The evidence supplied here proves otherwise.

that guilt may be removed, it is necessary that men be previously rendered guilty."[25] J. Matthew Pinson, an Arminian scholar, observes Arminius held to the Heidelberg Catechism and Belgic Confession of Faith concerning original sin and (though disagreeing with Augustine's view on infant damnation) was fully Augustinian on affirming the transmission of Adam's sin and guilt to infants.[26] Another noted Arminian scholar, Roger Olson, affirms Calvinistic total depravity, emphasizing a corrupt nature bound to sin and citing Arminius's own views that the human will is not only wounded, maimed, and weakened but imprisoned, destroyed, and lost.[27] If the problem of total depravity, inherited sin and guilt, and natural inability of the will is a problem for Calvinists, it is as much of one for Arminians, yet none of the critiques from advocates of the Traditional Statement are directed at them.

Scripture is not silent as to the state of humanity's condition after the fall of Adam.[28] Genesis 6:5 (cf. Gen 8:21) states, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." This verse shows not only the quantity of humanity's sin (being "great in the earth") but the very condition of the heart (*every* intention of all thought was continually evil). While Genesis 6 serves as a backdrop for God's judgment on the earth through the flood, it also clarifies why humanity immediately resorted to idolatry at Babel (Gen 11) and perversion at Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18–19) despite almost all of them being destroyed by the deluge. Sin persisted because sin is pervasive in all humanity. Sin is the universal human problem (1 Kgs 8:46; Job 14:4; Ps 143:2; Prov 20:9; Rom 3:23). Jesus affirmed that all sin comes from the heart (Mark 7:21–23), and Paul was clear that sin and corruption were not isolated to Adam alone but are the central problems for all humanity (Rom 1:21–32; 3:9–20; 5:12–21; 8:5–7).[29]

It is not necessary to provide an exhaustive biblical survey of humanity's sin for the sake of this argument, for Harwood and his constituents agree with sin's pervasiveness. Disagreement lay not in the existence of sin but the effects of sin. Harwood remains vague about what humans actually inherit in their nature from Adam (if anything), which is particularly concerning given his softened language on inherited consequences. He is abundantly clear that he rejects the inherited guilt view of Augustine alongside many other notable theologians; however, he provides no thorough description of how the fall affects humans (a deficiency needing utmost clarity). Harwood does cite Ulrich Zwingli in support of his denial of inherited guilt while also mentioning Zwingli's denial that humans inherited sin at all from Adam, seemingly a departure from the earlier view of inherited sinful nature.[30] He compares his

[25] James Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and W. R. Bangle (Lamp Post, 2009), 1:288.

[26] J. Matthew Pinson, "Jacobus Arminius: Reformed and Always Reforming," in *Grace for All: The Arminian Dynamics of Salvation*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock and John D. Wagner (Resource, 2015), 165–66. Pinson also contributes "Dissent from Calvinism in the Baptist Tradition," ch. 7 in *Calvinism: A Biblical and Theological Critique.*

[27] Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology* (IVP Academic, 2006), 55–56. He cites Arminius, "Public Disputations," in *Works*, 2:192. Olson contributed with Harwood to *Calvinism: A Biblical and Theological Critique* ("The Character of God in Calvinism," ch. 11).

[28] Harwood rejects the Federal Headship view, where Adam represented all of humanity's will and response to God through his sin. Arguing for humanity's total depravity from that perspective would only be dismissed by advocates of Harwood's position, so this section will focus on additional scriptural references about human nature. However, for an excellent defense of the Federal Headship view from a Reformed perspective which affirms total depravity, see Matthew Barrett, *40 Questions About Salvation* (Kregel Academic, 2018), 23–37.

[29] For a thorough treatment on sin's pervasiveness and effects, see Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Eerdmans, 1994), 133–86.

[30] Harwood, "A Critique of Total Depravity," 32–33, *Christian Theology*, 377.

view to the *hereditary decline* view of Pier Franco Beatrice, who affirms that people suffer consequences of Adam's sin (like physical death), but sin itself is not passed to Adam's posterity.[31] He is critical of Augustine's interpretation of Romans 5:12 and supposed misreading of "because all sinned," clearly arguing against inherited guilt, but his arguments are destructive, not constructive, in nature, suggesting that humans do not inherit sin at all.[32] With his emphasis that humans are only guilty for the sin they commit and that humans inherit negative effects of the fall (like mortality, a sinful environment, and desires to sin), readers are justified in believing Harwood's view of *inherited consequences* means exactly that—in Adam, people are sinned against, not sinners.

Notice the language of Article 2 of the Traditional Statement, which Harwood endorses:

> We affirm that, because of the fall of Adam, every person inherits a nature and environment inclined toward sin and that every person who is capable of moral action will sin. Each person's sin alone brings the wrath of a holy God, broken fellowship with Him…. We deny that Adam's sin resulted in the incapacitation of any person's free will or rendered any person guilty before he has personally sinned…"[33]

According to this statement, what every person inherits is a nature inclined towards sin, not a sinful (wicked, depraved) nature. In other words, the Traditional Statement claims that Adam's sin affects human nature, whereby people will want to sin in the sinful environment they inherit, but it does not make them sinners.

In response, no one seriously disagrees that the fall left people inclined towards sin and in an environment sullied by sin. The issue is in the condition of the human will. Both The Traditional Statement and Harwood's writings state that total depravity does not mean total inability to repent of sin and call on the Lord to save (defined often by the Reformed tradition as spiritual deadness).[34] In his view, if God calls everyone to repent and believe in the gospel, and if he wants salvation for every person, that must mean they have the ability to do so.[35] Here, readers find why total depravity (whatever it means in their view) cannot mean total inability. If total depravity means total inability to come to faith in Christ apart from God's effectual calling and regenerating grace (the Reformed view), then that would mean doctrines like unconditional election and irresistible grace would have to be true (which cannot be for these non-Calvinists).

Assuming for the sake of argument spiritual death does not mean spiritual inability, Scripture is replete with other images demonstrating complete human inability to approach God for salvation because of sinful depravity. Paul, in Romans 6, contrasted slaves of righteousness with slaves of sin (Rom 6:16; cf. 6:22). It would require extraordinary exegesis, something advocates of this inherited consequence view do not supply, to make a case for human ability and freedom from these texts. The thought of a slave willfully changing masters out of self-driven will is a notion entirely foreign to the biblical audience. As slaves were controlled by their earthly masters, so sinners are enslaved by their sin and unable to receive Christ as their Lord apart from God's work in redemption.[36] Scripture also

[31] Harwood, "A Critique of Total Depravity," 18.

[32] Harwood, *Christian Theology*, 364–66.

[33] Traditional Statement in Harwood, *Born Guilty?* 33.

[34] Harwood, "A Critique of Total Depravity," 45–46.

[35] Harwood, "A Critique of Total Depravity," 45–47.

[36] For support on inherited sin leading to spiritual enslavement and the necessity of redemption, see Daniel Kirkpatrick, "What Is Redeemed in Redemption? An Argument for Unconditional Redemption," *Evangelical Re-*

speaks of humanity as dwelling in darkness (John 3:19–20, John 12:39–40). No amount of human will or effort can remove darkness; only Light can do that (John 8:12, 9:5).[37] Romans 7:18 and Titus 1:15 are just some of the verses that show humans lack the spiritual capacity to do good before God. If believing in Christ unto salvation is a spiritually good thing, something which all traditions agree, then there is no way, biblically, someone can do such a thing in their fallen nature. Additionally, Romans 8:8 affirms that people in the flesh (their natural state) cannot please God. Believing in Christ for salvation would please God, but such a thing is not possible in people's natural (sinful) state. Human righteousness is also polluted before God (Isa 64:6; cf. Rom 3:9–20), so there is nothing of spiritual worth that people can bring to God apart from God's miraculous overcoming grace. These texts support the Reformed tradition that total depravity means spiritual deadness and inability to receive salvation in Christ.[38] For Harwood and adherents to the Traditional Statement, people only inherit an inclination to sin in a sinful environment. Being inclined to sin, though, is not the same thing as being a sinner. These views do not reflect the biblical portrayal of human depravity.

2.2. Lack of Overcoming Grace

This observation leads to the second critique—a lack of overcoming grace. Augustine was the pioneer in championing original sin and overcoming grace against the Pelagians and Massilians, leading to their subsequent condemnation at Carthage, Ephesus, and Orange respectively. Harwood, however, claims Augustine misinterpreted two Old Testament texts (Job 14:4 and Ps 51:5) along with three New Testament texts (Eph 2:3, Heb 7:4–10, and Rom 5:12). Additionally, Harwood claims Augustine's views were based upon distorted perspectives on humanity, sexuality, and marriage, and he departed from Paul's meaning on original sin when he read from the Latin, not Greek, texts.[39] Harwood finds that Augustine's erroneous views on inherited sin and guilt have so shaped Roman Catholics and Protestants alike that they, consciously or not, read Augustine's errors into the text, including the notion that total depravity means people are unable to repent and believe the gospel.[40]

No attempt will be made here to respond to Harwood's criticism of Augustine. Instead, the broader issue of the church's supposed longstanding error of believing in inherited sin and guilt and the matter of overcoming grace will take the focus. Are Christians, of virtually any stripe, to believe that they have been so blinded by Augustine's supposed bad translation and warped views on marriage and sexuality that they have misunderstood original sin and human nature for some 1,500 years? Although a possibility, it is very unlikely and historically naïve.

A more likely explanation is that Christians have had to interpret Romans 5:12 and 19 with recognition that, somehow, Adam's sin is reckoned to belong to all humanity. Original sin, as Harwood agrees, refers to the state or condition humanity is born into, which contrasts actual sins that a person willfully commits. Corruption is owed to original sin, biblically speaking, and it is inherited from Adam. As mentioned above, Harwood holds to inherited consequences, but the question is: To what extent does Adam's sin affect human nature? Harwood never answers this question in detail.[41] Harwood, as

view of Theology 47.2 (2023): 175–86.

[37] Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory* (Baker Books, 1986), 292–93.

[38] See Carl R. Trueman, *Grace Alone: Salvation as a Gift*, Five Solas (Zondervan Academic, 2017), 40–41.

[39] Harwood, "A Critique of Total Depravity," 25–32.

[40] Harwood, "A Critique of Total Depravity," 25, 40–43; *Spiritual Condition of Infants*, 105, 112.

[41] He does say inherited consequences is "the view that all people inherit from Adam sinful inclinations and mortality, not the guilt of his sin." Harwood, "A Critique of Total Depravity," 17. Notice, however, there is no men-

reflected by the Traditional Statement, denies the incapacitation of human free will, denies regeneration prior to hearing and responding by faith to the gospel, denies that faith is an act of God rather than a response of a person, and denies that there is an effectual call for people that is different from the general call for all people to hear and respond to the gospel.[42] Thus, there is no need for effectual calling, or overcoming grace, for people to hear and respond to the gospel, because the human will is not incapacitated by sin to believe in Christ for salvation.[43]

Scripture states otherwise. The general call comes from evangelists; the effective call comes from God. Acts 16:14 says, "The Lord opened her (Lydia's) heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul." 2 Thessalonians 2:14 states, "To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." In both verses, there is the call to salvation that comes from the preachers and another which comes from the Lord. While the Great Commission calls all disciples to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth, there is a distinct (but not separated) calling which comes from the Lord through the gospel preached. This calling, known as effectual calling, calls people out of darkness and into light (1 Pet 2:9), from having darkened eyes to enlightened eyes of the heart (Eph 1:18), from impurity to holiness (1 Thess 4:7).[44] As the Lord summons people to himself, he brings the transformation needed for a person to respond to that call with faith.[45]

Scripture used to support faith preceding regeneration is weak and insufficient and much better supports the Reformed view of overcoming grace leading to faith.[46] John 3:5 states, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Ephesians 2:4–5 says, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved." Colossians 2:13 states: "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses." Finally, Titus 3:5 says, "He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." These texts show God's regenerating grace is absolutely essential to overcome one's depravity leading to the exercise of faith.[47] The verbs used for regeneration here are all active verbs with God as the subject. There is no human activity or synergism mentioned or implied.[48] God must take the initiative in salvation by overcoming sinner's

tion of corruption and depraving effects of the fall.

[42] Articles 1, 5, and 8 of the Traditional Statement, in Harwood, *Born Guilty?* 33–35.

[43] The statements of the Traditional Statement appear to confuse the meaning of irresistible grace, which appears to be understood as meaning that God saves people apart from a willing response to the gospel. This caricature is not accurate. See Michael Horton, *For Calvinism* (Zondervan, 2011), 105–10. Horton prefers calling this work of salvation effectual calling as opposed to irresistible grace.

[44] For a robust treatment on the Reformed perspective on effectual calling, see Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Eerdmans, 1994), 81–89. See also Bruce A. Ware, "Effectual Calling and Grace" in *Still Sovereign*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Baker Academic, 2004), 211–26.

[45] Jonathan Hoglund, *Called by Triune Grace*, Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture (IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 4, 79–91.

[46] See Daniel Kirkpatrick, "An Exegetical and Theological Argument for the Priority of Regeneration in Conversion" in *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 31 (2020): 89–101 which analyzes proof texts from non-Calvinists and contrasts them with the Reformed perspective of regeneration preceding faith.

[47] Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Crossway, 2006), 291–95.

[48] Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, 94–105.

hostile nature because (contrary to Harwood's position) spiritual deadness means complete natural inability to approach God for salvation.

As mentioned above, the Traditional Statement and Harwood's views have been accused of Semi-Pelagianism.[49] In response, Harwood says their emphasis upon the Holy Spirit's drawing of sinners is sufficient enough to dispel accusations of this heresy along with their affirmation that no one is capable of achieving salvation or making the first steps towards their salvation.[50] What does Harwood and adherents to the Traditional Statement mean by the Holy Spirit drawing? They never develop an answer, nor do they mention overcoming grace. However, they seemingly have in mind John 6:44: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him," a verse that affirms complete human inability to come to Christ apart from God's sovereign and preceding activity. Their position is further complicated by Jesus's subsequent statement, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father" (v. 65). No one will come to faith in Christ Jesus unless God sovereignly wills it, and if he wills their salvation, they will be regenerated (John 3:3, 8) and believe, leading to eternal life (John 3:15).[51]

If Harwood's concern is to ensure that infants are not held guilty for Adam's sin, he is better off suggesting that the grace of God provided in Christ is sufficient remedy rather than to deny its transmission (and the transmission of other devastating consequences like inability to believe in Christ apart from regenerating grace). While Baptists like Harwood would understandably reject Augustine's modality of pedobaptism, they could still agree with the African bishop that God's grace is fully adequate to remedy the effects of inherited sin in infants. For Arminians, the means by which God overcomes the depraving effects of the fall is through prevenient grace, an act of love towards humanity whereby God overcomes original sin in people's lives, allowing them the freedom to accept or reject the gospel.[52] Reformed confessions, on the other hand, appeal to God's grace in election.[53] Granted, Calvinists debate Arminians tirelessly over the inadequacies of prevenient grace while Arminians constantly argue that Calvinists are wrong about effectual calling/irresistible grace, yet both traditions are unified in that some supernatural grace is needed to overcome the effects of the fall. Neither tradition takes the approach of denying the depraving, condemning, and incapacitating effects of Adam's sin. The pastoral challenge of inherited sin and guilt in infants is best met by emphasizing the sufficiency of God's grace in Christ, not by rejecting its transmission.

Harwood and those who follow him do not do justice to the biblical teaching of effectual calling and regeneration, with the result of them having too high a view of human ability and too low a view on overcoming grace. Either humanity does not inherit corruption and total depravity, making them free

[49] In addition to the Mohler and Olson citations provided above, Harwood addressed accusations of Semi-Pelagianism in "Is the Traditional Statement Semi-Pelagian," in *Anyone Can Be Saved*, 157–68. There is an anonymous appendix in *Calvinism: A Biblical and Theological Critique* entitled "Semi-Pelagianism: The Theological Catchall," 505–7.

[50] See Article 2 of the Traditional Statement and Harwood, "Is the Traditional Statement Semi-Pelagian?" 158–59.

[51] Peter van Mastricht, *A Treatise on Regeneration*, ed. Brandon Withrow (Soli Deo Gloria, 2002), 9–31. Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Zondervan Academic, 2011), 564–65.

[52] Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 35–36. When Arminius was asked if original sin leaves sinners guilty, his response was not to deny guilt but to say Christ's benefits are sufficient for it. See Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius*, 1:288.

[53] *Westminster Confession of Faith* 10.3 and *London Baptist Confession of 1689* 10.3. See Kirkpatrick, *40 Questions About Divine Election* (Kregel Academic, 2025), 211–16.

to approach God for grace, or they do. If Harwood takes the former view, it goes against his rejection of Pelagianism. If he takes the latter view, he must affirm the Reformed position and appeal to divine grace.

2.3. Lack of Biblical Exegesis

A third concern with Harwood's view of original sin is his exegesis regarding the phrases, "all sinned" in Romans 5:12, "condemnation for all men" in Romans 5:18, and "the many were made sinners" in Romans 5:19. Romans 5:12, in the ESV version which Harwood cites, states: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned…" When Harwood comes to the point of explaining the phrase, "because all sinned," his argument goes as follows: the text does not say "in whom all sinned" (reflective of Augustine's Federal Headship view) or "because all sinned in Adam" (the Covenant Theology / Natural Transmission view) but "because all sinned." He then refers to the United Bible Societies' notes that Adam's guilt is not transmitted, then describes how Augustine misread Romans 5:12 from the Old Latin and Vulgate translations rather than the Greek, and then argues that the Covenant Theology view erroneously reads "all sinned in Adam" into the text, which is simply not there. He wraps up his argument by denying inherited guilt.[54]

There is not much engagement with Romans 5:12 itself, particularly on the phrase, "because all sinned." Somehow, for Harwood, there is a complete disconnect from the first part of the verse that says, "sin came into the world through one man (Adam), and death through sin," and "so death spread to all men because all sinned." His central argument to refute centuries worth of interpretation that each and every person who has ever lived, other than Christ, has inherited sin and guilt from Adam is, "the Bible never says 'all sinned in Adam.'"[55] For Harwood, reading "in whom all sinned" in Romans 5:12 is a holdover from Augustine's faulty reading of the Latin text and not what Paul meant.[56]

Harwood's argumentation is weak and seems predicated upon a commitment to ensure that human beings do not inherit the guilt of Adam. Scripture states, though, that all human beings are sinners, as Harwood acknowledges. Further, it states that Adam's sin brought condemnation to all men. Commenting on Romans 5:18, Harwood says that Adam's condemnation can only belong to a person once they voluntarily ratify it through their own sin later on in life.[57] The text never says that, however. Adam sinned on behalf of humanity as their representative according to Romans 5:12 and 19.[58] That sin brought with it death (and guilt, according to many views). The biblical testimony on this matter is that people are either in the first Adam or the second Adam (Rom 5:12–21 and 1 Cor 15:45–49). There is no middle, or in-between, Adam that people are in until they voluntarily and consciously ratify their sin to

[54] Harwood, *Born Guilty?* 8–11.

[55] Harwood, *Born Guilty?* 10.

[56] Harwood, *Born Guilty?* 9; "A Critique of Total Depravity," 30, and *Christian Theology*, 364–66. George Eldon Ladd rightly observes that Romans 5:12 can grammatically mean that all people died because they all have sinned personally, just like it can mean that in Adam all sinned. However, verse 19 suggests to Ladd that the clear intention of Paul is that all people sinned in Adam, making Adam's sin their sin and his death their death. He states, "In this context people are not righteous because they do righteous deeds; they are righteous in Christ. So in this context people are not sinners merely because they do sinful acts; they are sinners in Adam." See George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, revised ed. (Eerdmans, 1993), 443.

[57] Harwood, "Commentary on Article 2," 47.

[58] Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 149, 161; Barrett, *40 Questions About Salvation*, 32–36.

the first Adam. People are born into the first Adam and his sin by nature then later born into the second Adam and his righteousness by grace.

There is, therefore, no strong biblical exegesis provided by Harwood to reject historic interpretations of inherited sin like the Federal Headship or Natural Transmission views.[59] The historical views of inherited sin articulated by the Reformed tradition which influence the doctrine of total depravity stand.

2.4. Lack of Solid Reasoning

A fourth critique relates to the rationale for changing from inherited sinful natures to inherited consequences. As mentioned before, Harwood originally claimed humans (even infants) are sinners and not innocent because of their association with Adam. His view, now, is inherited consequences where people merely inherit sinful inclinations and mortality. This quote, used above, warrants repeating and elaboration:

> In previous writings, I argued for an "inherited sinful nature," the view that all people inherit from Adam a sinful nature, not his guilt. Though I am in general agreement with the method and finding of those studies, I no longer refer to inheriting a *sinful nature* and prefer instead to refer to inherited *consequences*. The problem with affirming that all people inherit a sinful *nature* is that if human nature is essentially inherently sinful, then Jesus (who was truly human and divine) would have been a person whose human nature was sinful.[60]

Notice the fallacy in Harwood's language. He no longer argues for an *inherited* sinful nature because that would affirm human nature is *inherently* sinful. Harwood confuses the meaning of these two words. To inherit (a verb) is to receive something passed from someone else. Inherent (an adjective) refers to something being essential, natural, or an intrinsic part of something. Neither Calvinists nor Arminians argue that being sinful is inherent to what it means to be a human being. These traditions, instead, argue for inheriting a sinful nature from Adam. There is no logical rationale for denying inherited sin (or an inherited sinful nature) based upon Christ's inherent sinlessness.

Hebrews 4:15 (ESV) says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." Jesus can sympathize with human beings because he fully experienced human life, though without sin. The author of Hebrews does not suggest that Jesus's sinlessness makes him any less human than everyone else, as being human is not inherently sinful. Christ shares in full humanity with all people but stands apart in his sinlessness. Saying humanity inherits sin from Adam does not mean that human nature itself is sinful, for Adam was fully human both before and after his fall.

In summary, Harwood does not ascribe either to the Federal Headship view or Natural Transmission view, for either view would mean that human beings sinned in Adam and incur depraving effects like guilt and inability. As such, for Harwood, the virgin birth, though historical fact, is not essential to preserve Christ's sinlessness.[61] Instead, his view is that all people inherit consequences from Adam, not inherited sin, because an inherited sinful nature means an inherent sinful nature. This is a *non-*

[59] As the focus of this article is to defend total depravity against the alternative views expressed here, for the sake of focus, no attempt will be made to defend any specific view on inherited sin.

[60] Harwood, *Christian Theology*, 382, and Harwood, "A Critique of Total Depravity," 38–39, emphasis original.

[61] Harwood, *Christian Theology*, 354-358, 422-424. See also Millard Erickson, *Introduction to Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Baker Academic, 2015), 252–55.

sequitur, meaning that both the Federal Headship and Natural Transmission views can withstand this reasoning. Furthermore, there is no rationale for abandoning language of inherited sin and inherited sinful nature. Both Reformed and Arminian traditions affirm inherited sin and depravity along with authentic humanity. One need not reject one for the other, especially along these lines of reasoning.

3. Conclusion

The doctrines of grace, which outline a Reformed view of salvation, are intricately connected. The reason why God must unconditionally elect a person is because sin has left a person with no merit by which to please God. The atonement must be limited in scope to save persons God intends to save whereby the rest of people are left in their inherited yet willful sin. Grace must be irresistible, or overcoming, because of the depraving effects of sin on rebellious human wills. God must also preserve his grace in the lives of people, for the natural human heart will resort to its former ways. All doctrines of grace are related to and predicated upon original sin and total depravity.

This article has sought to defend the traditional Reformed view of original sin and total depravity against the critiques of Adam Harwood and adherents of the Traditional Statement. It found that their positions do not biblically portray human nature and ability, nullify overcoming grace, lack biblical exegesis, and are based upon faulty reasoning.

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Wisdom and Folly in Laodicea: Revelation's Message to the Laodiceans as Wisdom Discourse

— Joel MacInnes —

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Abstract: This article examines Christ's message to Laodicea as "wisdom discourse," arguing that it employs "wisdom forms," "allusions to wisdom literature," and addresses "wisdom concerns." The message highlights wisdom due to the Laodicean church's lack of it. This study explores potential parallels between the challenges faced by the churches in Colossae and Laodicea, noting similar diagnoses and remedies. Finally, the article examines how the wisdom theme in the message to Laodicea shapes our understanding of the seven messages in the book of Revelation.

The message to the Laodiceans in the book of Revelation is often remembered for its strong criticism.[1] However, it is also, paradoxically, the message that most powerfully emphasizes the love of Christ. Rebuke and love go together in this message. This apparent contradiction—harsh rebuke intertwined with profound expressions of affection (Rev 3:19)—raises a crucial question: Why does this message juxtapose such stark criticism with expressions of love? What is the background to this kind of language?

The book of Revelation is seldom thought of as wisdom discourse.[2] However, Revelation is rich in language typical of wisdom literature. It employs literary forms such as macarisms (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14), proverbs (3:19; 13:10; 22:11), and vice lists (9:21; 21:8; 22:15). The idea that wisdom belongs to Christ and to God is foregrounded (5:12; 7:12), but so is the need for wisdom among all followers of Christ—a wisdom that enables discernment of the way of Christ versus the way of the beast (13:18; 17:9). The reader is urged to have ears to hear (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22), a hallmark of the Jewish wisdom tradition that emphasizes the capacity to listen well (Prov 4:20; 15:31; 20:12; Job 12:11; 34:3). The language of wisdom informs Revelation's christology, ethics, and soteriology. I have

[1] I prefer the term "message" rather than the conventional "letter," since Revelation's messages do not contain a single "formal feature typically found in letters of that day." Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *The Sermons to the Seven Churches of Revelation: A Commentary and Guide* (Baker Academic, 2021), 2.

[2] The Jewish wisdom tradition is often associated with three main features: (1) the use of wisdom forms (e.g., macarisms and proverbs); (2) wisdom themes (e.g., how to cultivate character and how to gain wisdom); and (3) an emphasis on creation. Richard P. Belcher Jr, *Finding Favour in the Sight of God: A Theology of Wisdom Literature*, NSBT 46 (IVP Academic, 2018), 8–10. Wisdom literature centers on acquiring wisdom and offering guidance for personal growth.

elsewhere explored the use of wisdom themes and forms in the book of Revelation.[3] A preliminary finding from my earlier study is that the message to Laodicea contains an unusually high concentration of wisdom language compared with the other seven messages.

This article aims to further explore the wisdom-related issues mentioned in that message. I will first survey wisdom allusions and wisdom forms in Revelation. When this is accomplished, I will explore wisdom concerns and themes in the message. I will then explore the significance of wisdom in the context of Laodicea and the Lycus Valley. Finally, I will discuss how these findings relate to the other seven messages within Revelation.

1. Allusions to Wisdom Literature

Revelation 3:14–22 contains two, possibly three, allusions to wisdom literature. The first allusion appears in the Christological introduction, where Christ is presented as "the beginning of creation" (ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς κτίσεως; Rev 3:14).[4] As numerous scholars have observed, this phrase likely alludes to the personified Wisdom found in Proverbs 8:22 (LXX: κύριος ἔκτισέν με ἀρχὴν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ).[5] This allusion is highly probable for several reasons.[6] Let us restrict ourselves to four. First, both texts make use of words and concepts such as "beginning" and "creation." If the text alludes to the OT, Proverbs 8:22 provides the closest parallel. Second, the closest parallel in Jewish literature is the Targum to Proverbs 8:22, which reads: "God created me [Wisdom] at the beginning of his creation." Third, the closest parallel within the NT is Colossians 1:15, where Christ is described as "the firstborn of all creation" (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως).[7] Many scholars believe that the phrase in Colossians 1:15 alludes to Wisdom.[8] What is particularly intriguing with this is the close geographical proximity between Laodicea and Colossae, especially in light of Paul's instruction to the Colossians to exchange letters with the Laodiceans (4:16). We will examine this connection between the Christian communities of Colossae and Laodicea below. Fourth, many Jewish texts associate ἀρχή with wisdom (e.g., Sir 24:3–9; Wis 9:9), and the term is sometimes used as a shorthand for Wisdom.[9] Within the matrix of Jewish thought, ἀρχή is deeply associated with wisdom. Taken together, these factors strongly suggest an allusion to Proverbs 8:22.

[3] Joel MacInnes, *Wisdom Traditions in the Book of Revelation: A Literary and Theological Study*, LNTS (Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

[4] The phrase may be translated as "the originator of God's creation" (CSB) or "the ruler of creation" (NIV). Brian J. Tabb notes that "elsewhere in Revelation *archē* clearly means 'beginning' (contrasted with *telos*), while other terms such as *archōn* (1:5) and *basileus* (19:16) indicate Jesus' kingship." Tabb, *All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone*, NSBT 48 (Apollos, 2019), 63. G. K. Beale has argued that the phrase refers to the new creation, in light of Rev 1:5. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, JSNTSup 166 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 277–292. The notion of a new creation remains possible even if the phrase refers to the wisdom of God (as will be argued in this article); Christ is the beginning not only of the first creation but of the new creation.

[5] E.g., Ian Boxall, *Christ in the Book of Revelation* (Paulist, 2021), 41; James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (SCM, 1989), 247; Mitchell Glenn Reddish, *Revelation*, SHBC (Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 81.

[6] MacInnes, *Wisdom Traditions in the Book of Revelation*.

[7] All English translations are from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

[8] Jeffrey S. Lamp, "Wisdom in Col 1:15–20: Contribution and Significance," *JETS* 41 (1998): 45–53. On wisdom thought in Colossians, see more below.

[9] James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as it Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 46.

The second allusion to wisdom literature in the message to the Laodiceans appears in Revelation 3:19, where it is stated that Christ reproves and disciplines those whom he loves. This is clearly an allusion to, and a condensed version of, Proverbs 3:11–12:[10]

> My child, do not despise the Lord's discipline
> or be weary of his reproof,
> for the Lord reproves the one he loves,
> as a father the son in whom he delights.

David Aune helpfully notes the following: "The proverbial saying involves the application of the common theme in wisdom literature of educative discipline, in which the necessity of disciplining or chastening one's children, motivated by love and concern for their ultimate well-being … is applied to the relationship between God and his people."[11] Aune further notes that the function of discipline in wisdom literature is "educative, designed to correct, cultivate character, and inculcate wisdom (13:24; 19:18, 25; 22:15; 23:13–14; 29:15, 17)."[12] In Revelation, Christ stands in the place of YHWH and is correcting the Laodiceans so that they might cultivate a character that is fitting for them as disciples of Jesus.

A third potential allusion to wisdom literature appears in Revelation 3:20, where Christ presents himself as one who knocks on the Laodiceans' door. The passage probably alludes to Song of Songs 5:2.[13] However, there is disagreement over whether Song of Songs falls under the category of wisdom literature. It is love poetry. However, it is concerned with "the nitty-gritty of life" when it comes to questions about love.[14] If we count Song of Songs as wisdom literature, there are three allusions to wisdom literature in the book of Revelation.

However, allusions are not the only evidence of the influence of wisdom literature. The message includes the use of various wisdom forms.

2. Wisdom Forms

One characteristic of wisdom literature is that it is a sort of macro-genre that incorporates a multitude of wisdom forms, such as proverbs, macarisms, and riddles.[15] The message to the Laodiceans includes three wisdom forms.

We have already discussed the use of Proverbs 3:11–12 in Revelation 3:19. Revelation thus incorporates a well-known proverb. This proverb, which emphasizes the importance of discipline as an act of love, was widely used in both Jewish and Christian contexts (Job 5:17–18; Heb 12:6; Philo, *Prelim. Studies* 177; Pss. Sol 10:1–3; 1 Clem 56:4).

[10] Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, NIVAC (Zondervan, 2000), 161; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, revised ed., NICNT (Eerdmans, 1998), 112–13; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Baker Academic, 2002), 19.

[11] David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, WBC 52A (Word, 1997), 260. Emphasis original.

[12] Christopher B. Ansberry, *Proverbs*, ZECNT (Zondervan, 2024), 186.

[13] G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Eerdmans, 1999), 308; Osborne, *Revelation,* 212.

[14] Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 2001), 49.

[15] John J. Collins, "Wisdom Reconsidered in Light of the Scrolls," *DSD* 4 (1997): 265–266.

The message also employs the rhetorical device known as diatribe, which is not a strictly defined literary form but rather a mode of exhortation. The diatribe deploys imputed speech to address potential objections. Revelation 3:17 could be considered a diatribe:

> For you say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

In diatribes, the author often responds to an opponent's objection (Epictetus, *Diatr.* 4.9.5–6). Similarly, Jesus responds to the Laodiceans' self-assessment of their condition (Rev 3:17b–19). Here, Christ imagines what the Laodiceans are saying. Through this diatribe, Christ reveals the Laodiceans' true condition. It is an apocalyptic diatribe. It is revelatory. It is very similar to Epictetus's diatribe, where he challenges the Epicurean philosophy of pleasure.[16] In his diatribe, a Roman bailiff responds to Epictetus' notion of submitting pleasure to duty, stating, "But I am rich and need nothing" (ἐγὼ πλούσιός εἰμι καὶ οὐδενός χρεία). This language closely parallels Revelation 3:17: "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing" (πλούσιός εἰμι καὶ πεπλούτηκα καὶ οὐδὲν χρείαν ἔχω).[17] This striking similarity could suggest a shared genre.

Finally, the message concludes with a wisdom admonition. At the end of the message, and of all of the messages in Revelation, the reader is admonished to have ears to hear.

> Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. (Rev 3:22)

This should be understood as a wisdom admonition. The call to listen is a frequent feature of wisdom literature, particularly in books like Proverbs, where the wise listen, discern, and obey, while the fool rejects wisdom and instruction (Prov 1:5; 12:15; 18:13; 19:20; 25:12). In Matthew 7:24, Jesus identifies the wise person (φρόνιμος) as one who hears (ἀκούει) his words. The call to hear in Revelation probably alludes to the Jesus tradition in the Gospels, where Jesus urges, "If you have ears to hear, then hear!" (Mark 4:9, see also 4:23; Matt 11:15; 13:9, 43; Luke 8:8; 14:35). Many scholars have noted that this Jesus saying should be understood as a wisdom saying.[18] The call to have ears to hear is an invitation to hear and discern well. It is an invitation to wisdom.

Wisdom language is a key feature of the message to the Laodiceans, which portrays Jesus as a wisdom teacher, perhaps a Solomonic figure, offering instruction and discipline to those whom he loves.

3. Wisdom Themes

Given that Jesus presents himself as a wisdom teacher who disciplines and instructs his people, it is important to recognize that his corrections often address wisdom-related issues, specifically, three common symptoms of the foolish.

[16] It is noteworthy that Epictetus was from Hierapolis, a city very close to Laodicea.

[17] This could also be read as an allusion to Hosea 12:8: "Ephraim has said, 'Ah, I am rich; I have gained wealth for myself; in all of my gain no offense has been found in me that would be sin.'" See Beale, *Revelation*, 304. Epictetus's diatribe offers a closer parallel, since it contains both a declaration of wealth and the assertion that the subject is not in need of anything. My argument, however, is not that Revelation alludes to this saying, but that it makes use of a similar genre. Weima argues against an allusion to Hos 12:8, and argues that the phrase echoes a conventional or proverbial saying of the rich. Weima, *The Sermons to the Seven Churches of Revelation*, 243.

[18] Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Proverbs," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, (Abingdon, 1997), 5:174.

First, Jesus warns against *self-sufficiency*. The danger is evident in the Laodiceans' claim, according to Revelation, that they are rich, prosperous, and in need of nothing (3:17). The Laodiceans' claim likely reflects the self-image of the citizens of the prosperous city.[19] Following a severe earthquake in 60 CE, the city famously refused to accept any assistance from the Romans (Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.27; see also Sib. Or. 4.137–139). In Christ's diagnosis, this posture is evidence of the Laodiceans' foolishness. They had become "spiritually self-sufficient and saw no need of Christ's aid."[20]

Self-sufficiency is dangerous according to wisdom literature. In Proverbs 30:8–9, Agur asks the Lord to give him neither riches nor poverty, since poverty can lead to theft and the possibility of profaning God, and riches can lead to denying the Lord. Agur notes that riches can lead to a self-sufficient posture that forgets one's utter dependency on God.[21] This is a condition reminiscent of the Laodiceans'. In Sirach 5:1, Ben Sira specifically warns against the posture of relying on one's wealth and declaring, "I am self-sufficient" (Αὐτάρκη μοί ἐστιν).[22] Both the Laodiceans and the proud in Ben Sira boast of their self-sufficiency, particularly in relation to their accumulated wealth. Central to the folly's disposition is "the reliance on one's own quest for human autonomy, the reliance on one's own resources and the failure to acknowledge that true knowledge is derivative from God's—the sin of the garden of Eden."[23] Unlike the wise, the fool, in wisdom literature, "is self-sufficient and does not heed counsel ([Prov] 12:15)."[24] They need ears to hear with.

The self-sufficient Laodiceans are depicted as *lukewarm*. Christ warns the Laodiceans that because they are "lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot," he is about to vomit them out of his mouth (Rev 3:16). Many scholars believe this alludes to the Laodiceans' water supply.[25] It is often asserted that Laodicea's water quality was inferior to that of the surrounding cities. Colossae had cold, refreshing water, while Hierapolis was known for its warm and healing waters. It is sometimes claimed that Laodicea received

[19] On the material prosperity in Laodicea and its bearing on this passage, see Ulrich Huttner, *Early Christianity in the Lycus Valley*, AJEC 85 (Brill, 2013), 158–65. Craig R. Koester has raised questions regarding the extent to which the message alludes to specific local circumstances within the city of Laodicea. Koester, "The Message to Laodicea and the Problem of Its Local Context: A Study of the Imagery in Rev 3:14–22," *NTS* 49 (2003): 407–24. While he might be correct concerning the water supply (see below), as Ulrich Huttner notes, the combination of the importance of prosperity, gold, textiles, and eye salve, where there are credible allusions, makes his argument unlikely. Huttner, *Early Christianity*, 159 n. 79. See also Paul McKechnie, *Christianizing Asia Minor: Conversion, Communities, and Social Change in the Pre-Constantinian Era* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 33.

[20] Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Eerdmans, 1986), 195. See also Weima, *The Sermons to the Seven Churches of Revelation*, 241–246.

[21] Katherine J. Dell, "Didactic Intertextuality: Proverbial Wisdom as Illustrated in Ruth," in *Reading Proverbs Intertextually*, ed. Katherine J. Dell and Will Kynes, LHBOTS 629 (T&T Clark, 2019), 106; Lindsay Wilson, *Proverbs*, TOTC (InterVarsity Press, 2018), 308.

[22] Mark D. Mathews notes the similarities between Revelation 3:17 and Sirach 5:1, particularly their use of imputed speech. Mathews, *Riches, Poverty, and the Faithful: Perspectives on Wealth in the Second Temple Period and the Apocalypse of John*, SNTSMS 154 (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 72.

[23] J. Davies, "Folly," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman and Peter Enns (IVP Academic, 2008), 224.

[24] Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 2004), 113. Richard J. Clifford translates Proverbs 1:32b as "the self-sufficiency of fools will destroy them." Clifford, *Wisdom Literature* (Abingdon, 1998), 79.

[25] Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, 186–91; Ian Paul, *Revelation*, TNTC 20 (IVP Academic, 2018), 112–15; M. J. S. Rudwick and E. M. B. Green, "The Laodicean Lukewarmness," *ExpTim* 69 (1958): 176–78; Weima, *The Sermons to the Seven Churches of Revelation*, 236–41.

its water from the warm springs of Hierapolis, but at the time the water reached Laodicea, it was lukewarm.[26] However, recent archaeological and epigraphic evidence does not support the idea that the water in Laodicea was of poor quality.[27] The claim that the water came from Hierapolis (or other warm springs) has been shown to be incorrect. Laodicea did not get its water from Hierapolis; rather, the main water supply came from the south (while Hierapolis is located northeast of Laodicea).[28] Contrary to the claims of many scholars, Laodicea had multiple water sources, and there's no compelling reason to believe that the water quality was poor.[29] In fact, some sources claim the opposite, that the water in Laodicea was good and even wondrous (Strabo, *Geographica* 13.4.14; cf. Sibylline Oracles 3:470–474).

Regardless of the condition of the water in Laodicea, hot or cold beverages were generally preferred to lukewarm ones.[30] While warm water could be soothing, cold water was refreshing. Both were considered positive, whereas lukewarm beverages were often viewed negatively (cf. Seneca, *On Anger*, 2.25.1). Lukewarm water was of no use, just as the Laodiceans' deeds bore no fruit. In some cases, lukewarm water was even used to induce vomiting (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 3.123a; *Life of Aesop* 2–3). The Laodiceans' lukewarmness (vv. 15–16) relates to their self-sufficiency (v. 17). What makes Christ nauseous is their complacent self-sufficiency.[31] This self-reliance has led them to become lukewarm, rendering the congregation "no longer distinguishable from its context concerning the way

[26] G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, NCB (Eerdmans, 1978), 105; Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, NTL (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 82; J. Massyngbaerde Ford, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, AB (Yale University Press, 2008), 418–19; Scot McKnight with Cody Matchett, *Revelation for the Rest of Us: A Prophetic Call to Follow Jesus as a Dissident Disciple* (Zondervan Reflective, 2023), 180–81; Rudwick and E. Green, "The Laodicean Lukewarmness," 176–78.

[27] Allan H. Cadwallader and James R. Harrison, "Perspectives on the Lycus Valley: An Inscriptional, Archeological, Numismatic and Iconographic Approach," in *The First Urban Churches 5: Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea*, ed. James R. Harrison and L. L. Welborn, WGRWSup 16 (SBL Press, 2019), 32–36; Buist M. Fanning, *Revelation*, ZECNT (Zondervan, 2020), 186–87; Huttner, *Early Christianity*, 156–58; Craig R. Koester, "The Message to Laodicea and the Problem of Its Local Context," 407–24; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Revelation*, BECNT (Baker Academic, 2023), 204–5; Mark Wilson, "Did the Laodiceans Drink Lukewarm Water? A Hydrological Inquiry into the Temperature Metaphor of Revelation 3:15–16," *Lycus Journal* 8 (2023): 72–87.

[28] Unal Ozis, "Water Works of Ancient Civilizations," in *Water Resources of Turkey*, ed. Nilgun B. Harmancioglu and Dogan Altinbilek (Springer, 2020), 23–25. Another weakness of this view is that Christ drinks the water. Giuseppe Scardozzi notes that the "thermal springs inside the urban area are not suitable for drinking, being characterized by high concentrations of dissolved salts." Scardozzi, *The Territory of Hierapolis in Phrygia* (Ege, 2020), 89. The imagery of Christ spitting out the water is difficult to reconcile with the idea that it refers to the healing springs of Hierapolis. Fanning, *Revelation*, 187.

[29] Archeological excavations by the Turkish archeological team led by Celal Şimşek have been important. Much of the data that was found in 2003 has not been published in English, which has led to many biblical scholars not knowing of it. See Celal Şimşek, "Urban Planning of Laodikeia on the Lykos in the Light of New Evidence," in *Landscape and History in the Lykos Valley: Laodikeia and Hierapolis in Phrygia*, ed. Celal Şimşek and Francesco D'andria (Cambridge Scholars, 2017), 1–51. See also Mark Wilson, "Did the Laodiceans Drink Lukewarm Water?" 72–87.

[30] A more traditional interpretation, which has largely fallen out of favor among scholars, suggests the lukewarmness refers to the Laodiceans' spiritual indifference. For this view, see Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of the Revelation: A Commentary*, PNTC (Eerdmans, 1990), 65; Edmondo F. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John* (Eerdmans, 1999), 129. Neither of these works demonstrates any awareness of alternative interpretations. Cf. Huttner, *Early Christianity*, 157–58. A major weakness of this interpretation is that Revelation presents both cold and warm as equally positive qualities.

[31] D. A. Carson, "The Church in an Affluent Society (Rev 3.14–22)," *Banner of Truth* 185 (1979): 16–21.

its members conduct themselves."[32] The language of vomiting (3:16) "recalls the prophetic threat to a defiled Israel of being vomited out of the promised land."[33] In Leviticus 18:24–25, 28; 20:22, God warns the unfaithful that participation in idolatry will result in their expulsion from the land. The threat is extended to the Laodiceans: Christ will bring judgment if they do not repent.[34]

Second, Christ confronts the Laodiceans' *pride*. Pride and arrogance are consistently identified in wisdom literature as hallmarks of the foolish and evidence of a lack of wisdom (e.g., Prov 8:13; 15:25; 16:19; Job 33:17; 40:11–2; Sir 10:14; see also Isa 2:12; 9:8).[35] Proverbs 16:5 states, "All those who are arrogant are an abomination to the Lord; be assured, they will not go unpunished." In Sirach, to depart from God is the beginning of pride (10:12). "Mockery and abuse issue from the proud, but vengeance lies in wait for them like a lion" (27:28). In the NT, in Colossians 2:18, in a letter written to a congregation related to the congregation in Laodicea, Paul warns of being "puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking."[36] Wealth and pride are frequently associated with each other in wisdom literature (Prov 30:8–9); and wisdom is prized above riches (Wis 7:9). This strong connection between foolishness, pride, and wealth is particularly evident in James 1:2–27. However, as stated in Proverbs 11:28, it is those who trust in their riches that will fall (see also 13:3; 14:16; 16:5, 18). Their wealth is built on a false security. This is true of the Laodiceans. Their wealth has led them to believe they are self-sufficient and in need of nothing.

However, the Laodiceans' self-image is, in reality, a *self-deception*. One of the hallmarks of the foolish in wisdom literature is self-deceit (e.g., Prov 12:15; 14:12; 26:12).[37] In Proverbs, self-deception is often described with the phrase "in his own eyes" (12:15; 16:2; 21:2; 26:5, 12, 16; 28:11).[38] The eyes, in Proverbs, are "depicted as potential sources of self-deceit."[39] In 26:12, the one who thinks of himself as wise is worse than a fool. The wise, in contrast to the fool, know what they do not know (15:14). "Wise

[32] Markus Öhler, "Meals and Banqueting Culture in the Apocalypse of John," in *T&T Clark Handbook to Early Christian Meals in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Soham Al-Suadi & Peter-Ben Smit (T&T Clark, 2019), 318.

[33] Jon K. Newton, *A Pentecostal Commentary on Revelation*, POTNTC (Wipf & Stock, 2021), 113. See also Timothy L. Decker, "'Live Long in the Land': The Covenant Character of Old Testament Allusions in the Message to Laodicea (Revelation 3:14–22)," *Neot* 48 (2014): 417–46; Mark Wilson, "Neither Cold nor Hot but Lukewarm: Rethinking the Temperature Metaphor in Revelation 3:15-16," *TynBul* 76 (2025): 20–21.

[34] Mark Wilson argues that the metaphor refers to Greco-Roman bathing culture, where "the most important rooms in the bath, the tepidarium had a minimal function that served as a lukewarm space for bathers moving between the hot and cold rooms." Wilson, "Neither Cold nor Hot," 26. However, the imagery of vomiting in Revelation 3:16 is best understood as describing a liquid that Christ vomits out. Although I agree with Wilson that the imagery likely alludes to Leviticus, the primary metaphor remains: Christ vomits the Laodiceans out of his mouth because they are lukewarm. The metaphor inherently implies the presence of something lukewarm in Christ's mouth. Furthermore, it is unclear, based on Wilson's argument, why cold and warm would be preferable to lukewarm.

[35] D. Kellermann, "גָּאָה," *TDOT* 2:349.

[36] Clinton E. Arnold, *Colossians*, WBC (Zondervan Academic, 2025), 573–74.

[37] Joseph K. Pak, *What the Bible Says about the Dangers of Self-Deception: An Exegetical Approach* (Wipf & Stock, 2024), 28–35. Warnings of self-deception are prevalent in the letter of James (e.g., 1:6, 26), a text that is universally acknowledged to be indebted to wisdom literature. See Dan G. McCartney, "Self-Deception in James," *CTR* 8.2 (2011): 31–43.

[38] Ronald E. Murphy notes that "any conclusion that relies on 'one's own eyes' can easily be a case of self-deception." Murphy, *Proverbs*, WBC 22 (Nelson, 1998), 91.

[39] Ansberry, *Proverbs*, 439.

advice overcomes self-deception."[40] Agur describes the proud, in 30:12–13, as "those who are pure in their own eyes, yet are not cleansed of their filthiness. There are those—how lofty are their eyes, how high their eyelids lift!" Jesus, in Revelation, exposes the Laodiceans' self-deception. While they think they are pure and perceptive, similar to the self-deception described in Proverbs 30, Christ declares them "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Rev 3:17).

The Laodiceans are commanded to be earnest and to repent (3:19). They need not only ears to hear but also eyes to see. They are spiritually poor and blind. The only path out of this deception is to "buy" Christ's gold, white garments, and eye salve. James L. Resseguie observes, "In other words, deception is so powerful that only Christ can provide the remedy to this situation."[41] Jesus "counsels" (συμβουλεύω) them to buy from him, a word that "carries the nuance of providing wise advice to someone facing a critical decision (e.g., Exod 18:19; 1 Kgs 1:12; John 18:14; cf. 1 Clem 58:2)."[42] As a sage, he is urging them to choose a wise path that leads to life. The language of "buying" alludes to Isaiah 55:1–3, a text likely influenced by wisdom traditions and also alluded to in Revelation 21:6 and 22:17.[43] In Isaiah 55:1, all who thirst are invited to come and buy "wine and milk without money and without price." The Laodiceans need to depend upon Christ. They need riches which cannot be bought with money. Christ is the source of wisdom, a wisdom that enables the spiritually blind to see. To all who acknowledge their thirst and need for Christ, Christ will "give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life" (21:6; cf. Jas 1:5). Jamie Davies writes:

> There is a call to humility here for the church in Laodicea to recognise its spiritual poverty, to acknowledge its sin of spiritual self-sufficiency, and to turn in utter dependency to Christ who alone is sufficient. Buried in the logic of this devastating rebuke, however, is the message's only positive note. Jesus's stern discipline of the Laodicean church is a demonstration of his enduring fatherly love for them (cf. Deut 8.5; Prov 13.24; Eph 6.4), intended to reveal the truth and bring about repentance and change.[44]

4. Wisdom and Counter-Wisdom in Lycus Valley

Why is Laodicea singled out? Why is there a particular focus on the Laodiceans' need for wisdom? Perhaps because they lack wisdom the most. It is widely acknowledged that the message to Laodicea is the harshest of the seven.[45] It is because they are the most foolish. This could explain why Christ is described as the "Amen" and "the faithful and true witness," emphasizing his role as a reliable source of wisdom and truth (Rev 3:14).[46]

It is interesting to compare the message to Laodicea in Revelation with Paul's letter to the Colossians. Colossae and Laodicea were neighboring cities (separated by only 11 miles), both situated in the Lycus

[40] Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Baker Academic, 2005), 233.

[41] James L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed: A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse* (Brill, 1998), 173.

[42] Fanning, *Revelation*, 188 n. 28.

[43] MacInnes, *Wisdom Traditions in the Book of Revelation*.

[44] Jamie Davies, *Reading Revelation: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Smyth & Helways, 2023), 128.

[45] Although the message to Sardis is also severe, it does, at least, concede the existence of some individuals who have maintained their fidelity to Christ (Rev 3:4).

[46] This does not detract from the fact that "the Amen" is a likely allusion to Isaiah 65:16. G. K. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, 273–94.

Valley of Phrygia.[47] Colossians 4:16 suggests a close relationship between the congregations in Colossae and Laodicea, as they were instructed to exchange letters.[48] The close relationship is probably implied by Paul's omission of Hierapolis in 2:1 and 4:16. The omission is unexpected, given that Hierapolis, a city also in the Lycus Valley, is mentioned in 4:13 and is even closer geographically to Colossae (6 miles apart) than Colossae and Laodicea. The omission of Hierapolis in 2:1 and 4:16 "lies probably in the fact that the ties between the two communities in Colossae and Laodicea were close and those between Colossae and Hierapolis more distant."[49] It is possible that Paul views the congregations in Colossae and Laodicea as a unit, since he only greets them in Colossians 4:15.[50]

This is a crucial point. In the letter to the Colossians, Paul combats a false philosophy—a counter wisdom. This false philosophy has an "appearance of wisdom" (2:23) and leads to arrogance (2:18).[51] In the letter, Paul emphasizes that Christ is the true source of wisdom (2:3; see also 1:15–20). There is a comprehensiveness to the wisdom in Christ, for in Christ are hidden "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3). The point is that one should not look beyond Christ for wisdom.[52] No letter within the Pauline corpus emphasizes the need for wisdom as Colossians does (1:9; 1:29; 2:3; 3:16; 4:5).[53]

[47] On early Christianity in the Lycus Valley, see Lukas Bormann, "Early Christians in the Lycus Valley," in *Early Christian Encounters with Town and Countryside: Essays on the Urban and Rural Worlds of Early Christianity* ed. Markus Tiwald and Jürgen K. Zangenberg (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 211–31; F. F. Bruce, "Jews and Christians in the Lycus Valley," *BSac* 141 (1984): 3–15; Huttner, *Early Christianity*; Alastair Kirklan, "The Beginnings of Christianity in the Lycus Valley: An Exercise in Historical Reconstruction," *Neot* 29 (1995): 109–24; McKechnie, *Christianizing Asia Minor*, 18–67; Paul Trebilco, "Christians in the Lycus Valley: the view from Ephesus and from Western Asia Minor," in *Colossae in Space and Time: Linking to an Ancient City*, ed. Alan H. Cadwallader and Michael Trainor (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 180–211.

[48] On the significance of the exchange, see Benjamin P. Laird, *The Pauline Corpus in Early Christianity: Its Formation, Publication, and Circulation* (Hendrickson, 2022), 113–16. Some scholars have suggested that the "letter from Laodicea" (τὴν ἐκ Λαοδικείας) was written by the Laodiceans, not Paul. John Calvin, *Commentary on Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians,* trans. John Pringle (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1851), 204–5; Charles P. Anderson, "Who Wrote 'The Epistle from Laodicea'?" *JBL* 85 (1966): 436–40. While it is theoretically and grammatically possible, it is, however, most likely written by Paul. Why else does he know about it? If it is a letter from the Laodiceans to Paul, how does he know that they have a copy? Since the letters are in parallelism with each other in verse 16, it makes sense that Paul wrote both. See Arnold, *Colossians*, 783–85; Gie Vleugels and J. Christi Coetzee, "De brief uit Laodicea: Identificatie van dit aanbevolen geschrift (Kol. 4:16)," *In die Skriflig* 33.1 (1999): 71–71. The great majority of scholars accept that it is claimed that Paul wrote it. Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 34B (Doubleday, 1994), 487–88; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC (Eerdmans, 1996), 286; Alan J. Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC 12 (InterVarsity Press, 2022), 200–201; N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC 12 (Eerdmans, 1986), 160. The term "reading aloud" (ἀνάγνωσις) may have been a technical term for the public reading of sacred texts. See Tomas Bokedal, *The Formation and Significance of the Christian Biblical Canon: A Study in Text, Ritual and Interpretation* (T&T Clark, 2014) 266–67; Vleugels and Coetzee, "De brief uit Laodicea," 72–73.

[49] Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 272.

[50] Anderson, "Who Wrote 'The Epistle from Laodicea'?" 437.

[51] Ulrich Huttner notes: "The author's repeated appeal to 'wisdom' (σοφία) here at the end of the epistle should clearly be interpreted as an attack on the 'philosophy' being debated in Colossae; in this passage [Col 4:2–6], this wisdom can simply be identified with Jesus Christ." Huttner, *Early Christianity*, 147.

[52] Kevin McFadden, *Hidden with Christ in God: A Theology of Colossians and Philemon*, New Testament Theology (Crossway, 2023), 57–58.

[53] The only possible exception is 1 Corinthians. By contrast, Colossians places a far greater emphasis on the relationship between Christ and wisdom. Moreover, wisdom occupies a larger portion of Colossians's content

Paul obviously senses a need to emphasize where to find true and reliable wisdom and prays that the Colossians might be filled with it (1:9). Huttner suggests that Paul's appeal to walk in wisdom and to always speak graciously in Colossians 4:5–6 is a missionary strategy. He notes that the Lycus Valley has a favorable condition for rhetorical specialists and was associated with thinkers such as Poleman of Laodicea, Antipater of Hierapolis, and Epictetus.[54]

The exchange of letters between the congregations in Colossae and Laodicea suggests that the false teaching had spread beyond Colossae and influenced the Christians in Laodicea as well.[55] This suggests that Christian leaders, evident in Colossians and Revelation, felt a need to emphasize the importance of seeking genuine wisdom. This likely reflects a specific trend among Christians in this region to embrace ways of thinking that some Christian leaders found problematic. Colin Hemer reaches a similar conclusion, writing: "Rev 3.14 and Col. 1.15, 18 appear to combat a form of speculative heresy known from Colossians to have been prevalent in the Lycus valley. This relationship is accordingly situational as well as probably literary."[56]

It is possible that this is the reason why the Christians in Hierapolis are not commanded to read the letters to Colossians and Laodicea; they might not have been struggling with the same challenges and temptations as these churches. Nevertheless, they might still be susceptible to the temptations, given that Paul notes Epaphras has "worked hard" for the three congregations in the Lycus Valley (Col 4:13).[57]

The remedy to these false philosophies lies in emphasizing Christ as the true source of wisdom. Christ exposes the foolish self-deceptions and philosophies that were infiltrating the Christian communities in the Lycus Valley. What these Christians desperately need is the genuine wisdom that unmasks false wisdom and arrogance. Christ is the embodiment of true wisdom and the sole source of true knowledge.

5. Wisdom in Laodicea and the Seven Messages in Revelation

While wisdom is particularly important for the message to the Laodiceans in Revelation, there is a sense in which wisdom is an important element for all seven messages. This is partly evident in the fact

than of 1 Corinthians. McFadden notes that the "theme of wisdom and knowledge runs throughout Paul's letter to the Colossians." McFadden, *Hidden with Christ in God,* 56. Concerning wisdom in Colossians, see Matthew E. Gordley, *New Testament Christological Hymns: Exploring Texts, Contexts, and Significance* (IVP Academic, 2018), 125–32. Concerning wisdom in Paul, see James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Eerdmans, 1998), 267–80. Some scholars, however, are skeptical of interpreting Colossians 1:15–20 through the lens of wisdom traditions. Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology*: *An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Hendrickson, 2007), 595–625.

[54] Huttner, *Early Christianity*, 147.

[55] G. K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, BECNT (Baker Academic, 2019), 361; Eduard Schweitzer, *The Letter to the Colossians: A Commentary*, trans. Andrew Chester (Augsburg, 1976), 242. Anderson observes that the close proximity of the Colossians and Laodiceans suggests they shared "in a common religious and theological environment." Anderson, "Who Wrote 'The Epistle from Laodicea'?" 437. In Colossians 2:1, Paul similarly "contends" and "struggles" on behalf of the Colossians and the Laodiceans. This highlights "the close alignment between Paul and Epaphras in gospel ministry goals and passion." Thompson, *Colossians*, 197. Beale notes that ἀγών combined with ἀγωνίζομαι (1:29) usually refers to the struggle against opposition (e.g., 1 Tim 6:12). Beale, *Colossians*, 154.

[56] Hemer, *Letters*, 18.

[57] Arnold writes: "But one troubling implication of this passage is the very real possibility that the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis are in danger of succumbing to the same threat that is facing the Colossian church through the factional teachers." Arnold, *Colossians*, 779.

that all the messages conclude with the exhortation to have ears to hear. As we noted briefly above, this exhortation is a proverb that has its roots in the wisdom tradition, and especially Jesus's appropriation of it. All messages call their readers to hear well—that is, to discern wisely (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

In this sense, all the messages share wisdom elements, as they all exhort readers to discern wisely. Furthermore, when examining the content of the messages, one finds topics central to wisdom traditions. In the 1960s, the French scholar Joseph Comblin noted parallels between the seven messages and wisdom literature.[58] He noted thematic parallels such as (1) attention to good works, (2) the denunciation of evil works, (3) an appeal to conversion, (4) testing, and (5) rewards. These thematic parallels open up the possibility of reading all the messages through a wisdom lens.[59] The messages address wisdom questions, such as righteous conduct, the pursuit of a godly character, and the practice of wise discernment. What the Christians in Asia Minor are really in need of in the midst of challenging days is wisdom. The messages expose folly and guide the Christians toward true wisdom: Jesus Christ. In this sense, the seven messages in Revelation can be understood as revealed wisdom, calling the congregations of Asia Minor to live in accordance with the true wisdom found only in Christ.

6. Conclusions

The message to the Laodiceans includes strong language—language of rebuke and language of love. The language reflects the author's conviction that the Laodiceans are on the dangerous path of folly. The antidote of this foolishness is the same antidote Paul prescribed in the message to the Colossians: a focus on the supremacy of Christ and Christ as the true source and supplier of wisdom.

The extensive use of wisdom language in the message to the Laodiceans suggests that the text can be understood as a form of wisdom discourse. The message presents Christ as the embodiment of wisdom, revealing and exposing the Laodiceans' folly. He disciplines them out of love, and he knocks on their door, seeking to have them hear his voice so that they might repent and enjoy fellowship with him. By exposing the folly, the text is inviting the reader to cultivate a humble character that is in accordance with the way of Jesus.

It is possible that the Christians at Lycus Valley were particularly vulnerable to a philosophy that fostered self-sufficiency and blinded them to their need for Christ. However, Christ's correction is presented as an act of love, inviting the Laodiceans to embrace the wisdom of God.

[58] Comblin, *Le Christ dans l'Apocalypse* (Desclée, 1976), 120–28.

[59] Cf. J. De Waal Dryden, *A Hermeneutic of Wisdom: Recovering the Formative Agency of Scripture* (Baker Academic, 2018), 263.

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Retrieving Athanasius: Ruled Readings and Trinitarian Exegesis

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Abstract: This essay argues that evangelical retrieval of the Christian tradition finds a particularly fruitful interlocutor in Athanasius of Alexandria, whose "ruled readings" of Scripture and trinitarian exegesis model a canonically-coherent theological hermeneutic. Against lingering Harnackian suspicions that patristic theology represents a Hellenistic corruption of Christianity, the essay demonstrates that Athanasius's theological reasoning emerges from a deeply scriptural framework centered on the unity of Scripture and scripturally-rooted doctrinal conclusions. This essay concludes by showing the ways in which Athanasius's interpretive sensibilities can strengthen evangelical biblical, theological, and ecclesial convictions.

Evangelicals have become interested in retrieving the Christian tradition in recent years. There are likely several reasons for this, but two related issues stand out. First, evangelicals have developed a renewed interest in questioning their own biblical, theological, philosophical, and ecclesiological depth. Second and relatedly, evangelicals have renewed their interest in their relationship to the Christian past to answer some of these questions. In this essay, I propose that Athanasius of Alexandria is one helpful recourse for evangelical retrieval, especially regarding the scriptural witness to the triune God.[1]

In what follows, I will compare Athanasius's theological and exegetical sensibilities to our own, showing that though he is a far distant figure in the span of time, he is a close companion for our own theological and exegetical pursuits. I use the word "sensibilities" intentionally to point to certain theological and exegetical presuppositions (spoken and unspoken). So, I do not propose that we must wholeheartedly agree with every theological or exegetical conclusion that Athanasius—or any other church father, or any other human being alive, for that matter—comes to. I am only asserting that we share common sensibilities in our approach to Scripture, oftentimes more so than we might expect as

[1] "Retrieval" means different things to different people. For the purposes of this essay, I will define retrieval as *the act of reading and understanding figures and ideas from the past as a way to apply encouragement and/or correction for renewal in today's church.* To *understand* those who have come before us, we must do responsible, humble historical theology that understands figures in their own context and idiom. In order to *apply* their insights for encouragement and/or correction today, we must carefully consider the strengths and weaknesses in our own context and idiom, so that we can advance the gospel today with the help of treasures of old. I flesh out the idea of retrieval and shared sensibilities more fully in Brandon D. Smith, *Taught by God: Ancient Hermeneutics for the Modern Church* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024).

modern evangelicals. As we discuss Athanasius's approach to reading Scripture in the fourth century post-Nicene debates against so-called "Arian" groups, we will see that Athanasius's theological and exegetical sensibilities can be instructive for us, in part because of the sensibilities we share with him.

I will begin this essay by briefly surveying evangelicals' theological and exegetical sensibilities. I will also address potential concerns about retrieving patristic theology and exegesis and judge whether certain suspicions about patristic theology and exegesis are valid. Then, we will delve into the post-Nicene controversy and engage with Athanasius's ruled reading strategies and trinitarian exegesis contra subordinationism as a test case for evangelical retrieval. Finally, we will consider how particular aspects of Athanasius's theological and exegetical sensibilities can help encourage and correct our own today.

1. The Church Fathers and Hellenistic Suspicion

At the turn of the twentieth century, Adolf von Harnack famously asserted that soon after the close of the New Testament era, Christianity became infiltrated by Hellenistic philosophy and began formulating "dogma"—an authoritative set of doctrines that were more influenced by Hellenistic philosophies than the teachings of the historical Jesus.[2] For Harnack, dogma increasingly rested in the hands of authoritative teachers and creeds rather than the common Christian layman, detaching the church from the Bible and its primitive roots. This development of dogma was swift and totalizing, according to Harnack:

> A complete fusion of the old faith and theology [or dogma], one that tranquillised the minds of the devout, was not consummated till the fourth, strictly speaking, indeed till the fifth century.... But from the end of the second century up to the closing years of the third, the fundamental principle of philosophic theology had naturalised itself, in the very faith of the Church.[3]

Notice the timeline Harnack offers here: "philosophic theology," as he calls it, crystallized in the fifth century as the Roman Catholic Church began lording dogma over the laity was already making its home in the Christian faith within a brief century after the New Testament writings.[4] At the very core of Harnack's complaint is the concern that the faith founded on the historical Jesus had been shipped to the Hellenistic world, stuffed full of artificial "dogma" by increasingly hierarchical and exclusivist ecclesiastical structures, and then sold back to the people as though it was still the "old faith" of the Bible.

Due to his ardent rejection of "philosophy" and systematizing biblical claims into theological categories, Harnack ended up with no real place for supporting some of the basic orthodox beliefs of Christianity that evangelicals hold so dear. For example, he rejected the doctrine of the Trinity; discarded the Gospel of John; cast large swaths of doubt on the extraordinary claims of the Synoptic Gospels; emphasized a gospel focused on inner change and moral action rather than God's radical salvific grace

[2] This concern was by no means unique to Harnack. Another influential figure and contemporary of Harnack, Wilhelm Bousset, set out a similar path, though he saw Hellenism as a problem infiltrating the New Testament era itself, not merely the post-apostolic reception of it. Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (Abingdon, 1970), 13.

[3] Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. James Millar, 7 vols. (Williams & Norgate, 1894–1899), 3:5.

[4] See also Adolf von Harnack, *Bible Reading in the Early Church*, trans. J. R. Wilkinson (Williams & Norgate, 1912).

for sinners; underemphasized ecclesiology at the expense of academic concerns; and questioned the overall assumption that the Bible is divinely inspired and without error.[5]

Of course, recent patristic scholarship has roundly rejected Harnack's claim that early Christian theology was more concerned with some sort of Hellenized "philosophic theology" than Scripture—or that this dichotomy even existed. In a recent lecture, Lewis Ayres noted that "talking about a Christianity prior to Hellenism makes little sense" because the world of the New Testament had already experienced Hellenization long before the first century. For example, Jews already spoke and were being educated in Greek, and there already existed a Septuagint—which, of course, is quoted in the New Testament.[6] For evangelicals to wholesale reject "Hellenism" as a mere imposition on Christian faith is to reject early Christian life and thought and consequently portions of biblical writings—as Harnack ultimately did.

While Harnack is not a household name for many today, his ghost still haunts some evangelical theological houses. Many of his concerns above match basic evangelical concerns, especially the importance of access to Scripture and an aversion to ecclesiastical dogmatic overreach. And there is no doubt that his presuppositions are ingrained in many of us through academic and ecclesial training.[7] I intend to return to this point toward the end of the paper, but only after we take time to examine Athanasius's critique of the subordinationists as a test case. In particular, we will look at two overarching themes in Athanasius's writings that evangelicals can readily retrieve: (1) ruled readings of Scripture and (2) the resulting trinitarian exegesis. Then we can ask, is the Harnackian suspicion true of Athanasius?

2. The Trinity and Ruled Readings in Athanasius

2.1. Ruled Readings of Scripture

The first avenue for retrieving Athanasius is his practice of implementing ruled readings of Scripture. Because evangelicals value a whole-Bible hermeneutic that recognizes the divine inspiration and unity of the Old and New Testaments, we share this sensibility with Athanasius and the earliest theologians. We can define ruled readings as *certain theological-exegetical rules or sensibilities that constrain theological-exegetical results*. One might think of Irenaeus's famous "rule of faith" or "canon of truth" (κανών της αληθείας) in his *Epideixis*, commonly known as *The Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching*, which asserted that right interpretive conclusions would not violate Scripture's description of the unified work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or the unity of Scripture itself.[8] The fact that κανών ("canon") is sometimes translated as "rule" might be incidental but is actually informative: biblically-faithful ruled readings must do justice to the whole canon of Scripture. Heretics have their own ruled readings, to be sure, but they are judged based on their canonical-continuity.

[5] In briefer form, see his arguments in *What Is Christianity?* trans. Thomas Bailey Sanders (Harper, 1957).

[6] Lewis Ayres, *Christological Hellenism: A Melancholy Proposal* (Marquette University Press, 2024). See especially pages 15–30.

[7] The popularization of this concern comes through many avenues and to varying degrees. One example is its appearance in the theologies of scholars popular with evangelical pastors, scholars, and students. See for example William Lane Craig, "Is God the Son Begotten in His Divine Nature?," *TheoLogica* 3.1 (2019): 22–32, and Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Eerdmans, 2008), 59.

[8] Irenaeus, *Epideixis* 6.

Of course, Athanasius did not write a hermeneutics textbook, nor did he ever explicitly describe his exegetical "method."[9] That said, there are certain ruled readings evident in his works, perhaps most notably what he called the "scope" (σκοπός) or "character" (χαρακτῆρα) of Scripture and the Christian faith:

> This is the scope [or purpose] and character of Holy Scripture…. It contains a twofold account of the Savior; that he was and is God, the Son, being the Father's Word and Radiance and Wisdom; and that afterwards, for our sake, he received flesh from Mary, the Virgin and God-Bearer, and was made man. And this [scope] is to be found throughout all the inspired Scriptures, as the Lord himself said, "Search the Scriptures, for they testify about me."[10]

This ruled reading is a basic implementation of what has become known as "partitive exegesis"—the assertion that Scripture speaks about Christ doubly, as both divine and human.[11] Athanasius here makes the case that all of Scripture's claims about Christ can be summed up in predicating of him either divine or human attributes and operations. While it would be an overstatement to assert that Athanasius's entire exegetical "method"—if he truly has one—can be boiled down to this christological "scope," it nonetheless serves as an integral type of ruled reading for him. Any interpretation that would deny or minimize either Christ's divinity or his humanity—and, by extension, the necessity of the incarnation for salvation—would be clearly at odds with a key theme of Scripture. It would, indeed, be out of "character."

So if the preponderance of scriptural evidence points to the divinity of the Son, then any isolated text that may seem to indicate otherwise should be reconsidered in light of the whole Bible. Athanasius asserts, then, that the subordinationists are unable to understand and interpret Scripture properly. Why? Because they prooftext individual, isolated passages rather than see any particular passage's place in the broader scriptural context centered on Christ, the eternal Son who became man. In other words, the subordinationists claimed to be "biblical" by stacking up passages, but they actually needed a ruled reading of Scripture that was more canonically faithful to constrain their exegesis. If their version of a ruled reading was assuming that the Son was created, then they need to rethink their "rule" because it was clearly at odds with certain parts of Scripture. Like Irenaeus before him, Athanasius continued the tradition of following ruled readings that took into account the unity of God and the unity of Scripture. The subordinationists ultimately failed on both counts.

A prime example of this mistake is their insistence that Proverbs 8:22–25 taught that God created the Son before creating all other things.[12] Both Athanasius and the subordinationists agreed that the Son is the "Wisdom" spoken of in these passages but disagreed about his relationship to the Father. For the subordinationists, the Son should be thought of as a mediatorial figure between God and creation;

[9] See James D. Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 1–42.

[10] *Orations against the Arians* 3.29. English translations of *Orations against the Arians* are mine.

[11] This is no doubt influenced, in part, by the anti-"Arian" polemics that characterize much of his work, though this emphasis also shows up in less obviously anti-"Arian" works like *Against the Pagans* and *On the Incarnation*; James D. Ernest, "Athanasius of Alexandria: The Scope of Scripture in Polemical and Pastoral Context," *VC* 47 (1993): 341.

[12] See e.g., Athanasius, *Defense of the Nicene Definition* 26. In the LXX, v. 22 reads κύριος ἔκτισέν με ἀρχὴν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ εἰς ἔργα αὐτοῦ and v. 25 reads πρὸ τοῦ ὄρη ἑδρασθῆναι πρὸ δὲ πάντων βουνῶν γεννᾷ με. Both ἔκτισέν ("created" or "founded") and γεννᾷ ("born" or "begotten") were at the center of this debate.

for Athanasius, the idea that God could create a Son and thus become Father implied mutability in God. Moreover, Athanasius argues, Scripture teaches a Creator-creature distinction, so Arius's view that the Son has a unique divine-creature nature separate from the Father's violates basic biblical metaphysics. As he says in *Against the Arians*,

> But if he is Son—as the Father says and the Scriptures proclaim—and the Son is none other than what is begotten from the Father, and what is begotten from the Father is his Word, Wisdom, and Radiance, then what is there to say but that, in claiming, "There once was no Son," they, like robbers, strip God of his Word and proclaim that he was once without his own Word and Wisdom, the Light was once without radiance, and the Fountain was once barren and dry?[13]

Athanasius gathers several biblical texts together to make a rather clear rebuttal: to say that the Son was created is to say that the Father was once mute without his "Word" (John 1:1–3), dumb without his "Wisdom" (Prov 8:22; 1 Cor 1:24), and dull without the "Radiance of his glory" (Heb 1:3). Further, they must say that the "Fountain of salvation" (Isa 12:3; John 7:37–38) was once dry. Since these texts rule out the idea that the Son could be created, Athanasius offers alternatives that fit within the scope of Scripture.

Not only does he critique their exegesis, he accuses them of relying too much on the Greeks rather than Scripture because of their emphasis on God as ἀγέννητος ("unoriginate").[14] Though they accuse Athanasius similarly of using non-biblical words like *homoousios* ("of one substance"), he asserts that non-biblical terms are useful only if they truly represent what the Bible actually teaches: "even if the words are not as such in the Scriptures, yet … they contain the sense and communicate it to those who have ears that are whole and hearken unto piety."[15]

Athanasius sees no issue with using a non-biblical word or concept, but it must be critically appropriated—it cannot cut against the grain or "sense" of Scripture. Most notably, Athanasius points out that

> he did not teach us, "When you pray, say, 'Our Unoriginate in heaven'" but rather, "When you pray, say, 'our Father in heaven.'" And it was his will that the summary of our faith should be upheld the same way by calling us to be baptized, not in the name of the Unoriginate and Originate, nor in the name of the Creator and Created, but in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[16]

Since the subordinationists used "Unoriginate" to deny eternal fatherhood and sonship in God by separating God from all other things, Athanasius rejected its usage in favor of the baptismal formula, which is both biblical and in line with the church's triune worship in baptism. So, far from Harnack's accusation of a Hellenistic and/or dogmatic imposition, Athanasius first and foremost carefully constructed ruled readings and theological presuppositions from Scripture and the Christian faith itself. Any time a non-biblical word or concept was used, it had to pass the test of scriptural congruence and Christian practice.

[13] Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians* 1.14.

[14] Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians* 1.30.

[15] Athanasius, *Defense of the Nicene Definition* 21. English translation from Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, The Early Church Fathers (Routledge, 2004).

[16] Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians* 1.34.

2.2. Trinitarian Exegesis

Reflecting on the points above, Frances Young concludes that Athanasius "mapped the groundwork" for later trinitarian debates with these arguments.[17] Indeed, this christological "scope" was so central to his theology and exegesis that he employed it as part of his defense of the Holy Spirit's divinity in his letters to Serapion. He saw the Pneumatomachian error—that the Holy Spirit is a creature—as the same basic hermeneutical mistake as christological subordinationism, because both groups ignored the totality of scriptural witness about the Creator-creature distinction and the Son and Spirit's place on the Creator's side.[18]

So, the second avenue for retrieving Athanasius is his trinitarian exegesis. Within Athanasius's "scope" of Scripture is the affirmation that the Son is divine, which helps him develop a trinitarian exegetical argument. This affirmation of the Son's divinity is not forced into the text but something he sees as evident in the totality of the scriptural witness. As such, he deploys this ruled reading in various biblical texts in his detailed and sometimes winding discourses against the subordinationists. In the interest of time and space, we can look at one obvious example of this rule being applied: the debate over the meaning of Christ as the "firstborn."

In his third and culminating discourse against the so-called "Arians," Athanasius brings in biblical text after biblical text to show how their reading of Scripture leads to their heretical position.[19] In the midst of an extended reflection on the meaning of John 14:10—"I am in the Father and the Father is in me"—he notes that the subordinationists draw on the "firstborn" language from places like Colossians 1:15 and Hebrews 1:6 to say that the Son is created. But he saw their view of the Son as the "firstborn" as too myopic, too overshadowed by a dogged commitment to the Son's creation, so he points out other biblical passages, titles, and descriptions that must be considered alongside the "firstborn" passages.

First, he highlights their critique of equating the Father and Son according to nature in John 14 (and elsewhere). The "Ariomaniacs"[20] say, according to Athanasius, "'How can one be contained in the other and the other contained in that one?' or 'How can the Father, who is greater, be contained in the Son?'"[21] As Athanasius points out, this goes back to their assumption that the Son's existence must be related to creation, since sons must come after their fathers in time and a sequence of generation. But, as Athanasius points out, they do not understand the meaning of John 1's picture of a true Father and true Son, Hebrews 1's description of the Son as "the radiance of God's glory and the exact expression of his nature," and Colossians 1's description of the Son as "the image of the invisible God."[22] If the Father and Son are truly Father and Son, they must share the same nature and all the entailments therein, and these titles and descriptions reinforce their shared nature.

Second, in light of these titles and descriptions, Athanasius says that "firstborn" cannot simply mean that the Son was created by the Father. If the Son is created, then he is creature, not Creator, which violates plain biblical teaching. Again, the "scope" of Scripture will not allow a denigration of the

[17] Frances M. Young, *Scripture in Doctrinal Dispute* (Eerdmans, 2024), 47.

[18] See, e.g., *Letters to Serapion concerning the Holy Spirit* 2.2.2–7. Ernest, "Athanasius of Alexandria," 343 also points out this relationship and adds another example from *Defense of the Nicene Definition* 13–14.

[19] For more on the fourth oration once attributed to Athanasius, see R. P. C. Hanson, "The Source and Significance of the Fourth 'Oratio contra Arianos' Attributed to Athanasius," *VC* 42 (1988): 257–66.

[20] He uses the word "Ἀρειομανῖται" in *Orations against the Arians* 3.1.

[21] Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians* 3.1.

[22] Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians* 3.1.

Son's divinity or a hierarchy of divinity. However, the "scope" also affirms that the Son is truly human. Athanasius never denies the humanity of the Son in the incarnation, of course, but he continues to remind the subordinationists that the Son's humanity must be upheld alongside the affirmation of his divinity. He offers the following alternative interpretation:

> The Son is not called the Firstborn because he is counted among creation, but as proof of the creation and adoption of all things through the Son. Just as the Father is First, so also [the Son] is first as the image of the First. And because the First is in him, and he is also begotten from the Father, in him all creation is created and adopted.[23]

Put simply, the "firstborn" language shows that he is equal to the Father as his Son by nature and thus shows that he is worthy of bringing sons and daughters into God's family by adoption. "Firstborn" ranks the Son *above* creation rather than ranking him merely *with* creation among creatures, as the subordinationists thought. This argument also, then, affirms Athanasius's larger point about John 14:10—to say that the Son is "in" the Father is to say that they share the same nature. This better accords with the context of both John's Gospel and the broader scriptural witness, an umbrella under which "firstborn" must be understood.

Once again, contrary to the Harnackian suspicion about foreign impositions on the text, Athanasius debunks the subordinationist heresy through a comprehensive, whole-Bible hermeneutic that takes seriously all of its claims about the Son. As I mentioned above, we as modern evangelical interpreters are often beholden to the post-Enlightenment sensibilities of scientific inquiry and psychoanalyzing historical figures. This often leads us to Harnackian sensibilities of over-isolating biblical authors and books from another, a nervousness about anything that might "impose" on studying the subject (in this case, Scripture), and having a suspicion about the extent to which we can treat Scripture as a unified witness. For different reasons and in a different idiom, the subordinationist groups of the fourth century had the same myopic view of exegesis. But as evangelicals whose foundational sensibilities ultimately rest in affirming the doctrine of the Trinity and Scripture as a unified witness to the triune God, we have much more in common with Athanasius. Indeed, he is in part the *source* of these evangelical sensibilities.

3. Evangelical Sensibilities and Patristic Retrieval

I once had a student who, upon being assigned Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*, emailed me the following: "I am struggling to write a review of this book because I feel like it is too basic. I already know and affirm everything in here." Aside from pointing out his youthful hubris, I reminded him that part of why Athanasius feels so familiar is because evangelicals are theologically downstream from him. Much of what we take for granted both in our understanding of Scripture and our trinitarian theology is owed in part to Athanasius's work; however, evangelicals often pick-and-choose doctrines from the past that we enjoy, often without appreciating the methodology that led early theologians to their conclusions. Rather than steal the answers from Athanasius's theological test, we can learn how he studied for it by studying his methodology and theological-exegetical works. Let us return to Harnack (or his ghost) as a test case.

[23] Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians* 3.9.

On the one hand, evangelicals could agree with some of Harnack's sensibilities. We can certainly join him in celebrating the Reformation's re-emphasis on Scripture and the ability for people to read the Bible for themselves. We could also sympathize with the concern that theology can run the risk of imposing categories on Scripture that are not, well, *scriptural*. We could undoubtedly agree with his desire to see Christianity centralized on an understanding of the real, historical Jesus.

On the other hand, as evangelicals, we should also be concerned about where these sensibilities led him (and have at times led us). Harnack in the end did not tackle what we might deem understandable concerns with a retrieval of the Christian past or even a return to the divinely-inspired Scriptures. Instead, Harnack turned away from biblical and historic Christianity to the modern, post-Enlightenment emphases of personalized religion and historical-critical assumptions about history. Admittedly, Harnack is an extreme case, but I do not think it is a reach to conclude that, at least in part, Harnack's suspicion of the Christian tradition cut him off from one of the main resources he could have used to answer his concerns. Though we may not affirm many of his conclusions, we can certainly see how his sensibilities have negatively impacted modern evangelical thought and practice.

Now, it is true that Athanasius's writings contain no concerns about the late medieval Catholic Church's abuse of tradition or sacraments. He also had no meaningful concept for a distinction between systematic theology and biblical studies and, thus, no misgivings about the reliability of the Gospel accounts of the historical Jesus. And, of course, we should not expect him to—he was not alive for nor showed any prophetic insights about these controversies. In this way, his historical distance from us makes him less understandable and perhaps even less appealing to us than a modern man like Adolf von Harnack. However, when comparing Athanasius's sensibilities with our own, we should be able to see by now that he shares more with us than Harnack. In light of this, below are four ways to retrieve Athanasius as modern evangelicals.

First, we as evangelicals should take note of how ruled readings can help us better understand and articulate the unity of Scripture and the doctrines therein. We already apply ruled readings in our interpretation, even if somewhat unconsciously, through certain confessional commitments, ecclesiological traditions, and personal convictions. Instead of pretending as though we can shed ourselves of theological presuppositions or external influences, we should rather embrace critically-appropriated, scripturally-congruent categories to help us read and teach the Bible better. Retrieving Athanasius gives us more tools for our interpretive toolbelt and offers further insights into all sorts of biblical and theological issues that we might otherwise miss with a narrow focus on reconstructing historical minds and moments.

Second, we should take note of the cosmological rootedness of Athanasius's theology and exegesis. He takes seriously the Creator-creature distinction present in Scripture, understanding its power to affirm the Trinity and rule out false teachings. We as evangelicals still wrestle with allowing other religions to inform our biblical cosmology, assuming that mediatorial figures in Second Temple Judaism or "divine councils" in other religions are imported into Scripture. Rather than assuming that Scripture is primarily reliant on other religions' metaphysics (as modern historical-critical scholars do) or allowing pagan metaphysics to rule our theology (as the subordinationists did), we can take seriously the biblical data drawn out by Athanasius above and see that there is the triune God and all things in relation to God, as John Webster famously said.[24]

[24] John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (T&T Clark, 2012), 58.

Third, we should take note of the deeply exegetical foundation of Athanasius's trinitarian theology. He does not merely collate a bunch of prooftexts to make his point but rather brings these texts into conversation to demonstrate their logic and coherence. It is true that some in the biblical studies community are sometimes far too unsympathetic to retrieval; however, it can also be the case that those of us doing retrieval are sometimes too sympathetic. So we should be careful not to repristinate the past or spend more time teaching the doctrine of others—Athanasius, Aquinas, or whomever else—than teaching the doctrine from the Scriptures. We should not recommend retrieving Athanasius for his own sake, but rather because he models something closer to our own hearts, namely, a love for Scripture and a desire to formulate theology consistent with it.

Fourth, we should take note of Athanasius's apologetic impulse. We saw above that his ruled readings and trinitarian exegesis serve, in part, as a counter to false teaching. He is unafraid of using Scripture to critique false doctrine, largely by applying exegetical practices like ruled readings to teach "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). Ruled readings and trinitarian exegesis do not simply serve to teach the church right reading and belief—though this is important—but they also show the church how to combat false teaching. Even today, various groups flood front doors and mailboxes with rehashes of these ancient heresies of subordination and uncritical assimilation of other philosophies. In Athanasius, we have theological and exegetical resources "to contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all" (Jude 3).[25]

[25] A special thanks to Adonis Vidu and Winston Hottman for their helpful feedback on an earlier draft/presentation of this article.

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The Typology of Jonathan Edwards: A Rejoinder to Cameron Schweitzer

— Drew Hunter —

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Abstract: Cameron Schweitzer argues that Drew Hunter's earlier work on Jonathan Edwards's understanding of typology is too narrowly christological. This rejoinder argues that Hunter's view is not narrowly christological and that Hunter and Schweitzer's understanding of Edwards's typological exegesis are complementary rather than in competition.

I'm grateful for Cameron Schweitzer's thoughtful engagement with my article "Hebrews and the Typology of Jonathan Edwards."[1] In that article I examined what Edwards's interpretive reflections on Hebrews reveal about his practices and principles of exegetical typology. I showed how Edwards's principled typological method contributes to recent discussions about typology and the Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament.

In response, Schweitzer contends that my account of Edwards's typology is too narrowly christological. This rejoinder offers three responses: I will show that (1) his critique suggests a narrower understanding than I intended, that (2) the wording I use in my claim is drawn from Edwards's own articulation of his typology, and that (3) our conclusions are ultimately complementary. Our analysis of Edwards's typology differs in description and emphasis, rather than substance.

First, I will clarify the argument of my earlier essay. Schweitzer argues that my thesis regarding Edwards's typology is too narrow. He writes that I claimed that, for Edwards, types "always and only point to spiritual things related to Christ" and are "only and always related to Christ." He argues that we should "replace the imprecise term, 'christological,' with more accurate and broader terminology to describe Edwards's biblical typology."

By presenting this summary as my thesis, he suggests that the main burden of my article was to argue that Edwards's typology is narrowly christological. Additionally, he suggests that I used the term "christological" to articulate my view. In fact, my claim appeared not as the thesis but as a smaller subpoint within the broader article. In the section where it appeared, I distilled six principles of Edwards's typological interpretation drawn from his reflections on Hebrews. The principle addressed in the critique is that "The purpose of a type is to teach about Christ and 'gospel things.'" In my article, I did not use the term "christological" to summarize Edwards's view. Instead, I wrote that, for Edwards, "types always and only point to spiritual things related to Christ and the gospel," and "the antitype is always

[1] Drew Hunter, "Hebrews and the Typology of Jonathan Edwards," *Themelios* 44 (2019): 339–52; Cameron Schweitzer, "Does Edwards's Exegetical Typology 'Always and Only Point to Spiritual Things Related to Christ?' A Response to Drew Hunter from the Evidence of the *Blank Bible*," *Themelios* 50 (2025): 534–51.

related to Christ and 'gospel things' of the New Testament age." Given the brevity of this section, I did not thoroughly define these terms, and some of my wording could invite a narrower interpretation than I offered. By "gospel things," I was referring to realities bound up with Christ and his redemptive work, including both inaugurated and eschatological fulfillment. Thus, typological realities like the temple, New Jerusalem, the church, and rest are all connected to Christ and the new age of fulfillment he inaugurated.

Second, the language of my claim is drawn from Edwards's own description of his typology. In the places where the critique refers to my language as overly narrow, I am primarily quoting or paraphrasing what Jonathan Edwards himself wrote. For example, in one place Edwards argued that types are shadows, and shadows cannot be fully understood until light shines on them. Then he wrote this critical sentence, from which I drew the principle: "the light that was plainly to reveal the gospel things came after Christ, the substance of all ancient types."[2] Edwards presents light as shining on the Old Testament shadow-types, which he said revealed "gospel things," and that Christ is "the substance of all ancient types." This is Edwards's own way of articulating his typology.

Therefore, when the critique suggests that "Hunter's thesis that 'Christ is the substance of all ancient types' is too narrow to account for all the available evidence," it's worth noting that this language is drawn from Edwards himself. It is possible that Edwards's own language is too narrow or unclear at this point. However, my working assumption is that Edwards's own articulation of his principle does not contradict the examples of types that he provides. For Edwards, types that point to the church, the New Jerusalem, rest, and so forth, can be understood as relating to Christ and what he calls "gospel things." For Edwards, this seems to function not as a narrow category but an expansive one.

Third, I think my claim and Schweitzer's conclusions are best viewed as complementary rather than competing. He acknowledges this possibility in footnote 24, in which he says my use of the term "gospel things" could refer to a *strictly* christological category, or it could refer to a more expansive one. He then wrote, "It is possible, though, given Hunter's definition of "gospel things," to include these other antitypes such that he does not undermine his thesis about Edwards's 'christological' exegetical typology." He suggests this would require me to "provide greater definitional clarity or for the reader to be quite charitable in their interpretation of his terms." As I noted above, and which the examples in my article substantiate, Edwards operates with an expansive category of typological fulfillment, which can include eschatology, the temple, the church, the theme of rest, and so forth. According to Edwards, all such types are ultimately bound up with Christ and the gospel realities of the new age he inaugurated.

Schweitzer's article helpfully advances the discussion of Edwards's exegetical typology by providing precise and broad terminology to describe Edwards's practices. In summarizing his work, he wrote, "Edwards understands biblical typology as a kind of historiographical framework by which he interprets the world and redemptive history as a constant movement towards its God-ordained teleological and eschatological ends." He then provides four categories that encapsulate Edwards's typology: spiritual, historical, teleological, and eschatological. This is illuminating, and I propose Edwards would say these categories are also rightly connected to Christ and the gospel realities of the age of fulfillment.

My understanding of Edwards's language is similar to Jesus's claim that Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms spoke of him (Luke 24:44), and the Apostle Paul's statement that "all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor 1:20). It is similar to statements by the modern biblical theologian, Graeme

[2] Jonathan Edwards, *Typological Writings*, ed. Wallace E. Anderson, Mason I. Lowance, and David H. Watters, WJE 11 (Yale University Press, 1993), 149.

Goldsworthy, who wrote that Christ "is the ultimate substance of all the promises of God in which these people trusted" and "all texts in the whole Bible bear a discernable relationship to Christ and are primarily intended as a testimony to Christ."[3] These are each concise summaries of how all God's promises are ultimately fulfilled in Christ and his redemptive work—even if the details are complex to work out. Jonathan Edward would agree.

[3] Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Eerdmans, 2000), 108, 113.

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Mimesis and Christian Leaders: A Rhetoric of Authority and Accountability

— Matthew LaMaster —

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Abstract: LaMaster considers Elizabeth Castelli's contention that Paul's use of imitative language reinforces power in authority relationships. While Castelli has not found wide acceptance in the New Testament scholarly guild, a dismissal of her thesis contributes to an erosion of any understanding of pastoral authority in the New Testament. This paper demonstrates that Castelli was right in that imitation does reinforce pastoral authority but wrong in her mischaracterization of pastoral authority. In particular, NT mimetic use reinforces authority by limiting authority, sharing power, encouraging costly virtues, and inverting cultural norms of authority.

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). The rhetoric which Paul utilizes here is called "mimesis," and it is a staple of ancient authors and speakers of all stripes. Ancient rhetoricians, including the authors of the NT, argued their cases and achieved their literary and rhetorical goals using mimesis.[1] This neither is the only place where Paul makes use of mimetic rhetoric (cf. Gal 4:20; 1 Cor 4:16) nor is Paul the only author in the NT to use mimetic rhetoric (1 Pet 5:1–5; Heb 13:7).

Paul's mimetic rhetoric is not unscrutinized. In 1991, Elizabeth Castelli leveled a formidable critique against Paul's pattern of imitative exhortation. "The notion of mimesis," says Castelli, "functions in Paul's letters as a strategy of power. That is, it articulates and rationalizes as true and natural a particular set of power relations within the social formation of early Christian communities."[2] Paul's imitative commands, such as those found in 1 Corinthians 11:1, reinforce power structures. As a self-described Foucauldian, she looks askance at such authoritative relationships. Does Castelli have a point? Does mimesis reinforce authority structures in the NT church? Should students of the New Testament reconsider such mimetic relationships? What does this mean for Christians today in a world which questions the very legitimacy of authority?

This paper considers Castelli's claim that Paul's mimetic rhetoric reinforces authority structures. First, however, we look at Castelli's criticism in more detail, followed by the reception of her thesis. Then we compare her analysis with both the Pauline corpus and the broader NT. While this paper agrees with

[1] Benjamin Fiore, "Paul, Exemplification, and Imitation," in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World, A Handbook*, revised ed., ed. J. Paul Sampley (T&T Clark, 2016), 1:169–80. Fiore provides an overview of the uses of mimesis in ancient rhetoric. Cf. Charles A. Gieschen, "A Christian Identity in Pagan Thessalonica: The Imitation of Paul's Cruciform Life," *CTQ* 72 (2008): 4–12.

[2] Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul, A Discourse of Power* (Westminster John Knox, 1991), 15.

Castelli that mimetic rhetoric does, in fact, strengthen authority relationships, it also identifies ways in which her analysis is lacking, and, therefore, her account of authority relationships in the local church is, at best, deficient.

1. Castelli and Her Reception

Castelli begins her critique of Paul's mimetic rhetoric by defining imitation as a "movement from difference toward similarity."[3] By commending or commanding imitation, "sameness is not merely described, but rather it is prescribed."[4] This is, in her mind, paradoxical, for the more two things resemble one another, the more their distinctions become manifest.[5] Imitation is, inherently, about power, then, "insofar as the model represents the standard toward which its copies move."[6] This relationship is both hierarchical and asymmetrical. In her view, this dimension of Paul's imitative power rhetoric is "skirted" by NT scholarship.[7]

Castelli explores aesthetic imitation, cosmological imitation, the imitation of God, imitation in kingship, and educational and ethical mimesis in antiquity.[8] She concludes, first, that mimesis is inherently hierarchical in the ancient world. Second, authority is "foregrounded" in such mimetic relationships. Third, mimesis reinforces the ancient world's value of sameness over difference.[9] Assuming Paul fits within this Greco-Roman context, she turns her attention to Paul.

Castelli turns her attention to six Pauline texts and finds in them that his mimetic rhetoric "evokes for a first-century audience the whole range of associations" which she had explored elsewhere (1 Thess 1:6–7; 2:14; Phil 3:17; 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Gal 4:12).[10] She concludes that Paul's expectation that his readers would become his imitators "constructs the early communities within a hierarchical economy of sameness which both appropriates the members of the early communities and reinscribes Paul's privileged position as natural."[11] Whether Paul intended it or not, he was making use of a "political strategy"[12] which conflicts with presentations of Paul as establishing a "new, egalitarian community."[13] The mimetic drive towards sameness reinforces an institutional movement with power relations.[14]

[3] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 21.
[4] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 22.
[5] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 22.
[6] Castelli, *Imitating Paul,* 22.
[7] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 23–33.
[8] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 59–85.
[9] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 86.
[10] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 89–117, esp. 89.
[11] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 117.
[12] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 129.
[13] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 130.
[14] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 131.

Castelli has been repeatedly critiqued.[15] On the whole, Cornelis Bennema correctly observes that Castelli's approach "has not stood the test of time."[16] Nevertheless, it is worth asking whether Castelli's contention that Paul deploys imitative rhetoric in order to reinforce authority structures has any basis in the New Testament. This inquiry is worthwhile because a denial of Castelli's thesis likely portends revising or, at least, reassessing the assumed existence of any authority relationships among early Christians and, consequently, the need for such authority among Christians today. Three assessments of Castelli's claim concerning the relationship of imitation and authority are noteworthy.

First, Andrew Clarke critiques Castelli's characterization of Paul's mimetic commands as a "clear misreading of their context."[17] While not denying Pauline authority, Clarke argues that Paul's imitative assertions are mainly aimed at ethical standards.[18] These commands are grounded in the "father-child" relationship.[19] Clarke argues that Paul and Luke use mimesis to point attention away from Paul and onto Jesus as the ultimate example.[20]

Second, Kathy Ehrensperger grants Castelli's point that imitation does reinforce a hierarchy of power.[21] When seen within the specific Pauline contexts in which the mimetic rhetoric is deployed, however, this hierarchy is self-obsoletizing.[22] Thus, imitation is deployed to reinforce authority in such a way that this authority will no longer become necessary. While Castelli may be correct in the short term, in the long term her thesis fails.

Third, in Victor Copan's extensive critique, he counters Castelli by noting that all of Paul's imitative commands concern Paul's spiritual paternity.[23] Copan points out that Paul's imitative commands are often couched in his own selflessness.[24] He thus recasts any authoritative language in the mimetic language as "the intensity of Paul's desire for the welfare of his spiritual children."[25] Castelli, therefore, misunderstands the overall context and meaning of his rhetoric.

[15] Cf. Cornelis Bennema, *Imitation in Early Christianity, Mimesis and Religious Ethical Formation* (Eerdmans, 2025), 229–30, esp. n. 4. Kathy Ehrensperger, "'Be Imitators of Me as I am of Christ': A Hidden Discourse of Power and Domination in Paul?" *LTQ* 38 (2003): 241–61. Adam C. Koontz, "The Imitation of Paul in the Greco-Roman World" (PhD diss., Temple University, 2020), 15–18, 111–38. Fiore, "Paul, Exemplification, and Imitation," 169–95. Matthew Lewis LaMaster, "Imitation and Exemplarity in Hebrews" (PhD diss., Concordia Theological Seminary, 2024), 126–28. Victor Copan, *Saint Paul as Spiritual Director* (Paternoster, 2007), 181–218. Andrew D. Clarke, "'Be Imitators of Me': Paul's Model of Leadership," *TynBul* 49 (1998): 329–60. A. K. M. Adam, "Walk This Way: Repetition, Difference, and the Imitation of Christ," *Int* (2001): 19–33. Dustin W. Ellington, "Imitating Paul's Relationship to the Gospel: 1 Corinthians 8.1–11.1," *JSNT* 33 (2011): 303–15. James R. Harrison, "The Imitation of the 'Great Man' in Antiquity: Paul's inversion of a Social Icon," *Christian Origins and Greco-Roman Culture: Social and Literary Contexts for the New Testament*, Claremont Studies in New Testament and Christian Origins 1 (Brill, 2013), 218–19.

[16] Bennema, *Imitation*, 230.

[17] Clarke, "Be Imitators of Me," 332–33

[18] Clarke, "Be Imitators of Me," 332–33.

[19] Clarke, "Be Imitators of Me," 343–44.

[20] Clarke, "Be Imitators of Me," 359.

[21] Ehrensperger, "Be Imitators of Me as I am of Christ," 257.

[22] Ehrensperger, "Be Imitators of Me as I am of Christ," 257–58.

[23] Copan, *Saint Paul as Spiritual Director*, 209. Harrison, "Imitation of the 'Great Man' in Antiquity," 219. Harrison argues that Copan's assessment is overly reductionistic.

[24] Copan, *Saint Paul as Spiritual Director*, 210. Cf. Bennema, *Imitation in Early Christianity*, 305.

[25] Copan, *Saint Paul as Spiritual Director*, 216.

Castelli argues that Paul's imitative language is deployed in such a way that it will bolster authority relationships within a community. Clarke, Ehrensperger, and Copan have offered responses. Clarke connects mimesis mainly towards ethical standards such as Christlikeness. Ehrensperger argues that Paul's imitative commands may reinforce authority in the short-term, but in the long-term it makes authority unnecessary. Copan submits that any authoritative rhetoric in Paul's mimetic language is best understood as reflecting his paternal relationship, which is to say, they do not concern ecclesiastical authority. All apparently argue that any authority in Paul's mimetic rhetoric is negligible at best, and that, therefore, Castelli is fundamentally flawed. These dismissals of Castelli's contention concerning the relationship of mimesis and authority, however, contribute to an erosion of apostolic authority in the early church and pastoral authority in the present. Such erosion is acceptable if evident in the texts of the NT. The rest of this paper contends, however, that the NT's mimetic rhetoric actually serves to strengthen authority structures and that Castelli's contention should be reassessed.

2. Imitation Strengthens Authority Structures

Castelli's study highlighted six texts in which Paul commended the imitation of himself (1 Thess 1:6–7; 2:14; Phil 3:17; 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Gal 4:12).[26] When Paul urges the Corinthians to be imitators of him (1 Cor 4:16), he sends Timothy to remind the Corinthians of his ways in Christ, per his teaching (4:17) as a "proxy."[27] Paul's warning to the arrogant among the Corinthians is that he will come personally, for "the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power" (4:19). Thus, when he later furnishes his own example of doing all to the glory of God (cf. 10:31–11:1), it is under the premise that he will visit them soon and exert his authority.[28] Even the fatherhood metaphor Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 4:16 implies his authoritative position with the Corinthians.[29] "This points up the authoritative role that Paul's *imitatio* played in the formation of those he evangelized."[30]

Similarly, Paul's encouragement to the Philippians to be "co-imitators" of him (συμμιμηταί μου γίνεσθε, Phil 3:17) is spoken under the premise that, in due time, he himself will likely appear (1:27–30) in all his authority. Paul's commendation of his own example in 1 Thessalonians 1:6–7 and 2:14 not only has similar connotations (cf. 1 Thess 2:17–3:7), but it also commends the example of the Thessalonians compared to other brothers in Macedonia and Achaia, advancing their own position (1:7). Galatians 4:12 also seems to be written under the specter of his eventual return as well (cf. Gal 4:18).

Several things are clear from these brief observations. First, Paul's exhortations to imitate himself are backed by his authority (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Gal 4:12; Phil 3:17), given the premise of his eventual

[26] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 89–117.

[27] Bennema, *Imitation in Early Christianity*, 257.

[28] Cf. R. Gregory Jenks, *Paul and His Mortality, Imitating Christ in the Face of Death*, Bulletin of Biblical Research Supplement 12 (Eisenbrauns, 2015), 179. "When he spoke about mortality or any other subject within the realm of Christian theology, his position and authority were foundational." Michael Jensen, "Imitating Paul, Imitating Christ: How Does Imitation Work as a Moral Concept?" *Chm* 124.1 (2010): 23. "It is not that Paul completely eschews any pattern of relationship with the Corinthians that recognizes his authoritative role as Christ's appointed servant."

[29] Ehrensperger, "Be Imitators of Me as I am of Christ," 249. Even Ehrensperger, who is not inclined to agree with Castelli, admits this, though she argues the hierarchical relationship has an element of flexibility.

[30] Linda Belleville, "'Imitate Me, Just as I Imitate Christ': Discipleship in the Corinthian Correspondence," in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Eerdmans, 1996), 124.

physical return. Second, the imitation of Paul is, therefore, an acknowledgement of this authority. Third, Paul exhorts his readers to imitate him in such a way that it will reinforce his authority.[31] While it is too much to claim that every imitative relationship and all imitative rhetoric is authoritative, it is reasonable to suggest that other authoritative relationships are potentially strengthened by mimesis, including the relationship a pastor enjoys with his flock.[32] Weaver argues that this mimetic rhetoric "establishes a new set of community relationships."[33] It seems difficult to deny that Paul uses mimetic rhetoric to reinforce his authority within local churches. This, at least, seems to vindicate Castelli's argument for an authoritative dimension to mimesis. Her analysis, however, falters in at least four ways.

2.1. Christian *Mimesis* and the Limitation of Authority

Castelli's claim that "Paul does appear at times to confuse his own position with that of Christ or God" and is, therefore, a "confusion of identity"[34] is highly contestable.[35] It is true that when Paul points to his own example, it typically is in a context in which Paul's relationship with Christ is emphasized.[36] So, for example, Paul refers to "my ways in Christ" when telling the Corinthians to "be imitators of me" (1 Cor 4:16–17). This is reinforced by Paul's later "be imitators of me as I am of Christ" (11:1). Nothing, however, indicates that this is a confusion of identity. While assuming this faulty supposition, Castelli fails to note that these explicit references to Christ's example could have other purposes.

One such purpose is the limitation it places on the authority it reinforces. By placing his own example in such close reference to Christ's, Paul not only reinforces his authority, but he also provides a measuring stick by which the Corinthians might assess his example.[37] "His call to imitation," says Copan, "has legitimacy and authority on the basis that he continues to 'discipline himself.'"[38] In other words, he is simultaneously reinforcing his authority and providing accountability by limiting the very authority which he seeks to reinforce.[39] One could fairly say that the mimetic chain Paul establishes reinforces the derivative nature of his own authority.[40]

The other texts Castelli references function similarly. Consider Philippians 3:17, where Paul instructs the Philippians to be "co-imitators" of him and to walk according to the "example" or "pattern"

[31] Cf. Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (Yale University Press, 2003), 124.

[32] Harrison, "The Imitation of the 'Great Man' in Antiquity," 222–45. Harrison is persuasive that mimesis was a central rhetorical tool used throughout antiquity to bolster authority in a variety of settings including monuments, biographies, and edicts, among others. Cf. Jason Weaver, "Paul's Call to Imitation: The Rhetorical Function of the Theme of Imitation in Its Epistolary Context" (PhD. diss., The Catholic University of America, 2013), 198–210.

[33] Weaver, "Paul's Call to Imitation," i.

[34] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 112.

[35] Cf. Copan, *Saint Paul as Spiritual Director*, 206–7. Adam, "Walk this Way," 22–30. Ehrensperger, "Be Imitators of Me as I am of Christ," 243–45. Jensen, "Imitating Paul," 24.

[36] Cf. Jenks, *Paul and His Mortality*, 195.

[37] Belleville, "Imitate Me," 122. "It is, therefore, reasonable to think that Paul had in mind moral standards that he himself observed in his own life and enjoined in a normative fashion in his teaching…"

[38] Copan, *Saint Paul as Spiritual Director*, 245.

[39] Cf. LaMaster, "Imitation and Exemplarity in Hebrews," 127.

[40] Jensen, "Imitating Paul," 29–30. "Paul's use of mimesis occurs in the context of his authoritative apostolic address to the churches (e.g. 1 Cor. 4). He passes on an imitation of Christ that is refracted through the lens of the gospel which he was authoritatively commissioned to preach: he only has authority (as he sees it) as it derives from this source." Cf. Bennema, *Imitation In Early Christianity*, 260–61.

which they had in Paul and his associates (συμμιμηταί μου γίνεσθε, ἀδελφοί, καὶ σκοπεῖτε τοὺς οὕτω περιπατοῦντας καθὼς ἔχετε τύπον ἡμᾶς). Yet, this follows after Paul's personal description in Philippians 3:12–16, where Paul states that he himself has not yet attained what he desires. Likewise, after his admonition in Philippians 3:17, Paul refers to the final judgment of the wicked (3:18–19) and the inheritance of the saints (3:20–21). Paul's self-reference to imitation gives the Philippians a standard by which to assess him and places him under the same judgment that others will receive.

Any message Paul's example reflects is measured against Christ's example and message. Galatians 4:12 is written *after* Christ's virtuous love (2:20) is given as the ultimate example for the fruit of the Spirit (5:22–23). Likewise, Paul's example in Philippians 3:17 follows admonitions in Philippians 2:1–4 and the ultimate exemplarity he attributes to Christ (2:5–11).[41] Paul, says Mark Keown, needed "to embody the message."[42] Again, in 1 Thessalonians 1:6, Paul's reference to his example and Christ's functions not only to align Paul with Christ but also to limit the usefulness of his example to the ways in which it might reflect Christ's.[43] In none of these instances is it likely Paul confused his identity with Christ's. Rather, in each setting, Paul is at great pains to exalt Christ's example and limit his own to the ways they might overlap.[44]

This is, moreover, the pattern in other passages which Castelli does not mention. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12, Paul commends his own example in not being a burden while waiting for Christ's return. Paul caps this admonition by saying, "such persons we command and encourage *in the Lord Jesus Christ* to do their work quietly and to earn their own living" (2 Thess 3:12). Paul clearly believes that the Thessalonians' own relationship with Christ supersedes theirs with his, and, therefore, the only way in which his example might serve their walk is limited by the ways in which his example reflects Christ's. Certainly, this reinforces his authority, but it does so by simultaneously limiting it with a measure of accountability.

Likewise, in 1 Timothy 1:12–20, Paul points to his own example in conversion and faithful ministry. This is heightened by the contrast it provides with Hymenaeus and Alexander (1:18–20), who are examples of making a shipwreck of their faith. But Paul's example highlights the "perfect patience" (1:16) and "grace of our Lord" (1:14) when "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1:15). Paul certainly does give himself to Timothy as an authoritative model of Christian ministry, but this is only done by seeing that he is a sinner and that Christ alone is worthy of ultimate devotion.[45]

Paul instructs Timothy to think similarly about his own ministry. On the one hand, Paul tells Timothy, "Command and teach" (1 Tim 4:11). This is likely an application of the authority Paul has

[41] Bennema, *Imitation in Early Christianity*, 268–74.

[42] Mark Keown, "The Christ-Pattern for Social Relationships: Jesus as Exemplar in Philippians and Other Pauline Epistles," in *Paul and His Social Relations,* ed. Stanley Porter and Christopher Land, PAST 7 (Brill, 2013), 314.

[43] Jensen, "Imitating Paul," 24–25. Jensen's point is well-taken that in 1 Thessalonians 1:6, Paul is helping the Thessalonians *interpret* their action as an imitation of Paul and Christ rather than to exhort them. Michael Martin, "'Example' and 'Imitation' in the Thessalonian Correspondence," *SwJT* 42 (1999): 49. "The church's obligation to follow a particular leader grows out of the integrity of that leader's followship of Christ."

[44] Cf. Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Eerdmans, 2007), 145. Michael B. Thompson, *Clothed with Christ: The Example and Teaching of Jesus in Romans 12.1–15.13* (1991; repr., Wipf & Stock, 2011), 227. Thompson goes so far as to call Paul's suffering an *extension* of Jesus's experience; Paul's position here cannot help but be seen to decrease in light of Christ's increasing.

[45] Clarke, "Be Imitators," 344–45.

already invested in the office of elder (2:15–20; 3:1–7). In the next breath, however, Paul expects Timothy to "set the believers an example [τύπος γίνου] … keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching" (4:12, 16). Paul certainly believes that the example that Timothy sets will reinforce the doctrine that he teaches on the one hand. On the other, this is, again, a double-edged sword. If Timothy is to set an example, he will likewise be held accountable. Mimesis reinforces authority, but it also limits that authority through accountability.

We see this pattern with other passages in the NT which commend the imitation of leaders. So, for example, in Hebrews 13:7, before the author tells his audience to "obey" and "submit" to the leaders of the church (13:17), he tells them to "imitate [μιμεῖσθε] their faith" (13:7). Yet, in the context, this depends ultimately on Christ, who is the "founder and perfecter of our faith" (12:2), and his faithful example unto death (5:8–9; 12:1–4).[46] This accountability is furthered by the author instructing them to "remember" and "consider" their example before they imitate them (13:7). This is capped by the author reminding these leaders that they will "give an account" for their shepherding (13:17). Certainly, the author reinforces their authority, but he also limits it by referring his readers to the ultimate example and authority, namely, Christ himself.

Likewise, Peter exhorts the readers of his letter that elders should shepherd the flock of God "exercising oversight" (ἐπισκοποῦντες), not domineering but rather "being [τύποι γινόμενοι] examples to the flock" (1 Pet 5:2–3). Γινόμενοι in 1 Peter 5:3 probably modifies ἐπισκοποῦντες in 1 Peter 5:2 as a participle of manner.[47] This is a very clear instance in which the imitative relationship that Peter is calling elders to form with the flock of God among them actually reinforces the authority of Peter and his co-elders. On the other hand, Peter explicitly contrasts this with those who are "domineering" (κατακυριεύοντες) over those in their charge (5:3), "as God would have you" (5:2). The example elders should set implies an ethic.[48] Further, the eschatological judgment flavors Peter's mimesis: Peter identifies as a "partaker of the glory that is going to be revealed" (5:1) and reminds them the "chief Shepherd" will appear (5:4). Imitation reinforces authority, but, in doing so, it also points to a standard by which to hold that authority accountable.

There are even places in mimetic rhetoric where accountability is more pronounced than the authority which can be derived from such a relationship. Consider the parallel passages in the Synoptics: Matthew 20:20–28, Mark 10:35–46, and Luke 22:24–30.[49] In these passages, there is a dispute over who is the greatest. In each, Jesus defines a true leader as one who serves and sacrifices himself. In each, Jesus points to himself as the ultimate example "as the one who serves" (Luke 22:24); "even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for many" (Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28). There is an implicit mimesis which leaders can have with their charges here, for they are those who by

[46] Victor (Sung Yul) Rhee, *Faith in Hebrews: Analysis within the Context of Christology, Eschatology, and Ethics* (Wipf & Stock, 2019), 242. Rhee argues persuasively that, in Hebrews, Christ is not only seen as the object of faith but also as the ultimate exemplar. Cf. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, 349.

[47] Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Zondervan, 1996), 627–28.

[48] Thompson, *Clothed with Christ*, 40. Thompson suggests that 1 Peter 5:3–4 may derive from Jesus's teaching or a paraenetic tradition going back to him. Willis Peter De Boer, *The Imitation of Paul: An Exegetical Study* (1962; repr., Wipf & Stock, 2016), 85–86.

[49] Thompson, *Clothed with Christ*, 95. Thompson speculates that a similar tradition underlying these passages might be reflected in some of Paul's mimetic exhortations, although on the basis of these verses alone he admits such a connection cannot be established without doubt.

serving others can reflect the very example of Jesus himself.[50] They mediate his example to the followers. This does reinforce their authority as the "great/est among you" (Matt 10:26; Mark 10:43; Luke 22:26). Nevertheless, to enter into this imitative relationship as the greatest in the church requires them to become the least as Christ had.[51] Christ's example, while reinforcing the authority of the leader who truly reflects it,[52] simultaneously delimits his own example and thus provides a measure for accountability.[53]

Paul's final instructions to the Ephesian elders rings similarly: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers…" (Acts 20:28). Paul's comments are noteworthy for the exemplaristic flavor of this instruction. Elders cannot pay attention to the flock without paying attention to themselves. The authority which has been given to them is given to them in conjunction to their exemplary function in the local church. Their authority is, to some degree, contingent on their ongoing value as models for godliness in the body. The warning Paul gives them is that he is now "innocent of the blood of all" (Acts 20:26); they will be held accountable for their obedience or failure.

2.2. Christian *Mimesis* and Power Sharing

Second, Castelli's argument fails in that Paul consistently bolsters the example of others.[54] This is true of both close companions and potential rivals. While this does not occur in every circumstance, it is prominent enough to be noteworthy.[55] In 1 Corinthians 4:16, while presenting his own example for imitation, Paul also directs his readers to Timothy who will "remind you of my ways in Christ" (4:17). Some may rightly object that Paul here merely constructs a mimetic chain of sorts: imitate Timothy as he imitates me as I imitate Christ. Paul here also bolsters the example of Apollos (4:6)[56] and the other apostles (4:9), none of whom does Paul put in a mimetic chain with himself.[57] If Castelli was correct, it is difficult to see why Paul would have held up Apollos and Cephas—who had been seen as his rivals for Corinthian affection (3:1–22)—as examples for imitation. This undercuts the need for authoritarian power which Castelli attributes to Paul.

We see similar patterns in Philippians.[58] Paul does point to his own example (Phil 3:17). Much more prominent, however, are the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19–30).[59] Paul's praise for them follows shortly after the Christ hymn (2:5–11), where Paul highlighted Christ's example of humility, to which he had just exhorted them (2:1–4). Paul says of Timothy, "I have no one like him,

[50] C. D. "Jimmy" Agan, *The Imitation of Christ in the Gospel of Luke: Growing in Christlike Love for God and Neighbor* (P&R, 2014), 133–35.

[51] De Boer, *The Imitation of Paul*, 86.

[52] Agan, *The Imitation of Christ*, 134.

[53] Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, 221.

[54] Cf. Clarke, "Be Imitators," 334–35. LaMaster, "Imitation and Exemplarity in Hebrews," 127. Gieschen, "Christian Identity," 11.

[55] Martin, "'Example' and 'Imitation,'" 47. Martin draws attention to this phenomenon in the Thessalonian correspondence.

[56] Koontz, "The Imitation of Paul," 120.

[57] Ehrensperger, "Be Imitators of Me as I am of Christ," 251–53.

[58] Clarke, "Be Imitators of Me," 348–50. Keown, "The Christ-Pattern," 314–18.

[59] Gerald F. Hawthorne, "The Imitation of Christ: Discipleship in Philippians," in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Eerdmans, 1996), 174–75. Keown, "The Christ-Pattern," 315. Keown argues that Paul frames Epaphroditus as "the supreme example within the Philippian community." Bennema, *Imitation in Early Christianity*, 280–82.

who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (2:20). He praises Epaphroditus as one who "nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me" (2:30). Further, in 3:17, Paul may highlight his own example, but also draws attention to the example the Philippians had in both he and his associates (ἔχετε τύπον ἡμᾶς). These are more proximate both to the example of Christ in Philippians 2:5–11 and to the Philippian church by their visit. Though they are admittedly sent to communicate his example, Paul does not here construct a mimetic chain where Timothy and Epaphroditus mediate his example, as might be argued from 1 Corinthians 4:17, contra Castelli; rather, they are examples of Christ in their own right.[60] If Paul was consolidating his power, it is difficult to see why his descriptions of Timothy and Epaphroditus were not more restrained and more explicitly tied to himself.

The pastoral epistles similarly describe the exemplary moral qualifications for elders (1 Tim 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9) and deacons (1 Tim 3:8–13). Paul commands Timothy to "set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (4:12).[61] In none of these passages does the apostle imply that elders would take *Paul's* example as a reference point. The actual texts of the pastoral epistles imply that Paul entrusts to Timothy and Titus the responsibilities of assessing and acknowledging the godliness of the elders in their church (cf. 2 Tim 2:1–2; Titus 1:5). If anything, Paul's imitative commands here remove himself from the equation, inviting Timothy and Titus to form their own mimetic chains between Christ and the other elders and the flock.[62]

2.3. Christian *Mimesis* and Costly Virtues

Third, Castelli's argument fails in that Paul's example, which he commends for imitation, is typically of virtues[63] that would be difficult to turn to personal gain.[64] Indeed, the whole purpose of imitating Christ is for the benefit of others.[65] So, for example, it is true that in Philippians 3:17, Paul commends his own example to the Philippians. But of what is he an example? Is it that Paul counts his whole life before Christ as loss (3:7–8)? Is it that Paul's righteousness is only in Christ (3:9)? Is it that Paul strains towards the goal that comes from the prize of the "upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (3:14)? Is it that Paul portrays Christ as the arch-model for humility (2:1–11)?[66] How Paul leverages this self-deprecation for personal gain is unclear.[67]

Similarly, consider 1 Corinthians 4:16 and 11:1. "Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God," says Paul, "just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved" (10:32–33). These words directly precede Paul's statement, "Be

[60] Hawthorne, "The Imitation of Christ," 175. Hawthorne points out the importance of Epaphroditus's example, in particular, because he was from Philippi. Clarke, "Be Imitators," 349. "This perspective," says Clarke, "is strikingly at odds with the interpretation offered by Castelli … who see here references to power, control and authority."

[61] De Boer, *The Imitation of Paul*, 86–87.

[62] De Boer, *The Imitation of Paul*, 87–88. Clarke, "Be Imitators," 356.

[63] Jensen, "Imitating Paul," 32. Jensen argues that "*Paul's focus is on the 'passive' virtues: humility, generosity, patient endurance, forgiveness, forbearance, suffering with joy*" (italics original).

[64] Copan, *Saint Paul as Spiritual Director*, 210. LaMaster, "Imitation and Exemplarity in Hebrews," 127. De Boer, *The Imitation of Paul,* 207.

[65] Jensen, "Imitating Paul," 32.

[66] Clarke, "Be Imitators," 350. Weaver, "Paul's Call to Imitation," 196–97.

[67] Jenks, *Paul and His Mortality*, 216–17. Jenks shows how Paul is deliberately framing his future in martyrological terms.

imitators of me as I am of Christ" (11:1). Paul calls them to an example of one who sacrifices self-interest in order to draw others closer to Christ.[68] His example is not seeking his own advantage but others'.[69] As Ellington points out, the command actually invites the Corinthians to become co-participants in the gospel (cf. 9:23).[70] Similarly, Paul's statement earlier in the letter, "I urge you, then, be imitators of me" (4:16), is in reference to Paul's willing sacrifice on behalf of the Corinthians.[71] Paul refers to his weakness, disrepute, hunger, thirst, threadbare garments, physical beatings, homelessness, labor, enduring revilings, persecutions, slanders (4:8–13).[72] Paul finally concludes, "We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things" (4:13). Paul bears all this for his beloved children, the Corinthians (4:14–15). Paul's exhortation to imitate him in the Corinthian correspondence would be fulfilled by imitating his own correspondence to the "pattern and power" of the gospel, namely giving up one's own rights and embracing weakness.[73] Again, it is difficult to see how the specific example (namely, Paul's suffering on behalf of his readers), which he provides for the Corinthians, could be turned towards his own personal gain.[74]

Paul specifically aligns his example and Christ's (1 Thess 1:6) with the example of the Thessalonians (1:7; 2:14) in enduring affliction.[75] Both Paul and the Thessalonians exhibit endurance through tribulation. Paul notes how he had set an example in great deprivation, which the Thessalonians themselves had strictly followed. The pattern being stressed here is one of sacrifice, selflessness, and suffering, not of using official power and authority to cultivate personal prestige.[76]

Likewise, in Galatians 4:12, Paul entreats the Galatians to become as he is. What does this mean? Paul states very clearly, "for I also have become as you are." Paul's example is of one willing to set aside the law and embrace the gospel's freedom. Paul asks that they, too, would be willing to lay down their efforts at self-justification as he has. His example does not, here, engender loyalty to his person.[77] Rather, Paul's example encourages loyalty to Christ's person.

Again, in Acts 20:28, Paul enjoins the Ephesian elders, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers," and proceeds to hold up his own example of someone who worked with his own hands rather than coveting silver or gold or apparel (20:33–35). Paul had lived a life of generosity in line with the instructions of Christ (20:35); he expects the Ephesian elders will do likewise. How the example to which Paul draws attention as he leaves them for the last time could be used for self interest when he had already willingly laid down such gain cannot be easily substantiated.[78]

[68] Belleville, "Imitate Me," 126. Clarke, "Be Imitators," 346.

[69] Agan, *The Imitation of Christ*, 10–11.

[70] Ellington, "Imitating Paul's Relationship to the Gospel," 304.

[71] Jenks, *Paul and His Mortality*, 223–24.

[72] Cf. Harrison, "The Imitation of the 'Great Man' in Antiquity," 251.

[73] Ellington, "Imitating Paul's Relationship to the Gospel," 313. Cf. Fiore, "Paul, Exemplification, and Imitation," 185. Gieschen, "Christian Identity," 12. Gieschen argues for baptismal language in 1 Corinthians 4:17. Bennema, *Imitation in Early Christianity*, 258.

[74] Clarke, "Be Imitators," 345. Ehrensperger, "Be Imitators of Me as I am of Christ," 254–55. Jensen, "Imitating Paul," 23.

[75] Jenks, *Paul and His Mortality*, 215.

[76] Cf. Clarke, "Be Imitators of Me," 333–40. Jensen, "Imitating Paul," 25–26.

[77] Clarke, "Be Imitators," 352–53.

[78] Clarke, "Be Imitators," 357–59.

Paul is no outlier when compared with the rest of the New Testament. In the Synoptic passages we surveyed above (Matt 20:20–28; Mark 10:35–46; Luke 22:24–30), the specific virtue of leaders described in exemplary terms is a willingness to serve and to give oneself up for others. In order to rank as a leader in the church, one must become a slave (Matt 20:27; Mark 10:44) and a servant (Matt 20:27; Mark 10:43). "Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves" (Luke 22:26). This, of course, reflects Christ's sacrifice on the cross (Matt 10:28; Mark 10:45; Luke 22:27). Jesus instructs his followers that authority should only be given to those who sacrifice personal prestige for others' sake, obviously analogous to the cross. There is no insinuation of using authority for one's own personal gain.

We might also point to Peter's instructions to his co-elders, "shepherd the flock of God that is among you … not for shameful gain, but eagerly…" (1 Pet 5:2). The joy that comes from shepherding ought to motivate the elders, not personal gain. It is only after making this clear that Peter says, "being examples to the flock" (5:3). The virtue which Peter holds up as exemplary in this case is the joy in the "glory that is to be revealed" (5:1), not the desire to consolidate one's power.

Castelli's observation that the mimetic rhetoric of Paul often reinforces the authority structures within churches in his orbit seems straightforwardly correct. Less correct, however, is the accuracy of her characterization of that same authority. Rather than encouraging an authority which cultivates personal reputation, prestige, and power, we have seen that the exhortation to imitate Paul and other leaders throughout the New Testament increases accountability, shares authority, and encourages virtues which hinder using authority for personal gain.

2.4. Christian *Mimesis* Inverts Cultural Norms

It seems necessary, therefore, to add a fourth critique of Castelli's assessment of the imitative language of Paul. Castelli fails to understand the authority structures of the first Christians on terms which they themselves would have understood them.[79] This may be her deepest flaw. Certainly, the mimetic rhetoric of the NT reinforces authority structures. These relationships, however, do not cohere with her characterizations. True, Castelli cites Foucalt's observations concerning the distinction between "Pastoral Power" and "Royal Power" to this effect (in particular, that "Pastoral Power" leads to individualization rather than "sameness"), but this distinction does not characterize her view of Paul's mimetic rhetoric.[80]

[79] Copan, *Saint Paul as Spiritual Director*, 183–84. Copan is right to draw attention to Castelli's criticism of Paul's authority as illegitimate. LaMaster, "Imitation and Exemplarity in Hebrews," 126. Ehrensperger, "Be Imitators of Me as I am of Christ," 243–44. Ehrensperger highlights the unnecessarily restrictive account of the background of mimesis in the Pauline corpus as purely Greco-Roman. She instead points to the symbolic world of second-temple Judaism. Harrison, "The Imitation of the 'Great Man' in Antiquity: Paul's inversion of a Social Icon," 218. Harrison critiques Castelli's *a priori* suppositions concerning power and failure to integrate the culturally ubiquitous notions of shame and the *poleis*. Notably, Harrison also critiques Copan for much the same illegitimate equivocation. Koontz, "The Imitation of Paul," 115. Koontz draws attention to Castelli's "anachronistic" reading of the NT texts.

[80] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 47. Cf. Clarke, "Be Imitators of Me," 332. Clarke specifically notes Castelli's equivocation of Pauline mimesis with Greco-Roman mimesis. Harrison, "The Imitation of the 'Great Man' in Antiquity," 216–17. Castelli's view is particularly problematic in light of Harrison's assessment that, while there were some parallels between Paul and the philosophers, they do not correlate in every way, and, therefore, the imitation rendered to each will differ in respective ways.

The earliest Christians perceived the authority structures in their contemporary context as highly problematic.[81] "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles," says Jesus, "lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you" (Matt 20:25–26; cf. Mark 10:42–43; Luke 22:25–26). In the early church, authority was meant to be exercised and wielded in ways corresponding to the sacrifice of the Son of Man, not the Roman Imperium.[82] The earliest Christians were not averse to authority structures in the early church;[83] they were, however, wary of abuse and misuse of such authority. This stance was shaped by their settled conviction concerning the death and resurrection of Christ. If the same Christ who was worthy of ultimate authority laid himself down for others' sakes (cf. 2 Cor 8:9; Phil 2:5–11),[84] it follows that other leaders were only worthy of authority if they gained and used it in analogous ways.

It also follows that the rhetoric which reinforces these power structures will conform to similar patterns. Thus, if mimesis is used to bolster authority relationships in ancient rhetoric, it ought to do so in ways that reflect belief structures surrounding those relationships.[85] For Christians, this means cross-shaped leadership.[86] Cruciformity was certainly Paul's goal both for himself and his readers (cf. 1 Cor 11:1; 1 Thess 1:6).[87] Castelli points to the ways that mimesis was used to bolster authority in antiquity.[88] She fails, however, to note that Christian mimesis seems to upend the patterns of antiquity through what Harrison calls "Paul's Inversion of a Cultural Icon" in Paul's mimetic discourse:[89]

It was ultimately the *cruciform* nature of Jesus' call to mimetic discipleship (Mark 8:34–38; cf. 1 Cor 1:18–25; 2 Cor 4:7–12; 13:4) and his example of humility and service (Mark 10:35–45; Luke 22:24–37; John 13:1–17; cf. Phil 2:5–8; Rom 15:7; 2 Cor 10:1; Col 3:13) that triumphed over the Greco-Roman preoccupation with inherited status, individual achievement, and self-advertisement.[90]

By crucifying Christ, the Romans had attempted to make use of him as an *antitype*, a negative example.[91] The Christians transformed this negative *exemplum* into their ultimate exemplar. This

[81] Harrison, "The Imitation of the 'Great Man' in Antiquity," 240. For example, Harrison characterizes the difference between Plutarch's and Paul's respective discussions of great men as coming to "vastly different conclusions regarding the ethos of leadership." Cf. 245–49.

[82] Copan, *Saint Paul as Spiritual Director*, 203.

[83] Ehrensperger, "Be Imitators of Me as I am of Christ," 246–47.

[84] Harrison, "The Imitation of the 'Great Man' in Antiquity," 240.

[85] Gieschen, "Christian Identity," 7–8. "This is not to say that Paul learned this imitation tradition from the philosopher and employed it without modification…. (Paul) carefully distances himself from the problematic practices of charlatan philosophers who took advantage of their hosts through deceitful and flattering speech."

[86] David B. Capes, "Imitatio Christi and the Gospel Genre," *BBR* 13.1 (2003): 11. Cf. Jenks, *Paul and His Mortality*, 208. Clarke, "Be Imitators," 344. Note Clarke's application of this to, in particular, the Corinthian context. Ellington, "Imitating Paul's Relationship to the Gospel," 313.

[87] Gieschen, "Christian Identity," 12–16. Clarke, "Be Imitators," 350. "Unlike the frequent exhortations to imitation which are found in Graeco-Roman society and literature, the example of Paul (whether as father or teacher) is given only in the context of his following and directing the church also to follow the far greater example of Christ." Ehrensperger, "Be Imitators of Me as I am of Christ," 250. Ellington, "Imitating Paul's Relationship to the Gospel," 303–13. Harrison, "The Imitation of the 'Great Man' in Antiquity," 249. Richard B. Hays, "Christology and Ethics in Galatians: The Law of Christ," *CBQ* 49 (1987): 281. Jensen, "Imitating Paul," 23.

[88] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 78–81.

[89] Harrison, "The Imitation of the 'Great Man' in Antiquity," 213–54. Cf. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, 147–48.

[90] Harrison, "The Imitation of the 'Great Man' in Antiquity," 254.

[91] Fiore, "Paul, Exemplification, and Imitation" 183.

corresponded to their countercultural view of authority.[92] To understate the matter, the Roman attempt to make an example out of Christ backfired spectacularly.[93]

It is a methodological error to critique authority structures of the earliest Christians while failing to note the ways in which they themselves understood that authority. It is anachronistic and patronizing to negatively assess the authority relationships which the early Christians under such authority would not. If mimesis in the NT reinforces authority, which we should grant that it does, it is apparent that it reinforces a peculiarly Christian kind of authority. It leads to an authority not only committed to theological convictions around Christ's death and resurrection but also to an authority profoundly formed by these same cross-centered convictions.

3. Conclusion

This paper has assessed Elizabeth Castelli's contention that Paul's mimetic rhetoric is best understood as consolidating his personal authority. Castelli's negative reception nevertheless leaves open questions concerning the degree to which the NT does use mimesis to reinforce authority structures. We found that the mimetic texts of Paul do, in fact, strengthen authority relationships. It does so, however, in a way that increases accountability, shares power, encourages sacrifice, and conforms to a cruciform philosophy of leadership among the earliest Christians. Castelli errs not in observing relationships between mimesis and authority but in her anachronistic and patronizing characterization of such a relationship.

This is of great relevance today. In a day and age where authority structures in religious communities lack credibility, are rigorously scrutinized, and are often found wanting, the Christian understanding and culture of leadership is in need of repair. Fortunately, the restoration of authority is intrinsic to the gospel of redemption.[94] When reconstructing authority, therefore, Christians should not fear authority, but neither should we wield it flippantly. The imitative rhetoric of the earliest Christians is suggestive of how Christians ought to both strengthen and use their authority. In the New Testament, Christian mimesis bolsters authority, but as it does so it increases accountability, shares power, encourages sacrificial virtue, and conforms to the cross of Christ. If this paper has shown anything, it is that pastors would do well to regain the integrity necessary to say with the apostle Paul, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ" (cf. 1 Cor 11:1).

[92] Fiore, "Paul, Exemplification, and Imitation," 189–90.

[93] Cf. Fiore, "Paul, Exemplification, and Imitation," 189. "Mimicking aspects of Roman exemplarity but re-contextualizing them within Judean ethnic traditions by associating them with a number of scriptural *exempla,* Paul revalued Jesus' crucifixion and death. Originally an *exemplum* of Rome's power to silence and suppress its provincial subjects, Paul recoded Jesus' crucifixion as a model demonstrating submission to ecclesial authority, inner-assembly unity, ethical social praxis, divine power in the midst of socio-political weakness, and inter-assembly donations for Jerusalem's poor."

[94] As Jonathan Leeman has recently argued, "Jesus submitted and sacrificed himself *as an act of authority*–an act of taking charge and giving orders and declaring what's what… His cross work was *priestly*, say the biblical theologians. Yet it was also *kingly*." Cf. Jonathan Leeman, *Authority, How Godly Rule Protects the Vulnerable, Strengthens Communities, and Promotes Human Flourishing* (Crossway, 2025), 49. Italics in original.

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Main-Point-Driven: A Clear Methodology for Implementing the Christ-Centered Hermeneutic

— Dan Allen —

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Abstract: This article addresses the need for a clear methodology for implementing the Christ-centered interpretation. Without a consistent process to guard and guide interpreters, illegitimate connections to Jesus are to be expected. Therefore, the Main-Point-Driven methodology provides readers with confidence to discern how every passage directs us to Christ. Special attention is given to asking the right Christ-connection question and unpacking the C-H-R-I-S-T acronym to aid in memorizing the six possible paths to Jesus. The article closes with a brief apologetic of why the Main-Point-Driven methodology is the correct path forward.

I love the idea of Do-it-Yourself maintenance (DIY). Unfortunately, my projects involve more time and money than anticipated. I have the vision but lack the right tools or clarity on each step. My attempts demonstrate that without the correct equipment or clear instructions unsatisfactory results are inevitable.

The commitment to a Christ-centered hermeneutic continues to increase.[1] This is worth celebrating because proclaiming Christ matures the Church (Col 1:28). But conviction and commitment are not enough. We also need the right tools—a clear methodology for implementation to ensure our connections to Christ are legitimate. Many resources discuss various ways the Old Testament anticipates Jesus, demonstrating he is the perfect Prophet, Priest, and King, the true Passover, and the promised seed to crush the head of the serpent (i.e., the end product).[2]

However, few equip the reader with a straightforward methodology to confidently discern how every passage directs us to Jesus, especially from the many texts that do not contain an obvious connection.

[1] Otherwise known as the Christocentric, Christological, or Redemptive-Historical Hermeneutic.

[2] Examples include Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (IVP Academic, 2014); Michael P. V. Barrett, *Beginning at Moses: A Guide to Finding Christ in the Old Testament* (Reformation Heritage, 2018); David Murray, *Jesus On Every Page: 10 Simple Ways to Seek and Find Christ in the Old Testament* (Nelson, 2013); Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Baker, 1994); Dennis Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (P&R, 2007); Tim Keller and Edmund Clowney, "Preaching Christ in a Post-Modern World", *The Gospel Coalition*, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/preaching-christ-postmodern-world/.

The process is vague. Readers are left without necessary tools, and illegitimate connections to Jesus are common in pulpits, preaching workshops, and podcasts. Therefore, we need more resources offering instruction on methodology for implementing the Christ-centered hermeneutic. Two noteworthy books with strong dedication to this are *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, by Sidney Greidanus, and *Your Old Testament Sermon Needs to Get Saved,* by David King.[3] I agree with their methodology and intend to add to this conversation in four ways.[4]

First, in *Section 1: Process*, I offer a descriptive title for the methodology to make the process abundantly clear, provide important interpretive boundaries, and distinguish it within Christ-centered hermeneutics. Second, I propose Christ connection questions designed to guide the exegete according to the redemptive-historical context. Third, I provide the C-H-R-I-S-T acronym to aid readers in memorizing the six possible Christ connections in any given passage. Fourth, in *Section 2: Proof*, after explaining the process, I provide an apologetic for why this methodology is the optimal way forward. *Section 3: Practice* concludes with sample passages for the reader to experience the immediate usability of this methodology.

Implementing the Christ-centered hermeneutic need not be difficult or unnatural. Instead, with the right tools and clear instructions, it is a DIY project that interpreters of every level can accomplish.

1. Process of Main-Point-Driven Methodology

We begin with the process. The goal is to provide clear instructions so that the Christ-centered interpretation of any passage is organic, simple, and biblically legitimate. Let's get started.

1.1. Discern the Main Point: The Interpretation Driver's Seat

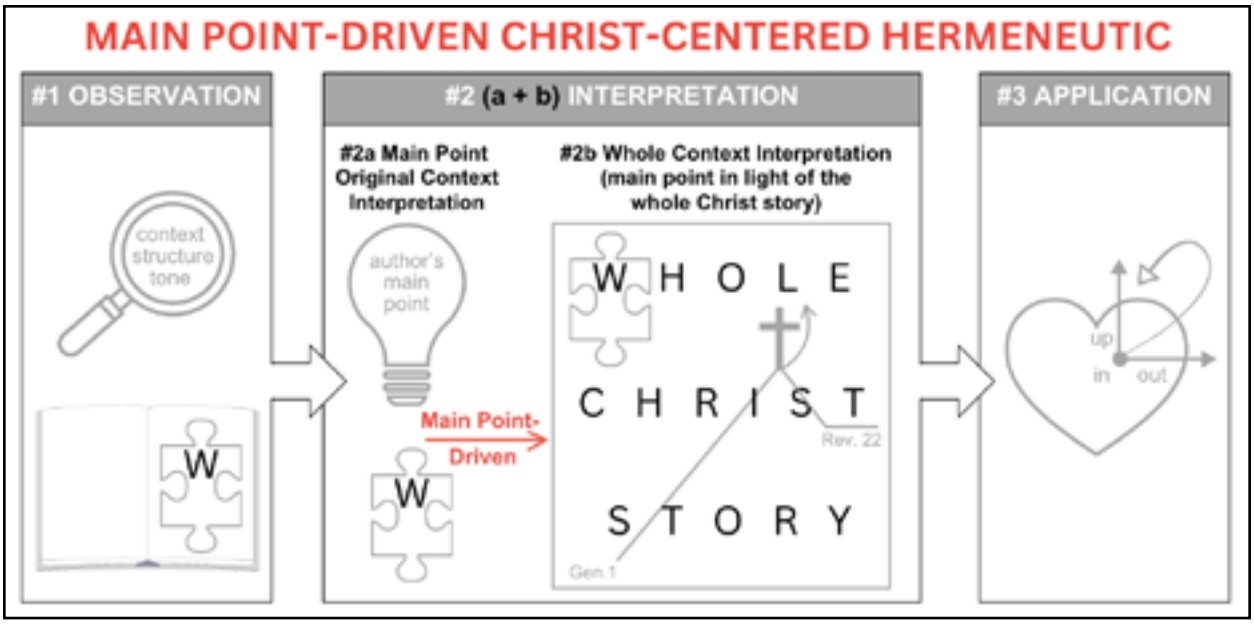
When studying a passage, we begin by making key observations to reveal the author's emphasis. These include discovering the *context* (historical, literary, and grammatical), *structure* (organization of the text), and *tone* (see "#1 Observation," in Figure 1, where the puzzle piece represents a passage). During this phase we must resist temptations to search for connections to Christ.

The next phase is interpretation in two parts, #2a and #2b. "#2a Main Point Original Context Interpretation" discerns the author's main point as understood by the first audience in the original context. This is the historical-grammatical interpretation, and it must not be skipped. As we summarize the main point, we include the unique contributions the passage makes to Scripture. Aim for specificity over vagueness, and comprehensiveness rather than pithiness.[5] This is the most difficult step in the exegetical process. But strong work here simplifies the next move.

[3] Sydney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Eerdmans, 1999); David M. King, *Your Old Testament Sermon Needs to Get Saved: A Handbook for Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 9Marks (Moody, 2021).

[4] To my knowledge there is not a name to distinguish their methodology from other Christ-centered approaches, which I will offer.

[5] We are not discussing homiletics, where we simplify an exegetical main claim for preaching. In exegetical work we aim for specificity. For example, rather than stating the main point of Genesis 12:10–20, as "God is sovereign," "God is faithful to His promise," or, "God is all-powerful," it is better to state how those characteristics of God are demonstrated in this passage. We might elaborate: "Abram fearfully gave Sarai to Pharaoh (i.e., in effect ending the promise), but God afflicted Pharaoh so that he returned her to Abram." It is clunky but highlights the unique claims, which will make the Christ connection simple.



(Figure 1)

After articulating the main point in the original context (#2a), we discern how the passage contributes to the whole context of the Bible (#2b Whole Context Interpretation). This step is the Christ-centered interpretation. It is essential because the Bible is a collection of sixty-six books with one overarching story from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. This storyline centers on the person and work of Christ and can be stated as *the story of God rebuilding his life-giving kingdom through the work of his Son*.[6] It begins in a garden and ends in a garden (and a great city!), and along the way there is tragedy and grace-filled triumph, all centering on the person and work of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, who rights all wrongs.

Therefore, we must understand how each passage contributes to this Christ story. Just as the message of a puzzle piece remains incomplete until it is placed within the whole puzzle where it reaches its full meaning, so with every passage: "Without the whole we have a hole in our interpretation."[7]

Faithfully implementing this conviction requires an intentional and consistent approach, which I call the "Main-Point-Driven" methodology or, more fully, the "Main-Point-Driven, Christ-Centered Interpretation." The key concept is that the connection to the larger story must be guided by the main point and never by details from the passage not stated in the main point.[8] This descriptive title provides exegetical boundaries and clarity to this crucial phase of interpretation.

The "Main-Point-Driven" methodology sounds obvious, but it is often neglected. Instead, interpreters set aside the main point to reflect on the passage once again, searching for elements that

[6] God's kingdom is when God's people are in God's place, living under God's rule. The result? God's people experience God's blessing, especially the blessing of God's presence. See Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible* (Intervarsity Press, 2002), 21–23; Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom*, The Goldsworthy Trilogy (Paternoster, 1981), 53–54.

[7] This phrase originated with my friend, Ryan Boyer.

[8] Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 288, 308; Ian Duguid, "Old Testament Hermeneutics," in *Seeing Christ in All of Scripture: Hermeneutics of Westminster Theological Seminary*, ed. Peter Lillback (Westminster Seminary Press, 2016), 19; King, *Your Old Testament Sermon Needs to Get Saved*, 59.

remind us about Jesus by parallel or contrast. These may include phrases, objects, actions, or principles. Sometimes a single connection is mentioned, but often a "spray approach" is utilized, where the teacher states multiple ways a passage points to Christ. For example, Landon Dowden states the main point of Esther 2:1–18, as: "*We live in a dark world, and sometimes we are part of the darkness; nevertheless, God in his grace does not discard us but delivers us, even from ourselves, and deploys us for his purposes*."[9] He suggests a range of ways the passage points to Christ:

> "A. Ahasuerus exercised authority for his own gratification, but Jesus does so for our good.
>
> B. Ahasuerus sought a beautiful and pure bride, but Jesus made us into one.
>
> C. Ahasuerus left the women he used with shame, but Jesus has taken our shame away.
>
> D. Mordecai could only check on Esther's situation, but Jesus can change ours."

While they are not heretical, the connections are not organic because none flow from the main point. There are no controls on connections. Therefore, I contend we must resist this common approach, which is prone to produce illegitimate connections.

Alternatively, sticking with Dowden's main point and allowing it to lead the way, we discern that it taps into a recurring theme of *God using the sinfulness of man to accomplish his mission, for his glory and our good*. Esther is not alone. Joseph's brothers sold him with evil intent, but God meant it for good (Gen 50:20), not to mention the evil schemes against Hezekiah, Nehemiah, and Daniel all turned for good. This theme eventually climaxes as Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, sinfully gathered against Jesus to accomplish what God predestined for his glory and our good (Acts 4:27–31). Man made it the darkest day, but God made it the brightest. How stabilizing to realize that sinful humans are not in control. God uses the fallenness of man to fulfill his wise purposes.

This connection does not require elaborate rumination because it flows naturally from the main point. Let us, then, continue and explain how it is done.

1.2. Ask the Main Point: Christ Connection Question

To ensure the main point is guiding our #2b interpretation, ask the appropriate Christ Connection Question from below:

When in the Old Testament: "What kind of a main point is this, such that it directs us to the Christ event?"[10]

When in the Gospels: "What kind of a main point is this, such that it demonstrates Jesus is the climax of God's story?"

When in Acts-Revelation: "What kind of main point is this, such that it unpacks the implications of the Christ event?"

[9] Landon Dowden, *Exalting Jesus in Esther,* Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Broadman & Holman, 2019) pp. 47–68. I appreciate Dowden's use of historical context and practical application points throughout this chapter.

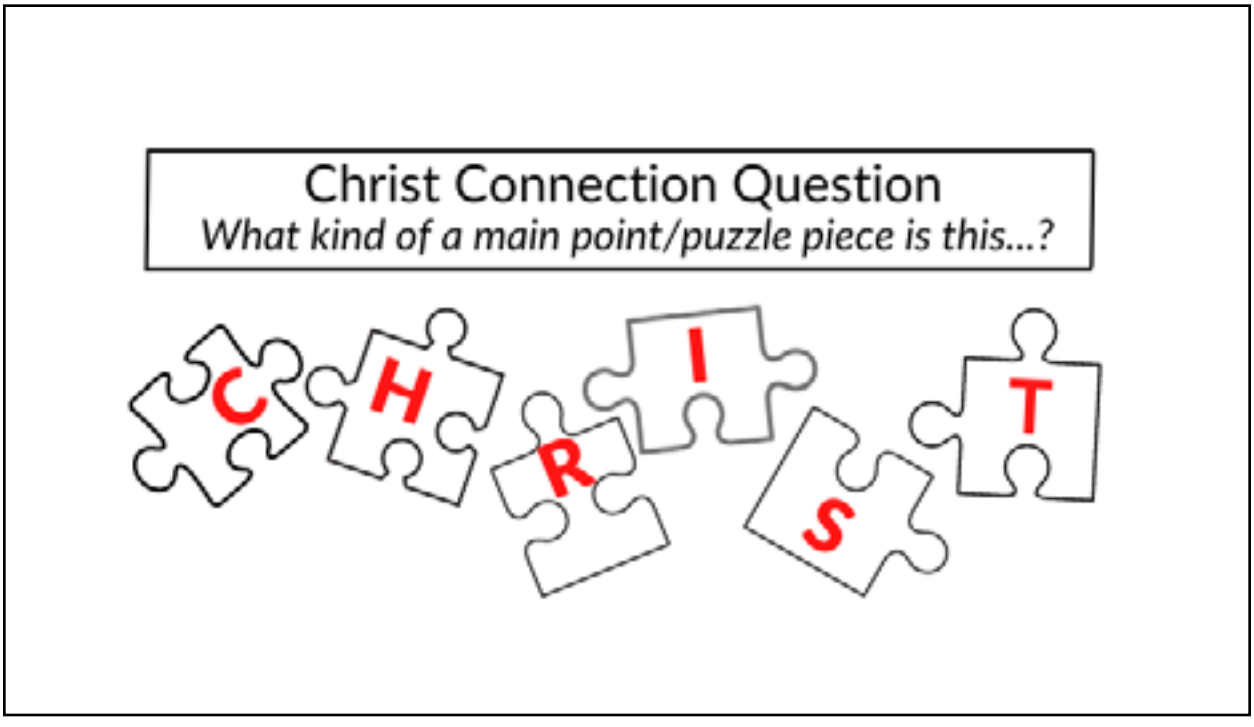
[10] By "Christ event" I include the person and work of Christ during the incarnation and beyond (i.e., his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and future return). The focus is determined by the main point and Christ connection.

These questions intentionally provide three benefits. First, they guard us from returning to the passage in search of other details by asking about the "main point."

Second, each one reminds us of the author's directional focus by altering the question according to the redemptive-historical context. The Old Testament authors looked forward and prepared the reader for the coming Christ event. The Gospel authors pointed backward to demonstrate how Jesus fulfilled promises, resolved problems, and most clearly displayed biblical themes and the character of God. They also pointed forward to prepare the reader for life as Christ followers. From Acts through Revelation the authors glanced back to unpack how the work of Christ decisively changed God's people positionally and conditionally, who are redeemed sinners, empowered to live as God's people. They also pointed forward to the inheritance and full salvation experience that still awaits those in Christ. These distinctions are especially helpful when interpreting the New Testament, where, ironically, it can be challenging to apply a true Christ-centered interpretation.

Third, the questions prompt us to consider the six kinds of main points by asking, "What kind?" This provides added protection from returning to the text for reflection and potentially making illegitimate connections to Jesus.

Thankfully, if we were clear with the main point, the Christ connection will be obvious.[11]



(Figure 2)

1.3. Follow the Main Point Path to Jesus: C-H-R-I-S-T Acronym

I organize the six kinds of main points with the acronym, "C-H-R-I-S-T."[12] Determine the most organic path according to the one best completing the statement:

[11] When there are multiple options, choose the most natural. If none make sense, then increase specificity in the main point.

[12] After comparing lists of "paths" to Jesus from others and aiming for memorability, I propose these six.

The main point of this passage is…

- A **C**ommand (biblical ethic) that can only be fulfilled and empowered by Christ
- A **H**ope (promise) we only have real reason to rest in because of Christ
- A **R**ecurring theme that eventually climaxes in Christ
- An **I**ll (problem) that can only be made right or resolved by Christ
- A **S**toryline reminder of the promised redemption to be accomplished by Christ
- A **T**ype (person, event, or institution) that pictures the Christ and his work

Let us consider each possibility.

C: A Command (biblical ethic) that can only be fulfilled and empowered by Christ

When the main point is a moral command (a biblical ethic) exhorting us to live a particular way, it directs us to Jesus as our only hope by taking us through several phases.[13]

First, we recognize that God's commands are good and right, and God demands we be holy as he is holy (1 Pet 1:15–16). When he calls us to be kind, self-sacrificial, generous, and not be selfish, harsh, anxious, or grumbly, God is not offering suggestions or asking for partial obedience but perfection.

The problem is, if we truly listen, we constantly fail. Therefore, the commands call for God's righteous judgment. This is bad news. We need resolution, to which the commands direct our attention.

By God's grace and mercy, Jesus died in our place as a sin-bearing substitute, and His perfect command-keeping was credited to our account so that we became the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21). This is "The Great Exchange." Everyone who trusts in the death and resurrection of Jesus is positionally purified before God as his forgiven child.

Furthermore, our condition on earth continues to be renewed. In the New Covenant, God's people are given new hearts and the Holy Spirit so we can increasingly experience the joy of walking in faithful obedience to God's good and wise commands (Ezek 36:25–27; Jer 31:31–34; Luke 22:20). In Christ, they are not burdensome, declaring, "You must fulfill me but can't" (1 John 5:3). Instead, they extend a glorious invitation, "Now, in Christ, you can fulfill me!"[14]

Therefore, when the main point of a passage is a biblical ethic, it directs us to Jesus as a command that can only be fulfilled and empowered by Christ.

Sample text: Ecclesiastes 12:8–14

Main point: Your top priority is submitting your whole self (mind, body, plans, resources, etc.) to God, your Judge.

Christ connection: This passage exhorts us to submit our whole self to God because it is the place of freedom and joy. The problem is that our sinful hearts consistently fail to pursue this. We love our comfort and plans. Our flesh has desires contrary to God's ways. Instead of submitting to God we grumble when his providential hand doesn't cooperate with our vision. This is bad news. Seeking stability and satisfaction apart from God's full authority is like chasing the wind. Furthermore, it calls for God's judgment. We need God's forgiveness, and we need internal transformation so we can enjoy this command. Thus, we must look outside ourselves to Christ. In his death and resurrection, he took the

[13] This includes not only the Ten Commandments or Levitical Law code but any passage that instructs a way of life under God, whether explicitly stated or implied, as in narrative literature.

[14] Tim Keller, "Gospel Preaching," unpublished notes, London Church Planting Consultation, February 2009, 15.

punishment for all who trust in him. We are given Christ's righteousness before God and are empowered by the Holy Spirit and a new heart to pursue this great calling and live as truly human. We must fight against our indwelling sin and remind ourselves that submitting wholly to God is the path to freedom and joy. In what way do you struggle to submit your whole self to God? Take heart, in Christ you now can.

H: A Hope (promise) that we only have real reason to rest in because of Christ

Since the fall (Gen 3) God has held out hope for his people. This includes promises for comfort through pain, peace amidst confusion, help in times of trouble, justice, renewal, rest, the final eradication of sin, God's presence, God's listening ear, God's providential care, and God's watchful eye. God's gracious promises are scattered throughout Scripture and are meant to encourage and strengthen the beneficiaries during their pilgrimage on earth.[15]

But who are the beneficiaries? Everyone? No. They are exclusively those who have been made God's people, which only happens through the atoning work of Christ Jesus. Our sin must be punished, and we must be forgiven so that we can come into God's family and be heirs of his promises. Therefore, we need the substitutionary death of Jesus, in whom all the promises of God find their "yes" (2 Cor 1:20).

We should recognize that not all promises are fulfilled in the same manner.[16] Below are five kinds of promise-fulfillment:

(1) *Direct fulfillment*. These promises are fulfilled exactly as stated and occur one time. For example, Micah promised the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2; Matt 2:5–6).

(2) *Surprising fulfillment*. This occurs with promises delivered in poetic literature, which describe a reality behind the picture. For example, Isaiah promised, when the Christ arrived, "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low" (Isa 40:3–5). John the Baptist insisted this passage was fulfilled, yet no geographical alterations took place. Of course, what happened was even greater. The Son of Man took on flesh to rescue God's sinful people forever. Now that is an "earth changing" moment (Luke 3:4–6)!

(3) *Recurring fulfillment*. These promises are repeatedly fulfilled until they are "fully-filled" up in Christ. For example, God promises to comfort his people (Isa 66:13) and declares he hears the cries of the needy (Ps 69:33). Every generation of believers experience these great promises.

(4) *Increasing fulfillment*. Sometimes a promise increases and takes on different forms as it unfolds. Suppose your great-great-great-great-grandfather left a rich inheritance for the fifth generation from him, which must be used to purchase the best transportation money can buy. His imagination described it as the best "horses and chariots." When the automobile was introduced, that generation described the promise as a car that could drive seventy miles per hour. Finally, today, the fifth generation is ready to receive the promise. Certainly, they do not think about horses. It would miss the point. Instead, they look for a personal jet or a self-driving electric truck.

Some of God's promises unfold in the same way. After man was kicked out of the garden, God promised to bring the intimacy back. Eventually, God promised Abraham a land. But as the story progressed, the land became less about the physical borders and more about the dwelling place of God with his people. By the time of Jesus, he declared that the meek will inherit *the earth* (Matt 5:5), and Paul said Abraham "would be heir of *the world*" (Rom 4:13). Even in his own day Abraham looked beyond

[15] "Hope" is a larger category than a direct promise and fulfillment (i.e., Micah 5:2; Matt 2:6).

[16] Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 206–12.

the land he could see, because "he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God (Heb 11:10).

On one hand, in Christ we have already come "to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering" (Heb 12:22). On the other hand, "Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come" (Heb 13:14).

All along, the promise increased. One day it will be fully fulfilled, and all God's people will receive the inheritance which is "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you" (1 Pet 1:3–5). We will dwell with God in the new heavens and the new earth, and in the city of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:1–2). In other words, to narrow the promise to the land boundaries of Canaan would go backwards and miss where the promise was headed.[17]

5) *Partial fulfillment*. Some promises are partially fulfilled during one period of history and completed in another. For example, Jesus said he came to fulfill Isaiah's words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me … to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." However, he left out Isaiah's next sentence, "And the day of vengeance of our God" (Luke 4:18–19; Isa 61:1–2). This portion of the promise will be fulfilled in the next installment when Jesus returns and destroys all evil.

All God's promises are "yes" in Christ Jesus, and in him we can trust the final fulfillment of everything yet to come. Therefore, when the main point declares a hope-filled promise, it directs us to Jesus as our only real reason to rest in the promise.

Sample text: Psalm 3

Main point: The Lord is my shield and my glory, my sustainer and my salvation, I will not be afraid.

Christ connection: The main point declares there is reason to hope and rest in difficult circumstances because God is the one who cares for us. Even if the hardship is a result of our wronging, as it was for David. This is not a promise for those who reject God but for those who have been brought near through the work of Christ. Living on this side of the cross and empty tomb, we have even more reason to have this hope, for "he who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things" (Rom 8:32). Have you any earthly fears? Of course! Yet, despite what our eyes see, in Christ this promise is ours and invites us to live in the freedom of it. Flee the anxious desire to control, and seek shelter in the Lord your sustainer and your shield!

R: A Recurring theme that eventually climaxes in Christ

The biblical narrative repeatedly highlights themes of redemption and the character of God, which eventually climax in or are displayed most clearly in Christ.[18] These themes thread through the storyline and give us a better understanding of what Jesus is like, what his work accomplished, and what he will bring to pass when he returns.[19] Examples include:

- Salvation through substitution
- God's character—love, faithfulness, grace, mercy, wisdom, etc.
- Man's need of a mediator before God

[17] Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry*, 9Marks (Crossway, 2010), 72–75.

[18] They do not include cultural or literary themes, like the themes of expecting a significant event when a biblical character arrives at a well, or the sea representing a place of chaos. These are true observations but do not fit in this category.

[19] Other names include canonical, longitudinal, and biblical-theological themes.

- God's judgment and triumph over evil
- Suffering under the sovereignty of God
- God's presence
- God overturns the plans of the wicked for the advancement of his mission

Many other themes could be listed. Each time one reappears within a main point, it is like a signpost along the trail, directing the reader's way as we journey to reach the theme's goal in the person and work of Christ. It helps to recognize these themes climax in at least four different ways:[20]

(1) *The theme is completed*. For example, Jesus is the long-awaited promised King to reign over all things (2 Sam 7:1–17; Ps 2:1–12; Dan 7:13–14; Matt 28:18; Rev 5:1–14).

2) *The theme is most clearly displayed*. For example, God's grace, love, mercy, and justice are seen most evidently in the person and work of the Son of God.

3) *The theme is resolved*. For example, the themes of God's love and God's justice against sin are relieved of tension because of the person and work of Jesus.

4) *The theme takes a twist*. For example, the theme of God's salvation to the weak and powerless takes a turn when Jesus brings salvation to the weak by becoming the weak and oppressed himself. Then, as the story continues the followers of Jesus declare that it is through our weakness that God's power is made perfect (2 Cor 12:9).

Therefore, if the main point includes a theme recurring throughout redemption history, we zoom out and trace the theme's development from Genesis to Revelation and rejoice as we see that reality shine most brightly in the person or work of Jesus.

Sample text: Judges 7:1–25

Main point: God graciously weakens Israel so she does not take credit for any victory.

Christ connection: The main point declares God ordains weakness for his people so they live dependent on God, for God's glory. This theme was in Moses's narrative, who vocalized his weakness and was discouraged when grumbled against. The same was true for Israel, weakened before Pharoah, rescued by God's power. God granted a thorn in Paul's flesh to shrink his view of himself and increase his view of God. How about you? Perhaps there is divine purpose in your weakness. These are not empty words. The all-powerful Son of God took on flesh, experienced human weakness unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore, Christ not only identifies with us in our weaknesses (Heb 2:17; 4:15), his resurrection victory demonstrates God used the greatest moment of weakness for his greatest moment of victory, for the good of his people and the glory of his name. So then, what weakness discourages you? Take heart, it is not a sign of God's absence but of God's plan, for your good and his glory.

I: An Ill (problem) that can only be made right or resolved by Christ

The Bible does not sugarcoat the problems of this world. Many passages aim to unsettle us. We read of barrenness, disease, famine, death, oppression, loss, the power of sin, the penalty of sin, and the devil seeking to destroy.[21] Evil emerges from outside of God's people, within the community, and deep within our own hearts. These are emotionally difficult passages to read, and if we soften the disturbance we feel, we miss the good news. We must slog through the muck to find the gold.

[20] Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 22–24. Tim Keller, "Gospel Preaching", 5–8.

[21] Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 40–42.

For example, the end of Nehemiah leaves us uneasy. After God graciously returned Judah from exile, God's people rebelled the minute God's prophet left town. They profaned the temple and the Sabbath, and they married foreign women. Nehemiah eventually returned and brought reform again. But the reader knows Nehemiah will die and the people will rush to their sinful ways. The future looks bleak (Neh 13:4–32).

But listen carefully. The ugly realities of these passages lead us to Jesus because only through him can we face the pain with hope rather than defeat. Jesus alone conquers every ill effect of the fall, which we experience now in part. The full experience is certain but yet to come.

Therefore, when the main point of a passage highlights a painful reality on earth, we listen closely, letting it direct us to Jesus, who makes all wrongs right.

Sample text: Judges 19:1–21:25

Main point: God's people do what is right in their own eyes, causing heart-breaking moral corruption (i.e., rape and kidnapping).

Christ connection: The final two scenes of Judges could be treated separately. They both highlight horrific sinful depravity within Israel. Unless God intervenes, God's people will be kicked out of God's presence forever. Take heed, nobody is immune to the seduction and destruction of sin—sometimes as the guilty; sometimes as the victim—causing us to long for sin to be conquered and hearts to be healed. Thanks be to God, Christ not only takes the penalty for our sin, he breaks its power so we can live in the freedom of pursuing what is right in God's eyes rather than our own. And for those suffering from the sin of others, there is real hope. God sees. God knows. God wins. Jesus himself was betrayed with a kiss, beaten, and crucified. But then came the empty tomb and Christ's ascension. The gospel demonstrates that God can bring life through sinful acts. Therefore, we can face the horrors and sorrows of our pilgrimage with hope. One day all wrongs will be made right. We shall see God, and he will wipe away every tear (Rev 21:4).

S: A Storyline reminder of the promised redemption to be accomplished by Christ

As redemption history unfolds there are passages where the Grand Author gives details as if to remind the reader, "Everything is still in my hands. Do not think all is lost. My design determines the days. No man can thwart my promises. I will redeem my people. Keep watching. Keep waiting. Keep listening."

These passages remind us history has a divinely ordained trajectory culminating in the work of Jesus.[22] They act like a director's cut of a movie, where the Divine Director informs us of the "why" and "how" behind the scenes.

For example, the book of Ezra opens with God's people in exile. But that is about to change because of God's promise through Jeremiah (Ezra 1:1). God "stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia" (1:1), and God stirred the spirits of his people (1:5), so they returned home with full provisions. The promise to Abraham (Gen 12:1–3), David (2 Sam 7:8–17), and Daniel (Dan 7:13–14) was not forgotten. Keep hoping. The Christ will come to redeem and restore all things.

Therefore, when main points declare a storyline reminder, they tell us to broaden the horizon, to remember the promises and the storyline. They lead us to Jesus because the great climax of God's redemption story is the person and work of Christ.

[22] David Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God's Word Today*, 9Marks (Crossway, 2014) 75–76.

Sample text: 2 Kings 25:1–30

Main point: All seemed lost for exiled Israel, but the rightful Davidic king was graciously given a seat at the table with the king of Babylon.

Christ connection: The main point highlights a storyline reminder shining a glimmer of hope. The Southern Kingdom lost the battle against idolatry and experienced the curses of the covenant. Jerusalem was in ashes and the people in captivity. All seemed lost. Unspeakable sorrow. But the story was not over. God is faithful to his rescue mission when his people are not. The Davidic line would not end. The Christ must come to redeem. And so he did. And while the crucifixion surprised the disciples, his resurrection declared victory. The story was not over, and one day he will consummate his kingdom. Friend, has sin left ashes in life? The story is not over, and the faithful Christ will bring full restoration! Wait patiently, sorrowful with hope. Come, Lord Jesus!

T: A Type (person, event, or institution) picturing the Christ and his work (correlation + escalation)

God not only made promises and predictions of his coming Messiah by direct speech but also by visualizing them in biblical history. God ordained people, events, and institutions[23] (including their related elements) to have true historical significance while also pointing readers beyond themselves to someone like them but greater. These historical pictures are called types,[24] and they point to their antitype. The study of types and antitypes is called typology.

Biblical typology does not always present Jesus as the antitype.[25] However, here we are only concerned with the types pointing to Christ. To qualify as a messianic type, two aspects must be present between the type and antitype.

First, there must be a correlation. The type resembles the antitype in a specific way (not every way) which must be represented in the main point.

Second, this correlation always displays escalation, or contrast, in the antitype (see Figure 3).[26] The type resembles the antitype, but the antitype is greater. In other words, types are limited and insufficient by design, thus causing us to long for something better, or sometimes someone totally opposite.[27]

For example, Adam was a type of Jesus in that all experience death through Adam's sin, just as those in Christ experience eternal life (Rom 5:12–17). The bronze serpent event functioned as a type in that all who were bitten by a snake and looked to the bronze serpent did not die. So, too, all who were bitten by sin and look to Jesus's death and resurrection do not receive the venom of sin, which is death, but receive eternal life (John 3:14). The tabernacle was a type as it represented the unique dwelling place of God among his people. In Jesus, God "tabernacled" among men (John 1:14), who gave himself unto

[23] This includes marriage and the ceremonial system with all the involved elements.

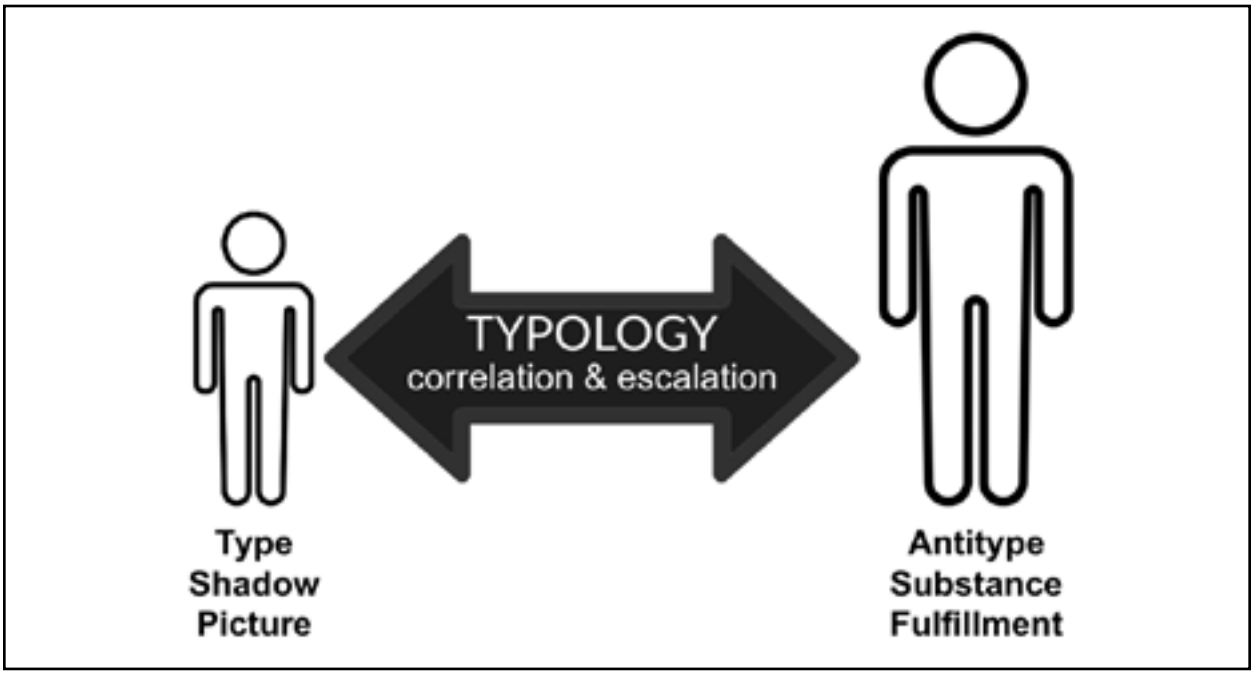
[24] They are also called "shadows," illustrating how they relate to what they point to (Col 2:17; Heb 8:5). A shadow is like the substance but not the real deal.

[25] For example, Jeremiah refers to the first exodus to declare the coming exodus of Israel returning home to Jerusalem from Babylon, the land of exile (Jer 16:14–15).

[26] Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (Eerdmans, 1982), 17–18; Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 212–20.

[27] It should be recognized, "Once a type, not always a type." When something functions as a type in one passage, it does not mean it will in all passages. For example, the bronze serpent served as a type in Numbers 21:4-9, when people looked to it in faith for salvation, but not in 2 Kings 18:4, when people rebelliously worshipped it.

death, that we might be the dwelling place of God today (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19) and that God might dwell with us forever (Rev 21:3–4).



(Figure 3)

Therefore, when the main point includes a person, event, or institution pointing beyond itself in a particular way to Jesus the antitype, it is a type.[28] Clarify the specific correlation and escalation as you move from type to antitype.

Sample text: Ruth 4:1–12

Main point: Unlike Mr. No Name, Boaz willingly paid the cost to redeem the needy.

Christ connection: This passage presents Boaz as a type of the Christ to come. The correlation is the willingness to pay a high cost to redeem the needy. The escalation is Boaz paying with monetary goods to preserve the inheritance for the needy, though it will perish. But Jesus paid the cost with his life to establish an inheritance for the rebellious, which shall never perish. Boaz's sacrifice was beautiful, and Ruth could trust Boaz would never turn her away after paying such a cost. But it is only a whisper compared to the beauty of Christ's sacrifice. Why would we question his faithfulness after such a demonstration of love? Where do you doubt his loving care? Let Boaz point you to the greater Redeemer who will never leave or forsake you (Heb 13:5).

1.4. Summary

We covered a lot. Let's summarize. To implement the Christ-centered hermeneutic, follow these steps.

[28] Insisting the type to be identified in the main point is a key guardrail to ensure legitimate Christ-connections. This is the one clarification I would include in James Hamilton's already helpful explanation of typological interpretation. James M. Hamilton Jr., *Typology: Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns* (Zondervan Academic, 2022), 26-27. See G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Baker Academic, 2012), 22.

Discern the Main Point

First, make observations that reveal the author's emphasis (#1 Observations) by examining the context (historical, literary, grammatical), structure (arrangement), and tone of the passage. Do not look for connections to Jesus during this step.

Next, synthesize the author's main point according to the original context (#2a Original Context Interpretation).

Ask the Main Point the Christ Connection Question

Now consider how the message fits within the whole Bible (#2 Whole Context Interpretation). Ask the appropriate Christ Connection Question:

When in the Old Testament: "What kind of a main point is this, such that it directs us to the Christ event?"

When in the Gospels: "What kind of a main point is this, such that it demonstrates Jesus is the climax of God's story?"

When in Acts-Revelation: "What kind of main point is this, such that it unpacks the implications of the Christ event?"

Follow the Main Point Path to Jesus

Next, use the C-H-R-I-S-T acronym to discern the most organic path to Jesus. Determine which option best completes the statement:

The main point of this passage is…

- A **C**ommand (biblical ethic) that can only be fulfilled and empowered by Christ
- A **H**ope (promise) we only have real reason to rest in because of Christ
- A **R**ecurring theme that eventually climaxes in Christ
- An **I**ll (problem) that can only be made right or resolved by Christ
- A **S**toryline reminder of the promised redemption to be accomplished by Christ
- A **T**ype (person, event, or institution) that pictures the Christ and his work

After discovering the path, "work it out" according to the uniqueness of the passage (i.e., the specific command or specific theme, etc.), as briefly demonstrated above.

The final step is "#3 Application," but that will be for another time. Instead, we move to a different crucial discussion.

2. Proof of Main-Point-Driven Methodology

We briefly consider an important question: Is the Main-Point-Driven methodology correct? Should this practice be promoted? The following are four reasons why the Christ-centered interpretation must be driven and controlled by the main point of the passage.

2.1. The Main-Point-Driven methodology honors the historical-grammatical hermeneutic.

This hermeneutic rightly teaches the biblical authors wrote with intentionality and our role as interpreters is to discern their main points, not ours (#2a Main Point Original Context). Therefore, we must discover how all the pieces of passages work together. Words and verses cannot be divorced from

the surrounding grammar. Some phrases play a supporting role, while others play a primary role. This approach ensures the author's "main thing" is our "main thing." When we extend the textual boundaries to the whole biblical context, we must maintain these principles and not allow details which played a supporting role in the original context (#2a) to take a primary role in the larger context (#2b). For example, if a tree plays a minor role in a passage (unmentioned in #2a), it does not play a major role as pointing to the Christ who was hung on a tree (#2b). Instead, we must allow the author's emphasis expressed in the main point to remain the emphasis as we consider the Christ connection.

2.2. The Main-Point-Driven methodology honors the intention of the Old Testament authors.

Peter declared,

> The prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Pet 1:10–12)

Peter clarified the Old Testament authors held two convictions we must affirm to faithfully interpret their writings. The first is what many call *sensus plenior* (fuller meaning). The second is what Abner Chou calls "directionality."

Sensus plenior emphasizes the intention of the divine Author and says the human author did not always know the full meaning of what he wrote. This is not problematic because the divine Author knew and would reveal it through a later human author. As Peter states, the prophets inquired for fuller understanding yet knew it would be revealed eventually.

It is important to recognize that the "fuller meaning" is not an entirely different meaning detached from the original human author. Rather, it is an extension of the original author's point. Details and nuances of the original point were clarified and "filled in" as the divine author progressively revealed the full meaning through a later author (or authors). In other words, the divine author ensured the original and future human authors were harmonious, not contradictory.[29]

Directionality is similar but emphasizes the human author's intentions. It teaches that Old Testament authors intentionally directed the reader forward to look and long for the story's consummation.[30] Every law, human hero, dark story, promise, and divine rescue points forward to resolution or full completion. The prophets knew they were not serving themselves, but their message would eventually be fulfilled (1 Pet 1:12). "Keep waiting; keep watching."[31] Even more, they were highly skilled theologians and interpreters who intended future authors and audiences to develop or complete their original points, not with a "different" meaning but with an expanded understanding of the same meaning. In other

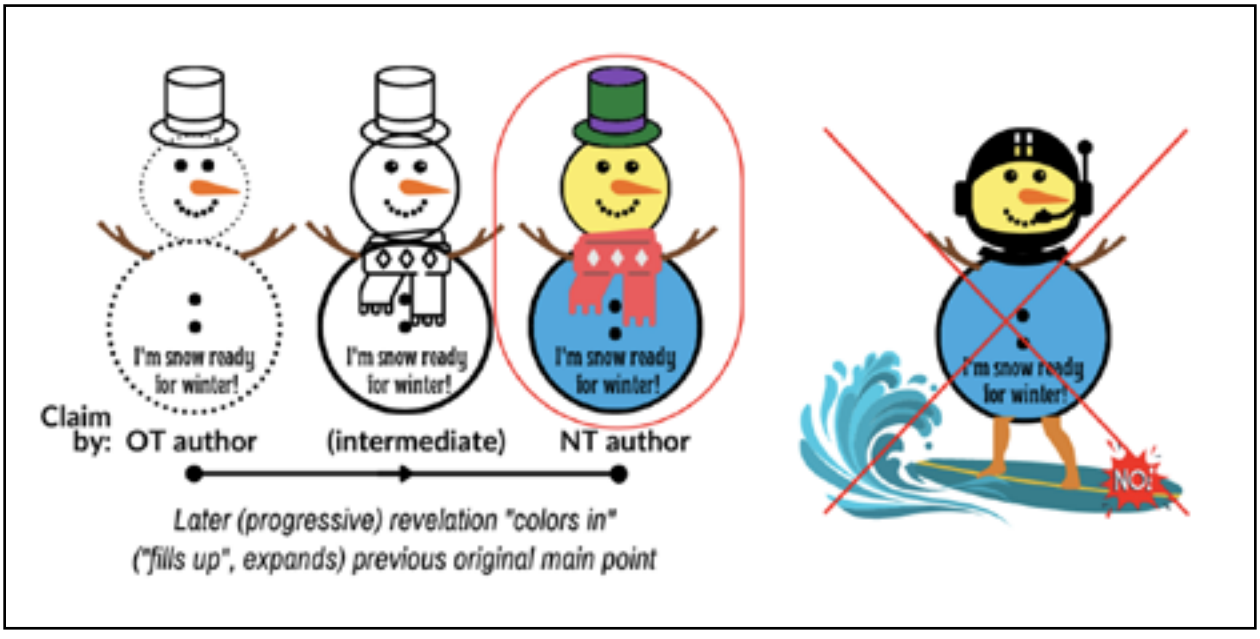
[29] D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 1984), 92–93; Douglas J. Moo and Andrew David Naselli, "The Problem of the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eerdmans, 2016), §3.8, 702–46.

[30] Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Authors: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Kregel Academic, 2018), 93-120; G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Baker Academic, 2011), 3-5.

[31] Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Authors*, 124, 93–120.

words, if an Old Testament author read a future author's expanded meaning of the original point, we would expect him to say, "Yes, I see that! It's even better than I knew!" and not, "Wait, what? That has nothing to do with what I meant?" (see Figure 4).[32]

Therefore, our Christ-centered interpretation must be driven by the main point of the author so that, if he listened to our interpretation, he would agree how it "filled in" his point.



(Figure 4)

2.3. The Main-Point-Driven methodology follows the pattern of the New Testament usage of the Old Testament.

New Testament authors demonstrate a commitment to careful exegesis. They read the Old Testament authors within their original historical-grammatical context and allowed the main point to direct their New Testament hearts to the Christ event, just as outlined in this proposed methodology.[33] Admittedly, sometimes it is challenging to follow the logic of the New Testament author's usage of the Old Testament. However, most passages are clear, and we are invited to replicate their hermeneutic.[34] This requires distinguishing the various ways they used the Old Testament, of which G. K. Beale surveys at least twelve different uses.[35] To simplify, understanding the following three uses increases clarity and confidence to handle the Old Testament like the New Testament authors.

[32] Kevin DeYoung, "Can That Be Right? The New Testament's Use of Old Testament Prophecy," *The Gospel Coalition*, 8 December 2015, https://tinyurl.com/5uxwedvn.

[33] Multiple views exist regarding the New Testament use of the Old. See G. K. Beale, *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New* (Baker, 1994) and Michael Vlach, *How Does the New Testament Use the Old Testament? A Survey of the Major Views* (Master's Seminary Press, 2021).

[34] G. K. Beale, "Did Jesus and His Followers Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? An Examination of the Presuppositions of Jesus' and the Apostles' Exegetical Method," *Themelios 14* (1989): 89–96.

[35] Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament,* 55–93.

A. To proclaim fulfillment of an Old Testament author's main point, introduced using a "passage catch phrase."

Imagine a loved one in the hospital severely injured. You lean in and ask her how she is doing. With short, painful breaths, she whispers, "When peace … like a river … attendeth … my way." What does she mean? She did not answer your question. Except, she did, using a catch phrase from Horatio Spafford's song, "It Is Well with My Soul." This transports you not only to the line but to the message of the whole song. If you know the lyrics and story behind this hymn, you understand the point. While her circumstances are heart-breaking, her soul finds rest in the God of promise.

The biblical authors often employ this "passage catch phrase" tactic to draw our attention to the whole passage and main point of an Old Testament author.[36] Without chapter and verse numbers, this could transport the audience to the whole passage of origin so they not only hear the Old Testament author's main point but also see how the New Testament author "fills in" that main point. In other words, same sense with extended meaning, demonstrating how the Old Testament passage fits within the biblical storyline (i.e., he inserts the puzzle piece into the puzzle).

For example, Jesus's cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Matt 27:46), transports us to Psalm 22. Hearing David's main point of the whole psalm gives insight into Christ's incredible faith on the cross.

Matthew's claim that Joseph bringing baby Jesus out of Egypt fulfilled Hosea's words, "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos 11:1; Matt 2:15), transports us to hear the main point of Hosea 11:1–11. Understanding Hosea's point clarifies Matthew did not misread Hosea. Instead, Matthew declared the promised new exodus had arrived. Jesus was bringing the return to God Hosea spoke about, and the Lion was roaring for his cubs.

The examples abound and show us that the New Testament authors did not read verses out of context to squeeze Jesus in. Instead, they often implemented the main point-driven Christ-centered interpretation.

B. To illustrate the New Testament author's point without interacting with the Old Testament author's main point.

For this usage, rather than interpret the meaning of an Old Testament passage, the New Testament author used a person or event to illustrate his own argument to his audience.[37] We do this. For example, if you made any of the following claims, Samson would be a good illustration:

- Fruitful ministry doesn't always equal spiritual maturity.
- Painful consequences from our sin does not indicate God is finished with us.
- Nothing can prevent God from using his broken people to accomplish his mission.

None are a main point throughout the Samson narrative (Judges 14–16). However, Samson can be used to illustrate them without claiming that the Old Testament author made these claims. In the same way, New Testament authors sometimes used Old Testament accounts to illustrate their points.

[36] C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology* (Nisbet, 1952), 132–33; Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament,* 5.

[37] Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 234; Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Authors*, 34.

For example, Samson is used to illustrate that God honors the smallest bits of faith (Heb 11:32). Paul used Sarah and Hagar to illustrate enslavement under Law versus freedom under Christ (Gal 4:21–5:6). James illustrated the relationship between faith and works by referring to Rahab (Jas 2:25).

We must not confuse the Old Testament being used as an illustration with interpretation of meaning, lest we conclude the New Testament authors read the Old Testament non-contextually.[38]

C. To announce the indirect fulfillment of an Old Testament pattern.

At times New Testament authors declared fulfillment of the Old Testament, but there is no stated promise corresponding to the fulfillment. This is legitimate because the Old Testament points forward to the Christ not only by direct promises but also by patterns.[39] These historical situations paint a picture for what the Christ and his work would be like.[40]

For example, John said that Jesus's unbroken bones fulfilled Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12, though neither text states a promise (John 19:36). But they do command to not break the bones of Passover lambs. Therefore, as the ultimate Passover Lamb, Jesus's bones were not broken.

Matthew claimed Jesus's return to Nazareth as a child fulfilled the prophets, "That he would be called a Nazarene" (Matt 2:23), which no prophet specifically stated. But the pattern of God's unimpressive rescuers, coming from forgotten places (i.e., Moses, Gideon, David), flows through the biblical storyline and is ultimately "filled up" in the coming of Christ.[41]

Remembering these three uses may clear up confusion. It is essential to understand that the Main-Point-Driven methodology follows the example of the New Testament authors.

We finish with a final reason to choose this methodology.

2.4. The Main Point-Driven methodology prevents all Christ connections from being similar.

This method ensures variety because it keeps with the emphasis of the biblical author. If the main point of the author commands us to forgive others or claims that God overturns the plans of the wicked for the advancement of his mission or promises that God hears the cries of his people, the Christ-centered interpretation keeps this emphasis as it is understood within the bigger picture. Therefore, this methodology prevents every Christ-centered interpretation from sounding the same.

More could be said. The point is that our pursuit of a faithful Christ-centered interpretation must be Main-Point-Driven, because this methodology honors the historical-grammatical hermeneutic, the Old and New Testament authors, and maintains variety according to the author's emphasis.

All we have left to do is try it.

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[38] Beale, "Did Jesus and His Followers Preach the Right Doctrine," 89–96.

[39] Sometimes patterns are recurring themes and sometimes they are typology. When categorizing consider this principle: all types are patterns, but not all patterns are types.

[40] Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 57–66; R. T. France, "The Formula-Quotations of Matthew 2 and the Problem of Communication," *NTS* 27 (1981): 233–51. In his book regarding typology, James Hamilton uses the helpful phrase, "Promise-shaped patterns." Hamilton, *Typology*, 4.

[41] Some may categorize this as typology, where Moses sets the pattern as the archetype, followed by Gideon and David being ectypes (Hamilton's term), or semi-typological fulfillments (Beale's phrase) of the antitype (Jesus) who eventually fulfills the pattern. Hamilton, *Typology*, 28, 35-51; Beale, *Handbook of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 16. However, others may categorize the example as a recurring theme. But regardless of the label, as long as the main point is driving the Christ-centered interpretation, both decisions should yield the same flavor of application.

3. Practice of Main-Point-Driven Methodology

Using the main points below, practice the methodology by asking the appropriate Christ Connection Question. Then discern the path to Jesus, using the C-H-R-I-S-T acronym. Practice will illustrate the simplicity of the Main-Point-Driven methodology, along with suggested connections.[42]

1. Exodus 15:22–27 = God turns bitter water to sweet for his grumbling people, that they might know that he will be their Healer if they walk in his ways.
2. Matthew 1:1–17 = Introducing Jesus the Christ, son of David, son of Abraham!
3. Psalm 23 = I need not fear, for the Lord is my guiding shepherd, whose steadfast love chases me.
4. 1 John 2:28–3:3 = Pursue righteousness according to who you are and what you will be.
5. 1 Kings 9:1–11:43 = Israel began to decay when the king turned from the Lord, even when he was old and things were wonderful.
6. Philippians 4:10–20 = Seek the secret of contentment and experience the joy of sacrificial living.
7. Judges 14:1–15:20 = God orders the sinful ways of Samson to accomplish God's mission of deliverance for Israel.
8. Jonah 1:1–17 = God mercifully chases his rebellious prophet who gets thrown into the sea to save rebellious sailors.
9. Mark 4:35–41 = Jesus of Nazareth has full authority over the wind and the seas.
10. Nahum 1:1–3:19 = God's jealousy for his people and his vengeance for the wicked shall be celebrated.

I hope you experience the Christ-centered interpretation as an enjoyable DIY project. With these tools you will find the Christ-connection can be organic, empowering, simple, and gloriously life-giving in and to the Lord.

[42] Answer options: 1=R; 2=S; 3=H, R; 4=C; 5=I, R; 6=C, H; 7=R; 8=R, T; 9=R, S; 10=H; R;

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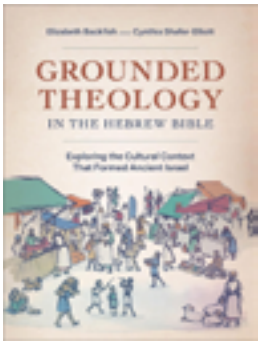
— OLD TESTAMENT —

Elizabeth Backfish and Cynthia Shafer-Elliott. *Grounded Theology in the Hebrew Bible: Exploring the Cultural Context That Formed Ancient Israel*. Baker Academic, 2025. xx + 268 pp. £23.99/$29.99.



Grounded Theology in the Hebrew Bible introduces readers to key elements of Israel's cultural context and their implications for understanding the theology of the Old Testament. In this review, *culture* is understood to refer to the beliefs, values, practices, institutions, social organization, and way of life of a particular group of people. *Cultural context* refers to how these elements shape the language, thinking, expectations, and worldview of people within that culture. As the authors themselves acknowledge, "there is no shortage of books on the cultural context of ancient Israel" (p. xx). What makes this book unique is the connections it draws between cultural context and the theology of the Old Testament.

Each chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section ("Looking Down"), written by Shafer-Elliott, deals with elements from Israelite culture based on the topic of the chapter. This includes material on ancient Israelite households (ch. 1), covenants (ch. 2), the land (ch. 3), holiness and purity (ch. 4), worship (ch. 5), the image of God (ch. 6), kingship (ch. 7), law and wisdom (ch. 8), warfare (ch. 9), and food/hospitality (ch. 10). Depending on the nature of the topic, this material is drawn from parallels in ancient Near Eastern texts, the material culture of ancient Israel (i.e., physical objects, architecture, etc.), and the Old Testament itself. The second section ("Looking Up"), written by Backfish, explores how this material informs our understanding of Old Testament theology. For example, in chapter 1, Backfish shows how Israelite views about the household shaped their descriptions of God (the head of the household), God's role as Israel's redeemer, and their communal identity.

Although the material in this volume can be found in other publications, there are several things that make this volume stand out. First, as mentioned earlier, this volume is unique in how it pairs cultural context with Old Testament theology. For readers who struggle to see the relevance of cultural context, the theology portion of each chapter provides immediate payoff that is both theologically rich and relevant for contemporary readers. Second, the presentation of material in this volume is particularly clear. The authors succeed in taking complex material and making it understandable to non-specialist audiences. Finally, this volume helpfully includes a diverse set of material in a single, accessible volume.

Despite these strengths, there are several places where this volume could be improved. First, despite its focus on culture and cultural context, the authors do not provide an explicit definition for either term—hence the definitions provided at the beginning of this review. Clear definitions are important since culture and cultural context can be understood in either a broad or a narrow sense. Readers with a narrow understanding will not be surprised to see discussions about the living arrangements and work distribution of Israelite households (pp. 2–4, 7–10); the arrangement of society into households, clans, tribes, and kingdoms (pp. 4–6); the diet and food preparation of ancient Israelites (pp. 200–6); and rules about hospitality (pp. 206–8). However, they might be surprised to see discussions about holiness and purity (ch. 4) and worship (ch. 5). This volume assumes a broad definition of culture and cultural context in line with the definitions given above.

Second, as with any work dealing with background material, there is a danger of allowing background material to introduce ideas or concerns that, though theologically legitimate, may not have been on the minds of biblical authors. For example, in the conclusion to chapter 6, the authors state that "Israel's God, however, was not to be represented in physical images or by a select individual because all humans were created to be God's images" (p. 136). While true theologically, the Old Testament itself never provides this as grounds for why the Israelites should not create or worship images of YHWH.

Finally, there are several significant problems with its chapter on covenants (ch. 2). First, the author states that the word *berit* (covenant) comes from a root (*barah*) that means "a cutting" (p. 23). While it is true that Hebrew often uses the language of "cutting a covenant" to express the idea of making a covenant, the idea of "cutting" does not come from the word *berit* (covenant) but from the verb *karat* (to cut), the verb used in the idiom. Second, the author includes a quote that is said to come from the Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon (p. 27). However, the quote comes from a different text, Ashurbanipal's "Prism A" (*RINAP* 1, "Ashurbanipal 11," lines i 8–22). This seems to be based on a misreading of the secondary source used for the quote. Third, the author unhelpfully includes correspondences between ancient Near Eastern treaties and the Decalogue in its discussion of parallels between ancient Near Eastern treaties and Deuteronomy (p. 29). For example, the author identifies the historical prologue with both Deuteronomy 5:6b and 1:1–4:14 (p. 29), without telling the reader that 5:6b is the prologue to the Decalogue rather than Deuteronomy itself.

Fortunately, these shortcomings are rare in this volume. Overall, *Grounded Theology* is a well-researched and well-written book that will prove useful for students, pastors, and laypeople who want to add depth to their study of the Old Testament.

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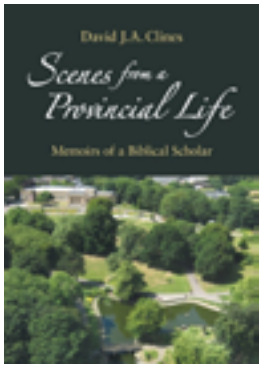
David J. A. Clines. *Scenes from a Provincial Life: Memoirs of a Biblical Scholar*. Sheffield Phoenix, 2025. 168 pp. £20.00/$30.00.



I sat next to David Clines once at a session of the International Society of Biblical Literature Conference in 2012. We spoke afterwards and I remember him being warm and inquisitive. After mentioning that I taught at Morling College in Sydney, he told me that he had attended the Hebrew classes of John A. Thompson in the late 1950s when the college was located at Ashfield (Thompson wrote the NICOT commentary on Jeremiah among other things). Clines was not officially enrolled as far as I recall but attended to supplement his Sydney University Hebrew classes. It was with this story in mind that I purchased his memoirs to see if he made mention of it. Alas, this story of what is probably our college's most famous audit student didn't make it to print.

In his fascinating autobiography, David Clines recounts his childhood family life in Oatley, Sydney, his school and university education in Sydney, then his post-graduate study in Cambridge. The second half of the book covers his scholarly career in Sheffield, with one year at Fuller Theological Seminary in California.

Stories of his upbringing in Sydney and his schooling were especially intriguing to this Sydneysider. A significant part of his childhood formation was his family's affiliation with the Brethren assemblies, of which he gives mixed assessments. For instance, "From the age of 4 until I was baptized (and so became an adult member of the assembly) I probably sat through 500 of these Morning Meetings. It was a kind of cruelty, but my 750 hours of compulsory silence with only a Bible, a hymnbook and my Bible trivia book left me very familiar with the contents of the Bible, and proved an excellent foundation for a biblical scholar. So I am not complaining" (p. 15).

His five years at Sydney University (1956–1961) offer a snapshot of a bygone golden era in the study of the humanities: classes in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Ancient History, accompanied by annual production of Greek or Latin plays in the original languages. During this time, he began teaching at a new Brethren Bible School in Sydney for training missionaries and church workers and led Brethren youth camps.

After completing an honours degree, he received a scholarship to attend Cambridge University (1961–1964). Here he recounts his teachers and subjects and his time at Tyndale House. From there he took his first academic appointment at Sheffield University, where he spent the bulk of his career. Over three chapters he gives insights and reflections on his work, including writing a commentary on Job, the founding of Sheffield Academic Press and the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, and the rationale and history behind what is perhaps his greatest publishing legacy, the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, published in nine volumes between 1993 and 2016.

After his return to Sheffield from Fuller at the end of 1975 (where he had taught a course on the Pentateuch, which inspired his book *The Theme of the Pentateuch*), Clines tells how he was unable to find a local church that measured up to his experience in California. While his children continued to attend youth groups, and his wife continued to attend church, at this time he says, "I could live with all the Apostles' Creed apart from the belief in the 'communion of saints.'" His colleague, Anthony Thiselton, "was appalled" (p. 81).

Somewhat tellingly, his giving up on church marks a turning point in the book. While the book to this point is full of personal stories, after this confession, the book is almost devoid of personal anecdotes unrelated to his scholarly career. There is no acknowledgement or explanation of his shift away from evangelical faith, only his desire expressed in an unfinished final chapter for the "liberation of biblical scholarship from the control of religiously committed believers.… Why do we not hate it when the great majority of biblical scholars are adherents of a religious tradition?" (p. 131). He continues his accounts of his colleagues and their scholarly contributions, including four pages on Cheryl Exum, but divulges nothing about his personal relationships and family life.

David Clines's academic achievements are towering, and his legacy will be long felt in biblical studies, but the message of his memoirs for me was the critical importance of active involvement in a local church.

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Tremper Longman III. *The Old Testament as Literature: Foundations for Christian Interpretation*. Approaching the Old Testament. Baker Academic, 2024. xii + 292 pp. £26.97/$34.99.

The Old Testament as Literature is the first book of a three-part series called "Approaching the Old Testament" in which Longman seeks to "offer my best thinking at the twilight of my career" (p. ix). This book centers on the OT as literature, and two future volumes will focus on historical and theological perspectives of the OT. Longman's book is broken up into three parts: Part 1 (chs. 1–6) presents the methodology of reading narrative and poetic texts; parts 2 and 3 apply the literary approach of part 1 to narrative texts in the Torah and Former Prophets (chs. 7–8) and to poetic texts from the Psalms, Wisdom Literature, Prophets, and Epic Poetry (chs. 9–11). In this review I will overview and analyze the highpoints of Longman's methodology in part 1 and provide two examples from parts 2 and 3 to show the fruit of his literary approach.

In chapter 1, Longman analyzes the text's meaning. Since the goal of this specific volume is not to discern the history behind the text or the theological implications of the text, Longman posits that the goal of the reader is to discover the meaning of a text as intended by the author(s) of the final form of the text (pp. 8–9).

Chapters 2 and 3 present a history of interpretation in OT as literature and OT genre. Longman begins with the historical-critical method followed by more text-centered approaches (especially the work of Robert Altar). Longman also shows the shortfalls of Gunkel's view of genre and its function within literature, and he presents genre as a more flexible writing tradition that an author consciously or unconsciously writes within (p. 50).

Chapter 4 explores the characteristics of the narrative genre that contribute to a text's "aesthetic quality" (p. 64). The first discussion focuses on the narrator, whom Longman differentiates from the author. While the author is the creator of the text, the narrator is a literary device by which an author "controls the (re)presentations of events" (p. 67). This distinction moves the discussion away from historical perspectives on authorship (which is to come in a future volume) to analyses of the literary features of the text. Along with the narrator, Longman illuminates other elements of narrative, including focalization, plot, characterization, setting, time, and dialogue.

Chapter 5 investigates poetry and its defining features as a genre. One specific feature of Hebrew poetry examined in the chapter is parallelism. He, like most scholars, moves away from Lowth's understanding of parallelism and meter and agrees with Kugel, who sees the relationship of the A & B lines as "A, what's more, B" (p. 112). This understanding may solve the problem caused by the Lowthian categories, but its simplicity can miss the forest for the trees. For example, the discussion of parallelism mainly examines line pairs or triads, while leaving analyses of larger sections of poems unexamined (see pp. 113–22). While line pair relationships are important, overvaluing parallelism has the possibility of pulling line pairs/triads away from their broader context within the poem. Longman also surveys other features of poetry, such as terseness, imagery, metaphor, simile, metonymy and synecdoche, personification, hyperbole, refrain, structural patterns, soundplay, and voice.

Chapter 6 focuses on intertextuality through Richard Hays's widely held criteria of interpreting intertextual relationships within Scripture. Longman provides inner-biblical allusions within the OT, followed by NT use of the OT, and he concludes the chapter by disarming the narrative approach to

the Psalms. Although I agree with Longman, the discussion seemed out of place in the chapter and took space that could have been used for other methodological approaches in the developing field of intertextuality.

I would next like to analyze two of the case studies to show how the methodology gives insight into real biblical examples. First, Longman seeks to solve the seemingly morally ambiguous actions of the midwives in Exodus 1. Should the midwives be allowed to lie to Pharaoh to keep the baby boys alive? In his methodology concerning narrative genre, Longman notes that "the Hebrew narrator is often reticent to provide a moral evaluation of a character's actions in a story" (p. 83), but they will instead give implicit narrative details throughout the remainder of the narrative that show whether the action was moral. In Exodus 1, a close reading of the story helps Longman conclude that "rather than tell, the narrator shows readers that the midwives' lie has God's approval" (p. 198). Longman's method in part 1 gives clarity to a morally ambiguous passage in Exodus 1, and it gives tools to the reader who will encounter similar situations throughout the OT.

The second case study is Deborah's Song analyzed in part 3. Specifically, I would like to point out the final verse: "At her feet he sank, he fell; there he lay. At her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell—dead" (Judg 5:27, NIV). In part 1, Longman explains how authors can use hyperbole to emphasize a point through exaggeration, and interpreting the hyperbole's function can save the reader from "interpretive and theological errors" (p. 146). Longman notes the difference between Sisera's death here and in Judges 4:21–22 (the narrative depiction) and discerns that "the hyperbolic imagery appearing in the poem … is simply intended to heighten the dramatic effect of Sisera's downfall" (p. 264). Even though the poem and the narrative are "different," Longman's methodology for reading poetry helps the reader see the varying literary goals of narrative and poetry at work in the hyperbolic depiction of Sisera's death.

In conclusion, while this book is not breaking new ground in OT scholarship, it does provide thoughtful tools picked up through Longman's career and applies them to biblical examples. For the student or pastor desiring to gain practical tools in their literary toolbelt, I recommend this new one-stop shop for literary readings of the OT.

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Jennifer M. Matheny. *Ḥesed, the Seed of the Biblical Story: New Life for Old Testament Theology*. Baker Academic, 2026. 200 pp. £21.98/$26.99.

Matheny, the Associate Professor of Christian Scriptures at George W. Truett Theological Seminary, aims "to offer a new proposal for engaging in Old Testament theology that incorporates strengths of past proposals." This she does through a survey of the concept of *ḥesed*, a Hebrew word variously rendered "love," "faithfulness," "mercy," "kindness," and "beauty," as well as by compounds such as "loving loyalty," in an endeavor to capture something of its breadth of meaning and potential.

Matheny provides the reader with a brief survey of previous approaches to developing an Old Testament theology which would be useful for any first-year theological student. She decries what she calls the "pidginization" of this discipline—its reduction to one central theme (*Mitte*) which seeks to draw everything in the Old Testament into it (p. 2). Themes such as covenant, kingdom of God, promise, and relationship have previously been called into service as the center for organizing Old Testament theology.

Drawing on the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, Matheny proposes instead an approach based on the notion of a seed, or kernel (*Kern*), which grows outward, a methodology which "seeks to create imaginative space and open-endedness," inviting the reader into the story and "unleashing potential, diversity, and hope" (p. 7).

Matheny engages with previous scholarship on *ḥesed*, which, because it cannot be reduced to a single notion in western languages such as English or German, has been the subject of several influential monographs and major articles over the past century. Does *ḥesed* entail the notion of obligation, or can it be a kindness freely bestowed? The lexicons have vacillated on this point. Matheny sees a deliberate ambiguity and open-endedness, so context must play a significant role in coming to understand something of this "relational term that embodies flourishing" (p. 9). She affirms that "the elasticity of *ḥesed* is revealed in its context and expanded by other terms used with it (such as 'compassion,' 'mercy,' 'truth,' 'justice,' 'covenant,' 'faithfulness,' 'goodness,' 'grace,' 'righteousness')" (p. 36). However, very limited exploration of these semantic associations is provided.

From each of the sections of the Hebrew canon Matheny considers sample passages that illustrate the range of uses of *ḥesed*. *Ḥesed* comes to expression through the actions of characters in stories, including minor characters, who do or do not exhibit *ḥesed* in the way they relate to each other. Because of the *imago Dei*, human *ḥesed* is a window on how God relates to his people and his world, for we are people-keepers and earth-keepers. Above all, "*Ḥesed* is a defining characteristic of Yhwh" (p. 43).

Matheny makes use of intertextuality, showing how passages are in conversation with each other, often by way of contrasting the behaviour of the characters, such as the different ways of treating brothers in the accounts of Cain, Esau, and Joseph. Matheny shows how writers may exploit the ambiguity inherent in the word. Esther's *ḥesed* (Esth 2:9), for example, may refer simply to her beauty as perceived by the king, or perhaps to the favour she receives, but the reader is invited to see resonances of "blessing, life, and surprising salvation" (p. 115) when the book is read in a canonical context.

Matheny pays attention to the issue of canonical shaping. The placement of stories can heighten the significance of the actions of various characters, such as the contrast between the behaviour of Ruth and the characters of Judges 19–21, or the arrangement of the Psalter with its growing focus on God's *ḥesed* as the basis for an ongoing relationship with his people beyond exile.

I was perplexed by aspects of the methodology. While it may be fine to include the stories of the Israelite midwives or Pharaoh's daughter when the word is not found in these accounts, and I have little doubt that an Israelite could have been comfortable affirming these characters as exhibiting *ḥesed*, it is puzzling to see them being used in the mix of sample passages called upon to demonstrate the range of meaning of *ḥesed*.

One of the longstanding debates has been whether *ḥesed* is used of the human response to God. Matheny answers with a resounding yes, though the few passages that could be taken this way (e.g., Hos 6:6) are all capable of being read in terms of human–human interactions, and Matheny does not justify her confidence with solid exegesis.

In the end I was not clear how the metaphor of a seed (*Kern*) differed significantly from the notion of a center (*Mitte*). Both suggest something held to be a core concern, with other theological issues considered in relation to this theological locus. I would prefer the notion of multi-perspectivalism, where we can look at the Old Testament from different angles, each perspective adding to the richness of our understanding, though I am glad to see *ḥesed* being given a seat of honour at this table.

The style of writing is fresh and engaging, though I occasionally found the retelling of the biblical stories somewhat protracted for an academic tome. I also found off-putting the inconsistent transliteration of Hebrew (*ḥesed* but *khakham*; *suv* but *shamar*). The book is enhanced by the inclusion of a Scripture index and a subject index.

Matheny has done the church and academy a service in helping us focus on an important word and concept in the Old Testament, and project ourselves into the story and join the discussion of how together we may promote human flourishing.

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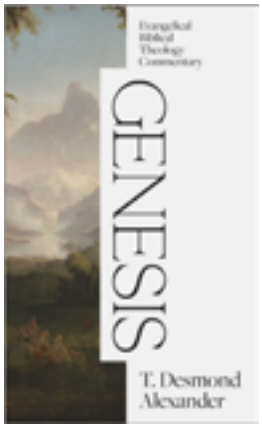
T. Desmond Alexander. *Genesis*. Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentaries. Lexham Academic, 2025. xxi + 525 pp. £46.99/$54.99.



Part of the Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentaries (EBTC) series, T. Desmond Alexander's *Genesis* is a consolidation of over four decades of research on the Bible's first book. Alexander is Senior Lecturer in Biblical Studies at Union Theological College in Belfast, Northern Ireland. He also serves as one of the EBTC general editors, who state that their aim is to "relate biblical theology to our own lives and to the life of the Church" (p. xiv).

Within this framework, biblical theology is defined as the theology of the entire Bible, an exercise in "*whole-Bible theology*," and, more broadly, an attempt to understand and embrace the perspectives of the biblical authors (p. xi; italics original). In this way, biblical theology involves a close study of the use of the Old Testament in the Old Testament and its use in the New Testament, both at the level of individual texts and at the level of broader christological and soteriological themes (pp. xi–xii). On this basis, the commentary does not disappoint.

Genesis is divided into two main parts: (1) Introduction (pp. 1–56) and (2) Exposition (pp. 57–476). The biblical text is broken into eleven sections: (I) The Creation of the Heavens and the Earth (1:1–2:3), (II) The Offspring of the Heavens and the Earth (2:4–4:26), (III) The Offspring of Adam (5:1–6:8), (IV) The Offspring of Noah (6:9–9:29), (V) The Offspring of Noah's Sons (10:1–11:9), (VI) The Offspring of Shem (11:10–26), (VII) The Offspring of Terah (11:27–25:11), (VIII) The Offspring of Ishmael (25:12–18), (IX) The Offspring of Isaac (25:19–35:29), (X) The Offspring of Esau (36:1–37:1), and (XI) The Offspring of Jacob (37:2–50:26). An extensive bibliography rounds things out (pp. 477–501). There is also a Scripture index.

In the Introduction, concerning JEDP sources, although Alexander considers Genesis to be a "literary collage, created through combining preexisting materials," he also maintains that this "does not justify ignoring the present coherence of the book" (pp. 2–3). Regarding the ancient Near East, the author argues that because we know "so little about the process by which Genesis was composed, it is easy to speculate regarding all kinds of influences…. For this reason, priority should be given to interpreting passages in Genesis in the light of their own literary and canonical context" (p. 21). Each section of the commentary follows a consistent fourfold pattern: "Exposition," "Context," "Comments," and "Bridge."

Typographically, the commentary displays an attractive use of white space, bold, shading, and the like, with ample tables and charts, often displaying the chiastic structure of the text. That said, the image quality of some figures can vary (cf. p. 315). The font size of the Hebrew makes both the vowels themselves and the Masoretic pointing and accentuation quite readable, albeit these rarely play a sustained role within the commentary (see pp. 170 and 454).

Lexically, Alexander deftly differentiates between Hebrew stems and utilizes precise nomenclature for verbal forms, such as *wayyiqtol*. A variety of dictionaries, such as BDB, *TDOT*, *TWOT*, and *NIDOTTE* are cited alongside GKC, *IBHS*, Arnold-Choi, and Muraoka for Hebrew grammars.

To critique, although Alexander is an exceptionally adept scholar, I was at times rather surprised by some of his comments. For instance, given the longstanding consensus that Ham's actions in Genesis 9

seem to reflect a serious breach of filial respect, Alexander maintains that there is no reason to believe Ham's behavior in verse 22 is malevolent and that Noah's testimony points instead to Canaan as the perpetrator (p. 177).

This assessment, however, appears to conflate Ham's reporting of the matter with rectifying it. The narrative subtly contrasts Ham with Shem and Japheth's deliberate attempt to honour their father, something Ham himself does not do. It is also written that Noah "learned" (*yada*ʿ) that Ham, Noah's youngest son, "did" (ʿ*asah*) something warranting censure (Gen 9:24).

I also quibble with the author's reticence to associate reeds with the ark's construction. Alexander states that *qinnim* is "never associated with reeds used in the construction of boats" within the Bible and that it is a "mistake" to assume the supposed reference to reeds in 6:14 provides evidence that the biblical account is closely related to Mesopotamian traditions regarding the construction of an ark (p. 158). An alternative possibility, argued elsewhere, is that revocalization permits reading the term as an accusative of material, that is, "out of reeds."

Readers will need to adjudicate for themselves the merits and drawbacks of the Christian Standard Bible being used as a base translation. One also wonders if Kenneth A. Mathews's Christian Standard Commentary *Genesis 1—11:26* (Holman Reference, 2023) simply appeared too late in the publishing process to incorporate, since Alexander's citations refer to Mathews's 1996 NAC Genesis volume.

Lastly, since Alexander delineates various schematics of the "chiasms" or "ring structure" of the flood (pp. 151–55), the recent comments of Douglas K. Smith in "A Comparative Discourse Analysis of the Genesis Flood Account in the Hebrew Masoretic Text and the Greek Septuagint" (PhD diss., Columbia Biblical Seminary, 2023) would have proved valuable.

To close, the book of Genesis is one of the most important, yet also one of the most misunderstood and misused, books in the canon. Fortunately, this volume in the Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentaries series offers a handy yet thorough commentary that provides a holistic reading of the book, taking seriously the literary structure and central themes of Genesis within a canonical focus. Its primary users will likely be students in Bible college, university, and seminary contexts alongside preachers, pastors, Bible study leaders, and invested lay people.

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James D. Nogalski. *The Book of Micah*. NICOT. Eerdmans, 2024. xxi + 258 pp. £34.99/$44.99.

This volume replaces Leslie Allen's contribution (1976) in the NICOT series. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that James Nogalski has shaped an entire generation of research on the Book of the Twelve since the publication of his seminal works, *Literary Precursors to the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 217 [de Gruyter, 1993]) and *Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 218 [de Gruyter, 1993]). With more than three decades of publishing at the highest level, including at least fourteen volumes and four commentaries, alongside extensive experience leading international academic committees and editorial boards, there are currently very few scholars who possess Nogalski's breadth and depth of expertise on the Book of the Twelve. Those familiar with the NICOT series will already know that it not only upholds the authority of Scripture but also consistently represents some of the finest Old Testament scholarship presently available. This volume continues to strengthen NICOT's standing as the premier academic commentary series in Old Testament studies.

The opening forty-five pages of this approximately 250-page volume provide an up-to-date and highly useful introduction to the book of Micah, covering its history, composition, authorship, setting, and textual history. The highlight of this introduction is Nogalski's reading of Micah within the larger literary framework of the Book of the Twelve. Here, he discusses how Micah functions as a bridge between Jonah and Nahum, creating a sequence of three books that sustain a continuing concern with Assyria. Nogalski's approach reflects the enduring strengths of classical redaction criticism alongside a strong inclination towards understanding the rationale and message of the book's final form.

For Nogalski, redaction criticism serves the message of the text rather than the reconstruction of hypothetical historical stages. He tends to avoid speculative discussions regarding textual dependency and instead views the Twelve as an "editorially created scroll" with "editorial insertions of compositions that invite readers (ancient and modern) to ask how the twelve prophetic writings function as a literary collection" (p. 27). As a whole, Nogalski sees the book of Micah addressing the fate of Assyria, Israel (Samaria), Judah (Jerusalem), and the nations.

The structuring of the commentary proper follows a clear and coherent logic and is presented with consistency throughout the volume. Discussion on each textual unit begins with a concise overview that highlights major structural divisions and literary features. This is followed by Nogalski's own translation of the Masoretic Text and is appended with detailed textual notes on ancient manuscript variants, especially in relation to the LXX and Qumran texts. It is worth noting that Nogalski is generally resistant to unnecessary textual emendation, a position that gives the commentary a refreshing restraint.

Nogalski's commentary is a masterclass in balancing rigorous scholarship with readability. He demonstrates extensive engagement with some of the most important scholarship on the Twelve in both English and German, with German works comprising at least a quarter of the select bibliography located in the preliminary section of the volume. A sizable part of his research appears in the extensive footnotes, where the meticulous reader will discover deeper insights.

Nogalski consistently explains textual obscurities, traces thematic and literary connections, and highlights poetic features such as assonance, paronomasia, and wordplay that shape the rhetorical force of the text. Yet he does not write as someone disposed to conform to the unspoken expectations of the

scholarly guild, nor does he hide behind a pretentious or performative scholarly façade. Despite the depth of scholarship, his writing remains remarkably clear, readable, and accessible.

Nogalski also does not neglect the question of what it means to read Micah today. Besides a brief but thoughtful section entitled "Contemplating Micah Today" in the Introduction, he regularly pauses at the conclusion of major text units to offer reflections and highlight significant points of contemporary application. To me, these are among the most heartening portions of the commentary.

For example, he observes how the prophet Micah "speaks truth to power, not in ideological rants as one often sees on social media of our day" (p. 135). In Micah's own historical setting, the prophet courageously denounced the idolatrous political leadership of Israel and Judah at huge personal risk. Nogalski then contrasts this with the tendency of some Christian communities and Protestant leadership today to remain silent when social injustices emerge in ways that threaten their own institutional or social advantage. Such reflections are brief, but they are thoughtful, measured, and pastorally aware.

There are several features of this commentary that readers will particularly appreciate. First, Nogalski demonstrates an impressive methodological balance throughout the volume. While he interacts carefully and respectfully with some of the most sophisticated scholarly opponents, he avoids writing in a manner that privileges his own research while dismissing competing perspectives. Likewise, he refuses to overcommit himself to any specific methodological agenda. Instead, he gives sustained attention to syntax, textual criticism, historical context, poetics, redaction, and broader holistic readings in a balanced and integrated manner.

Second, although Nogalski has written previously on Micah in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary Series and has addressed the composition of the Twelve extensively elsewhere, this volume nevertheless feels fresh and does not read like a mere repackaging of his earlier publications. At the same time, readers who wish to appreciate the full depth of his arguments will still need to consult those earlier works alongside this commentary.

Third, this remains primarily an academic and technical commentary. Theological reflection, traditional interpretation, and sustained applicational discussion are relatively limited. Although Nogalski occasionally offers pastoral or theological insights, readers looking for extended theological engagement or sermonic application may be better served by other commentary series such as the NIV Application Commentary. There is comparatively little interaction with the church fathers or reformers, such as Calvin or Luther, or with more recent Christian theological movements.

Leslie Allen's earlier volume included a dedicated section on "Theology" in the Introduction, but this refreshed version no longer contains such a section. This does not mean that Nogalski neglects theology altogether. Significantly, his section on "Reading Micah in the Twelve," a major area of scholarly development that emerged after Allen's work, offers an important contribution to understanding the theology of the Minor Prophets. Nogalski's primary task is to elucidate the text, which he has done extremely well.

As a brief side note, I did not find the Hebrew transliterations especially helpful. This observation probably pertains more to the series' stylistic decisions than to Nogalski. My sense is that seminary students learning biblical Hebrew from grammars published within the last one or two decades generally no longer rely on transliterations.

I highly recommend this commentary on Micah. The quality of research throughout the volume is simply outstanding. It is an important contribution to contemporary scholarship on the Twelve and will serve as an invaluable resource for pastors, teachers, students, and scholars alike.

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Martin A. Shields. *Job*. The Story of God Bible Commentary. Zondervan Academic, 2025. xxi + 486 pp. £37.00/$53.99.

Martin A. Shields is an Honorary Associate in the Department of Hebrew, Biblical and Jewish Studies at the University of Sydney. He writes for "typical Bible readers and preachers" (p. xvii) and delivers a commentary that is both academically rigorous and accessible.

This commentary represents a significant development in evangelical readings of Job since the landmark work of David Clines in his Job commentaries in the Word Biblical Commentary series. While benefiting from Clines's linguistic rigour, Shields sets aside Clines's depiction of God as a "cosmic bully" and Job as a tragic hero who goes down in silent defiance. While acknowledging Job's strong confrontational, even defiant, manner, Shields holds that "Job remains ultimately convinced that God is just, and this is the ultimate sign of the strength of Job's faith" (p. 270).

Each portion of the text is treated under three headings. In "Listen to the Story" Shields introduces the reader to texts from the ancient Near Eastern setting against which these words would have been heard. In "Explain the Story" he engages in exegesis with close attention to the challenges of the book's linguistic obscurities. Finally, in "Live the Story" he addresses questions of application.

While many see the biblical text as a product of ancient Near Eastern religious developments, Shields explains God's revelation as countering the beliefs and myths of contemporary cultures (p. 166). The god of the book of Job is Yahweh and he notes that "there are no other deities upon which blame for suffering can be levelled" (p. 41).

While many commentators are wont to amend or rearrange the text, Shields asserts that we must "begin with a faithful trusting relationship with their ultimate author" (p. 18).

Without denying the historicity of these events (p. 13), Shields suggests that "the story of Job is a stylised telling of his story, or it may even be something like an extended parable." He asks, "Could Job have been a piece of performance literature like a modern play? It is hard to rule the idea out" (p. 12). As a parable the book would leave its readers to solve the riddle as a wisdom exercise as per Proverbs 1:6–7 (p. 62). He highlights the extensive use of irony and sarcasm, along with parody in Job 26, and avoids euphemising the confronting language of the Hebrew text, noting that Job's intense expressions are "not wrong or sinful" (pp. 78–79).

It is in the sections headed "Explain the Story" that Shields develops his overall thesis. He begins with "the elephant in the room" and asks, "Why is Job's affliction not removed by God once the wager has been won?" (p. 21). He sees the larger issue as the need for Job and his friends to appreciate the

difference between their wisdom and the Creator's. He reads the poem on wisdom in Job 28 as the words of the narrator rather than Job, and as the focus of the chiastic structure of the book (p. 307).

Shields reads Job and his friends as sharing a presupposition with respect to retributive justice, which he defines as requiring God to deliver justice, blessings and curses, in this life (pp. 115–16). That said, he affirms God's delivery of retributive justice in his final judgement, stressing that God delivered that justice for our sins onto his Son in our place. Christ's atonement constitutes the basis for God's statement that Job is "blameless." He cites Romans 3:25–26 in support of the way Christ's atonement is effective retrospectively for people who lived before that event.

Shields follows Clines's analysis of Job 42:6, correcting Jerome's evocative image of Job repenting in dust and ashes. He notes that the word *nkhm* means "to comfort, console," that it has this meaning every other time it appears in Job, and that comfort is a theme in the book. For Job to repent implies guilt and would contradict both God's initial and final judgements with respect to Job.

Shields argues that Job "thought he knew better than God" (p. 395), that "Job's claims about God were wrong" (p. 348), and that "in this, Elihu is right and Job is wrong…" (p. 375). He reads Job as seeking to call God to account. This raises the question of how to reconcile Shields's analysis with God's contrasting evaluation of Job's words and those of his friends at 42:7–9. There, Shields argues that Yahweh is likely not simply offering blanket approval of everything that Job had said, and that God is not so much interested in the words spoken as their meaning (p. 443).

The crux of any reading of Job lies in our understanding of the divine speeches in Job 38–41, and in particular the question of whether God rebukes Job for charging him with injustice. Shields concludes that God's rebuke functioned as teaching rather than condemnation and that Job's response was withdrawal of his argument rather than repentance of any sin.

Shields's work invites further investigation of the relationship between God's acknowledgement that he inflicted such horrors on Job "without cause" (2:3) and Job's arguments.

Biblical wisdom literature functions to provoke thinking and discussion. This volume is a significant contribution to that discussion. Readers at all levels will find in it a wealth of wisdom and much that will deepen their understanding of the gospel.

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— NEW TESTAMENT —

Timothy A. Brookins. *Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Corinthians: Paul, Stoicism, and Spiritual Hierarchy*. Eerdmans, 2024. xi + 354 pp. £49.99/$64.99.

In 1 Corinthians 1–4, Paul devotes a lengthy section of the letter to address divisions that have occurred in the church. These are reflected in the slogans of 1 Corinthians 1:12: "I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, etc." What has led to these divisions is a perception amongst some that they possess a wisdom that is superior to the wisdom possessed by the rest of the church. Previous scholars have noted that this wisdom reflects ideas found within the Stoic/Cynic tradition, and it is this that is likely informing the slogans and attendant behaviour that we see later in the letter (e.g., 6:12: "I have the right to do anything"; 8:1: "we all possess knowledge"). Other more recent studies, however, suggest that the core of the divisions relates to oratory. Specifically, those of the Apollos faction were enamoured by his superior rhetorical abilities and have subsequently come to favour him over Paul. While the Corinthians were still perhaps incorporating ideas from popular philosophy, it is the rhetorical abilities of their teacher that sets them apart. Brookins, however, challenges this popular assumption, arguing that the problems in Corinth are rooted specifically in Stoicism. In other words, the "wisdom" that has led to the divisions is not sophistry but rather a Stoic-inspired understanding of natural hierarchy in which the wise man places himself above those he considers to be spiritually underdeveloped. In the case of the Corinthian church, this has led to a faction of Paul's followers perceiving themselves as superior to and in rivalry with other members of the church.

The book contains three main sections. Part 1 (chs. 1–2) presents an overview of the previous scholarship on the question of the Corinthian wisdom (ch. 1). This is followed by a brief overview of the history of Stoicism and the ways in which the language of *sophia* was defined within Stoicism and how this could have come into dialogue with the Christian message at Corinth (ch. 2). Part 2 (chs. 3–9) is where Brookins does the exegetical heavy lifting. Here, he systematically works through 1 Corinthians 1–4 with a close analysis of the Greek text, highlighting at each point the Stoic connections in the passage. Throughout this section, Brookins also critiques the main proponents of the rhetorical view (primarily, Winter, Litfin, and Pogoloff), arguing instead that these chapters need to be understood as being informed by Stoic ideas and values. Chapter 9 of this section draws together these insights and extends them to other sections of the letter where this wisdom is being manifested in the Corinthians' behaviour (e.g., the sexual immorality in 5:1–6:20 or the participation in activities of idol temples in 8:1–11:1). Overall, he proposes that the "Corinthian wisdom" is in fact a type of "sub-Stoicism"—that is, Stoic doctrine "subordinated" to Paul's teaching.

In part 3 (chs. 10–13), Brookins proposes an entirely original background to the situation in the church. He argues persuasively that the factions of 1:12 reflect a typical rivalry between different philosophical schools, with the named individual as their teacher (ch. 10). Specifically, he proposes that some in the church saw Paul as the founder of a new philosophical "school" in Corinth and have broken off into their own faction. The other three factions have subsequently formed as a reaction to this new group. According to Brookins, this Paul faction began and subsequently took shape in the household of Titius Justus, in whose house Paul moved the church after being driven from the synagogue (Acts

18:7). Some of the members of this founding group had formal acquaintances with Stoicism both due to their more elite status as educated men, as well as with their connections to some of the local Stoic philosophers (well-attested in first-century Corinth [ch. 11]). Over time, and in the ongoing absence of Paul, Stoic ideas have come to embed themselves in the Christian doctrines of this group. This resulted in a new identity grounded in their "sub-stoicism."

Overall, the book is a significant milestone in Corinthian scholarship. Brookins's proposal that it is Stoicism that lies behind the Corinthian wisdom is entirely compelling. While previous scholars have argued along these lines, Brookins has (in my view) put the matter beyond doubt. However, I remain unconvinced by other aspects of the thesis. Notably, Brookins presents the background of the Corinthian wisdom in either/or terms. That is, it is *either* philosophy *or* rhetoric, his proposal being that Stoic philosophy provides the only necessary explanation for the Corinthians' wisdom. But this was not a dichotomy reflected in ancient education. Philosophical schools also prioritised oratory and vice versa. Moreover, the arguments put forward by advocates of the rhetorical thesis in Corinthians still (in my mind) offer a more plausible explanation for aspects of 1 Corinthians 1–4, most especially 2:1–5. But despite my reservations on this point, it does not detract from the central thesis of the book. That is, what happened in Corinth was the emergence of a "sub-Stoicism" that has led to the factional behaviour discussed in 1 Corinthians 1–4. Brookins's extensive knowledge of the primary sources as well as his depth of comparative analysis throughout the study has established this as a solid foundation for ongoing discussion of the topic. This conclusion, I believe, sets the book apart as one of the turning points of Corinthian scholarship.

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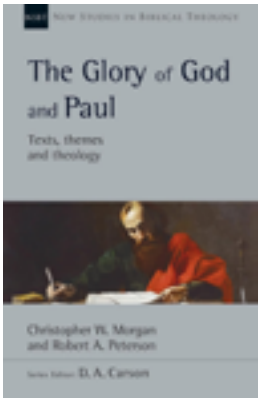
Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson. *The Glory of God and Paul: Texts, Themes, and Theology*. New Studies in Biblical Theology 58. Apollos, 2022. xviii + 283 pp. £17.99/$29.99.



Those who know Chris Morgan are familiar with his pastoral heart in the context of theological education. As a long-time local pastor and dean of Christian Studies at California Baptist University, Morgan has been a pivotal figure in creating a vigorous ecosystem for Californian evangelical life, particularly Baptist life, over the past decades. Consequently, his influence has spread beyond California's borders. Morgan's commitment to sound theology, to the local church, and to educating the next generation of pastors and leaders is evident in his life's work; his books are known for scriptural faithfulness, and he can organize complex and important theological topics in accessible language.

Morgan's recent book, *The Glory of God in Paul,* published in the NSBT series and co-authored with his long-time collaborator, Robert A. Peterson, explores the glory theme in Paul. The glory motif in biblical studies, particularly in Pauline studies, has engendered several dissertations and publications in the past 10 years, building on the work of Carey Newman's groundbreaking study, *Paul's Glory-Christology: Tradition and Rhetoric* (Brill, 1992). For example, Donald Barry (*Glory in Romans and the Unified Purpose of God in Redemptive History* [Pickwick, 2016]), Mikko Sivonen ("The Doxa Motif in Paul: A Narrative Approach to the Vindication

of the Glory of God through Christ" [ThD diss., University of Helsinki, 2018]), Haley Goranson Jacob (*Conformed to the Image of His Son: Reconciling Paul's Theology of Glory in Romans* [IVP, 2018]), and Donnie Berry (*The Earth Will Be Filled: A Biblical Theology of the Glory of God* [IVP Academic, 2025]) have all written on the topic. Morgan and Peterson's book is a helpful and accessible addition to the discussion of this important theme, found both in Scripture and theology.

The first two chapters lay the groundwork for the book's aim, namely, to explore the glory theme in Pauline epistles. Chapter 1 offers a panorama of God's intrinsic and extrinsic glory in Scripture and theology. The authors paint a big picture, showing how God's intrinsic glory flows out to make it visible. God's glory appears in seemingly tension-filled ways: it is transcendent yet immanent, full and received, unique and shared. Glory appears in every major section of the Bible and is woven throughout all major parts of redemptive history.

Chapter 2 looks at the storyline of redemptive history: how the glory is manifested in creation, shattered in the fall, inaugurated in the redemption, and promised to be fully restored in the consummation. According to the authors, there is no "grander theme than that of God's glory" in the Scriptures (p. 31).

Chapters 3–7 examine six Pauline epistles in light of the glory motif. Chapter 3 examines the glory of God in Romans. According to the authors, salvation is presented in a major way in Romans through the glory theme. Chapter 4 explores the glory of God in 1 Corinthians 15, showing the centrality of glory in both Jesus's and believers' resurrection. In chapter 5, Morgan and Peterson compare the Old and New Covenants as they are described in 2 Corinthians 3–4, the most glory-filled of all New Testament scriptures. They show how the New Covenant glory is superior to the Old Covenant. Paul's letter to Ephesians in terms of glory and the church is analyzed next in chapter 6. "God's ultimate goal for the church is to glorify himself in his people and in his son" (p. 171). Finally, the authors see eschatological glory as the central theme in 2 Thessalonians. God's glory is fully manifested in the "resurrected, transformed, glorified bodies" of the believers (p. 199). In the final two chapters, Morgan and Peterson both systematize the findings and make applications to the Christian life.

The authors' careful exegetical work (though missing discussion on some Pauline passages like 1 Cor 11), combined with a sound biblical-theological approach and an ability to synthesize findings coherently, engenders another gift to the church, especially to the teachers and pastors who want to familiarize themselves with one of the most, if not the most, important motifs in Paul. How God in his glory and humans as the image and glory of God (and as sinners who fall short of God's glory) relate to the image and the glory of Christ and the promise of final glorification is a colossal and fascinating reality.

In addition to careful biblical exegesis, Morgan and Peterson draw prudently from wider scholarship, interacting with the best-known commentators and contemporary biblical theologians. The bibliography is generally up to date, though the authors overlook some more recent monographs. Furthermore, issues such as what lexemes in addition to *doxa* should contribute to our understanding of the concept of glory and what is the relationship between honor and shame are outside of the scope of this book.

Regardless, Morgan and Peterson have written another solid book, this time a clear and systematic presentation of the glory theme in Pauline letters, both textually and theologically. While the book feels at times like a classroom-type presentation and could potentially have benefited from more creative

delivery, the substance of this fine volume is vital for understanding both Paul and the entire Bible. Morgan and Peterson's book serves as a great and helpful resource for that undertaking.

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David I. Starling. *1 Corinthians*. Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary. Lexham Academic, 2025. 428 pp. $49.99.

First Corinthians presents interpreters with an unusual challenge. Few New Testament letters combine such a diverse range of theological, ethical, ecclesial, and pastoral questions or have generated such an extensive history of interpretation. David Starling proves to be a wise guide through this complex terrain. Marked by sound exegetical judgment, broad engagement with contemporary scholarship, and a consistent concern to interpret individual passages within Paul's larger theological argument, this volume is a valuable guide for pastors, students, and scholars alike.

One of the commentary's greatest strengths is its balance between breadth and depth. Starling moves confidently through the letter's major interpretive issues without allowing the discussion to become either superficial or unwieldy. Particularly valuable is the substantial 60-page introduction. Beyond surveying the historical setting and social world of Corinth, Starling explores the letter's occasion, literary coherence, and principal theological themes, including wisdom, Christology, ecclesiology, salvation, and eschatology. These opening chapters establish the conceptual framework that governs the exposition, enabling readers to understand each passage within Paul's larger theological and pastoral argument.

Equally commendable is Starling's engagement with contemporary scholarship. He demonstrates extensive familiarity with the major conversations in Pauline studies while exercising admirable restraint in their use. Scholarly discussions are introduced not to display erudition but to illuminate genuine exegetical questions. His treatment of the meaning of "head" in 1 Corinthians 11 illustrates this approach well. Competing interpretations are represented fairly before Starling offers a measured defense of his own conclusions. Even readers who disagree with particular judgments will appreciate the integrity and generosity with which opposing views are handled.

The commentary is especially successful in fulfilling the distinctive aims of the Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary series. Rather than treating Paul's use of Israel's Scriptures as a collection of isolated citations, Starling consistently demonstrates how they advance the theological logic of the letter as a whole. Whether discussing the Deuteronomic background and Passover imagery of chapter 5, Israel's wilderness experience in chapters 8–10, or the Adam-Christ theology that climaxes in chapter 15, he shows that Paul's ethical exhortations and pastoral instruction emerge from the larger story of God's saving work fulfilled in Christ. Biblical theology therefore remains an integral feature of the exposition rather than an occasional aside, making this volume a fitting contribution to the series.

The volume's commitment to accessibility necessarily limits the amount of space devoted to sustained interaction with some technical debates. Readers seeking exhaustive treatment of every

grammatical, rhetorical, or text-critical issue will still need to consult larger commentaries such as those by Thiselton, Fee, Garland, or Ciampa and Rosner. Likewise, although the "Bridge" sections consistently connect Paul's argument to broader theological concerns, some readers may wish they ventured further into concrete pastoral and homiletical application. These are less shortcomings than the inevitable tradeoffs of a commentary designed to remain both academically responsible and genuinely useful for the church.

One final theological observation may be offered. Starling rightly appeals to creation in several pivotal discussions—notably Paul's treatment of food offered to idols (chs. 8–10), gender and worship (ch. 11), and the resurrection (ch. 15)—and perceptively argues that redemption restores rather than abolishes God's created order. Readers may nevertheless wonder whether this creation–new creation framework could have been developed more explicitly as one of the principal theological threads unifying Paul's diverse pastoral concerns. Throughout 1 Corinthians, questions of worship, sexuality, authority, ecclesial life, and eschatological hope repeatedly find their theological grounding in God's creational purposes as renewed through the gospel of Christ. Bringing this pattern into sharper focus would have further illuminated the coherence of Paul's argument and reinforced the commentary's already strong biblical-theological orientation.

These observations, however, do little to diminish the commentary's considerable strengths. Starling has produced a balanced, reliable, and theologically rich exposition of one of Paul's most demanding letters. His combination of exegetical judgment, fair engagement with competing interpretations, theological sensitivity, and biblical-theological insight makes this commentary a worthy contribution to the Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary series. It deserves a wide readership among pastors, teachers, students, and scholars seeking a commentary that combines exegetical rigor, theological depth, and pastoral usefulness.

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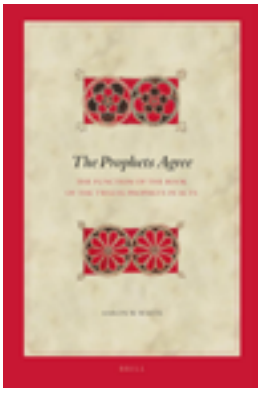
Aaron W. White. *The Prophets Agree: The Function of the Book of the Twelve Prophets in Acts*. Biblical Interpretation 184. Brill, 2020. 260 pp. £102.77/$132.93.



This volume is a revised version of White's 2017 PhD dissertation, written under the supervision of John Nolland at Trinity College, Bristol. In developing the topic, White focuses on the four quotations in Acts from the Book-of-the-Twelve-Prophets (TP): Joel 3:1–5 [2:28–32 MT] in Acts 2:17-21; Amos 5:25–27 in Acts 7:42b–43; Habakkuk 1:5 in Acts 13:41; and Amos 9:11–12 in Acts 15:16–18a. All four of these quotations are from the Greek Old Testament, and each is used at a significant turning point in the narrative of Acts chapters 1–15. Based on the references to the TP in Acts (called "book of the prophets," 7:42; "the words of the prophets," 15:16) and in keeping with the current consensus of prophet scholars, White understands the TP to be a literary unity, and for him this unity is "formed around the theme of the day of the Lord" (p. 41).

From the beginning he clarifies that his aim is "to show that Luke's use of the TP is instrumental in reflecting the early church's view of the universal lordship of Jesus, the Messiah, as it developed from Pentecost to the Jerusalem Council" (p. 2). Thus, the main theme of the TPs is developed in Acts by Luke's use of the quotations from the TPs to show that Jesus is the Lord who ushers in the Day of the Lord prophesied in the TPs.

The book has four main chapters with an introduction and conclusion. In the introduction White builds his case for the study, surveys previous related works, and explains the process he will follow. He is especially influenced by the "three-way dialectic" of Francis Watson (*Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, 2nd ed. [T&T Clark, 2016]), which for Watson involved Paul, the Jewish Scriptures, and an early Jewish interlocutor. For White it involves Luke, the Greek text of the TPs, and an early Jewish text using the same TP text. (Interestingly each of the TP texts quoted in Acts is used one time elsewhere in early Jewish literature.) For Watson, Paul is a "reader" of Scripture who knows it well "and is actively engaged in the process of interpreting its meaning into a new context" (White, pp. 30–31). However, White follows others who are concerned about Watson's reticence to claim one voice as correct over the others, and his goal in the three-way conversation in his dissertation is to understand the construal of the normative text (LXX–PT) in Acts (pp. 34–35).

In chapter 1, the third interlocutor in White's study of Joel 3:1–5 [2:28–32 MT] in Acts 2:17-21 is the Testament of Judah [T. Jud.] 24, a passage that appropriates terms and themes from LXX-Joel 3:1–5 at four points and supports the eschatological prophecy from Joel with allusions to prophecies about David's line from Isaiah 11. As a result, the prophecy in T. Jud. 24 is strictly future (as Joel) and messianic. By contrast, the use of Joel in Acts 2, which is interpreted in view of Jesus's death/resurrection/ascension, involves a present and future fulfillment of Joel. Furthermore, the messianic element in T. Jud.'s use of Joel combined with Isaiah 11 is not part of the fulfillment of Joel in Acts 2, but in the Acts 2 context messianic fulfillment is based on the use of Psalms in that context (Ps 16 in 2:25–28 and Ps 110 in 2:34). For White, the emphasis of the use of Joel in Acts 2 is the lordship of Jesus. One could quibble with White about this emphasis in Acts 2 rather than a focus on Jesus as both "Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36) since the pouring out of the Spirit in Joel 3 is the work of the Spirit-anointed Messiah in Acts 2. However, White's point is that the emphasis on Jesus as messiah comes from the Psalms quotations while the Joel 3 passage emphasizes his lordship, and Luke is using Joel to indicate that Jesus is the Lord who is inaugurating the last days, i.e., the "day of the Lord."

In chapter 2, White analyzes the use of LXX-Amos 5:25–27 in Acts 7:42–43, and the third speaker he interacts with is the Damascus Document (CD-A 7:13–8:1). He argues that Amos 5:25–27 functions typologically in Acts 7 as a hermeneutical lens that draws together two eras of Israel's history, revealing a pattern of idolatrous and sinful behavior in Israel that extends into Luke's/Stephen's day (p. 103). In contrast, the use of Amos 5:25–27 in CD-A is midrashic, employing *gezerah shawah* to turn the judgment in Amos 5 into a message of hope, based on the experience of the Qumran sect: the sect truly possesses the law, and its members are sent away from the Temple into exile by those who despise the law. Both interpretations of Amos 5 are eschatological and contemporize the text for their audiences, describing a schism involving the Temple, but the application to the communities is very different.

In chapter 3, White addresses the use of LXX-Habakkuk 1:5 in Acts 13, which describes God's work through a foreign nation and is appropriated by Luke to describe God's astonishing work among gentiles bringing them as gentiles into his own people under the lordship of Christ and not under the Law of Moses. Thus, the passage connects the emphasis on the lordship of Christ in Acts 2 and the

confirmation of the salvation of gentiles as gentiles in Acts 15. The pesher of Habakkuk (4Q Florilegium Frgs. 1–2) applies the text to the Qumran sect's situation, using the text to describe the eschatological conflict the Teacher of Righteousness and his covenant-keeping followers have with the Traitors. God will judge the Traitors (wicked priests and false prophets) by the Kittim (the Romans). As in Acts, God's "work" and the astonishment concerning it involves gentiles, but the two authors' uses of Habakkuk are different, applying the text to their unique situations.

The final quotation from TP in Acts (LXX-Amos 9:11–12 in Acts 15:16–18a, using 4Q Florilegium Frgs. 1–2 and 21,1 as interlocutor) is the topic of chapter 4, and it concerns the conditions for the entrance of gentiles into the people of God. In Acts 15 the LXX of Amos is fulfilled in the Christ events, and for White the "tent" of David that is rebuilt and restored is the church, the people of God in this age, which consists of Jews and gentiles (who are able to come to God as gentiles). These believers in Jesus make up the eschatological people of God under the lordship of Christ and their salvation fulfills Acts 1:8 and 2:39. In contrast the use of Amos 9 in 4Q Florilegium points to a future fulfillment limited to members of the sect.

In addition to the bibliography, the book has a brief appendix containing the texts of the early Jewish works discussed in chapters 2–4, as well as Indices of Sources, Authors, and Subjects. This book is recommended for those doing research in the use of the OT in the NT, especially in Acts. It also contains many insights into the theology and development of the argument of Acts.

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— HISTORY & HISTORICAL THEOLOGY —

Joel R. Beeke, Randall J. Pederson, and Fraser E. Jones. *Meet the Puritans: A Guide to Their Lives and Books*. 2nd ed. Reformation Heritage, 2025. 1254 pp. £69.99/$70.00.

Even those who do not have a particular interest in seventeenth-century Reformed theology are unlikely to have missed the remarkable attention which the Puritans have received over the last eighty years. Often attributed to the founding of The Banner of Truth Trust in 1957, and its close association with Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the second half of the twentieth century saw the republication of numerous theological and devotional works from the early modern period.

This appetite spawned numerous other publishers who sought to meet the growing interest in Puritan literature. One of the most prolific of these is Reformation Heritage Books (RHB), set up under the editorial direction of Joel Beeke in 1995. In the time since, it has published or reprinted over 150 titles, many of which relate to Puritan spirituality. Particularly important were the publication of three introductory volumes to the subject: *Meet the Puritans (*2006), a catalogue of Puritan republications since 1957 with accompanying biographies; *A Puritan Theology* (2012), an introduction to fifty key areas of Reformed theology which the Puritans developed and applied to their lives; and *Ore from the Puritans' Mine* (2020), a compilation of over 3,000 quotations from more than

250 Puritan authors organised under 400 different headings. I have regularly turned to each of these titles, both in my pastoral ministry and studies of post-Reformation Reformed theology.

So it was with excitement that I heard that RHB had released a new edition of the first of these books. As well as cataloguing the hundreds of reprints that have become available over the last two decades, this expanded version of *Meet the Puritans* also includes short biographies of an additional forty-five figures from the early modern period. Amongst the additions are accounts of Englishmen such as Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658), Irishmen such as James Ussher (1581–1656), and Scotsmen such as Robert Rollock (1555–1599), as well as those from the Dutch Further Reformation such as Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706). There are also expanded bibliographies of collected Puritan works and secondary sources on the movement, together with an enlarged glossary of key terms.

This second edition also has a handful of new features. There is a guide for those wanting to read the Puritans for the first time (which originally appeared elsewhere). There are also short chapters from each of the authors with their personal recommendations of particular writers to read. Added to the sections in the previous version providing brief histories of English Puritanism, Scottish Presbyterianism, and the Dutch Further Reformation, there is now included a more general introduction to Puritanism, an essay on the Church of England and the universities of early modern England, and chronologies detailing the births and deaths of the 190 individuals covered in the work. If the first edition was already a treasure trove of information on the Puritans, this new edition is even more so, being forty percent longer than its original size.

With size comes cost. Currently retailing for over $50, the new edition is not cheap. That being said, it will likely prove a valuable investment for those able to buy it. The authors explain that they had three intended audiences in mind, and undoubtedly each will find it beneficial. If you are a church member, it will provide a helpful guide to support your devotional reading. There are lots of books *about* the Puritans, but there is no replacement for reading them yourself. The authors' recommendations will give inspiration for what to read, and the bibliographies will help you find it. The various introductory sections will offer helpful background on the historical events and social dynamics of the times, and the short biographies will provide a window on a writer's particular place within them. Like in all periods of historical theology, the impact of such information can be significant for our appreciation of what someone wrote and why they wrote it.

If you are a pastor, this book is likely to be of help in a number of additional ways. Not only will the accounts of the ministries of a previous generation be of encouragement to you in yours, they will also prove a fertile source of illustrations for your preaching and teaching. And when it comes to deciding what titles to add to your library, the book summaries will encourage you to resist the chronological snobbery of thinking that new is necessarily better by introducing you to some of the best from the seventeenth century.

For students just getting into the period, the introductions and biographies will provide you with valuable orientation before moving on to more advanced secondary sources. The glossary will be of help too, though, as you become more familiar with the area, you will begin to realise that many of the definitions given there are rather more nuanced in the scholarship.

Like the volume's predecessor, this expanded edition will be a helpful work for specialists to keep close at hand. The chronological list of births and deaths is a neat way of quickly identifying the dates of figures in relation to each other. The biographical sketches also provide a good overview of an individual's life, though most receive no more than a few pages. This is less a criticism of the authors of

this important volume and more a reflection of the scholarship. For whilst so much has been done in the last seventy-five years to increase the contemporary church's appreciation of the Puritans, there is still more work to be done in our understanding of them. The authors have done an impressive job in giving church members, pastors, and scholars what they need to keep meeting the Puritans.

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Leland Brown. *The First Pastors*. Gorgias Studies in Early Christianity and Patristics 82. Gorgias, 2026. xiv + 265 pp. £85.00/$129.95.

The church fathers have been used to defend countless ministry models, ecclesiological structures, and missiological emphases. Scholars and practitioners alike continue to examine these documents—and the men who wrote them—attempting to ascertain a better sense of the historical realities at play in the early church and a better path to the hopeful realities in our churches today. But in Leland Brown's newest work, a publication of his dissertation from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, an attempt is made to understand the church fathers' ministry on their own terms. The research question at hand is, "*What is the pastoral theology of the Church Fathers, taken from their own words*?" (p. 2). Such an endeavor should pique the interest of every ministry leader today, especially those who aim to root their work in the early church.

Leland Brown is a pastor at East Cooper Baptist Church in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, and also serves as a Senior Director with the London Lyceum. But if one wants to discern his credentials, do not read his bio; read his work. His scholarship in *The First Pastors* speaks for itself. Brown shows extensive familiarity with the primary texts of the church fathers, the secondary literature, and the linguistic issues at play, often dissecting the complexities of the Greek text. His scholarship in this work is superb.

Brown argues that the church fathers shared a stable and uniform vision for ministry (p. 211). To demonstrate this thesis, he evaluates their pastoral theology *textually and theologically*. That is, he does not interpret the Fathers according to their sociological milieu or shifting cultural contexts. (This emphasis sets him apart from the broader field of scholarship.) Instead, he reads them on their own terms to ascertain the organic themes within. What develops is a sublime (yet not surprising) similarity to the pastoral theology of the New Testament. Brown shows that their pastoral theology centered on four elements: the *virtue* of the leader, his *authority* being grounded in God himself, his primary *work* of teaching and protecting the flock, and his *suffering* as an essential element of his task.

The leader's *virtue* is of supreme importance, not his charismatic gifting or evangelistic output. The singular way to determine a pastoral leader's calling is his relational virtue. Is he gentle, humble, meek, peace-making? In a word, is he "blameless"? The leader's virtuous life is his primary ministry. His godliness is more important than his giftedness.

Brown also shows that the Fathers understood the leader's *authority* to come from God's own lordship. The flock submits to the leader because he is God's steward. Of course, this can be fraught with

interpretive questions (e.g., apostolic succession) or potential abuse. But the Fathers clearly held that the church's leaders had an authentic heavenly authority that demanded submission.

The leader's *work* is diverse. Pastoral leaders must teach, lead, protect, and care for the flock. There is a centrality to teaching that cannot be replaced, and it dovetails with the protective work required to lead the congregation, maintain unity, and guard from false teachers. Yet still, amidst all other responsibilities, the authoritative leader must be gentle as a dove with the poor, widowed, and needy in the congregation.

Perhaps the most intriguing element of Brown's study was his focus on the leader's *suffering*. Any reader of the church fathers should expect suffering to rise as a theme. But the unexpected portion is Brown's focus on the leader's suffering *from within the church*. Brown demonstrates that the church fathers believed that leaders would necessarily suffer from individuals within their midst. This reading will certainly encourage any current pastor who is surprised at the fiery trial coming upon him from his own congregation, thinking that something strange was happening to him (1 Pet 4:12). The church fathers show that it is not strange at all.

At the same time, Brown gives little attention to the suffering from *without*. When reading the Fathers, martyrdom and external threat is a consistent concern. Brown comments on this element briefly (p. 167), but one would expect it to play a larger role in his study.

The scholarly payoff of Brown's work—one that is well received—is that the church fathers' unity begins with their shared theological vision about pastoral identity and work (p. 217). In other words, they are not uniform because of church structure, as some confessional strands may contend, nor are they significantly diverging from one another due to social and cultural development, as critical scholarship has argued. Instead, a New Testament model of ministry serves as the "through-line" for all church fathers. Of course, pastors in evangelical churches may detect this "through-line" carrying forward into their congregations today. Faithful ministry—despite countless cultural-historical contexts—requires the same virtue, authority, work, and suffering as it did in the first and second centuries.

One final limitation of the book (which Brown himself addresses on p. 95) is the vague nature of leadership in the early church. "Who are the 'leaders' in view?" one might ask. Bishops, elders, deacons? Brown sidesteps the question and lumps all those with authority into a category of "pastoral leaders." This serves Brown's argument well, since his focus is not on a classification and taxonomy of ecclesiological structures. Nevertheless, one should not look to Brown's book to sort out the complexities of this issue in the church fathers.

Though this is an academic work, it is instructive for pastoral leaders today. God's church should not succumb to modern reinventions, nor should pastors refashion their work with the times. Leland Brown shows that the church fathers rooted their shared pastoral theology in the New Testament. As such, they can say, just like the Apostle Paul, "follow us, as we follow Christ."

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John Gill. *The Gospel-Centred Evangelicalism of Alexander Carson*. Monographs in Baptist History 34. Pickwick, 2025. xix + 162 pp. £21.00/$27.00.

While it is often called the land of saints and scholars, Ireland rarely receives much attention in theological studies today. John Gill, professor of Christian studies at California Baptist University, seeks to correct this oversight. In this book, based on his doctoral dissertation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, he explores the life and ministry of Alexander Carson. His work not only helps to retrieve the legacy of this noteworthy saint and scholar, but it also provides an important insight into nineteenth-century evangelicalism. In particular, Gill shows that Carson's theology is an excellent example of the standard beliefs of British evangelicals in the nineteenth century.

As the pastor of the Baptist church in Tobermore, a small rural village in the north of Ireland, Carson initially seems like an unusual choice for such a significant study. Nevertheless, Gill demonstrates that the scale of Carson's ministry and the strength of his scholarship mean that he deserves our attention. The opening chapter provides an overview of his life and work. This short summary not only weaves together all of the relevant biographical sources, but it also provides an insightful introduction to the theological temperature of Presbyterianism and the development of Baptist churches in nineteenth-century Ireland. Gill also includes a helpful survey of Carson's voluminous and varied theological output, including works on hermeneutics and the philosophy of Bible translation, biblical exposition in both Testaments, doctrinal treatises on the atonement, polemical defences of the doctrine of Scripture and the Trinity, and interactions with Roman Catholic theology and the rise of biblical criticism.

To the extent that Carson is remembered today, it is often for his treatise *Baptism in Its Mode and Subjects Considered* (1831). In this work, Carson presents a powerfully persuasive account of Baptist principles, which was widely read and interacted with at the time. For example, he received honorary degrees from Kentucky and Louisiana on account of this treatise. Similarly, his contemporary, the Princeton Presbyterian Charles Hodge, recognized it as one of the best defenses of the Baptist position. Nevertheless, despite the popularity of his ecclesiological polemics, Gill shows that Carson did not operate from a spirit of denominational narrowness. As Carson himself declared in 1842, when preaching at the fiftieth anniversary of the Baptist Missionary Society, "Brethren, I yield to no man in zeal for baptism: but baptism is not my gospel. I love all who love Christ" (p. xvi).

It is this love for all who love Christ, and Carson's theological unity with them, that Gill goes on to examine in the main body of the work. He uses David Bebbington's popular quadrilateral to explore key aspects of Carson's theology and demonstrate that he conforms to the broader model of nineteenth-century evangelicalism. Gill includes a chapter on each of Bebbington's four evangelical emphases: the Bible (ch. 2), the cross (ch. 3), conversion (ch. 4), and activism (ch. 5). Given the great extent of his work and ministry, this is a helpful way to uncover Carson's core convictions and concentrate on his central concerns. The chapter addressing Scripture is particularly revealing, given the controversies that Carson engaged in on the topic as well as the theological climate at the time. Indeed, it shows that long before Charles Spurgeon famously defended the doctrine of Scripture at the end of the nineteenth century, another erudite and influential Baptist leader was well known for doing the same.

Gill's work is a brilliant introduction to this incredibly influential yet often overlooked figure. However, it is important to note that it also suffers from a wider methodological limitation in the field. As Gill himself admits, Bebbington's quadrilateral was developed based on a study of evangelicalism in England, Scotland, and Wales (p. 148). It did not include a detailed consideration of the Irish context and, for that reason, we should be cautious about automatically extending Bebbington's analysis across the Irish Sea. Using his quadrilateral as an organizing principle allows Gill to demonstrate that Carson generally conforms to the core beliefs of evangelicals in the rest of the British Isles. However, it limits substantive exploration of how Carson might differ from them in other important ways or conform more closely to those within his own Irish context. Gill helpfully uncovers evidence of such differences, briefly discussing Carson's distinctive views on church order, theological alignment with Sandemanism, and personal relationships with Scotch Baptists. Such issues would benefit from further consideration in light of Carson's immediate Irish context. We should also not overlook how the numerical and cultural strength of Roman Catholicism in Ireland may have uniquely shaped the beliefs and practices of Irish evangelicals, including Carson. Therefore, while Bebbington's quadrilateral sheds much light, there is a need for a similar study of Irish evangelicalism that is sensitive to its own political, historical, and religious context. Assessing Carson's theology as part of this wider study would build on the excellent work that Gill has begun. It would also deepen our understanding of the Baptist movement that began to spread across Ireland in the wake of the ministry of this significant saint and scholar.

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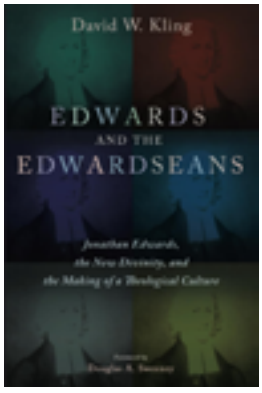
David W. Kling. *Edwards and the Edwardseans: Jonathan Edwards, the New Divinity, and the Making of a Theological Culture*. Pickwick, 2024. xxvii + 242. £28.00/$37.00.



Scholarly interest in Jonathan Edwards remains high. However, over the past generation, a closely related topic has attracted considerable attention from historians (and sometimes theologians): the wider Edwardsean tradition that developed in the three generations following Edwards's death in 1758. Many scholars argue for a "New England Theology" that encompassed a range of theological and philosophical views that, to varying degrees and with various adjustments, drew upon insights and instincts found in Edwards's writings.

Over the past three decades, David Kling has distinguished himself as a historian of the New Divinity, the name given to second-generation Edwardsean theologians such as Samuel Hopkins, Joseph Bellamy, and Jonathan Edwards Jr. Kling's monograph, *A Field of Divine Wonders: New Divinity and Village Revivals in Northwestern Connecticut, 1791–1822* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), was an early contribution to the literature related to the wider Edwardsean tradition. Since then, his further scholarship has been published in refereed journals and collections of essays. In *Edwards and the Edwardseans*, Kling brings together lightly updated versions of his shorter writings.

Some might wonder the value in publishing an anthology of essays that are all readily available elsewhere, at least to those with access to a good research library. Doug Sweeney offers one answer in his foreword: Kling is a "field-changing" scholar (p. xvi). In his own introduction, Kling adds that this

collection offers an accessible and coherent introduction to Edwards and his theological legacy, which continued (especially in New England) well into the 1830s. I agree on both counts, with one exception to Kling's claim of coherence.

The book is divided into two parts, each with four chapters. Part 1 focuses on Edwards himself. The key themes include Edwards's theology of conversion, his bibliology, his understanding of prayer, and his role in contributing to the rise of the modern missions movement. Edwards was a central figure in the transition from the older Puritanism to the ascendant evangelicalism, the latter of which linked conversion with assurance and championed cross-cultural missions. But these chapters include one outlier that belies Kling's attempt at coherence.

Chapter 3, on "Edwards, Petitionary Prayer, and the Cognitive Science of Religion," is different from the other chapters in the book. Kling puts Edwards's views in dialogue with theories among cognitive scientists, then raises questions for pastoral application. Kling suggests a disconnect, especially among laypersons, between Reformed theology, which emphasizes God's absolute sovereignty, and the practice of petitionary prayer, wherein believers seek to influence God to act in particular ways. Regardless of what one might think of Kling's theological assumptions, the interdisciplinary nature of the essay, as well as its more prescriptive turn, does not fit neatly with the rest of the chapters.

Part 2 focuses on the New Divinity. Kling introduces Edward Dorr Griffin and Asahel Nettleton as lesser-known figures who were key Edwardsean revivalists during the Second Great Awakening. He argues the New Divinity provided the theological context for both the rise of the modern mission movement in New England and evangelical education in that region, and the two overlapped considerably. In the case of the latter, New Divinity thought was passed down primarily through informal "Schools of the Prophets," household seminaries where a seasoned pastor mentored a small number of younger men who aspired to pastoral ministry. The model closely followed the example of Edwards himself, who trained Hopkins and Bellamy in this manner. Williams College, to which Kling devotes his final chapter, became a hotbed for both New Divinity thought and missionary fervor.

Kling ably demonstrates that the same notes sounded, or at least suggested, by Edwards during his own lifetime, especially the intersection of Calvinism, revival, education, and missions, reached a later crescendo among his successors during the next generation. There was considerable continuity between Edwards and the Edwardseans. Of course, there was also discontinuity at times, especially in doctrinal matters such as the nature of original sin, the imputation of Christ's righteousness, and the intent of the atonement. While Kling gives minimal attention to these matters, those discontinuities account for why many modern Reformed theologians continue to regard the New Divinity with suspicion.

Because of the nature of Kling's book, scholars will find little here that is new. They have either already read earlier versions of these chapters, or they have read the works of other scholars who have been shaped by Kling's arguments. But students of Edwards and his legacy—whether they are enrolled in graduate programs or are learning for their own benefit in the pastor's study—will find Kling's book an essential resource in orienting them to some key themes in Edwards's thought and their legacies among his successors.

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Samuel E. Masters and Peter de Vries, eds. *The Serampore Form of Agreement: A Commentary*. H&E Academic, 2025. 335 pp. £18.99/$24.99.

Since 2023, several books have been published to mark the bicentennial of the death of missionary pioneer William Ward, all aimed at highlighting and remembering the third partner of the famous Serampore Trio. The latest book in this vein, *The Serampore Form of Agreement: A Commentary*, seeks to revisit and display Ward's masterful succinctness in articulating missiological principles put forth by the missionary community at Serampore in 1805, principles that still stand the test of time two centuries later. Thirteen contributors from five continents offer thoughtful and detailed commentary on the SFA's historical context and its distinct statements. After two introductory chapters set the background, the eleven subsequent chapters discuss each of the document's eleven statements.

Michael A. G. Haykin first examines the SFA's origins, noting that it arose from English churchmen familiar with church covenants in their Particular Baptist churches that addressed matters of personal conduct. Haykin points to the document's directness as a pushback against the popular belief in European superiority, but he laments that churches should have followed the SFA's emphasis in their own missions (pp. 15–17). Samuel E. Masters then details the SFA's origins as an outgrowth of William Carey's famous manifesto, *An Enquiry*. The SFA was an 1805 update to a missionary agreement signed by the Serampore missionaries in 1800, which sought to strengthen a covenant that bound them together in core missiological principles as they sought to preach the gospel and plant new churches (pp. 25–27). The theological preamble of the SFA displays a vigorous "Evangelical Calvinism," as the missionaries connected their work to God's providence, his sovereignty in salvation, and their own responsibility to preach the gospel to the lost (pp. 34–36). Sadly, the SFA was only in effect for a few years (pp. 30–31).

After this introduction, eleven chapters provide commentary on each of the SFA's eleven statements. The first four statements share the missionaries' identity and vision, their entry into the culture, their removal of barriers to the gospel, and their constant pursuit of opportunities to share the gospel. For Statement One, Bennie Crockett, Jr. expands on the missionaries' conviction that human souls possess "infinite value" and must hear and believe the gospel or otherwise experience eternal punishment (pp. 54–57). As a result, the missionaries asserted their obligation to preach the gospel. Joshua Bowan surveys Statement Two as the missionaries' commitment to learning the worldview, culture, and languages of the Indian people to gain credibility to share the gospel. Johnson Thomaskutty explores Statement Three and how the missionaries were self-aware in building relationships by avoiding certain behaviors that brought prejudice against the gospel. Myron Noonkester reviews Statement Four, which asserts the need to share the gospel daily with as many people as possible in every place.

In examining the next four statements, Peter de Vries first submits that Statement Five presents the cross of Christ not only as the central theme of Serampore preaching but also as the central focus of their mission. Next, G. Landon Adams explains Statement Six as a pledge to display hospitality and humility toward the Indian people, making them feel "quite at home in our company," a stance that stood in stark contrast to how other outsiders behaved (pp. 153–56). De Vries, Masters, and Matthew M. Reynolds collectively observe that Statement Seven constitutes the pastoral responsibility to shepherd and disciple those who came to Christ through the missionaries' witness. Michael Chatterjee then

works through the longest section in the SFA, Statement Eight, to show the missionaries' resolve to contextualize the message and plant indigenous churches led by Indian leaders, who were then to send out Indian missionaries.

The final three statements of the SFA address Bible translation, personal spiritual life, and self-sacrifice for the mission. Pratap C. Gine highlights the high priority the Serampore team placed on Bible translation, even noting an additional published document from March 1806, which outlined specific principles for future Bible translation (pp. 226–27). Statement Ten asserts the priority of personal spirituality, a section which Peter J. Morden describes as the "keystone" of the SFA, stating: "The BMS missionaries were sure that if they did not prioritize prayer and personal godliness, then God would not be glorified, and their pioneering mission venture would fail" (pp. 254–55). Johan Kommers then assesses Statement Eleven and views the section as the missionaries' clarion call to live courageously in consecration, dependence upon God, and connection with his heart. The Appendix then follows with the full text of the SFA.

The Serampore Form of Agreement: A Commentary is a robust attempt to examine and explain a forgotten yet significant historical and missiological document, and the book's contributors deliver exceptionally well on their goal. While each contributor tackles their assigned statement differently, some directly interact with specific words, clauses, or paragraphs in a conventional commentary style. In contrast, other contributors take a more general approach to reviewing their section. Using the same format for every chapter might improve the book's overall readability, since it is presented as a commentary on the SFA. Parsing out and directly commenting on specific words and sentences from each section seems a more effective and beneficial approach.

I would also suggest that future editions of the book include the text of each specific statement at the beginning of the chapter that discusses it or systematically place different parts of each statement throughout the chapter, with direct commentary underneath. Making these additions at the beginning of each chapter would help readers quickly reference each statement, rather than flipping back and forth to the Appendix. However, the entire text of the SFA should remain in the Appendix for the reader's reference.

In light of current missiological conversations, the SFA is a noteworthy example of the dual emphasis of vibrant evangelism and thoughtful ecclesiology. Throughout the document, the Serampore missionaries displayed both a commitment to plant indigenous churches and a determined resolve to get the gospel out as quickly as possible to as many as possible. Thus, the SFA may speak into current missiological conversations with an insistent, historical voice that the powerful advance of the gospel and the identity and health of the local church are never competing priorities but mutually bound necessities for the mission. What God hath joined together, let no missiologist separate. Indeed, the goal of the men and women of Serampore was to sow as much gospel seed as they could so that more churches would be planted and grow into New Testament health. May it be so with us as well.

Overall, *The Serampore Form of Agreement: A Commentary* is a literary and missiological achievement, shining as an example of theological retrieval. I commend the editors and contributors for bringing due attention back to the SFA as a model to reference and gain insight in our day. Be sure to grab a copy for your own library, and as you read, pray that the Lord who sent out Carey, Marshman,

and Ward would inflame your heart and strengthen your resolve to possess the same zeal for the nations that marked the missionaries of Serampore.

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Mark T. Mulder and Gerardo Martí. *The Church Must Grow or Perish: Robert H. Schuller and the Business of American Christianity*. Eerdmans, 2025. 344 pp. £18.99/$32.99.

Robert H. Schuller (1926–2015) strove to remodel American Christianity for the twentieth century from his Orange County drive-in church and avant-garde Crystal Cathedral. For several decades, he sustained national prestige and global fame through his leading religious broadcast, *Hour of Power*, until his mega-ministry collapsed into bankruptcy in 2010. Sociologists Mark T. Mulder and Gerardo Martí first traced the dramatic rise and fall of Schuller's organization in *The Glass Church: Robert H. Schuller, the Crystal Cathedral, and the Strain of Megachurch Ministry* (Rutgers University Press, 2020). Building on years of research and a broad base of archives and interviews, Mulder and Martí have now produced a comprehensive biography of Schuller for the Eerdmans Library of Religious Biography. Along with their academic expertise, the authors each carry a personal connection to their subject: Mulder shares Schuller's rural Midwestern upbringing and Dutch Reformed background, while Martí grew up in Garden Grove, California, under the shadow of the towering Crystal Cathedral, frequenting its programs and activities throughout his adolescence. Together, they offer a penetrating look at the life, thought, and influence of Schuller, who they argue "crafted a market-oriented Christianity" that permeates many corners of the American church today (p. 277).

The destruction of Schuller's Iowa family farmstead by a tornado in 1944 provides a ready metaphor for his driving conviction: unless deliberately fortified from the tornadic secularizing currents of modern society, the Christian church would likewise be swept away. For Schuller, the evidence of effective fortification from the winds of modernity—and proof positive that his techniques of perpetual innovation and market adaptation represented the future of Christianity—was numerical and physical growth. "A church must never stop growing," Schuller advised the many pastors who sought to emulate his success, "when it ceases to grow, it will start to die" (p. 5). His philosophy of relentless expansion—aptly described as "the ecclesial equivalent of 'keeping up with the Joneses'"—vaulted him into celebrity, earned him many critics, and spelled his ministry's ultimate downfall (p. 288).

Like many other twentieth-century mega-ministry pioneers (e.g., Bill Bright, W. A. Criswell, Oral Roberts), Robert Schuller came from humble origins in Middle America. Yet, as the authors emphasize, surprising contradictions distinguish his otherwise unorthodox career. Unlike most of his fellow mega-preachers and televangelists, Schuller cannot be accurately described as evangelical, fundamentalist, or charismatic. He never departed the mainline Reformed Church in America (RCA) of his Dutch Calvinist roots, despite charting his own path in theology and practice. Educated at RCA-affiliated Hope College and Western Theological Seminary, Schuller emerged from a deep study of Calvin's *Institutes*, believing his tradition had misunderstood the Reformer's writings on human depravity. Instead of "fetishizing

humiliation and conviction," he determined to henceforth proclaim "uplift and agency … hope rather than guilt" (p. 43). Disillusioned by his early ineffectiveness in a small Chicago pulpit, Schuller soon turned to positive-thinking guru Norman Vincent Peale (a pariah among RCA purists) and social salesman Dale Carnegie. After growing his first congregation from thirty-five members to four hundred in under five years, he accepted the RCA's invitation to plant a new church in the booming suburbs of Orange County, California, in 1955.

In California, Schuller embraced novelty, a willingness to disrupt established norms, and a seeker-sensitive posture (before the invention of the term). He rented a drive-in theater on Sunday mornings to establish not any old Reformed church but "a positive-thinking mission that will meet the needs of the people here who don't go to any church!" (p. 73). For the rest of his career, as the authors reiterate, Schuller faced constant criticism for his unorthodox routes to success. He tailored his therapeutic sermons to the felt material needs of his audience—upwardly mobile, mostly white suburbanites overwhelmed by the pace and demands of modern life—rather than attempting to exegete a biblical text, teach doctrine, or issue a gospel plea. Schuller determined to accommodate his message to what modern people would find relevant and useful. By soft-selling Christianity from the pulpit, modelling church management after the corporate boardroom, and shamelessly pursuing ostentatious building projects and external funding sources, Schuller provided a template for aspiring megachurch pastors that he aggressively marketed through books, his Institute for Church Leadership, and, eventually, a television audience of millions.

Across ten chapters and a theory-heavy epilogue, the authors weave social and theological analysis, relevant historical context, and biographical substance, especially regarding Schuller's marriage to his invaluable partner, Arvella, and his intense struggles with self-esteem, anxiety, food, and weight. The footnotes reveal a varied source base of Schuller's published works, personal correspondence, eyewitness interviews, press clippings, and secondary literature. Chapters 6 and 7 explore how Schuller balanced relationships with architects, donors, entertainers, and congregants while pushing ahead with the construction of the $16-million Crystal Cathedral in the late 1970s. Chapter 9 explores the expansion of *Hour of Power* into Russia and Schuller's relationship with President Clinton, and chapter 10 details the ministry's rapid financial collapse after a failed familial succession plan.

The authors note Schuller's weaknesses and contradictions but portray their subject sympathetically. At times, key assertions seem overstated. Schuller was clearly a pivotal and interesting figure who achieved extraordinary success, but did he truly "intuit a new form of Christianity … crafted and contoured for the latter half of the twentieth century in America"? (p. 33). Although Schuller boldly marketed himself as a singular trendsetter, claiming responsibility for launching the megachurch movement and once labeling himself "the founder of the church growth movement," his ministry's notable aspects had clear antecedents, inspirations, and contemporary peers (p. 129). Schuller mostly avoided political controversy, but his embrace of a radical individualism and adoption of market principles coincided with the ascendant conservatism of the postwar Sun Belt and the well-established fusion of business and American Protestantism. Despite constant references, the authors strangely wait until chapter 8 to elucidate "positivity thinking," Schuller's theology of self-esteem and individual action that he once called "almost as important as the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (p. 196). Schuller's style and substance had many critics, but I completed the book still lacking a concrete sense of his pulpit rhetoric or the thrust of a typical Sunday message. Despite these shortcomings, the biography is cohesive, thorough, and well-researched.

Mulder and Martí contend that Schuller's influence on the trajectory of American Christianity has been underappreciated and "poorly understood" (p. 23). Schuller may not have been the definitive fountainhead of the methods and contours of seeker-sensitive megachurches and their diffuse imitators today, but he was a bold, early adopter of many popular and controversial elements in contemporary churches. *The Church Must Grow or Perish* includes many positive and negative historical lessons that will enlighten scholars, pastors, and keen observers. After all, Schuller's church did grow, yet it too perished.

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Daniel J. Ragusa, ed. *Cornelius Van Til: Letters from America*. Reformed Forum, 2025. 170 pp. $29.99.

The editor and translator, Daniel Ragusa, has performed a great service in his editing and translating of these twenty-four journalistic reports prepared by Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987) for inclusion in the Dutch religious newspaper, *Die Reformatie*, in the 1935–1940 period. This reporting on developments in America might have continued longer, were it not for the German invasion of the Netherlands in May 1940. German occupation meant that the publication of *Die Reformatie* was suspended. The import of Van Til's reportage is far greater than it first meets the eye.

In a very skillful introduction, Ragusa places Van Til in the context required in order for the reader to understand why an American philosopher-theologian would be writing (in Dutch) for this particular Dutch newspaper. Van Til's family roots lay in the 1837 religious division (the "Afscheiding") of the National Reformed Church of the Netherlands, which helped to create the constituency that read *Die Reformatie*. This was a constituency that had stood for absolute fidelity to the Reformed confessional documents as well as the factuality of events recorded in biblical history. The newspaper's editor, Klaas Schilder (1890–1952), was also attracted to Van Til because, within their respective countries, each was in the vanguard of opposition to the growing influence of Swiss theologian Karl Barth. Van Til had an additional motivation beyond this collaboration with Schilder; he wanted to confirm Dutch readers in their existing tendency to see the controversial events playing out among American Presbyterians in the 1930s as a replay of their nineteenth-century Dutch religious history. One of Van Til's 1935 letters, published in *Die Reformatie*, posed the question, "Afscheiding in 1936?"

These overlapping, but distinguishable purposes, were useful in building a trans-Atlantic community of feeling. The seminary (Westminster) with which Van Til had been associated since its founding in 1929 and the small denomination, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, which followed the creation of Westminster, both needed friends and supporters. Van Til was keen to secure this support in the Netherlands as well as in his native Midwest; in both respects, he succeeded.

Of course, the way to know Van Til cannot be provided through twenty-four letter-articles supplied to a Dutch newspaper. Several serious biographies exist for this purpose. Yet there are in these pieces of journalistic correspondence valuable allusions to occurrences in Van Til's years at Princeton and at

Philadelphia; these shed interesting light on Van Til's definite perspective. A few examples will illustrate what is to be gleaned.

In 1929, J. Gresham Machen invited at least six Princeton faculty members to accompany him to launch Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia. Van Til, already an instructor at Princeton, was among the three who accepted the invitation (the others being Robert Dick Wilson and Oswald T. Allis). Considering that the number declining included Machen's mentor in New Testament studies, William Park Armstrong, the revered biblical theologian Geerhardus Vos, and the venerated theologian C. W. Hodge Jr., one grimaces to find Van Til (like others who went with Machen) regularly disparaging post-1929 Princeton as if these trusted former associates were not still there, faithfully laboring on. Van Til, as much as any of the early Westminster faculty, was hawkish in his monitoring of the ebb and flow of events in Princeton. It is not saying too much to say that he was a polemicist on such matters. In 1937, he could write, "The history after 1929 has also proven that the Reformed sound is no longer actually heard from Princeton" (p. 119). A close examination of Princeton, even at the date of Van Til's writing, shows a situation much more complex than he acknowledged.

Van Til had strong differences of opinion with Free University of Amsterdam theologian Valentine Hepp (1879–1950). Hepp had given the Princeton Stone Lectures in 1930 and made a point of visiting the young Philadelphia seminary while in the region. Westminster sought but did not gain from Hepp the unqualified endorsement he might have supplied in his own editorial role at *Die Reformatie* (the role later filled by Schilder). Hepp, however, recognized that a faithful witness to the Reformed faith was still being continued at Princeton; his viewpoint set him at odds with the polemic being generated in Philadelphia. Moreover, Hepp was in those years on an Atlantic-hopping campaign to build up an international Reformed alliance. This involved Reformed groups in Hungary, Switzerland, France, Germany, South Africa, the USA, and the United Kingdom, as well as in his homeland. But from Van Til's perspective, Hepp was a temporizer (p. 34). Van Til and the other early Westminster faculty members seem to have been vaguely aware of these larger, transatlantic efforts, but were so preoccupied by the survival of their young seminary and young denomination that they scarcely had time or interest to be involved. There was no appreciation for Hepp's coalition-building.

Van Til's correspondence also made reference to disagreements within the Machen-led movement, disagreements which resulted in the resignation of numerous seminary trustees and the departure of Professor Allis. The bone of contention had been the insistence that all trustees and all faculty members pledge support for the independent mission board Machen had begun and the shadow-denomination "Constitutional Covenant Union" which Machen had created in anticipation of denominational division. Samuel G. Craig, a trustee and editor of Christianity Today magazine, resigned over the matter. Van Til portrays Craig as halting and lacking in nerve (p. 54). Van Til could not have known in 1935 that he would eventually turn to Craig's Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company as his main publisher and collaborate with Craig in the production of a compact edition of Warfield's writings.

Finally, we are able to see through Van Til's eyes what he considered the underlying issues that led to a division of the nascent alternative Presbyterian movement within a year of Machen's death (in 1937). Van Til described the underlying causes of this 1937 division by alluding to the mixed multitude that followed Moses out of Egypt, "Dispensationalists, half-dispensationalists, and quarter-dispensationalists also left with them. In the struggle against modernism, they stood with him (Machen)" (p.109). But they proved false. Dutch readers of *Die Reformatie* may have found this interpretation to be to their taste; yet it also disclosed that Van Til, ever the strict confessionalist, was opting for ideological purity in a

situation which called for forbearance and coalition-building. Old Princeton had been a "bigger tent" than Westminster.

Thank you, Daniel Ragusa, for what is clearly a labor of love! This collection helps us to see the polemical early Van Til interpreting important inter-war American trends for foreign readers. It sheds light on aspects of Van Til's stance that will need to be taken into account in future efforts to interpret this period.

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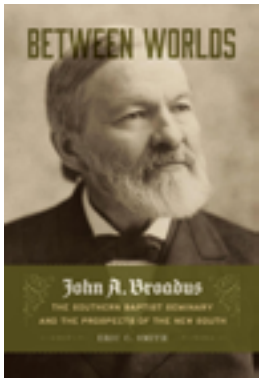
Eric C. Smith. *Between Worlds: John A. Broadus, The Southern Baptist Seminary, and The Prospects of the New South*. Louisiana State University Press, 2026. xii + 284 pp. £42.00/$49.95.



John Albert Broadus (1827–1895) stood in the nineteenth century as a towering Southern Baptist leader. Indeed, he served as a founding faculty member and the second president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and was the author of many influential works, including *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*. Yet, like many figures of the nineteenth century, Broadus's legacy is tainted by slavery. Eric C. Smith, a church historian who teaches at Broadus's former institution, Southern Seminary, presents the first critical biography of this complex, prodigious figure.

Between Worlds generally follows a chronological approach, stopping to consider the conflicting themes of Broadus's life along the way. Broadus displayed the tension between personal ambition and piety. From his youth, he longed to make something of himself. Yet these aspirations for greatness were redirected through his conversion and call to ministry. After rising to denominational fame as a Virginia pastor, Broadus moved to Greenville, South Carolina, to join the founding faculty of Southern Seminary in 1859. With the seminary opening at the height of the sectional crisis, Broadus opposed both abolitionism and secession, recognizing, along with James P. Boyce, that secession meant war, and war meant an end to slavery. The Civil War indeed followed South Carolina's secession, leading to the seminary's temporary closure. After the seminary reopened, Broadus labored to ensure the school's survival. He married his personal ambition to the school, not taking a paycheck for months, fundraising in the north, and galvanizing a beleaguered faculty. His resolve was immortalized into Southern Seminary lore when he implored the other founders, "Suppose we quietly agree that the Seminary may die, but we'll die first" (p. 99). The school began to flourish after its move to Louisville, Kentucky, attracting aspiring Baptist ministers from around the nation.

The final decades of Broadus's life continued to present a man navigating between worlds. Indeed, Broadus was beloved in both North and South, in the countryside and the city, among the common and the elite. Yet, moving between worlds was not without challenge. He committed himself to the highest levels of scholarly rigor while maintaining an unwavering orthodoxy; many of his pupils, most notably Crawford Toy, failed to hold such commitments together. As theological institutions in the North followed the liberalizing trends of German higher criticism, Broadus managed to position

Southern Seminary to pursue excellence in scholarship and research while upholding a commitment to the historic Christian orthodoxy. Broadus's graceful navigation of conflicting worlds enabled him to be a peacemaker and consensus holder among Southern Baptists as the seminary's second president.

Readers will find no hagiography here. Instead, Smith's telling of Broadus's life is a model critical biography. Certainly, Smith is sympathetic to Broadus, but it is a significant achievement to write a biography that is both sympathetic and critical. He skillfully interprets Broadus's actions through the lens of contemporary academic research. In the tumult of the last decade, modern evangelicals have grappled with how to wisely approach figures from the antebellum past who were stained by the sin of slavery. In a spectrum of approaches, some sought to cancel those figures while others aimed to overlook their participation in the peculiar institution and preserve their legacies. Smith comments that his aim is "neither to praise Broadus nor to bury him" but instead "to simply arrive at a better understanding of this major figure from the past (p. 8). Smith's approach is refreshing. *Between Worlds* is not an apologetic for Broadus. Examining Broadus's plantation childhood, Smith situates him in the context of Southern planter paternalism, the notion that antebellum white Southerners believed it to be their fatherly Christian duty to ensure the well-being of the "childlike" slaves, free blacks, and uneducated whites. Smith traces Broadus's paternalism beyond the Reconstruction years and into the final decade of his life.

And yet, much of modern Southern Baptist life is shaped by the legacy of Broadus. Charles Spurgeon praised John Broadus as "the greatest of living preachers" (p. 110). His *Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* is still the best-selling preaching manual of all time. Indeed, Broadus stands as the father of modern expository preaching due to the incredible success of his *Treatise*, which has even influenced modern evangelicalism. Southern Seminary's commitment to academic rigor and Christian orthodoxy was championed by Broadus. Ultimately, Smith presents Broadus as a figure whose legacy also rests between worlds: the wickedness of slavery and unquestionable racism on one hand and godly scholarship and unflinching orthodoxy on the other.

While readers with connections to Southern Seminary will enjoy this biography, *Between Worlds* deserves to be read widely. Smith provides readers with a model of charitable, honest historiography. Many other monumental figures from the nineteenth century deserve similar treatment.

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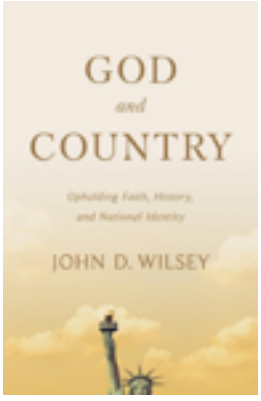
John D. Wilsey. *God and Country: Upholding Faith, History, and National Identity*. B&H Academic, 2026. xii + 164 pp. £17.21/$22.99.



Is it possible for a twenty-first-century person to be *both* a committed Christian and a proud American? In *God and Country*, John D. Wilsey tackles the complex and entangled concepts of history, faith, and patriotism as he formulates his answer to this question. In the current cultural climate, when almost any expressed appreciation for America by a Christian is labeled as "Christian nationalism," Wilsey courageously defends the possibility of Christian patriotism. The key is for this patriotism to be rightly ordered and rooted in gratitude. At once enlightening and puzzling, frustrating and uplifting, Wilsey's *God and Country* is an admirable if inconsistent attempt to defend historical study as a means of rightly ordering our national patriotism. This short book ultimately tries to accomplish too much in too little space, leaving the reader looking for more despite the insightfulness of much of its content.

John Wilsey, professor of church history and philosophy and chair of the department of church history at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, makes two arguments in his book *God and Country*: first, that "history is deeply relevant" for Christians, and second, "that good historical, biblical, and theological thinking are necessary" for healthy patriotism (p. 6). Wilsey calls patriotism a "virtue," seeing it as a form of "love for others" or "neighbor-love." Wilsey defines history as "*the way we make sense of the past*" (p. 8, emphasis in original). His definition emphasizes the interpretative role played by the historian. The historical study is not relativistic because history is "the pursuit of truth in the past for the purposes of the present" (p. 11). These definitions illuminate at least three elements to Wilsey's conception of history: (1) history relies on evidence and documentation; (2) history involves truth and understanding; and (3) history is about interpretation and meaning-making. Because history involves truth and moral judgments, historical inquiry requires a virtuous inquirer. Wilsey argues that the "exercise of virtue" is necessary for historical thinking so that we can learn our "place in time" and learn how to "cultivate a rightly ordered love of country" (p. 11).

Wilsey turns to Scripture to defend the study of history. Christianity is inherently historical, and God has revealed himself "in historical language" (p. 34) through the Bible. This means that "the option of considering history as irrelevant is not open to the Christian" (p. 25). History is complementary to faith, as a means of "establish[ing] us deeper in the truth" (p. 33). The study of extra-biblical history, such as American history, is a means of acquiring wisdom (p. 41).

Following the biblical rationale, Wilsey examines the five Cs of historical thinking: Change, Context, Causality, Contingency, and Complexity. Wilsey's treatment of each "C" helps the reader understand better the questions historians bring to the past and the limits within which they work. The final "C," complexity, may be the most important for Wilsey's argument. Simplifying history is usually the first step toward forcing the past to meet our own agendas. Strangely, history's formative power is not heavily emphasized in connection with the five Cs of historical thinking, even though the person who habitually practices thinking historically has the power to form a person in wisdom.

An unexpected and important contribution in *God and Country* is Wilsey's argument that the historian must bring theological and classical virtues to the study of history to "do" history well. The

central virtue is love, which is "absolutely necessary for the serious historical thinker" (p. 95). Reproducing 1 Corinthians 13, Wilsey examines different aspects of love—patience, kindness, contentment, humility, selflessness, truth—and how they influence historical inquiry. Frequently, history is reduced to a conflict between good and evil, what Wilsey calls the Star Wars approach to history (pp. 111–14). Instead, through virtues like wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance, we can approach the past "with charity" and "be in a position to cultivate mature and rightly ordered love for our country" (p. 132). Less clear, though, is how the historian is supposed to bring wisdom as a virtue to historical study if historical study is a key means of gaining wisdom.

Finally, in the book's last chapter Wilsey argues that patriotism "is rightly ordered love of country that comes from gratitude and joy in the good gifts God has freely given by His grace" (p. 143). Patriotism is not merely abstract or theoretical; instead, loving both God and our country entails loving the very real people in our immediate contexts, beginning with "the members of our households" (p. 141). The virtue of gratitude is "at the heart of rightly ordered patriotism" and "is the way of Christ" (pp. 148, 155). It is surprising that gratitude did not frequently appear in previous discussions on the virtues (and it does not have an index entry). Wilsey provides a summary of two kinds of exceptionalism that he defined in detail in an earlier work: *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion: Reassessing the History of an Idea* (IVP Academic, 2015). Closed exceptionalism "amounts to national idolatry," whereas open exceptionalism entails grateful recognition "that ours is a great country because of its unique contribution to human freedom" (p. 147).

As a general introduction to historical study, *God and Country* is full of genuine insight. Unfortunately, the book suffers from poor organization and incomplete argumentation. The book's three major subjects—the five Cs of historical thinking, virtues, and patriotism/nationalism—are not intuitively related to one another. For instance, the role of virtue in historical inquiry is one of the work's strongest features, but more clarity is needed on how virtue contributes to the overall argument regarding patriotism and American identity. Important concepts like gratitude and tradition appear in the last chapter with little to no prior introduction. Additionally, this book does not make a strong or memorable contribution to the current debate surrounding Christian nationalism, as the reader would expect based on the book's marketing. The book claims to address the question, "Is nationalism always a threat to Christian faith?" (back cover). The problem is that the concept of nationalism rarely appears in the book (there are only three entries in the index). Nationalism is never defined, and patriotism is never compared with or distinguished from nationalism. The book's major argument is contained in the last chapter, but the last chapter's relationship to the previous four is tenuous.

Nonetheless, Wilsey's thoughtful and careful explanations of the nuances involved in historical thinking and understanding are a helpful corrective in our age, which witnesses the polarized weaponization of history. The challenge faced by American historians is one of disposition more than content. Everyone agrees that historical events are important, but no one agrees on why they are important or what lessons they impart for the present. In *God and Country*, Wilsey is defending an increasingly rare *approach to history*: one that seeks wisdom from the past through humility and gratitude. Wilsey suggests that a recovery of grateful receptivity in historical inquiry is our best means to "uphold" faith, history, and national identity.

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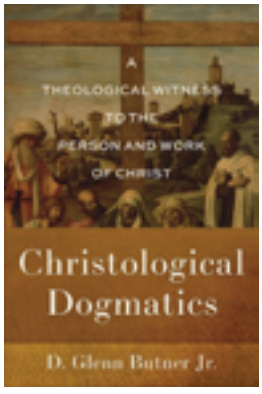
— SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY —

D. Glenn Butner Jr. *Christological Dogmatics: A Theological Witness to the Person and Work of Christ*. Baker Academic, 2026. xii + 347 pp. £26.97/$36.99.



D. Glenn Butner Jr.'s *Christological Dogmatics* is a graduate-level work of dogmatic theology engaging the full scope of christological doctrine. Butner is an associate professor of theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and the author of *Trinitarian Dogmatics: Exploring the Grammar of the Christian Doctrine of God* (Baker Academic, 2022).

The last ten years have seen the release of numerous high-quality publications concerning the doctrine of Christ, though *Christological Dogmatics* stands apart from contemporary christologies in its methodological approach and organization. A key distinction of Butner's book, in contrast to similar studies, is its focus on christological loci over historical progression. *Christological Dogmatics* does not follow the typical diachronic order: from Scripture, through tradition, to contemporary debates. Instead, it involves a synchronic analysis of christological loci, drawing upon a diverse collection of global and historical biblical scholars and theologians.

Christological Dogmatics is "a work of dogmatics" insofar as it "seeks to fulfill the threefold task of navigating theological disputes, training Christians in theology, and synthesizing the teachings of Christ in Scripture" (p. 3). Butner explains that the triad of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy provides the framework for his dogmatic approach. He writes, "Such an account ought to clarify the truth of who Christ is and what he has accomplished (orthodoxy), compel us to moral action in line with his teaching and to follow his example as empowered by the Spirit he sends his church (orthopraxis), while recognizing the necessary spiritual transformation that accompanies our conversion to Christ (orthopathy)" (p. 8). In each chapter, Butner introduces a topic in Christology, investigates various positions regarding disputes on that topic, and often concludes with a dogmatic summary.

Christological Dogmatics is also unique in the way that its chapters weave the person and work of Christ together. Many recent works treat either the person of Christ or the work of Christ, and those that treat both do so sequentially. Butner's organization and treatment of these doctrines remind the reader how closely they are connected. Indeed, the author argues that they are inseparable. Butner also frequently connects issues in Christology to broader issues in theology and practice. He always has a mind for the whole, not merely the parts. Butner writes, "The various doctrines of the Christian faith are connected to one another like strands in a web; move one strand, and the entire web shifts" (p. 7).

One of the various strengths of *Christological Dogmatics* is that it interacts with a wide range of theological disciplines, traditions, and eras. The book has a clear ecumenical appeal; Butner wants to hear from all the members of Christ's body, so he engages with sources outside of typical conservative evangelical theology. But as a work of dogmatics, Butner is not afraid to draw boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable doctrine. Although Butner is charitable and irenic with his interlocutors, he never strays from biblical fidelity, creedal orthodoxy, or his Reformed heritage. Another strength is his commitment to the gospel, the Great Commission, and the Christian moral life. He argues that this dogmatic theology is profoundly relevant to our lives. Life's deepest questions about happiness and

meaning "have comforting answers only if Christ is the incarnate God-man, two natures in one person, with each nature working and willing what is proper to it" (p. 277).

Christological Dogmatics has a couple of limitations. First, although the synchronic organization has a novel appeal, it makes the sequential reading of the book more demanding. The author often introduces an idea in one chapter but postpones discussion of it until a later chapter. Conversely, situations arise where the conventional order is inverted, leading the author to analyze a subject before the essential christological foundations are established. For example, the third chapter, "Two Natures," discusses Christ's sinlessness, impeccability, and temptation, but it is not until the seventh chapter, "Dyothelitism," that the number of wills in Christ is settled. Because temptation and sin are especially concerned with acts of the will, it would be preferable to establish an understanding of the number and nature of Christ's wills beforehand. This disadvantage is also evident in the interlacing of chapters on Christ's person and work. Butner argues that dividing person and work "can lend conceptual clarity, but it can also result in a doctrine of the person and natures of Christ detached from any saving significance" or a study of the work of Christ prone to error (p. 43). However, the author could have improved clarity without minimizing their interconnectedness by treating the person and work sequentially rather than in alternation. Second, some readers may wish that the author argued more forcefully for certain theological positions. Butner explains that his book "will at times describe disputes with several possible positions from which the reader can choose without fearing heresy" (p. 3). For example, although he has dogmatic reasons to reject a Pelagian account of original sin, he declines to bind the reader on the mode of transmission or its entailments, including original guilt. Likewise, within his treatment of satisfaction, he leaves open whether the reversal of original guilt and propitiation are integral to the doctrine. He certainly offers reasons to affirm both but stops short of treating them as dogmatically binding. These reservations notwithstanding, they do not significantly diminish the value of the book as a rigorous and constructive contribution to the field of Christology.

I definitely recommend *Christological Dogmatics* to students and scholars of Christology. Though the book is explicitly designed for advanced seminary curricula, its utility extends to advanced undergraduates, pastors, and professional theologians. Students and scholars will find *Christological Dogmatics* to be a useful resource. Besides Butner's clear and insightful prose are various aids to the reader, including copious footnotes, annotated lists of sources for further reading at the end of each chapter, and a lengthy back matter comprising a glossary, dates for historical figures, a bibliography, and three indices. *Christological Dogmatics* is not an introduction to Christology, nor is it the final word on the matter; rather, it is a guardrail and springboard to further christological studies.

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Kevin DeYoung. *The Nicene Creed: What You Need to Know about the Most Important Creed Ever Written*. Foundational Tools for Our Faith. Crossway, 2025. 93 pp. £9.99/$12.99.

Kevin DeYoung has written an accessible introduction and overview of the Nicene Creed, particularly for readers unfamiliar with the creed or its historical background. This succinct work emerges at a critical juncture for evangelicalism, marked by a renewed focus on the creed and proposals to integrate it as a confessional statement within mainstream evangelical denominations, including the Southern Baptist Convention. DeYoung begins his work underscoring the importance of the creed: "After the Bible, the Nicene Creed may be the most important Christian text ever written…. Without exaggeration it can be said that every church and every Christian ought to know the Nicene Creed" (p. 9). The creed is analyzed through historical, theological, and devotional lenses, though a substantial portion of the text is dedicated to detailing the significance of its constituent parts and the heresies it was designed to counter.

The work begins with a summary of the historical context preceding the Council of Nicaea. It delves deeply into the topic of Arianism, a belief that contested the divinity of Jesus Christ and was a significant point of contention in the early church that ultimately influenced the formation of the creed. DeYoung elaborates on the revisions of the creed that occurred at the Council of Constantinople so that readers will understand the doctrinal development that took place concerning the final form of the Nicene symbol recited in the modern church. The rest of the work analyzes the text of the creed itself. The exposition starts by grounding the creed in Scripture and proceeds to illustrate the utilization of another widely recognized Christian article of faith, the Apostle's Creed, as a baptismal formula by the church.

Chapter 2 ("only begotten") is a theologically rich exposition concerning the distinction between God the Father and Son while still affirming the full deity of the Son. DeYoung elaborates on the term *monogenes* ("only begotten") to refer to the eternal generation of the Son as "very God of very God" (p. 39), not as one created at a point in time (refuting Arianism). Chapter 3 ("one substance") unpacks the debate concerning *homoousios* ("same substance") and the importance that the Son shares the same essence of the Father while being distinct from the Father (p. 50). Chapter 4 ("for us and for our salvation") elaborates on the work of Christ in his humiliation and exaltation as vital for our salvation (including comparisons to the Apostles' Creed). Chapter 5 ("who proceeds from the Father and Son") is an in-depth treatment concerning the double procession debate between the Eastern and Western church with the addition of the *filioque* clause, with arguments for and against the addition of the *filioque* and mediating positions proposed by modern scholars. DeYoung ultimately sides with the inclusion of the *filioque*: "The double procession underscores the critical and biblical truth that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ" (p. 69). Chapter 6 ("one holy catholic and apostolic church") elaborates on the attributes of the church (while clarifying to readers that the term *catholic* means universal church and is not limited to the Roman Catholic Church), and Chapter 7 ("one baptism for the remission of sins") argues that baptism for the remission of sins is a spiritual reality and not an efficacious/sacerdotal baptism (p. 81). DeYoung summarizes his position as: "The physical act of baptism points to these spiritual realities. In the same way, to be baptized *eis* [in] the remission of sins means that baptism points to

the forgiveness of sins. Baptism identifies us as God's beloved people…. We do not put confidence in the sign as such or in the act that the minister performs. We trust in God; we confess our baptism" (p. 82). He also argues from a paedobaptist, not credobaptist, perspective. He concludes the work with a summary of the Nicene Creed and practical applications of the creed for Christians.

DeYoung's work was published at an opportune moment within evangelicalism. With evangelicals needing a solid understanding of essential doctrines of the faith (the Trinity, the Person of Jesus Christ, etc.), and with the resurgence of interest in and the potential incorporation of the Nicene Creed as a statement of faith in mainstream evangelical denominations, it is vital that Christians have a solid understanding of the creed. It would be tragic if the adoption of the creed became a statement Christians merely agreed to without fully understanding the importance and richness of the creed. DeYoung offers the average church member or Bible college student who may be new to the creed a clear understanding of the historical background, theological understanding, and practical applications of the creed. It is accessible and digestible and can easily be read in a single sitting or easily used in a church Sunday School, small group Bible study, or as recommended reading for a Bible college course. Non-Reformed readers will take issue with DeYoung's paedobaptist position supporting infant baptism versus believer's baptism, but most evangelicals will be generally comfortable concerning how DeYoung views the relationship between baptism and faith. Many evangelicals will also agree with DeYoung's acceptance of the *filioque* clause and his position on double procession. However, DeYoung discusses various mediating positions (such as the procession from the Father through the Son) that are acquiring traction within evangelical scholarship, and he interacts well with those mediating positions.

A solid introduction to the creed, this book is a vital read for contemporary lay Christians and a constructive step in equipping the church with a richer understanding of its tenets. DeYoung is correct in his affirmation that every Christian should know the Nicene Creed. It has been a pivotal statement throughout church history and one that should see a revival of interest and adoption in the church today. *The Nicene Creed* is one of the most useful introductions to the creed that will ensure Christians can know and understand this theologically rich statement of faith.

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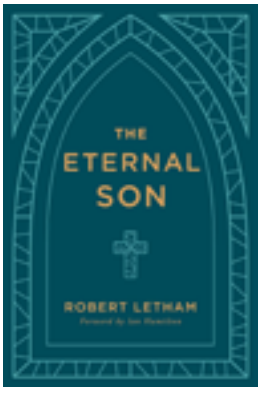
Robert Letham. *The Eternal Son*. P&R, 2025. xviii + 387 pp. £29.99/$29.99.



The doctrine of Christ is the church's most precious possession, and Robert Letham has written a sensitive and engaging historical-systematic treatment of this in *The Eternal Son.* He has previously written a tome on the Trinity, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (P&R, 2004). His current project is a trilogy of books, where each volume will explore one of the divine persons. *The Eternal Son* is the second piece in this trilogy. *The Holy Spirit* was released in 2023, and a volume on the Father is forthcoming. This work of Christology is well-researched and penetrating, evidencing Letham's lifelong devotion to trinitarian theology. He shows that Christology is not merely a doctrine to be placed on the shelf alongside others but that Christ is the heart of the gospel and the Christian faith.

The first three chapters set the stage. In chapter 1, Letham establishes the Trinitarian foundations for the doctrine of Christ, such as the concepts of eternal generation, perichoresis, inseparable operations, and distinct appropriations. In chapter 2, he deals with the Son's eternal existence, highlighting how this pre-existence is related to predestination and election. If we are chosen *in Christ* before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:3), then the Son's eternal nature is not just a presupposition but the foundation for our salvation. Chapter 3 deals with the incarnation, which Letham calls the "center of the Gospel" (p. 67). Here the reader is introduced to the centrality of Cyril of Alexandria's thought to the development of Christology. Cyril champions the concept of one unified christological subject (person), thereby rejecting the Nestorian tendency to divide the person of Christ into two subjects. And it is through Cyril's eyes, Letham argues, that the Council of Chalcedon must be interpreted. The debates following Chalcedon were largely disputes among rival interpreters of Cyril, not between his supporters and opponents.

From there, the book is a historical journey from the fifth century onward, with the chapters generally following the debates and discussions chronologically. While many evangelical perspectives appear to consider the Chalcedonian Definition of 451 AD as the final resolution of early christological debates, Letham effectively illustrates that this event initiated a period of increased doctrinal contention. In chapter 7, Letham explains the twin threats of monoenergism and Monothelitism, which arose in the seventh century. Respectively, these views held that Christ operated only through one energy or operation and one will. Through the case study of the Gethsemane scene in the Gospels and the advocacy of Maximus the Confessor, Letham shows these views to be lacking and out of the bounds of orthodoxy. He then addresses the influence of the Reformation and the aftermath of the Enlightenment upon Christology. Ideas that spring up in the modern era, such as kenotic Christology, are also critiqued with great insight. Letham concludes with a final chapter reflecting on the soteriological impact of the doctrine of Christ's person.

Theological discourse often separates the person of Christ from his salvific actions, with these distinct aspects occasionally forming separate volumes within a series. And to be sure, there is not a lot of material in *The Eternal Son* on the doctrine of the atonement. While Letham acknowledges this, his concluding chapter introduces soteriology emerging from Christology. Protestants can give the sacraments short shrift, but Letham reflects on the dual function of baptism and the Lord's Supper and their role in the believer's relation to the person of Christ. In baptism, we are promised union with him; through communion, we feed on him. Letham concludes with a Protestant take on the controversial notion of *theosis*. Commonly assumed to be merely an Eastern Orthodox idea, Letham provocatively suggests that we are already in possession of something similar under the more Western label of *glorification.*

The Eternal Son is a book that is well suited for a theological student to acquire an overview of the development of christological doctrines. It is introductory but written with a level of engagement that would well prepare a reader for further study. Despite its limitations in providing an exhaustive historical examination or a thorough analysis of specific disputes, the book serves as an excellent introductory resource. Letham is especially good where he shows the contemporary relevance of certain issues. Monothelitism is not dead, for example. It lives on in evangelical circles through living advocates such as Garrett J. Deweese and William Lane Craig. The book's two appendices are polemical, directly engaging contemporary christological proposals that he finds dubious.

In Letham's telling, ancient debates are described as having perennial relevance. Cyril of Alexandria and Karl Barth are presented as interlocutors who find common ground despite a temporal distance of approximately fourteen centuries. Something similar can be said of John Calvin, Origen, and Gregory of Nazianzus. Letham exposes the reader to many important theological voices; he is very generous in presenting various theological figures. Though objecting to Barth on several aspects of his theology, Letham commends the Swiss theologian at various points throughout the book. He even mentions the Eastern Orthodox theologian Sergei Bulgakov. This generosity results from the true catholicity of Letham's project.

The Eternal Son is the product of a very mature systematic-historical theologian. Its author has devoted a long career to the study of the Trinity and the doctrine of Christ. Christology is a treasure of the church, and it is in good hands with Robert Letham.

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— ETHICS & PASTORALIA —

Chap Bettis. *Managing Your Households Well: How Family Leadership Trains You for Church Leadership*. P&R, 2025. xviii + 135 pp. £18.99/$16.99.

At first glance, it might appear that a typo has infiltrated the title of this book (and indeed, it is misprinted in multiple places online). Most churches expect their leaders to have one "household"—not multiple "household*s*"! The plural, however, is not only intentional but fundamental to the book's message. Chap Bettis contends that there is an organic, God-ordained connection between parenting well and pastoring well: the better a man manages his own household, the more skillfully he will shepherd God's household—and vice-versa.

Bettis begins by highlighting 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, where Paul devotes disproportionate space to the elder's effective family management (1 Tim 3:4–5; Titus 1:6). This "vital aspect of godly leadership," Bettis laments, "is being overlooked" in contemporary seminaries and churches (p. xii). *Managing Your Households Well* aims to address this void—not as a "comprehensive leadership book" or an in-depth parenting manual but to "make clear the connection between leading your family well and leading God's people well" (p. xiv).

The book divides neatly into two parts. Part 1 establishes the theological foundation by expounding the relevant Pauline passages and clarifying key concepts such as "manage" (pp. 8–10) and "above reproach" (pp. 39–48). Part 2 draws out practical implications in the areas of leadership (ch. 5; Appendix A), communication (ch. 6), conflict resolution (ch. 7), and character formation (ch. 8).

As I read, I was struck by how richly and naturally the leadership lessons of church and home inform one another. As Bettis wryly observes, "A plumber might not make deep connections between his job and his family (other than fixing the pipes!), but a church leader should see profound similarities" (p. 8).

On Bettis's model, the home is not merely the initial testing ground in which leaders display their fitness for ministry, as a cursory reading of Paul might suggest; it is a discipleship laboratory in which leaders continue learning fresh lessons for ministry. Listening carefully to one's wife, for instance, can help a pastor see things from a woman's perspective and more effectively care for women in his congregation (pp. 68, 73). Likewise, moving toward difficult conversations at home strengthens a pastor's resolve to face conflicts within the church (pp. 46–47).

The strengths of *Managing Your Households Well* are threefold. First, given the relative lack of contemporary emphasis on the "marvelous pipeline" between the home and the church (p. xvii), Bettis's book fills a significant gap—one that seminary curricula have been slow to address. Shepherding one's family may indeed be one of the most important "things they don't teach you in seminary."

Second, Bettis writes with the gravitas of a seasoned pastor-father. Each chapter is packed with pithy one-liners that search the soul: "You don't want to be a public success and a private failure" (p. 25); "Our children … are little sanctification machines that shine a floodlight on ways we need to grow" (p. 59). The same pastoral wisdom informs Bettis's balanced and nuanced approach to leadership. The model leader, in his view, is characterized by "both rule and care," "authority and affection" (p. 18), and is "neither permissive nor perfectionistic" (p. 41). Throughout, Bettis addresses problematic contemporary trends in pastoring and parenting (pp. 15, 16, 18, 22) without diminishing the book's timeless message.

Third, Bettis has a rare gift for posing penetrating questions: "Would your wife and children say you are the same person in public that you are in private?" (p. 26); "Are you a skilled encourager, giving grace with your words? Or are you stingy with your praise?" (p. 65). Such questions are not merely tacked on to each chapter as an afterthought; they invite leaders to evaluate themselves with specificity and honesty. In particular, the final two appendices (pp. 119–34) are well worth the price of the book, for they supply dozens of questions for a pastor and his wife to evaluate his leadership together—an exercise my wife and I found highly illuminating and have already recommended to other church leaders.

One of the book's most debatable points lies in chapter 3, where Bettis presents five arguments that the phrase *echōn pista* in Titus 1:6 refers to "faithful" children rather than "believing" children (pp. 30–32). His strongest argument is that belief is a sovereign work of God, whereas a father more directly cultivates faithfulness and other virtues in his children (p. 30). One wonders, however, whether a father bears substantially more influence over his children's *faithfulness* than their *faith*. By God's grace, might not a father exert as much influence on their faith through proclaiming the gospel as he does on their behavior through discipline? Some readers may find more persuasive the observation that whenever the New Testament pairs *pistis* ("faith," cognate to *pistos* in Titus 1:6) with *echō* ("to have"), the phrase uniformly refers to possessing faith in God (Matt 17:20; 21:21; Mark 4:40; 11:22; Luke 17:6; Acts 14:9; Rom 14:22; 1 Cor 13:2; 1 Tim 1:19; Phlm 5; Jas 2:1, 14, 18). To his credit, Bettis later qualifies his position and, in a characteristic display of nuance, gestures toward the "believing children" interpretation. He concludes that "when a loving father teaches his children the gospel, and when they trust their father, then we could expect them to embrace his God.… This is a gracious outworking of hearing the sweet news of the gospel from a source they trust" (p. 34).

None of the foregoing detracts from the book's substantial value. *Managing Your Households Well* will prove useful to a wide range of readers: emerging elders, pastoral search teams and ordination

committees, seminary professors teaching pastoral theology, and especially pastors, young and old, who aspire to be "shepherds after [God's] own heart" (Jer 3:15).

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James K. Dew and Jordan Steffaniak. *Moral Apologetics: A Short Companion*. Essentials in Christian Ethics. B&H Academic, 2026. 224 pp. £22.99/$22.99.

The recent shift from evidential to moral apologetics has been drastic. Since the Enlightenment, the main challenges to Christianity have been leveled at its truth claims. Today, however, skeptics are generally not asking if Christianity is *true*. Instead, they are asking whether it is *good*. The church, then, must be ready to speak into the moral issues surrounding topics like racism, sex and gender, the family, abortion, euthanasia, and AI. This is a difficult task, particularly as Christian responses are often seen as abusive, hateful, and anti-human. But thankfully, help is at hand. In *Moral Apologetics: A Short Companion*, James K. Dew and Jordan Steffaniak offer a valuable resource to equip believers to present cogent apologetic arguments in answer to common objections.

The authors' main contention is that all the moral objections to Christianity stem from a failure to appreciate the significance of the human person—a significance grounded in the eternal existence of the Triune God. Based on a defense of humanity's hylomorphic constitution and unique status as God's image (part 1), Dew and Steffaniak pick apart the culture's critique (part 2), effectively dismantling the moral arguments against the Christian faith. This review will highlight the authors' two key arguments for the metaphysical reality of human nature in part 1 of their book and then provide an assessment of their application in part 2.

Part 1 explores the foundations of Christian morality as grounded in human metaphysics. For human nature to be an objective concept that is universally true, there must first be such a thing as objective morality that provides moral standards that are binding for all people in all places. Thus, Dew and Steffaniak aver that atheistic moral concepts have no metaphysical room for transcendent morality. So, for example, when assessing the non-natural, non-theistic moral realism of Erik J. Wielenberg, the authors state: "Obligations to do particular actions and avoid others arise from persons, not facts or objects. If morality is merely a brute fact [as Wielenberg claims], we lack obligations altogether" (p. 30). Hence, objective moral obligations cannot be brute facts but must be grounded in the eternal being of a personal God who will hold his creatures accountable.

This brings us to their second key argument: the objective reality of human nature (or the self). They define human nature as "the particular essence that grounds all essential attributes shared by human beings" (p. 36). They then argue that the postmodern attempt to make human nature plastic or "fluid" is what has led to the current confusion concerning identity, sexuality, gender, and personal autonomy. And so, "If we want to respond to the moral debates of our day, we must understand the philosophical backdrop of the changing views on human nature" (p. 38). In landscaping this backdrop, Dew and Steffaniak make two points. First, until postmodernity, every philosopher believed that humans shared

a particular nature located in the self; second, even though they shared a belief in the objective reality of human nature, they did not share a unified understanding of the self.

In response to the postmodern assault on the self, the authors offer multiple arguments. First, postmodernists do not offer any compelling arguments for completely removing human nature from reality; they merely offer rhetoric. Second, philosophers who deny the existence of the self "teeter on absurdity," as they deny the self-evident truth that all people share "ontological similarities," such as feeling, thinking, planning, and acting. If we are the "kinds of things" that can perform these actions, then we are "kinds of things" that have a fixed nature or essence (p. 51). Third, the postmodern understanding of the self is self-contradictory, because the "self" that is shaped by cultural forces cannot exist in the postmodern worldview. As Dew and Steffaniak state: "How is it that I can be shaped if 'I'—a particular self—am not there in the first place as the kind of thing capable of being shaped" (p. 51). Fourth, postmodernists have no ground to enforce their ethical codes if their worldview denies that "we are kinds of beings that have moral obligations or duties" (p. 52). Fifth, it is impossible to affirm both Christian doctrine and postmodern anthropological views because the postmodern view of human nature denies the creation of humanity in God's image and the full humanity of Christ (pp. 52–53).

In part 2, Dew and Steffaniak demonstrate how a right understanding of human nature answers the moral objections to Christianity surrounding racism, sex and gender, abortion, marriage and the family, and transhumanism. For example, only a biblical worldview truly combats racism by affirming the equal dignity of every human being, only biblical doctrine teaches the true meaning and purpose of human sexual dimorphism, and only a biblical anthropology has the resources to prevent us from allowing technology to transform us into machines because "if our bodies are part of what it means to be human, we should not seek to transcend them" (p. 185).

Although Dew and Steffaniak typically offer robust arguments throughout their book, I have one small critique of their chapter on sex and gender. They argue that sex and gender are interchangeable terms. They are aware, of course, that some use gender to refer to social roles, norms, or identity. In fact, they concede that there is "nothing inherently wrong about this when carefully used." But they continue, "in our view, when 'gender' is used for these social outworkings of biology, it is nothing distinct from sex." And so, they conclude, "we think it's best to treat them as synonymous and still make clear there is a difference between sex and its social expression" (p. 121).

The problem here is the confusion created by maintaining that "there is a difference between sex and its social expression" and yet also maintaining that "when 'gender' is used for these social outworkings of biology, it is nothing distinct from sex." If the first proposition is true, the second cannot be. Moreover, one problem that often arises from conflating sex and gender is the creation of rigid stereotypes. For example, if seventy per cent of men love hunting and fishing, and we have no other term to describe their preference other than *sex* (or gender meaning *sex*) then what about men who do not love hunting and fishing? Are they less male because of that fact? No.

What this highlights is the need to allow some slack in the line between sex and its various outworkings. So, even if we lost the language of gender altogether, we would still need terms to describe the psychosocial dimensions of sex (e.g., "sex roles," "sex norms," and "sex identity") and to express the fact that, when it comes to prevailing norms for masculinity or femininity in a given culture, men and women land at various points on their respective distributional curves. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that both the authors and this reviewer are arguing for the inextricable connection

between sex and its expression and against any severing of that connection—as in transgenderism and gender-inclusive feminism.

God's people stand in need of robust and readable resources to refute ethical objections to the goodness of God and the Christian worldview. Dew and Steffaniak have gone a long way toward meeting that need in *Moral Apologetics*.

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Keith Getty and Kristyn Getty, eds. *The Sing! Hymnal*. Crossway, 2025. xii + 912 pp. £25.99/$34.99.

Can you solve this mystery? As I entered the choir room of an old church, I saw about fifty copies of the *Baptist Hymnal* (1991) neatly divided into stacks of five and equally spaced around the room on every windowsill. I was encouraged to think that this church still used hymnals, yet was also mystified: Why keep the hymnals on the windowsills?

Can you guess the answer? No, it wasn't for the purpose of singing in the round. The hymnals were used to prop open the choir room windows.

In many churches, most people no longer remember the older use of their hymn books—providing the congregation with lyrics to be sung. This role became the job of, first, the overhead projector, then the LCD projector, and now (in more technologically adept churches) an LED wall with confidence monitors. New technology has brought churches many easy-to-see gains—lifted heads can sing more easily than heads face-down in a book, and new songs can be added at a moment's notice. But while those gains are easily recognizable, it is more difficult to gauge what might have been lost.

So ubiquitous has been the demise of the church hymnal that, in 2025, when Crossway partnered with Keith and Kristin Getty to publish a new hymnal, it was an anomaly. Believers in the majority of churches that might use this hymnal would typically read the words on a screen and might continue to do so even if their church purchased cases of the Getty hymnal to keep in the book racks of their chairs or pews. In fact, when I attended a dedication service for the *Sing! Hymnal*, at which Crossway generously provided each attendee with a complimentary copy, some happily opened their new hymnals to sing. But during the corporate singing most of us lifted our eyes (and some of us our hands) while following the lyrics on the screens.

Nevertheless, informing a congregation of the next lyric has not been the only service hymnals have rendered Christians. Indeed, there are other uses where their true utility may come into its own. For many generations, they have served in domestic and academic contexts just as vibrantly as in churches (see Christopher Phillips's *The Hymnal: A Reading History* [John Hopkins University Press, 2018]). The hymnal also provides a usable tool for smaller worshipping communities or those that are less equipped technologically: in chapels, nursing homes, small groups, or outdoor services.

The Getty hymnal features an admirable representation of historic hymnody—ancient hymns of Latin and Greek origin, Reformation hymns, as well as the best of revivalist songs. It also features an array of modern compositions, many written and published by the Gettys and their broader network

of songwriters who prioritize congregational singability. The boundaries of this in-group are difficult to ascertain (N.B.: Getty Music has neither a denominational affiliation nor a doctrinal statement), but the loosely affiliated yet tightly aligned nature of this Getty Cinematic Universe creates the unique flavor of the hymnal.

How this hymnal presents these selections deserves some attention, so permit a brief discussion of page layout. A typical hymnal fits each work onto its own, single page. By contrast, the *Sing! Hymnal* presents the score more spaciously, sometimes overflowing the last line of a stanza across the top of a second of a two-page spread. This leaves much of the second, right-sided page (the "recto") blank where another hymnal might insert a second, shorter hymn. But the Getty hymnal often fills that space with a combination of related Scripture readings, poems, prayers, and devotional quotations. For people expecting a similar layout to their other hymnals, the effect can be surprising. Here, the *Sing! Hymnal* takes up that neglected role of domestic and educational use. At its best, the interweaving of biblical passages and congregational hymns can invoke a rhythm of revelation and response. God's word calls his people to worship, and his people employ a great hymn to respond in praise.

No attempt to assemble a definitive collection of hymns will please everyone, or perhaps anyone. Indeed, two criticisms might be levied against it. First, the hymnal has fewer compositions (497) than other recent examples by like-minded publishers—245 fewer than the *Trinity Hymnal* (1961/1990), and over 300 fewer than *Lift Up Your Hearts* (2013). In terms of size and scope, it is most similar to the 2015 collection from Master's Seminary, *Hymns of Grace*.

Second, the selections themselves are curiously eclectic, although perhaps this is a fitting artifact for the amalgam that is Getty Music. Consider some seeming paradoxes: Getty Music spokespersons advocate for church-based ministry while representing a para-church organization. They decry performance-based aesthetics in worship during conferences held in the Grand Ole Opry. They bemoan spectacle while featuring high-energy (and well-executed!) Irish step dancing. So, it seems somehow fitting that a hymnal which champions congregational singing would conclude with nine pages devoted to Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" in the key of D. Congregational music proponents who argue for singable tessitura will be shocked to see high As in the soprano parts. My church choir sopranos might be able to hit that note, but that note will certainly hit back.

To my eye, it is best to understand the *Sing! Hymnal* not in the tradition of the major denominational hymnals of the recent century. Instead, it seems more accurate to consider it as a beautifully produced Getty songbook with two substantive additions: first, the addition of a broad selection of historic hymns, and second, a collection of devotional resources. Concerning those devotional resources, Crossway has recently released an expanding lineup of high-quality aesthetic devotionals (e.g., Jonathan Gibson's liturgies for daily worship) designed to deepen personal and family worship. These devotionals utilize historical creeds, confessions, and structured Bible readings. The *Sing! Hymnal* sits well within this genre.

Understood from this perspective, and noting how hymnals have largely fallen out of use, the *Sing! Hymnal* is an achievement in remediation. With its beautiful design, its fabulous indexes, and its hymn stories, the Gettys have labored to ensure that this hymnal will provide Christian homes and smaller worshiping communities with a valuable tool; one that people can actually use.

Keith Getty is an immensely gifted brother in Christ—a fabulous musician and songwriter, as well as a sensible organizer and ministry leader. But perhaps his gift that most benefits the body of Christ is that of a convener. As populist and consumer winds increasingly shape the larger marketplace of

contemporary worship, Getty Music has carved out a niche exulting in conservative theology and Christian discernment. Ministries like this (conservative and discerning) are often characterized by rigid standards and few, albeit fervent, members. In a unique way, the Gettys have used their gifts to gather a discerning community that is not narrowly parochial. They have forged a movement. There are too few ministries like Getty Music—clearly and convictionally pursuing kingdom purposes while irenically and joyfully forging kingdom partnerships.

So, may the Lord use the *Sing! Hymnal*—not to prop open the windows of old choir rooms but to open the very windows of heaven on our churches (cf. Mal 3:10) so that he may pour down much needed blessing upon us for his glory.

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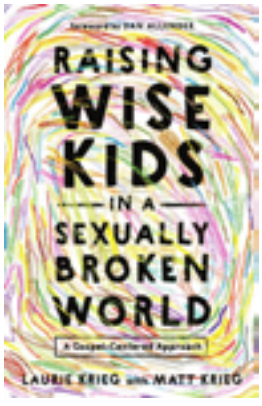
Laurie Krieg with Matt Krieg. *Raising Wise Kids in a Sexually Broken World: A Gospel-Centered Approach*. InterVarsity Press, 2026. 229 pp. £17.99/$21.99.



Charles Spurgeon once said, "The affections, typically understood as the heart, are the wellspring of crimes.... The essential self of man is wrong, and manhood's vital essence is corrupt" (*The Heart—A Den of Evil,* sermon 1867). However, were God at the center of our affections, human beings would have no desire to turn elsewhere for inappropriate comfort or attention. Nor would we succumb to the temptation to see and treat others as physically and sexually expendable. But the fact is that we are sinful people living in a broken world where we give our love away cheaply and often carry the scars to prove it. Moreover, as parents, we fear that our children will repeat our mistakes.

Aware of these risks and realities, Laurie Krieg with her husband Matt have written an incredibly helpful book, *Raising Wise Kids in a Sexually Broken World*. The book aims to equip parents to do something with both the perennial and evolving questions that arise when teaching children about sexuality. The goal of the book is to instill the wisdom of Jesus in kids, so they are faithful and confident in navigating this complex, fallen world.

The Kriegs are not only parents of three school-aged children but also carry experiential and professional weight. Laurie is the director of parent programs and discipleship at The Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender. Matt is a licensed mental health therapist with a focus on helping people with sexuality related issues. Furthermore, they are both candid about Laurie's history of abuse and her struggle with same-sex attraction. (They discuss these matters at greater depth in their previous book, *An Impossible Marriage: What Our Mixed-Orientation Marriage Has Taught Us About Love and the Gospel* [InterVarsity Press, 2020].)

This book begins with a gospel exposition, which is then followed by a discussion of five aspects or expressions of our sexuality: marriage and singleness, gender, God's design for sex, body safety, and pornography prevention. Each is handled by an explanation and then practical steps of action. The general target audience is parents of children who are twelve and under, but the book contains many more specific guideposts as to what to address with kids based on their age.

Raising Wise Kids in a Sexually Broken World has three main strengths. First, it is saturated with the gospel throughout, not just at the beginning. For example, when expounding on marriage and singleness in chapter 3, Krieg discusses the specific benefits of each but also makes the crucial zoom-out statement, "It is wise to talk about the options for marriage and singleness as valuable ways to live into God's mission to restore and redeem the world unto King Jesus" (pp. 41–42). Likewise, in talking about gender in chapter 6, she reminds parents that while our kids are "struggling with living in a sin-drenched world and body," they were made by God and redeemed by Jesus (p. 93).

Second, Krieg tackles each topic with specific evidence and practical suggestions. For example, chapter 11 uses psychological, social, and religious texts to support the myriad effects of pornography and its ubiquity among Christians, both adults and teenagers. She then follows this up with an age-appropriate breakdown of how to broach the subject of pornography with children (pp. 173–74) and what to do if (or, more likely, when) kids come across it (pp. 175–77).

The third strength is that Krieg works hard to see that no aspect of sexuality is missed. For example, she talks of the heart and mind dimensions of sexuality and how children should view their own future and their role in the lives of others. She even touches on how parents may have been affected by their own sexual failings, long before children were ever part of their lives. For many parents, conversations with children about sexual matters naturally stir up past baggage and even reopen old wounds, especially if they are yet to resolve their own history and clarify their views on some aspects of biblical sexuality. Krieg astutely anticipates this, encouraging parents to teach children from wisdom rather than fear or shame, "because adolescents can pick up emotional nuances like no one else" (p. 100).

This last strength could easily devolve into the greatest weakness of the book—its intensity. If parents dive into this book solely focused on their child, they could be blindsided by their own stories, fears of what their child is being exposed to, missed opportunities at crucial ages, and ignorance of the topics mentioned. This is all to say that the Kriegs' book should possibly come with a stronger warning to read it slowly and carefully and not to do so in isolation from other parents. The sexual climate and chaos of this generation is a lot to process, and the stakes are indeed high. I could see a nervous parent reading this and expecting the worst for their child. I could also see a wise, older saint reading this alongside a small group of young parents in a sober and prayerful way to the great benefit of many.

Spurgeon was right: "man's vital essence is corrupt." So, it is not surprising that all the research, argumentation, and scriptural testimony in this book confirms this tragic truth. But thankfully that is not the only truth. The gospel is good news for adults and children alike: it brings healing where there has been damage, cleansing where there has been defilement, and forgiveness where there has been failure. Not only that, it can also help us face our own corruption, learn to resist temptation, and grow in faithfulness and wisdom. Best of all, it promises believers living in a sexually broken world that one day Jesus will return to make all things new. So, until then, our aim is to raise wise kids who know his grace and desire to imitate him.

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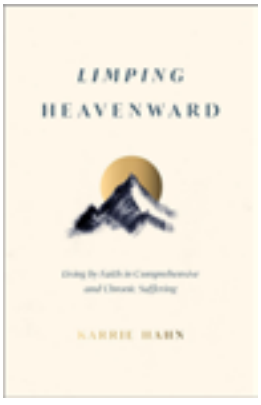
Karrie Hahn. *Limping Heavenward: Living by Faith in Comprehensive and Chronic Suffering*. P&R, 2025. 200 pp. £16.99/$16.99.



Karrie Hahn is an associate editor for Ligonier Ministries and *Tabletalk* magazine, and a counselor certified by the Association of Biblical Counselors. The subtitle of her *Limping Heavenward* reveals the book's aim: to help those who experience comprehensive and chronic suffering to live by faith. In fact, the term "chronic and comprehensive suffering" appears seventy-one times in the book. Her focus, therefore, is deliberately narrow, and based largely on her personal experiences. She addresses chronic illness, loss of employment, and isolation from family and fellow Christians as causes and results of suffering. She also seeks to deal with the various forms of suffering that arise from different sources, especially those that end up producing long-term struggles; to interact with both those who endure chronic suffering and those who would seek to minister to them; and to remind us all that "a loving and powerful God is not against us but for us in our affliction (see Ps. 56:9)" (p. 24).

Hahn begins by outlining her personal struggles as she lost her health, her job, her ability to live independently, her marital prospects, and her church relationships. She suffered these devastating losses in rapid succession and the effects endured over a period of years. This led to a crisis of faith. She points out that while we can often bear "a short-lived, major crisis" of "chronic but low-grade suffering," enduring "a chronic crisis" is another thing altogether (p. 23). Comprehensive and chronic suffering inevitably stresses the resources of the believer to breaking point.

Like Job, often the suffering Christian encounters "helpers" who posit that prolonged pain is evidence of spiritual weakness. They offer quick fixes with a few Bible verses and then move on, leading to a sense of abandonment. Part of Hahn's work is devoted to helping caregivers know how to encourage and support rather than to admonish (p. 29). She names, and on subsequent pages expounds, five common failures of poor helpers: accusation, aphorisms, abandonment, avoidance, and apathy (p. 36).

She also points out that suffering has one common, foundational source: human sinfulness. She adds, though, that while Satan may be involved in causing the believer's pain, God too will have his sovereign purposes to mature and strengthen the character of the believer and increase their ability to depend on him for strength (p. 63). Ultimately, it may not be possible to understand why the particular suffering has occurred, but by the grace of God it is possible to endure it for the glory of God and to learn from it.

Hahn encourages honestly expressing the pain associated with tragedy to God, again reminding the reader of Job's experience. She also points to the lament psalms as sources of encouragement and models of faithful self-expression, saying that, in contrast with the common encouragement to never show pain, lament, properly done, indicates spiritual wisdom and maturity (p. 136). It can paradoxically be the path to joy (p. 153).

Hahn's work is uncomfortable to read as the reader is drawn deeper into the pain of her experiences. This discomfort may arise from identification with some or perhaps all the events that plagued her. Nevertheless, her interactions with Scripture give helpful reminders that, in Christ and by his Spirit, God walks with suffering Christians through their distress and that his heart is affected by our pain.

While some might struggle with Hahn's strong conviction that God is sovereign over all human suffering, her belief is not only well founded biblically, but her insights offer genuine hope without trying to give easy answers to complex suffering that cascades and appears to be unending. Her advice to helpers is worth the price of the book, especially when she encourages them to ask sufferers what might be most helpful for them rather than assuming that they already know what the questions and (indeed) the answers are (p. 188).

One caution for the reader is that Hahn's emphasis on chronic and comprehensive suffering may lead one to think that if they are only suffering in one area of life, the comparatively minor distress they feel is indicative of spiritual weakness. Indeed, it is almost impossible to read of Hahn's long-term and widely diverse calamities without feeling ashamed of our reaction to comparatively minor suffering. Nevertheless, while one person's burden may not be of the same magnitude as that of another, it is still the burden they are facing and having to carry, and it may indeed be heavy for them. Hahn does not deny this reality, but it is not the emphasis of her book.

As we have seen, Hahn does not attribute all suffering to Satan. However, she does, at points, give him more credit than might be warranted. For example, on the basis of Acts 10:38, "[Jesus] went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil" (ESV), she seems to conclude that Peter "attributes *[all?]* physical suffering to the oppression of the devil" (p. 60). While there are several instances of Satanic involvement in sickness in the Bible, it would have been more appropriate to add the qualifier "some" to this sentence to avoid the idea that all illnesses or physical infirmities are the direct work of Satan or demons.

These quibbles notwithstanding, *Limping Heavenward* is highly recommended for individuals in the midst of tragedy. It offers hope and solace to those in real and chronic pain. It will also prove extremely valuable to those who aspire to help them, as it gives advice that is both biblically sound and readily practicable.

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Richard Rohr. *Just This: Prompts and Practices for Contemplation*. SPCK, 2018. 144 pp. £11.99/$17.00.

At a time when spiritual formation, contemplative practices, and discussions surrounding Christian mindfulness have become increasingly influential within evangelical circles, Richard Rohr's *Just This: Prompts and Practices for Contemplation* is highly relevant, despite its publication several years ago.

Rohr writes from a Franciscan and contemplative tradition markedly different from mainstream evangelical theology. Nevertheless, engaging voices like his can help evangelicals clarify both the strengths and the limits of contemporary contemplative spirituality. Indeed, his emphasis on awakening, surrender, and awareness raises important theological questions concerning revelation, Christology, sanctification, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Rohr proposes a contemplative vision of the Christian life centered on "awe," "awakening," "nondual consciousness," "suffering," and radical presence in the "now" (pp. 5–8). The book is neither a systematic

theology nor a prayer manual. Rather, it is a spiritual invitation, calling readers to relinquish control, suspend judgment, and inhabit reality as the primary means of divine encounter.

Rohr opens with a foundational claim: contemplation begins in awe. Awe interrupts habitual consciousness—our constant analyzing, judging, comparing, and controlling. It "stops you in your tracks" and ushers the soul into simple presence (pp. 9–10). Contemplation, he suggests, is not discursive reasoning but "a different way of knowing," a direct, loving gaze upon reality (p. 12).

This insight carries genuine spiritual weight. Given the common tendency to reduce faith to moral correctness or doctrinal precision, awe destabilizes such reductionism. It exposes the limits of the ego and reorients the self toward receptivity rather than mastery.

Yet a theological question emerges: Is awe sufficient to ground authentic spiritual awakening? While it may interrupt self-enclosure, it does not necessarily interpret itself. Without divine revelation, awe may devolve into vague mysticism. From a gospel-centered perspective, awe becomes transformative not merely because reality is overwhelming but because it is illuminated by God's self-disclosure in Scripture and in Jesus Christ. Awe before creation finds its fullness when directed toward the Creator; awe before suffering becomes redemptive when interpreted through the cross. Thus, while Rohr rightly identifies awe as an experiential threshold, evangelical theology insists that revelation gives awe its true epistemological focus and saving orientation.

One of Rohr's most provocative distinctions is between "growing up" and "waking up" (pp. 18–21). A person may mature morally, psychologically, and religiously ("grow up") without experiencing a fundamental shift in consciousness ("wake up"). Awakening involves liberation from the ego's need to be right and from dualistic thinking that divides reality into rigid binaries.

Against what he calls the "dualistic mind," Rohr argues that ego-driven certainty fuels division and violence (pp. 24–27). Whereas awakening entails a "nondual way of seeing"—a mode of perception that transcends oppositional categories and fosters compassion.

Here, the dialogical tension of Rohr's approach intensifies. Evangelical theology also affirms the danger of self-righteous certainty. Indeed, history—both secular and ecclesial—demonstrates how claims to moral superiority breed conflict. However, Christian faith is not a rejection of truth distinctions. God remains the source and standard of truth; good and evil are not mere constructs of limited consciousness.

Theologically, humanity's problem lies not in the existence of moral distinctions, but in the attempt to determine them autonomously. Human beings seek to "decide good and evil" apart from God. In that sense, Rohr's critique of ego-centered dualism resonates. Yet the solution is not merely a shift in awareness; it is repentance and reconciliation through Christ. Awakening, from a gospel perspective, requires not only psychological expansion but spiritual regeneration. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts of sin and illuminates the depth of divine love—dimensions of experience that exceed self-discovery and depend entirely upon divine grace. Thus, while Rohr's nondual emphasis can function as a corrective to self-righteous religion, it must be integrated with a robust theology of revelation and redemption.

Rohr presents suffering as a "necessary teacher" (pp. 49–52). Loss of control exposes the fragility of the ego and creates the possibility of surrender. Surrender, he insists, is not defeat but trust—"giving over" rather than "giving up" (p. 55). This framework aligns with human experience. Even outside Christian faith, suffering often catalyzes maturation. It disrupts complacency, exposes irresponsibility, and demands re-evaluation of priorities. Rohr's insight that suffering confronts the illusion of control is psychologically astute.

Yet the theological depth of suffering cannot rest on existential realism alone. Without hope rooted in God's sovereignty and redemptive purpose, suffering may just as easily produce bitterness as transformation. The gospel situates suffering within a larger narrative: God remains sovereign; Christ has entered human suffering; resurrection reframes despair. Trust, therefore, is not an abstract spiritual posture but confidence in a personal, covenantal God.

In this light, surrender is not merely acceptance of reality but faith in divine providence. It involves repentance, a recalibration of desires, and renewed obedience. While Rohr's language of surrender is helpful, it is only properly grounded when placed within this framework. Otherwise put, it is only "those who love God" who truly know that "all things work together for [their] good" (Rom 8:28).

A central thesis of *Just This* is that the present moment is the only place where God can be encountered. We cannot meet God in nostalgia or speculative futures; we meet God in the concrete now. This emphasis is compelling. Christian discipleship is indeed enacted in present obedience. While memory of God's past faithfulness and hope in future grace is indispensable, relationship with God unfolds in lived immediacy. Faith is not an abstraction; it is an embodied response in the present.

However, theological nuance is required. The present moment is not sacred simply because it is immediate; it is sacred because God is sovereign over it and at work within it. The Christian does not merely embrace reality as it is but entrusts it to divine governance. Thus, presence is inseparable from providence. The believer's acceptance of the present is grounded in the conviction that history—including the present moment—is under God's redemptive authority.

Rohr resists the accusation that contemplation is escapist. Instead, he argues that contemplative awareness purifies action by exposing ego-driven motivations (pp. 68–73). Contemplation, therefore, becomes the ground of compassionate engagement with the world. This claim finds resonance within evangelical spirituality. True inward renewal precedes authentic outward service. When believers discern their pride, insecurity, and hidden ambitions, and bring these sins to the foot of the cross, ministry becomes less about self-justification and more about humbly loving others for Christ's sake.

Nevertheless, the transformative power of contemplation must again be connected to grace. Self-awareness alone cannot overcome sin. The Spirit's sanctifying work, grounded in Christ's atonement, sustains moral transformation. Contemplation, therefore, is not an autonomous technique but a means of grace—effective insofar as it draws the believer into deeper communion with the triune God.

Just This offers a profound invitation: stop controlling, stop judging, and inhabit reality with awakened awareness. Rohr's emphasis on awe, surrender, presence, and compassionate seeing provides a needed corrective to anxious, performance-driven religiosity.

Yet his approach requires gospel framing and theological anchoring. Awe must be illuminated by revelation; awakening must be grounded in regeneration; surrender must rest upon providence; presence must be sustained by hope in Christ. Without these, contemplation risks becoming anthropocentric spirituality. With them, however, it can become a deepened mode of genuine Christian discipleship.

In the end, Rohr's work calls for discernment and development. It challenges readers to wake up, which raises the question, wake up to what? While Rohr's answer has much to commend it, the fullest answer is to the living God revealed in Jesus Christ, present in this moment, sovereign over suffering, and faithful in redeeming grace.

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Kyla Gillespie (with Maureen Reid). *Transformed: The Power of God's Word and God's People in One Woman's Journey through Gender Confusion, Reassignment Surgery, and De-Transitioning*. B&H, 2026. 206 pp. £17.99/$17.99.

In *Transformed*, Kyla Gillespie recounts her dramatic journey through gender confusion, gender reassignment surgery, and eventual de-transitioning after encountering Christ and becoming grounded in the truth of Scripture. Combining memoir, testimony, and pastoral reflection, Gillespie traces the ways God used both his Word and his people to draw her toward redemption. Although the work is not intended as a scholarly treatment of gender dysphoria or Christian sexual ethics, Gillespie presents a compelling testimony that humanizes a frequently polarized cultural conversation while consistently pointing readers toward the hope of the gospel.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its honesty. Gillespie writes with a humility and vulnerability that allows readers to enter into the emotional complexity of her story. She openly discusses the instability of her upbringing, fractured family relationships, struggles with identity, and longing for acceptance. Reflecting on the breakdown of her parents' marriage when she was a child, she writes, "I couldn't believe my ears. This was insane. The two people I looked up to the most were destroying our perfect family, right before my eyes. Panic raced in, and the blood rushed to my head" (p. 12). Such moments give the memoir emotional depth and help readers understand some of the personal pain that shaped her search for identity. Rather than presenting herself as a detached commentator on contemporary gender debates, Gillespie invites readers into the lived realities that shaped her thoughts and experiences.

The narrative structure strengthens the memoir's impact. Gillespie traces the progression of her life, from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, showing how emotional wounds, relational struggles, and cultural influences shaped her understanding of her identity over time. Importantly, she does not portray her spiritual transformation as immediate or effortless. Instead, she candidly describes the internal conflict she experienced while wrestling with both her sexuality and the claims of Christ. At one point, as she describes the tension between surrendering to God and remaining in denial regarding his authority over her sexuality, she writes, "It was a tug-of-war, and I was caught in the middle" (p. 109). This honesty prevents the book from reading as simplistic or triumphalistic. Gillespie's transformation was a gradual (and often painful) process marked by struggle, repentance, community, and growing dependence upon Christ.

Throughout the memoir, Gillespie consistently emphasizes the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. One particularly important passage appears near the conclusion of the book:

> To really understand the truth of sex, sexuality, gender, and identity, we need to start from the beginning, from humanity's inception. This means turning to the opening chapters of the Bible. For it is only from the inerrant, infallible, active, authoritative, living, and breathing Word of God that we are able to see who we are, how we were made, and why. (p. 183)

This theological conviction, while expressed later in the book, is actually the foundation of the entire work. Gillespie's story is not ultimately presented as a celebration of personal self-discovery but

as a testimony to God's grace in reorienting her understanding of her true identity according to biblical truth.

Another significant strength of the book is its pastoral usefulness. Gillespie repeatedly demonstrates the importance of a loving Christian community in the process of spiritual restoration. Pastors, church leaders, parents, and friends are reminded that individuals wrestling with gender conflicts are image bearers deserving of compassion, patience, and truth. Particularly helpful are Gillespie's reflections on the ways members of her church community walked alongside her with both conviction and grace. Describing the care shown by her church community, she notes that these brothers and sisters in Christ, "prayed for and figured out how to love me well and still speak the truth" while "navigating what could at any time become turbulent waters" (pp. 111–12). Reflections like these provide practical wisdom for those attempting to disciple the gender-conflicted in ways that are both faithful and compassionate.

The book's style further enhances its impact. Gillespie writes in a vivid and engaging manner that keeps the narrative moving steadily forward. Its readability will make *Transformed* especially accessible for those who may feel intimidated by more academic discussions surrounding gender identity and Christian anthropology.

While Gillespie clearly communicates a high view of Scripture and an orthodox understanding of human identity and sexuality, her book contains relatively little interaction with the broader academic, psychological, or theological discussions surrounding transgender ideas and identities. Consequently, those looking for extensive exegetical argumentation, detailed engagement with revisionist perspectives, or interaction with contemporary scholarly literature will need to look elsewhere.

But given the book's intended purpose and genre, this is hardly a weakness. *Transformed* is a biblically informed testimony, not an academic monograph. Gillespie is not attempting to provide a comprehensive psychological framework for understanding every aspect or variety of gender dysphoria, nor does she try to offer a detailed analysis of the contemporary debates surrounding sexuality and identity. Instead, she is offering a personal and powerful account of how the Lord met her in the midst of confusion and suffering, forgave her sins, changed her heart, and gave her back to herself.

As such, *Transformed* is a valuable and timely contribution to contemporary Christian discussions surrounding identity, sexuality, embodiment, and discipleship. Gillespie's willingness to speak candidly about her regret, pain, turmoil, and redemption gives the book credibility. Importantly, the personal nature of the work helps us to avoid reducing individuals who experience gender dysphoria to political talking points or ideological categories.

Transformed will prove especially helpful for pastors, parents, counselors, and church members seeking to minister wisely to individuals wrestling with questions of gender identity. It may also serve as an encouraging testimony for Christians struggling with their own sense of identity and longing to understand their lives within the framework of God's design. For all of us, Gillespie's testimony provides an important perspective on an increasingly significant cultural conversation.

Ultimately, *Transformed* succeeds because it keeps the focus where Gillespie wants it to be—not on herself but on the redeeming grace of God in Jesus Christ. In a cultural moment often marked by confusion, anger, and polarization, Gillespie offers a deep and personal account shaped by conviction,

humility, and hope. Her story stands as a reminder that the Christian response to those wrestling with gender and sexuality must always be marked by both biblical truth and Christlike compassion.

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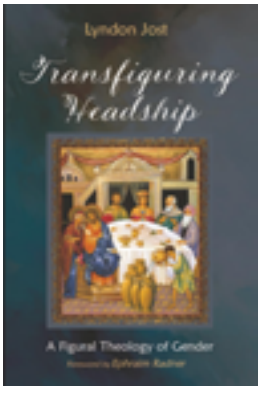
Lyndon Jost. *Transfiguring Headship: A Figural Theology of Gender*. Pickwick, 2026. 210 pp. £22.00/$30.00.



The evangelical conversation about gender and headship has long suffered from a peculiar inversion: the more heat a topic generates, the less precise its central terms tend to become. Lyndon Jost's *Transfiguring Headship: A Figural Theology of Gender* is a serious attempt to reverse that tendency. He asks, with genuine philological and canonical care, what "head" (*kephalē*) actually meant before centuries of political and ecclesiastical contest remade it in their own image. The result is a theologically ambitious treatment that will reward careful readers, even in places where it might frustrate them.

Jost's central contention is that headship in Scripture is neither primarily about authority nor about leadership, but about *soteriological representation*: "the head is the one in whom the salvation or damnation of the body are mediated" (p. 59). Christ is the interpretive center of both head and body, *totus Christus*; the gendered figures of male and female are to be understood only in relation to Christ. The man figures Christ the head; the woman figures Christ's body, the church. Headship is not first a prescription about what men *do* so much as a declaration of what men *signify*: the man bears "representative responsibility" (p. 58) for the flourishing of the body to which he is joined, after the pattern of Christ's self-giving relation to his church.

In six chapters, the book moves from historical and cultural analysis (the etymology of "headship" and its genealogy in Western history), through canonical exegesis (the soteriological function of heads in the Old Testament and the Pauline corpus), to a constructive figural theology of gender. Chapters three and four chart how male headship moved from social good to social evil. Drawing on the work of Ivan Illich, Jost argues that the rise of wage labor displaced the household as a site of shared production, reducing sexual difference to biology, and diminishing the perceived dignity of gendered vocations. Enlightenment dualisms and the elevation of paid labor, he argues in chapter 4, helped produce both an authority-heavy complementarianism and later feminist revisions.

The book's most significant contributions come in its historical and exegetical sections. Jost's etymological genealogy is genuinely illuminating. His demonstration that the English word "headship" was coined in early modern debates over whether pope, king, or Christ should be considered "head" of the church, and that this coinage encoded an authority-meaning foreign to the Hebrew *rosh*, is the kind of diachronic work that evangelical gender discussions rarely consider. His canonical reading of the Old Testament head-figure, tracing the pattern of corporate solidarity through Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Achan, builds a patient case that "head as soteriological representative" emerges from the inner logic of the canon itself. His exegesis of Ephesians 1:22–23 is particularly fine: the observation that Christ rules *with* his body over all things—rather than *over* his body—is not merely rhetorical; it captures something essential about the corporate character of Christ's reign. Jost's christological centering throughout

displays an evangelical instinct well deployed. To read the head-figure through Christ, with Christ as both its referent and its fullest instantiation, is precisely the kind of canonical judgment that a figural theology demands.

Equally commendable is his constructive move regarding the woman as "glory": in figuring Christ's body, the woman represents not a diminished humanity but the paradigmatic form toward which all of Christ's members are being perfected (p. 217). This reframes the question in a way that neither complementarianism nor egalitarianism has typically managed: not "how much authority does she have?" but "what does her particular creaturely form signify?"

These are real achievements, which make the book's lacunae feel proportionately disappointing. The first concerns the exegetical foundations of Jost's thesis. His entire constructive argument depends on establishing that *kephale* means "representative member" rather than "authority over." He is right to press the distinction between lexical association and identity of meaning, but complementarian critics—Grudem most prominently—have mounted sustained challenges to precisely this reading, and Jost does not engage those challenges with sufficient directness. The historical argument about *rosh* is compelling; whether it settles the question of how Paul himself uses *kephale* in Ephesians and 1 Corinthians is a harder case. Readers who need that case made will find the exegetical work suggestive but not fully demonstrated.

The deeper problem is structural. There is a persistent conflation of the male-female relation in general with the husband-wife relation in particular. Jost's figural logic (man as head, woman as body) is introduced as a claim about gendered humanity as such, and he invokes 1 Corinthians 11 (which he sees as being addressed to the assembled congregation, not to married couples) as evidence that the figures carry ecclesial weight. But whenever he cashes out the practical implications, he returns to the marriage pair. The unmarried woman, the unmarried man, and the congregation gathered for worship remain largely unaddressed. This is not a peripheral gap. If the figural logic is real, if men and women *as such* signify differently, not only as spouses, then the book must say something about what that signification means beyond marriage. That it does not is a noteworthy omission.

This conflation feeds directly into the book's studied silence on ecclesial order and ordination. Jost's conclusion gestures emphatically toward women's full participation in the ministry of the church—"teaching, preaching, prophesying, discipleship" (p. 237)—and frames the inclination of male authority to "restrict and shut women down" (p. 235) as a betrayal of the figural logic of headship. But this raises an obvious question he declines to answer: does male headship, as he has defined it, generate *any* structural asymmetry in the governance of the church? Does the man's role as figural head retain, in the assembly, some specific institutional expression, say, in the office of elder or overseer, or is the figural asymmetry exhausted by its marital instantiation? The two questions are connected: if headship is a gendered vocation that extends beyond marriage, there is at least a coherent case that it takes some form in the governance of the church body. If, however, it applies only within marriage, then the ecclesial question dissolves, but the figural framework Jost has built is narrower than he claims; it is not about gender more broadly but about husbands and wives particularly. He cannot have both a broad figural anthropology *and* remain silent on church order. The silence is not neutral. It will be read, by both complementarians and egalitarians, as evasion.

None of this should diminish the genuine achievement of *Transfiguring Headship*. Jost has written a book that takes Scripture seriously as a canonical whole centered in Christ, reads the head-figure with historical precision, and refuses the pinched alternatives that have dominated evangelical gender

debates for a generation. He emphatically stands against both abusive male power and radical feminist readings, which both do violence to the Scriptures. That Jost ultimately declines to follow his own argument into the ecclesial realm where it is most urgently needed is a disappointment proportionate to its promise. Readers willing to press the questions Jost leaves open will find this volume an indispensable conversation partner.

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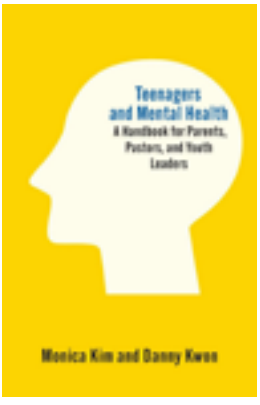
Monica Kim and Danny Kwon. *Teenagers and Mental Health: A Handbook for Parents, Pastors, and Youth Leaders*. New Growth, 2025. 240 pp. £13.99/$26.89.



There are books that inform and there are books that shepherd. *Teenagers and Mental Health* belongs to the latter category. Drawing on decades of experience in counseling and youth ministry, Monica Kim and Danny Kwon offer a resource that is both theologically grounded and pastorally sensitive, written not from a distance but from within the lived realities of ministry among teenagers and their families. The book is organized in two parts. The first establishes a theological foundation, situating mental health within the biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. The second addresses specific struggles—anxiety, depression, trauma, and suicidal ideation—with clarity and care. This structure reflects a sound instinct: theology should serve practice and practice must remain anchored in theology.

The work is notably usable. While it benefits from a sequential reading, it readily accommodates situational engagement. Especially in the second half, readers can turn directly to the relevant chapters and find immediate, thoughtful guidance. This reflects an awareness of ministry's realities—often reactive and time-sensitive—while preserving a coherent theological vision consistently oriented toward Christ and the life of the church.

A central strength lies in the authors' integration of technical expertise and lived experience. Kim writes as a clinician; Kwon as a youth pastor. Yet neither adopts the posture of a detached specialist. Their counsel is shaped by years of walking with teenagers and families through complex and often painful situations, yielding a wisdom that is not merely conceptual but tested. They write as those who have "walked the road," and their work carries that weight. This depth is further evidenced in their ability to anticipate the questions readers are likely to raise—regarding the role of the church, the limits of care, and the relationship between theological and clinical categories—and to answer them with restraint and pastoral discernment.

Theologically, the book is well anchored. The authors resist reductionism and dualism, affirming that human beings are embodied souls and that mental suffering cannot be reduced to either the spiritual or the biological aspects of human existence. Their engagement with psychological insights, under the authority of Scripture, models a posture that is both judicious and appropriately open. Their attentiveness to the inner lives of teenagers is particularly noteworthy. Recognizing that much of adolescent experience is affective and difficult to articulate, they prioritize presence, patience, and

careful listening. They are not merely correcting ideas but attending to deeper currents of fear, shame, and longing, reflecting a holistic theological anthropology even where this is not fully developed in explicit terms.

At several points, however, the strength of the book invites further development. While the authors situate their work within the biblical narrative, the eschatological horizon could be more fully integrated. Mental suffering is not only to be alleviated but located within the movement toward the new creation, and a clearer emphasis on this final horizon would deepen the framework by situating present care within ultimate hope. Similarly, the cultural assumptions shaping contemporary mental health discourse warrant further attention. The modern emphasis on inward identity and authenticity significantly influences how suffering is understood. While the authors consistently direct readers to Christ, a more explicit engagement with these cultural assumptions would strengthen their pastoral insights, enabling readers not only to operate within existing categories but also to evaluate them. In addition, a fuller integration of the church's doctrinal inheritance could provide a more explicit grounding for the book's account of identity and healing. In a context marked by inward instability, the church's external confession offers a necessary anchor.

A further reflection concerns the book's implicit cultural framework. While attentive to teenage experience, it appears to assume primarily a Western, individualistic context. For many adolescents—particularly in immigrant or bicultural settings—mental distress is deeply relational, shaped by family expectations, communal dynamics, and intergenerational pressures. The authors' pastoral instincts translate well across these contexts, especially in their emphasis on presence, relational care, and ecclesial belonging. At the same time, a more explicit engagement with these realities could extend the book's reach, allowing readers to see how similar struggles—such as anxiety over academic performance, depression tied to family obligation or shame, or identity conflicts between home culture and peer culture—may take on different forms depending on cultural context.

These observations are best understood as suggestions for development rather than serious deficiencies. They arise precisely because the book is so thoughtful, pastorally attuned, and theologically serious. Its vision of the church—as refuge, lighthouse, and first responder—provides a helpful model for understanding both the possibilities and the limits of ecclesial care. The church's role, while not exhaustive, is indispensable.

In a context where many pastors and parents feel uncertain about how to respond to rising mental health challenges of adolescents, *Teenagers and Mental Health* offers a steady and reliable guide. It avoids simplistic solutions and instead calls for faithful presence, wise discernment, and sustained care rooted in the gospel. For these reasons, it is warmly recommended. It will serve pastors, parents, and ministry leaders well—not because it resolves every question but because it provides a faithful framework for care marked by both clarity and humility.

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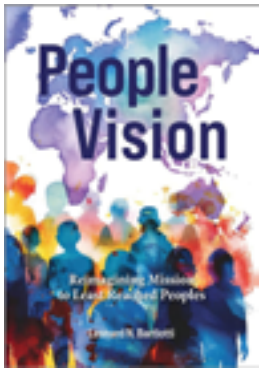
— MISSIONS & CULTURE —

Leonard N. Bartlotti. *People Vision: Reimagining Mission to Least Reached Peoples*. Carey, 2024. xi + 301 pp. £16.49/$19.99.



Leonard Bartlotti's *People Vision* provides a much-needed reframing of how to think about ethno-linguistic people groups. Ralph Winter's talk at the first Lausanne Congress in 1974 provided the catalyst for thinking about people groups. Winter argued that churches should target ethno-linguistic people groups instead of geopolitical countries. Winter's assumptions and categories once seemed obvious but have come under scrutiny. *People Vision* brings together a team of missiologists and practitioners from around the world to address these concerns and rediscover the people-group paradigm.

A strength and a challenge of the book is the wide range of topics, divided into seven sections, contributed by over sixty authors. The topics include: the biblical foundations for people-group thinking, denominational and agency focus on unreached peoples, practitioner challenges in focusing on unreached peoples worldwide, church methods, global efforts at collaboration, and specific challenges and future strategies for targeting the unreached. Bartlotti explains that *People Vision* aims to provide an "overview of people group thinking, the priority of least reached peoples today, and innovative efforts to reach them" (p. 27).

The first section focuses on the biblical foundation of people-group thinking. This is the area that has received the greatest opposition. Critics argue that the people-group approach relies on modern sociological divisions rather than biblical ones. The authors respond by showing how the ethno-linguistic definition of people groups is firmly grounded in Scripture.

The second and third parts describe the journey of a few key mission agencies toward a focus on the unreached, as well as the on-the-ground experience of individuals. Neither of these sections advances an argument for or against unreached people groups, but they offer anecdotes about people-group thinking in recent history. These sections highlight some of the obstacles that churches and practitioners face when focusing on the unreached.

The second half of the book details global mobilization strategies to the unreached, considers some of the complexities and challenges of these efforts, and concludes by describing the heart of unreached ministry as "*a tool to make sure we don't miss anyone*" (p. 267). Rather than serving as a robust defense of the ethno-linguistic people group concept, the book focuses on helping the church catch a vision for sending people to places where Christ is not named.

There are two major strengths of *People Vision*. First, Bartlotti identifies the need to recast people-group thinking in view of the needs of the unevangelized. *People Vision* does not redefine people groups but focuses on the complexities of globalization and urbanization in making disciples among the unreached. They respond to criticism of traditional paradigms that sought to develop monoethnic congregations. Bartlotti writes, "Gospel freedom allows and celebrates, but does not demand, homogeneous ethnic churches" (p. 38).

Second, *People Vision* is a practical book that invites churches, organizations, and individuals into the discussion and helps recast a vision for bringing the gospel to whole ethnic groups without access.

This is a welcome missiological addition that will help further the discussion regarding people groups in missions.

The introduction, first chapter, and conclusion, all written by Bartlotti, provide a cohesive argument for a biblical understanding of people groups, the need to re-envision the approach, and a way forward in light of shifting global realities. The primary weakness of *People Vision* as a whole, however, is that it reads like a collection of loosely connected articles, given the vast number of contributors and subjects. The sheer volume of topics in *People Vision* obscures the book's main point.

Secondly, since the biblical basis for ethno-linguistic people-group thinking has received the most objections, this book could have provided a more in-depth biblical analysis of people groups in Scripture and maintained that analysis throughout. The first part of the book, which presented the biblical grounds for people-group thinking, provided an excellent overview and analysis, but it left the reader wanting more. Bartlotticould have strengthened this book and reached a wider audience by including voices from biblical scholars who have written on *ethne* (nations).

The definition and use of people-group terminology throughout the book can sound contradictory. For example, in the conclusion, Bartlotti argued that the Bible's use of "people groups" primarily refers to ethno-linguistic groups and is distinct from groups of people with shared interests (p. 259). The chapter, "Rethinking the People Groups Concept," provides an excellent reference point for outreach to social groups in an urban context. Still, the chapter is out of place because it focuses on groups of people with shared subcultures like "punks, bikers, hipsters, and other sexual orientation types" (p. 203) rather than on narrowing in on a biblical perspective of people groups. Even though the chapter does not claim that social groups are ethno-linguistic people groups, including a chapter on social groupings further confuses the biblical framework of people groups that the book seeks to "reimagine." The chapter entitled "The Rise of Muslim-Background Churches" likewise contributes to an ambiguous definition of people groups, as it focuses on "Muslims," a group defined by religious affiliation rather than the ethno-linguistic definition used throughout the book.

People Vision provides an excellent reanalysis of people groups, wrestles with difficult case studies, and relies heavily on practitioners, churches, and organizations. The book does fall short of the lofty hope of the foreword, to be "the most important book in many years" (p. xi), mainly because it fails to address the biblical foundation for people groups comprehensively. However, the main value is its thoughtful analysis and compelling motivation to reach the unreached.

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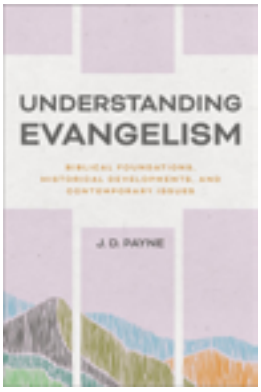
J. D. Payne, *Understanding Evangelism: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*. Baker Academic, 2025. xvii + 324 pp. £26.99/$32.99.



Few books on evangelism treat the subject with both academic rigor and biblical fidelity. Most tend to be overly practical and methods-driven. Yet Christian practice must always rest on the indicatives of the faith. J. D. Payne offers a much-needed contribution to the landscape of evangelism literature—one that faithfully engages theology, history, and practice. Payne intends the book to serve both as a seminary textbook for training future church leaders and as a resource for pastors.

Payne's book includes twenty-three chapters, a conclusion, two evangelistic case studies, a bibliography, and three indices. Part 1 addresses introductory issues, including the definition of evangelism, the content of the gospel, the global status of world evangelization, and the motives and ethics of evangelism. Payne emphasizes that evangelism is the verbal proclamation of the gospel to the unregenerate, thus primarily practiced outside the gathered church (p. 14). He pushes back against definitions that measure evangelism by results or that broaden the term to include other ecclesial functions. Evangelism is not everything (p. 21).

Part 2 focuses on the biblical and theological foundations of evangelism. Payne traces the mission of God in the Old Testament, explains how evangelism fits within the various elements of the Great Commission, examines the evangelistic examples of Jesus and the disciples, and discusses key doctrines such as God's sovereignty, election, atonement, repentance, faith, and conversion.

Part 3 provides a historical overview of evangelism from the first century to the present, highlighting influential evangelists and missionaries as well as major evangelistic gatherings of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These chapters effectively demonstrate the diversity of approaches and theological convictions that have shaped the church's evangelistic efforts.

Part 4 engages issues of culture, context, worldview, and apologetics. Payne argues that while the gospel itself is unchanging, the media and contexts through which it is proclaimed are not (p. 191). Christians must therefore be students of culture if they hope to communicate the gospel faithfully and effectively. He rightly distinguishes apologetics from evangelism, describing it not as evangelism itself but as a segue to the gospel (p. 208).

In part 5, Payne turns to practical matters, addressing the use of personal testimonies and the sinner's prayer, the importance of pastoral leadership in cultivating an evangelistic church, evangelizing children, and overcoming personal hindrances—such as the misconception that only those with the gift of evangelism are called to evangelize (p. 248). He concludes by offering guidance on how to initiate, carry out, and conclude an evangelistic conversation.

There is much to commend here. Payne clearly has his finger on the pulse of global evangelism, both historically and in the present. His overview of twentieth century global evangelistic gatherings is worth the price of the book. For my personal study, I have wanted to find a concise treatment of these gatherings, and Payne has provided it. Moreover, Payne avoids advocating a single evangelistic method, a restraint for which he should be commended. A book advocating a specific method is less helpful for a seminary course on evangelism for the very reason that it limits scope.

The book's greatest strength is its scope—covering definitions, theology, history, individuals, and practical matters—however, that breadth inevitably limits depth. This is not a fatal flaw, given Payne's stated aim. He leaves room for instructors to expand upon key topics and fill in exegetical or theological gaps. He accomplishes his stated goal of producing a textbook for seminary students. Without question, this will be my go-to text when teaching evangelism in the future.

Most of my critiques arise in part 2. Although Payne references a wide array of biblical texts, he rarely engages in sustained exegetical analysis. His treatment of the five Great Commission texts in chapter 7 is underdeveloped. For an academic book, one would expect at least some discussion of the classification of the Greek participles in Matthew 28:19–20 in relation to the imperative "make disciples." Similarly, when discussing the evangelistic methods of Jesus and the apostles, Payne does not engage 1 Corinthians 9:19–23—an omission that is difficult to justify. Likewise, his discussion of conversion, repentance, and faith would have benefited from an exegetical treatment of Romans 10:9–17.

Finally, although Payne writes from a Calvinistic perspective, he appears overly inclusive of Wesleyan-Arminian positions, presenting competing views within each doctrinal section. The strength of this approach is its potential to broaden the book's readership. The weakness is that it can create the impression that mutually exclusive positions rest on equal biblical footing. The doctrinal chapters often read as summaries of various views. I would have preferred that Payne lean more fully into the Reformed position and use the additional space to strengthen his arguments through deeper exegesis and theological reasoning, particularly by drawing out the implications for evangelistic practice. *Tell the Truth* by Will Metzger and *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* by J.I. Packer are great examples of evangelism books that root their arguments in Reformed theology. Interestingly, when Payne turns to practical matters, his counsel clearly presupposes Calvinism.

In the end, Payne delivers what he promises. I anticipate that many evangelism professors will adopt *Understanding Evangelism* for their courses in the years ahead.

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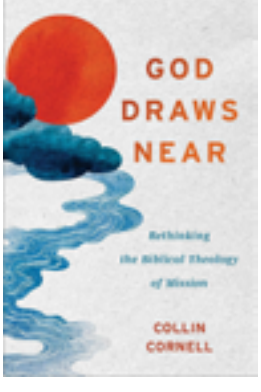
Collin Cornell. *God Draws Near: Rethinking the Biblical Theology of Mission*. Baker Academic, 2025. 224 pp. £19.97/$26.99.



Collin Cornell is Assistant Professor of Bible and Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary. He is also active in the Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology. In *God Draws Near*, Cornell challenges the prevailing "dramatic paradigm" in the biblical theology of mission, particularly the "intellectual infrastructure" that views the Bible as one overarching story encapsulated by the plotline of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Fundamental in Cornell's approach is de-centering the theme of "repair," which he argues is axiomatic to the dramatic paradigm and ultimately results in "obsolescence" for Israel and Christ's incarnation. For Cornell, these approaches to Scripture end in anti-Judaism and supersessionism; only a "geometric Bible" and re-centering mission around "divine communion" can correct these anti-Jewish ways of interpreting Scripture. He is attempting "a

postsupersessionist and *supralapsarian* biblical theology of mission … that refuses obsolescence with regard to Israel and the Incarnation" (p. 16). How does he achieve this?

Methodologically, Cornell acknowledges the contributions of several critical scholars to his own thinking and to proponents of the dramatic paradigm. Brevard Childs was influential in Cornell's moving from a unilinear Bible interpreted within the framework of salvation-history toward a geometric Bible.

Chapter 1 examines the scholarship of three contemporary exemplars of the dramatic paradigm—Arthur Glaser, Christopher Wright, and Michael Goheen. Cornell argues that their use of Genesis 12:1–3 is influenced by Gerhard von Rad, who enables them to construe the Bible's story as moving from the universal horizons of primeval history in Genesis 1–11 to the particularity of God's choice of Abraham and Israel for humanity's redemption, a choice rooted in instrumentality and eventual obsolescence.

Following the scholarship of Kenneth Soulen and Charles van Driel, chapter 2 argues that if one believes Israel's calling obsolesces (per his reading of the dramatic paradigm), then it follows that the incarnation will also obsolesce. Structurally important for Cornell's critique of Genesis 12:1–3 as the spinal cord of the dramatic paradigm is von Rad's belief that Abraham's calling was a late addition to the text of Genesis by the Yahwist.

In defense of a geometric Bible, Cornell turns in chapter 3 to the Song of Songs and Rabbinic insights about the tabernacle with the *tamīd* offering (i.e., "perpetual offering") at its center. Ancient rabbis saw God seeking communion with Israel by means of the tabernacle, and this vision converges in the Song of Songs so that, per Cornell, the tabernacle texts form "*the center of Torah*" (pp. 89–90). As a result, in chapter 4, Cornell argues for re-reading Genesis 12 in a way similar to the priestly blessing in Numbers 6, a tabernacle text focused solely on Israel.

Following Rashi, Cornell argues that the main verb of Genesis 12:3, *nivrechū*, should be understood reflexively not passively—all families of the earth will bless themselves by observing Abraham's example; they will not be blessed (instrumentally) by or through Abraham/Israel. The gist of this move is that both Numbers 6 and Genesis 12 are Israel-focused and not focused on the families/nations of the earth—"Meeting Israel, blessing Israel, is God's original creation purpose" (p. 125).

In chapter 5, Cornell couples his Israel-centric interpretive framework with a supralapsarian Christology. By placing God's decision to become incarnate prior to the fall, Cornell aims to prevent the incarnation from obsolescing. He concludes the book by arguing that the tabernacle and incarnation are dual ultimacies, resulting in a more positive understanding of Israel. The dramatic paradigm's view that God's mission is to restore creation and redeem humanity is reversed per Cornell's geometric Bible: "Instead of a gentile-centric Bible, this book presents an *Israel-centric* Bible" (p. 174).

Several observations are pertinent in evaluating Cornell's book and its attack on a coherent, story-structured, biblical theology of mission. First, Cornell is right to emphasize divine communion as ultimate and repair as instrumental. In many ways, this parallels John Piper's theocentric view of mission in *Let the Nations Be Glad*.

Second, while arguing for a geometric Bible, Cornell frequently invokes the Enlightenment and antisemitism as factors underpinning a unilinear Bible, divine repair, universality/particularity, instrumentality, and obsolescence. Indeed, Cornell's theological commitments on these issues drive his whole hermeneutic, including his selective appropriation of the speculations of historical critics that advance his agenda. This is particularly acute as it relates to Genesis 12:3. Cornell's argument depends on critical scholarship's assertion that Genesis 12:3 is the work of a redactor, the Yawhist, and a reflexive interpretation of the main verb, *nivrechū*. On this last point, he cites "ancient rabbis" while ignoring

the more ancient Jewish translations/interpretations of *nivrechū* as passive found in the LXX, Targum Onkelos, and the NT (cf. Paul in Gal 3:8 and Peter in Acts 3:25).

Third, like most dispensational and post-supersessionist scholars, Cornell essentializes Jewish identity by fixing it at the time of the patriarchs and viewing it as static throughout history. Moreover, he conflates Jewish identity with adherence to Rabbinic Judaism, a contested association among Jews for centuries.

Fourth, Cornell draws on Rabbinic insights to argue that the tabernacle is the center of Torah. In doing so, he ignores the more ancient and authoritative Jewish teaching that Jesus is the center of Torah (cf. Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:39).

Fifth, Cornell fails to address the idea of OT typologies being fulfilled in the NT, which accounts for his anemic engagement with the NT. This is especially the case with several texts that challenge his proposal, including Galatians 3, Ephesians 2, Colossians 1:20, Hebrews, and 1 Peter 2:4–9.

Sixth, Cornell's treatment of repair completely ignores the wealth of Jewish theological reflection on the theme of *tikkun olam* (i.e., "repairing the world"), which is often tied to Genesis 12:3.

Seventh, Cornell's biblical theology seems to make obsolete the sole entity that Jesus established as the instrument by which all people would experience God's blessing—the church (Matt 16:18; Eph 2:20; 1 Pet 2:4–6).

Finally, and most seriously, are the soteriological implications of Cornell's proposal, which is functionally dual covenant—one path of divine communion for Jews via Torah (i.e., keeping the law *as understood through the lens of Rabbinic Judaism*) and another path for Gentiles via faith in Jesus. For everything good Cornell says about divine communion, he deprives the Jewish people of the sole means of achieving it—the indwelling (tabernacling) of God's Spirit by grace through faith in Jesus. The absence of Cornell's affirmation of Jesus's centrality in this regard might be construed as the most anti-Jewish aspect of *his* book. For all these reasons, unfortunately, I cannot recommend Cornell's book.

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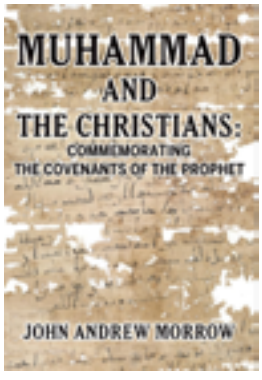
John Andrew Morrow. *Muhammad and the Christians: Commemorating the Covenants of the Prophet*. Academica, 2025. xxxv + 246 pp. £80.00/$99.95.



In the aftermath of 9/11, many Muslim publications appeared denouncing the violent expressions of Islam as false representations of the religion's true nature. One writer has been particularly outspoken, not only in his denunciation of radical Islam but in elevating a source he contends demonstrates Islam's peacefulness, tolerance, and pluralism. The source, the Covenants of Muhammad, presents enduring agreements Muhammad reportedly issued to various religious groups, particularly Christians. Since his influential 2013 book, The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World, Canadian Native American Professor John Andrew Morrow (i.e., Imam Ilyas 'Abd al-'Alim Islam) has spawned significant interest in the topic, evidenced by the number of times the book was referenced in a ten-year span (over one thousand). Not only has

Morrow's work ushered in other authors devoted to research on the covenants, but he has continued his own efforts, having written numerous articles and books, including his 2025 book, *Muhammad and the Christians: Commemorating the Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad*, which is the focus of this review.

Morrow directs readers unfamiliar with the covenants to previous works that engage more directly with questions regarding their history and offer apologetic defenses of them (pp. xxv–xxvi). Nevertheless, the book aims to be concise and accessible, building on prior work by him and others on the covenants to take a "deeper dive into certain topics" (pp. xxv, xxxiii). The topics covered have the overarching goal of demonstrating what "Islam could have been and should have been" if Muslims had "faithfully followed the Qur'an and the covenants" (p. xxxv).

Chapter 1 aims to demonstrate that the tenor and content of the covenants are consistent with the Qur'an. The chapter compares several Qur'anic passages with those in the covenants to show that the texts align. In chapter 2, Morrow explores various possibilities for explaining the relationship among Muhammad, the eagle, and Mt. Sinai. After posing several tenuous theories aimed at discerning the legend's origins, he nevertheless contends that the historicity of Muhammad's visit to St. Catherine's Monastery does not determine the validity of the covenant (pp. xxxiii, 70).

Chapter 3 seeks to show that the covenant housed at Cambridge University resembles the Najran Covenant, reportedly discovered in 878/879, as described in a Church of the East history book compiled in the tenth or eleventh centuries, the Chronicle of Seert. The similarities between the two documents connect Sionita's seventeenth-century copy to the ninth century. Chapter 4, examines a covenant dated to 1934 written in Arabic with Syriac script (i.e., Garshuni), explores the possibility that Muhammad corresponded with Christians in Syriac, and contains a lengthy section addressing objections to the covenant's authenticity (pp. 103–20).

Chapter 5 examines the artistic symbolism found in numerous covenants and explains their significance, particularly the image of Muhammad's hand, which he allegedly imprinted on the covenant as his authorization (pp. xxxiv, 132–42). Chapter 6 analyzes the competing narratives of Muhammad's encounter with the Najrani Christians as presented in Muslim and Christian sources. Morrow offers various possible explanations for why the account in the Christian source should be trusted over that in the Islamic sources (p. 183).

The last chapter, "Were the Covenants Ever Negated?" compares an Islamic treaty template created by Imam al-Shafi'i (d. 820) with the covenants. While noting the significant differences between them, Morrow argues that the similarities are due to the former's reliance on the latter (p. 207). Explaining these differences, he suggests that "Imam al-Shafi'i, for reasons of his own," diluted the original rights and protections given by Muhammad to align with the "social dynamics" of al-Shafi'i's era (p. 211). Despite "sporadic efforts" to dilute or alter the covenants, Morrow states that "their existence could never be controverted" (p. 211). Finally, the General Conclusions chapter details the covenants' social impact and concludes by highlighting the hopeful role of the covenants in curing the "deadly disease at the heart of Islam" [i.e., radical Islam] (p. 220).

People engaged in Christian-Muslim relations (e.g., missions, apologetics, evangelism), especially in the West, may encounter Morrow's work. He and other proponents of the covenants present a pluralistically tolerant form of Islam agreeable to Western societies. Therefore, it is helpful to be aware of two common features of his work: a polemical tenor toward those who doubt the covenants' authenticity and his suspect methodology employed as an apologetic defense of them.

Hope in the covenants' ability to excise radical expressions of Islam perhaps explains the polemical tenor leveled against those who doubt the documents' authenticity. Addressing the "doubters," Morrow describes them as "almost invariably Islamists or Islamophobes" who "share the same violent and intolerant vision of Islam and reinforce each other's narrative" (pp. xxvi, 131). He complains that they raise the same issues *ad nauseam* (p. xxvi). These issues include: 1) the covenants' absence from the Islamic traditions, and 2) the first appearance of one occurring in a Christian source at least 250 years after Muhammad died. Regarding the first issue, Morrow has asserted that the traditions do indeed contain "a copy of a treaty with the monastery at Saint Catherine" (Morrow, *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World*, p. 69). The Islamic source he connects the treaty to is Ibn Sa'd (d. 845). However, Morrow notes that Ibn Sa'd's account is a "far shorter" version than the covenant and that his account is a secondary source that cites the primary source (i.e., the covenant).

Some people have attempted to locate Ibn Sa'd's reference to the treaty, yet have failed to do so, with one reviewer commenting that the citation is unsubstantiated. In response to this observation, Morrow states that scholars attempting to find the citation of the treaty with the monks of St. Catherine's "should have searched for the substance of the treaty, which is easy to locate" as, he asserts, the treaties found in Muslim and non-Muslim sources "all share the same core components" (Morrow, *Islam and the People of the Book*, vol. 1, pp. 27–28). It is this line of argument (i.e., substantive overlap) that enables Morrow to arrive at his conclusion in chapter 7 regarding the similarities between Imam al-Shafi'i's treaty template and the Najran Covenant. Although al-Shafi'i's template predates the covenant, Morrow attributes the similarities to the former's dependence on the latter (pp. 210–11).

In his publications, Morrow consistently highlights a noteworthy point: Islam appears to have been more religiously tolerant in its early decades. Scholars have observed this point in some seventh- and eighth-century non-Muslim accounts (e.g., Isho'yahb III and John Bar Penkaye). Nevertheless, Morrow's assertion that Christians had no reason to remind Muslim rulers of the covenants during the first two Islamic centuries because they were allegedly upheld (Morrow, *Islam and the People of the Book*, vol. 1, 402)—thus explaining their textual absence—is erroneous, evidenced by other Christian sources from this period.

To the doubters, Morrow asks, "What kind of a person opposes the principles found in the covenants of the Prophet?" and wonders, "Rather than promote the protection of Christians, would critics prefer Muslim scholars to promote their persecution, enslavement, and murder?" (pp. 32–33). By dividing the stances toward the covenants as promoters of peace on the one side and as Islamists and Islamophobes on the other, Morrow may simply be responding to his lived experience. Nevertheless, expressing doubt about the covenants' authenticity does not equate to hatred of Muslims nor the view that Muslim scholars' only option is to promote violence against Christians.

We can embrace the principle of peaceful coexistence embodied in the covenants; however, implementing the covenants themselves may pose challenges. The covenants are predicated on non-Muslims seeking protection from Muhammad and subsequent Muslim authorities. According to the covenants, the linchpin guaranteeing non-Muslims protection is a tax paid to Muslims (clergy and monks are tax-exempt). Thus, one particular challenge concerns the geographic implementation of the covenants. This may not be a challenge in Muslim-governed countries, as taxes are paid to Muslim authorities. However, implementing the covenants, not merely their principles, in countries where Muslims are not the authorities may be more difficult.

The covenants do not appear to be wholesale forgeries, meaning they were created entirely from scratch. They build on previous sources, thereby providing insight into early Islam. However, the stipulations they contain point to social and religious issues Christians faced long after Muhammad died. There is growing support for the authenticity of the covenants, but this support builds on tenuous arguments. Substantive overlap, however minimal, with earlier sources is taken as evidence of the covenants' ancient and authentic nature. Although there are exceptions, Morrow frequently resorts to personal *ad hominem* attacks against those who do not share his conviction about the covenants. Peaceful coexistence and an excision of radical Islam are hopes we can all share. Still, the questionable nature of the covenants raises concern among some about placing hope in them to achieve these desired outcomes.

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Bart Ehrman. *Love Thy Stranger: How the Teachings of Jesus Transformed the Moral Conscience of the West*. Simon & Schuster, 2026. xii + 266 pp. £22.00/$30.00.

Long known for his work in New Testament studies, Bart Ehrman's *Love Thy Stranger* examines an intriguing question: Why is it that we are compelled to help not only those we care about but also others outside of our immediate circle of relationships? This inquiry is not theological in nature for Ehrman, as he is a former evangelical who now identifies as an agnostic atheist. Instead, he approaches this question as a socio-historical study. His thesis is simple and straightforward: This urge is primarily influenced by Christianity. He writes, "The impulse to help strangers in need is embedded in our Western moral conscience because of the teachings of Jesus" (p. 2).

In chapters 1–3, Ehrman examines the notion of altruism, which proves to be a bit trickier than is perhaps initially imagined. A person may enjoy helping someone in need, but is their action precipitated by a desire to help (altruism) or because it will feel better once the person acts (egoism)? Motivations aside, the salient point here is that people desire to serve not just their family but also strangers. Such a desire would have been wholly foreign to the ancient Greeks and Romans, for whom the main concerns in life were more egocentric.

Chapter 4 examines the background of Jesus's ethics. Readers familiar with Ehrman will recognize his penchant for claiming the gospels are not written by eyewitnesses and frequently contradict each other (p. 90). He has a naturalistic view of Scripture that rejects divine authorship (in the style of the Bauer thesis) and does not see Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. Instead, he sees Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet who expected the imminent end of the age (pp. 91–92). Thus, Jesus commands his followers not to store up their treasures on earth since they will soon be in heaven. In the meantime, we should care for others (p. 97). In chapter 5, Ehrman writes that "love stands at the very center of Jesus's ethical instruction" (p. 102). Further, love is more than a feeling—it entails action. Jesus sees love as outwardly focused on those in need, regardless of their ability to repay.

In chapters 6–8, Ehrman argues that Jesus's teachings were gradually modified as the church grew and spread. Given that the end of the world was not as imminent as initially thought, how then should we live? Again, given that Ehrman rejects any notion of unity of Scripture, its figures (like Paul and Jesus) do not complement each other but are often contrasted to highlight discrepancies. For example, while Jesus is concerned with helping those in need, the apostle Paul focuses more on church life (p. 145). He writes, "Jesus urged his followers to help the poor and needy whoever they are, wherever they live, and whatever religion they embrace. Where is this in Paul?" (p.150). Not only does Paul deviate from Jesus's main emphases, but many subsequent Christians do as well. Christian service is philanthropic insofar as it is missional (p. 154). However, the emphasis on service eventually extended not only to Christians but also to strangers—everyone is worthy of attention and care.

Ehrman sees Christians (beginning with those of the early church) as cherry-picking Jesus's moral commands (p. 163). Ultimately, Christians typically do not *literally* follow these imperatives (i.e., few people sell all they have and give it to the poor). However, Jesus's emphasis on caring for others—irrespective of relationship or social status—led to the formation of institutions like hospitals (p. 197). The very fact that we feel we should care for others and feel guilty when we fail to do so is evidence of the moral revolution instigated by Jesus's teachings. On this front, Ehrman's thesis succeeds and pairs well with other books in this area (e.g., Tom Holland, *Dominion* [Basic Books, 2019]).

However, I do have some concerns. Ehrman rightly distinguishes between forgiveness and atonement; however, he adds that the concepts are mutually exclusive (p. 72). He writes, "Forgiveness is not possible if there is atonement, and where there is atonement, there is no forgiveness" (p. 72). Further, while Jesus taught forgiveness, Ehrman contends the emphasis on atonement came later with the New Testament authors (p. 131; 199–209). Yet it is difficult to square this away with texts like Luke 4:16–21, where Jesus says he fulfills Isaiah 61; thus, Jesus sees himself as the Suffering Servant. In Gethsemane, Jesus prays to have the cup of God's wrath removed (Luke 22:42). Both texts counter Ehrman's claim that atonement was a later addition to Christian doctrine.

For Ehrman, the Bible is not divinely inspired and often contradicts itself; however, Jesus's moral teachings have greatly impacted our world, and we ought to recognize that. Moreover, when it comes to the failure to obey Jesus's moral prescriptions, Ehrman sees most Christians as inconsistent (p. 138), hypocritical (pp. 219–20), or even malevolent (p. 166). However, his treatment of social issues is remarkably superficial and rehashes modern liberal scholarship. In other words, his liberal views of biblical inspiration, inerrancy, and the like overflows into his discussion of ethics—if Christians are going to follow Jesus's teachings, then it ought to be done in the way Ehrman understands them.

Ehrman also suggests that it "is impossible to know" if institutions like hospitals, orphanages, and charities would have been created apart from the Christian movement (p. 221). In Kuhnian terms, Ehrman's central thesis is an anomaly that his paradigm cannot explain. Given the centrality of the *imago dei* in Christian theology and praxis, I suspect it *is* possible to know—the answer is *no*. In a naturalistic framework with atheistic presuppositions, what room is there for grounding "human rights" (p. 165)? Ehrman's presuppositions preclude the notion of objective worth and value, both of which are required to supervene a Darwinian paradigm where the fittest survive at the expense of the weakest.

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