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UNIO CUM CHRISTO[®]

UNION WITH CHRIST

Apologetics



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Center Indonesia
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Jakarta Pusat, 10720, Indonesia

uniocc.com
info@uniocc.com

Submissions

For questions regarding submission of articles, contact Paul Wells at pwuniochristo@gmail.com or Bernard Aubert at baubert@wts.edu. Guidelines of style can be found at our website: uniocc.com.

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The Way We Live Now

PAUL WELLS

At the beginning of the third decade of this new century, *Unio cum Christo* will address the issues of apologetics and public theology. Both subjects present challenges that demand the attention of Reformed Christianity since we live in a world where change seems to be accelerating at breathtaking speed with new issues constantly surfacing. We trust the way of presenting these questions will be stimulating and useful to you, our readers.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, when the narrative of modernism disintegrated, the radical individualism of “me and my conscience” invaded the social beachheads. The title of Elton John’s recent autobiography *Me* says it all. The identity constructs of subjective autonomy sounded the death knell of rationalism, debate, and historical materialism. It is the final escape from reason, to use Francis Schaeffer’s term. Traditional understandings of class, gender, and language are seen to be the tools of ruling elite oppression. The order of the day became deconstruction of worn-out narratives to remove the injustices of the past: of reason, history, nature, class, sex, and, above all, family and religion. Autonomous individuals attach themselves to groups or lobbies to reconstruct the world. Freedom is defined by group identity, a social metastasis of collectivist Marxism. The ground motif of postmodernity is a juxtaposition of nature and freedom—no longer the freedom of autonomous reason, historical liberation, depth psychology, or romantic mysticism, but identitarian liberty without limits in a posttruth situation.

This new version of human flourishing is different from but coexists with and challenges previous versions of the good life, whether humanism, existentialism, Marxism, or the remnants of a Christian worldview. Opposing

values lead to culture wars against conservatism, first in ideas, then in social practice and political debate, and finally in lawmaking, as the old order is swept away. Pockets of resistance hunker down for a long struggle.

There are also crossovers. The aspirations of modernism and postmodernism fraternize because of a shared nature-freedom ground motive. Four common elements of all post-Enlightenment secularisms are individual autonomy, the neutrality of reason, the innate goodness of human beings, and progress. Relativism, naturalism, and evolutionism follow in their wake. The common ground between modernism and postmodernism is that both undermine objective truth, particularly that of any supposed revelation. When relativity rules the day, and right disappears from the realm of facts or values, so does wrong, but good and evil are redefined. So, there is little debate today about ideas, only power confrontations between opposing groups. Lobbies are the heavy armor of various pressure groups.

What does differentiate the present from the past is the radical nature of the emerging hyperindividualism with which Christian apologetics is struggling to catch up; our apologetics often remain preoccupied with themes that are irrelevant to this new ethos, and Christian preaching even more so. There are numerous flashpoints at which the new hyperindividualism confronts the Christian apologist. Here are a few challenges, by no means all:

1. Christianity on Trial

Radical individualism accentuates the idea, already present in modernism, that religion belongs to the past, but with an add-on: religious values are immoral. Christianity was the cement of a certain morality in the West, but a reversal of values has taken place with astonishing speed. In today's narrative, the Judeo-Christian God is an executioner and Christian values are male oriented, sexist, and patriarchal. The Bible promotes slavery. Christians are hypocrites in opposing diversity and egalitarianism, and their past is marked by all sorts of violence: crusades, colonialism, slavery, war, and the oppression of women. Having always been on the side of white male bosses, Christianity, as a religion of oppression, has controlled historical narrative and filled the earth with victims. Its values are unethical and must be gotten rid of for the sake of freedom and progress.

2. The Imperative of Egalitarian Tolerance

Freedom of conscience, a fruit of the Reformation, has morphed into the imperative of tolerance. The personal self-identification of other people must be accepted because of the rights of diversity, inclusivity, and equality. Those demanding tolerance do not grant others the right to object on

grounds of conscience to egalitarian inclusive ideologies. Donald Carson makes a distinction between old and new tolerance.¹ The former accepted what was not necessarily approved out of respect for the freedom of others. The latter no longer works with ethical categories but prioritizes individual choice, and certain choices are considered no longer acceptable. If you do not agree with gay marriage, you *are* homophobic. Not “celebrating” the preferences of others is deemed to be racism, sexism, bigotry, or fascism. It has become nigh on impossible to discuss any subject calmly. How can one defend the principles of a Christian worldview when the only push-back is ridicule?

3. *Obsession with Self*

Self-obsession is the key to the decadence of our time. Everything feeds into this attitude, and consumerism is geared to it: how one looks, what one eats, the fitness fad, mental health issues, leisure and tourism experiences, virtue signaling, and virtual or real group recognition. Hyperindividualism paradoxically leads to collective asphyxia because of its obsession with creature comforts and the inalienable right to consume endlessly. Regardless of one’s sex one can choose a gender; one can be white and identify as black, human and identify as something else. When fulfillment is reduced to feel-goodism, perception is all that matters. Self-obsession is the apotheosis of a decadent society as it slips into dystopia. Almost everything is driven by self-indulgence and the satisfaction of gratification. This idolatry is a new slavery and leads to death. How can the good news of the gospel penetrate the hermetic echo chamber?

4. *The Past Lost in the Fog*

The hypermodern digital age blanks out historical perspective, as history is not what happened in the past but how we appropriate the past according to the values of today. Just as history published in Stalinist Moscow was airbrushed, so is the history of the West today. The screen-oriented present is what matters. If God did act in the past, it is irrelevant in the here and now. The past is like a lost Atlantis. In progressive liberal societies, references to tried and tested institutions, moral virtues recognized since the dawn of time, social values and national identity, or the reality of the spiritual dimension pale into insignificance. You are from nowhere, not somewhere, a rootless autonomous individual without a past or future. This view of history is

¹ Donald A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 28–29, 129–33, 167–68.

opposed to the biblical narrative of creation, fall, and redemption in Christ. However, this contrast is no longer an issue.

5. *Climate Change*

Self-obsession reaches a paroxysm when the individual takes responsibility for saving the planet. Whether humans are responsible for climate change, as the media say through the Attenboroughs and Thunbergs, is difficult to determine. Still, we are ordered to change our personal lifestyle to save a future which will not in any case be ours. Responsibility means changing soon to ethical veganism, electric cars, less air travel, and carbon-neutral cities. However, everything we use day by day is a factor in diminishing planetary resources, and every time we drive to the store, we unavoidably buy tons of cardboard and plastic. There is no way out, so we are over a barrel. No wonder mental health is a huge issue among malleable young people who live in fear and have no alternative to the way we live now. How can the fact that only the Creator can be the Savior of the planet be brought home in our generation?

6. *The State's Increasing Control*

The sovereign secular state, seeking by *realpolitik* and neutrality to accommodate the many diverse mixes of multiculturalism, is at a crossroads. On the one hand, it seems powerless to face global financial crises, does not know what to do about climate change except enact policies that have no sure results, is unable to protect citizens from terrorism and knife crime, has borders that have become sieves, and has no way of handling new forms of poverty related to ingrained deprivation and different kinds of abuse. Respect for the political class has hit a low. On the other hand, all the issues discussed above tend to isolate rootless individuals and make them malleable to group control. So, the state limits the damage by making politics governance, exercising social control through egalitarianism and diversity in compliance with pressure groups.

Individualism is ultimately self-destructive as freedom, including freedom of conscience, is undermined by the forces of collective control. These pressures may well increase as a result of the global pandemic of Spring 2020. The harvesting of information about everything and everyone is opening the way to future totalitarianisms, which may be far off but are being modeled in China. Little wonder that in this context, public theology is assuming new importance.

All these issues raise novel questions for Christian apologetics. Our initial reaction might be to throw up our hands and say, “Lord have mercy, what can be done?” This might well be the sane reaction, so seemingly insurmountable are the challenges. We certainly need to awaken to the woke. That is one thing, as many Christian organizations and churches are carrying on business as usual although these issues are not going away. Another thing seems obvious: in the face of the new self-obsessed attitudes of radical individualism, we need to abandon any illusions we might have had about the usefulness of rational arguments (ontological, cosmological or teleological) or evidences for the resurrection, miracles, and anything else, to demonstrate the truth of Christianity. Talk about Christianity as the highest form of religious expression, as a completed form of humanism, or even as a social gospel, have been once and for all kicked out of bounds. Any of these ideas seem laughable to social justice warriors or climate activists.

Finally, Reformed apologists and preachers need a renewed sense of the absolute necessity of dependence on the Holy Spirit for any gospel witness to the truth, because the truth of the Word needs to be illuminated by the life-giving Spirit. As Herman Bavinck remarked,

Just as the eye alone is insufficient and sees only when rays of light pass through it, and the ear alone is insufficient and hears only when it receives sounds from the outside, so also the seed which is sown in regeneration cannot progress to the act of faith without encountering the Word of the Gospel from the outside. Just as light suits the eye and sound suits the ear, so the object of faith offered in the Holy Scriptures suits the new life which the Holy Spirit breathes into the heart through regeneration.²

² Herman Bavinck, *Saved by Grace: The Holy Spirit's Work in Calling and Regeneration* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Heritage Books, 2008), 150.



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Reformed Millennium Center Indonesia

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Jl. Industri Blok B 14 Kav. 1

Kemayoran, Jakarta Pusat, 10610, Indonesia.



The Areopagus Speech and Contextualization: Some Hermeneutical and Exegetical Considerations

FLAVIEN PARDIGON

Abstract

The Areopagus speech is commonly seen as a model of missionary contextualization, an exemplary translation of the gospel into the language and concepts of Paul's Athenian audience. This article evaluates this line of interpretation using the hermeneutical concept of "framing" that is at the heart of contemporary linguistics, narratology, translation theory, and evangelical contextualization models. Looking especially at the work of Colin Chapman and Kevin Higgins, two influential missiologists, and considering seven key exegetical cruxes, it shows that their type of interpretation fails to read the speech contextually because it is not attentive to the way Paul and Luke frame the text.

Keywords

Areopagus speech, contextualization, book of Acts, cognitive linguistics, narratology, missiology, biblical hermeneutics (or biblical interpretation), Colin Chapman, Kevin Higgins

Paul's Areopagus speech in Acts 17:22–31 is commonly, if not universally, considered the biblical *locus classicus* of cross-cultural (cross-religious) communication and evangelism.¹ It is the only example recorded in the New Testament of an apostolic presentation of the gospel message to a pagan² audience, that is, to a group of people completely unfamiliar with the Old Testament Scriptures.³ As such, it is generally understood to be a model or exemplar provided for the church's witness "to the end of the earth" until the Lord Jesus returns.⁴ Since the 1970s, the particular "method" employed by Paul in his address is construed and defined as "contextualization"⁵—so much so that this interpretation crux is typically taken for granted rather than argued or demonstrated, especially by missiologists and practitioners (our focus in this article), and occasionally by biblical scholars too.

¹ "Paul's address to the Athenians in Acts 17 is perhaps the outstanding example of intercultural evangelistic witness in the New Testament. This makes it a pivotal text for our study of New Testament patterns of contextualization. ... In Acts 17, Luke gives us a snapshot of Paul at the height of his powers as a missionary communicator." Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Groves, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 72.

² I use the terms "pagan" and "paganism" to refer globally to the highly diverse religious beliefs, practices, and cults encountered all over the ancient Mediterranean world, together with their cultural, social, and political embodiments. Though past scholars have questioned the validity of these terms, there exists a consensus among contemporary historians of antiquity that there were enough common features among these to legitimately use a single label to denote them. Further, these historians agree that they share a basic world and life view—as long as it is understood that they did not constitute a unified religion with a shared creed, organization, or rituals. Cf. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 26–47.

³ Paul and Barnabas's words in Lystra (Acts 14:14–18) do not constitute a missionary speech but an urgent attempt to prevent the local people from offering a sacrifice to them as if they were gods. It clarifies who they are and their purpose in relation to the true God who alone is the creator and bestower of all goods.

⁴ If not a model to be followed today, at least a model of the common apostolic practice. There have been only a few exceptions to this interpretation. William M. Ramsay (*St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1897]) is especially famous for claiming based on 1 Corinthians 2:2–5 that the speech is a one-time (failed) attempt by Paul to use a philosophical argument, an approach that he would have subsequently repudiated. No serious interpreter of the speech today finds his argument convincing: the nature and the content of the book of Acts as a whole speak against it.

⁵ The term "contextualization" first appeared in a report of the Theology Education Fund in 1972. However, the issue of how to adapt one's gospel proclamation to one's audience is nothing new and was already raised by the earliest church fathers. In the past two centuries, it was mostly discussed under the rubrics of "adaptation," "accommodation," "acculturation," "inculturation," "nativization," or "indigenization." For a short historical survey, see Dean Gilliland, "Contextualization," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau, Harold Netland, and Charles Van Engen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 225–26.

I. *What Is Contextualization?*⁶

Maybe the first challenge we encounter is what the term “contextualization” and its cognates mean. In his dictionary entry on contextualization Dean Gilliland (ironically) states, “There is no single or broadly accepted definition of contextualization.”⁷ Indeed, the term is notorious for being used to refer to many different concepts in the literature, often without clarification or specification. Most, however, would generally agree with Gilliland that the goal of contextualization

is to enable, insofar as is humanly possible, an understanding of what it means that Jesus Christ, the Word, is authentically experienced in each and every situation. ... The gospel is Good News when it provides answers for a particular people living in a particular place at a particular time. This means the worldview of that people provides a framework for communication, the questions and needs of that people are a guide to the emphasis of the message, and the cultural gifts of that people become the medium of expression.⁸

Differences in approaches are often considered from an essentially *quantitative* point of view, as a continuum between two extremes—under-contextualization and overcontextualization.⁹ This tendency has been reinforced and solidified by the “C1-C6 spectrum” (sometimes “C scale”) developed by John Travis (a pseudonym). His analytical description has become a dominant framework, shaping and directing the way people in missionary and church-planting circles think and talk about the topic.¹⁰ Such a perspective, however, is reductionistic. What fundamentally distinguishes the different conceptions and practices of contextualization is not so much a matter of *amount* as a matter of *kind*.

⁶ The purpose of this article is not to debate contextualization theory itself—even less to assess the merits or demerits of any particular model—but exclusively to look at certain *hermeneutical* and *exegetical* common practices pursued in its name and support. I therefore limit myself to some general orientating considerations in this section.

⁷ As quoted from Gilliland, “Contextualization,” 225.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ For two random examples from influential figures, see Tim Keller, “Center Church: Gospel Contextualization Q&A,” Redeemer City to City, September 16, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9a1VGW99uI&t=758s>, and Greg Parsons, “What Is Contextualization?,” EplainEDtv, August 11, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGj2v-BHlgQ>.

¹⁰ John Travis, “The C1 to C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of ‘Christ-Centered Communities’ (‘C’) Found in the Muslim Context,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34.4 (1998): 407–8. Observe the authoritative role it plays in the argument developed by Joshua Massey, “God’s Amazing Diversity in Drawing Muslims to Christ,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 17.1 (Spring 2000): 5–14.

Understandably, practical matters such as cross-cultural communication (often inclusive of culturally appropriate forms of worship and behavior) tend to dominate discussions of contextualization (whether “overseas” or “at home”).¹¹ However, it is essential to keep in mind that contextualization is, at a deeper and foundational level, concerned with theological method and biblical hermeneutics since it is concerned with how to be disciples of Christ in a specific locale and time. It is hence an outworking of one’s world and life view, and thus it entails a particular understanding of human nature and context (which includes, but is not limited to, culture), of their relationship to the gospel, and, therefore, of the nature of the gospel itself.¹²

Paul Hiebert’s classic survey of the history of contextualization in missions identifies three main phases or “Weberian ideal types”: *noncontextualization* (which includes a period of “minimal contextualization”), *uncritical contextualization* (which includes “radical contextualization”), and *critical contextualization* (the model he advocates, building on a critical-realist epistemology).¹³ Though helpful for the big historical picture, this taxonomy is too general and exposes insufficiently the methodological and philosophical (even ideological) diversity composing each category. Gilliland’s seven models (“adaptation,” “anthropological,” “critical, semiotic,” “synthetic,” “transcendental,” and “translation”) and Sam Schlorff’s six (“imperial,” “direct,” “indirect or fulfillment,” “dialectical,” “dialogical,” “translational or dynamic equivalence”) provide better heuristic tools and offer complementary perspectives.¹⁴ Among evangelicals, the dominant model of contextualization has been and remains the translational type—especially the “dynamic equivalence” kind championed by Charles Kraft, Eugene Nida, and Hiebert, though some (like the defenders of the so-called Insider Movements) have incorporated “incarnational” or “fulfillment” elements in it.

¹¹ See, for example, the various relevant contributions in Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, eds., *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981), a classic anthology.

¹² See Gilliland, “Contextualization,” 226–27, or the longer Sam Schlorff, *Missiological Models in Ministry to Muslims* (Upper Darby, PA: Middle East Resources, 2006).

¹³ See the older Paul G. Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11.3 (July 1987): 104–12, or the more recent Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 17–35.

¹⁴ In Gilliland, “Contextualization,” 227, and Schlorff, *Missiological Models*, 3–27.

II. *Contextualization-Focused Evangelical Interpretation*

The literature on the Areopagus speech seems to be without end. For the sake of space, and given the narrow scope of our study, we will take our cues primarily from two representative studies of the Areopagus speech published by influential missiologists Colin Chapman and Kevin Higgins.¹⁵ We will look at seven exegetical cruxes that are decisive for the interpretation of the speech as a whole, especially as regards the issue of Paul's contextualizing the gospel for pagans. Though we discuss them individually (for clarity), one should keep in mind that they are interconnected and form a unified hermeneutical complex.

1. *Contextual Interpretation and "Framing"*

"Context" plays a crucial role in our interpretative considerations, of course. Besides the obvious centrality of "context" to "contextualization," it is also universally recognized as the most determinative factor in interpretation of any kind (e.g., literary, social, psychological, cultural, and political), and therefore also in biblical exegesis (as perusing any recent exegetical textbook would show). As a matter of fact, "context" has become the heartbeat of all cognitive sciences, which commonly use the language/metaphor of "frame" and "framing" (or functional equivalents such as "schema" or "script") to conceptualize how humans (and human-made "artificial intelligence") produce, access, and process "meaning." This is particularly the case for linguistics, literary studies, narratology, and translation theory.¹⁶ In fact, "framing" and its related concepts are at the very core of the "dynamic equivalence" theory undergirding the translational contextualization model claimed to be exemplified by Paul's address to the Areopagus.

¹⁵ Colin Chapman, "Rethinking the Gospel for Muslims," in J. Dudley Woodberry, ed., *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road*, Crucial Issues in Witness Among Muslims (Monrovia, CA: MARC Publications, 1989), 106–25; Kevin Higgins, "The Key to Insider Movements: The 'Devoteds' of Acts," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 21.4 (Winter 2004): 155–65. I am not thereby claiming that all or most proponents of this contextual reading would agree with every point made by these two authors, especially with their theological and missiological elaborations.

¹⁶ For an introduction to the concept in cognitive linguistics, see Ernst Wendland, "Frames of Reference," in *A Guide to Bible Translation: People, Languages, and Topics*, ed. Philip A. Noss and Charles S. Houser (Maitland, FL: Xulon; Swindon, UK: United Bible Societies, 2019), 454–58, and Deborah Tannen, "What's in a Frame? Surface Evidence for Underlying Expectations," in *New Directions in Discourse Processing*, ed. Roy Freedle (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1979), 137–81.

The following is a helpful basic definition:

A “frame,” generally speaking, may be defined as a psychological construct, or mental model, which furnishes one with a prevailing point of view that manipulates prominence and relevance to influence thinking and, if need be, subsequent judgment as well. A frame is an interrelated set of concepts, including associated cultural attitudes, expectations, values, and assumptions, that forms the hermeneutical background for perceiving and understanding any individual concept within it.¹⁷

As such, frames enable people to make sense of the world and to represent it to others by providing understandable categories. This “framing” is thus crucial for effective communication and proper interpretation. It is how a speaker/author guides the audience/readership along his discourse or narrative:

By inviting others (observers, listeners, readers, etc.) to conceptualize a certain topic from a predetermined point of view, a text “framer” not only supplies an initial orienting mental scenario, but frequently s/he is also able to control their cognitive and emotive alignment as well as their positive or negative response to that particular subject or issue.¹⁸

In the remainder of this article, we evaluate the exegetical decisions made by Chapman and Higgins (and some hermeneutical implications) in relation to how Paul and Luke have framed their language, discourse, and narrative. We aim to assess how contextual their reading of the Areopagus speech is.¹⁹

2. Seven Exegetical Cruxes

i. What the Book of Acts Is or Is Not

One of the first steps in the interpretation of any text is to determine what kind of literature we are dealing with so we know what to expect from it and how we are meant to read it. The two articles we are looking at do not address this issue explicitly. However, their respective ways of dealing with the text reveal their unstated (possibly unconscious) point of view. Both interpret the speech and story as historical events and seek to make sense

¹⁷ Ernst Wendland, “Framing the Frames: A Theoretical Framework for the Cognitive Notion of ‘Frames of Reference’ in Translation,” *Journal of Translation* 6.1 (2010): 2. The page numbers refer to the revised version of this article available at <https://sun.academia.edu/EWENDLAND>, not the published original.

¹⁸ Wendland, “Framing the Frames,” 3.

¹⁹ For the scholarly context in which my study fits, the full hermeneutical framework I defend, and my detailed exegesis of the speech, see my monograph, Flavien Pardigon, *Paul Against the Idols: A Contextual Reading of the Areopagus Speech* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019).

of both in terms of “what (must have) happened.” As such, the “author” whose meaning is the object of study is Paul, and the “audience” whose understanding is treated as normative is the group of Athenians who heard the speech as it was delivered. The *book* of Acts is here treated as a mere chronicle, the “objective” recording of bare historical events. Though Higgins mentions *Luke* in the first part of his article—where he looks at the various texts in Acts where the term “devoted” is used—he never considers Luke’s role as *author* when it comes to Paul’s speech; Chapman does not mention him at all. In fact, the narrative, literary, and textual nature of what we have before us appears to play no role in these authors’ interpretation. Even less do Luke’s readers or his theological, ecclesiological, and rhetorical purposes in reporting this story the way and in the sequence he does.

This feature is congruent with several issues identified below, since trying to interpret Paul’s words as historical artifacts in strict or relative abstraction from their *textual* factuality has massive consequences on the framework (“context”) used for their interpretation. First, the “encyclopaedic knowledge” activated by the “frames of reference” is located in a different thought-world, one that is exclusively extratextual (therefore abstract, speculative, foreign, and artificial) rather than the one provided by the author for his readers. Second, one is a lot less likely to pay attention to the cues given by the narrator, to the way he frames his story, so a competent reader (in narratological terms) would make sense of it. In any case, what we have in Acts is not a mere collage of self-standing (acontextual) bits of historical information/tradition, but a carefully, intentionally, and meaningfully crafted historical narrative with theological and pastoral purposes—as Luke indicates in the prologue of his Gospel (Luke 1:1–4). One cannot bypass the Lukan framework in which the speech is embedded and the Lukan language in which it is embodied. This fact does not imply that we have lost Paul’s intended meaning in the mists of ancient history. What it means is that we have no direct access to it, only a mediated one: to understand *Paul’s* oration at the Areopagus rightly, we have no other choice but to listen carefully to *Luke* telling the tale. Luke’s story is the only “immediate context” available to us in God’s design.²⁰

²⁰ I do not deny the importance of the historical, cultural, political, social, and religious contexts in which that story was composed and first read/heard. They are all part of the extra-textual frames of reference activated by the text. I only highlight their theoretical and partial nature in order to emphasize the hermeneutical necessity and primacy (because concrete and “given”) of their intratextual and intertextual companions. The fact of the matter is that we are dealing with a *text*. We simply cannot go back in time and listen to Paul first-hand or put ourselves infallibly in his historical audience’s shoes.

ii. What the Speech Is and Is Not

Similarly, the type of speech one determines the Areopagus address to be—which relates to its purpose, goals, and expected content—will control one’s reading strategies and expectations. By definition, contextualization-focused interpretations are based on the premise that it is a type of gospel proclamation, a missionary speech showing Paul’s (habitual) approach among pagans.²¹ The problem with such a view is that, first, it is assumed rather than argued and, second, it does not fit either the picture developed by Luke or the actual content of the speech as reported.²²

Luke’s extensive narrative frame for the speech effectively sets the reader’s expectations in this regard. The picture painted in verses 16–21 indicates that not only much of his audience (at least) had already heard the gospel proclaimed, explained, and argued over a certain length of time, but that this is the very reason why they dragged him before the Areopagus court to explain himself. From the perspective of narrative analysis, whatever else the speech might be, it is definitely a form of *post*-evangelism, a consideration sufficient to explain why there is no express “gospel presentation” included in the speech itself. This, combined with several macronarrative and micronarrative elements—Socratic echoes (including the charges that led to his demise), the legal vocabulary, the forceful ushering of Paul, the context of the highest court in the city, and the Lukan running theme of the gospel being under attack (then vindicated)—point clearly in the direction of an *apologia*, a formal defense speech in a juridical setting. According to verse 33, it was rather successful since he left the court unhindered! Though there is undoubtedly much to be learned from this story about cross-cultural gospel communication, the speech itself is not a straightforward model for contextualized *evangelism*, nor can it be a “translation” of the gospel in Greek categories (since it is not meant to present the gospel as such).

²¹ “Luke presents this as a method Paul used regularly, depending upon his hearers and his context.” Higgins, “Key to Insider Movements,” 160. A number of commentators (not our two authors) see in it a form of “pre-evangelism,” either because that was all Paul intended to do (e.g., Flemming, *Contextualization*, 75; F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1990], 379) or because he was interrupted and thus did not get to the gospel part itself (e.g., Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007], 558).

²² Another example of such *a priori* identification concerns the often-associated words of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra (Acts 14:14–18). Many, including Higgins, see the two speeches as essentially identical (one addressed to “uneducated” the other to “educated” pagans). Though the two addresses show some limited parallels, their circumstances and purposes (and content) are fundamentally different. No gospel or pre-gospel was intended or communicated in Lystra at that point.

iii. Paul's Perspective on His Audience

A good storyteller like Luke always frames a story by providing at the outset the basic perspective needed to understand what follows.²³ Of the many elements used to construct this necessary pre-understanding or “thematic” information (such as, when, where, and why), three are especially significant: setting, characterization (the way “characters” in a story are depicted or framed), and the precipitating event for the episode. In our story, verses 16–17 provide this information by emphasizing the extreme idolatry of the place, highlighting Paul’s emotional reaction to that situation, and showing how he acted in consequence. Higgins and Chapman both refer to this segment and see in it a challenge to missionaries to feel the same (compassionate) way about the lost.²⁴

But is it what the Greek verb *paroxynō* means? What is the frame of reference associated with Luke’s use here? A quick look at a standard New Testament Greek lexicon will show that the word usually denotes being aroused to anger or wrath.²⁵ A word search in Luke-Acts finds that this is the only time the verb is used, while the cognate noun *paroxysmos* occurs in Acts 15:39, referring to the conflict between Paul and Barnabas that leads to their parting ways. Each is used once more in the New Testament: the noun in Hebrews 10:24, “to *provoke* one another to love and good works”; the verb in 1 Corinthians 13:5, “[love] is not *irritable*” (ESV). So far, the harvest is rather meager. However, one should remember that, first, the Old Testament was the earliest church’s Scriptures (thus Luke’s and his original readers’) and, second, that its Greek translation(s) (commonly called “Septuagint” for convenience) is the most significant influence on Luke’s thought and language. A word search in the Septuagint reaps two occurrences for the noun and fifty-two for the verb.

Significantly, the most typical usage represented is the depiction of Yahweh’s attitude or response toward idolatry (of both Israel and the nations) and covenant-breaking, often in combination with cognates of *thymos*

²³ Some of those develop with the narrative, occasionally experiencing surprising turns or upsets. However, the initial framing is the necessary point of departure to follow the narrative line (or plot) and keep up with the narrator’s point of view.

²⁴ Chapman speaks of Paul’s “distress,” while Higgins uses terms like “disturbed,” “passionate,” “heart,” “care,” and “moved to act”; see respectively, Chapman, “Rethinking,” 107, and Higgins, “The Key to Insider Movements,” 161.

²⁵ The Bauer lexicon also suggests “grief” or “desire to convert” for our text but does not provide any external evidence; see Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 629.

(“wrath”) or *orgē* (“anger”).²⁶ They occur particularly in the context of anti-idol polemics like those found in Isaiah and Jeremiah, which constitute the intertextual warp of the entire Areopagus speech! Luke is using the verb *paroxynō* to activate this frame of reference in his readers’ mind, thus characterizing Paul as being led and driven by the same (condemnatory) point of view concerning idolatry and idolaters as God’s. Since there is no subsequent *recharacterization*²⁷ of Paul in this regard, there is no ground for claiming that his attitude or perspective when speaking to the Areopagus is any different (as the conclusion of his argument confirms). This framing of the entire Athens episode has a significant impact on how we must read the speech, and therefore on the subsequent exegetical points under review.

iv. Paul’s Affirmation of the Athenian Religion (vv. 22–23)

Three elements in the introduction of Paul’s speech are purported to show that Paul was able to “genuinely” and “with integrity”²⁸ or “truly and honestly”²⁹ affirm his audience’s religiosity. Let us look at each in order of appearance.

First, Paul says that he observes that “in all things you [men of Athens] are *deisidaimonesterous*.” This *hapax legomenon* is singularly responsible for much spilled ink!³⁰ The term is highly ambiguous, both in terms of lexical domain and grammatical form (a stand-alone comparative, possibly having an elative or superlative force). What is clear is that it has to do with an exceptional, maybe extreme, form of religious attitude and practice (especially with the attached “in all things” or “in all ways”). It can, however, be used with either a positive (“religious”) or a negative (“superstitious”) import. Typically, commentators resolve the uncertainty by making the commonsense observation that no orator in his right mind would begin a speech by insulting his audience! The meaning must, therefore, be positive, “neutral” (factually descriptive, with no value judgment), or at least intentionally ambiguous. That means that either Paul changed his attitude or was able to master himself remarkably.

²⁶ For *paroxysmos*: Deut 29:27 and Jer 39:37. For *paroxynō*, examples from the Old Testament books most used by Luke include Deuteronomy 9:7–8, 18–19; 32:16, 19, 41; Psalm 9:25, 34; and Isaiah 65:3. Cf. the parallel use of *parorgizō*.

²⁷ “Recharacterization” is when an author changes or shifts the way a particular character in the story should be conceived or perceived in the course of a story. It is an intranarrative form of reframing.

²⁸ Chapman, “Rethinking,” 113.

²⁹ Higgins, “The Key to Insider Movements,” 161.

³⁰ Its cognate *deisidamonia* (“religion” or “superstition”) is used by Felix in Acts 25:19, also an ambiguous occurrence.

The picture is much more complex than it might at first appear, however. There is evidence that complimentary *exordia* or openings (viz., *captatio benevolentiae* or winning of goodwill) were forbidden or discouraged when addressing the Areopagus.³¹ We even know of a man insulting that very court in his *exordium* and successfully securing the court's goodwill regardless (in Lucian, *Demonax* 11)! Extant sources show that a negative sense for the term *deisidaimōn* was the default usage among *educated* Athenians of the period (the proper historical frame of reference). There is no recorded jeering or reviling coming from the audience, however, which would have certainly happened if they had felt unambiguously reviled. One reason might be that they considered Paul to be a *spermologos* ("babbler" in v. 18, an Athenian slang term), and therefore would have doubted his ability to use *their* language properly. So, it seems that at an intranarrative level, the term is just as ambiguous and confusing to Paul's depicted audience as it is to modern commentators.

However, Luke's micronarrative cues (especially the framing of v. 16), the point of view he has constructed over his two volumes so far, the theology of worship and idolatry he develops throughout, and the Old Testament intertextual matrix of the speech make one thing clear to the attentive reader: the Athenian religion in part and in whole is abhorrent to God and Paul his herald. The term is probably used because it is ambiguous, therefore enabling Paul to avoid making his conclusion obvious from the very start, thus ensuring his audience will listen longer—in fact, the original uncertainty means they will listen carefully in order to ascertain his meaning. In the end, even if what precedes his statement was not clear enough to the reader, the remainder of the speech and its climax leave no doubt.³²

Second, Paul purportedly says the Athenians worship the true God "without knowing," that is, without realizing they are doing it³³ or without knowing him.³⁴ Higgins denies that this worship would have been salvific. One can only wonder what worshipping someone unknown or unknowingly

³¹ See Lucian, *Anacharsis* (*De Gymnasta*) 19, and Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 10.7.

³² This statement corresponds to the basic narratological principle that "what precedes prepares for what follows, and what follows develops what precedes." Besides, note that Paul mentions several features that were considered typical of "superstition" in his discourse (including ignorance and "unreasonable" fear), of which the concerned altar stood as a monumental expression.

³³ Chapman, "Rethinking," 113. Chapman's interpretation depends extensively on an article by Myrtle Langley I was not able to find in any library I had access to, not even the Cambridge Center for Christianity Worldwide (formerly Henry Martyn Archives). He cites approvingly the translation of this clause by the Jerusalem Bible (which is significantly influenced by the inclusivist theology that dominated the Second Vatican Council).

³⁴ Higgins, "The Key to Insider Movements," 161.

means concretely, especially in regard of the close personal relationship (communion) that is essential to its being acceptable to God according to the Scriptures (cf. Isa 23:19; cited in Matt 15:8–9 and Mark 7:6–7). In any case, Chapman is correct when he points out that “ignorance” is the emphasis of the speech. Indeed, that theme frames the whole speech, in that it forms an *inclusio* bracketing Paul’s entire oration (with various echoes interspersed throughout the episode). Where he is mistaken is in adopting a false dichotomy between ignorance and idolatry, thus missing the point of the speech: idolatry *is* the ignorance that must be repented, the sin that offends God and elicits his wrath and eternal judgment. The idolatry in view is not merely the making of physical images, but the false conceptions of the divine being and person behind their design (v. 29, mirroring the second commandment in the Decalogue). This theme of ignorance is, unsurprisingly, part and parcel of the Old Testament anti-idol polemic tradition; it is one of the ways in which idol-worshippers image their idols.³⁵

Third, Paul supposedly identifies the altar’s “unknown god” with the Creator he heralds (v. 23). It is undeniable that Paul links the two, but one must be careful to discern exactly what kind of relation exists, and which does not. First, it should be noted that Paul does not say that the god associated with the altar or the object of their worship *is* the God whom he proclaims. Here Paul does something that is grammatically subtle but extraordinarily meaningful (and can only be seen in the original language): he shifts the gender of the pronoun to the neuter while both the preceding inscription (“to an unknown god”) and the object of his proclamation (“the God who,” v. 24) are masculine. At a rhetorical level, this double shift creates a buffer or chasm (rather than a bridge) that keeps the Creator God from being identified with the target of the altar or the object of their worship. What Paul says is that the reality that explains why they would do such a thing—and of which they know nothing—is the God whom Paul is there to make known (reveal) to them. He does affirm that all men are religious because there is a Creator God, but he does not conclude from it that their worship is, therefore, true or acceptable to this God. The remainder of the speech argues that it is the exact opposite that is in view.³⁶ Their groping is a sign not that they are on the right track, but rather that they are

³⁵ On this subject, see the excellent book by G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

³⁶ This is not surprising for someone who wrote, “No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons” (1 Cor 10:20 NIV).

blind to the obvious.³⁷ Secondly, Paul immediately defines—that is, characterizes or frames—the God he proclaims as the Creator, further increasing the distance and contrast with the object of their worship. It should be noted that ancient Greeks had absolutely no concept of a personal and transcendent Creator God, whatever approximations may have existed in their religion and philosophies. This Old Testament concept was, indeed, *unknown* to them. By changing the frame of reference so radically, Paul makes sure there is no confusion and provides the point of view from which to understand every statement that follows.

v. Common Ground and General Revelation

The ironic reversal brought about by Paul's characterization of his audience as "ignorant" (set up by Luke's own in vv. 18–21) and of himself as the one agent authorized and sent by that God to reveal his person, work, and will is not only striking but indicates that whatever Paul says subsequently belongs *ipso facto* to the theological category of *special revelation*.³⁸ Contrary to what is often claimed, Paul's argument is not "from nature" or a form of natural theology but is a compact survey of biblical theology of religions drawing most visibly (but not solely) from Genesis 1–11, Isaiah 40–66, and the Mosaic laws concerning Yahweh's worship and idolatry, to weave its intertextual web.³⁹ The "framing" of his little exposé informs the reader that the appropriate frame of reference for the language of verses 24–28 is biblical revelation, not Greek philosophy, which implies that it cannot be a recasting of biblical revelation in Greek *categories*.⁴⁰ This fact, combined with the mention of the Creator, means that Paul's argument in these verses cannot be construed as "establishing common ground" in the way Chapman, Higgins, and many others claim. It is rather the opposite: Paul creates an

³⁷ As Paul writes, "as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one'" (Rom 3:10–12 ESV).

³⁸ This is consistent with Paul's argument in the first three chapters of Romans. The mention of the Creator seems to confirm this categorical identification, for "by faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible" (Heb 11:3 ESV).

³⁹ Neither Chapman nor Higgins explicitly say that Paul develops a natural theology here (a number of other commentators do, however), but rather that he affirms, recognizes, and uses what (some in) his audience would have believed that was true about creation, before "correcting" what needs to be in light of special revelation.

⁴⁰ Much of the scholarly debate over the interpretation of this part of the speech in the twentieth century revolves around how to "disambiguate" his language, which appears to allow either reading (commonly associated with the figures of Bertil Gärtner and Martin Dibelius). The concept of framing and narratological considerations such as "point of view" and levels of reading (from inside or outside the story) are vital in dealing with this issue.

unbridgeable chasm between him and his audience, his God and their gods, his religion and worship and their idolatry. He challenges their worldview as a whole rather than piecemeal, which makes sense because of the systemic and integrated nature of worldview, religion, and culture.⁴¹

vi. Paul's Appropriation of Truth from Greek Philosophers and Poets? The preceding considerations have critical exegetical implications for determining the precise nature of what Paul is doing when using language shared with Greek philosophers or quoting one of their poets. Though there is a formal similarity between the two, there is a world of difference in their respective meanings (due to radically different “frames of reference” or worldviews), not solely in their object or referent.⁴² In other words, Paul is not depicted as telling his hearers that they have true beliefs about God or that they ascribe these truths to the wrong object(s). By framing his speech the way he does, he makes their very words mean something completely different from what they intended, because he has changed what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls the “grammar.”⁴³ Words are not “Stoic” or “Epicurean” or “Christian” or anything else in themselves: they take their meaning from the context in which they are set (framed). Hence, for example, the Aratus verse no longer communicates its original Stoic pantheistic message but expresses the biblical notion of humankind’s creation in God’s image. Paul is neither adopting the Athenians’ concepts nor translating his Christian message into their categories. Instead, “familiar terminology is ... co-opted and infused with new meaning in light of biblical revelation and the Christ event.”⁴⁴ This semantic transposition would have been transparent to his audience—they did the same when citing other thinkers!

⁴¹ Cf. Harvie Conn, “Culture,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, 252–54, and Paul G. Hiebert, “Culture and Cross-Cultural Differences,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981), 369–70. This is why Hendrik Kraemer insisted that one must have a “totalitarian” (integrated) view of religion, as noted by David J. Hesselgrave, “World-View and Contextualization,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 402.

⁴² C. Kavin Rowe, *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016) sets forth a convincing and convicting challenge to the way comparing Christianity to ancient philosophies is almost universally practiced in scholarly circles. His critique applies directly to contextualization-focused readings of Acts 17.

⁴³ “By placing the vocabulary of pagan philosophy inside the hermeneutical context of creation (vv. 24, 26) and eschaton (vv. 30–31), Luke renders obsolete the original structures of meaning in which the pagan phrases occur and, therefore, radically alters their sense.” C. Kavin Rowe, “The Grammar of Life: The Areopagus Speech and Pagan Tradition,” *New Testament Studies* 57.1 (January 2011): 45.

⁴⁴ Flemming, *Contextualization*, 79.

vii. Divine Design for World History

This leads us to the last exegetical point. Higgins is correct when he writes, “Paul’s use of the altar and the poets is [a] very logical outworking of his worldview,” that is, his theology of history, religion, and culture.⁴⁵ The same is true of Luke also, who *chose* to include this story in his narrative at this specific juncture and to tell it the way he does. That worldview constitutes a significant part of the frames of reference defining the author’s “intended meaning.” The “translational contextualization” reading of the Areopagus speech concludes that Paul sees genuine—however much partial and somewhat misdirected—*divine truth* being present and active in the Athenian religion and culture. It therefore finds in the speech its own premise that a kind of commensurability and continuity exists between all human religions and cultures and the biblical faith, which allows the latter to build on the former—and requires merely one to supplement, adjust, and correct them “as needed.”⁴⁶ In fact, Higgins goes so far as to summarize Paul’s purported worldview thus: “The true God has designed the cultures, seasons, and locations of the nations to further the process by which all peoples might seek after and *actually find Him*” (emphasis added).⁴⁷ Dean Flemming, who is generally more conservative in his interpretation, says that “God’s prevenient grace is at work among people of other faiths and worldviews, *drawing them to himself*.”⁴⁸ All religions and cultures are thus deemed to be divinely orchestrated *redemptive* preparations for the gospel. For Higgins and Chapman, they even constitute a sort of “prehistory” to Christianity, parallel to Israel’s history of redemption.⁴⁹

Our study, however, has shown that this conclusion is based on a misreading of the speech and the episode as a whole. Neither Paul nor Luke expresses such a notion of continuity, similarity, or identity. On the contrary, they have emphasized the distance between the two, and the need to replace one with the other wholesale. The Athenians are not depicted as genuine truth-seekers who “are doing their best with what has been given them”

⁴⁵ Higgins, “The Key to Insider Movements,” 161.

⁴⁶ Chapman writes, “It is through knowing Jesus that we know *more clearly* what God is like and what is the standard by which we shall be judged.” Chapman, “Rethinking,” 121 (emphasis added to highlight the relative or quantitative nature of the claim). Higgins says that Paul’s method also involves “point[ing] out areas that will need correction in the light of God’s truth.” Higgins, “The Key to Insider Movements,” 161.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Flemming, *Contextualization*, 83. Emphasis added.

⁴⁹ Flemming, however, argues strongly against this characterization. See Dean Flemming, “Contextualizing the Gospel in Athens: Paul’s Areopagus Address as a Paradigm for Missionary Communication,” *Missiology: An International Review* 30.2 (April 2002): 210, n. 26.

(whose coming short from full truth is “through no fault of their own,” to use the expression canonized by Vatican II), but as arrogant, uncomprehending, idle, and mostly interested in a bit of jest mixed with a concern for protecting the city from foreign novelties (vv. 18–21). The speech certainly teaches that there is a (necessary) point of contact for the Christian proclamation: God’s creational design for man that was marred by the fall and led to God’s abandoning the nations to their rebellious folly (after Babel), leaving them to the “suppression” of the truth so strikingly captured by Paul in Romans 1:18–32. The good news of Paul’s message is not that God has been at work (redemptively or preredemptively) among the nations all along, but that he is *now* (emphatic in v. 30) doing a new thing: he has opened the way of salvation that had been closed to them and is consequently calling them to repentance (from their sin of idolatry) and faith (in the risen Jesus) in view of the imminent final judgment of God’s wrath. At last, they can “turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess 1:9–10 ESV).

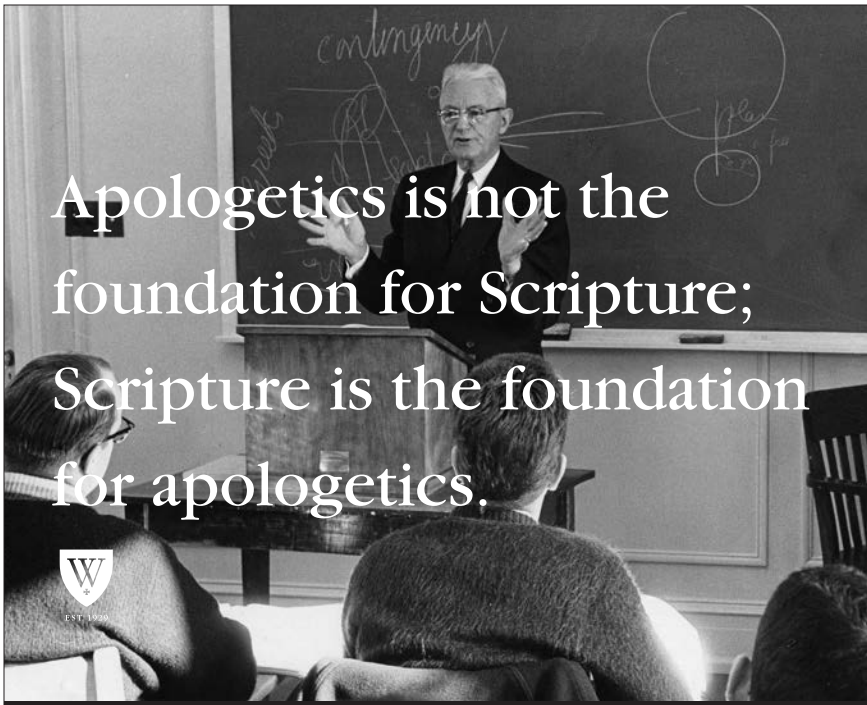
Conclusion

The only translation of the gospel in Athenian terms recorded in this story is the one attributed to the philosophers in verse 18. Hearing Paul through their own frames of reference (the fundamental pagan worldview shared by both popular religion and sophisticated philosophy), they show (and confess) themselves totally confused, unable to make head or tail of Paul’s teaching—so much so that they misconstrue his kerygma as the heralding of two new pagan-style deities, Jesus and his consort Resurrection! It is only when Paul provides the necessary biblical-theological frame of reference that his message is correctly understood by the audience (a structural narrative arc of the episode), though it is not precisely widely embraced.

Unquestionably, other proponents of “contextualization-focused” readings would not agree with all or some of either Chapman’s or Higgins’s interpretations. Yet, it appears from our discussion that the “translational contextualization” *type* of interpretation tends to read its own worldview and presuppositions into the text (eisegesis) rather than draw them out from it (exegesis). Failing to heed Luke’s cues, it exchanges Luke’s and Paul’s frames of reference for its own and thus significantly alters the meaning and import of the text, turning it on its head at various points. Using the terminology of its underpinning translation theory, it has “re-framed” the text without first “de-framing” it. This common line of interpretation of the

Areopagus speech, therefore, substitutes an abstract, artificial, and alien framework for the original linguistic and narrative contexts. It is not exactly acontextual—for that is impossible—but, more precisely, *anti*-contextual.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ This uses the etymological (Greek) meaning of “anti,” viz., “in place of” or “instead of,” rather than “against.”



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Shared Presuppositions? The CAMEL Method and the Insider Movement

JOHN SPAN

Abstract

This article explores whether the CAMEL method and the Insider Movement (IM) paradigm share similar philosophies, approaches, and underlying presuppositions. After a brief overview of the CAMEL method and its contexts (twentieth-century missions, the International Mission Board, and the Bangladeshi context), I will discuss four themes common to CAMEL and IM. We will see that CAMEL and IM share similar assumptions yet with different outworkings. Both seem to share the sentiment of the Catholic Louis Massignon, chief architect of Vatican II's approach to non-Christian religions: "Rather than destroy Islam, might it then not be better to expand it? ... If a Moslem followed his soul's promptings to the end, he would come to Christ."¹

Keywords

Camel Method, Insider Movement, mission, Islam, Bangladesh

¹ Jean Daniélou, *The Salvation of the Nations*, trans. Angeline Bouchard (Notre Dame: University Press of Notre Dame, 1962), 30–31.

Introduction

In 2011, Kevin Greeson, the leading proponent of the CAMEL method, asked, “Who would have thought that their own book would have been one of our chief tools for engaging Muslims with the Bible?”² This led some missiologists to conclude that the CAMEL method might be leaning toward the Insider Movement (IM) paradigm.³ When Joe Bell III interviewed Dudley Woodberry on the Christology of the CAMEL method, Woodberry, no stranger to Bangladesh and IM, stated that the CAMEL method encapsulated

a very clever and easy-to-remember way to combine a number of approaches that others have used. The contextualization aspects have been adopted from the insider movement that has been going on for some years in Bangladesh.⁴

In October 2011, Steve Addison interviewed Greeson, who affirmed that the method observed “C3 or C4 levels of sharing” by Christian believers from a Muslim background. Greeson stressed that CAMEL was not following a C5 or IM paradigm.⁵ David Garrison, a fellow International Mission Board (IMB) worker with Greeson and editor of several CAMEL texts, disagreed with Woodberry’s analysis regarding CAMEL and IM, stating,

Kevin [Greeson] learned the approach that he condensed into the Camel Method from MBB friends in Bangladesh; many of these friends had originally been associated with [an American IM proponent] and [a Bangladeshi IM proponent]’s Insider Approach, but had become disenchanted with it. The Camel Method, from its inception, did not adhere to Insider methods or aspirations.⁶

² “Movements with Steve Addison: 027-Building a bridge for Muslims—Kevin Greeson,” by Steve Addison, *player.fm*, October 19, 2011, podcast, time 13:04, <https://player.fm/series/movements-with-steve-addison/027-building-a-bridge-for-muslims-kevin-greeson-podcast>.

³ Rebecca Lewis defines an “insider movement” as “any movement to faith in Christ where a) the gospel flows through pre-existing communities and social networks, and where b) believing families, as valid expressions of the Body of Christ, remain inside their socioreligious communities, retaining their identity as members of that community while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.” Rebecca Lewis, “Promoting Movements to Christ within Natural Communities,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24.2 (Summer 2007): 75.

⁴ J. Dudley Woodberry, “Camel Training Method,” email to Joe M. Allen III, July 21, 2006, cited by Joe M. Allen III, “An Evaluation of the Christology of the Camel Training Manual” (Master’s thesis: Dallas Theological Seminary, 2007), 13, n. 22.

⁵ Addison, “Movements,” time 5:36.

⁶ David Garrison’s personal e-mail to the author, March 13, 2015.

There is a difference of opinion between Greeson and Garrison's assertions and those made by Woodberry. This article will investigate the extent to which CAMEL shares common ground with IM.

1. *Introduction to CAMEL*

The CAMEL method is an outreach method to Muslims drawn from of Sūrat Āl 'Imrān 3:42–55. It derives its acronym from the idea that Mary was chosen (C), that angels announced the birth of Isa (A), that this Muslim Jesus performed miracles (M), and that he knows the way to eternal life (EL). Its literature states that the “Camel Method is a simple method using one particular passage in the Qur'an as a means to confront Muslims with important truths about Who Jesus is” and that it is a way of “using Muslim's own scripture to introduce them to Jesus the Messiah.”⁷ It also describes itself as the “Koran as a Bridge” method.⁸

Developed in Bangladesh in the latter part of the 1990s and early 2000s, the method adopts ideas from earlier outreach efforts that utilize Christian interpretations of the Qur'an. Some notable contributors to this dynamic include Paul of Antioch (ca. 1200), Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464), and in the twentieth century, Kenneth Cragg, Giulio Bassetti-Sani, Fouad Accad, and Abdul Haqq.⁹ Common to all of them is the assertion that there is Christian truth latent in the Qur'an, and if read correctly, it can be a bridge or a stepping-stone to biblical truth.

Greeson and Garrison, as we have seen, assert that CAMEL arose from observing Bangladeshi church planters of Muslim background.¹⁰ Greeson then turned them into an easily replicable training package.¹¹ Greeson utilized the camel motif as he was persuaded that Muslims commonly believe that only this animal knows the mystery of the hundredth name of Allah—who, Greeson suggests, is the Christian God.¹²

⁷ Kevin Greeson and Randy Owen, “The Camel Method: Muslim Evangelism Training for Christians” (n.p.: P.E.A.C.E, 2005), 2. Hereafter *CAMEL PEACE*, <http://standupforthetruth.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/PEACE-Camel-Training-Final.pdf>. The second part of the quotation comes from the teaching DVD accompanying the *CAMEL Rider's Journal* (Arkadelphia, AR: WIGTake Resources, 2009), time 1:42–1:47.

⁸ David Garrison, ed., “The Camel Method: Introducing Muslims to Jesus” (unpublished document, 2003), 3, www.paul-timothy.net/docs/camel_method.doc.

⁹ Akbar Abdiyah Abdul Haqq, “Christ in the New Testament and Quran” (self-published, 1975); Fouad Elias Accad, *Building Bridges: Christianity and Islam* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997).

¹⁰ Kevin Greeson, “Camel Tracks ... Discover the Camel's Secret” (unpublished document, 2009), <https://ruhallah.webs.com/Camel%20Tracks%20PDFs/CamelTracks11.15.07.pdf>.

¹¹ “Movements with Steve Addison: 027.”

¹² *Ibid.*, time 15:00.

Greeson acknowledges strong dependence on *The Way to Heaven: Through the Light of the Qur'an* by the Bangladeshi Samiron Baroi.¹³ He stated that Baroi was the person from whom he “learned the most” as a “mentor” and referred to him as an evangelist who is “the most effective I have ever encountered.”¹⁴ Parallel to Baroi’s work, the CAMEL method states that from Qur’an 3:42–55 one can find that “Isa is holy, powerful, and knows the way to heaven”—describing these as “divine attributes.”¹⁵ This threefold theme is found in all CAMEL materials and is referred to as the method’s “three humps.”¹⁶ CAMEL suggests that these concepts mean the same thing to the Muslim mind as to Christian thinking, and it infers equivalence between the Muslim Jesus and the biblical Jesus. In the words of CAMEL, “What is useful as a bridge is the way Christ’s divinity still shines through, as Isa is called a Spirit from Allah, a testimony to His divinity that is not shared by any other prophet in the Qur’an.”¹⁷

Current online CAMEL resources include “CAMEL tracks,” “Ruhallah,” and the revised CAMEL II documents in multiple languages.¹⁸ The 2009 *CAMEL Rider’s Journal* with teaching DVD and the CAMEL (2010) edition are readily available.¹⁹ In 2015, Greeson developed a mobile application of CAMEL with the IMB entitled “Islam: Getting2Gospel.”²⁰ Whereas earlier CAMEL presentations stressed Qur’an 3:42–55, this one singularly refers to Qur’an 3:45 to state that the referent, ‘Īsā al-Masīh, means “The promised salvation.” This patent Christianization of the Qur’an is a common CAMEL theme.

Garrison’s *Wind in the House of Islam* features the CAMEL method at work. He relates the story of ‘Amid, an evangelist about to baptize 63 people who “were convinced, from the Qur’an, that Isa was God’s only way of

¹³ Samiron Baroi, *The Way to Heaven: Through the Light of the Qur'an* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: A. M. Chowdhury Publication, 2004).

¹⁴ Kevin Greeson, e-mail to author, December 1, 2014. Kevin Greeson, “CAMEL” (audio lecture in Austin, Texas, April 4, 2014, 2:30 p.m. session), time 26:06. Everett Miller, who formerly worked with the IMB in Bangladesh, suggests that Greeson “admits that perhaps 80% or more of the Camel were [sic] learned from Samir.” In an e-mail to the author, March 18, 2015.

¹⁵ Kevin Greeson, *The Camel: How Muslims Are Coming to Faith in Christ!* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2010), 105.

¹⁶ Greeson and Owen, *CAMEL PEACE*, 13.

¹⁷ Kevin Greeson, *The Camel: How Muslims Are Coming to Faith in Christ* (Arkadelphia, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2007), 131.

¹⁸ <http://www.ruhallah.webs.com>.

¹⁹ David V. Garrison and Al Hodges, *The Camel Workshop* (Arkadelphia, AR: WIGTake Resources, 2009), and Greeson, *Camel* (2010).

²⁰ Kevin Greeson, “Islam: Getting2Gospel” (n.p.: IMB Connecting, 2015), <https://s3.amazonaws.com/SouthAsianPeoples/Islam+G2G+guide.pdf>.

salvation.”²¹ Earlier ‘Amid has recounted his methods to Garrison:

First we show them from the Qur’an that only Isa al-Masih is the Savior, and then we baptize them. Then we give them the Bible and we disciple them.²²

This quote suggests that according to Garrison, ‘Amid and friends found the way of salvation in the Qur’an, and like Baroi, they believe that the Muslim Isa is the same Savior as the biblical Jesus. Secondly, ‘Amid appears to base the act of baptism on adherence to doctrines derived from the Qur’an. Only after baptism are those baptized introduced to the Bible and a life of discipleship. This scenario raises multiple theological concerns, including its ecclesiology and doctrines of inspiration and special revelation.

II. CAMEL in the Context of Protestant Mission, IMB, and Bangladeshi History

The twentieth century ushered in an era of questioning the effectiveness of previous outreach efforts to Muslims. In 1941, Henry Riggs penned “Shall We Try Unbeaten Paths in Working for Moslems?”²³ Multiple responses, many of which stood philosophically on the idea of convergence or a rapprochement of Islam and Christianity, emerged. In 1969, the Vatican’s Secretariat for Non-Christians produced *Guidelines for Dialogue*. It advocated that

we must try to discover with our Muslim friends the lines of convergence, which will lead us to become more united in heart and mind, with a deep respect for each other’s main fundamental trends of thought and belief We cannot yet see how our separate ways will ever meet [yet we work] in anticipation when all believers will be One.²⁴

In the 1970s, Protestants took up this theme of convergence or bridge-building at several key symposia. Don McCurry, leader of the 1978 Glen Eyrie consultation, related that the “doors were thrown wide open” to try all kinds of experiments with contextualization but without “any

²¹ David V. Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God Is Drawing Muslims around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2014), 119–20.

²² Ibid.

²³ Henry Riggs, “Shall We Try Unbeaten Paths in Working for Moslems?,” *Muslim World* 31.2 (April 1941): 116–26. See a similar title in Phil Parshall, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism: Evangelical Approaches to Contextualization* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).

²⁴ Secretariat for Non-Christians, *Guidelines for a Dialogue Between Muslims and Christians* (Rome: Edizioni Ancora, 1969), 141.

guardrails.”²⁵ In 1976, Fouad Accad, who spoke at many of these conferences, published “The Qur’an: A Bridge to Christian Faith.”²⁶ In 1978, he published his “Seven Muslim-Christian Principles,” which featured a four-book idea that used the Qur’an, the *Tawrāt*, the *Zabūr*, and the *Injīl* with equal authority to make a gospel presentation. CAMEL and IM publications widely reference Accad’s 1997 text, *Building Bridges*.²⁷ The influence of Accad’s phraseology on CAMEL can be seen in the two following statements, which purport to demonstrate that “no Muslim can deny” the following truths regarding the divinity of Christ/Isa from the Qur’an. CAMEL: “From the text of his own Qur’an, he will see that Isa is far more than a prophet. Surah al-Imran 3:42–55 attests to divine attributes of Isa that no Muslim can deny.”²⁸ Accad: “No sincere, clear-thinking Muslim can deny what the Qur’an affirms about Christ’s divine characteristics.”²⁹ Both assert that the Qur’an contains indisputable Christian proofs and truths.

The IMB of the Southern Baptist Convention established itself in Bangladesh in 1957, and in 1976 this country too became part of the “bold mission thrust” of the IMB to reach all peoples by the year 2000. In 1998, the IMB officially introduced strategies of church planting movements (CPMs): “We will facilitate the lost coming to saving faith in Jesus Christ by beginning and nurturing Church Planting Movements among all peoples.”³⁰ Garrison defined a CPM as a “rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting churches that sweeps through a people group or population segment.”³¹ This “need for speed” entered CAMEL as well, as the 2010 edition plainly states:

This method of evangelism is a major factor in the *speed* by which the Gospel is spreading. Muslim-background believers feel comfortable using the Qur’an as a bridge.³² ...Using passages from the Qur’an as a bridge to share the Gospel has kept martyrdom relatively low while *speeding* the Gospel’s spread throughout Muslim communities.³³

²⁵ Interview with Don McCurry with the author, Cairo, January 2014.

²⁶ Fouad Accad, “The Qur’an: A Bridge to Christian Faith,” *Missiology* 4.3 (1976): 331–42.

²⁷ Fouad Accad, *Building Bridges: Christianity and Islam* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997) in Greeson, *CAMEL* (2010), 203.

²⁸ Greeson, *CAMEL* (2010), 105.

²⁹ Accad, *Building Bridges*, 113.

³⁰ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1999), 7.

³¹ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake, 2004), 21.

³² Greeson, *CAMEL* (2010), 39 (emphasis added).

³³ *Ibid.*, 170 (emphasis added).

This speed bias also appears in IM literature. John Travis surveyed several movements in Asia, including Bangladesh and West Java, Indonesia. Among their common elements, they include the formation of “biblical ekklesiae, rapid multiplication, and the gospel moving through family networks.”³⁴

In 1995, Thom Wolf of Golden Gate Seminary taught about finding a “man of peace” (from Luke 10:6), and his material was included in CPM literature in 1998 and in CAMEL materials.³⁵ Finding this movement-starting person, said to be hospitable to the gospel, became a primary goal of the CAMEL evangelists: “The purpose of the Camel Method is to help you find a person of peace, a person in whom God’s Spirit is already at work, and to share with that person the Good News of Jesus Christ.”³⁶ Critics have suggested that whereas CAMEL promises an almost fail-proof prescription for success, scrutiny reveals strained exegesis of the Luke 10 passage.³⁷ CAMEL material from 2012 until the present now embarks on a search to find “4th soil persons.” This prescription is based on the parable of the Sower. In 2016, Greeson stated, “Jesus trained his people how to look for 4th soil persons.”³⁸ Both CAMEL and IM share the trait of strained exegesis, with CAMEL committing it with both qur’anic texts and biblical ones, while IM has its dossier of biblical prooftexts that include John 4 and Acts 15 and 17. The only prooftext held in common between them is Acts 17, which both cite as a justification for using qur’anic texts—akin to using pagan poets—to prove the gospel.³⁹

III. *Statistics*

In 2004, Greeson stated, “The Camel Method is an attempt to package the method being used to lead more than 7,000 Muslims to faith in Christ each

³⁴ John Travis, “Reflection on Jesus Movements among Muslims with Special Reference to Movements within Asian Muslim Communities,” in *Toward Respectful Understanding and Witness Among Muslims: Essays in Honor of J. Dudley Woodberry*, ed. John Dudley Woodberry and Evelyne A. Reisacher (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2011), 234.

³⁵ Mark Snowden, ed., *Toward Church Planting Movements* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1998), 12–18.

³⁶ David Garrison, ed., *CAMEL Rider’s Journal* (Arkadelphia, AR: WIGTake Resources, 2009), 87. See also, Greeson and Owen, *CAMEL PEACE*, 12; Kevin Greeson, *Camel Training Manual: The Secret of the Camel Is Out ... Muslims Are Coming to Faith in ‘Isa* (Bangalore: WIGTake Resources, 2004), 51.

³⁷ Salaam Corniche [pseud.], “Man of Peace Show Thyself: Another Look at a Contemporary Silver Bullet,” *St. Francis Magazine* 10.3 (Aug 2014): 8–24.

³⁸ Kevin Greeson, Lecture at Denver Seminary Chapel, February 8–9, 2016, time 16:40, <http://www.denversereminary.edu/student-life/chapel/chapel-archive-spring-2016/>.

³⁹ Kevin Higgins, “The Devoted of Acts: The Key to Insider Movements,” in *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus Within Diverse Religious Communities*, ed. Harley Talman and John Jay Travis (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2015), 234.

month.” At the 2010 Lausanne Conference, S. Kent Parks and John Scott reported on a statement taken verbatim from the 2003 CAMEL book: “From 1998 to 2003, the Isa Jamaat Movement produced more than 250,000 Muslim background believers worshipping in an estimated 8,000 contextualized churches.”⁴⁰ Phil Parshall described the fruits of the CAMEL CPMs as “one of the most extraordinary acts of the Holy Spirit among Muslims ever chronicled.”⁴¹

Kevin Higgins was the coordinator of a study of IM groups in Bangladesh in 1995. He stated that it was reported in this “highly contextualized effort” that “tens of thousands of Muslims had become followers of Jesus while remaining Muslim.”⁴² Belay Olam Guta reported in 1997, “I have been a missionary in a South-Asian country, Islampur [= Bangladesh], and worked for two and a half years within a Muslim movement toward faith in Christ. In the last fifteen years, over 1,000,000 Muslims may have come to Christ in Islampur—often whole villages are converted.”⁴³ The term “thousands” frequently appears in a 2015 IM anthology by Harley Halman and Travis, with a dedication to “the many thousands of disciples of Jesus who bear witness to him as insiders.”⁴⁴

It appears that both CAMEL and IM have a bent toward using statistics to validate their approaches even though research among Bangladeshis by the likes of Bill Nikides for his documentary *Half-Devil: Half-Child* casts considerable doubt on these numbers. Higgins’s phrase “while remaining Muslim” is a key to understanding the heart of IM and to a degree, as the next sections will show, CAMEL.

IV. Four Main Themes of CAMEL with Comparisons to IM

A survey of CAMEL material from 2003 until the present reveals four recurrent themes:

⁴⁰ Cited by S. Kent Parks and John Scott, “Missing Peoples: The Unserved ‘One-Fourth’ World: Especially Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims,” Advance Paper for the 2010 Lausanne Cape Town Conference. This same statistic is found in *CAMEL* (2003), 12, and *CAMEL* (2004), 2, citing “Abdul’s central committee” as the source.

⁴¹ Phil Parshall, “Book Review of the *Camel Training Manual*,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 41.3 (2005): 384–85.

⁴² Kevin Higgins, “Encountering Muslim Resistance,” in *Reaching the Resistant: Barriers and Bridges for Mission*, ed. J. Dudley Woodberry (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1998), 109.

⁴³ Belay Guta Olam, “Contextualizing the Church among the Muslim Oromo” (DMiss diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission, 2003): 166–67.

⁴⁴ Harley Talman and John Jay Travis, eds., *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus Within Diverse Religious Communities* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2015), iii.

1. Christianity fulfills Islam,
2. The Qur'an is a valid starting point for building a bridge to the gospel,
3. The Qur'an complements the Bible,
4. Proper interpretation of select Qur'anic passages will convince Muslims of its Christian doctrine.

IM literature, as we will observe, also subscribes to these four assumptions.

1. *Christianity Fulfills Islam*

By references to “Pakka” or “completed Muslims,” CAMEL suggests that the Qur'an can serve as a tutor to lead people to Christ in a fashion similar to the use of the law in Galatians 3:24. It also suggests that Christianity is the crown of Islam—to rephrase John Nicol Farquhar's 1913 work, *The Crown of Hinduism*.⁴⁵ That way, Christianity can, as Isaac Taylor quipped in 1887, be said to “fulfil what is lacking in the Koran of Mahomet.”⁴⁶

Baroi, in his *Way to Heaven*, says this about Jesus: “There should be no dispute of the fact that *Isa* died as a pure Muslim (perfectly surrendered to Allah's will).”⁴⁷ The “CAMEL Tracks” and “Ruhallah” booklets tell Muslim readers that they can become “Pakka” or completed Muslims.⁴⁸ The following quote illustrates the authority given by CAMEL to the Qur'an as a repository of “Truth” and liberation:

Do you want to know the Truth and be set free? Please take the time to open your Qur'an and read for yourself, *ayyah* by *ayyah* this amazing passage *surah al-Imran* 3:42–55. I have provided you with my explanation of each *ayyah*. I pray that your eyes will be opened and you will understand this Truth and join the Pakka Muslim movement.⁴⁹

The 2004 *Camel Training Manual* suggests that some members of its CPM identify themselves as “Isai Muslims,” and it justifies this term by citing Qur'an 3:53 and stating “the followers of Jesus identified themselves as Muslims.”⁵⁰

⁴⁵ John Nicol Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), 300.

⁴⁶ Isaac Taylor, “Mahommedanism,” in *Church Congress. General Peace: Congress Report of the Proceedings of the Church Congress Held at Wolverhampton, October 1887*, ed. C. Dunkley (London: Bemrose, 1887), 325–31.

⁴⁷ Baroi, *Way to Heaven*, 30.

⁴⁸ Peter Black defines a Pakka Muslim as a “proper or excellent Muslim.” Peter Robert Black, “Dynamic Equivalent Conversion and Baptism for Converts from Islam” (PhD diss., University of Wales, Lampeter, 1997), 20–21, n. 10.

⁴⁹ Greeson, “CAMEL Tracks,” 3. See also, Greeson, “Ruhallah,” 6–7.

⁵⁰ Greeson, *CAMEL* (2004), 11 citing Qur'an 3:53.

It is noteworthy that the CAMEL method employs a term that suggests a *bona fide* Muslim. By definition, such a person would be part of the Islamic *umma* (religious community) and would give their highest allegiance to Muhammad, said to be the perfect man (Arabic, *al-insān al-kāmil*), the model example of life (Qur'an 33:21; 68:4) and the final prophet who makes obedience to himself and Allah co-equal.⁵¹ The CAMEL material reports that some Pakka Muslims had a dream where Muhammad came to attest to the veracity of Qur'an 3:42–55.⁵² It states,

A recent survey was conducted of 600 “Pakka Muslims.” Out of 600, 150 said that they became “Pakka Muslims” through a dream where a messenger of Allah appeared to them and confirmed the Truth found in surah al-Imran 3:42–55. Some “Pakka Muslims” have even had dreams where they saw and heard the Prophet Mohammad, confirm the Truth that is presented in this booklet.

CAMEL thus suggests that a person who is decidedly against Christ—i.e., Muhammad—can appear in a dream to attest to the veracity of the biblical Christ in the Qur'an and by extension to its truths.

Proponents of IM utilize similar phraseology to describe Jesus's followers. D. O. in his pseudonymous “Jesus Movements in Islam,” asked, “Could not this be the testimony of the Muslim who begins to follow Jesus, that he is now becoming a filled or true Muslim?”⁵³ Woodberry related that the subjects of his 1995 study in Bangladesh called themselves “Muslims,” “real Muslims,” “completed Muslims,” and “Muslim followers of Isa.”⁵⁴ IM advocates Higgins and Travis utilize the term “Messianic Muslims.” Other IM advocates and adherents utilize the terms “In-Christ Muslims,” “new creation Muslims,” and “Biblical Muslims and pro-Christ Muslims.”⁵⁵ Collectively, they imply a parallel relationship between an Old Testament Jew who comes to know the Messiah and a “Qur'an-based” Muslim who

⁵¹ Qur'an 3:32,132; 4:80.

⁵² Greeson, “Ruhallah,” 6.

⁵³ D. O. (David Owen?), “A Jesus Movement Within Islam,” *Interconnect* 5 (1991): 15.

⁵⁴ J. Dudley Woodberry, “A Global Perspective on Muslims Coming to Faith in Christ,” in *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way Journeys of Faith*, ed. David H. Greenlee (Waynesborough, GA: Authentic Media, 2006), 20.

⁵⁵ Kevin Higgins, “The Messianic Muslims” (unpublished manuscript, 1997); John Travis, “Messianic Muslim Followers of Isa: A Closer Look at C5 Believers and Congregations,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 17.1 (Spring 2000): 53–59. “Pro-Christ Muslim” is a self-descriptor by an IM adherent named “Angus” [pseudonym] in an interview with Jan Prenger; see Jan Henk Prenger, “Muslim Insider Christ Followers: A Grounded Theory” (DMiss diss., Biola University, 2014), 366. “Angus” also refers to people in his IM group as “completed Muslims” (368).

comes to know Jesus.⁵⁶ Traces of fulfillment theology with its stress on the idea that Christ came not to destroy but to fulfill (Matt 5:17) appear to be present in the idea of Pakka or Messianic or pure and completed Muslims.

Higgins expresses IM fulfillment thinking by suggesting that the Areopagus address justifies its assertions since “it is biblical to speak of the gospel as a fulfillment of the ‘seeking, reaching out, and finding’ process in every culture and religion.” He concludes that, based on this precedent, “insider movements can be said to relate to their religious context from this perspective of fulfillment.”⁵⁷ One cannot help but wonder if Higgins would support Louis Massignon’s stance observed earlier: “If a Moslem followed his soul’s promptings to the end, he would come to Christ.”⁵⁸

Adam Sparks and Paul Hedges have studied the rise of fulfillment theology and its view of non-Christian religions.⁵⁹ Sparks sees that this theology makes an equation of the “fulfilment of the Old Covenant by Christ, to the fulfilment of other religions by Christ.”⁶⁰ He terms this the “Israel analogy” and suggests that this is an erroneous equation.

Greeson defends the CAMEL approach by appealing to Don Richardson’s redemptive analogies in his *Eternity in Their Hearts* and *Peace Child*. He asserts that God has “filled the world with redemptive bridges ... that point both to our need for salvation and to the hope of salvation. ... We have learned that the Quran contains many bridges that we, too, can use to introduce Muslims to Jesus Christ.”⁶¹ Greeson appeals to what he sees as a precedent in Acts 17.⁶² Specifically, he affirms the usefulness of the story of Isa breathing life into clay birds in Qur’an 3:49 in a similar fashion to how Paul used the unknown altar to the Athenians by using “words and symbols familiar to their faith and [pointing] them to Jesus the Messiah.”⁶³

⁵⁶ See Richard Jameson and Nick Scalevich, “First-Century Jews and Twentieth-Century Muslims,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 17.1 (2000): 33–38.

⁵⁷ Higgins, “The Key,” 235.

⁵⁸ Daniélou, *Salvation of the Nations*, 30–31.

⁵⁹ Adam Sparks, *One of a Kind: The Relationship between Old and New Covenants as the Hermeneutical Key for Christian Theology of Religions* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014); Paul Hedges, *Preparation and Fulfilment: A History and Study of Fulfilment Theology in Modern British Thought in the Indian Context* (Oxford: Lang, 2001).

⁶⁰ Adam Sparks, “The Fulfillment Theology of Jean Daniélou, Karl Rahner and Jacques Dupuis,” *New Blackfriars* 89.1024 (2008): 633.

⁶¹ Greeson, *CAMEL* (2010), 17. Kevin Greeson, Lecture at Austin, Texas, (2014), 9 a.m. session, time 27:56.

⁶² See also Don Richardson, “How Missionaries Enrich Cultures,” *Moody Monthly* 9 (June 1976): 55–58.

⁶³ David Garrison, “Welcome to Camel Training,” in *CAMEL Rider’s Journal*, accompanying DVD media (Arkadelphia, AR: WIGTake Resources, 2009), session 1, time 1:28.

Two strong IM advocates also speak of redemptive analogies in Islam. In 1987, David Owen stated, “As we have surveyed the field of Islamic history, we have found redemptive and messianic analogies everywhere.”⁶⁴ In 2006, Jeff Hayes of the Navigators, in a presentation on sharing the gospel with Muslims, advocated the use of “redemptive analogies in the Koran.”⁶⁵

Are Greeson, Owen, and Hayes correct? Throughout the book of Acts, the apostle Paul forged communication bridges with his audiences, and at the Areopagus, he employed object lessons to his advantage; however, they fail to recognize that Paul used these bridges and object lessons subversively, not affirmingly.⁶⁶ Rather than seeing Athenian religiosity as a bridge to, or preparation for, the gospel, he saw it as an expression of idolatry, which called for repentance.⁶⁷ As for Richardson’s work, Christian Reese examines it and says it would be more accurate to call his descriptions “non-redemptive analogies” that bring humans to the end of their “own misguided attempts to find God.”⁶⁸ Thus, once “careful observations” (cf. Acts 17:23) are made of Qur’an 3:42–55 in its broader Islamic worldview, one cannot help but see it as a fundamentally distorted view of Christ. Rather than affirming the message of salvation, it supplants it.⁶⁹

2. The Qur’an Is a Valid Starting Point for Building a Bridge to the Gospel

In response to the question, “Have you or do you use the Quran in evangelism to Muslims and to what degree?” Greeson replied, “Yes I use the Q. as pre-evangelism or as a bridge to the Gospel. I use this method almost every time I try to evangelize a Muslim” and “those [of a Muslim background] who I have seen come to Christ personally—95% came to Christ through the use of the Q. as a bridge.”⁷⁰

In 2003, Garrison, author of CPM texts and strategy coordinator for the IMB in the “South Asia” region, formalized Greeson’s observations and

⁶⁴ David Owen, “Project Sunrise Publication Report” (Larnaca, Cyprus: n.p., 1987), 3.

⁶⁵ Jeff Hayes, “Sharing the Gospel with Muslims” (unpublished document, Navigators, 2006), PPT slide 6.

⁶⁶ See Christopher Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 40.

⁶⁷ See Flavien Olivier Cedric Pardigon, “Paul Against the Idols: The Areopagus Speech and Religious Inclusivism” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2008).

⁶⁸ Christian Reese, *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized* (Secunderabad, India: OM Books, 2003; repr., Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2000), 162–163, n. 8.

⁶⁹ See Christopher Robert Flint, “How Does Christianity ‘Subversively Fulfil’ Islam?” *St. Francis Magazine* 8.6 (2012): 776–822.

⁷⁰ Scott A. Elliott, “Survey on Quran, Allah and CPM,” paper presented to Dr. David Sills of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for course 80623 (December 9, 2006): 29–30.

edited “The Camel Method: Introducing Muslims to Jesus.”⁷¹ This document advises the trainee to read Qur’an 3:42–55 in the presence of a Muslim friend and say, “I have been reading the Koran and I discovered an amazing truth that has given me hope of eternal life in heaven.”⁷² Concerning Qur’an 3:49, the trainee is to observe, “Isa created life and did miracles,” and that “Allah demonstrated His power through Isa. The Koran says that the lepers were healed, the blind received their sight, and even the dead were raised to life again.”⁷³ The evangelist is instructed to close the conversation thus:

Once again, the Koran has flooded my soul with hope. Isa had the power to raise the dead—POWER OVER DEATH! This is amazing. Before, I had thought that death was the strongest enemy in the world. But the Koran says that Isa has been given power over death.⁷⁴

The recurrent phrase, “the Koran says,” followed by a biblical truth of who Jesus is, demonstrates that CAMEL sees the Qur’an as a useful theological starting point (*locus theologicus*) in defending the gospel.⁷⁵ It also ascribes a level of revelational authority or biblical inspiration to the Qur’an with a phrase reminiscent of the biblical phrase “thus God says”—which, CAMEL asserts, has the power to flood the readers’ soul with eschatological hope.

IM advocate Richard Jameson describes the affinity that so-called “In-Christ Muslims” see between the Bible and the Qur’an: they “find considerable common ground” between them which serves as “the bridge for outreach to their communities.”⁷⁶ Michael Roberts and Jameson also suggest that like converts from Judaism, these believers are merely engaging in a “reinterpretation” of a sacred text and using it as a “bridge to proclaim Christ.”⁷⁷ Corrie Block uses this same bridge motif, and the title of his work is “Expanding the Qur’anic Bridge.”⁷⁸ In his work, he advocates “constructing bridges of thought between Islam and Christianity” and concludes that “both Muslims and Christians are perhaps beginning to

⁷¹ David Garrison, ed., “The Camel Method: Introducing Muslims to Jesus” (unpublished document, 2003), www.paul-timothy.net/docs/camel_method.doc.

⁷² Ibid., 18–19.

⁷³ Ibid., 14, 19.

⁷⁴ Greeson, *Camel Training Manual* (2004), 68. See “CamelTracks,” 11.

⁷⁵ See Garrison, *CAMEL Rider’s Journal*, 55.

⁷⁶ Richard Jameson, “God’s Creativity in Drawing Muslims to Jesus,” in Talman and Travis, *Understanding Insider Movements*, 615.

⁷⁷ Michael Roberts and Richard Jameson, “Conversion in the New Testament,” in Talman and Travis, *Understanding Insider Movements*, 211.

⁷⁸ Corrie J. Block, *Expanding the Qur’anic Bridge: Historical and Modern Interpretations of the Qur’an in Christian-Muslim Dialogue with Special Attention Paid to Ecumenical Trends* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

acknowledge that their respective scriptures may be the incomplete revelations they possibly present themselves to be.” He cites John 21:25 and Qur’an 31:27 as prooftexts.⁷⁹

CAMEL and IM presuppose, contrary to the advice of Reformed missiologists Hendrik Kraemer, J. H. Bavinck, Samuel Schlorff, and Cornelius Van Til that one can build an edifice of the gospel on the basement foundation of the Qur’an. Rather than challenging the non-Christian presuppositions of the Muslim, CAMEL and IM appear to be affirming them. Block’s quote suggests—quite erroneously in light of the *sui generis* nature of the Bible—that it and the Qur’an are essentially incomplete without each other, which leads to the theme of the next section.

3. The Qur’an Complements the Bible

Perhaps the most crucial word-picture for understanding the continuity of the post-2013 CAMEL II materials with previous versions are images employed by Greeson. One features a vehicle with four wheels labeled “Taurat,” “Zabur,” “Injil,” and “Qur’an” (see Figure 1).

Earlier, at a talk given at the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and in the “Camel Tracks” booklet, Greeson employed an image of a cow.⁸⁰ “Camel Tracks” advises that “a cow with only one leg cannot stand, but when he stands on all four legs, he is strong.” The tract suggests that a “Pakka” or completed Muslim “reads all the Kitabs [holy books].”⁸¹ This statement appears to suggest that alongside the Bible, this person should also read the Qur’an.

These images suggest that each leg or tire carries equal weight or is of equal importance.⁸² Thus, the Qur’an is assigned equality to the three other parts, notably the *Tawrāt* [= Torah], *Zabūr* [= Psalms], and *Injīl* [= Gospel(s)].⁸³ CAMEL authors might defend the picture as a simple illustration for Muslims, namely that the Qur’an instructs them to read all four books. Without clearly stating this point and defending the uniqueness of biblical truth, however, CAMEL, as Keith Eitel has pointed out, could

⁷⁹ Corrie J. Block, *The Qur’ān in Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Historical and Modern Interpretations* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 305–6.

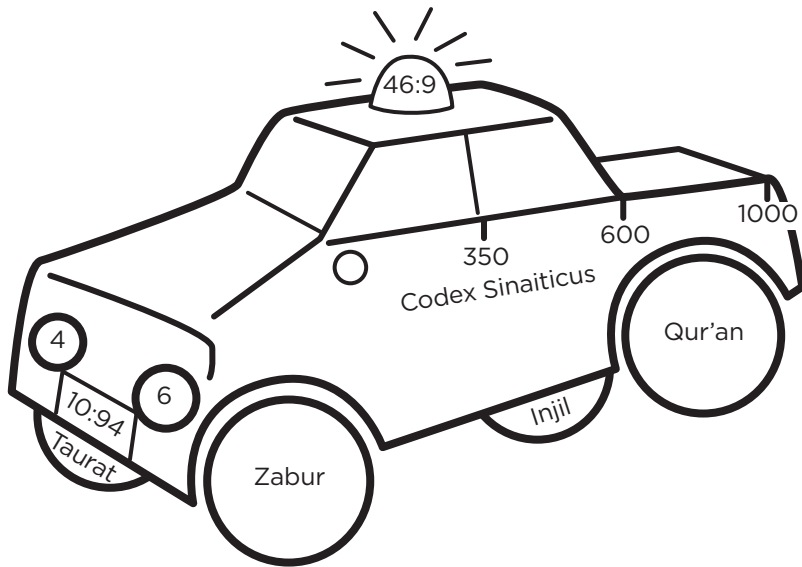
⁸⁰ Keith Eitel, “Ends Justifying Means, at a Price: Critique of a Camel” (unpublished document, 2005), in response to Greeson’s oral presentation on CAMEL at the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (March 14, 2005).

⁸¹ Greeson, “Camel Tracks,” 9–10.

⁸² Greeson, “CAMEL II materials,” <http://tinyurl.com/cameldocs>.

⁸³ These equivalences are assumed by CAMEL. See my PhD thesis for further explanation. John William Span, “A Critique of the Camel Method’s Use of the Miracles of the Muslim Jesus” (PhD diss., Faculté Jean Calvin, Aix-en-Provence, 2016).

Figure 1. Greeson uses a word-picture of a car to illustrate CAMEL II.



suggest that Qur'anic truth needs to be supported by biblical truth, and that biblical truth needs support from Qur'anic truth.⁸⁴

Baroi also affirms the complementarity of the four revelations to Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad and suggests that “the basic guidelines of all these separate paths are fundamentally the same.”⁸⁵ Are they?

Henk Prenger illustrates this four-book idea. He interviewed Higgins about his view of the Qur'an, and Higgins replied,

I see the Qur'an as a communication that continues to participate in that narrative. I would put it and Mohammed in a very similar category in a sense that I think that there are clearly places where he seems to have spoken out of a deep experience of the character of God, and he is participating in the biblical narrative.⁸⁶

Higgins's own words seem to suggest that he believes that the Qur'an is part of biblical salvation history.

The assertion of the equal status of these four books by IM and CAMEL calls into question the unique revelatory status of the Bible and its views of inspiration and revelation. Already in 1980, Schlorff foresaw the danger of

⁸⁴ Eitel, “Ends Justifying Means.”

⁸⁵ Baroi, *Way to Heaven*, 11.

⁸⁶ Prenger, “Muslim Insider Christ Followers,” 349–50.

a confusion of authorities when the Bible and the Qur'an are given equal revelatory status.⁸⁷ When Scott Elliott interviewed missionaries and Christians of a Muslim background, he documented evidence of this confusion of authority, even though Greeson, in the same interviews, did not see it.⁸⁸ Greeson responded that among "MBBs who came to faith through the Quran as a bridge and those who came to faith through another method or avenue besides the Quran, I have not found any differences in regard to their belief in biblical authority."⁸⁹ A theologically trained Bangladeshi Christian of Muslim background, however, suggested to Scott Elliott that the four-book idea validates the prophethood of Muhammad and should be categorically avoided.⁹⁰

4. Proper Interpretation of Qur'anic Passages to Convince Muslims

Baroi opens his work with the wish to "develop an understanding of the meaning of the Qur'an in an effort to present its light to the people of the world."⁹¹ After examining the miracles of the qur'anic Jesus, Baroi affirms that "we have [then] no other choice but to conclude that *Isa* is in fact Allah."⁹² The CAMEL method consistently suggests the same, even though Greeson asserts, "Your goal here is not to prove Christ's divinity through the Qur'an. The Qur'an is incapable of doing that."⁹³

The 2004 *CAMEL Training Manual* examines Qur'an 3:49 and affirms the power to create life in the breath of *Isa* and directs the trainee to show the Muslim to "see the likeness and unity of *Isa* and Allah." It concludes by stating—in a similar fashion to Baroi—that *Isa* is "the *Ruhuallah* [Spirit] of Allah" and, by extension, equal to him.⁹⁴ The 2007 edition of CAMEL uses this same motif of spirit and suggests, "What is useful as a bridge is the way Christ's divinity still shines through, as *Isa* is called a Spirit from Allah."⁹⁵ CAMEL also attempts to extract the Logos doctrine from Qur'an 3:45.

The *CAMEL Rider's Journal* asks, "What does it mean that *Isa* is a Word from Allah?" and then schools the CAMEL trainee on the Arabic meaning of *kalimah* (word) and then suggests, "*Isa* is literally called the 'Word of

⁸⁷ Samuel P. Schlorff, "The Hermeneutical Crisis in Muslim Evangelization," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 16.3 (July 1980): 151.

⁸⁸ Elliott, "Survey on Quran, Allah and CPM."

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹¹ Baroi, *Way to Heaven*, 3.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 18–19.

⁹³ Greeson, *CAMEL* (2010), 134.

⁹⁴ Greeson, ed., *Camel Training* (2004), 67. *CAMEL* (2007) repeats the same verbatim.

⁹⁵ Greeson, *CAMEL* (2007), 131.

Allah.”⁹⁶ In its quest to find Christian doctrine in the Qur’an, CAMEL has overlooked the critical distinction between the meaning of “Word *from* Allah” and “Word *of* Allah,” with the former simply an expression of divine fiat—as per the Qur’an—and the second the Logos doctrine—as per the Bible. Paradoxically, the Muslim Muḥammad ‘Alī Merad states, “It is impossible to define the words *Kalima* and *ruh* as applied to Christ,” adding the caveat “unless the Qur’anic thinking is modified according to Christian thinking.”⁹⁷

Higgins advocates a similar hermeneutical key to unlock the contents of the Qur’an. He first asks a rhetorical question: “Whose criteria, indeed, whose hermeneutic will determine the validity of the interpretation of the Qur’an or Hadith offered by a Muslim insider movement?”⁹⁸ Then he answers:

I am suggesting that in an insider movement in Islam, it is possible to re-read the Quran with the hermeneutical key of the Old and New Testaments and develop an entirely new interpretative result.⁹⁹

Higgins has clearly Christianized the Qur’an. From a Christian standpoint, this is an illegitimate imposition of the doctrine of one sacred text, namely the Bible, on to the Qur’an, and from an Islamic standpoint, it fails to appreciate the entire Islamic worldview and the nonexistent place of a Savior and salvation within it.

V. Synthesis of CAMEL and IM Commonalities and Differences

As much as Greeson and Garrison categorically state that they are following the IMB contextualization guidelines, “C-4 and no more,” the data that has been presented from CAMEL raises some concerns as to its shared assumptions with IM.

CAMEL considers the concepts of holiness, power, and knowledge of the way to heaven, as well as Spirit and Word of Allah, as meaning the same in the Muslim mind as they do to the Christian. IM assumes that the history of redemption means the same in the Bible as it does in the Qur’an. Both suggest that a Muslim will consider a Christian interpretive grid imposed on the Qur’an valid. They both assert that this grid will have the same

⁹⁶ Garrison, *CAMEL Rider’s Journal*, 55.

⁹⁷ Muḥammad ‘Alī Merad, “Christ according to the Qur’ān,” *Vidyajyoti* 45 (1981): 312–15.

⁹⁸ Higgins, “The Devoted of Acts,” 237.

⁹⁹ Kevin Higgins, “Identity, Integrity and Insider Movements,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 23.3 (Fall 2006): 123, n. 17.

operative power as the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit to open spiritually blind eyes, but in this case, they use the Qur'an instead of the Bible. They assume that the unregenerate person is both able and willing to accept spiritual truth even if it is so-called Christian doctrine in the Qur'an. However, Islamic material will not support the first two assumptions, and biblical material (see 1 Cor 2:14; 2 Tim 3:16) will not support the latter.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

Both CAMEL and IM are variegated entities with proponents that advocate stronger and weaker forms of both. They are not monolithic. However, the CAMEL method is easier to analyze than IM as Greeson and Garrison demonstrate its assumptions. IM has multiple proponents, with views of Muhammad as everything from an inspired prophet on par with the Old Testament prophets to “only a warner” (Qur'an 13:7).

In their historical and theological contexts, CAMEL and IM share antecedents in fulfillment theology, convergence thinking, and a Christianized qur'anic hermeneutic. In these ways, they are both much older than meets the eye. The latter was already in service with Paul of Antioch (1200s) and Nicholas of Cusa (1400s), and the former in the mid-1800s. As we have seen, convergence thinking was very much the brainchild of Massignon in Roman Catholic circles and came to full flower around Vatican II.

After examining the CAMEL corpus from 2003 to 2016 in its historical context, and comparing and contrasting its assumptions with those of IM, we can safely conclude that in most places, CAMEL is a weak form of IM and differs from IM in degree, not in kind. The reason we can attribute a weak form of IM to CAMEL is that it advocates Christian conversion and public displays of faith, whereas IM prefers to retain hyphenated-Muslim identities—“while remaining Muslim.” However, with the use of the term “Pakka Muslims” and assertions that the Qur'an is a valid source of Christian doctrine, CAMEL is close to the heart of IM.

As much as CAMEL declares that the Islamic Jesus is powerful and holy and knows the way to heaven, this is nothing other than a Christianized qur'anic hermeneutic. IM shares in this same interpretive scheme, and as a result, both of them have suffered from spurious conversions, which are not detailed in their glowing statistics. Both CAMEL and IM have adopted

¹⁰⁰ See Richard B. Gaffin, “Some Epistemological Reflections on 1 Cor 2:6–16,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57.1 (Spring 1995): 103–24, who illustrates the darkness of the unregenerate mind due to the noetic effects of sin.

pragmatic means to achieving their numerical results, which are then used to justify their underlying methods and assumptions. Perhaps we might conclude that CAMEL and IM sing, “Traditional methods of evangelism and discipleship have slain their thousands, but we our tens of thousands.” Perhaps it would be much better to construct a new CAMEL scheme which affirms the following:

- the **C**hosen One of God as the Son of God
- the one worshipped by **A**ngels as God incarnate and whose conception was announced to Mary as the Son of the Most High with an eternal kingdom
- the promised Messiah whose **M**iracles usher in the new era and confirm his divinity
- the **E**ternal One “from of old” (Mic 5:2) and who is the Alpha and the Omega and who lives and reigns forever
- The way, the truth, and the **L**ife, who is the Living God himself.

Missiological Implications of Conscience in Present-Day Roman Catholicism

REID KARR

Abstract

During Jorge Mario Bergoglio's papacy, the theology of conscience has taken on a significant role. A developed theology of conscience emerged during the Second Vatican Council, most notably with *Gaudium et spes*, and later developed as essential in moral theology. Francis is the first pope to fully embody Vatican II teachings, in particular in his incorporation of the conscience into theology and practice. During the first months of his papacy, he made it clear that conscience is crucial to his theology and, in a letter exchange with a prominent Italian journalist, he underscored obedience to one's conscience as the key to receiving forgiveness of sins. This development has tremendous theological and missiological implications for the Roman Catholic Church.

Keywords

Roman Catholicism, Pope Francis, conscience, missiology, morality, Vatican II, Gaudium et spes

Introduction

In September of 2013, the Argentine Jorge Bergoglio had been Pope Francis for only a few months. The world, and especially the Catholic faithful, still had much to learn about the new pope. His theology and policies, and the convictions that would shape his papacy were still unknown. An essential piece of this puzzle, however, was divulged to the famed Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari in September of 2013. In an exchange of letters between Scalfari and the Vatican State, Pope Francis disclosed a crucial piece of his theological convictions. In his letter to Scalfari, the pope addresses the position of the Catholic Church regarding those who do not believe in Jesus Christ. More specifically, Francis responds to Scalfari's inquiry about whether God ultimately forgives those who do not believe. After stating that God's mercy knows no bounds and no limits, the pope wrote this telling statement: "The issue for those who do not believe in God concerns obedience to their conscience. Sin, even for those who do not believe, occurs when one goes against their conscience."¹ The pope's statement here is significant and has tremendous theological and missiological implications for the Roman Catholic Church. This article aims to assess those implications from an Evangelical reading and perspective.

I. *Defining Conscience*

Concerning the weight of Pope Francis's statement and the importance the conscience receives in the salvation of the soul, our first task must be an attempt—feeble as it may be—to define the conscience. This task would be simplified were the Bible to provide a clear definition of the term. This is not the case, however, so we are left to piece together what Scripture does reveal concerning the conscience while also exploring other sources that aid us in better understanding and defining the conscience. Certainly, our research will take us outside of Scripture, but in doing so, we want to be vigilant in not overstepping the boundaries the Bible provides and stipulates concerning the idea and concept of conscience. Our reflections must add to and complement what God has revealed through his Word, not take away or detract from it. It is important to ground the conscience in the Word of God from the outset, as doing so necessarily makes the discussion of the conscience a moral one. Giuseppe Angelini explains why this distinction is

¹ "Papa Francesco scrive a Repubblica: 'Dialogo aperto con i non credenti,'" *La Repubblica*, http://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2013/09/11/news/sintesi_lettera_bergoglio-66283390/?refresh_ce.

important when he says, “The term ‘conscience,’ in modern-day use, does not refer to moral conscience, but an awareness of self.”²

Etymologically speaking, however, the term “conscience” derives from the Greek *syndērēsis* and *syneidēsis* and in both cases affirms the moral nature of its meaning. *Syndērēsis* underscores the habit or capacity of the conscience and the basic sense of responsibility that characterizes humanity. It is a term, however, that is not frequently found in Greek literature and is largely accredited to Jerome. *Syneidēsis* is understood as the action of the conscience, determining whether an act is right or wrong. This usage is common in Paul’s writings. In any case, they both relate to the moral nature of the conscience.

Timothy O’Connell further affirms the moral nature of conscience when he says, “conscience is often taken to be a synonym for morality itself.”³ Indeed, the conscience makes itself known when we are faced with questions of morality. What is right or wrong? What should I do? These are the questions through which the conscience reveals itself to us, for they are deeply moral. Conscience is not a mere awareness of self. Internal conflict makes it present and reminds us of its reality. It is virtually impossible to suppress. Attempts at suppressing the conscience and the moral battles that rage in our minds are almost always futile. We can certainly choose to ignore the conscience, but we simply cannot make it go away.

This development suggests that to be human is to have a conscience. It is an integral part of who we are and how God has made us, and this should not surprise us. Scripture is clear that we are all made in the image of God (Gen 1:27), and God is a moral being who decides what is right and what is wrong. Those created in his image, therefore, are also moral beings, as they bear the image of their Creator. The conscience, then, is inherent to personhood and is not the result of sin. Indeed, it is greatly impacted by sin (a topic to which we will return later), but it is not a product of sin. It is a creation of the God of the Bible and is, therefore, an inherent and integral characteristic of being human. The Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck eloquently summarizes and describes this phenomenon of the conscience.

Etymologies can assist us in defining the notion of the conscience. Included in the key terms are ideas of self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-testimony about my conduct. Using our reason, we form judgments about our own conduct on the basis of God’s law, which lies in our heart. This law of the conscience is called the

² Giuseppe Angelini, *La Coscienza Morale: Dalla voce alla parola* (Milan: Edizioni Glossa srl, 2019), 13.

³ Timothy E. O’Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 103.

syndērēsis. It comes from God, to whom alone it is subject. To the degree that it is common to all people, it contains natural principles of religion, morality, and justice and is called a “natural conscience.” For those regenerated by the Holy Spirit, enlightened consciences are those bound to the Word of God. No person or human authority may bind the conscience; only he who created and knows the conscience can bind and punish it.⁴

The idea of the moral nature of the conscience is well supported by Scripture. Although the concept is not prevalent, and there is no word that corresponds with the conscience in the Old Testament, the idea is undoubtedly present. Here it is the “heart” that provides moral guidance. “In the Old Testament the heart is present as the witness of the moral value of human acts.”⁵ Clear testimony of the conscience is present with the remorse of Joseph’s brothers (Gen 37), in David after the census (2 Sam 24:10), in Solomon’s dedicatory temple prayer (1 Kgs 8), and with Jeremiah’s declaration that sin is written on the tablet of the heart (Jer 17:1). This survey is not exhaustive, but it demonstrates the presence of the idea of conscience in the Old Testament.

The idea of conscience is more prevalent in the New Testament. Andrew Naselli and J. D. Crowley helpfully point out that the Greek equivalent for conscience occurs twice in Acts, twenty times in Paul’s letters, five times in Hebrews, and three times in 1 Peter.⁶ Studying these texts and the usages of the word in the New Testament, Naselli and Crowley note that the conscience appears to be capable of performing three critical actions: (1) it can bear witness or confirm (Rom 2:15; 9:1; 2 Cor 1:12; 4:2; 5:11); (2) it can judge or try to determine another person’s freedom (1 Cor 10:29); (3) it can lead one to act a certain way. Three examples illustrate this action: it can lead one to either accuse or defend oneself based on how the conscience bears witness (Rom 2:15); it can lead one to submit to authorities (Rom 13:5); it helps in determining what food can be eaten from that which should not be (1 Cor 10:25, 27–28).⁷

Reflections on the conscience of this nature would lead one to believe that an attempt at defining conscience would produce only long and convoluted definitions that create more confusion than clarity. One would be wrong,

⁴ Herman Bavinck. *Reformed Ethics: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 166.

⁵ Marciano Vidal, ed., *Manuale di etica teologica*, trans. Lorenzo de Lorenzi (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1994), 529.

⁶ Andrew David Naselli and J. D. Crowley, *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train it, and Loving Those Who Differ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 33.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41–42.

however, in making this assumption. The Greek lexicon, for example, defines the conscience simply as “the inward faculty that distinguishes right and wrong.”⁸ Similarly, but with some noteworthy differences, Naselli and Crowley suggest, “The conscience is your consciousness of what you believe is right and wrong.”⁹ This definition personalizes the conscience, underscoring the idea that what one believes is right and wrong is not necessarily the same as what is right and wrong. It also suggests that the conscience can change for both good and bad. The renowned Catholic moral theologian Bernard Haring defines the conscience as a “person’s moral faculty, the inner core and sanctuary where one knows oneself in confrontation with God and with fellow men.”¹⁰ Lastly, J. I. Packer reminds us of Thomas Aquinas’s classic definition of the conscience as “man’s mind making moral judgements.”¹¹

To summarize, the conscience is the moral command center of our being. It guides and directs as we seek to determine what is right and wrong, what is good and evil, what we should do and should not do. It is the “voice within actually addressing us to command or forbid, approve or disapprove, justify or condemn.”¹² It predates sin and was part of creation, which God declared was good (Gen 1:31). It remained intact after sin entered into history, but together with the rest of creation, it was greatly damaged by sin. The degree to which it was damaged is a crucial part of this reflection and will receive more attention shortly.

II. A Brief Historical Survey of the Conscience

While our focus is on the conscience in present-day Roman Catholic theology and practice, a brief historical survey of the conscience is necessary to provide a framework for the current discussion. This brief survey begins with the church fathers and will bring us to the present day, reaching the crux of the conversation.

Concerning the church fathers and the conscience, Bavinck provides a helpful and succinct analysis. He states, “The church fathers provide very

⁸ Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 967.

⁹ Naselli and Crowley, *Conscience*, 42.

¹⁰ Bernard Haring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, vol. 1, *General Moral Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 224.

¹¹ J. I. Packer, *Serving the People of God: Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 2:334.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2:335.

little about the conscience.”¹³ Of course, “very little” does not mean that the conscience is absent in the church fathers. References do appear here and there. Clement of Alexandria wrote that a good conscience keeps the soul pure and preserves it from ignorance,¹⁴ affirming the moral nature of the conscience.

John Chrysostom spoke even more of the conscience. In a sermon on Genesis 27:42, he writes, “So let no one claim to be neglecting virtue through ignorance or through not having the way to it pointed out. In fact, we have an adequate instructor in our consciences, and it is not possible for anyone to be deprived of help from that source.”¹⁵ In a sermon on Matthew 15, Chrysostom explains that there is nothing more pleasurable than a sound conscience.¹⁶ On the other hand, there is nothing as painful and that cuts so deep as a bad conscience.¹⁷ For Chrysostom, the conscience is an uncorrupted judge and, therefore, unerring in its judgment. It is divine and therefore cannot be bribed. It is implanted in our souls by God himself. Additionally, Chrysostom believed that conscience is an autonomous and autarchic source of moral insight, along with creation as the other source of our knowledge of God.¹⁸

The scholastic theologians made a much closer examination of conscience. Here we see for the first time the integration of the theological dimension of the conscience with its anthropological dimension. The scholastics discussed the term *syndērēsis* widely, although in his exposition of Ezekiel, the church father Jerome introduced the term *syndērēsis* as the conscience itself, which rationally perceives the sin in our hearts. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas raises the question of whether *syndērēsis* is a special power of the soul distinct from others. In his response, he argues that it is not a power but a habit¹⁹ and thus is malleable and can be trained in the same way that humankind is born with the idea of what is true and false and so can determine good from evil.

Returning to the idea of *syndērēsis* as a habit, as suggested by Aquinas, *syndērēsis* always incites one toward good while opposing evil. Bavinck clarifies when he says,

¹³ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 176.

¹⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 6.14 (ANF 2:506).

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 54 (The Fathers of the Church 87:92 [trans. Robert C. Hill]; PG 54:472).

¹⁶ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, NPNF¹ 10:331 (*Homily* 53, on Matt 15:32).

¹⁷ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, NPNF¹ 11:424 (*Homily* 12; Rom 6:19).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11:467–68 (*Homily* 16, on Rom 9:20–21).

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 79, art. 12.

Scholastic theologians held firmly to this notion of *syndērēsis*, maintaining within it the human moral nature in the state of sin, and viewing it as the capacity to do good, in the same way that reason is the capacity to know the truth. Nevertheless, they did not for that reason deny the depth of sin, because this *syndērēsis* is inclined to the good in general, but it neither discloses the genuinely good (which is meritorious) nor leads one to perform it fully.”²⁰

The scholastic development of the conscience—and especially the contribution of Aquinas—is significant to the conversation at hand and has greatly influenced present-day Catholic theology of the conscience.

Looking ahead to the Reformed tradition, Bavinck helpfully notes that “the Protestant Reformation was an act of conscience, and in this way conscience is frequently discussed by Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin.”²¹ In John Calvin, we note the influence of Chrysostom’s writing in the use of conscience in the sense that it does not allow man to hide his sin from God. Conscience provides an “awareness which hales man before God’s judgment” and “is a sort of guardian appointed for man to note and spy out all his secrets that nothing may remain buried in darkness.”²² The conscience cannot be bribed to betray the role it was created to serve. Unlike Chrysostom, however, Calvin would not consider the conscience to be uncorrupt and thus unerring. The Reformers, such as Peter Martyr Vermigli, believed that the conscience, due to sin, is inadequate and is dependent on the Word of God and the Holy Spirit for enlightenment and guidance. Only God himself and his Word can fully bind the conscience (Isa 33:22; Jas 4:12).

Contemporary thinkers, in line with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, have detached the conscience from God, his law, and his Word and placed it on its own. With this detachment, the conscience became purely moral and subjective. For Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant, to use Enlightenment examples, conscience is indeed detached from God entirely and simply a moral instrument, not a religious one. “Kant wants nothing to do with an erring conscience; the very notion must be banned.”²³ The German philosopher Johann Fichte also rejected the notion that the conscience errs and even elevated it to a higher level than Kant did. For Fichte, the conscience was an enlightening, infallible, and undeceived celestial gift.

Even more recently, especially with the theories of Sigmund Freud and his idea of the super-ego (which he equates with the conscience), we see a

²⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 180.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

²² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 848 (3.19.15).

²³ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 189.

bizarre and further distancing of the conscience from God and his Word. Packer provides a helpful synthesis of Freud's hypotheses that demonstrate the point at hand.

Freud gives the name of conscience to the various neurotic and psychotic phenomena of obsessive restriction, compulsion and guilt His model of man, hypothesized on the basis of clinical work with the mentally ill in fin-de-siècle Vienna, pictures the psyche as like a troubled home, where the ego on the ground floor (that is, the self-conscious self, with doors and windows open to the world) comes under pressure both from the id (aggressive energy rushing up from the cellars of the unconscious) and from the super-ego (an unnerving voice of command from upstairs, whereby repressed prohibitions and menaces from parents and society are "introjected" into conscious life in portentous disguise, and with disruptive effect). The super-ego, each person's tyrannical psychic policeman, is the culprit to which neuroses and psychoses are due, and the goal of psychoanalysis is to strengthen one's ego to unmask the super-ego and see it for the hotch-potch of forgotten traumas which it really is, thus winning freedom to discount it.²⁴

This short historical synthesis of views of the conscience provides the necessary context for the development and articulation of the view of the conscience in present-day Roman Catholic theology and practice, which developed not in a vacuum but is intimately tied to and dependent on the past. With a historical and contextual foundation laid, we are now able to understand better why this is the case.

III. Conscience in Present-Day Roman Catholic Theology and Practice

Any contemporary discussion of the conscience in Roman Catholicism must be pursued in light of Vatican II, for it is Vatican II that more than anything else has shaped the modern-day Catholic, the Catholic Church, and its theological interpretation of the world in which we live. In the documents produced by the Council, conscience receives notable attention, which has been instrumental in shaping present-day Roman Catholic moral theology. What is right, and what is wrong? What is good, and what is evil? These questions, as we have discussed, are found at the core of morality, and it is the conscience that plays the decisive role in responding to these inquiries.

Most contemporary discussion on the conscience in Roman Catholicism rely heavily on the Vatican II document *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (better known as *Gaudium et spes*). Here Pope

²⁴ Packer, *Serving the People of God*, 2:337–38.

Paul VI, toward the conclusion of Vatican II, underscores the prominence of the conscience:

In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to his heart more specifically: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged.²⁵

According to *Gaudium et spes*, humans are endowed with an innate ability and drive to seek and do good. This ability is an acquired skill that requires constant training. Human beings must learn to distinguish good from bad, and the truly good from what appears to be good. A sensitivity to human values must also grow and develop. From where do people derive this training and sensitivity? Catholic author on the conscience Anthony Marinelli answers this question: “They gain this from the world, culture, family, church, society and ideas that they are exposed to.”²⁶ We should not confuse this type of informed conscience with the conscience endowed on all of humanity for merely being human. The universally endowed conscience is not something we ask for but is simply there. We are born with it. O’Connell refers to this as *conscience/1*.²⁷ Innate to this form of conscience is a general sense of value and an awareness of personal responsibility. It is an innate drive toward what is good and is emblematic of humanity.

The informed conscience that is trained and desires to grow and mature and better decipher what is really true from that which seems true is *conscience/2*. This conscience requires training and education, the sources of which have already been mentioned. “It is on this level that we can distinguish different ‘types’ of conscience, one of which is a Catholic Christian conscience.”²⁸ Conscience/2 is informed by the factors and sources that shape it. For the Catholic, the magisterium, the pope and the bishops, and the local community of faith are the primary educators. While they are primary, there are other sources as well. “In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems that arise in the life of individuals and from social relationships.”²⁹

²⁵ *Gaudium et spes*, 16, December 7, 1965, Vatican Archive, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

²⁶ Anthony Marinelli, *Conscience and Catholic Faith: Love and Fidelity* (New York: Paulist, 1991), Loc 74 of 1195.

²⁷ See O’Connell’s *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, 110–17.

²⁸ Marinelli, *Conscience and the Catholic Faith*, Loc 87 of 1195.

²⁹ *Gaudium et spes*, 16.

There remains a third form of conscience. While conscience/1 represents a characteristic and conscience/2 is a process, *conscience*/3 is an event and as such is concrete. With this event, a person makes a concrete judgment concerning an immediate action. Conscience/3 represents the most powerful quality of the conscience. It constitutes the final norm by which a person's action must be guided. "Indeed, by the personal decision either to accept or to refuse the demand of conscience/3, the moral agent engages either in an act of sanctity or in actual sin."³⁰

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, conscience also plays a vital role in understanding contrition and being remorseful and sorrowful regarding sin. It is the stirring of the conscience that initiates the process of contrition, which is then brought to completion in the sacrament of penance. Furthermore, an examination of the conscience prepares one for the reception of this sacrament. This examination is to be carried out in light of the Word of God.³¹ Echoing *Gaudium et spes*, the *Catechism* teaches,

Moral conscience, present at the heart of the person, enjoins him at the appropriate moment to do good and to avoid evil. It also judges particular choices, approving those that are good and denouncing those that are evil When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking.³²

The conscience in modern-day Roman Catholicism also has clear soteriological implications that strongly impact its missiology. In the controversial sixteenth section of the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (or *Lumen Gentium*), for example, there is a discussion regarding salvation for those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Jesus Christ, nor his church, yet strive to do good and in some mysterious way seek God. How do they relate to the church, and how does the church view and understand them in their faith journey? The answer is clear. For those who "strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of their conscience,"³³ everlasting salvation can be attained.

Writing in the early years post Vatican II, the noted Catholic moral theologian Haring affirmed the writings of the Council, particularly those of *Lumen Gentium*. Concerning the conscience, he writes,

³⁰ O'Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, 112.

³¹ See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, 1453–54, Vatican Archives, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P4D.HTM.

³² CCC, 1777 http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P5Z.HTM.

³³ *Lumen Gentium*, 16, November 21, 1964, Vatican Archive, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

When a person is truly looking for what is good and right, there is a kind of inflexibility in the conscience. With unwavering certainty, it orders the will to conform with the intellect, following its light, as the two are rooted together at the core of one's being.³⁴

Sin, therefore, is when the clear dictates of the conscience that lead one to do good and, eventually, eternal salvation are ignored and disobeyed. "Sin is alienation from one's better self, loss of knowledge of the unique name by which we are called, a plunging into the darkness, and a split in the depth of our existence."³⁵

Though this survey of the conscience in modern-day Roman Catholicism is insufficient and incomplete, it suffices to demonstrate the vital role the conscience plays in present-day Roman Catholicism and its crucial theological and missiological implications.

IV. An Evangelical Assessment

This brief Evangelical assessment of the conscience in Roman Catholic theology and practice reveals two concerns: the question of the distinction between an unregenerate and a regenerate conscience and the distinction between a theology of nature and a theology of grace.

1. Unregenerate and Regenerate Conscience

Regarding the first concern, the Evangelical is alarmed by the absence of a distinction between a regenerate and an unregenerate conscience in Roman Catholicism. The difference in views is undoubtedly due to the differences in theological convictions regarding justification. For the Evangelical, justification is a single act with clear juridical implications. For the Catholic, however, justification is not a single act, but a lifelong process. In Roman Catholicism, therefore, there is no regenerate or unregenerate conscience but a "developing conscience."³⁶ Roman Catholic theology trusts the capability of the "developing" conscience to lead one to salvation, as demonstrated by *Lumen Gentium* 16 and the comments of Pope Francis to Scalfari.

Evangelical theology does not reject the ability of the conscience to determine in many situations what is right and what is wrong, but it does reject the capacity of the unregenerate conscience to lead one to repentance and salvation. In 1 Corinthians, Paul makes this point clear when he says, "The

³⁴ Haring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, 1:240.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:260.

³⁶ See CCC, 1784, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P60.HTM.

natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14 *ESV*). Reformed theologian Cornelius Van Til articulates this point well when he makes a distinction between the Adamic consciousness and the sinful or unregenerate consciousness. The Adamic consciousness represents human reason as it existed before the fall. “Its knowledge was, in the nature of the case, true, though not exhaustive. This reason was in covenant with God, instead of at enmity against God. It recognized the fact that its function was that of the interpretation of God’s revelation.”³⁷

The Adamic conscience stands in stark contrast with the unregenerate, or sinful conscience, which is

the “natural man,” “dead in trespasses and sin.” The natural man wants to be something that he cannot be. He wants to be “as God” himself the judge of good and evil, himself the standard of truth. He sets himself as the ideal of comprehensive knowledge.³⁸

This person, however, as Paul clearly noted, cannot accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him. It is obvious, therefore, that such a conscience is not naturally capable of guiding one to repentance and salvation. Roman Catholicism, therefore, grants too much to conscience by not making a distinction between a regenerate and unregenerate, or an Adamic and sinful, conscience. Its theology does not allow for this clear distinction either.

2. Theology of Nature and Grace

The second concern is closely related to the first and regards a theology of nature and grace. Reformed Italian scholar Leonardo De Chirico correctly states, “Nature and grace are two fundamental categories in all theological discourse. ... They are always at the center of any theological attempt to come to terms with the Christian faith.”³⁹ This centrality is also relevant when discussing the conscience. It is profoundly shaped by how one understands the theological relationship between nature and grace. This relationship is at the core of any religious system and has systemic implications.

³⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (1974; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 62–63.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁹ Leonardo De Chirico, *Evangelical Theological Perspectives on Post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism* (New York: Lang, 2003), 195.

In the Roman Catholic religious system, two principal traditions expound this relationship: the Augustinian tradition and the Thomistic tradition. These traditions, as De Chirico notes, “bear witness to a persistent diversity in terms of theological accents and attitudes.”⁴⁰ Whereas the Augustinian tradition stresses the concept of *natura vitata* (or, a corrupted nature), the Thomistic tradition insists on the inner resources of nature’s *capacitas Dei* (or, human capacity for God). While the Roman Catholic system embraces both traditions and does not identify exclusively with either, the Thomistic tradition with its emphasis on nature’s capacity for God has proved more prominent and preferable in Vatican II theology and modern-day Roman Catholicism, as evidenced by the church’s teachings on and interpretation of the conscience.

The implications of the Thomistic tradition are troubling to an Evangelical interpretation of the conscience in Roman Catholic theology and practice. Indeed, Evangelicals reject any notion that nature has any capacity for God. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the garden of Eden and sin and its devastating effects entered into the world, nature lost all capacity to repair that relationship with God. This is why Paul can say to the Corinthians that the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; rather, they are mere folly to him (1 Cor 2:14). The restoration of that relationship is, therefore, made possible by God’s grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. There is no room at all for *capacitas Dei*. Once we allow for human or nature’s capacity for God, salvation is no longer by God’s grace alone through faith in Christ alone but now includes roles for humans and nature in salvation. By extension, therefore, the conscience can guide one along the path of salvation, obedience to one’s conscience is key to having success on the salvific journey, and disobedience to conscience, as Pope Francis has noted, is equivalent to sin.

Scripture, however, does not permit such an interpretation of the conscience and the capacity of nature for God. In addition to his teachings to the Corinthians, Paul reminds the church in Ephesus,

You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Eph 2:1–4 ESV)

⁴⁰ Ibid., 202.

Paul consistently eliminates the possibility of what Van Til refers to as “a common consciousness.”⁴¹ It is theologically dangerous to speak of such. Scripture consistently contrasts a regenerate conscience with a sinful or depraved conscience. If we were once dead in our sins and are by nature children of wrath, carrying out only the desires of the body and mind, then our conscience cannot be trusted to lead us to repentance and salvation or any right place or standing with God. Nor is it capable of doing so.

The Evangelical must, therefore, raise concerns regarding the present-day understanding of the conscience in Roman Catholic theology and practice, for the clear teachings of Scripture cannot sustain it. It must also be questioned for the strong missiological implications that it has on the Roman Catholic Church and its faithful. We now turn our attention to those implications.

V. Missiological Implications of the Conscience in Roman Catholic Theology and Practice

The Evangelical will note that the missiological implications of the conscience that we have observed here are significant for the Roman Catholic Church. The strong influence of the Thomistic tradition on its view of nature and grace, along with the lack of distinction between the Adamic and unregenerate conscience, is proving to have devastating effects on the missiology of Roman Catholicism. *Lumen Gentium* 16 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church provides a clear example of these devastating effects. According to *Lumen Gentium*, the plan of salvation is vast in its inclusiveness and hinges on a mere acknowledgment of the Creator. “In the first place among these (who acknowledge the Creator) there are the Moslems, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God.”⁴² The extent of salvation is much broader than even this, however: “Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace.”⁴³ It is the dictates of the conscience of one moved by grace and striving to do good that serves as the guide to salvation.

With no distinction between the Adamic and the unregenerate conscience, and with the strong influence of the Thomistic *capacitas Dei*, the conscience

⁴¹ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 62.

⁴² *Lumen Gentium*, 16.

⁴³ Ibid.

has been given a capacity that Scripture does not warrant, and the result is a confused soteriology. In light of *Lumen Gentium* 16, it is fair to ask who is not included in the church's plan of salvation. Who is not a recipient of God's grace to at least some measure? The renowned Catholic scholar Avery Dulles notes this clearly in his renowned book *Models of the Church*: "The Church ... takes it for granted that others besides Christians are recipients of God's grace in Christ."⁴⁴ The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner took this idea a step further when he proposed the idea of the anonymous Christian. "In the acceptance of himself," Rahner writes, "man is accepting Christ as the absolute perfection and guarantee of his own anonymous movement towards God by grace."⁴⁵ It is the dictates of the conscience that guide one along this anonymous movement toward God and his grace. This explains why Pope Francis can simply refer to obedience to one's conscience as the key to knowing God and disobedience to conscience as equal to sin.

Ignored entirely in this stream of thought and theology, however, is the justice and judgment of God. Even more absent is the idea of hell and eternal punishment. Jesuit theologian John Sachs adds to this observation when he says,

It may not be said that even one person is already or will in fact be damned. All that may and must be believed is that the salvation of the world is a reality begun and established in Christ. Such a faith expresses itself most consistently in the hope that because of the gracious love of God whose power far surpasses human sin, all men and women will in fact freely and finally surrender to God in love and be saved.⁴⁶

A weak and confused soteriology will always produce a weak and confused missiology. If when sincerely desiring to do good and avoid evil one follows the dictates of her or his conscience, which then inevitably, even anonymously, leads to knowledge of the Creator and everlasting salvation, what role then does mission play in the church? What gospel or good news is left for the church to proclaim? What does the mission of the church become? When the plan of eternal salvation is reduced to a genuine attempt to follow the dictates of one's conscience, the message of the gospel and salvation in the cross of Christ become secondary at best and fade into a milieu of contradictory messages, in which even Moslems are considered brothers of the church.

⁴⁴ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1987), 71.

⁴⁵ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 6, *Concerning Vatican Council II* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969), 394.

⁴⁶ John R. Sachs, "Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 252–53.

The Evangelical is concerned about this missiology. The Bible is clear: apart from Christ, we are dead in our trespasses and sins. Dead in sin, our natural self cannot perceive the things of the Spirit and even rejects them and considers them folly, preferring instead to live out the passions of the flesh and the desires of the body and mind, which due to our sinful nature are prone to sin and destruction. The natural man desires to be God himself, deciding what is good and what is evil. Sin, however, makes this entirely impossible.

The good news of the Bible is that through God's grace alone, demonstrated in Christ's salvific work on the cross, and through faith alone in the saving work of Christ, humans can be saved from their sins and freed from their bondage to sin. They are made alive in and through Christ and are no longer a slave to sin and the natural, sinful self. The mission of the church is to proclaim this good news with the hope of seeing the lost come to know Christ as Savior. It has, therefore, a clear mission.

Regarding the conscience in Evangelical theology, "awareness of conscience increases church unity and strengthens evangelism and missions."⁴⁷ This is due to the clear distinction between the unregenerate and regenerate conscience and to the rejection of a "common conscience." The unregenerate conscience will naturally reject the things of the Spirit. The regenerate conscience, however, will desire to grow in the knowledge of God's Word, and God's Word will shape and train the conscience to desire church unity, proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, and strive towards a unified and common mission with the people of God, the church.

This element is missing in present-day Roman Catholic theology and practice and thus has significant theological and missiological implications. The Evangelical, therefore, is driven to pray for a biblical, gospel reformation in the Roman Catholic Church. The debate regarding the conscience provides a helpful platform on which this discussion may continue.

⁴⁷ Naselli and Crowley, *Conscience*, 17.

Cults and Conscience: Apologetics and the Reconfigured Conscience of Cult Members

H. G. (HENK) STOKER

Abstract

While our Creator made the human conscience an intrinsic part of us to enable us to fulfill our calling morally and responsibly, cults use people's consciences to control them—even to do things that they would have previously considered as wrong. The conscience goes against the immediate human impulse for self-interest and is independent of the individual's will because God created it to go against that person's desire. A guilty conscience can thus be abused as a very effective means of control. While the so-called Christian cults make their members willfully obedient through reconfiguring their consciences, Christian apologists should find ways to address the content of cult members' consciences to bring them back to a truly biblical understanding.

Keywords

Cults, conscience, apologetics, control, mind control, reconfigured conscience

I. Anna's Story

Anna, a mother of two boys, ages three and five, became a Christian after her marriage. Her husband was not a believer, but she was determined to raise her boys in the Christian faith. When she found a Christian group that was wholeheartedly devoted to living according to the Bible as the Word of God, she was glad to become part of it. She viewed the leader of this “Bible study group” not only as a mature Christian with special insights into the Bible and a straightforward way of applying them, but also as someone living so close to God that God “revealed” to this leader many things that she was to pass on to *the group* (as they nicknamed themselves).

The word the leader used to control them was “evil.” She and her followers became more and more frantic about the presumed influence of “evil” that supposedly was trying to get a hold on them in a variety of ways. They were, for instance, not even allowed to have clothing or household appliances similar to others’ lest these things make it easy for “evil” to go from one person or house to another.

Anna’s younger son was hyperactive. The leader said they had to find the source of evil in her house to free her son of the evil influence that caused the hyperactivity. She then told Anna to burn all the curtains in the house, because they had been bought from a store chain owned by people the leader regarded as evil; these people’s influence was coming through the curtains into Anna’s house. When that did not help, the leader told her to destroy all the crystal glasses in her home because evil can easily jump from evil fortunetellers, who use crystal balls for divination, to crystal glasses and through them to her son.

Because the leader convinced her that she must protect her family and especially her son in this way, it spoke to Anna’s conscience in the sense that she should do what is right to protect her family.

Anna destroyed the glasses—to the dismay and outrage of her non-Christian husband. Her conscience was so reconfigured through the influence of the leader that she burned the cow doll that her hyperactive son was so fond of—which resulted in many tears for many nights—because the leader had told her that the cow, which had been bought in Switzerland, resembled the holy cow of Hinduism and had evil influences on her son at night.

There was no connection between the cow bought in Switzerland and Hinduism, but cults typically make connections between things that are parts of members’ lives and evil, which enables them to discredit anything.

Those working with cults should show cult members examples that do not fit into the cult's worldview to get them to start thinking for themselves. In this instance, it would have been easy to show that there are cows in every country in the world, that only 13% of the world follows the Hindu view of cows, and the Swiss are not in that group. That the cow doll had no relation to the boy's hyperactivity could also be seen in that the hyperactivity did not stop after his cow was destroyed. However, this did not stop the leader from following that illogical connection with another.

Because there was no change in the boy's hyperactivity, the leader came to Anna's house. When she saw Anna's cat, she told Anna that the evil was coming through their cat because her cat was a Persian cat, and Persia, or Iran, is a country full of superstition, evil, and sorcery. Even though she and her boys were very fond of the cat, Anna took it to a vet to have it put down. She told her boys that the cat probably got lost; she just could not tell them what she had done. But Anna's son was still hyperactive.

Her reconfigured conscience had allowed her to hurt her family and lie—things she would not have done in the past—to “rid” him and their house from this “evil.” While nothing changed in her son's condition, proving that the leader was wrong and not speaking for God, Anna was so under the influence of the leader that she did not question her.

The leader then came to her and told her she had found the source of the evil—it was her son himself.

To get rid of her son was, fortunately, too much, even for Anna's reconfigured conscience (and that while there were several suicides in the group in faithful reaction to suggestions of the leader). Even then, it did not come to her mind that the idea of getting rid of her son to save her son did not make sense.

Anna did not know where to go or what to make of it, but through God's providence, it happened that we had just started an English ministry close to her in Sunnyside, Pretoria. When she saw the advertisement, she and another member of the group decided to come to our service that Sunday. After the service, I had invited those attending to come to our course on dealing with cults the Monday evening. In the meeting, I explained in brief what cults are and how they work. Afterward, she came to me and told me about the group, what they had said about her son, and the similarities between what the leader had been doing and what I had just explained, and she asked if I could help.

When cult members are receiving “information” from their leaders of such a nature that it has an impact upon their consciences and reconfigures and repacks the content thereof, it changes their view of good and

evil. They even become convinced that certain people and things that they did not previously consider evil truly are morally evil—as can be seen in Anna’s story.

II. *Conscience and Apologetics and Cults*

God made it possible for us as human beings to fight sin and evil even in ourselves, to do good things that we do not want to do, and to refrain from evil things we do want to do. We call the source of these unselfish acts our *conscience*. Our conscience brings a sense of right and wrong and can even force us in the opposite direction from what we want.

Conscience does not stop at knowledge. People act according to their consciences. As illustrated in the story of Anna, one’s conscience is much more than a moral awareness of what human beings ought and ought not to do. While assuming a certain moral content, man’s conscience has the power to compel, to go against an individual’s will or what at first sight seems to be good and right and proper. It brings a sense of how one ought to act but is also more than just a feeling: it is an inner reaction of the individual against evil or selfishness in him- or herself. A good example of this can be seen in the reaction of the Jewish leaders to Jesus’s answer to their question of whether they must kill the woman who fornicated (John 8:9).

Because the conscience is more than just a feeling, but an inner reaction of the individual against evil or selfishness in him- or herself, it can unfortunately be harnessed to adhere to the cult’s “God-ordained” norms. The reconfigured conscience plays into the hands of the cult leader both in this obligation to do what should be done according to the cult (positive pressure) and in the experience of guilt in not adhering to the cultic rules (negative pressure). Cult and ex-cult members need to regain a free, autonomous conscience. The reconfiguring and repacking of the cultic conscience to its real intent and God-willed purpose must be part of our apologetics and our outreach to those with a cultic outlook.

Cornelius Van Til’s views correspond with those of John Calvin when he states that by being created in the image of God, man can know God, although this knowledge is suppressed (Rom 1:21).¹ Apologetics needs to address this suppressed knowledge, for the suppression is not total. Conversion takes people not from utter ignorance to a basic understanding of reality, but from a distorted understanding that is typical of cults to knowledge, built on Scripture, that enables them to understand things as they are. Christian

¹ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 197.

apologists want to break through the falsehood, inconsistency, and lies people believe to open the way for people to be introduced and confronted with the true gospel.

We can define religious cults as groups that actively set out to control both the earthly and eternal lives of people.² They reconfigure or repack their members' entire minds to control their behavior, thoughts, emotions, information and environment, language, norms, history, view of God and salvation, interpretation of Scripture, doctrines, and membership.³ This article focuses in part on the first three control mechanisms.⁴

III. *Behavior Control*

Through changing and repacking the conscience's sense of what ought to be, cult leaders change their members' sense of how one ought to act—as can be seen in Anna's story. The vast and manipulative influence of the leader on the behavior of the group and each member must therefore be understood and challenged (first in a very subtle way using informative questions) when the apologist reaches out to these people.

1. *The Influence of the Leader*

The influence of the leader on members' understanding of right and wrong becomes so strong that the members will

- commit suicide, as happened to many of the 912 members of the Peoples Temple, followers of Jim Jones in 1978;
- make themselves, their wives, and even their children sexually available to the leader and even among themselves or as a means of earning funds for the group, as exemplified by the Children of God and the David Koresh groups;
- commit murder, as has happened in recent years in cults around the world, for instance, in South Africa in 2018 by members of the Seven Angels Ministry in the Eastern Cape;

² Robert Lifton defines cults as “sealed-off communities where reality can be dispensed and controlled.” Robert Jay Lifton, *Losing Reality: On Cults, Cultism, and the Mindset of Political and Religious Zealotry* (New York: New York Press, 2019), 1. According to Steven Hassan, control is the main difference between a normal group and a cult. A cult is “subjecting its members to systematic control ... to keep them dependent and obedient.” Steven Hassan, *Combating Cult Mind Control* (Newton, MA: Freedom of Mind Press, 2016), 82.

³ H. G. Stoker, *Die Jehovah-getuïes: 'n onchristelike kulte?* (Gezina, SA: Printburo, 1995).

⁴ This article builds on my previous work, Henk Stoker, “Is the Church a Cult?”; for an overview of all twelve control mechanisms, see <http://www.gksa.org.za/pdf/Eng%20documents/apologetics.pdf>.

- suffer rather than to go to a doctor as, for example, Christian Scientists;
- marry or divorce on command of the leader, as, for example, the Unification Church and Christ in Me International;
- interact socially only with people the leader approves of, relinquish education, or renounce parents and family.

2. *Suppressing of Personality*

One of the first signs that a cult has enlisted or influenced a person is that he or she starts to behave differently.⁵ Why would an introvert go out three times a week knocking at strangers' doors, inviting them to Bible studies, or telling them to repent? Why would an extrovert sit for hours and meditate or study the Bible somewhere alone on his own?

Their conscience tells them to do so—sometimes even telling them they are enjoying it, even if they are not.

Several years ago, I was asked by members of a family who had been involved in the Jehovah's Witnesses for decades to visit that family. When my friend and I knocked on their door one Friday evening, they were, as Jehovah's Witnesses, quite surprised that Christians would come knocking on their door. We had a wonderful, blessed discussion that evening. Speaking during our visit with him, Carl told us how he looked forward to and enjoyed going out on weekends as Jehovah's Witness to take their message. Later in the evening, however, after some very intense hours, he came through God's providence to the insight that he was spreading a false message, and he then told us that he actually had not been looking forward to weekends because it was so difficult for him as an introvert to go knocking on people's doors.

Man's conscience is an inner reaction of the individual against evil or selfishness in him- or herself. In the hands of cult leaders, it becomes a tool to bring members to what the leadership has declared to be correct behavior. It happens not only through direct teachings but also through the unconscious strengthening of specific behaviors through group cohesion and commitment. They just "feel" they "ought to" do as they are told.

I had the privilege of helping more than forty young people (several of them senior medical students at the University of Pretoria) leave Providence (a

⁵ For this reason, Michael Langone defines a religious cult as a "group or movement that exhibits great or excessive devotion or dedication to a person, idea or thing, uses a thought-reform program to persuade, control, and socialize members, systematically induces states of psychological dependency in members, exploits members to advance the leadership's goals and causes psychological harm to members, their families, and the community." Michael D. Langone, introduction to *Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse*, ed. Michael D. Langone (New York: Norton, 1993), 5.

cult that originated in Korea) and to rid themselves of the cultic manipulation and influence. While in the cult, they had a rigorous program, starting early every morning with prayers (with prescribed content) and sessions before they went to class. There was also a program every evening until late, which deprived these students of time to study. When I asked them why they adhered to these rulings when they had such challenging courses that should have been occupying most of their time, one of them answered, “No one told me to start praying at three in the morning.” Though he was obviously obeying the unspoken commands of Providence, he told me he was doing it because he felt it was right to do what everyone else was doing.

Conscience shapes one’s view of how one ought to act and is more compelling than rules given by another (even those believed to be from God through the cult leader). Many people who believe in God and the Bible as his Word will still do things opposite to what they know the Bible says. Conscience is more than just an acknowledgment or a feeling of right and wrong; it is a force within us that God gave us so that we do what we ought. Cult leaders play into the compelling nature of the conscience when they continually remind their members of the “higher aims” and “calling” of the group. Through these “higher aims” and “calling,” the conscience is reconfigured, with the result that in the member’s behavior, what the leader has taught will take precedence over any individual or personal aims. The reconfigured conscience brings the member to the conviction that personal aims and related goals can only be selfish, with the result that he or she will act accordingly.

The son of one of our acquaintances became involved with the daughter of the apostle of a splinter group of the Catholic Apostolic cult. I have even met with this “apostle” of the group, which claimed to be the only true representatives of God on earth.⁶ These two children were married, and in his bridegroom’s speech, the son of our friends acknowledged the “apostle” as his only father. He did so while his own father was there and had even paid for part of the ceremony. I did not get the impression that anyone forced the bridegroom to say what he said.

Did the son act in this way because he became hard and unfeeling towards his biological father, the person who was there and loved him from before he was born, the man who sacrificed a lot to help him through his childhood and study years? This was certainly not the case. Because of the control of

⁶ Among other questions, I asked this “apostle” on what basis someone can discern that he is a true apostle sent by God, while the apostles of the groups they came from (such as the Old Apostolic and New Apostolic) are false apostles.

the cult, this son did what he considered as the right thing to do. His conscience could not warn him against the pain he was causing his father and family. It was reconfigured according to the higher aims of the group and its leader (or “father”).

3. *The Elite Mentality*

The precedence of the group is underlined by the proclamation that only they have the truth and have been specially chosen by God to proclaim the truth to the world. Through these higher aims and elite mentality, members are bound together in a tightknit group and constantly inspired to work harder for the “God-given doctrines” of the group. Their consciences are reconfigured accordingly.

When we deal apologetically with people in cults, this feeling of elevation and elitist mentality makes it very difficult to reach them because they are looking down on us—no matter who we are. To break through this elite mentality, we need to show members of a cult (if possible, in a personal relationship) that most cults present similar exclusive truth claims. This method can play a vital role in breaking the idea of uniqueness that keeps their conscience captive.

One Sunday evening, I had the rare opportunity to speak in Pretoria to approximately fifty members of a cult. The South African leader of this international Providence cult had been wrestling with the question whether they were as unique as he thought, and he had told the extremely intelligent group of young people devoted to their cultic calling to come to the meeting to debate with me whether they were in the truth and the only true Christian organization. I knew I had to focus on their elitist mentality before they would be open to listening to me on doctrinal and other issues. So I asked them about their view of cults (a subject that was even part of their own teaching materials) and their idea that they were unique, the only true Christians, and the calling it put on them. Then, I showed them several video clips of other cults, where the members were saying similar things. The reaction was overwhelming, with several of the women crying while watching and listening, and some of the men walking out, coming back after a while, listening, walking away, and returning angry as they realized that they, who knew how to bring new converts in, were far from unique and had themselves been misled, manipulated, and controlled.

When engaging in apologetics with cult members about their urge to spread their message, tell them (and even show them, if there is an opportunity) that their position is not as unique as they think. Refer to the similarity in the truth claims of other cultic groups. Ask questions about how to

determine the truth among all the different truth claims. Ask why someone they want to convince should believe what their leader says, as opposed to the words of any one of the several other leaders? You can even ask them what would have happened if it had been one of the other cults talking to them at the stage when they decided to join the group they are now involved in.

To normalize the conscience is imperative. It took a while for the young people coming out of Providence to trust themselves to read the Bible as it is and not as it had been presented. This is most of the time a difficult process, but when people humble themselves to read and reread the Bible, to open their hearts through God's grace to hear what the Spirit is saying to us in his Word, conversion happens.

I met with a couple who had asked for my help. The wife was in a mainstream Christian church and the husband in a cult that uses the Bible, but in its own way, and sees it as subordinated to the apostle's authority, I asked them on what they agree. Both of them agreed that the Bible is important, and I encouraged them to read the Bible together every evening, listening to what it actually says. They started to read it as it is, instead of the way the apostle or prophet or priest would "spiritualize" it. In the end, the husband became convicted by the Word of God, left the cult after forty years, and started to serve in the congregation of which his wife was part.

IV. Thought Control

1. Thought-Stopping Techniques

When you try to reason with cult members, you usually are only able to progress up to a certain point. Then, it is as if the person you are talking to becomes stuck in a mental blockage. While it shows how much mind control they are under, it also reveals that their reconfigured consciences and what you are saying threaten their experience, what they live for and hold dear.

That the conscience is involved can be seen in the emotional and even aggressive reaction we typically encounter when we put facts before cult members that question the authority and integrity of the leadership and organization to which they belong. The person experiencing guilt for not adhering to the cultic rules will not let any accusations or feelings of doubt enter their mind. A guilty conscience lets a person who would otherwise react in a very logical and civil way react in a hostile and illogical way. Putting facts to a cult member results in a struggle between mind and conscience, and even between conscience and conscience.

An example of this struggle appears in the title and subtitle of a book by Raymond Franz, *Crisis of Conscience*, which has a telling subtitle, "The

Struggle between Loyalty to God and Loyalty to One's Religion."⁷ He wrote it to describe why he—a member of the governing body of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the possible successor of his uncle, Frederick Franz, as president—left this group. He describes the struggle he had with his conscience as he was considering leaving the organization.

To attain the slavish subjection of their members, cult leaders need to control the way their followers think.⁸ Any critical thoughts the members may have of the leader or the group must be stopped. Members must so strongly believe that their group has the only truth and only the truth, that their consciences are reconfigured so that they are willing to filter all information that contradicts their thinking through their cultic spectacles, coloring it accordingly or even rejecting it.

Jehovah's Witnesses, for instance, are programmed through the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society's propaganda machine to believe and accept that individual thinking is of Satan. They are taught that God is the editor of *The Watchtower* magazine, and in it they are told not to allow any critical thinking of this so-called organization of God.⁹ They must fight against Satan and his forces through the unquestioning acceptance of that which comes from the "Faithful and Discreet Slave."

2. Closed-Mindedness

Cult members are led to believe that the better they become at rejecting and obliterating negative thoughts, the stronger their faith has grown.¹⁰ The heartbreaking part is that the opposite is true and that the better they become at this, the more they surrender their conscience to the leader.

⁷ Raymond Franz, *Crisis of Conscience: The Struggle between Loyalty to God and Loyalty to One's Religion* (Middletown, DE: NuLife, 2018).

⁸ "This single truth, the sacred word, is the word of the leader, or sometimes, that of a deity to whom the leader is the only one to have a direct line. All knowledge comes from the leader. While the leader may change their mind as new 'insights' appear, followers may never do so, although they must ever be on the alert to jump to the leader's sudden ideological shifts." Alexandra Stein, *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 18.

⁹ Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, *Avoid Independent Thinking* (*The Watchtower*, January 15, 1983), 22.

¹⁰ "Reflective, critical, evaluative thought, especially that critical of the cult, becomes aversive and avoided. The member will appear as you or I do, and will function well in ordinary tasks, but the cult lectures and procedures tend to gradually induce members to experience anxiety whenever they critically evaluate the cult. Soon they are conditioned to avoid critical thinking, especially about the cult, because doing so becomes associated with pangs of anxiety and guilt." Margaret Thaler Singer, *Cults in Our Midst: The Continuing Fight against Their Hidden Menace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 118.

In several conversations with cult members, I have experienced an honest and open discussion of doctrine until we reach a certain point where what we read contradicts their doctrine, and their reaction completely goes against the trend of the conversation up to that point—as if they have no insight or logic. For example, I was having a very friendly and reasonable conversation with two Jehovah’s Witness ladies on the subject of who the 144,000 in Revelation refers to. They agreed that these people had to be marked *on earth* when the earth was going to be destroyed, according to Revelation 7. They agreed that according to these verses, those people will then be *on earth*; they would be marked as not to be destroyed. They agreed that in that passage it is the 144,000 who are marked. However, they just could not acknowledge the logical conclusion that, according to that passage, the 144,000 will be *on the earth* when it is destroyed. According to their doctrine, the 144,000 had to be *in heaven*.

It is vital for apologists to cult members to understand that when these people experience in their consciences a reaction such as distrust of information that threatens the authenticity of their group, they can become hostile, accuse their interlocutor of blackening their reputation, and withdraw from the conversation. Even if we present evidence that the organization to which they belong is misleading them, it is as if there is a blockage preventing this previously rational person from grasping or understanding the facts.

3. A Reconfigured Conscience

Cults use the controlling of thoughts to reconfigure the content of their members’ consciences and then use the reconfigured consciences to guide these people’s thoughts and behaviors in the desired direction. When the leader and his or her fellow workers repack the cult members’ consciences, members can even become convinced that certain people and things that they did not previously consider bad are morally bad and even evil.¹¹

Anna’s story, with which we started this article, is an excellent example of this. The leader of the group convinced the members that things such as certain clothes, glasses, and pets could be evil and needed to be discarded. This even included prohibitions of eating mushrooms (because they grow at night), driving a red or black car, or buying clothes similar to others’. Because of the focus on the so-called evil in things, things not normally considered bad became evil when the leader said so, and the group attuned its conscience to it.

¹¹ Cults establish their own “brand of morality, outside normal social bounds.” Singer, *Cults in Our Midst*, 9.

To reconfigure conscience and eliminate consciousness, cults make use of a variety of methods of thought interchange, such as concentrated prayer, loud or soft chanting, meditation, singing or humming, and saying things over and over.¹² Members believe that the better they manage to erase “negative” thoughts, the more they have grown in the faith. The content of their conscience has been changed, and they have increasingly become slaves of the organization. Even after members have broken loose from a cult, they are not rid of the enslaving effect that it has on their thinking and consciences. We must address this problem when working apologetically with these ex-members.

When the members of Providence I worked with concluded that they were part of a cult and needed to leave, they had the problem that when they read the Bible, it triggered the memories of how the leaders had interpreted it. Also, when they started praying, the words and mantras that were part of prayer in the cult came back. As one said, “I cannot trust myself to read the Bible or pray.” For a while, I advised them to read the Bible with others to listen to the Word, not to the cult. I also told them that if they stopped their prayer for a while to get rid of the cultic influence, I and several others would be praying on their behalf.

It is not sufficient for ex-members only to have insight into the cultic thought control that should be worked through, processed, and eventually discarded. They must also know that the truth sets them free (cf. John 8:32) and keep believing this promise of God. Make sure that they do not exchange their reliance on the cult leader for reliance on you. Instead, help them to come to trust (again) in the Lord and configure their consciences according to his will. They should accept nothing that anybody teaches without thinking about it and comparing it to the Word of God (2 Tim 3:15–17). The Bereans in Acts 17:11–12, who tested everything that Paul said by Scripture, can serve as a good example.

V. Control over Emotions

We can consider the control that cults have over the emotions of their members as emotional abuse. Cults manipulate various emotions such as

¹² “Repetition, monotony, rhythm: these are the lulling, hypnotic cadences in which the formal indoctrination is generally delivered. Material is repeated over and over and over. If the lectures are sophisticated, they vary their talks somewhat in an attempt to hold interest, but the message remains pretty much the same. During the changing phase, all this repetition focuses on certain central themes.” Hassan, *Combatting Cult Mind Control*, 127.

fear, guilt, loyalty, and love to ensure strong control over the members' individuality, thoughts, behavior, and consciences.

1. *Fear*

Cults exploit emotions like fear and the need for security. Cult literature is full of threats of the impending disaster looming over humankind or specific people or groups that have a malicious agenda and are focusing on them. Members' salvation depends on their loyalty to the group and hard work for its aims, even though these aims might jeopardize the security of members and their families.

In 1994, the big change in the government in South Africa took place. In September 1993, I had discussions with a grade 10 student who had left his parents to join a cult. After the police found him and brought him back to his parents, the parents contacted me for help. The young man had been convinced by members of this religious but politically motivated cult that the judgment day and the terror preceding it would come in 1994 with the change in government. If they wanted to survive it, they had to take supplies and become part of the cultic group, which had their headquarters in the Eastern Cape Mountains close to Barkley-East.

The teaching that the judgment day or some other catastrophic event is at hand is a way in which cults in South Africa recruit members among young people. Some groups inflate the tension between tribes and races to get people of a particular tribe or race to follow the "vision leader" of the cult. The economic crises and imbalances in Africa offer breeding grounds for politically motivated religious cults focusing on fear and people's need for survival.

The danger of leaving the group is continuously impressed upon members and possible converts. Some groups convince their members that if they were ever to leave the group, something terrible would happen to their loved ones. In this way, the conscience is reconfigured so that members will do things to loved ones that they would previously have considered bad (for instance, breaking ties completely) while thinking they are doing it for their own good. Other groups will teach members that if they stay "in the truth," they can even save their unbelieving families. To do what is "right" can become a burden on the consciences of these people.

Mari's involvement in the Bloomberg cult illustrates this point. When Bloomberg had to leave South Africa, she followed him to Switzerland. She was sent from Switzerland to Jerusalem to gain converts there, without money or support for the trip. As a young woman with a brilliant mind, she managed to hitchhike to Israel through countries for which she did not have

the necessary papers. There she lived under horrendous conditions, weighing only 36 kilograms in the end. Her parents had no idea where in the world she was and not even if she were still alive. Nevertheless, she thought she did it all for her family, believing that if she stayed true to Bloomberg, her whole family could be saved: her conscience was so radically reconfigured that she thought that by breaking all ties with her parents and siblings, she would “save” them! At the same time, she cried every night, longing for them. To borrow words from Martin Luther, who said his conscience was held captive by the Word of God, this person’s conscience was held captive not by the Word of God as such, but by the word as interpreted by, added to, subtracted from, and reinterpreted by the leadership of the cult.

2. Guilt

An important reason for the control cults have over their members is the abuse of guilt. Cults are experts in controlling the guilt feelings of their members. Many cults actively promote and praise the confession of guilt feelings to the group or at least to the leaders. They know that if an individual feels guilt toward another, the first individual’s bad conscience will force him or her to do almost anything for that other person. It is evident that such confessions (sometimes very intimate and personal) would enable leaders to have an even stronger hold over followers.¹³

One of the reasons for guilt feelings among cult members resides in the cult’s emphasis on purity, especially over and against the world. When working apologetically with those involved in cults, we have to deal with their disappointment in themselves for not being “good enough,” and the bad conscience it brings must be handled.

An ex-cult member who spoke about the guilt feelings he had experienced as a member of a cult described it as follows: “I began feeling very estranged from myself. I became extremely depressed and angry with myself for not being able to be this perfect person God wants me to be. Confusion and ambivalence set in, with suicidal thoughts surfacing.”

In everyday life, our conscience does not kick in when a person with superior moral knowledge explains what we should or should not do. By contrast, it is when we know we are acting or want to act against what we ought to do that we experience conscientious reproach or conscientious

¹³ “Just as the initial love bombing awakened feelings of warmth, acceptance, and worthiness, now the group condemnation leaves recruits full of self-doubt, guilt, and anxiety. Through this kind of manipulation, they are convinced that they can be saved only if they stay with the group.” Singer, *Cults in Our Midst*, 119.

coercion—a deep-in-the-heart experience and feeling of guilt. Cults aim to reconfigure members' sense of "what we ought to do" so they can trigger guilt feelings for any desire or action that threatens its dominance.

Confession by members before the group serves as a kind of personal cleansing. It also symbolizes self-sacrifice and the member's willingness to make himself accessible to the group. It serves as proof that he is one with the group to such an extent that even his most intimate affairs are known to the group. It also affords the group a chance to confess things of the past and in such a manner that he would get relief from suppressed feelings of guilt. He also feels that he is closer to these people who are sharing his deepest secrets. In this way, the cult further reinforces its control over its members.

Guilt, as such, is not necessarily bad. The existence of the guilty conscience is usually good because it makes possible the final triumph of what is morally good over what is morally bad. The problem is, therefore, not our consciences themselves but consciences filled with lies and deceit. Many cults thrive on news telling of impurity and bad things happening, for instance, in Christian churches, to show how special they as this devoted group of followers are to God. This stance puts even more pressure on the cult members. Because even the best person cannot live in one hundred percent righteousness, the members feel guilty and ashamed toward the organization about their own impurities. The bad feelings that accompany the feelings of impurity are then so deeply internalized that they push those members to make amends for their misdeeds through hard work and dedication to the cult. This process causes a deepening in their sense of guilt, which in turn strengthens their cultic consciences.

Understandably, someone who has gone through such a process will find it difficult to leave the cult to which they belong. Considering leaving the organization generates an enormous guilt complex in that person. The conscience tells them that it is the most terrible and disloyal thing to do and that doing so stabs "God's organization" in the back. Thus, someone who wants to break away from a cult experiences extreme guilt feelings. Apologists must understand that if such a person does leave the cult without proper help and support, they might go back to the cult or a similar group to get peace of mind.

3. Loyalty and Commitment

For cults, the hallmark of a good member is loyalty and commitment. This loyalty and dedication include making sure that negative emotions do not surface, except toward outsiders. It also involves members marginalizing their own needs in light of the best interests of the group. Instead of

criticizing the leader of the organization, members should rather criticize themselves and ascribe faults to their own shortcomings as members of the group. When the members' consciences are thus reconfigured, the leadership of the cult maintains an impregnable position of authority.

In an apologetic discussion with these people, it is therefore vital to emphasize that the Lord came to set us free from our sin and any feelings of guilt. God forgives us of our sins not because and as long as we tread carefully, but because his Son fully paid for them on the cross.

4. Love and Unity

In many cults, a recruit encounters at first a love that seems so unselfish and without limitations that all the attention and motivation afforded to him sweeps him off his feet.¹⁴ He feels that he has walked into a utopia where all are focused on their higher calling, care for each other, and want to live accordingly. Over time, as he becomes one of the older members, this initial attention and flattery wanes and is turned toward new members. He then learns that the love of the group was not truly unconditional but was earned through his loyal and active participation and the turning in of good results. This realization convinces him to work harder and become more seriously involved in the cult.

An important reason for the uniform conduct of cult members is the feeling of unity that prevails. Through this unity, a group conscience grows, where everyone's consciences become accustomed to a different way of doing things. The morals of the group become the morals of each member. A cultic conscience develops. Members experience themselves as the elect that should bring "God's message" to the world. This feeling of unity is reinforced in that they feel mutually dependent because the people outside the cult differ from them—even by minor things such as their drinking of Coke or coffee, which might not be allowed in the cult. They become like a family that has to endure the onslaughts of the world.

This unity can become so strong that the conscience of a group such as People's Temple can be reconfigured to the point that even suicide is no longer wrong but a sacrifice to do for the cause, the cult, and its leader.

¹⁴ Jean-Marie Abbrall describes it as "drowning the subject with reassuring emotional ties that give him a feeling of belonging." Jean-Marie Abgrall, *Soul Snatchers: The Mechanics of Cults*, trans. Alice Seberry (New York: Algora, 2000), 118. According to Singer, this "love bombing" is a "coordinated effort, usually under the direction of leadership, that involves long-term members' flooding recruits and newer members with flattery, verbal seduction, affectionate but usually nonsexual touching, and lots of attention to their every remark." Singer, *Cults in Our Midst*, 114–15.

The feeling of unity not only influences cult members' conduct among themselves but also causes them to see it as a norm for each member to go out and recruit new members for their elite group (based on their faith that only they possess the truth and therefore are elect instruments of God in spreading it).

VI. *Freedom in Christ*

The human ability to choose within the boundaries of what ought to be and is morally proper is the basic condition for human freedom. Where either choice (as in liberalism) or restraint (as in cults) is overemphasized, human responsibility, conscience, and freedom are in jeopardy. By being controlled, those involved in cults have lost the freedom to be the persons God made and remade. Therefore, in our apologetic work with those involved in cults, the following words of the cult expert Walter Martin are relevant:

We are confronted with those whom the apostle Paul described as victims of the master psychologist and propagandist of the ages, described by our Lord as “the prince of this world” and by the apostle Paul as “the god of this world,” the one who by sheer force of his antagonism to the truth of divine revelation in the person of Jesus Christ has psychologically “blinded the minds” of those who believe not the Gospel, “lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them” (2 Corinthians 4:4).¹⁵

Human freedom is possible only if a person, based on his conscience and possibility of choice, does what he as a human being ought to do, applying norms to himself as a specific human being and what his specific situation asks from him. What one can, should, and ought to do is not based on the whims of cult leaders who expect to exercise total control over them and destroy their individuality. The task of Christian apologetics is to break through the control of conscience by human-made religion, to bring these cult-invested people back to the living, loving God.

¹⁵ Walter Martin and Ravi K. Zacharias, *The Kingdom of the Cults: The Definitive Work on the Subject*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2003), 39–40.

Solidarity in the Fall: An Essay on Self-Deception

ANDRÉ GESKE

Abstract

This article aims to explore the notion and the dynamics of self-deception as a part of what we understand as the noetic effects of sin. Firstly, we start with a theological analysis of the consciousness because of the supratemporal nature of the human heart. Secondly, through this analysis, we can see the roots of self-deception in the presupposition that the ego is transparent to itself. Thirdly, one element of the dynamic of self-deception is the cognitive parallax that shows the distance between theory and reality. Fourthly, self-deception can be formalized in theoretical systems and create a legitimizing discourse to support given positions. Finally, we try to redeem self-deception through the revelation that enlightens the human mind.

Keywords

Self-deception, noetic effects of sin, Augustine, Herman Dooyeweerd, epistemology, the self, modern philosophy, sensus divinitatis, consciousness, revelation

Introduction

Humanity is a united whole, and the poison taken in by Adam spreads through the whole body. We may deplore this state of things, but human beings exist in solidarity with one another and not just as juxtaposed individuals.¹

Meanwhile, we can sum up the initial progress that the spirit of rebellion provokes in a mind originally imbued with the absurdity and apparent sterility of the world. In absurdist experience, suffering is individual. However, when a movement of rebellion begins, the experience of individual suffering comes to be seen as a collective experience. Therefore, the first step for a mind impressed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling is shared by others. Human reality, in its entirety, suffers from the distance that separates it from the rest of the universe. The disease experienced by a single person becomes a mass plague. In our daily trials, rebellion plays the same role as the “cogito” in the realm of thought: it is the first piece of evidence. However, this evidence lures the individual from their solitude. It finds its first value on the whole human race. I rebel—therefore we exist.²

Estrangement exists between the human being and reality. God created reality to reveal himself to man; however, sin obscures the way that man experiences reality. As a revelation of God, reality is blurred by a sinful perception that deceives and relativizes its meaning. A structural element in the fallen constitution of humanity can be identified—self-deception. Theologically, it is a part of the noetic effects of sin. However, self-deception touches human thinking in all its aspects through a myriad of misunderstandings. Consequently, it is one of the greatest unavoidable problems that drive people to rebellion.

This article analyzes self-deception and aims to understand its development, acknowledging the supratemporality of the human heart. Furthermore, we will see how the human heart deceives itself and creates theoretical systems biased by self-deceptive conceptions. Finally, we will provide some guidelines for thinking of ways to evade the self-deceptive process. Our aim is to understand self-deception as a common element in the molding of worldview, a kind of illusory power that mesmerizes us all. Thus, we can see solidarity in the fall.

¹ Pierre Courthial, *La Confession de foi de La Rochelle: Commentaire* (Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma, 1979), 53.

² Albert Camus, *L'homme révolté*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 3, 79.

I. *Knowing God and the Soul*

The attempt to comprehend the human self has been the *raison d'être* of philosophy since the beginning. Knowing oneself is a justifiable effort for a better life. However, every human attempt has monumentally failed due to the lack of recognition of the supratemporality of the human self.³

The supratemporality of the self is the structure that is above all aspects of created reality. For that reason, the various aspects of created reality do not exhaust it. The attempt to conceptualize the self through the aspects of reality demands an antithetical relation between the logical function of the intellect and an aspect of reality. Then, a synthetical relation should be established to form theoretical concepts through the contrast of the logical function of the mind and the nonlogical aspects of reality. Following this reasoning, the human self would be described by a composition of meanings; it would lose its self-consciousness in reality through not being able to find an Archimedean point to anchor theoretical thinking, and consequently the capacity to know itself would be limited. The human self would never be capable of accomplishing its calling in created reality. As an ectype of the divine archetype the human self cannot be enclosed in time.⁴

Inevitably, an analysis of the self through the logical function of the intellect presupposes the primacy of the human “ego” as responsible for the theoretical conceptualization. The intellect thus is absolute and becomes the anchor point of scientific-philosophical elaboration.⁵ Firstly, it assumes a kind of transparency to analyze itself clearly and perfectly. Secondly, it assumes that it would never be confused in its analysis. However, we can also see the deceitful potential of the self to deceive and lose itself in many unproductive reasonings.

The supratemporality of the human self makes it possible to know the consciousness of self and the external reality, but to accomplish this task an absolute anchor point is needed. It inevitably has a religious nature that points to the origin of everything. Indeed, this religious origin opens the way for theoretical thought because human conceptualization is always tied to the diversity of temporal reality. A religious origin transcends the diversity of temporal reality and prevents the absolutization of any aspect

³ Herman Dooyeweerd, *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy: Philosophy of Nature and Philosophical Anthropology*, A.7 (Grand Rapids: Paideia, 2011), 125. See also Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought: Studies in the Pretended Autonomy of Philosophical Thought*, B.16 (Grand Rapids: Paideia, 2012), 17–19.

⁴ Dooyeweerd, *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy*, 132.

⁵ Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought*, 21.

of reality and therefore underlies temporal existence and sets the conditions for the possibility of human knowledge.⁶ Although philosophy has acknowledged many different origins on which to anchor theoretical thought, only God can fulfill this condition. John Calvin has identified this relation for the possibility of knowledge when he begins the *Institutes of Christian Religion* by affirming, “Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.”⁷

Thus, man cannot know himself truly if he does not recognize the origin of his existence in God. Any philosophical attempt that seeks an autonomous anchor point will fail to understand the true signification of human beings. God alone has absolute nature of being, self-existence, as he does not depend on anything for his existence. In contrast, autonomous thinking seeks a nonabsolute origin as the anchor point for its thought in reality and thus absolutizes a relative element by attaching itself religiously to it and putting aside the real origin of the existence.⁸

Therefore, as Herman Dooyeweerd affirms, “the ultimate and central questions about human existence cannot be answered by any philosophy in an autonomous way since such questions are of a religious character.”⁹ By encountering divine origin, the self recognizes it and itself, because being otherwise empty, it needs to encounter real existence in the absoluteness of the divine being. This explains Augustine’s declaration, “I wish to know God and the soul (*Deum et animam scire cupio*).” Augustine could have employed another verb to designate the will of the soul; however, he used the verb *wish* to describe the intensity of the search for God and self that permeates human beings.¹⁰ This knowledge is mediated by divine revelation through the action of the Holy Spirit. The human self can only be known through the mediation of special divine revelation that by the action of

⁶ Dooyeweerd, *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy*, 137.

⁷ John Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrétienne* (Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma; Excelsis, 2009), 1:3 (1.1.1).

⁸ Calvin affirms, “From the power of God we are naturally led to consider his eternity since that from which all other things derive their origin must necessarily be self-existent and eternal.” Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrétienne*, 1:22 (1.5.6). Calvin clearly defines the ontic manner in which God underlies the whole of created existence, which points to him transcendently. Only God can be established as absolute by the simple fact that he has existence in himself. Man exists from the divine archetype. In this way, the human self is a creation that transcends temporality and cannot be subjected to created reality in space and time.

⁹ Dooyeweerd, *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy*, 124.

¹⁰ Bernard J. Coughlin, *The Soul of a Nation: Culture, Morality, Law, Education and Faith* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2012), 206.

the Holy Spirit enlightens the human mind and penetrates the deepest dimension of human being, making for wholeness before God, *coram Deo*.¹¹

The scientific ideal, on the other hand, tries to explain the self through the absolutization of an aspect of reality. The problem arises because any chosen aspect of reality fails to understand human wholeness because of the inevitable contradictions it promotes. Consequently, everything that does not fit its paradigm is considered as non-knowledge. This occurs in some psychological schools that try to define the human being through its biotic-psychical aspect by reducing it to a set of sensations determined by genotype or phenotype. A psychological approach to the complexity of the self can err when it equates the human psyche to consciousness and tries to describe it as a material construction. The human psyche is formed by the sensations and impulses of biotic nature perceived in time and space, while the consciousness is a deeper dimension that resides in the religious dimension of the self.

This example shows that the scientific ideal of humanist postmodernism presupposes the immediacy of the subject in analytical thinking. It hides the self through a false idea of objectivity, thus creating an idol that establishes the meaning of reality by the absolutization of one of its aspects. Emancipated from its transcendent divine origin, the self is erected as an idol and hides behind other idols formed by the absolutization of aspects of reality. The immediacy of the subject leads to self-deception.

Self-deception originated at the fall; Eve looked at the fruit and reasoned that the tree was good for food, pleasant to the eyes, and desirable to make one wise. She took of the fruit, ate it, and gave it to her husband and he ate it (Gen 3:6). Self-deception started when the first couple conceived reality according to their own interest, affection, and will. Man established himself as the criterion of truth, motivated by self-satisfaction.

The phenomenon of self-deception relates to the postlapsarian human self, because it guides the actions of man in a corrupted worldview. Because of sin, all share in this condition. There is solidarity in the fall.

II. *Through the Eyes of Narcissus*

It follows from the supratemporality of the self and the impossibility of immediate self-knowledge that self-deception is present throughout all human space-time experience.

¹¹ Dooyeweerd, *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy*, 141.

The phenomenon of self-deception has its roots in a conception of the human self that is presupposed in every philosophy in modern times. Every tradition since René Descartes—through Nicolas Malebranche and Baruch Spinoza, following on with Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Georg Hegel, ending with Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger—establishes the human ego as an autonomous source of truth that can be neither verified nor deduced.¹² The self presupposes uncritically that it is the source of the meaning of the created reality and that it is transparent in its relation to that reality (the subject-object relation). It sets itself up as the source of rationality and as the criterion of all critical thought.¹³

However, due to its supratemporality, the human ego cannot be analyzed by itself. An apostate system of thought will not recognize this supratemporality because every attempt at investigation is placed in the spatio-temporal dimension of reality. The result of such thinking is the same as that of Kant's when he identifies the mysterious human ego as the transcendental logical unit of apperception.¹⁴ The Kantian definition of the human ego is completely impersonal and responsible only for perceiving the psychical-physical ego manifested in experience.

In his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (*Méditations métaphysiques*), Descartes proposes the hypothesis that self-deception is to be attributed to a malicious demon when the self is searching for the truth. In the end, he arrived at the famous conclusion that if while being deceived he continues thinking, then he is a thinking being—*Cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am)—that is, the act of thinking is true even though he might be being deceived. Descartes claims that the ego is the foundation of every reflection. If the first truth is the thinking ego—*res cogitans* (thinking thing or mind)—the whole of reality is to be analyzed by this new criterion. In the Cartesian system God is a logical necessity and responsible for assuring the meaning of reality. If it were not so, he would be the malicious demon that deceives the thinking ego, which would contradict his perfect nature.¹⁵

So the human ego establishes itself as the foundation of truth by self-deception on the supposition of its transparency to itself and its incapacity

¹² Paul Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations* (Paris: Seuil, 2013), 237.

¹³ Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 21.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1956), 140 (B132); 155 (A107).

¹⁵ René Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 49–141. The Cartesian arguments for this thesis can be found in the second and third meditations. Kant criticizes this theory of divine assurance as circular reasoning. See also, Luc Ferry, *Kant: Une lecture des trois "Critiques"* (Paris: Grasset, 2006). Although Kant criticizes Descartes's theory, he holds the primacy of the ego in his idealist philosophy.

to be confused in its reasoning. The irony of the Cartesian system is that it resorts to the idea of God for the self-establishment of the ego. However, Descartes deceives himself when he recognizes that the human ego has autonomy in self-attestation. The “attestation is fundamentally attestation of the self” as Paul Ricœur says.¹⁶ The inevitable conclusion of this kind of reasoning is that the human ego becomes narcissistic. It falls in love with itself and makes itself an object of devotion.

If the anchor point of reasoning is found in the human ego, the consequence is that its ethical standard lies in the individual autonomy emancipated from its divine origin. Following Kantian morality, Ricœur argues that individual autonomy is linked to concern for and justice to others. Thus, morality is formed by the interiority of consciousness in an autonomous way, promoting the self-justification of its acts. A self-deceived ego searches for self-justification and when confronted resorts to resentment or disproportionate rejection through victimizing and blaming.

This occurs because the human ego tends to search for self-satisfaction. Even those actions considered as beneficial to society as a whole are motivated by the self-preservation efforts of the ego as the idol. Hence, the ego is guided by its own desires (Rom 1:18–32), apostatizing from God and reversing the Augustinian dictum, “I wish to know God and the soul.” This can be observed when scientific-philosophical theories eliminate the existence of God while at the same time trying to explain the existence of human beings as evolved from animals.

In daily life we obviously find individuals acting fairly, but this is due to the residual presence of the *sensus divinitatis* in the consciousness. Divine providence protects the human being from its own destructive potential. Even in individuals with high moral standards, who are endowed with unique goodness, behavior is still skewed away from devotion to the source of all good in God himself. Thus, we can still acknowledge worthy initiatives, even though these always express an apostate attitude.

Because of the radical nature of self-deception both believers and non-believers can be self-deceived. In the Christian mind, self-deception works by relativizing Holy Scripture and changing the source of authority in life by theories or feelings. Sin acts surreptitiously, making good and evil or right and wrong interchangeable. Therefore, the Christian life must be lived in self-examination through the Holy Scriptures with the illumination of the Holy Spirit if the Christian is to form a worldview according to the principles of revelation.

¹⁶ Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, 34.

The emotions, the reason, and the will of a self-deceived person converge on emancipation from the divine origin. Self-deception may be formalized in theoretical systems, leading them to cooperate with certain positions that avoid confrontation with created reality. Thus, reality is redefined and consciousness rests in the illusion that God and judgment do not exist. This is the condition of every person in a fallen world. There is solidarity in the fall.

III. *Intermezzo—Cognitive Parallax*

Cognitive or conceptual parallax is a philosophical concept conceived by the Brazilian philosopher and journalist Olavo de Carvalho to describe a flaw in a theoretical system as the dissonance between the process of theorization and the practical experience. If the theory elaborated by the individual were applied in reality, it would contradict the theory. Descartes proposes, for instance, to describe a real psychological experiment, but at the same time, he proposes that the subject for this experiment is an abstract ego isolated from the conditions of space and time. The same applies to theories that seek to demonstrate the inexistence of God since they necessarily presuppose an organized universe with a well-established origin, an ordered reality, intelligence in its conception, beauty, harmony, and the existence of a being that has self-consciousness. Such conditions can only have a divine origin and not a purely organic origin as claimed by scientific theories, as an organic origin would inevitably result in chaos. Moreover, it is impossible that chaos originate order, senselessness intelligence, inorganic organic, or unconsciousness consciousness. A philosophical-scientific explanation of reality should necessarily presuppose the existence of God. However, this is not the case in the modern age with the dissonance between the theoretical pole of reasoning and the practical experience of the person.

When theoretical reasoning does not correspond or corresponds only in part to reality, a parallax arises in this theoretical system that brackets off reality in order to legitimize the presuppositions of the system.¹⁷ All human knowledge is made up of the assemblage of pieces of knowledge that form the conditions for the rise of new ones. This process is the element that assures scientific-philosophical development through the accumulation of knowledge, which is constantly criticized, evaluated, discarded, restructured, and renewed. Thomas Kuhn has identified this process with the formation of what he calls the paradigm for establishing scientific criteria and

¹⁷ Olavo de Carvalho, *Prestação de Contas*, Online: <http://www.olavodecarvalho.org/semana/12142002globo.htm>.

determining what can be considered rational or irrational. It is responsible for accepting certain problems to be resolved, as well as procedures and theories to be elaborated scientifically.¹⁸ The paradigm promotes a kind of cognitive parallax when theoretical formulation is abstracted from practical scientific experience. Outside of the paradigm, nothing can be verified as true. Such absolutization is frequently found in some evolutionist scientific circles. Kuhn identifies a displacement of the individual through theorization vis-à-vis his object of analysis due to the fundamental role of the paradigm. He affirms that the scientific method works in a world different from that of the paradigm. Even language can promote a displacement because, through it, thought is externalized, and if the terms are employed in a congruent manner, distance between the theorization and experience can arise.¹⁹

In politics the phenomenon of ideology may look like cognitive parallax. Hannah Arendt affirmed that ideology can have a dissimulative role in the hermeneutical process of understanding the facts of reality.²⁰ Karl Mannheim highlights the particularity of ideology to create half-conscious and unwitting dissimulation in calculated attempts to dupe others to self-deception.²¹ A theory can alienate the consciousness from a correct way of conceiving the world. Ideology becomes the criterion for analyzing reality in forming a political worldview and, consequently, alienating the person from the real meaning of reality. Everything is interpreted in order to serve the political point of view. Because of cognitive parallax, theories such as deconstruction, relativism, nihilism, and existentialism found support—in spite of their incapacity to describe reality—by presupposing a kind of neutrality and smuggling in elements taken axiomatically to legitimize their systems. In this way, cognitive parallax is an important part of self-deception that cannot be confused with it, since self-deception is more radical in the human ego and englobes other elements such as the will and feelings.

IV. Formalizing Self-Deception

Self-deception can be formalized in theoretical systems that externalize the way an individual seeking to understand a subject thinks. These

¹⁸ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 10–11, 23, 25.

¹⁹ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 125–26.

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, *La crise de la culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 176.

²¹ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Harcourt, 1985), 55–56.

philosophical-scientific systems configure a worldview that provides parameters for interpreting reality. In this way, even in theological reflection, self-deception can arise.

When cognitive parallax is present in a philosophical system, it shapes an individual's consciousness by a process of theorization in which the individual engages after sharing the philosophical system with others. If we take this procedure to the extreme, we see that it engenders, on the one hand, a dogmatic attitude and, on the other, a skeptical attitude towards everything that is not in accordance to the stated position.

Due to the illusion caused by self-deception in elevating some aspects of reality over others, the religious nature of human ego expresses itself in analytical attitudes that are religious too. The capacity for being aware of the possibility of self-deception formalized in theoretical systems lies in a consideration of the real motivations behind them. A posture critical of the criterion of critical thought is necessary. This metacritical posture creates an awareness of self-deception in our own reasonings. Through a hermeneutical consciousness of the real motivations that guide theoretical systems, the abandonment of critical thought since the Enlightenment might be overcome in a postcritical way of reasoning.

However, the presence of self-deception in a theoretical system does not necessarily render it ineffective: theoretical thought necessarily deals with an aspect or many aspects of reality that even though absolutized may still integrate reality. The problem arises when self-deception drives the reflection to absolutize an aspect of reality that deprives it of its real meaning. We can observe a kind of naivety in this way of thinking.

In a theological system, self-deception may arise when its anchor point is changed and is no longer in Scripture. Theology becomes dualist and reductionist. Thus, a hermeneutical approach to theology can be developed that unravels the real presuppositions that guide the whole system and to make us aware of the motivations intended to support theological reasoning. For instance, we can observe a change in Arminianism that arose in the theology when the ideals of freedom and autonomous reason were present. A theological-philosophical rationalism absolutizes the ideal of freedom and proposes a false metaphysical dichotomy between divine election and human freedom.²² In countries such as the Netherlands, rationalism proposed by Descartes and assimilated by Spinoza replaced the intellectual

²² Fabiano A. Oliveira, "Diagnosticando os Sintomas do Nosso Tempo: Parte 1—Um Ensaio Crítico sobre os Ídolos da Modernidade," *Fides Reformata* 16.2 (2011): 82.

primacy of Aristotle.²³ A new paradigm was created with new tendencies.

Another example is found when the Enlightenment emphasized the autonomy of reason as the criterion of evaluation of reality and characterized theology as a pseudoscience. Man sought emancipation from religion to create a new religion for himself. In this perspective, a new movement arose, theological liberalism, that tried to answer the challenges brought by the Enlightenment by updating theology with Enlightenment rationalist presuppositions and methods. It manifests the change of the anchor point in thought when it took from Kantian or Hegelian philosophy the parameters for theological thought, bringing foreign presuppositions into the Christian faith. The result of this expedient was synthesis, which redefined the concepts of Christian theology through a subjective prism (religion, for instance, became a feeling).²⁴ Moreover, the proponents of this change thought that they were bringing new light into theology and a real defense of the Christian faith. The rise of theological liberalism shows the blind idolatrous tendency toward the satisfaction of the ideal of freedom and rationality; however, it replaced the biblical anchor point with a humanistic perspective. Self-deception created a theological scientific discourse to establish itself as a plausible possibility and deceived people into thinking they were developing good theology.

After the French Revolution and the political division between “right” and “left,” theology has been used to legitimize both wings through ideological usage. Today the ideals of gender and absolute individual freedom lead to the false identification of the Bible and Judeo-Christian tradition with an oppressive, dominant patriarchal structure. This ideological interpretation has promoted a desire to be emancipated from any kind of determination in order to pursue absolute freedom, and its consequent perspective shows its contradictions when it paradoxically defends the important role of the body (feminists pleading, “My body, my rules!”) and at the same time the disembodiment of the ego (those wishing to redefine gender as beyond intrachromosomal reality).²⁵ From this perspective come theological

²³ Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience Européenne, 1680–1715* (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 126–27.

²⁴ Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 36–37. In liberal theology, the anchor point can be found in the analytical capacity of man as an autonomous being.

²⁵ Guilherme de Carvalho, *Ideologia liberal e promiscuidade sexual: Cúmplices?* Online: <http://ultimato.com.br/sites/guilhermedecarvalho/2013/10/29/ideologia-liberal-e-promiscuidade-sexual-cumplices/#more-861>. See also Dooyeweerd, *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy*, 152; Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, 46–48.

reflections and ideological discourses that seek to legitimize homosexuality, such as Queer theology.²⁶ This theology has an underlying ideological engagement that seeks the subversion of social structures through a revolutionary proposition. Individuals deceive themselves by searching for a relevant and contemporary theology, but forgets the foundation—divine revelation—by forming a new theoretical deconstructionist referential. There is no criticism at this level, only deconstruction.

This synthetical thought appears in South American theologies such as the liberation theologies that employ Marxist philosophy instead of the Holy Scriptures as a hermeneutical matrix for understanding society. The ideals of social justice, egalitarian economy, autonomous freedom, and subversion of social order lead to the development of a theology determined by the social class searching for a rearrangement of society following the dialectic of class struggle.²⁷ Thus, biblical concepts and theological tradition are redefined to fit in the ideological mold for military and political goals. The result is a reconfiguration of meanings and a new comprehension of reality. Redemption, for instance, does not mean the forgiveness for covenant-breaking, but the liberation of a person from an oppressive structure of power that enslaves in a social condition. This is the product of secular theology.

Although self-deception can be rooted in the deepest dimension of a human being, redemption can be found in Christ. If there is solidarity in the fall, there is also solidarity in redemption in Jesus Christ.

V. *Through Jesus's Eyes*

Human ego deceives itself by seeking its own satisfaction; it redefines reality in order to prevent being confronted by it.

The redemption of self-deception starts with the acknowledgment of divine revelation that enlightens human mind and transforms the self by a new identity because it is dependent on its ontic source. This ontic source is recognized by the *sensus divinitatis*. The Creator is the ultimate reality of the self and, due to its timelessness, this reality cannot be apprehended by created aspects of reality. Here lies the need for special revelation to redirect the human ego positively: “Scripture is the positive form of God’s Word Revelation through which the norms of faith, innate in man, receive a

²⁶ Gerard Loughlin, ed., *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

²⁷ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teologia da Libertação* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1979), 34, 38.

concrete divine content.”²⁸ The confirmation of faith in the human heart by the Holy Scriptures assures the renewal of emancipated apostate faith in a new direction of obedience. Renewal is through the power of the Holy Spirit in new birth (*palingenesis*), and it enables the formation of a new matrix of interpretation for the self and reality by revealed criteria. To use C. S. Lewis’s expression, the *endarkenment* of self-deception is confronted by the enlightenment of God’s revelation.

In modern times the *maîtres du soupçon* (masters of suspicion), as Ricœur called them, have had to acknowledge that the human ego is self-deceived. Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, and Darwin put forward suspicion as an interpretative key to the understanding of man and reality in a critical way; however, this way of thinking showed itself to be an excursion in the wilderness of uncertainty, where man walks without direction. Christian thinking invites one to put suspicion aside and promote a search for the identity of human beings through the Holy Scriptures. People must understand that they are not the center of everything and, at the same time, that only God can establish meaning in reality. People need to learn the way of humility.

In this context, some insights may be helpful in breaking self-deception. First, as identified by Ricœur in his phenomenological reflection, the human ego is not immediate, as Descartes thought. It is not a starting point, but something that demands an effort of the understanding. It cannot be simply presupposed; it is understood through the possibility of nonreductionist knowledge. Self-comprehension cannot be reduced to one aspect of reality. The self is deceived by the presupposition that it is transparent and incapable of mistakes.

Secondly, this should lead to the recognition of the need for revelation from outside reality. Only special revelation can unravel the depths of the human heart (Heb 4:12) and the idols present there. The religion that a person confesses is brought to light when confronted with the true religion of Christ, the true God incarnate. Then the criteria of thinking are displaced from the self to a secure vantage point that enables the removal of the self-deceptive powers of the human ego centered on itself.

Thirdly, the existential dimension of the human ego is developed through the consideration of the finite human condition vis-à-vis the transcendence of God, who reveals himself to human beings through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The incarnation shows us the integral condition of the self in contrast to the fragmentary conceptions of modern anthropology such as proposed through a Cartesian dualism of body and mind. In Christ, people

²⁸ Dooyeweerd, *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy*, 41.

are invited to reencounter themselves in an integral existence *coram Deo*, since Christ is the new type of human being. He is the starting point for considering all existence through hope, because the possibility of being free from self-deception exists.

Fourthly, through the incarnated promise of God that transcends time, the human self can be assured of a hope that promises will be fulfilled because through bodily resurrection we have the attestation of those promises. Therefore, the proclamation of the gospel (*logos prophorikos*, proclaimed word) is the mediation of the presence of Christ in human life that breaks self-deception by expressing the witness to a new way of being, a new perspective of life towards eternity.

Finally, communication by the witness of the gospel among human beings is presupposed in the hope of a new existence for eternity in the presence of Christ. Consequently, there is no redeemed ego without an intersubjective dimension in communal existence. As Ricœur states, “all of our relations in the world have an intersubjective constitution.”²⁹ This intersubjective constitution can only be promoted in the communal life of the church as the body of Christ where the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered. This is the covenantal relationship between God and human beings established by faith in our mediator—Jesus Christ. The community promotes the wellbeing of each of its members by a clear vision of the chief end of human beings—“to glorify God and to enjoy him forever” (Westminster Shorter Catechism 1). This intersubjective reality of faith in the incarnated promises of God engenders a balanced view of the individual and collective aspect of humanity through love. Only in covenantal relationship with God through Christ is love not self-love but a love that goes out to the other. Therefore, the church as the covenant community can treat self-deception. It serves to perfection each member of the body of saints sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit. The church cannot be other than a *communio sanctorum* (communion of saints). If there is solidarity in the fall, there is also solidarity in redemption.

Conclusion

Self-deception manifests itself through a false religion that ignores the divine truth and forges itself another god, the self, and establishes its own community, the pantheon of idols, hiding the greater idol. Self-deception is an illusory condition in which the individual provides a criterion of

²⁹ Paul Ricœur, *De l'interprétation: Essai sur Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1965), 406.

self-justification, excusing the conscience in a false standard of justice, the religion of the self. For this reason, postmodern religion is emptied of its content, giving birth to a concept of individual spirituality that is simply ethical responsibility. Self-deception arrives on the scene in a sordid way by usurping true religion and reversing its core values. The unregenerate, deceived through the obliteration of divine truth in their hearts, are guilty of deceiving themselves (Rom 1:18). They fall in love with themselves like Narcissus, forming a religion that engages in the search for self-satisfaction.

Alterity, a typical Christian value, is neglected by self-satisfaction, leading to a crisis in society since nothing matters but oneself. As a result, the Christian faith has been emptied of truth to become relevant, simply another consumer product. In fact, the crisis of our culture analyzed by Arendt and Husserl lies in nothing other than Christian values having become the same as the values of the culture. Modern man searches for a nontranscendent center to anchor his way of thinking and so engenders a culture that believes that “God had to die in order that man might be what he is to become, in order that man may become the unlimited creator of culture.”³⁰

The interiorization of the gospel into the Christian life becomes a parameter for reforming the awareness of self-deception. The Christian becomes aware of self through the revelation of God. At this point, Reformed theology has always emphasized the practice of self-examination, a forgotten practice today. Christians are invited to think critically about themselves through meditation on the Holy Scriptures in order to recognize that self-deception is a structural part of a universe fallen into sin until the final redemption. It will still torment us; however, God invites us to persevere in unity with Christ to fight against this evil. Although there is solidarity in the fall, the Holy Spirit tells us today to examine ourselves and so “to eat of that bread, and drink of that cup” (1 Cor 11:28).

³⁰ Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (New York: George Braziller, 1961), xvi.

Self-Deception and the Apologetic of Despair in Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Bahnsen

THEODORE G. (TED) VAN RAALTE

Abstract

One of the helpful approaches of a Christian apologist in the present anti-Christian climate is an apologetic that presses the unbeliever to admit that their views lack hope and lead to despair. Though many unbelievers deny the despair and prefer to deceive themselves, one influential author views self-deception as fundamental to the human condition and non-culpable. However, Christians must expose self-deception as evil—a product and species of sin—seek to root it out of themselves, and lead others to the hope of dealing with life truthfully. This essay helps Christian apologists by utilizing the analysis of self-deception by Greg Bahnsen and shows that the older accounts of Blaise Pascal and Søren Kierkegaard accord well with Bahnsen’s approach.

Keywords

Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, Greg Bahnsen, self-deception, apologetic of despair, presuppositional apologetic, sin, history of apologetic, apologetic method

Introduction

Engraved at the Temple of Delphi were the words “Know thyself,” and in line with this pithy saying, Socrates asserted that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” It should come as no surprise that most people think they know themselves and would prefer to deny that they are self-deceived. But it should likewise be no surprise that most people think they know someone else who is self-deceived. This dichotomous popular sentiment may well confirm the existence of self-deception. One philosopher states that self-deception is common and quotes another who says “self-deception is so undeniably a fact of human life that if anyone tried to deny its existence, the proper response would be to accuse him of it.”¹

If self-deception is universal, are humans really guided by reason? According to the best-selling author and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, to say that we are guided by reason is the “rationalist delusion.” Rather, he argues, David Hume was correct that we are governed by passions and intuitions; our reasonings are fundamentally *post hoc* justifications for “gut” choices we have already made apart from reasoning.² Haidt’s observations may well be correct as a description of the present fallen sin-world, including when he titles one section in his book “We lie, cheat, and justify so well that we honestly believe we are honest.”³ Unfortunately, he cannot account for the fact that humans almost universally sense that *something is wrong* with lying, cheating, and deceiving ourselves. From his thoroughly evolutionary starting point, Haidt has no God, no good creation, no image of God in humans, and no fall into sin as key to the explanation of the present human condition.⁴ This also means that he does not so much despair when faced with self-deception as he does simply accept it as part of evolutionary development and suggest that recognizing the prevalence of this problem may help opponents sympathize

¹ Brian P. McLaughlin, “On the Very Possibility of Self-Deception,” in *Self and Deception: A Cross-Cultural Inquiry*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Wimal Dissanayake (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 31. McLaughlin cites Allen Wood.

² Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 29–108. On the phrase “rationalist delusion,” see page 34.

³ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴ Haidt believes that most of moral psychology can be understood as a “form of enlightened self-interest ... easily explained by Darwinian natural selection working at the level of the individual ... our righteous minds were shaped by kin selection plus reciprocal altruism augmented by gossip and reputation management. That’s the message of nearly every book on the evolutionary origins of morality.” *Ibid.*, 220, cf. xviii.

with each other.⁵ Popular songwriters and singers reflect the despair of Western culture more readily than Haidt.⁶

Whereas Haidt regards self-deception to be normal, the Scriptures treat it as a result of the fall into sin and teach us that God tests human hearts to expose their self-deceit and self-deception. The truth must shine forth; Jesus himself is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:16).

It is in the context of despair that the teacher in Ecclesiastes states that God tests man. I would translate 3:18 as, “This happens *for the sake of* the sons of men, so that God may test them and they may see for themselves that they are like animals” (partly based on the CSB). God tests. God has a purpose in putting this world under a curse (Rom 8:20–21). He wants to drive people to a sense of futility. “What is the point?” they have to ask. The teacher continues:

For the fate of the children of Adam and the fate of animals is the same. As one dies, so dies the other; they all have the same breath. People have no advantage over animals since everything is futile. All are going to the same place; all come from dust, and all return to dust. Who knows if the spirits of the children of Adam rise upward and the spirits of animals goes downward to the earth? (Eccl 3:19–21 CSB)

There is a very valuable lesson here for our defense of the faith. It has to do with the claims of other religions and ideas. Evolution makes it plain: there is no afterlife. Other religions claim there is, but they cannot ground their claim in any real hope.⁷

Gently but firmly, we have to press home this point with others. What is your hope? How do you know? Do you have a god who can carry you across the threshold of death? Has he ever done that for anyone? Can you prove it? We call this an apologetic of despair, or a negative apologetic (in contrast to a positive apologetic, which would offer positive reasons for faith).

Ecclesiastes says the unbeliever cannot offer hope to himself or others. On evolutionary principles, all these passages are absolutely true: “The wise man ... the fool ... the same fate overtakes them both” (Eccl 2:14); “Do not all go to the same place?” (6:6); “Who can tell ... what will happen under the sun after he is gone?” (6:12). Finally, Ecclesiastes 4:2–3 argues that one

⁵ Haidt even entertains the charge that his book amounts to little more than his own *post hoc* rationalizations. *Ibid.*, 59–60.

⁶ Note the song of Taylor Swift and Zayn, “I Don’t Want to Live Forever” (2016), the Bleachers’ song, “I Wanna Get Better” (2014), and the song “Demons” of Imagine Dragons (2013). All of these are explicit about the present hopelessness of life.

⁷ For an example of an apologetic of despair in action, see Ravi Zacharias, *The End of Reason: A Response to the New Atheists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 9, 17, 27, 39–45, 74–82.

not yet born is better than anyone alive because all who are alive know they will die.

Thankfully, God's good creation precedes, and his good re-creation follows, the present troubled condition that humans brought upon this world. As related by John Fesko, the Leiden Synopsis of the early seventeenth century made clear that before the fall into sin the primary principles—such as the true, the good, and the beautiful—“functioned in perfect harmony” with secondary principles derived from these, as well as with Adam's mind, will, and affections. Nevertheless, after the fall, though these primary principles continue to shine forth in creation and conscience, sinful humans deviate widely from them when they derive principles. With sin in the mind, heart, and affections, sinners distort the truth, suppress it, deny it, and then rationalize their errors as if they are doing something good.⁸ For this reason, Christian apologists do well to study the concept of self-deception, root it out of their own hearts first of all, and then expose its presence in the hearts of unbelievers. We turn, then, to the definition of self-deception.

I. Definition of Self-Deception

Gregory Lyle Bahnsen (1948–1995) was a Reformed epistemologist who wrote, lectured, and built upon the presuppositional apologetics of Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987). Many Van Til experts today consider Bahnsen to have been the ablest expounder of Van Til's apologetic.⁹ Bahnsen certainly made much of the transcendental argument for the existence of God, believing that atheists, in particular, were suppressing the knowledge of God available in their consciences and from the creation. Bahnsen's doctoral research on self-deception helped him describe how humans suppress the truth they know.¹⁰

In this study, I will use Bahnsen's definition and analysis of self-deception as somewhat of a template and compare the accounts we find in Blaise

⁸ John V. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith* (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2019), 38. Fesko observes the same reasoning in Calvin (59). Even sinners normally defend their acts based on seeking some good principle or goal. Thus, the current LGBTQ movement acts on the perceived good of inclusion, non-discrimination, and equality for minorities (morphing a question of sexual morality into a question of human rights). They regard their efforts to be akin to those who sought the end of the slave trade and slavery in the early nineteenth century.

⁹ The most systematic account of Van Til's apologetic is a collection of readings collated by Bahnsen, with his expert analyses introducing each topic. Bahnsen completed the manuscript of readings just before his death, and it was published a few years later. Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998).

¹⁰ Gregory Lyle Bahnsen, “A Conditional Resolution of the Apparent Paradox of Self-Deception” (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1978).

Pascal (1623–1662)¹¹ and Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855).¹² Bahnsen did not study Pascal or Kierkegaard in his dissertation, but their less technical accounts match well with his study. These three accounts will reinforce the techniques of our apologetic of despair.

I will work with the following definition of self-deception, taken from a journal article by Bahnsen, and along with his dissertation:

1. S believes that p,
2. S is motivated to ignore, hide, deny (etc.) his belief that p, and
3. By misconstruing or rationalizing the evidence, S brings himself to believe falsely that “S does not believe that p.”¹³

This definition makes clear at the outset that the present essay is not concerned with ignorance, forgetfulness, or simply being mistaken. Rather, motivated self-deception, not unmotivated, is under analysis. Eventually, the discussion will narrow to religiously motivated self-deception—that self-deception which all humans engage in, to some extent, to reduce the anxiety involved in truly dealing with themselves before God. As such, this essay illustrates the crucial place of self-deception in a coherent apologetic of despair.

II. *Bahnsen on Self-Deception*

Bahnsen’s dissertation begins with a plethora of examples of self-deception from history and literature. This survey establishes that the concept is widespread and addressed by philosophers such as Georg Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Jean-Paul Sartre, ideologues such as Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, ancient Greek dramatists, Benjamin Franklin (“Who hath deceived thee so often as thyself?”), and numerous novelists.¹⁴

¹¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

¹² Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 2004). Although other works of Kierkegaard also touch on self-deception, I am limiting my analysis to *The Sickness unto Death*.

¹³ Greg L. Bahnsen, “The Crucial Concept of Self-Deception in Presuppositional Apologetics,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57.1 (Spring 1995): 29; cf. Bahnsen, “Apparent Paradox of Self-Deception,” 53. Bahnsen never mentions Pascal in his dissertation but does mention Kierkegaard twice without entering into any substantial discussion of his views. *Ibid.*, 2–3, 7–8, 55.

¹⁴ Bahnsen, “Apparent Paradox of Self-Deception,” 1–14. Most books and articles on self-deception acknowledge its pervasive presence, even if the authors are skeptical about the possibility of a valid philosophical description. For example, see Brian P. McLaughlin,

As Bahnsen turns to more recent critics of the concept, it becomes clear that many treat self-deception as an unsolvable paradox or as something unreal. Bahnsen argues that self-deception is real because “people do not merely play at self-deception; they engage in it in tragic ways” and then cites Albert Speer’s *Inside the Third Reich* (1970). Besides, it is not likely that one can reason away in philosophy what has such widespread support elsewhere. Finally, contra Sartre and approvingly quoting John Turk Saunders, Bahnsen argues, “if the notion of self-deception were really self-contradictory, there would be no such thing as self-deception: for there cannot be any instances of a self-contradictory notion.”¹⁵ Thus, Bahnsen regards his task to consist in retaining the phenomena while coherently explaining them, resolving any apparent paradox.¹⁶ He recognizes the heterogeneous nature of the beast:

Self-deception can be about many things (circumstances, thoughts, feelings, emotions, desires, character traits, personality, capabilities, talents, plans, motives, personal relations, facts, life’s meaning, etc.), pursued in various ways (perception, memory, reasoning, etc.), and engaged for various general reasons (to blind one to the painful, to help one feel good, to enable one to refuse the distressing truth, etc.).¹⁷

However, he denies that this variety precludes a broad definition or typical kind of case, and concludes that the following general description will guide his study:

Self-deception involves an indefensible belief about one’s beliefs. That is, S perpetrates a deception on himself when, because of the distressing nature of some belief held by him, he is motivated to misconstrue the relevant evidence in a matter and comes to believe that he does not hold that belief, although he does. When he holds a belief that is discomforting, the self-deceiver simultaneously brings himself to believe that he does not hold it, and toward the end of maintaining that

“Exploring the Possibility of Self-Deception in Belief,” in *Perspectives on Self-Deception*, ed. Brian P. McLaughlin and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (London: University of California Press, 1988), 29.

¹⁵ Bahnsen, “Apparent Paradox of Self-Deception,” 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29–34. On page 32, Bahnsen lists seven criteria for an adequate analysis of self-deception: “(1) It must supply the truth conditions for ‘S deceived himself into believing that p.’ (2) It must be true to the ordinarily recognized, paradigm examples ... and be able to account for the ordinary language of ‘self-deception.’ (3) It must avoid logical contradiction and paradox. (4) It must avoid confusing self-deception with related conditions and reducing it to one or more of them. (5) It must not depend on appeal to notions which are even more puzzling or paradoxical. (6) It must account for the fact that ‘deception’ is used in cases of both interpersonal and intrapersonal deception. (7) It must be amenable with, or incorporate, the credible insights of alternative solutions without falling prey to their defects.” In pages 317–24, Bahnsen returns to these criteria to show, one by one, that his study has satisfied them.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41–42.

unwarranted second-order belief he presses into service distorted and strained reasoning regarded [*sic*] the evidence which is adverse to his desires. He not only hides from himself his disapprobated belief, but when he purposely engages in self-deception he hides the hiding of that belief as well.¹⁸

Notice that in this description, “beliefs” stand central. Bahnsen admits that no philosopher has succeeded in circumscribing the multifaceted character of “belief.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, the concept is so central to his project that he cannot avoid extensive study of what a belief is. He arrives at the following characterization, which he refuses to call a definition, but does consider sufficient to “facilitate an account of self-deception.”

Belief is a propositional attitude (not excluding false propositions) of a positive, cognitive, type constituted by a continuing, intentional, action-guiding mental state (made up of ideas which give it a determinate character corresponding to the proposition believed) with a stimulus-independent causal capacity to affect one’s theoretical and/or practical behavior (such that one relies upon the propositional attitude in his reasoning and conduct), under suitable circumstances, in a wide variety of manifestations (some of which are subject to degrees of strength).²⁰

Beliefs, then, affect one’s behavior. Beliefs are mental states, not mental acts like judgments and not mere thoughts, but contributing factors in guiding actions. Indeed, one’s behaviors (including private assent) form the evidence for one’s beliefs.²¹ To say that a person believes “that p” does not entail that they assert or assent to p. Nor is rational deliberation the criterion for attributing belief. Rather, as will be explained, the question is one of “a variety of behavioral indicators.”²²

In order to be beliefs, all such beliefs must be under one’s voluntary control and yet must also, in a sense, be constrained by the evidence—that is, the beliefs are not purely arbitrary. To say that such beliefs are voluntary does not mean that one can set aside all sensory evidence (like looking out the window on a cloudy day when it is raining and forcing oneself to believe it is a sunny day). However, one can “exercise some control over the way in which he sees the evidence,” focusing on this or that, suppressing parts of it, and so on.²³ Such control of one’s attention makes beliefs “indirectly voluntary.”²⁴

¹⁸ Ibid., 47–48.

¹⁹ Ibid., 63.

²⁰ Ibid., 143.

²¹ Ibid., 143–44.

²² Ibid., 145.

²³ Ibid., 138–40.

²⁴ Ibid., 145.

A “belief” can also vary in degree, being described as either conviction, opinion, surmise, suspicion, or other terms, but the agent must have been voluntarily involved in the inducement of the belief.²⁵ This voluntary control continues throughout the duration of the belief so that the agent is also responsible for the level of attention given to the belief and to the evidence for maintaining it.²⁶

In self-deception, two beliefs come into conflict. This is not a case of knowledge versus belief but two beliefs. The first-order belief is suppressed by a second-order belief when the subject exercises control over his attention to generate the belief that he does not believe the first-order belief. Thus, a belief about one’s beliefs results.²⁷ Both beliefs are genuinely held; the first-order belief is not eradicated or replaced, but *suppressed*.²⁸

Three further chapters of Bahnsen’s dissertation defend the views that self-deception has a motivational explanation: the self-deceiver manipulates, suppresses, and rationalizes the evidence for the first-order belief in such a way as to support the second-order belief, and is motivated to do so by the pain that would result from admitting the first-order belief.²⁹ It is absolutely critical that the subject be aware of the first-order belief being true; otherwise, there would be no reason for the second-order belief to arise.³⁰

But what happens to that first-order belief? After the second-order belief is generated, the subject no longer assents to p (the first-order belief) inwardly or publicly. Nevertheless, it is not a case of mere ignorance, for behaviors betray the first-order belief: “the self-deceiver shows the slips and mistakes of ‘bad-acting,’ obviously rationalizes, speaks in a strained voice or is less than calm under cross-examination, etc., that is, the self-deceiver has the affective signs of trying to cover up something.”³¹ Behavior is the measure of what beliefs are held. However, the self-deceived person does not consciously realize why these slips occur. “The fact that the self-deceiver is not aware that he believes p (i.e., does not believe that he believes p) allows for him to assent sincerely to something incompatible with that belief, thereby

²⁵ According to Bahnsen, the belief is unwarranted (unjustified) without voluntary involvement. This must be because it needs to be a propositional *attitude* of a *positive* type. Ibid., 144–45.

²⁶ Ibid., 145.

²⁷ Ibid., 147–49.

²⁸ Ibid., 151–57. “Therefore, we find no reason to look upon the belief that is operative or avowed in self-deception as somewhat less than full, ordinary, genuine belief. The self-deceiver really believes what we attribute to him on the basis of his behaviour and avowals” (157).

²⁹ Ibid., 198–249.

³⁰ Various proposals are critiqued in 250–57, but they all come down to the defect that the agent “does not explicitly notice or have detailed consciousness of the truth of p.” Ibid., 257.

³¹ Ibid., 260.

satisfying the necessary condition for being deceived (i.e., for having a false belief).”³² S also knows that to hold such a pair of beliefs would be irrational, but is not aware that he himself holds both. “Logic prevents both beliefs from being true, but not from being held.”³³

At the limits of self-deception, Bahnsen concludes that it is even possible to deceive oneself on purpose.³⁴ The interconnectedness of all the events in self-deception to the original belief can be explained:

Self-deception may be viewed as one unified phenomenon: the belief which is the *object* of self-deception (S’s awareness of p’s truth) is also the *cause* of S’s attempt to deceive himself, and the intention to deceive himself about his *belief* includes the deceiving himself about the *intention* itself.³⁵

All of this leads Bahnsen to conclude that he has set forth the necessary and sufficient conditions to prove that the notion of self-deception is neither paradoxical nor contradictory. S brings himself to believe that he does not believe p, even though he is in a mental state of believing it; his observed behaviors give him away, showing that p is indeed part of his theoretical or practical inferences. “Self-deception involves deception *by* the self, *of* the self, *for* the sake of the self, *about* the self. The paradox of self-deception is thus only apparent and can be given a coherent resolution.”³⁶ “The phenomenon seems paradoxical because we tend to think of men’s beliefs as rational. But what ought to be, often is not.” Thus, Bahnsen finishes on the disturbing note of humanity’s “capacity for irrationality and duplicity” and challenges the reader who might think himself to be a very rational and nonduplicitous person that we must “either adjust our self-conception or willingly engage in further acts of self-deception itself”!³⁷

It should not escape the reader that like Haidt, Bahnsen has asserted self-deception to be a large and inescapable part of human reality. As such, and apart from offering an answer to the problem, Bahnsen has supplied the ingredients for despair. His argument fits well within an apologetics of despair. In his other work after his dissertation, Bahnsen applied his knowledge of self-deception to the problem described in Romans 1:18. In this passage, sinners suppress the truth in unrighteousness, not despite, but

³² Ibid., 261.

³³ Ibid., 263.

³⁴ Ibid., 309–10.

³⁵ Ibid., 310.

³⁶ Ibid., 316.

³⁷ Ibid., 324. This is the last sentence of the dissertation, the only application to the reader that Bahnsen makes.

precisely because God has made it plain to them that he exists, and they, in turn, do not want to be held accountable to his judgment.

III. *Pascal on Self-Deception*

Pascal was a child prodigy in mathematics and the physical sciences. At the age of thirty-one, he became a Jansenist, that is, a member of a Roman Catholic movement that sought to follow Augustine on points of grace and predestination and in opposition to the Jesuits. Pascal entered this debate deeply with the publication of his *Lettres provinciales* in 1656–1657. He then began work on something tentatively titled *Apologie de la religion Chrétienne*. The work was not complete when Pascal died in 1662, but the sayings recorded on scraps of paper for this work were published nonetheless for the first time in 1669 as the *Pensées* (thoughts). This work has become a classic Christian work and a classic of French literature.

Perhaps Pascal's most famous *Pensée* was, "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing." If taken in the negative sense of covering something up, this thought may well capture the essence of self-deception.³⁸ The heart, for Pascal, the organ of faith and belief, has its reasons for hiding its beliefs, reasons for which the mind in its rational aspect knows nothing. Compare this thought: "The heart has its order, the mind has its own, which uses principles and demonstrations. The heart has a different one. We do not prove that we ought to be loved by setting out in order the causes of love; that would be absurd."³⁹ Again, taken in the negative sense, this means that self-deception is so powerful that it succeeds in hiding from the rational side of the heart what the nonrational (volitional or affective) side holds as "reasons" to justify certain beliefs.

In *Pensée* 978, Pascal does write about self-delusion: "It is no doubt an evil to be full of faults, but it is a still greater evil to be full of them and unwilling to recognize them, since this entails the further evil of deliberate self-delusion."⁴⁰ We should notice the deliberateness, the unwillingness to recognize one's evils—in Pascal's view, the unwillingness constitutes self-delusion. The unwillingness is so powerful that it covers up the faults to the point that one holds a false belief about oneself.

We should not mitigate the volitional aspect just because Pascal describes this deliberate self-delusion as "ignorance" a few sentences later. It is clear

³⁸ Pascal, *Pensées*, 127 (entry 423). This *Pensée* is more likely to be used positively in faith and science discussions.

³⁹ Ibid., 94 (entry 298; cf. 380, 382).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 324,

that he has in mind a culpable and motivated ignorance. In this entry, Pascal also deals at length with other-deception, something Bahnsen also addressed.

As for despair over the self-deceived character of humanity, Pascal has plenty of it: “Those who have known God without knowing their own wretchedness have not glorified him but themselves.”⁴¹ Although self-deception is not mentioned in words, not knowing one’s own wretchedness is a form of self-deception that makes for pride. In connection with deception’s deep-rootedness, he writes,

Thus human life is nothing but a perpetual illusion; there is nothing but mutual deception and flattery. No one talks about us in our presence as he would in our absence. Human relationships are only based on this mutual deception; and few friendships would survive if [people said it face to face] Man is therefore nothing but disguise, falsehood, and hypocrisy, both *in himself* and with regard to others ... and all these tendencies ... are naturally rooted in his heart.⁴²

Pascal, however, also presents the solution for self-deception in Christ: “Jesus is a God whom we can approach without pride and before whom we can humble ourselves without despair.”⁴³ Because of Jesus’s person, we need neither hide our wretched state from ourselves in self-deception nor deceive others.⁴⁴ What is rooted in the heart may be dealt with honestly.

Pascal’s category of “diversion” is different from self-deception, yet the two are related. Pascal’s diversions have a decidedly volitional origin: “Being unable to cure death, wretchedness, and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things.” The next thought contains this also. It answers the question, How should a man go about getting happiness? “The best thing would be to make himself immortal, but as he cannot do that, he has decided to stop himself thinking about it.” Pascal finds the reason for the popularity of “gaming and feminine society, war and high office” to lie in the human desire for diversion from the reality of their own wretched existence. Solitude is a person’s greatest fear. To put it in Bahnsen’s terms, the pain of facing the truth about themselves causes humans to cover it up. The difference here is that Pascal

⁴¹ Ibid., 57 (entry 189).

⁴² Ibid., 326 (entry 978), italics mine.

⁴³ Ibid., 69 (entry 212).

⁴⁴ Compare: “Knowing God without knowing our own wretchedness makes for pride. Knowing our own wretchedness without knowing God makes for despair. Knowing Jesus Christ strikes the balance because he shows us both God and our own wretchedness.” Ibid., 57 (entry 192). Cf. “If you knew your sins, you would lose heart ... [but] the fact that I tell you is a sign that I want to heal you.” Ibid., 291 (entry 919).

is not speaking about a second-order belief but a range of activities that occupy the person. Thus, diversions are not the same as self-deception, though they arise for similar reasons.⁴⁵

Finally, we ought to note Pascal's overt predestinarian thinking. This position leads him to assert the divine action of blinding the eyes of the stubborn. Here, blindness is a kind of self-deception, because the eyes are closed by the agent even though God adds to the blindness. "There is enough light to enlighten the elect and enough obscurity to humiliate them. There is enough obscurity to blind the reprobate and enough light to condemn them and deprive them of excuse."⁴⁶ Leaving the reprobate without excuse because they are blind precisely while the light is present to them can only mean that they have shut their eyes in an effort to hide from their own wretchedness. They are self-deceived.

The pithy *Pensées* of Pascal assert that humans are in self-delusion about their wretched condition. Humans are wretched (condemned) in not acknowledging their wretchedness and likewise wretched (despairing) in knowing it without Christ. Pascal's reflections should lead the reader to Christ. Pascal's remarks are not technical like Bahnsen's, yet they do vouch for the basic paradigm that Bahnsen advances.

IV. Kierkegaard on Despair and Self-Deception

Although Kierkegaard does address self-deception elsewhere, his *The Sickness unto Death* represents his most sustained effort. Compared to Pascal and Bahnsen, Kierkegaard, the precursor to existentialist philosophy, speaks a different language. For instance, the self is "a relation which relates to itself." To will to be a self without recognizing the third relation, that to the power which established it (God), is to be in despair. Within this basic structure, self-deception is to speak of this utter despair as something less, something like misfortune:

Where then does despair come from? ... From the fact that God, who made man this relation, as it were lets go of it And in the fact that the relation is spirit, is the self, lies the accountability under which all despair is, every moment, what it is, however much and however ingeniously the despairer, *deceiving both himself and others*, speaks of his despair as a misfortune.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid., 37–43 (entries 132–39).

⁴⁶ Ibid., 73 (entry 236; cf. 232, 893). Note that the metaphor of blindness also links to the theme of the hiddenness of God (entries 242, 394, 427, 438, 444, 446, 449, 781).

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 46 (italics mine). Technically, the author of the work is Anti-Climacus, a pseudonym used because Kierkegaard did not consider himself to meet the

Each person's wish is nearly always to want to be different from what they are; one aims to "be rid of oneself." At this point, even greater despair sets in, because it is impossible: "The torment of despair is precisely the inability to die."⁴⁸ Despair cannot consume itself. For this reason, most people deceive themselves into thinking they are different from what they really are. Specifically, they live in denial of the fact that God constituted them as a self, which is God's greatest gift to them (their existence).⁴⁹ This despair is universal.⁵⁰

Kierkegaard recognizes that many would take his account to be gloomy, but he responds, "It is not gloomy; on the contrary it tries to shed light on what one generally *banishes to a certain obscurity*."⁵¹ He continues addressing the concept of self-deception as follows: "The common view ... assumes that every man knows best himself whether or not he is in despair," and every person's self-diagnosis is accepted by others. Not by Kierkegaard! In his view, "not to be in despair may mean precisely to be in despair."⁵² Kierkegaard seeks to be the physician who presents the true diagnosis through the proper understanding of despair.

People who do recognize their despair to some extent still try to ignore it. While it is true that "actual life is too complex to turn up contrasts as abstract as that between a despair that is completely ignorant of being despair and one that is completely conscious of being so," within the continuum between the extremes, people have "a dim idea," though they rarely deal with it. Diversions help maintain this ignorance: "Or perhaps he tries to keep his own condition in the dark by diversions and other means, for example, work and pressure of business, as ways of distracting attention, though again in such a way that he is not altogether clear that he is doing it to keep himself in the dark."⁵³

As the treatise progresses, Kierkegaard argues that despair is sin: "Sin is: *before God or with the conception of God, in despair not wanting to be oneself, or*

ideals set forth in *The Sickness unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*. Therefore, he had to come under the power of the message, as a fellow with his readers. Nevertheless, I shall keep matters simple and speak of *Kierkegaard's* views in what follows.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 48–49.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁰ "There is not a single human being who does not despair at least a little And besides, there is no one and has never been anyone outside of Christendom who isn't in despair; and no one in Christendom who is not a true Christian [i.e., only true Christians can get beyond the despair to hope]; and so far as he is not wholly that, then he is still to some extent in despair." Ibid., 52.

⁵¹ Ibid., 52 (italics mine).

⁵² Ibid., 54.

⁵³ Ibid., 78–79.

wanting in despair to be oneself.”⁵⁴ Not wanting to be oneself refers to not striving to be the true healthy self in relation to God, while wanting in despair to be oneself is holding onto the old sick self of independence from God. The relation to God is key: sin’s opposite is not virtue (moralism), but faith, for both sin and faith are about the self’s relation to God.

In order to highlight sin’s willfulness, Kierkegaard draws a contrast with the Socratic approach, which defines sin as ignorance. Kierkegaard does not reject Socrates’s view entirely, but states that its defect lies in its ambiguity as to whether the ignorance is original or acquired. Then follows an astute observation in connection with self-deception’s willfulness:

If [the ignorance is acquired], then sin must really consist in something other than ignorance; it must consist in the activity whereby a person *has worked at obscuring his knowledge*. But even assuming this, the intractable and very tenacious defect returns, in that the question now becomes whether at the moment he began to obscure his knowledge the person is clearly conscious of doing so.

We may observe how Kierkegaard endorses the idea of ignorance but qualifies it as willfully acquired ignorance. He does this under the rubric of *obscuring*, and even introduces the question of the consciousness of the obscuring act, an essential question in analyzing self-deception. Similarly, Bahnsen had observed that in order for the second-order belief to be willed (to arise), there had to be consciousness of the first-order belief, at least initially.

Kierkegaard does clearly posit an initial knowledge of what Bahnsen would call the first-order belief. He writes of “a large number of people” who “contrive gradually to obscure” the knowledge that would lead them to the truth.⁵⁵ His view that humans do not want to understand what is right indeed implies that they do know what right is, for, as Bahnsen pointed out, it is impossible to react against something you are not aware of (even if only initially aware).

While all of the account thus far of Kierkegaard’s view of self-deception draws on themes of continuity between Kierkegaard’s and Bahnsen’s views, it may seem there is also an item of major discontinuity, namely, the role of paradox. Bahnsen’s thesis is that the paradox is only apparent. Kierkegaard, however, insists on maintaining paradox. We need to ask what the paradox is, and I would posit that in this case, Kierkegaard’s paradox is original sin, not self-deception.⁵⁶ He quite transparently describes self-deception as a

⁵⁴ Ibid., 109.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 127.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 125. The paradox may lie in the “dialectical specification” between knowing and doing (which is: willing). However, if read carefully, the paragraph in question first posits the

progressive interaction of the mind, will, and lower affections:

In the life of the spirit there is no standing still [*Stilstand*] (really there is no state of affairs [*Tilstand*] either, everything is actualization): if a person does not do what is right the very second he knows it is the right thing to do—then, for a start, the knowledge comes off the boil. Next comes the question of what the will thinks of the knowledge. The will is dialectical and has underneath it the whole of man's lower nature. If it doesn't like the knowledge, it doesn't immediately follow that the will goes and does the opposite ... but then the will lets some time pass During all this the knowing becomes more and more obscured and the lower nature more and more victorious. For alas! the good must be done immediately, directly it is known ... but the lower nature has its strength in dragging things out. Gradually the will ceases to object to this happening: it practically winks at it. And when the knowing has become duly obscured, the will and the knowing can better understand one another. Eventually they are in entire agreement, since knowing has now deserted to the side of the will and allows it to be known that what the will wants is quite right. And this is perhaps how a large number of people live: they contrive gradually to obscure the ethical and ethico-religious knowledge.⁵⁷

The will is dialectical, moving between knowledge and the lower nature (affections). What thus begins with the will delaying continues with the affections wearing down the will to go their way and the passage of time obscuring the knowledge. The repetition of the root “obscure” is critical. Something was known but became hidden by a dialectical mental process. Kierkegaard here provides a very psychologically detailed account of self-deception. It fits hand-in-glove with Bahnsen's characterization in terms of first- and second-order beliefs.

Conclusion

After introducing a social psychologist (Haidt) who believes that humans are the product of biological evolution and that self-deception is a rather normal human phenomenon, we have reviewed in more detail the analyses

doctrine of the will's defiance, and then the addition of the doctrine of original sin. Kierkegaard makes the connection between original sin and paradox via the metaphor of sewing. He introduces it as follows: “And then to *fasten the end* very firmly, [Christianity] adds the dogma of original sin.” He continues the metaphor with speculative philosophy sewing and sewing without “fastening the end and without knotting the thread.” The paragraph ends, “Christianity, on the other hand, *fastens the thread* with the help of *paradox*.” My observations are confirmed by further remarks of Kierkegaard on the “Christian principle that sin is affirmative—not as something that can be comprehended, but as a paradox which has to be believed.” Ibid., 130.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 126–27. Kierkegaard is objecting to Greek philosophy and “modern philosophy” (Cartesianism, in his day) as rationalistic and showing that it is not true that one always does what one knows.

of three authors: a French Jansenist Roman Catholic of the seventeenth century (Pascal), a Danish philosopher-theologian of the nineteenth century (Kierkegaard), and an American philosopher-theologian of the twentieth century (Bahnsen).

Each author approached the topic in his own way. Pascal utilized the metaphor of blindness, Kierkegaard spoke of sickness, and Bahnsen employed a variety of metaphors. Their particular genres heavily influenced the shape of their accounts. Bahnsen's was a dissertation submitted to a faculty of philosophy, Pascal's a collection of pithy reflections, and Kierkegaard's a treatise designed for awakening complacent Christians. Thus, we should not press these authors for complete uniformity.

At the same time, the similarities outstrip the differences. All of these authors were Christian. All were Western. All defended a strong view of sin and were overtly monergistic. All were concerned for sinners to know themselves as sinners and find salvation in Christ. For Bahnsen, this can be clearly deduced from many of his other works, as this was his overall apologetic concern. For Kierkegaard, his follow-up work, *Practice in Christianity*, provides a positive counterpart to *The Sickness unto Death*.

Does this analysis mean that a robust account of self-deception within an apologetic of despair or a negative apologetic is the unique property of those who hold to total depravity and a monergistic view of salvation under a sovereign God? While it may be the case, such a conclusion goes beyond the evidence presented in this article. At the same time, we should note that Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Bahnsen were, respectively, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed. Thus, it suggests that a wide variety of Christian apologists could make effective use of this apologetic tool, even if it is most suited to those who hold to total depravity.

It may be worth noting that at both the academic and popular levels, the idea that many people are self-deceived is widely accepted. However, the Christian apologist presses home the point that this self-deception is particularly prevalent in the area of moral culpability and spiritual insight. Sinners are motivated to run from God's judgment and to justify in their own minds any deviation from his instructions to avoid a sense of guilt. Christians, however, should understand that God has designated the sense of moral culpability as key to seeking gospel hope.

As for self-deception's place in a negative apologetic, it may well argue the need for divine revelation. If all people are self-deceived about their true condition, who is going to show the way to honesty and truth? Kierkegaard argued in effect that it was because of our obscuring acts that the only way humans could know that their sinfulness arose from their defiance of God

was by divine revelation—the Scriptures.⁵⁸ These Scriptures reveal at their heart Jesus Christ: Son of God and man, the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:16). He has conquered death and lives forevermore (Rev 1:18). He is the Christian hope stored up in heaven, imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (1 Pet 1:3–5). No other religion proclaims such hope, and certainly not such hope rooted in the historical reality of this world.

Bahnsen and Van Til both recognized the crucial place of self-deception in their presuppositional apologetic.⁵⁹ Van Til argued that while atheists claim that they reason and live without God, their atheism presupposes theism inasmuch as their use of logic, living by moral standards, expectation of nature's uniformity, fear of death, and assumption of freedom of thought all manifest an otherwise hidden belief in the true God of Christianity.⁶⁰ Atheists are self-deceived about their world-and-life view. A coherent account of self-deception is critical to espousing this.

The three authors reviewed in this essay provide strong support for the place of self-deception in the Christian doctrine of sin. In my view, self-deception is but one more expression of the pervasive depravity of the human mind, will, and passions. We cannot make every instance of self-deception a simple fault of either the passions or the mind or the will; rather, the effect of sin in all of these psychic faculties (i.e., total depravity) contributes to self-deception.⁶¹ Its universal presence argues for a universal culpability before God. The right response to a study of this doctrine can only be that of the psalmist: “Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults” (Ps 19:12), and “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps 139:23–24).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵⁹ “This notion *functions in such a crucial manner* in his [Van Til’s] argumentation that *without it* presuppositional apologetics could be neither intellectually cogent nor personally appropriate as a method of defending the faith.” Bahnsen, “Crucial Concept of Self-Deception,” 2.

⁶⁰ Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 450, see also 438, 443–60. “*Sinners hate the idea of a clearly identifiable authority over them. They do not want to meet God*” (213).

⁶¹ The original integrity and the subsequent fallen condition of the mind, will/heart, and affections are described in the Canons of Dort, chapter III/IV, article 1. The renewal of the mind and will are described in chapter III/IV, article 11.

Does Our Lord Ask Too Much? A Neglected Issue in Apologetics Today

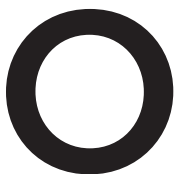
WILLIAM EDGAR

Abstract

The article begins with a historical survey of challengers of hypocrisy and inauthentic Christianity throughout church history: Søren Kierkegaard, Bernard de Clairvaux, Girolamo Savonarola, Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, and Francis Schaeffer. It continues with two questions about the biblical warrant and feasibility of such warnings. Finally, it concludes with a consideration of two dangers facing the church today: conservatism and escapism in the church. In the end, we can only face up these challenges in the task of apologetics through the power of the gospel.

Keywords

Søren Kierkegaard, Bernard de Clairvaux, Girolamo Savonarola, Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, Francis Schaeffer, hypocrisy, mission of the church, conservatism



ne evening, we were having dinner with my wife's older sister and her husband in Anderson, South Carolina. At one point during the meal, there came a loud clatter. The house shook, and we could not hear each other talk. It ended as abruptly as it began. We asked, "What was that?" They

answered, “What was what?” In fact, it was a local railroad train speeding on the tracks behind the house. But they had heard it so many times they did not hear it anymore.

I. Advocates against the Establishment

There has never been a more severe critic of hypocrisy than Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). His guns were constantly aimed at the pretenses of Christendom. In his judgment, the Lutheran Christians of Denmark, in effect, could not hear the gospel anymore. His attacks are found on nearly every page of his writings, sometimes directly, often by implication. Kierkegaard has to be one of the most enigmatic theologians of any age. He was no doubt a romantic, one whose life was in part determined by his father’s cursing God, and also by his well-known engagement and then break up with Regina Olsen. He often used pseudonyms, which never really hid his identity for long. He was a fierce opponent of Hegel and Hegelian thought, finding it deterministic and rationalist.

However we might evaluate Kierkegaard’s overall theology, an issue still requiring further study, we can easily agree that his attacks on the deafness of the official church, of the clergy, within the culture of Christendom, remain a powerful challenge to this day. To pick one article, nearly at random, we discover the flavor of his approach. “The *Instant*, No 5” is an editorial in a series originally written for *The Fatherland*, a daily paper published in Copenhagen.¹ Among his many arguments, he reminds the reader (provocatively) that God, the God of love, is really our mortal enemy, because he requires us to give up every earthly good.² He equates believing in official Christianity with playing happy music at a funeral.³ The true pattern for the Christian life is to be lowly, not great. To espouse Christendom unthinkingly is equivalent to regressing to walking on all fours, like an infant, pitting dogmas against the truth, the very opposite of the call to be real.⁴ The sober truth is that in the pretense of leaving paganism behind, we have simply baptized pagan practices as “Christian.” If you really want to be a Christian in the New Testament sense, you will experience “sheer

¹ July 27, 1855 (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels’ Estate & Heirs, Bianco Luno’s Press). Here we will refer to “The *Instant*, No. 5,” trans. Walter Lowrie in Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon “Christendom”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 155–77.

² *Ibid.*, 157.

³ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

anguish, crucifying the flesh, hating oneself.”⁵ He ends this essay with reflections on the passages about those who like to walk in long robes (Mark 12:38; Luke 20:46).⁶ Jesus is not criticizing the size of people’s clothes, but their ostentatious vanity.

One of the most critical tasks for doing Christian apologetics today, as in every day, is to ask our people to stop and listen to the train. Put differently; we need to be warned against presuming that our relation to God is safe because we have ensconced ourselves in a secure place.

Kierkegaard stands in a long line of prophetic evangelists who attack the hypocrisy and false security of “Christian” culture and refuse to face God as he really is. In their own often different ways, preachers such as Bernard de Clairvaux, Girolamo Savonarola, Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, and Francis Schaeffer similarly plead for authentic religion over against the lazy practices of the cultural Christian.

Bernard de Clairvaux (1090–1153) argued for spiritual authenticity within the confines of the official church. He was the confidant of five popes. His primary opponent was Peter Abelard, whom he considered to be a rationalist with little spiritual understanding. While working tirelessly as a reformer, Bernard managed to preach extensively. His most expansive series was on the Song of Solomon. There are some eighty-six sermons in the series, each one a meditation on the relation of God to the human soul. Drawing extensively on the analogy between the bride and the bridegroom, he appeals to the need for mutual love: “The Father is never fully known if He is not loved perfectly.”⁷ “But the love of a bridegroom—or rather of the Bridegroom who is love—asks only the exchange of love and trust. Let the Beloved love in return. How can the bride—and the bride of love—do other than love? How can Love not be loved?”⁸

Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498) was the fiery Florentine preacher who railed against the corruption of the city and the pope. Machiavelli called him an “unarmed prophet.” His sermon series on Amos and Ezekiel, for example, includes fierce attacks against the corruption of local government and the venality of the papacy. At one point, he convinced the city of Florence to hold a “bonfire of the vanities,” a great fire in which books, clothing, cards, and other worldly objects were burned up. His aggressive messages eventually earned him the death penalty. If we could sympathetically summarize

⁵ Ibid., 168.

⁶ Ibid., 174–77.

⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, “Sermon 83,” in *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, http://people.bu.edu/dklepper/RN413/bernard_sermons.html.

⁸ Ibid.

his message, though, it would be the triumph of the cross of Christ over worldly wisdom. For example, in his series on “Ruth and Micheas,” he preached on not avoiding but facing death with realism and grace, as Jesus had done.⁹ Savonarola’s was a wake-up call against the blind authority of official power.

Martin Luther (1483–1546) railed against the religious apparatus of his day. In what was perhaps his most vehement critique of the establishment published in the extraordinarily prolific summer of 1520, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, he boldly attacked the sacramental system of Rome. His reasoning was not limited to the critique of the number seven and reduction to two (baptism and the Lord’s Supper—though initially he retained penance, only redefining it to require contrition of the penitent). His reasoning implied a significant reduction of the official church’s power to control the lives of believers. Hitherto, the claims of the Roman Catholic Church were so tied to the efficacy of the sacraments that the power of the priesthood rose or fell with them. According to Roland Bainton, “The repudiation of ordination as a sacrament demolished the caste system of clericalism and provided a sound basis for the priesthood of all believers.”¹⁰ And his reduction of the mass to the Lord’s Supper was less an attack on the priesthood as it was on the interpretation that the Eucharist was mechanical, the resacrifice of Christ, a ceremony that was valid *ex opere operato* (“by the work worked” or efficaciously) regardless of the faith of the participant. In consequence, he concluded, not only the priests but the laity should have access to the cup as well as the bread.¹¹

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) famously pleaded for an authentic religious experience, opposing it to the many forms of counterfeits of the experience of grace. In three seminal works, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741), *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1742), and above all in his classic, *A Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections* (1746), he compared true faith to its forgeries. To take but one example among many, he contrasts “legal humiliation” with “evangelical humiliation.”¹² The former is when the mind, moved by the Holy Spirit,

⁹ Girolamo Savonarola, “Ruth and Micheas,” Sermon XXVIII from *The Art of Dying Well* (All Souls’ Day, November 2, 1496), reprinted in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490–1498* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 41.

¹⁰ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Mentor, 1950), 106.

¹¹ Martin Luther, *A Prelude by Martin Luther on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, trans. Albert T. W. Steinhäuser; online: Project Wittenberg, December 3, 2002, <http://www.projectwittenberg.org/etext/luther/babylonian/babylonian.htm#2.5>.

¹² Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections* (1746; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 237–66.

comes to the conviction that God is great and fearful, convicting us of our exceeding sinfulness and of our liability at the judgment of God. The latter comes when our hearts are disposed to discover “God’s holy beauty.” The contrast is between having a proper despair over our not being able to help ourselves and being “brought sweetly to yield.”¹³ Timothy Keller, one of the great preachers of our times, beseeches preachers to be “affectionate.” Following Edwards, he says you cannot manufacture affection: “Your heart needs to be soft toward God and toward people.” This requires both a certain freedom from your notes [as a preacher], but above all the frequent practice of prayer.¹⁴

We could multiply examples. Closer to our own day, Schaeffer loved to appeal to our need to know God, not only intellectually, but in reality. The term *reality* was often used at L’Abri, the community which the Schaeffers founded in the 1950s. They were concerned to “exhibit the reality of the supernatural to a generation that has lost its way” in an age of imitations.¹⁵

II. *Biblical Warrant for These Calls?*

Two questions need to be asked here. First, do these severe admonitions have biblical warrant? And, second, if they do, can they possibly be heeded? To the first, there is a wealth of passages that require the principle of authenticity, as well as many that showcase people who do or do not conform to it.

We might remember the defining event shortly after Solomon’s death when the kingdom was divided in two. Jeroboam claimed the north, and in order to keep the people from loyalty to the true remnant in the south, made idols and two counterfeit altars, one in Bethel, the other in Dan, and then told the people they no longer had to take the wearisome journey to Jerusalem (1 Kgs 12:25–33; 13:33–34; and see 15:34). He went further and appointed false priests. Also, he changed the sacred calendar. It is significant that a number of the anticlerical revolutions in modern history attempted to revise the calendar. The French Revolutionary calendar, for example, placed year one just after the Assembly was dissolved and designed each month to be 30 days, with names derived from parts of nature, a week to be ten days (replacing Sunday as the day of rest with the tenth day, or *decadi*).

¹³ Ibid., 238.

¹⁴ Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 168.

¹⁵ Francis A. Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1977), 70.

This new calendar was meant to represent the supremacy of reason over the church. It lasted until Napoleon's coronation.¹⁶

So many of the prophets rail against Israel's slouching into a surface religiosity that hides the need for authentic dispositions. Picking nearly at random, take the case of Hosea. The Lord's appeal for authenticity is not only a brutal demand for truth, but also a passionate entreaty to consider the consequences of abandoning his extravagant love. There is plenty of wrath (Hos 5:14; 7:1–3; 8:5; 12:2). And the hypocrisy of celebrating festivals without integrity is denounced (8:13; 9:5; 10:1–2). But the prophecy also recalls God's affection for his people and thus the tragedy of their forsaking him: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (11:1); "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk I led them with cords of kindness, with hands of love" (11:3–4). Like a father who hates to discipline a child, the Lord asks, "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?" (11:8). In the end, he promises to take his children back and heal them (14:4–7).

The New Testament is no less poignant. It is fitting to consider the famous parable called "The Prodigal Son" (sometimes renamed "The Two Brothers" or even "The Prodigal God"; Luke 15:11–32). Here our Lord compares two reactions to the Father's love. The one is from the penitent prodigal. The text tells us that after he had exhausted his resources, he "came to himself" (v. 17). The father came running to greet him and interrupted his prepared speech. His old home feted his return with a great celebration. The elder brother, by contrast, was angry and would not share in the joy. His terrible words include these: "Look, these many years I have served you and never disobeyed your command" (v. 29). He did not understand the privilege, the joy, the wonder of a loving God.

One of the most poignant stories confirming the dreadfulness of a frozen heart is the episode about the ten lepers, two chapters from this one (Luke 17:11–19). Leprosy was a term used for what we now call Hansen's disease, an infestation of *Mycobacterium leprae*, a bacterium that attacks the nervous system. In biblical times and even to some extent today, it so disfigured the victim that he or she was required to be isolated. According to Leviticus 13:45–46, this pollution required the victim to shout, "Unclean, unclean!" while traveling. It is hard to imagine a greater opprobrium. In our story, the ten cried out to Jesus for mercy, upon which he directed them to show themselves to the priest. The law required a leper to show himself to the priest only after healing was complete. Here, they were healed as they went.

¹⁶ Napoleon wisely told the pope the country would revert to the Gregorian calendar—on condition he would come and place the crown on his head!

And then the drama: only one, a Samaritan, turned back and worshiped Jesus in gratitude (v. 16). There is a good deal going on in this story, including Luke's growing emphasis that the Gentiles would respond to the good news when many of God's ancient people would not. Why? As Fred Craddock puts it, "Israel's special place in God's plan for the world had turned in upon itself, duty had become privilege, and frequent favors had settled into blinding familiarity."¹⁷

In view of the temptation to a surface religion, the New Testament puts the most severe warning to us. "In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrine the commandments of men," Jesus declares, quoting Isaiah (Mark 7:7; Isa 29:13). Although a good deal of the accusation of hypocrisy is addressed to the Pharisees and other religious leaders, in all, it is an equal opportunity disease. In his sobering words in the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord tells us the gate is narrow, and those who find it are few (Matt 7:14). Matthew records the story of the wedding feast, which concludes, "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt 22:1–14). Only eight people were saved during Noah's flood, Peter reminds us (1 Pet 3:20).

On one reading, these texts tell us that only a few will be saved. That is a plausible interpretation. However, there are several problems with this view. One is the apparent teaching to the contrary in the Bible. For example, John records in the Revelation that he beheld "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the lamb" (Rev 7:9, cf. 5:9). Jesus tells his followers, a "little flock," not to fear (Luke 12:32).

In a marvelous article, Benjamin Warfield tackles the question of these apparently small numbers head-on.¹⁸ His basic argument is that the gate is narrow and those who find it are few because the moral requirements for entry are difficult. However, this is not because the Bible is doing a numerical survey; rather, it is stressing the need for authenticity and denying a hereditary right to salvation. "The point of the remark [that many will strive to enter] is that salvation is not to be assumed by anyone as a matter of course, but is to be sought with earnest and persistent faith."¹⁹ The ultimate message of the New Testament is not about small numbers but the need for grace. The gospel is the decisive reversal of human religion, which teaches that we enter the kingdom as a right, not a privilege. It is the very writer Luke who goes on to tell us of the massive expansion of the church in the first century.

¹⁷ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, IBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 203.

¹⁸ Benjamin B. Warfield, "Are They Few That Be Saved?," in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 334–50.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 340.

Thus, to our second question, can the severe warnings of the Bible be heeded, or, to put it another way, is anyone qualified to pass the test of authenticity? Along with Warfield and, indeed, with all five of our cautionary fathers, we answer that—not in our own wisdom, but yet in the grace of God—the answer is affirmative. Often the very accounts of the difficulty (*viz.*, impossibility) of entering into God’s kingdom give a key to its opportunity. An outstanding case is that of the rich young man (known as the rich young ruler in many translations), as recorded in Luke 18:18–30 and parallel passages. After the disturbing story of a wealthy young man unable to give up his resources in order to follow Christ, the Lord tells his disciples that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (v. 25), to which the perceptive disciples asked—not “How may rich persons be saved?” but “Then who can be saved?” (v. 26). Jesus’s commanding answer is memorable: “What is impossible with men is possible with God” (v. 27). And he finishes with the promise that whoever leaves (unhealthy) attachments to property and family for the sake of the kingdom will be generously rewarded (vv. 29–30).

III. *Two Contemporary Dangers*

In the end, as G. K. Chesterton has put it, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.”²⁰ Had he said, “It has been found impossible,” he would have been closer to the truth.

What, then, is the secure place to warn people against in our own times, and, more importantly, what real hope can we bring to them? Since we are no longer living in Christendom, we cannot make one-to-one applications of the critiques of Luther or Kierkegaard to the cultural captivity of professing Christians today. Still, much of what they say is valid for church-going people who are inclined to rest in the false security of religious life, often connected with some cultural ideal. It can be a simple nostalgia for better times. It seems to me that the false security is more in some permutation of modern Western ideals than the long robes of Danish pastors. Let me address just two of them.

1. *Temptation to Conservatism*

The first is what I would like to call the temptation to conservatism. Many believers identify with conservatism. I do on many points. But what is it?

²⁰ Gilbert K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World*, part 1, chapter 5 (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2007), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1717/1717-h/1717-h.htm#link2H_4_0006.

We have recently lost one of the great voices representing conservatism, namely, Roger Scruton. As he put it, conservatism is “as much a temperament as a philosophy.”²¹ The history of Western and American conservatism is long and involved, going back at least to the first critics of the French Revolution.²² More recently, in many countries conservatism has moved more resolutely to a right-wing radicalism. And in the United States, many evangelical Christians have embraced a quite radical version of conservatism.²³

A number of the ties between conservative values and the Christian faith are undeniable. The general commitment to such traditional ideals as respect for freedom of speech and for the liberty of public expressions of faith, as well as to the elevation of life, education in the classics, and the family should be cited. Perhaps also important is the conservative opposition to laissez-faire morality and the not-so-hidden tenacity of what is politically correct. At the same time, we ought carefully to disentangle any lock-step association of the Christian faith, particularly in its evangelical expression, from conservatism in general. D. G. Hart has helpfully reminded us that any “ism” is a potential pitfall, including the temptation to conservatism. For in its critique of ideologies, it unwittingly slouches into its own ideology.²⁴ And today, in the United States, the “elephant in the room,” the success of Donald Trump, has rightly caused a number of evangelicals to debate the association of the Christian faith with his particular brand of conservatism. There are those, such as Jerry Falwell Jr., who enter the “Faustian bargain” that produces greater right-to-life views and the placing of conservatives on the Supreme Court, regardless of the character of the facilitator. There are others such as Michael Gerson, who has seriously questioned the support of evangelicals for a president he considers to be a narcissistic bully.²⁵ Alan

²¹ Dominic Green, “Roger Scruton: A Conservative for Modern Times,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 13, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/roger-scruton-a-conservative-for-modern-times-11578955867>.

²² There exist several reliable histories of the conservative temperament. See Roger Scruton, *Conservatism: An Invitation to the Great Tradition* (Chippenham: Horsell’s Morsels, 2017); Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind from Burke to Eliot* (Washington, DC: Gateway, 2001); Gregory L. Schneider, *Conservatism in America Since 1930: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

²³ See, for example, Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatives* (New York: Norton, 2011); Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁴ See D. G. Hart, *From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin: Evangelicals and the Betrayal of American Conservatism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

²⁵ See Michael Gerson, “Trump Has Adopted the Coward’s Conception of Heroism,” *The Times*, December 18, 2019, <https://www.timesonline.com/opinion/20191218/michael-gerson-trump-has-adopted-cowards-conception-of-heroism>.

Jacobs goes so far as to suggest the term “evangelical” has lost its meaning since it has become a voting block with mixed success and short-term gains, but which in effect gains the world but loses the soul.²⁶

Perhaps the most helpful suggestion from an evangelical is Os Guinness’s view that Trump is not the problem, but a symptom of a society’s obliviousness about the true sources of freedom. Guinness has told his evangelical colleagues that fierce debates for or against Trump are both uncivil and ignorant of the real question: how can we be free? In the end, we are faced with two options, he contends, 1776 and 1789 (the American or the French Revolution).²⁷ As could be expected, Guinness argues for the first, insisting that freedom requires virtue and faith.

My point here is not to weigh in on the present American political scene, nor for that matter on the European situation (I was raised in France), but simply to ask that we be alerted to the dangers of the systematic and often unthinking association of the Christian faith with one particular cultural or political stance. This is *not* to say we should be like the ostrich and hide away from facing the important questions. But we should do so with the kind of authenticity the above visionaries asked for, seeking first the kingdom of God, while also rendering to Caesar what rightly belongs to him in God’s world.

2. The Church, Not Simply a Refuge

A second example is a bit different. I see a danger in Western Christians assuming the church is merely a safe refuge. I do not want to take any cheap shots here. The church is such a precious institution, and my own involvement with it has been a priceless part of my life. Much more important, our Lord declared that it was on the rock of apostolic confession that he himself would build his church and that not only would the gates of hell itself not prevail against it but its leaders would be given the very keys of the kingdom of heaven (Matt 16:18–19). So there can be no doubt about the ultimate victory of Christ’s church.

My concern is with the way some believers can use the church. It can become a place to reinforce our natural tendency to look for a safe haven,

²⁶ See his now infamous article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Alan Jacobs, “Evangelical Has Lost Its Meaning,” *The Atlantic*, September 22, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/09/the-end-of-evangelical/598423/>. This bargain has been defended by certain conservatives as well. At least one of them declares that private foibles should have no bearing on the virtues of public policy; Dennis Prager, “A Response to the Editor of Christianity Today,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, December 28, 2019, <https://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/Op-Ed/2019/12/28/Dennis-Prager-A-response-to-the-editor-of-Christianity-Today/stories/201912280007>.

²⁷ See Os Guinness, *Last Call for Liberty* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2018).

often where everyone looks alike, and forget the need to reach out. Years ago, my friend C. John Miller experienced and then promoted a renewal in church life whose effects are still being felt today. He writes about it in the classic *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*.²⁸ Nothing revolutionary, really, and not everyone agrees with all of the content. But the basic message is that the church needs to function as a missionary organization far better than it does. Perhaps Miller's most helpful content focuses on the nature of the local church. After some meditations on passages such as 1 Peter 2:9–10, he asks (almost) rhetorically, "What, then, is the basic, fundamental nature of the church? To serve itself and its own self-centered interests? Or even first of all to serve others?" His answer should not surprise us, but maybe it does: "No, its fundamental character is to belong to God."²⁹

Miller goes on to admonish Christians that belonging to God should mean generous outreach. He warns against being passive in relation to the world and its own life.³⁰ He gently criticizes local churches for not going "beyond the ordinary" and failing to realize that the Great Commission is not only about foreign missions, but about values, practices, attitudes across the board.³¹ The rest of the book, like the "new life" movement he helped spawn, is filled with practical admonitions on developing the courage to reach out. Though many of these views are incontrovertible, there has been, no doubt predictably, severe criticism of Miller and the movement he spawned, the New Life churches, for nurturing superficial revivalism. This opposition is of varying degrees of thoughtfulness.³² Of course, throughout church history, both support and criticism of the more revivalist church have been going on. My only point here is not to take sides, nor even to go deeper into the pros and cons of a particular missionary church, but simply to affirm the rightness of the caution against becoming ingrown. And the last thing we want to do, any more than Miller did, is to motivate people on either side out of guilt.³³

We might come at this from a different angle. Most countries in Europe, and certainly in North America, are struggling with questions about

²⁸ C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 67, and ad loc.

³² See Geoff Thomas, "The Movement Called 'Sonship,'" *The Banner of Truth*, December 1, 2000, <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2000/the-movement-called-sonship/>.

³³ A similar point is made in the area of finance by my friend James Petty. He argues that our lives and our money should exhibit the central truth of the gospel, that God is a giving God. See James C. Petty, *Act of Grace: The Power of Generosity to Change Your Life, the Church and the World* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2019).

immigration. People from places of great hardship are flooding through the gates, hoping for a better life. Germany has the largest foreign-born population in Europe, many of them coming from Poland, Turkey, and Russia. France and the United Kingdom count together well over nine million foreign-born immigrants. Switzerland has a high number, as do Austria, Sweden, and Ireland.³⁴ In North America, the United States is home to some 44 million immigrants, 13.5% of the total population.³⁵ In 2016, Canada showed nearly 30% of its population to be foreign-born.³⁶ Besides the magnitude of the numbers, these statistics often represent extreme destitution and persecution in the home countries, as well as the difficulty of integration to the new homeland.

What does the gospel say to us about the issues? Certainly, the first thing to say is that there is no “silver bullet” or one-size-fits-all solution. The extreme temptations on the “right” include simply closing all borders. The opposite extreme is an unqualified invitation to come and live in the home country. I am not qualified to make public policy judgments on these matters. What I think we can more safely do is evaluate our churches and their policies of compassion and put them to the test without using guilt tactics. In a series of articles on these subjects, Calvin Seerveld offers a few suggestions.³⁷ His key theological point throughout is that humanness should not be determined by “ethnic cultural minority colorfulness” but by conformity to God’s image.³⁸ This should not lead to a melting pot but to the privilege of immigrants being respected and the joy of being able to contribute to the new homeland from their background.

The basis for the respect due should not be Lockean tolerance, nor Enlightenment *fraternité*, but what he dubs “tough love.” By this he means that anyone who has power over another should do everything to support his or her dependent. He calls this, deliberately riffing off of Darwin, supporting “the survival of the weakest.”³⁹ He enjoins us to open our eyes to human neighbors in need of care. Though many of Seerveld’s practical

³⁴ Information received from the International Organization for Migration, 17 route des Morillons, P.O. Box 17, 1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland, <https://www.iom.int/contact-us>.

³⁵ See “United States,” *Migration Policy Institute*, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/regions/united-states>.

³⁶ See “Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity: Key Results from the 2016 Census,” *The Daily*, October 25, 2017, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/171025/dq171025b-eng.htm>.

³⁷ Calvin G. Seerveld, “Minorities and Xenophobia,” and “Beyond Tolerance to Tough Love,” in *Cultural Problems in Western Society*, ed. John H. Kok (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2014) 1–16, 17–34.

³⁸ Seerveld, “Minorities and Xenophobia,” 7.

³⁹ Seerveld, “Beyond Tolerance to Tough Love,” 24.

solutions bear on nations and how to treat immigrant minorities, much of it applies to the church. Admittedly, much of this is theoretical, but the larger principles of caring for the weakest ought to inform church ministry. This could look as basic as helping the foreign-born find work or health care. It could look as difficult as respecting the worship styles of newer members without eradicating the treasury accumulated by the church. And it will want to move from the legitimate concerns of the local church to other Christians, at home or abroad.

Conclusion

Where do these considerations leave us? With many questions, of course. But are we not due for a healthy self-examination in response to the challenges, both from the fathers and, more critically, from the Scriptures, about resting thoughtlessly in a tradition, an ideology or a set of religious practices that cloud the way to a genuine relationship to the living God? The gospel demands it. The discipline of apologetics will not mean very much if we do not stress it, for the goal is not to win arguments but to exalt Christ and win souls. But can we accomplish it? Absolutely not, unless the power of God to salvation is at work (Rom 1:16–17).

God Intended It for Good: Re-forming Evil

YANNICK IMBERT

Abstract

The confession that God intends evil for good, which is one of the great conclusions of the cycle of Joseph (Gen 37–50), sheds light on the limited manner in which we have tried to answer the challenge of evil. Each generation faces anew the challenge of explaining the sovereign action of a benevolent God in a world where evil rages. This article explores the three key words of the sentence “God intended it for good”: *God*, *intended*, and *good*. Our aim is to reflect on a “re-formed” answer in emphasizing the need for a language that reclaims the richness, diversity, and incomprehensibility of the biblical language about God’s action in the world.

Keywords

Evil, theodicy, causality, anthropomorphism, incomprehensibility (of God), sovereignty (of God)

I. Introduction: The Reality of Evil

“**Y**ou intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen 50:20). With those memorable words, the story of Joseph comes to a close. This affirmation frames the direction of our reflection: God intended it for good.

In this post-Christian emotional age, the challenge of evil cannot be avoided. The common modern objection runs like this: If the God of the Bible exists, he is either good and impotent or evil and omnipotent, sadistic, or unpredictable. This objection is far from logical, but it carries emotional force. One could mistakenly believe that its shallow intellectual depth puts us in a favorable position, since the Christian believer, transformed by the Spirit, informed by the Scriptures, and with the benefit of centuries of Christian apologetics, is not left without answers. Dismissing the emotional objection, however, would be a mistake. We should not merely dismiss the current restatement of the problem of evil but strive to present a *re-formed* answer to what is and should remain a perennial question.

“God intended it for good,” is one of the most important answers that faith has given to the “problem” of evil and suffering in the battle against the monsters of evil. I propose to consider the three keywords—*God*, *intended*, and *good*—and point out how we must refine, or re-form, our understanding of God’s action in a sinful world in light of Scripture.

II. God

Serious philosophical arguments are immediately raised by the problem of evil in pastoral and apologetic contexts. Often the solutions offered rely more or less on an abstraction from the reality of God.

1. Evil and the Abstraction of God

One answer to the problem is to reduce and abstract God to one dimension of his nature, for instance by appealing to divine otherness and claiming that since God is so different from us, we should not question the wisdom of his actions. While there is some truth to that, it implies a partial—and consequently an abstract—view of God. The temptation is to reduce God to his will. Since God wills everything that happens, evil and suffering fall within the sphere of his will. There is some biblical truth to this perspective, but it is not the whole picture. God is likewise abstracted should he be reduced to his love: evil and suffering exist because God chose to love a “free” creature. The temptation to “abstract God” is the temptation to rely almost exclusively on one dimension of his person. When “God intended it for good” is affirmed in the context of evil and suffering, the question must first be asked: “Which God?” Further, deeper, and worshipful reflection must meditate on and consider this question.

The God who reveals himself in Scripture remains active in the history of his creation, cannot be completely understood, and at the same time acts in

love, compassion, and judgment. He sends rain and thunder; he disciplines his people, judges the nations, and orders the angel of death to Egypt. Scripture speaks of God's involvement in the world in active language—even when it comes to calamitous events. Psalm 105 goes so far as to say that no evil happens in a city that the Lord has not done and that he turned the Egyptians' hearts to hate his people (v. 25). Theologians as diverse as Tim Keller and David Hart have pointed out that God is active and personal; our problem is too often having an abstract view of God.¹ For John Swinton, theodicy has focused on a "general" god rather than the Trinitarian God.² To reform our answer to the problem of evil, a healthy doctrine of God should be the starting point; divine self-revelation is the only sure ground upon which one can meaningfully and humbly say, "God intended it for good."

2. The Otherness of the Covenanted God

Three crucial aspects of the biblical picture of God are to be underlined. First, a sound biblical doctrine of God must maintain the otherness of God. God is not totally and absolutely beyond our understanding. However, God and we humans are different beings, and consequently, God always escapes our intellectual and experiential "grasp." This ought not to lead to a passive view of our knowledge of God, but it should nourish a desire to know him better.

Second, a biblical view of God underlines his incomprehensibility. As Herman Bavinck explains, while creatures cannot fathom the "unsearchable majesty and sovereign highness of God," knowledge of God can nevertheless be "true and pure": "what we know of God we know only of his revelation, and therefore only as much as he is pleased to make known to us concerning himself."³ God truly reveals himself in Scripture, but his person and actions remain a mystery to be embraced fully.⁴

Third, a sound doctrine of God goes hand in hand with a sound doctrine of creation. The God who is other comes down to us and makes himself accessible to our understanding, howbeit in a limited manner. God's incomprehensibility and accommodation are complementary. As N. T. Wright points out, "It ought to be clear that reemphasizing the doctrine of

¹ Timothy Keller, *Walking with God Through Suffering* (London: Hodder, 2015), 87, and David B. Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

² John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 36.

³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 51.

⁴ A mystery that is, according to Bavinck, "the lifeblood of dogmatics." *Ibid.*, 2:29.

creation is indeed the foundation of all biblical answers to questions about who God is and what he's doing."⁵

Our first re-formed answer to the problem of evil is that the God we are talking about is the Trinitarian God revealed and "covenanted" in Scripture, a God who reveals what is sufficient to know him truly. The otherness of God does not deny that he is there and that he is not silent.⁶

3. Language about God and Evil

The God who personally reaches down from heaven in signs of thunder, shaking mountains, a whisper, and the cross, is a God of whom we can say, "He intended it for good." He is sovereign over everything, and all events manifest his glory. These are words, sentences, descriptions of who God is and what he does. Here lies the challenge of our language about God. If God is really other, and though he reveals himself in the Scriptures, how can we hope to adequately describe his will and active sovereignty over evil?

Here too the reference point is the doctrine of God. That God revealed himself in Scripture means not only that he can be truly known but also that in a limited but true manner, language is adequate to talk about him and describe his revelation of himself. We can meaningfully talk about God because he desired it to be so and he accommodated himself to us. We must learn to use everything the Bible reveals about God.

Among the things the Bible teaches is this great but short sentence: God is sovereign over evil. The only way to talk about God's sovereignty over everything is in terms of what the Bible says. We can lament with the words of Psalm 88:13–18, whose author knew there was no other way than to affirm faith in the sovereignty of God and to hope that suffering would end while recognizing God's mysterious hand. Wright says, "The psalmist will not suggest that what is happening to him is other than the strange and terrifying work of YHWH himself. He can't understand it; he knows it isn't what ought to be happening; but he holds on, almost one might think to the point of blasphemy, to the belief that YHWH remains sovereign."⁷

The "untamedness" of God must be recognized. He is the God who made Cyrus his "anointed king" (Isa 45:1). Even the violence of the Chaldeans is a work of God (Jer 1:15; 7:14). Jeremiah goes so far as to call Nebuchadnezzar a servant of God (Jer 25:9). God hardens Pharaoh's heart (Exod 9:12). Cruel nations are instruments of his judgment and wrath, and they manifest

⁵ N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 70.

⁶ Cf. Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2001).

⁷ Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 62.

the action of his will (Isa 10:5). God gives men up to the evil desires of their hearts (Rom 1:28).⁸

God is also the one who does not plan to harm us and gives hope “for the years to come” (Jer 29:11), who showed his goodness and faithfulness, and who “so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16). James states, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one,” and “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (Jas 1:13, 17).

The problem is overreliance on an ontological anthropomorphism. From anthropomorphic language we have adopted an anthropomorphic description of God’s nature. Hart, for example, writes,

The entire case is premised upon an inane anthropomorphism ... that reduces God to a finite ethical agent, a limited psychological personality, whose purposes are measurable upon the same scale as ours, and whose ultimate ends for his creatures do not transcend the cosmos as we perceive it.⁹

While as human beings we have no other choice but to use anthropomorphic language to talk about God, we must beware of *anthropomorphizing* his nature.

The biblical language about the acts of God should inspire awe because it makes us pause. There is something truly incomprehensible about the way the Bible talks about “God and evil.” While God cannot be tempted by evil, he sends judgments on his people. While God is good, he exercises his justice through acts that are, in themselves, evil and do not correspond to his character. Without *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) and *tota Scriptura* (all of Scripture), we risk not being faithful to the God who brought us out of the world of darkness and into the kingdom of his light (1 Pet 2:9). Everything the Bible says is to be affirmed if we are to invite our contemporaries to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps 34:8).

III. *Intended It*

God works in mysterious ways: “His steadfast love endures forever” (Ps 136). This expression, which structures Psalm 136, points toward the next consideration: God’s intention expressed within a fallen, evil world. What is God doing in this world? How can he accomplish his purposes through the

⁸ In this verse of Romans, “gave up” might not refer to the will of God but to his “permission.”

⁹ Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 13.

agency of evil acts? These questions are profoundly biblical and have serious pastoral implications.

The psalm begins with the picture of God, the great and bountiful Creator of the universe, the one “who alone does great wonders ... who by understanding made the heavens ... who made the great lights” (vv. 4, 5, 7). God, in his providence, takes care of his creation and acts with goodness and love toward it. At the same time, this psalm is also a hymn of praise for God’s actions for his people, a hymn that calls on them to give thanks “for his steadfast love endures forever” (vv. 10, 17–18).

God struck down the firstborn. He killed great kings. How can such acts be compatible with God’s nature? God is justified in acting based on the judgment we deserve as sinners. He acts on behalf of the people he “elected.” Correct as this might be, the danger is that this is too quick an answer. God’s judgment is justified because of sin. Does that automatically justify God “using” or “causing” evil as an expression of judgment? His actions are often incomprehensible, even though we confess that he is a God of love, grace, and compassion, who will make his justice shine through all the vicissitudes of history.

1. An Abstract View of Causality

The personal God of the Bible acts throughout history to bring about what he intends to accomplish. That is an integral part of “God intending it for good.” A temptation is to adopt an abstract view of causality. How can God “intend” something evil? How can the death of a newborn be the result of the intention of a good and providential God? One answer runs like this: nothing in this world escapes the reaches of God’s sovereignty and will; *therefore*, even the death of an infant must remain within God’s sovereignty and will. Even though the conclusion that nothing falls outside God’s sovereignty is correct, there is a question about the “therefore” in this sentence. God is sovereign; *therefore*, evil is an expression of his will.

The problem is not necessarily what this reasoning tries to say—that if God is sovereign, he is so over everything that happens—but the view of causation. This line of reasoning can lead to the entertaining of an abstract view of causation. God becomes a mechanistic causal instrument who acts in such a way because he is supposed to. The issue is not merely theological or speculative. It impacts pastoral practice. A “mechanistic causal” view of God’s intention might be a temptation in pastoral counseling to have one primary objective: that the person who lost a loved one recognize that in mysterious ways God’s intentional good will was at work.

This perspective will tempt us to identify the goodness that results from suffering. “God intended it for good,” *therefore*, let me show you that the death of your father was indeed for your good. That is a mechanical view of God’s intention that identifies the specific manner in which two realities are connected: first, the existence of evil and suffering in the experience; second, the good intention of God. A causal explanation leads to the identifying of a resulting good. By God’s grace, we might stumble on a correct answer. The danger is of being unfaithful to our calling to suffer alongside those who suffer.

Mechanistic causal explanations lose sight of God’s greatness and otherness, his inscrutable wisdom, and mysterious goodness. God’s wisdom is “manifold,” says John Calvin,¹⁰ and so is his will. Trying to explain the “causal relations” between God, evil, and the intended good diminishes God, obscuring the mystery, the awe-inspiring wonder of divine action. The God who reveals himself acting throughout history is lost, as is the empathic possibility of being a Christ-centered community for whom evil and suffering are unacceptable. Evil is really evil, and it should never be suggested that something makes it somehow acceptable. That is the problem of trying to identify the specifics of God’s intention: it somehow makes evil or suffering all right.

Can nothing be offered apart from empathic listening? To go further it is necessary to leave aside an abstract view of God and his will. Paul Helm helpfully notes that Calvin, while never shy of assigning the glory to God and confessing his sovereignty, is nevertheless content to emphasize *that* God acts in the ways that the Bible describes. God did intend that “good” should come out of evil. Helm continues that Calvin has little to say about *how* or *why* he acts in such a way.¹¹ That is the best path to practical wisdom since what the Bible says about how God intended good to come out of evil is scant.

God’s self-revelation emphasizes his nature and the result of his actions. What the Bible affirms and we should affirm is that God is actively working for the good and the salvation of those who believe in him. The specific manner in which he does so remains, in part, a mystery. We go back to the biblical language. While God is good and there is no evil in him, God nonetheless is described as sending death, plagues, and judgments on the world.

While God is the one without whom nothing can happen in the world, God never desires evil. This implies that the specific order of the causal

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 1:202 (1.18.3).

¹¹ Paul Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 113.

relationship that God ordered cannot often be identified. Calvin never implies that God would cease, at any point, to be sovereign or exercise his will. God is always active:

I say then, that though all things are ordered by the counsel and certain arrangement of God, to us, however, they are fortuitous,—not because we imagine that Fortune rules the world and mankind, and turns all things upside down at random (far be such a heartless thought from every Christian breast); but as the order, method, end, and necessity of events, are, for the most part, hidden in the counsel of God, though it is certain that they are produced by the will of God, they have the appearance of being fortuitous, such being the form under which they present themselves to us, whether considered in their own nature, or estimated according to our knowledge and judgment.¹²

2. *The Ever-Active God*

The sovereignty of God has always been a central element of Reformed theodicy. The faith of biblical believers is that no matter how much we do not understand about the manner of God's action, he remains good, faithful, and sovereign. Vern Poythress notes that in Job nobody assumes that bad events “just happen.”¹³ All the “actors” assume God does indeed control the events that happen. This is the essence of God's answer in the closing monologue. A balanced view of active providence over evil is hardly simple, and theology has therefore sought to explain how God accomplishes his will while not being the author of sinful and evil actions.

A common way to reach a balance is through the distinction between “permission” and “will.” Since God cannot “cause” something incompatible with his nature, he cannot cause or will something that is, in itself, evil. God's “causal will” cannot result in the death of a newborn or the suffering of his people. Thus, some things he wills and others he merely permits. Superficially this seems to be a convincing and relevant distinction. God *wills* those things that are compatible with his nature but *permits* those incompatible with his moral nature.

This distinction comes from a mistaken premise. Because we think we understand the causal will of God, we need to identify something other than his will at work in the world to safeguard God's sovereignty. Thus, the distinction between God “permitting” and God “willing.” The risk is an artificial distinction within the one will of God. However, when God acts, his will is at work—thus limiting the value of the distinction between “will” and “permission.”

¹² Calvin, *Institutes*, 180 (1.16.9).

¹³ Vern S. Poythress, *Chance and the Sovereignty of God: A God-Centered Approach to Probability and Random Events* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 43.

Calvin himself warns about this distinction. In his usual direct way, he writes,

Yet from these it is more than evident that they babble and talk absurdly who, in place of God's providence, substitute bare permission—as if God sat in a watchtower awaiting chance events, and his judgments thus depended upon human will.¹⁴

His concern is that this distinction seeks to justify God when the language of the Bible concretely tells us that God's actions are always a manifestation of his will. Therefore, even when God allows something to happen, his will is at work:

I will not hesitate, therefore, simply to confess with Augustine that the will of God is necessity, and that everything is necessary which he has willed; just as those things will certainly happen which he has foreseen.¹⁵

When God allows something to happen, he is active, and being active means that he exercises his will. God does indeed ordain everything that comes to pass.

While the distinction can be often problematic, Bavinck helpfully indicates that the notion of “permission” is not absent from Reformed theology.¹⁶ However, he states it in such a way as to avoid the implication that God's will could somehow be passive in the face of evil. In line with Reformed theologians, Bavinck concludes that “‘permission’ is no pure negation, no mere cessation of volition.”¹⁷ Even the permissive will of God is *efficacious*.

At this point, an important distinction can be made. Calvin's *Defense of the Secret Providence of God* replies to Sebastian Castellio's accusation that his view of God's providence makes God the author of sin and evil. Calvin notes that what God *wills* and what the person *committing* evil wills are neither identical nor to be confused. God's will for a parent going through the rape and murder of a child is not to be confused with the will of the rapist and murderer. That God wills to bring good out of evil never underplays the evilness of the act.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battle (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 231 (1.18.1).

¹⁵ See Calvin, *Institutes*, trans. Beveridge, 2:232 (3.23.8).

¹⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 61.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

While God ordains whatever comes to pass, what comes to pass is not of itself necessary but happens in virtue of his will.¹⁸ For example, God wills that we learn endurance. However, in its absolute sense, this does *not* necessitate the death of a newborn child, while this might be the mysterious instrument through which we do learn endurance and trust. As Helm points out, Calvin here uses the distinction between “the necessity of the consequence” and “the necessity of the consequent.”¹⁹ The first means that God necessarily brings about the goodness he wills. The necessity is the consequence, the result which corresponds to his goodness.²⁰ The second means that the instrumentality of evil is necessary in order for God to bring about the “good result.” What is here necessary is the consequent, the action itself.

Christians, like Calvin, must learn to make this biblical distinction: to affirm the former and deny the latter. When God intends that something good comes out of the death of a loved one, the suffering or the evil is not itself necessary, while my learning patience, endurance, trust, is the necessary action of God.²¹ God wills to exercise our patience and incorporates evil actions to that end. We do learn patience through suffering. God willed it to be the case: the consequence (the learning of endurance) is necessary, not the consequent (the death of the child). God would deny his own nature were it so. This distinction does not answer all our questions, and one remains: how can a good and faithful God allow evil and suffering to enter the world in the first place? While there are some clues in the Scriptures, the Bible’s silences and the boundaries of the mystery of the divine will and decree ought to be respected.

IV. For Good

While there is some mystery to God’s action in the world, his mysterious “intention” will eventually be fully accomplished. The final fruition of his

¹⁸ See Calvin, *Institutes* 3.23.8.

¹⁹ Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 117.

²⁰ Reformed scholastics use a similar distinction in their discussions about God’s decree and human freedom. Wilhelm van Asselt writes, “However great the creature’s freedom may be, these acts are still necessary from this perspective, otherwise God’s foreknowledge could be false and his decree changeable.” Wilhelm van Asselt, “Scholasticism in the Time of High Orthodoxy (ca. 1620–1700),” in *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism*, ed. Wilhelm van Asselt (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 162. He notes, “The necessity of an event or the existence of a thing. If a thing is, it is necessarily. This is an example of a necessity of the consequence. It is not an absolute necessity” (163).

²¹ What God permits, says Hart, “may be *in itself* contrary to what he wills.” Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 82.

goodness will be revealed. “God intended it for good,” but what is meant by “good”? We do not know what the resulting good is, therefore the best answer might be to remain silent before God. However, the God who reveals himself in Scripture communicates something about this.

1. *A Glorious Purpose*

One answer to the problem of evil is that God intends everything for his glory. That might be the only justification God would need. As Daniel Fuller writes,

Thus it is surely right for God to prepare vessels of wrath, for it is only by so doing that he is able to show the exceeding riches of his glory, the capstone of which is his mercy. For God not to prepare vessels of wrath would mean that he could not fully reveal himself as the merciful God. Thus creation could not honor him for what he really is, and God would then have been unrighteous, for in the act of creation he would have done something inconsistent with the full delight he has in his own glory.²²

While this has some truth, the problem with this account lies in the first sentence: “for it is *only* by so doing.” Only by revealing himself as the Redeemer could God be known as merciful. Because it is better to know him as Redeemer—rather than merely as Creator—it was somehow better that God prepared “vessels of wrath.” God would be more glorified by vessels of wrath who have been reconciled than by un-fallen creatures who know him solely as a bountiful Creator.

There are several problems here. First, by framing the issue in terms of *necessity*, this explanation makes the intrusion of *sin and evil* in the world necessary. Hart concludes, “That is why it is misleading even to say ... that the drama of the fall and redemption will make the final state of things more glorious than it might otherwise have been.”²³ It is true that through the story of the fall and redemption God demonstrates his glory. However, it is hardly necessary that this great statement of faith lead to the conclusion that, somehow, evil might be essential to the glorifying of God.

Second, this view entertains an imprecise or improper view of God’s glory. It tends to reduce God’s glory to something God has or acquires. God is “more glorified” in a sinful world. This expression is dubious. God cannot have “more” glory. Glory is not an abstract quantity that God more

²² Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God’s Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 447.

²³ Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 74.

or less “possesses” but a summation of all his perfections.²⁴ He can be “more glorified” through the recognition of the glory he always fully possessed. Indeed, he is glorified when sinners come to recognize his saving grace. In this limited sense, maybe it could be said that the more people are saved, the more God is glorified.

How then should we consider evil within the larger picture of God’s actions? Certainly, “God’s overarching purpose in all he does, then, is the manifestation of his glory and the delight of his creatures in his divine splendor.”²⁵ Thus, “God intended evil for good.” God brings everything into the awe-inspiring orbit of his glory. But God is also incomprehensible. Although every act of God and everything in the world participates in the manifestation of his glory, we should pause before trying to define the specific manner in which evil manifests God’s glory. Otherwise a causal relationship is made about which the Bible often remains silent. Everything glorifies God, including his great act of salvation. Can it be said *therefore* that a world in which evil rages is preferable to a world without sin? According to Bavinck, this is doubtful for several reasons. First, it robs evil of its ethical character. Evil cannot remain evil but becomes acceptable. Second, “not only is the good necessary to evil, but conversely, evil is necessary to the good.”²⁶ Third, evil ceases to be antithetical to the goodness of God, and becomes a lesser degree of the good, a necessary part of history. Fourth, it tends to make God the author of evil. Of course, this is the one implication that is explicitly rejected by all Reformed theologians—more or less consistently. Fifth, it leads to a “horrible effect on the practice of life” by placing the blame for all evils in the world on God.²⁷ With such a view, it is not surprising that our contemporaries blame God for earthly suffering or doubt his existence in the face of evil.

2. The Glory of His Salvation

Everything in the world brings glory to God, including, in a mysterious and awe-inspiring manner, evil and suffering. While this is part of faith in the sovereign God of Scripture, the Bible itself remains silent on the specific manner in which this happens. Scripture talks more abundantly about the

²⁴ According to Wolfgang Musculus, as quoted in Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 541.

²⁵ James N. Anderson, “Why Did God Allow the Fall?,” *The Gospel Coalition*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-did-god-allow-the-fall/>.

²⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:57.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:59.

glory that God brings himself through the salvation of his people. In doing so, he freely uses evil and the suffering of the world. John Flavel explains that “sometimes God makes use of instruments for good to His people, who designed nothing but evil and mischief to them. Thus, Joseph’s brethren were instrumental to his advancement in that very thing in which they designed his ruin (Genesis 50:20).”²⁸ God glorifies himself in doing good for his people—when others are trying to destroy them. This has two consequences that bring suffering into a new light.

First, by acting for the salvation of his people, God displays the radical nature of sin. He does so because evil and suffering are an integral part of how he brings about salvation, not only through deliverance, which is certainly an essential part of it, but also by judging his people—for God is not partial (Deut 10:17; Job 32:21; Jer 9:25). Through his impartiality God works out salvation by unveiling the sinfulness, not only of nonbelievers but also of his people (Ps 34:16). The radical nature of the holiness, justice, and goodness of God will not leave any evil or sin hidden.

This has another implication. By using evil and suffering as instruments of his salvation and agents of his goodness, God demonstrates the hopelessness of human life apart from salvation. Everything is revealed as vain for happiness in this life. This, according to Ecclesiastes, is a great evil (Eccl 5:13). If God were not to reveal the radical nature of sin, humans would remain blind to the effects of evil and their sinful nature. God uses evil and suffering to reveal the nature of sin and evil to nonbelievers in order to bring them to himself (Ps 34:8).

Second, one of the most common effects of suffering is its sanctifying dimension, as Peter repeatedly writes (1 Pet 1:6b–7a; 4:12). God uses suffering and evil to produce godly character. As Flavel writes, “by these rebukes of sin the evil of sin is revealed more apparent to us, and we are made to see more clearly the evil of it in these glasses of affliction which Providence at such times sets before us, than we ever saw formerly.”²⁹ The evil and sufferings we go through are not necessary *consequents*, but what God intends for our sanctification. We can indeed say with Dan McCartney that “suffering administered by the Holy Spirit purges our old sinful nature” and that “suffering enables a Christian to see his own evil clearly and equip him to purge it. It also enables him to see his connection to Christ more

²⁸ John Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1963), 120. See also, Poythress, *Chance and the Sovereignty of God*, 45.

²⁹ Flavel, *Mystery of Providence*, 173.

clearly.”³⁰ So we become more Christ-like, learning, like him, obedience through suffering (Heb 5:8).

Sufferings also bring glory to God “by showing the quality of our faith,” including resistance and victory over the attacks of the adversary. Satan afflicts us with diseases because of our faith in Christ (Luke 13:16), but we nonetheless move forward, demonstrating to the world that Christ is the divinely appointed answer to evil. The exhortation to endure suffering and evils is a call to manifest the victory over Satan that Christ has already acquired for us.

3. Practical Reformed Theodicy

How does faith in this God who has revealed himself in Scripture transform and inform the way we live before a watching world? What Swinton calls “practical theodicy” can be described in three ways.

First, it is learning to live with evil and suffering in our relationship with God. This implies learning to live in a transparent and humble way by God’s revelation. For example, lamenting about sorrows and suffering, crying out to God, “How long, O Lord? will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” This is not an expression of doubt and rejection but of putting words to troubles that are too heavy for us: “With my voice I cry out to the LORD; with my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD” (Ps 142:1). We identify with the psalmist in his darkest hours: “Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me” (Ps 88:16).

We learn to read and pray the psalms. Sometimes, only the words of biblical lament are available to our exhausted minds. We must recognize the profound and radical effects of evil and suffering, whether physical, psychological, or emotional. As Swinton remarks, suffering can be numbing. Living with the God of Scripture will help us give voice to our suffering when we are without words. In a world where suffering is often silenced, this attitude can serve as a demonstration that our God is a living God who hears the cries of his people.

Enduring evil and suffering in our relationship with God is a form of resistance against the ideologies, philosophical or political, that justify evil as an unfortunate but necessary part of this world.³¹ The biblical presentation of God is that of a living, personal, transcendent Creator who commits himself—or “binds” himself, to use directly covenantal language—to his

³⁰ Dan G. McCartney, *Why Does It Have to Hurt? The Meaning of Christian Suffering* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998), 95, 63.

³¹ Swinton talks about “practical theodicy as resistance” (Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, 85)—I adapted this insight for this article.

creation. After the fall, God “covenants” himself to his people in order to remove the roots of evil. Living in faith and perseverance through suffering in Christ, we try to “reveal the goodness and power of God and the nature and reality of God’s continuing response to evil and suffering.”³² In doing so, we demonstrate our faith in a living personal God.

Second, enduring suffering by living with God demands that we rely on the union we have with Christ. God’s gracious providence over evil is nowhere more clearly seen than in the cross, the most intense act of divine power.³³ The sacrifice of Christ is central to all of human history—which lies in subjection to evil and vanity. In the crucifixion of his Son, God weaves together for us the two sides of this “evil re-formed”: nothing escapes his intentional will, and evil is, and remains, evil. Here, we must think in a concrete and christological manner. Christ is the recapitulation of all the Bible says about God, suffering, and how he brings about his good intention through an evil world. He does so in Christ. In fact, “Jesus suffers the full consequences of evil: evil from the political, social, cultural, personal, moral, religious and spiritual angles all rolled into one.”³⁴ Because he was subjected to evil and suffering, our union with him will have radical implications.

A crucial implication is that because we are being transformed in his image, our sufferings participate in this process, bringing us into fellowship with Christ’s suffering and helping us appreciate how he suffered for us (Phil 3:10; 1 Pet 2:19–24). As McCartney writes, “the point is that the suffering and dying of Christ were the means used to connect Christ to his people.”³⁵ Not only are our sufferings under the sovereign will of God, they are also an integral part of our calling, summarized by the apostle Peter: “Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin” (1 Pet 4:1). In other words, if we suffer with or in Christ, we are outside sin’s dominion because we demonstrate that we are under Christ’s dominion.

Third, how we suffer the consequences of evil and suffering has implications for the world in which we live. Suffering in union with Christ teaches us Christlike empathy. The author of the letter to the Hebrews emphasizes this when he writes, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to

³² Ibid., 88. Swinton talks about God “taking responsibility” for evil to describe his commitment to opposing evil. While that might not be the most helpful expression, he correctly points out that this relates to the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of his Son. Ibid., 87–88.

³³ Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 80.

³⁴ Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 92.

³⁵ McCartney, *Why Does It Have to Hurt?*, 64.

sympathize with our weaknesses” (Heb 4:15). Christ did learn obedience through suffering, and in doing so, he became like us—except for sin. Renewed by the Spirit in the image of Christ, we are also rendered able to empathize with our fellow image-bearers. United to Christ the Mediator, we should not become less sensitive to the evil and suffering of this world but rather develop an acute sense of their radical presence in the lives of our fellows.

Furthermore, we should consider the sufferings that come with living in an evil world part of the great cosmic battle in which we are engaged. As James Boice notes, that is precisely what happened to Job: his trials are a direct consequence of the cosmic opposition between God and Satan.³⁶ Job’s affirmation of faith is crucial to the book’s teaching about what is happening in our world. Because evil and suffering are not entirely “natural,” there is something “spiritual” about the way Christians live through them. Learning to read the psalms of lament goes hand in hand with the hopeful words of the apostle Paul: “For I consider that the suffering of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18). The next verse includes all of creation in the cosmic dimension of this warfare and in hopeful anticipation.

Suffering can be an occasion for witness to eschatological hope in Christ. It is a demonstration that one day, the cosmic battle will end. Then, on this wonderful day, at the sound of the trumpet, the divine Mediator and conqueror will appear. All things will be transformed. Evil and suffering will melt away. We will see the coming of a world in which there will be no mourning, crying, or pain (Rev 21:4).

Conclusion

What does “evil re-formed” mean then? First, following the biblical language used to describe God’s action and nature, it means that God is good, just, and faithful and that he does not act contrary to his nature. He nonetheless sends judgments and evils against nations and individuals. Our rational understanding cannot resolve this tension but has to recognize it and learn to live with it and through it, being careful not to explain it away but maintaining that God is good and that his faithfulness endures forever. The tension at the heart of the Christian life acknowledges that there are many things we cannot know because of the “epistemic distance,” to use Helm’s words,

³⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, vol. 2, *The Reign of Grace, Romans 5–8* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 530–31.

between the Creator and the creatures that comes with being sinners.³⁷

Second, answers to the problem of evil seek ways of affirming the good intention of God in bringing about the fullness of his plan, even though the specific manner in which he acts remains unseen. The mystery flowing out from believing in a transcendent personal God at work in the world remains. People around us ask, “Why did God let this tsunami [or earthquake or flood] happen?” We should not be ashamed to answer that we do not know because “our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases” (Ps 115:3).

Third, the answer to the question of what God is doing in an evil world must never forget the goodness of his purpose and character. Hart sums it up:

Indeed we must say this: as God did not will the fall, and yet always wills all things toward himself, the entire history of sin and death is in an ultimate sense a pure contingency, one that is not as such desired by God, but that is nevertheless constrained by providence to serve his transcendent purpose. God does not will evil in the sinner.³⁸

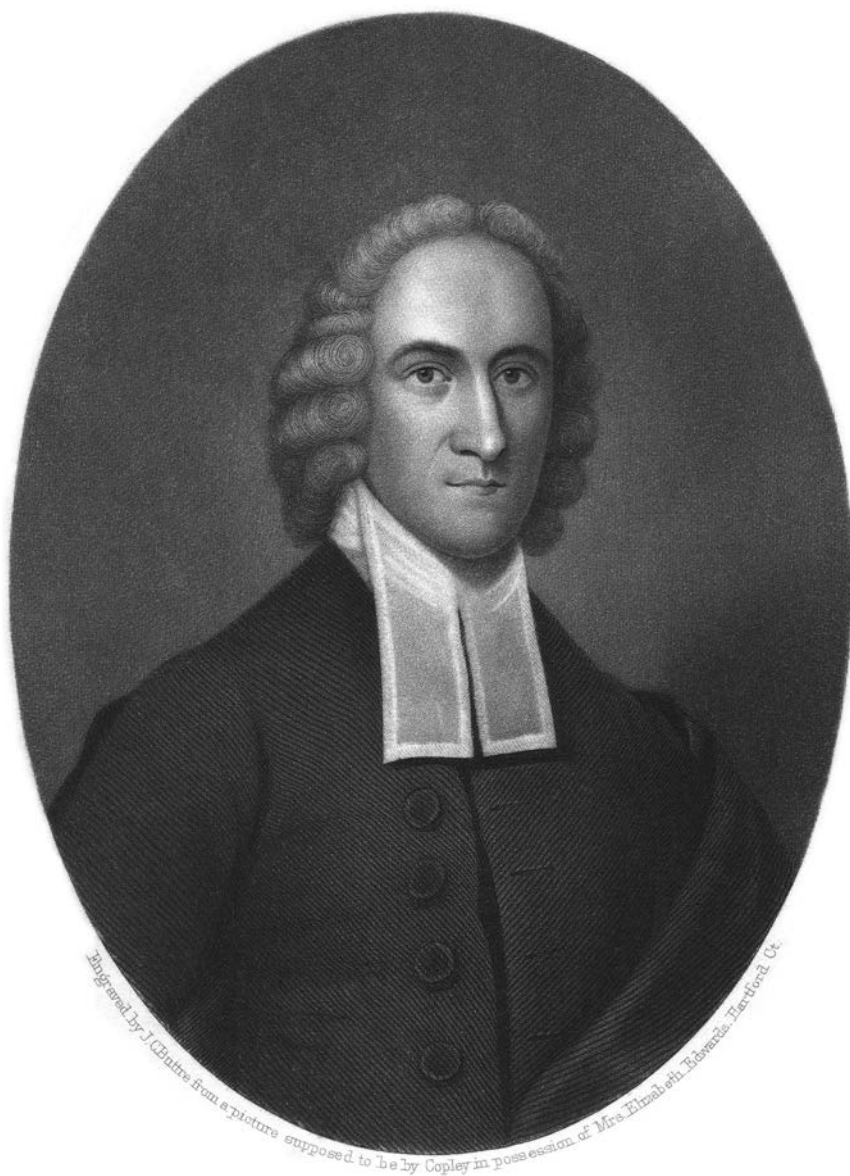
God’s intention is good, and because he is faithful and sovereign, he will accomplish the objective revealed in the cross. God intends to restore people’s communion with him through their conformity to the image of Christ. We live through evil and suffering, exhibiting the same patience and faith Christ confessed during his earthly ministry, “learning obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8). The best way to move forward is to keep our eyes fixed on what God has done in Christ and what he intends to do for us and in us through this same Christ. Only in him who learned obedience through suffering can the “purposes” to our own suffering be discovered. A practical theodicy must be Christ centered.

“Evil” is not to be made a remote philosophical problem but an occasion for practical and faithful engagement.³⁹ Living faithfully in a world where evil rages is itself an apologetic. It is crucial to reform our understanding of God, who reveals himself in the Scriptures, covenantally bonding himself to his people, and acting for their good.

³⁷ Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 112.

³⁸ Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 83.

³⁹ Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, 85.



JONATHAN EDWARDS

1703-1758

Edwards: Ethics for Both the Vulgar and the Learned¹

PAUL HELM

Abstract

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) in effect lived two lives: one as the pastor of churches in New England, teaching his people the faith and including in that the ethical side or outworking of the faith, the other as a theorist of God's relation to his universe. These two roles need to be borne in mind in what follows. The first is closely connected with doctrinal and practical themes of the Christian faith, the second with the meaning and truth of ethical matters at their most fundamental level. To have a rounded view of Edwards's ethics, we need both.

Keywords

Jonathan Edwards, Ethics, true religion, doctrine and life, John Locke, Religious Affections, Nature of True Virtue, Charity and Its Fruits

In his *Principles of Human Knowledge*, published in 1710, George Berkeley gave the world his subjective idealism, saying that to be is to be either perceived or a perceiver, and hence that “particular bodies, of what kind soever do none of them exist whilst they are not perceived.” To this rather counterintuitive thesis, he considers this objection: “Would

¹ A shorter version of this article appeared in *A Reader's Guide to the Major Writings of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Nathan A Finn and Jeremy M. Kimble (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 193–208, and was the basis of a lecture at the Jonathan Edwards Centre, University of Liverpool, June 2018.

not a man deservedly be laughed at, who should talk after this manner? I answer, he would so; in such things we ought to *think with the learned and speak with the vulgar*.” So this dislocation between the two worlds that Jonathan Edwards occupied required the skill “to think with the learned, and to speak with the vulgar.”²

The youthful Edwards took this distinction on. In an unpublished work in the 1720s, he wrote that he meant to communicate “as if the material world were existent in the same manner as is vulgarly thought.”³ He carried this outlook into his activities as a minister and author.

In Edwards’s ethical writings, the line of argument is aimed at the vulgar. In *The Freedom of the Will* (1754), Edwards strongly expressed his view that the topic must be discussed in everyday language, not in the specialist language of scholasticism or the refined style of the metaphysicians of his day.⁴ *Religious Affections* was preached before it was published, and *Charity and Its Fruits* consists of sermons. An exception is *The Nature of True Virtue*, which is aimed at the learned. But all these books tell the same ethical tale.

In estimating the significance of particular writings of Edwards, one needs to bear in mind that throughout his life he was an inveterate note-taker and annotator and that he suffered an untimely death, leaving behind unfinished written material in various states. In the Yale University Press edition of his *Works*, virtually all his writings—previously published and unpublished private jottings, as well as works in preparation—are available. However, it happens that in the area of ethics, all of the three of the writings already mentioned were finished by the time of his death. *Religious Affections*, *Charity and Its Fruits*, and a shorter work, *The Nature of True Virtue*, were finished by Edwards and published or ready for publication when he died. *Charity and Its Fruits* was preached in 1738 and published posthumously by a grandson, Tryon Edwards, in 1852, and *The Nature of True Virtue* was published along with *God’s End in Creation* by Ezekiel Hopkins in 1765.

The Nature of True Virtue, the shortest of these works, is a product of Edwards the philosophical theologian, written in the language of the learned, a short treatment of deep questions on moral value and meta-ethics, questions like, What ought our moral purposes to be, and how are they

² George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710; repr., Cambridge: Hackett, 1982), 51.

³ References to Edwards’s writings are to *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Perry Miller, John E. Smith, and Harry S. Stout (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009–), hereafter *WJE* followed by volume and page number. Here, Jonathan Edwards, *The Mind*, in *WJE* 6:354.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will* (1754), in *WJE* 1:150: “as vulgarly used”; see also 150–51, 155.

grounded in reality? What is moral virtue, and what is its nature? What is love? Are there truths in ethics, or simply expressions of feeling? He linked this essay with another, *God's Last End in Creation*, though this linkage does not add much as far as Edwards's ethics are concerned, and so I shall disregard it here.

There is quite a bit of evidence that Edwards the learned theorist was keen to make a mark in Europe, and these short works were aimed at both the export and home markets. Reflecting on *The Nature of True Virtue* will provide us with an understanding of the dimensions of Edwards's interests in this field, as well as of some of his distinctive positions. Despite all this, his views on ethics were of one piece, as we shall see.

I. Religious Affections

Let us begin by considering the earliest, *Religious Affections*.

Besides Berkeley, another early and lasting influence on Edwards was the English gentleman and Arminian John Locke. In his account of religious affections, Edwards depends⁵ on Locke more than is generally realized.⁶ For example, his references to regeneration/conversion as consisting in the God-given acquisition of a new inward perception⁷ are in accord with Locke's recognition that God "doth sometimes enlighten men's minds in the apprehending of certain truths ... by the immediate influence and assistance of the Holy Spirit, without any extraordinary signs accompanying it."⁸ Moreover, Edwards broadens Locke's tests to include moral and spiritual fruit. No doubt, theologically speaking, Edwards offered a "puritanized" version of Locke by having a more developed appreciation of the connectedness of Word and Spirit, which is an important feature of *Religious Affections*. The three parts of the book have to do with effective or ineffective tests for regeneration and conversion. Though he never mentions Locke by name, his dependence on Locke follows the contours of Locke's views on faith and reason and religious enthusiasm. After all, he preached mostly to the vulgar, less so to the learned.

It is not being argued here that the very fact of the use of tests for the reasonableness of certain phenomena shows that Edwards was a follower of

⁵ The paragraphs that follow are adapted from the author's *Human Nature from Calvin to Edwards* (Grand Rapids, Reformed Heritage Books, 2018), chapter 8.

⁶ See also Paul Helm, "Jonathan Edwards, John Locke, and *Religious Affections*," *Jonathan Edwards Studies* 6.1 (2016): 3–15.

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746), in *WJE* 2:205.

⁸ John Locke, *Essay*, 5th ed. (1706), 2 vols., ed. John W. Yolton (London: Dent, Everyman's Library, 1961), 4.19.16.

Locke and no one else. Setting up the tests of which the *Religious Affections* is full was a part of Puritan practical theology, and Edwards cites a good example of such a test in Thomas Shepard's *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*.⁹ Also, it may be that Locke gets his fondness for tests via English Puritanism. Nevertheless, Edwards follows Locke in respect to reason and revelation, and, more importantly, he follows Locke's argument that the chief human motivations to action are the enjoyment of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.

Edwards's doctrine of the "new sense," a "new simple idea," as given to us in the *Religious Affections* deliberately meets the Lockean approach. It is an immediate, supernatural intuition from God, not from man, that is validated by reason as such. Locke thinks that such experiences are legitimate, provided that they are subordinated to and informed by revelation. Edwards provides such tests, appealing to reason¹⁰ and revelation in so doing. For Edwards, Lockean "enthusiasm" is not "spiritual." Edwards likewise dismisses the idea of new revelations and the acquisition of new faculties.¹¹ No doubt Locke would have regarded the various agitations of the body that Edwards condoned or encouraged—such as those that his wife Sarah related to him¹²—as rather unbecoming and even somewhat embarrassing, but he could hardly have argued that in and of themselves they had significant negative epistemological value. (More on Locke's view on bodily agitations is to follow.) In any case, as we know, Edwards thought in the main that such agitations were neither here nor there as far as providing evidence of a genuine work of the Holy Spirit is concerned.

Affections are central to the book, of course. Despite Edwards's Puritan background, the account he gives of an affection was also mostly the result of direct Lockean influence. For the Puritans, in general, the emotions or affections were subordinate to the intellect or reason and needed disciplining. Edwards, following Locke, had a more unified account of the human self or heart, and so the affections were more central to his anthropology. Before the long chapter 21, "Of Power," in book 2 of *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which Edwards used overtly in his account of human action in *Freedom of the Will*, Locke placed a shorter discussion, chapter 20, "Of

⁹ Thomas Shepard (1605–1649), the author of *The Parable of the Ten Virgins Opened and Applied* (1659). Shepard was minister at Cambridge, Massachusetts, from 1639 to 1649, having arrived from England shortly before. Edwards frequently cites him on the importance of self-examination.

¹⁰ Edwards, *Affections*, 2:132.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2:210.

¹² Sarah wrote out an account of what happened to her, and Edwards published an anonymized version of it in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion* (1742), in *WJE* 4:331–41.

Modes of Pleasure and Pain.” I will try to display the close similarity, if not identity, of their views, by quoting first Locke verbatim, and then Edwards.¹³

First Locke:

1. Amongst the simple *ideas* which we receive both from *sensation* and *reflection*, *pain* and *pleasure* are two very considerable ones. For as in the body there is sensation barely in itself, or accompanied by *pain* or *pleasure*, so the thought or perception of the mind is simply so, or else accompanied also with *pleasure* and *pain*, delight or trouble, call it how you please. These, like other simple *ideas*, cannot be described, nor their names defined; the way of knowing them is, as of the simple ideas of the senses, only by experience. ...

2. Things then are good and evil, only in reference to pleasure or pain. That we call good, which is *apt to cause or increase pleasure, or diminish pain in us; or else to procure or preserve us the possession of any other good or absence of any evil*. And, on the contrary, we name that *evil which is apt to produce or increase any pain, or diminish any pleasure in us: or else to procure us any evil, or deprive us of any good*. By pleasure and pain, I must be understood to mean of body or mind, as they are commonly distinguished; though in truth they be only different constitutions of the mind, sometimes occasioned by disorder in the body, sometimes of thoughts in the mind.

3. *Pleasure and pain* and that which causes them, good and evil, are the hinges on which our *passions* turn.¹⁴

Locke then goes on to illustrate this by reference to the various affections: love, hatred, and so on. Toward the end of the chapter, he makes some remarks on the effects that pleasure and pain may have on the body.

The passions too have most of them, in most persons, operations on the body, and cause various changes in it; which, not being always sensible, do not make a necessary part of the *idea* of each passion. For *shame*, which is an uneasiness of the mind upon the thought of having done something which is indecent or will lessen the valued esteem which others have for us, has not always blushing accompanying it.¹⁵

Locke is claiming the following. Firstly, the ideas of pleasure and pain are essentially *simple ideas*, that is, ideas that we cannot understand by their

¹³ Locke's *Essay*, first published in 1689, went through five editions in his lifetime. Edwards is reckoned to have first read the book around 1717. George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 62. The fourth edition of the *Essay* (1700) contained, amongst other new material, the chapter “Of Enthusiasm,” which was retained in the fifth (1706) and subsequent editions. Locke died in 1704. Edwards purchased and used the two-volume seventh edition of the *Essay* (London, 1716). It is listed in his “Account Book” (a register of books that he owned and lent to others). See “Catalogues of Books,” in *WJE* 26:337–38. (I am grateful to Doug Sweeney for this information.) Currently, the most direct route to the seventh edition is the identical fifth edition (1706).

¹⁴ John Locke, *Essay*, 2.20.1–3. All the italicizations are in the original.

¹⁵ Locke, *Essay*, 2.20.17.

being described, but only by direct experience. Locke is here making a major claim about the philosophical psychology of human action, that actions of aversion are driven by the prospect of pain and those of propensity by the prospect of pleasure. So, secondly, we call that good which is apt to cause pleasure or its increase. We call that evil which is apt to diminish pleasure or directly cause pain. Pleasures or pains embrace both bodily and mental states of affairs and are the hinges on which our passions turn. Thirdly, the prospect of such pains and pleasures are what produce passions such as love and hatred, including both our love of both inanimate and animate things. So, pleasure and pain are the motivators of our actions.

Now we turn to Edwards.

In taking on the Lockean importance of the ideas of pleasure and pain in human motivation, Edwards modified the more intellectual Puritan and Reformed Orthodox account of the affections that he had been brought up on.

There are some exercises of pleasedness or displeasedness, inclination and disinclination, wherein the soul is carried but a little beyond a state of perfect indifference. And there are other degrees above this, wherein the approbation or dislike, pleasedness or aversion, are stronger; wherein we may rise higher and higher, till the soul comes to act vigorously and sensibly, and the actings of the soul are with that strength that (through the laws of the union which the Creator has fixed between soul and body), the motion of the blood and animal spirits begins to be sensibly altered; whence oftentimes arises some bodily sensation, especially about the heart and vitals, that are the fountain of the fluids of the body: from whence it comes to pass, that the mind, with regard to the exercises of this faculty, perhaps in all nations and ages, is called the *heart*. And it is to be noted, that they are these more vigorous and sensible exercises of this faculty, that are called the *affections*.¹⁶

Later on in the book, Edwards continues,

Nor on the other hand, do I know of any rule any have to determine, that gracious and holy affections, when raised as high as any natural affections, and have equally strong and vigorous exercises, can't have a great effect on the body. No such rule can be drawn from reason: I know of no reason, why a being affected with a view of God's glory should not cause the body to faint And no such has as yet been produced from the Scripture: none has ever been found in all the late controversies which have been about things of this nature.¹⁷

¹⁶ Edwards, *Affections*, 2:96–97.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:132–33.

Though, as we have seen, Edwards used the Lockean expression “simple idea” later on in *Religious Affections*, he does not do so at this point. Nevertheless, the Lockean outlook is present in two of Edwards’s propositions. Firstly, the inclinations of the will are of two sorts: those to which the soul is drawn and those to which the soul has an aversion. Secondly, when these inclinations reach a certain strength, they give rise to affections and even to bodily agitations. For Edwards, the world of the living is comprised of two sorts: men and women who have only the simple ideas of the five senses, and men and women who also have a new simple idea of the divine excellency and a distinct set of pleasures. This warrants Edwards’s use of the term “supernatural” to characterize the affections of the regenerate: they are not generated by natural causes, but directly by the Spirit of God.

So for both Locke and Edwards, the understanding judges between good and evil by whether the basic ideas of sensation and reflection are pleasurable or painful. If they are pleasurable, they are good; if painful, evil. That is, of course, good or evil in the estimation of the one who has them. So our passions/emotions are moved by beliefs about the goodness or evil of states of affairs by whether our sensations and reflections are painful or pleasurable. And so our various affections/emotions—love, hatred—are characterized by distinct kinds of pleasure and pain. Edwards puts essentially this same point in terms of degrees of pleasedness or displeasedness and notes that these positive and negative qualities have degrees and that the “more vigorous and sensible exercises of this faculty ... are called the *affections*.”¹⁸ And these affections might be so strong as to affect our bodies.

Finally, these mechanisms, which Locke calls “hinges” and which Edwards refers to as the “springs” of action, have fundamental effects in our lives.¹⁹ Here is Locke once again:

The uneasiness a man finds in himself upon the absence of anything whose present enjoyment carries the *idea* of delight with it is that we call *desire*; which is greater or less, as that uneasiness is more or less vehement. Where, by the by, it may perhaps be of some use to remark that the chief, if not only spur to human industry and action is uneasiness.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 2:97.

¹⁹ In discussions such as those of Locke and Edwards, we see the beginnings of modern utilitarianism, such as that of Jeremy Bentham: “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*.” Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to Principles of Morals and Legislation* (London: T. Payne, 1789), i. But while pleasure of a certain kind might be a sign of the moral goodness or badness of an action, Edwards no more than Locke claims that moral goodness *consists in* having sensations of pleasure, or in the maximizing of them.

²⁰ Locke, *Essay*, 2.20.6.

These words of Locke also are taken up by Edwards:

Such is man's nature, that he is very inactive, any otherwise than he is influenced by some affections, either love or hatred, desire, hope, fear or some other. These affections we see to be the springs that set men agoing, in all the affairs of life, and engage them in all their pursuits; these are the things that put men forward, and carry 'em along, in all their worldly business, and especially are men excited and animated by these, in all affairs, wherein they are earnestly engaged, and which they pursue with vigor.²¹

Why do we spring out of bed in the morning? What sets us “agoing”? The answer of Locke and Edwards is, the prospect of the greater pleasures of the body or the mind (or both) being enjoyed by getting up, or of pains being averted, than those pleasures to be enjoyed, or pains to be averted, by staying in bed—even though getting up, considered by itself, may not be very pleasurable. So when Edwards says, in the opening discussion of *Religious Affections*, that “true religion, in great part, consists in holy affections”²²—the doctrine he infers from 1 Peter 1:8, “Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory”—he intends to show the front and central place of the affections in energizing “true religion.”²³ “Joy unspeakable” is in Edwards’s estimation joy to a high degree, perhaps to the highest degree humanly possible, an exalted, pleasurable affection arising from faith in the exalted Savior. And if these affections are strong enough, they will result in effects on our bodies, as they did in the case of Sarah Edwards. So, not surprisingly, Edwards says that such affections are the “springs” of our actions, as Locke had called them “hinges.”²⁴ So the prospect of pleasure and pain is at the heart of Edwards’s account of action, as they were also for Locke.

Now we come to the central argument of *Religious Affections*. The book was in the tradition of works of self-examination by the New England minister Thomas Shepherd and of many a Puritan minister in Old England, and it consists of “signs” as a basis for self-examination. Two sorts of criteria in the search for true religion are described in the section titled “What Are No Certain Signs That Religious Affections Are Truly Gracious, or That They Are Not.” The first includes many of the phenomena that occurred during the Great Awakening, such as dancing and the sudden coming to

²¹ Edwards, *Affections*, 2:101.

²² *Ibid.*, 2:95.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2:96.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:100–101.

mind of Scripture passages. These are neither here nor there as indicative of a person's spiritual state. Edwards could hardly say otherwise in light of his knowledge of his wife Sarah's bodily contortions during periods of religious ecstasy while she was alone in her room. Such as the Davenports were adamant that such phenomena are by themselves infallible signs of the work of God, but Edwards was not so sure.

The second shows "affections that are truly spiritual and gracious, do arise from those influences and operations on the heart, which are *spiritual*, *supernatural* and *divine*."²⁵ The most important is this: "the transcendently excellent and amiable nature of divine things, as they are in themselves; and not any conceived relation they bear to self, or self interest."²⁶ God himself is the fundamental objective of human ethics, the first and supreme object of love and obedience, loved for his beauty and goodness without self-regard. Love for the creature follows closely behind. Their God-centered nature makes godly affections "supernatural."

Despite the influence of Locke, which provides a framework of his thought, Edwards was here following a Puritan and New England pastoral tradition in the main argument of the work.

II. The Nature of True Virtue

In *The Nature of True Virtue*, a brief essay designed to have an impact on those thinkers who gave various account of virtue in his day, Edwards lays bare and endeavors to resolve an apparent tension in his thought. His style is measured, abstract, and respectful, rather different from those writings that were first preached before they were published. One element of the tension is his strong theocentrism. As we have just noted, Edwards holds that gracious affections, of which love is the foremost, are founded on divine things—which excel and are lovely, as they are loved in themselves—and not in any conceived relation they bear to self or self-interest. This is critical: love to God for who he is, and not what he will or might do for us, is the foundation of true religion.

So the primary and central foundation for true affections and for the Christian morality that they motivate is not self-regard, what God can do for us, but God's excellence as it is in itself, with no relationship to our self-interests. Nevertheless, our other relations and interests to divine things are far from excluded. This is the result of the motivating factors of pleasure and pain in our actions. The central object of gracious affections is God in

²⁵ Ibid., 2:197.

²⁶ Ibid., 2:240.

himself, and this affection arises from pleasure that centers on God's sublime nature. Can Edwards resolve this tension between our valuing God for his own sake alone and our having an interest in God as a result of having pleasure in him in our gracious affections? He has been criticized by some, such as the nineteenth-century Southern Presbyterian Robert Dabney, for having a "selfish" ethic.²⁷ Is that fair? We must keep this criticism in view.

Here *The Nature of True Virtue* can help. Herein we hear the voice of Edwards the intensely thinking theologian rather than Edwards the pastor of his people. In rather abstract, philosophical language he outlines this contrast between love for God and love for his created beings, include self-love. True virtue consists in loving "Being in general," that is, "the great system of universal existence."²⁸ He endorses a standard distinction between the love of benevolence, the affection or disposition to well-being and happiness, and the love of complacency.²⁹ "Universal existence" is God and his works and will.

*The first object of a virtuous benevolence is Being, simply considered: and if Being, simply considered, be its object, then Being in general is its object; and the thing it has an ultimate propensity to, is the highest good of Being in general.*³⁰

This is an account, in the more abstract language of the learned of his day, of our Creator and Lord. Of God alone can it be said that he exists, for he exists necessarily. So Edwards was a nonnaturalist in ethics and an objectivist. We might refer to him as a "supernaturalist." Ethics is not grounded in the states of mind of human beings; rather, its fundamental ground of reference is Almighty God.³¹ The way this language echoes the First Commandment, not only as a duty but more particularly as a pleasure, is evident.

Virtue cannot be understood as grounded in a love of virtue, or anything similar, because that is circular reasoning. "Being in general" means intelligent being in all its expressions, but especially the Divine Being and his intelligent creatures. Love as benevolence is seen in our doing what God

²⁷ Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 99–100. For discussion, see Sean Michael Lucas, "He Cuts Up Edwardsism by the Roots," Robert Lewis Dabney and the Edwardsian Legacy in the Nineteenth-Century South," in *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards: American Religion and the Evangelical Tradition*, ed. D. G. Hart, Sean Michael Lucas, and Stephen Nichols (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 200–214.

²⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, in *WJE* 8:542.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 8:545.

³¹ *Ibid.*

wants, in actions of “private” benevolence, as Edwards calls them, which are derivative of and dependent upon love to God. Our ethics must flow from love to God.³² To the objection that love to God alone is excessively spiritual, Edwards would reply that God’s creation is an immediate consequence of his goodness.

He that has true virtue, consisting in benevolence to Being in general, and in that complacence in virtue, or moral beauty, and benevolence to virtuous being, must necessarily have a supreme love to God, both of benevolence and complacence. And all true virtue must radically and essentially, and as it were summarily consist in this. Because God is not only infinitely greater and more excellent than all other being, but he is the head of the universal system of existence; the foundation and fountain of all being and all beauty; from whom all is perfectly derived, and on whom all is most absolutely and perfectly dependent.³³

Anyone who has such virtue is drawn to others of that character, to instances of spiritual beauty, exhibiting the love of complacency. So true virtue starts with love to the Supreme Being for his own sake, admiring and taking delight in what he delights in, and so with glorifying him.

This spiritual beauty, that is but a *secondary* ground of a virtuous benevolence, is the ground not only of benevolence but of *complacence*, and is the *primary* ground of the latter; that is, when the complacence is truly virtuous. Love to us in particular, and kindness received may be a secondary ground: but this is the primary objective foundation of it.³⁴

Edwards’s prose is formal and technical, one sign of the audience he intends his essay to reach. In the more theological and religious terms he used in *Affections*, this means that virtue first and centrally is expressed in love to God for his own sake. This “fixes” the character of true virtue. Other expressions of benevolence, to the creature, on the basis of love and kindness received, are secondary. Love to others is grounded in love to God for his own sake.

So far as a virtuous mind exercises true virtue in benevolence to created beings, it chiefly seeks the good of the creature; consisting in its knowledge or view of God’s glory and beauty, its union with God, conformity to him, and love to him, and joy in him.³⁵

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 8:551.

³⁴ Ibid., 8:548. Edwards is here referring to the two kinds of love, of complacence and of benevolence.

³⁵ Ibid., 8:559.

But what about the area of potential tension we noted between love to God and self-love and love to other created things? To appreciate Edwards's answer to this, we must persevere a little further with *The Nature of True Virtue*. Here we see what Edwards's response would be to Dabney's claim (and to that of John Piper and similar), that his ethics was hedonistic.³⁶

Chapter 3 of *The Nature of True Virtue* is a penetrating discussion of self-love and the idea that all ethics proceeds from self-love. That ethics proceeds from individual self-love was one of the fashions of the age, popularized, for example, by Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Public Benefits* (1714). However, "self-love" is ambiguous. It may mean "whatever is pleasing to a person," indicating the capacity people have for being pleased or displeased with things. There is no harm in self-love in that sense; it is inevitable. But if self-love denotes a particular object of love, a person's private good, say, or that of his neighbor, or living for the glory of God, then to think of all loving arising from self-love in this sense muddles cause and effect. For it is not our happiness that is loved, but rather the happiness of the other person, say, who is the cause of our delight and admiration, or our benevolence. We take pleasure in these actions. To be productive of or supportive of true virtue, self-love must have as its foundation supreme love to God, a love "in which God is the first and the last." Nothing is of the nature of true virtue in which God is not the first and the last, or which, with regard to their exercises in general, have not their first foundation and source in God's supreme dignity and glory, and in answerable esteem and love of him, and have not respect to God as the supreme end.³⁷

From *The Nature of True Virtue*, we can gather something of the general character of Edwards's ethics. Besides being a "supernaturalist," he was a cognitivist, that is, he believed that there are ethical truths because God and his will are the object of morality. And so he did not believe that they are merely subjective or emotive; their objectives are both supernatural and natural in a rather complex way. Being grounded in God, they are supernatural and can only be understood as such by an agent who undergoes a supernatural change (i.e., regeneration) and conversion. Nevertheless, his pleasure-pain approach meant that if an unbeliever made correct ethical judgments—that stealing was wrong, say—this was so because they expressed what is objectively true.

³⁶ See, e.g., John Piper, "Was Jonathan Edwards a Christian Hedonist?," *Desiring God*, September 29, 1987, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/was-jonathan-edwards-a-christian-hedonist>; and Paul Helm, "Baring Our Souls—John Piper & Christian Hedonism," *Helm's Deep*, Thursday, July 11, 2011, <https://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2011/07/baring-our-souls-john-piper-christian.html>.

³⁷ Edwards, *Nature*, 8:561.

III. *Ethics and True Religion*

We have seen the definiteness with which Edwards defends the idea that the foundation of virtue is in God himself. Truly virtuous affections come from the work of God's grace in the heart. What exactly true grace consists in was a source of controversy in the revivals. Edwards's view is that ethics is founded not on religion, but rather in what Edwards calls "true religion," which is the work of God in the soul. Its being from God is shown by the possession of a "new sense." As we have seen, *Affections* is primarily taken up with delineating and commending this view. This is why his discussions of virtue have a buoyant, positive note. The difficulties and setbacks to the acquiring of true virtue, of the sort that Paul identifies in Romans 7, which Edwards believes are real enough, and which he occasionally mentions in these writings, remain in the background.

In summary, Edwards claims that the affections of pleasure and pain, and more formally of beauty and excellency, are the product of the heart, of which the intellect is an aspect, and more formally love, which he sees as both an affection and a virtue. Moreover, virtues that are truly gracious are founded firstly in the excellency of God considered in himself and not in how we may be benefitted by him. True self-love—and true religion—is the delighting in God for himself, having "a supreme regard to God," the being of beings. Everything else, our regard for lesser interests, flows from this. For the final example of Edwards writings on ethics, let us consider how he expresses himself in *Charity and Its Fruits*.

IV. *Charity and Its Fruits*

In these sermons, Edwards sets forth the superiority of charity (or love) over other virtues and calls his people to appropriate self-examination. We will sample his exposition by looking at the first and last chapters.

Love—that disposition or affection whereby one is dear to another—is the sum of the virtues. Edwards places it in its context in 1 Corinthians. "Knowledge" without charity puffs up, but charity builds up (cf. 1 Cor 8:1).³⁸ Charity is Christian love at its purest, whether exercised towards God or one's fellows.³⁹ All other projects and aspirations are pointless without it. It is "supernatural" in the special Edwardsian sense of having a divine origin and object. God is love, and therefore the Holy Spirit, who is God, infuses

³⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, in *WJE* 8:130.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8:132–33.

love into the soul; this infusion is what distinguishes Christian people from all others. For all true love is the same in principle, whatever its objects. God is loved for excellency, and similarly the saints. And all people have some excellency. (Sometimes it may appear that for Edwards love is reserved for God and the Christian community, and this may be so for the love of complacency, admiration, and delight, but I am sure that this is not his intention for benevolence, in which works of mercy are to reach to needs of people of all kinds.)

In effect, this book of sermons puts further detail on the rather abstract outline of *The Nature of True Virtue*. There he was attempting to reach the learned, while the other writings, *Religious Affections* and *Charity and Its Fruits*, are in the language of the vulgar. God, “the being of all beings,” is always first and central. “A true Christian delights to have God exalted in his own abasement, because he loves God. He is willing to own that God is worthy of this; and it is with delight that he casts himself in the dust before God, because he loves him.”⁴⁰

Edwards proceeds to affirm that other virtues, such as justice, truth, humility, honor, contentment, and peaceableness, all have their root in love (cf. Gal 5:6). So love will dispose us to the whole range of Christian duties.⁴¹ The law in both its tables is summed up in love, and true faith is productive of works of love. Faith works by love. Edwards does not deny that faith alone justifies, but in these writings, he is stressing that true faith is loving, and love will endure when the era of faith comes to an end.

So what is Edwards doing here? He is trying to echo both the stress and the balance of the New Testament. But the language is aspirational: he is calling his hearers to such a life. In characteristic Puritan fashion, the application contains a call to self-examination. He focuses on whether his hearers have such a charitable disposition and whether this disposition shows itself in action. “My little children, let us love neither in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). “The work of redemption which the gospel makes known, above all things affords motives to love.” Edwards develops this in a Trinitarian direction. Christ had love to the Father. Father and Son are one in love, joined together in the Spirit of love. So Christians should be on their guard against what would lessen or break their love—envy, malice, and bitterness. As Christians must grow in grace, so they should especially grow in the cardinal grace, love.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 8:135.

⁴¹ Ibid.

The body of the book is an enlarging of this central theme. The last chapter has to do with that state and place when the superiority of love—its purity and unfailingness—will be manifest. Heaven is a world of love. Charity never fails. Heaven is not only a place where the saints can never sin, but it is also the state in which love is everlastingly communicated to the church.⁴² The church was imperfect in the Old Testament and less imperfect in the New. In heaven, the Spirit shall be “more perfectly and abundantly ... given to the church than it now is [on earth].”⁴³

God is everywhere, filling both heaven and earth, omnipresent, ubiquitous. Yet in Scripture, he is said to be essentially present in some places rather than others. And so it is in heaven. Heaven is a part of creation that God has built for this end, to be the place of his glorious presence, and it is his abode forever. Here he will dwell and gloriously manifest himself to eternity, and this renders heaven a world of love.⁴⁴ For here, in heaven, God himself dwells, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the eternal Three in One—and is manifest, “without any obstacle to hinder access” to him. “There this glorious God shines forth, in full glory, in beams of love.”⁴⁵

Conclusion

It is appropriate that we end our account of Edwards’s ethics with his depiction of heaven, where God dwells. For Edwards’s ethics is nothing if not deeply religious. He is far from thinking of ethics as having to do exclusive or primarily with the promotion of good behavior and civic virtues. He lived at a time when there was a great deal of talk about virtue, and especially the virtue of benevolence. To Edwards, however, there seemed to be little place for God, who was portrayed as incidental to the moral life. In contrast, nothing could be truer of Edwards than that his ethics, a virtue ethics, is unmistakably God-centered, for God is the chief source of ethical virtue, through whom all expressions of virtue to the creature flow, and in the love of God all other loves are contained.

We can now see more clearly, perhaps, the character of Edwards’s hedonism. Hedonism is the doctrine that we necessarily do things for pleasure, but that our pleasure is intrinsically good and not an incidental feature of our conduct. As we have seen, the two areas are in apparent tension in Edwards. The first is that considerations of pleasure and pain are what

⁴² *Ibid.*, 8:367.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 8:368.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 8:370.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

move us to action; the second is that the foundation of true virtue lies in the glorifying of God, the being of beings, for his own sake and not for what we receive by way of pleasure. It is this stress, that virtuous life is rooted in one who is loved for his own sake, and not in our advantage, that imparts to Edwards's ethics an aesthetic tone—it is an ethics of harmony, of beauty. God is not only the source of ethical goodness, but also the first object of ethical goodness. If in ethics we focus exclusively on our private pleasure, or that of our clan or nation, then we are guilty of a certain kind of idolatry.

The second emphasis is that ethics is a matter of the heart, and not principally of law and duty. We must distinguish between the norms or values of an ethical system and the reason why we endeavor to endorse and follow those norms. It is undoubtedly the case that Edwards endorsed the values of the Decalogue: love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself. It may be said that his ethical writings, including *The Nature of True Virtue*, constitute an all-around meditation on those words. Moreover, he believed that the outworking of these values is delight in the two tables of the Decalogue. The ethical project is, by God's grace and the Spirit's indwelling, to endeavor to realize this delight and to strive to practice these values, embodying them in one's own life.

A final feature of Edwards's ethics is his interaction with the thinking of his own day, as he found it in New England and Europe in the various theories of ethics then current: he was convinced that heaven is the culmination of true religion and the love that is at its center. What is at the heart of his project is love to God and man, the contemplation of the beauty and sublime character of the love of God for sinners. Though he was intensely curious regarding all aspects of this life—the physical world and its science, everyday affairs, the latest news from Europe, the arduous work of the ministry, the promotion of true religion, his endless writings, his own intellectual discoveries and speculations—the center of gravity lay in the life of the world to come: God glorified in the society of the redeemed. He had no inclination to encourage the salvation of the planet as a contribution to moral redemption, or the “transformation” of culture with Christian achievements in art and literature as part of the redemption of society. He is very hazy, and understandably so, about how the redeemed shall be eternally occupied. However, whatever the details of the life to come, it will be a society of love, love between people, grounded in love for the loveliness of the Trinitarian God who has by his grace brought this heavenly society, through its pilgrimage, into fulfillment in his presence. It is then that ethics reaches its eternal climax.

Thinking of ethics as the business of acquiring distinctive virtues has a long tradition in classical philosophy, throughout the Middle Ages, and of course in the New Testament, where the various fruits of the Spirit are often listed. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” Paul says that “against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:22–23). To this list may be added those in Ephesians 4:31–32; Philippians 4:8–9; Colossians 3:12–14; and James 3:17, all of which are usually referred to as the fruits of the Spirit. Second Peter 1:5–7 has a similar list of “virtues,” as they are called. In the New Testament such fruits or virtues are moral dispositions implanted in regeneration, the imparting of Christ’s righteousness, which Christians are to develop in the spirit of Paul’s advice to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:12).

Edwards follows these emphases with little distinct stress on the moral law, though he notes the place of our duties. Yet, as we have seen, the contours of that law are reflected in *The Nature of True Virtue*, at least in Christ’s summary of the law as love to God, the Supreme Being, and love of oneself as the measure of the love of neighbor. This emphasis is transmuted in Edwards’s thought as the growth of virtue through his emphasis on the effects of regeneration on the soul. He does not emphasize duties, though he would not deny that men and women have duties.

I suggest that this reflects the social setting of his work, a society in which people were very familiar with the duties of both tables of the Law, but for whom the great need, in Edwards’s estimation, was “true religion.” It is not surprising that we find him saying, “Many ... have been so long in the school of Christ, and under the teachings of the gospel, they yet still remain; in a great measure, ignorant what kind of a spirit a truly Christian spirit is.”⁴⁶ It may be fairly easy for me to convince myself that I keep the law in a social sense—I am a faithful husband, a decent parent or child, pay my taxes, work hard, worship God on Sundays and so forth. But whether my life expresses true virtue, and I possess “true religion,” is a matter of serious introspection, as I seek to assess the state of my heart and the work of the Spirit within it. For all the novelty of the emphasis of Edwards’s thinking, here he is fully in line with the esteemed ministers of New England’s past.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8:143.

⁴⁷ A further accessible resource on Edwards’s ethics is Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, “True Virtue, Christian Love and Ethical Theory,” in *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 528–48.

Progress and Protest in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Presbyterianism

CHAD VAN DIXHOORN

Abstract

This article surveys the Presbyterian conflict in America at the turn of the twentieth century, which was marked by a drive for progress and a reaction of protest. After setting up the historical context, it looks at “progress” in action, theology, preaching, and presidents. It then focuses on the protest of J. Gresham Machen, who was engaged in church debates and publications (e.g., *Christianity and Liberalism*) and who, in response to progressive theology, founded Westminster Theological Seminary, an independent mission board, and a new denomination. It concludes with observations about the continuing witness of Westminster Seminary.

Keywords

Social gospel, progressive theology, Presbyterian conflict, Woodrow Wilson, Auburn Affirmation, J. Gresham Machen, Westminster Theological Seminary, theological education, mission, Westminster Confession of Faith

Introduction

In this article, I offer a whistle stop tour of Presbyterian progress and protest in the first three decades of the twentieth century.¹ The scene I set presupposes an imaginary series of dazzling lectures describing the northern Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) after the close of the American Civil War. These lectures include five key data points.

First, there is the decision in the northern part of the country, approved by the voting majority of New School and Old School Presbyterians, to reunite the denominations that had divided decades earlier for doctrinal and ecclesiological reasons. On the whole, New Schoolers, while tethered to confessional moorings, tended to give themselves a lot of rope, permitting them to ride the social and political currents in America. Old School Presbyterians tied themselves tightly to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, even if that occasionally left them out of touch with currents in American religious life.

Second, there is Princeton professor Charles Hodge's notoriously pessimistic prophecy (a gift occasionally permitted for Presbyterians) that even if the heretics in the church should come from the Old School, their defenders would come from the New School.

Third, as if to fulfill Hodge's prophecy, there is the case of Charles Briggs, a professor who developed a deficient understanding of biblical authority. He and others were eventually ejected from the ordained ministry. Curiously, while he was raised in Old School piety, it was a New School-inclined presbytery that protected him when he deviated from orthodoxy.

Fourth, there is the story of the revision of the Confession in 1903, in which systemic changes were offered to the church's subordinate standards. It was a debate that Hodge's successors lost: in 1903 the Calvinism of the Westminster Confession was softened to accommodate greater doctrinal diversity in the church.

Fifth, there is the 1906 union with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, for which 1903 was only a prelude. This is an intriguing story for denominational geneticists: The Cumberland group was a rare breed of Presbyterians, for they were Arminians. As it happens, serious Calvinists and Arminians both opposed the union: although disagreeing about important doctrines,

¹ This article was first delivered as a lecture at the invitation of Westminster Theological Seminary on September 20, 2017.

they agreed about the importance of doctrine itself.² After all, even after 1903 the surviving Confession was still recognizably Reformed. If, as the act of Union would suggest, both Calvinists and Arminians were intended to subscribe to the same detailed system of doctrine, what did it say about the importance of doctrine? The initially puzzling, and apparently “paradoxical,” part of the story is that “the Cumberland Presbyterians who favored the merger and who went into the united church were the more liberal elements in the Cumberland church. ... Yet they had accepted a much less liberal creed than that which they had.”³ But the fact that the union entailed an expansive understanding of subscription permitted more scope for liberals in both churches. As Francis Patton said, the union was, “in effect, not necessarily in intention, an indirect way of revising the Confession of Faith on radical grounds.”⁴

Doctrinal subscription would be relegated to Christianity’s most basic concepts—and which concepts, no one really knew. What you need to know is that most Presbyterians considered this a small price to pay for progress; they reasoned that a bigger church surely constituted a better church, and all peace, no matter the cost, was a good peace.

I. *Progressive Christians*

1. *Progressive Action: Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch*

At this time, progress was the thing. Following the American Civil War, reconstruction efforts (at least in theory), the rise of research universities, and charitable responses to industrialism, Western civilization felt a tremendous sense of progress, both in society and the church.

Across America, progressive clergy saw seminaries as places not so much to learn theology and biblical languages as to incorporate recent developments in humanitarianism, sociology, psychology, and comparative religions. Not for the first time in history, church leaders argued that religion is action, Christianity is a life, and we live in the here and now. Seminarians needed to be exposed to social problems and be taught how to apply social cures.

Pastoral courses equipped seminarians to lead churches at home that had become multipurpose service centers. For those who considered service

² John T. Ames, “Cumberland Liberals and the Union of 1906,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 52 (Spring 1974): 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ Cited in David Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary: The Majestic Testimony, 1869–1929* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 251.

abroad, missions courses suggested that the key task of the missionary was not the redemption of individuals with the gospel but the transformation of societies with American values. Soon any progressive clergyman could identify the promised land and the good news: it was America and democracy, material prosperity, scientific progress, and world peace.

Outside of seminaries, progress assumed some sinister forms. Behind South Africa, but ahead of Germany by a decade, America developed a fad to sterilize and, in some cases, lobotomize undesirables—the mentally incompetent, the unproductive, and the incorrigible. State and federal governments toyed with a variety of theories for improving society Darwinian style.

Eventually churches began to shift their emphasis from reforming individuals to reforming societal structures. Labor reforms and social justice captivated not only Christian thinkers, but churches, their pastors, and their sermons. Congregationalist minister Washington Gladden (1836–1918) and Baptist pastor Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918) led the charge for the social gospel at the turn of the twentieth century.

2. Progressive Theology: Made in Germany?

As it happened, preachers of the social gospel such as Gladden and Rauschenbusch also accepted higher criticism of the Bible. Many theologians rose above textual criticism of the Bible and advocated the use of comparative religions and theories of textual development; in so doing, these men reinterpreted, pared down, and dismissed increasingly large parts of the Bible.

Identifying the culprit responsible for the rise and spread of liberalism has become a Sunday afternoon pastime for conservative churchmen. After two world wars, it takes very little persuading to convince American evangelicals that the fault lies with the Germans. As it happens, the blame game started even earlier. Long before the opening disaster of the twentieth century, the evangelist Billy Sunday told his audiences that if you turned hell upside-down, you would find that it said, “Made in Germany.”

There is something existentially satisfying in blaming others for our problems: it just feels right to blame Friedrich Schleiermacher and his spiritual children for what was happening in America. Yet the identification of Germany with liberalism is hardly arbitrary. It was fashionable in academia to keep up with the Germans, and even if American theologians read German works more as a badge of respectability than as a set of propositions to consider, the influences from German universities proved corrosive to orthodoxy.

Whatever the causes of liberalism, excitement about American social and educational reform effectively hid how far theology could drift among the

progressive clergy. Because it advocated for such seemingly beneficial social changes, even those who disagreed with the trends in American seminaries underestimated the danger of progressive theology. By increasingly prioritizing issues of the day over eternity, people created room for theological error; however, liberalism would probably not have gained the prominence that it did without the aid of pastoral training centers.

Having buried Briggs a moment ago, it seems a little awkward to bring him back up again, but history is like that sometimes. Even though Briggs was defrocked by his denomination, he did not take off his academic regalia but continued to teach at Union Theological Seminary. In order to keep Briggs and other progressive professors employed, this seminary became independent of the Presbyterian denomination—a largely nominal independence, for the New York Presbytery gave the institution its benediction and readily accepted its graduates as candidates.

Others outside of New York City began to eye the graduates of Union with increased scrutiny. Consequently, in 1910, when the New York Presbytery licensed three candidates for licensure despite their refusal to affirm the virgin birth of Christ, it became a matter for the General Assembly. The 1910 General Assembly insisted upon not only the virgin birth but a total of five fundamentals: the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth, Christ's death as an atonement for sin, bodily resurrection, and the historical reality of Christ's miracles. The Assembly declared these doctrines to be "essential and necessary," rightly adding that "others were equally so,"⁵ for these were fundamental doctrines!

Three aspects of the 1910 Assembly prove especially striking and significant for us moving forward: First, in emphasizing the importance of "fundamental" doctrines as "essential and necessary" for the ministers of the church, rather than insisting that the full range of doctrines in the Confession be necessary for ministers, the 1910 Assembly was employing a New School understanding of confessionalism. For those who are interested in the genealogy of ideas, there is a plausible long-distance relationship between New School thinking and what would come to be known as Fundamentalism. Second, and more obviously, it showed the immediate fruit of ecclesiastical union with the Cumberland Presbyterians. It is another reminder that it is not enough to merely have a Confession—it also matters how you hold it. "To have and to hold"—such a useful phrase for serious commitments! Third, Old School protests against this shrunken version of confessionalism—

⁵ Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church Since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954), 98.

expected as routine by this point in history—were conspicuous in their absence. The Philadelphia presbytery was silent. Princeton was silent. They knew they had lost the battle for the Reformed faith; they were now fighting for the survival of basic Christian orthodoxy.

It seems that there was a psychological and not simply a strategic aspect to their silence. Historians describe “the intellectual leaders of the right wing of the church at Princeton Seminary” as “an increasingly isolated body of intellectuals.”⁶ While this is true, we should not assume they were unaware of their isolation. I think they were profoundly conscious of their seeming irrelevance.

3. Progressive Preachers: Henry Sloane Coffin and Harry Emerson Fosdick

Princeton’s theologians looked like veterans fighting finished battles in their dreams, but the changes in seminaries and sermons were real, not imagined. All of the old denominations were renegotiating old doctrines. In addition to denying the five doctrines just mentioned, leading liberals announced that traditional interpretations of other doctrines were only theories and therefore optional. They posited that there were other ways of understanding Jesus’s identity, the return of Christ, and the mission of the church.

Inevitably there were ministers and theologians who were concerned about the rise of modernism, or liberalism. Equipped with oil money from Texas and theological perspectives from denominations across America, conservatives worked together to write twelve pamphlets on key doctrines. Published between 1910 and 1915, the series of pamphlets on these fundamental doctrines vigorously defended these biblical teachings as revealed truth rather than what the progressive clergy preferred to call debatable theory.

The most prominent progressive preacher inside the Presbyterian Church was Henry Sloane Coffin (1877–1954), an immensely popular preacher and later president of Union Theological Seminary. The Great War—which we now know was only the *First World War*—resulted in the largest loss of life then known to human history. This did not look like progress. Even Coffin admitted that the world is “vastly more tragic than we thought.” However, these were merely doubts about progress, and as historian Richard Gamble has written, they were not “anything resembling real disillusionment.”⁷ The

⁶ William J. Weston, *Presbyterian Pluralism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 16–17.

⁷ Richard M. Gamble, *The War for Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), 236.

war forced progressive clergy to realize that progress was not as easy as they thought, let alone inevitable.

Despite the war's devastation, the definition of what constituted progress remained the same. Progress was still "the thing." In his adoring biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Eric Metaxas relates how Bonhoeffer found the elites at Coffin's country estate during the interwar period occupied with polite talk about education and the other constant interests of the progressive clergy and the social elite. In witnessing this phenomenon, Bonhoeffer noted that Jesus Christ was peripheral to Coffin's progressive conversations, and to Harry Emerson Fosdick's (1878–1969) Sunday sermons.⁸

Fosdick, a Baptist preacher, was by far the best known of all progressive preachers and a regular guest preacher at First Presbyterian Church in New York City. In 1922, he chose this venue to launch a battle with conservatives in the church. He entitled his sermon "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" In essence, Fosdick's sermon was a delayed response to the fundamentalist pamphlets; it made a splash by itself, but with the help of John D. Rockefeller Jr., it made waves. Rockefeller money transformed the sermon into a printed pamphlet that was distributed across the nation. Later, when the General Assembly required the New York Presbytery to investigate Fosdick's theology before permitting him to continue guest speaking, Rockefeller responded by building Fosdick the grand Riverside Baptist Church in Manhattan's Morningside Heights.

4. Progressive Presidents: The Case of Woodrow Wilson

In Rockefeller, progressives found the premier financier of the progressive movement—after all, he had constructed what was essentially a cathedral for Fosdick. But in Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924), more than any other political leader, the progressives found their diplomatic ally. It was only a matter of time before Wilson led America out of neutrality and into the First World War. Under Wilson, the American flag became the flag of humanity. As an "instrument in the hands of God," America entered the "War to end all wars."⁹ As America was a new Israel, American history could be learned from the Old Testament.

However, for Wilson and the progressive clergy, America was more than a new Israel: America had a messianic role that assumed international dimensions. In the language of service, America would lift the burdens of

⁸ Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Nelson, 2011), 330, 332–33.

⁹ Richard M. Gamble, "Savior Nation: Woodrow Wilson and the Gospel of Service," *Humanitas* 14.1 (2001): 16.

the world, “grant freedom,” and “uphold the righteous”—all Wilson’s phrases.¹⁰ When servicemen died, unless they were known to be Jewish, they were given grave markers with the Christian cross, monuments were decorated with angels, and plaques assured readers that these men were destined for heaven. The Great War became a saving work of the highest kind. Ultimately, as Richard Gamble notes, “Wilson reassigned the divine attributes of Christ to the American nation: the U.S. was the Mediator, the light of the world, the peacemaker, the bringer of salvation.”¹¹ Of course, as Augustine noted long ago, if any country or cause is too closely identified with the church, the opponents are infidels and heretics; as Gamble highlights, if America is the Savior, its opponents are diabolical. This problematic formulation in some ways parallels the biblical theological error on church-state relations found in the original Westminster Confession of Faith—but that is for another time.

Ultimately politicians used churches for their own propaganda purposes—a role that churches viewed as a privileged act of service. Furthermore, at his death, many mourned Wilson as a religious icon. Famously, former British Prime Minister David Lloyd George proclaimed that Wilson was “a failure, but a glorious failure. He failed as Jesus Christ failed, and like Christ, sacrificed his life in pursuance of his noble ideal.” He had come so close to the progress that he sought. He was Moses on the edge of the promised land; he was John the Baptist unable to live to see the kingdom: “There was a man sent of God whose name was Woodrow Wilson, to bear witness to that light of the world.”¹² Consequently, by the 1920s the grand old churches of America, especially in the North, had failed to keep their ministerial focus, were in the process of losing the gospel, and had become pawns of politicians. The church looked no better in its seminaries than on the mission field.

II. *Protest*

1. *J. Gresham Machen*

It was in the midst of these developments that J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) was born in Baltimore, the second of three sons, to the young wife of a 53-year-old Harvard-trained lawyer. Both Machen’s father and mother were cultured Southerners; his mother had published one book, his father

¹⁰ Gamble, *The War for Righteousness*, 87.

¹¹ Gamble, “Savior Nation,” 20.

¹² Gamble, *The War for Righteousness*, 254.

some novels and short stories. As his chief influence Machen's mother taught him the Scriptures and the Shorter Catechism. Much of what we know of Machen comes from his frequent letters to his mother.¹³

Machen attended a private school, and after graduation from Johns Hopkins University with a focus on classics, did a year of graduate study and a stint at business school. He finally decided to enter Princeton Seminary in 1902. He was a sporty, fun-loving seminarian with addictions to tennis, cycling, mountain climbing, watching football, and playing checkers. He did not enjoy Hebrew or homiletics, and he complained that afternoon classes were an evil invention, an assertion which seems entirely reasonable. While at Princeton Seminary, Machen devoted any free time remaining after seminary and sports to earning a master's degree at Princeton University, where Woodrow Wilson was then the University President.

Machen's next port of call was Germany. At Marburg, he studied under the leading liberals of his day, the piety and arguments of some of whom were impressive, and he sometimes left lectures wondering how he could hold on to his Christian faith. These studies forced Machen to work out why orthodox Christianity was really true and why the Bible should be trusted. When his brother asked why he did not study under Theodor Zahn (1838–1933), the great conservative scholar of the day, he replied that that was not the Princeton way, which did not hide from students the current state of scholarship, whatever it might be.

Machen set himself out notably enough as a student both at Princeton and overseas in Europe that his former New Testament professor requested that he return to Princeton. Machen declined this request, but when B. B. Warfield was asked by the president of another academic institution for Machen's address, he declared that they could not have him, for he was coming to Princeton. In 1915, Machen finally agreed to return for a year. Princeton Seminary remained his home for fourteen years, save for his time as a Red Cross worker in the trenches of World War I, captured wonderfully in Barry Waugh's edition of Machen's war letters.¹⁴

2. *Christianity and Liberalism*

The battle between the fundamentalists (or conservatives) and modernists (or liberals) had already begun when Fosdick raised his standard in his sermon of 1922. The most memorable response to Fosdick came from

¹³ The definitive biography remains D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

¹⁴ Barry Waugh, ed., *Letters from the Front: J. Gresham Machen's Correspondence from World War I* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012).

Machen. He entitled his 1923 response *Christianity and Liberalism*. His stated purpose was “not to decide the religious issue of his day, but merely to present the issue as sharply and clearly as possible, in order that the reader may be aided in deciding it for himself.”¹⁵ In the process of “clarifying,” Machen argues that in countenancing liberalism, the Presbyterian Church was countenancing a religion other than, and opposed to, Christianity. The problem, Machen argued, went beyond individual doctrines. The errors that the church used to take seriously were now almost passé. For example, Charles Erdman, Machen’s colleague at Princeton Seminary, did not hold to biblical inerrancy and was yet considered a “moderate” in the controversy.¹⁶ With such positions now considered moderate or even mainstream, Machen’s conviction that he was fighting for the survival of doctrine itself appeared to be a curious fascination with the eddies.¹⁷

In his work, Machen pronounces the importance of doctrine in many different ways. Sometimes it is a plea for intellectual honesty. Machen points out that at ordination, ministers have to make vows. They are asked if they “sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith of this Church, as containing the system of Doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.” He goes on to say, “If these ‘constitutional questions’ do not fix clearly the creedal basis of the Presbyterian Church, it is difficult to see how any human language could possibly do so.” The problem, for Machen, is that

immediately after making such a solemn declaration, immediately after declaring that the Westminster Confession contains the system of doctrine taught in infallible Scriptures, many ministers of the Presbyterian Church will proceed to decry that same Confession and that doctrine of the infallibility of Scripture to which they have just solemnly subscribed!¹⁸

Sometimes Machen argued from the specificity of the Confession itself.¹⁹ If the Confession were vague or allowing of many positions, liberals might earn some consideration—but the Confession is not vague. “The Confession, whatever its faults may be, is certainly not lacking in definiteness.”²⁰ Nor is the Confession inclusive. “The historic creeds,” Machen says, “were exclusive of error; they were intended to exclude error; they were intended to set forth

¹⁵ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923), 1.

¹⁶ Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 140.

¹⁷ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 17–53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 163–64.

¹⁹ Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 358, 366.

²⁰ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 170.

the Biblical teaching in sharp contrast with what was opposed to the Biblical teaching, in order that the purity of the church might be preserved.” Machen clearly saw the Westminster Confession of Faith as one of those historic creeds. The Nicene Creed was clearer than the Apostles’ Creed, but, he declares, “How much more precise and how vastly richer still were the Reformation creeds and especially our Westminster Confession of Faith!”²¹

In yet another place Machen expresses the problem in terms of attitude. The importance of doctrine, he says, “concerns not merely the question as to the content of the doctrine that we are to set forth, but rather the attitude that is to be assumed with regard to all doctrine as such.”²² It is worth noting that while he abstains from direct debate regarding “necessary and essential” doctrines, Machen does speak predominantly (and perhaps exclusively) of the “system of doctrine” contained in the Confession.²³

3. The Auburn Affirmation and “Moderate” Presbyterianism

The official reply to the rising concern of conservatives, confessional thinkers like Machen, was penned at the end of 1923 and came to be known as the Auburn Affirmation. Shortly after its submission to the General Assembly in 1924, almost thirteen hundred ministers signed this affirmation. Remember that the 1910 Assembly had required all ministers to hold to at least five fundamental doctrines; the signers stated that the 1924 General Assembly, in enforcing the five fundamentals, was requiring an after-the-fact subscription to something extraconfessional. The conservatives, on the other hand, maintained that since ministers had already subscribed to the Westminster Confession of Faith, which clearly taught doctrines such as the bodily resurrection of Christ, incoming ministers should have no trouble affirming these integral doctrines.²⁴ Gordon Clark’s response among the conservatives is typical:

²¹ J. Gresham Machen, “The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance,” in *Scripture and Confession*, ed. John H. Skilton (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 151–52.

²² J. Gresham Machen, *The Attack on Princeton Seminary: A Plea for Fair Play* (Princeton: J. Gresham Machen, 1927), 9.

²³ Machen did engage those who signed the Auburn affirmation the second time, particularly their additional note regarding Charles Hodge and his opposition to the Gardiner Springs Resolution. Machen pointed out that the purported parallels between the recent assembly’s decision and the Gardiner Springs Resolution are not truly analogous because the five fundamental doctrines are contained in the Confession, whereas, as Hodge noted, the additional stipulations for ministers recommended in the Gardiner Springs Resolution were truly extraconfessional. See Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary*, 510–11, n. 7.

²⁴ See Machen’s counteraffirmation recorded in Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 367–68.

When future historians of the Church evaluate this present age, the publication of the Auburn Affirmation will stand out in importance like Luther's nailing up his ninety-five theses. But it will be important for a different reason. The reason the Auburn Affirmation is so important is that it constitutes a major offensive against the Word of God. It, or at least its theology, is the root of Presbyterian apostasy. Officials in the Presbyterian Church in the USA have commonly spread the rumor that there is nothing doctrinal involved in the Auburn Affirmation. This rumor, regardless of its source, is untrue. It is true that the Auburn Affirmation is a cleverly written document with some pious phraseology slightly obscuring its real intent. But once a person has seen exactly what it says, there is no disguising the fact that it is a vicious attack on the Word of God.²⁵

As expected, the Auburn Affirmation generated tensions in the church. After his 1925 election as moderator of the General Assembly, Erdman attempted to defuse these tensions by doing what Presbyterians always do: he appointed a committee. He tasked the committee with discovering the cause of disunity in the church and pointing out the way to peace. A year later, the committee happily reported that it found no traces of liberalism in the church. It determined that the sad cause of disunity was a party of conservatives who made unwarranted accusations against earnest ministers. Needless to say, most of the ministers in the church were not liberals at that time—but a great many were moderates: if not liberal themselves, they were willing to live with liberals within the church. Consequently, the liberals and the moderates have maintained a majority in the assemblies of the PCUSA from 1925 to this day.

4. The Battle for Theological Education

The remainder of the story can be told quickly. The 1926 General Assembly appointed a new committee to focus on Princeton Seminary, the source of many of these disruptive conservatives. While the Assembly did not mention him by name, everyone knew that the committee's real target was Machen. In response to the marginalization that he and other confessionalists at Princeton faced, Machen founded a new seminary, Westminster Theological Seminary, in downtown Philadelphia in 1929. But in spite of broad opposition to the reorganization of Princeton, and widespread distress with the moderates and liberals of the church, he managed to draw away only a few young talented students and teachers from Princeton—he could not attract the retired, or almost retired, professors.

²⁵ Gordon H. Clark, "The Auburn Heresy (1935)," *The Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 2020, <https://www.opc.org/cce/clark.html>.

5. The Fight for Foreign Missions

It was hard to start a new seminary as Wall Street crashed and the Great Depression began. It was even harder to see Christians give their hard-earned money to church missionaries who no longer believed the gospel. The mission field was a battlefield. Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning missionary Pearl Buck was a trophy for liberal Presbyterians. An accomplished woman leaving her mark on the world stage, she also happened to think that Christian distinctives were hardly necessary for Chinese peasants. Indeed, she publicly referred to historical understandings of salvation as “superstitious.”

The events that follow are well known. In 1932, the General Assembly of the PCUSA accepted a report that refused to censure Buck for her comments. The Assembly also accepted a report on missions funded by Rockefeller called “Re-thinking Missions.” It called missionaries not to conceive of Christianity as the exclusive religion approved by God and urged that humanitarian causes, rather than evangelism, be promoted at the heart of missions. These were the decisions that Machen and his colleagues had dreaded, but predicted, if the church were to continue to veer off course. And yet the decisions of the assembly appeared plausible to the moderates of the denomination because they had the support of Rev. Robert Elliott Speer (1867–1947).

Speer was the prince of the moderates in the Presbyterian Church, one-time head of almost every evangelical organization that mattered, a respected champion of foreign missions, and secretary of the church’s board of missions. He argued for the uniqueness of Christ to an extent that the liberals suspected him of fundamentalism. But he was so averse to theological conflict and so unwilling to speak out against rank liberalism on the mission field that he was not trusted by fundamentalists. Despite her doctrinal position, the mission’s board, under Speer’s leadership, decided that Buck did not need censure. Machen decried this decision and took the lead in forming an Independent Board for Foreign Missions in 1933. He encouraged conservative churches and individuals to support this new parachurch institution instead of the board of the church.

As it happens, Presbyterians—especially New School Presbyterians—had been supporting parachurch organizations that rivaled denomination institutions since the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the spheres of home missions, foreign missions, seminary education, and Sunday school training, Presbyterians possessed the freedom to support generically evangelical institutions instead of uniquely Presbyterian ones. Nevertheless, liberals took umbrage at this new institution that could potentially drain funds away from liberal missionaries. As a result, by 1935, all members of

Machen's Independent Board who were ordained in the PCUSA were suspended from ministry. In a vain effort to keep the board itself from being rejected by the PCUSA, fundamentalists on the board even removed Machen as president, lest the work of the board be tainted by his own struggles. Machen was deeply grieved but labored on.

6. *The Presbyterian Church of America*

Machen's journey during these years was a brutal one. He tried to move his credentials to the presbytery of Philadelphia, where he now lived, and where a majority favored his confessional outlook, but his effort ran aground because, according to the clerk of the denomination, there was an error in the paperwork. Machen was to remain a minister in a hostile New Jersey presbytery. Committees that comprised solely his opponents met behind closed doors; surprise meetings, moving deadlines, and devious methods of every sort were used to maneuver Machen to the sidelines. Indeed, he was never given a chance to defend himself, for he was forced to answer yes and no questions like a child. No record of the meetings was permitted; he was permitted no stenographer to keep a record; the PCUSA then closed its archives on Machen.

Opposition to Machen was bitter. It could be expressed rather crudely, as in an anonymous letter which addressed him as the "Professor of Bigotry" and read, *sic*, "You got a well deserved spanking today. Now just stop calumniating your brethren and broaden out your miserable Theology and learn to be a Christian. or else Get Out." This particular letter is quoted in Wayne Headman's 1974 Princeton Seminary ThM thesis.²⁶ Headman points out that the letter was posted in Baltimore on June 2, 1926—the place and time of the general Assembly. The letterhead, blacked out, but now visible over time, shows that the letter came from some person or persons of the Church's own Board of Christian Education.²⁷ Other charges against Machen, such as Erdman's assertion that "Dr. Machen's tone and methods of defense" should disqualify him from promotion, were more cautious in tone, but much more damaging, as they were spoken before the church and, courtesy of the *New York Times*, before the world.²⁸

Some of the opposition appears to be petty nastiness. But it is easy to overlook how dangerous Machen appeared from the vantage point of those promoting the progress of peace. Machen thought people were saying

²⁶ Wayne Headman, "A Critical Evaluation of J. Gresham Machen" (ThM thesis, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1974), 88.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 88–89.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

peace, peace, when there was no peace. This was not an acceptable message in the 1930s either in the church or in politics. It was about this time that there was another oddball, this one in England, who worried about Germany as a political threat in the 1930s. Career bureaucrats in the state had no more patience with Churchill than career bureaucrats in the church had with Machen. Both men in their own way came across as warmongers, cranks that ought to be ignored if possible, silenced if not.

Machen was finally defrocked and removed from the ministry of the PCUSA, but his trial was a charade and a travesty of justice. A group of ministers responded by renting a hall and starting a new denomination—something that Protestants do from time to time.²⁹

As a minister of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) I often get asked, usually on elevators, what makes the OPC different from the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). If we are only going one floor, I just say, “We were the PCA first!” After all, in 1936 the fledgling church named itself the Presbyterian Church of America. But while it was called the Presbyterian Church of America, the denomination was supported not only at home but also abroad: foreign missionaries risked everything, gave up their pensions, and joined the new denomination—including a certain Richard Gaffin and his wife, who were laboring in China. The PCA was promptly sued for having a name too similar to their opposite, so it chose a new name that highlighted its differences with the mainline church. But no one dared to sue the Presbyterian Church in America, which started in the 1970s because—and this detail also explains the real difference between the PCA and the OPC—the PCA has better lawyers. That is what I would add if we are going to the third floor.

The seminary and the denomination that Machen started both attempted to move forward by looking backward. They recognized that Presbyterians had surrendered the city to hold the citadel, but giving up Reformed theology to hold on to a few fundamental doctrines did not really work. So both the seminary and the denomination attempted to self-consciously recover the riches of the Reformed faith. As with the seminary, it was also hard to start a new denomination after years of severe economic depression. Many congregations were unhappy with the old denomination, but they were hesitant

²⁹ See D. G. Hart, “The Legacy of J. Gresham Machen and the Identity of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 53.2 (1991): 209–25; D. G. Hart and John Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1995); Edwin H. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1940; repr., Philadelphia: Committee of the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1992).

to leave their buildings—for in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America it was a sure thing that the denomination would win every battle over property, much like the American Episcopal church does today when congregations attempt to leave it. Even if entire congregations would leave to join the OPC, they would have to give their property to the PCUSA. Those who did leave would have to meet in rented facilities, storefronts, and homes.

Machen was speaking on behalf of this new denomination in North Dakota in December 1936 when, exhausted from the long battle, he developed pneumonia and died on January 1, 1937. Famously, just before his death, he had a telegram sent to his dear friend and colleague John Murray: “I’m so thankful for active obedience of Christ. No hope without it.”³⁰ He is buried in Baltimore. His gravestone reads, “Faithful unto Death” in Greek.

III. *A Continuing Witness*

Thankfully, not only the denomination but also the seminary weathered those storms and survived the loss of a leader. Almost a century later the continued existence of Westminster Seminary reminds us of a vision worthy of humble promotion and gracious defense.

Machen founded a biblical seminary. He wanted to teach in such a way that the faculty would not only commend a system of doctrine but persuade from the Scriptures. He wanted to emphasize the skills required for building theology from the ground up. This is our immediate heritage and part of what comes to mind when the “Westminster brand” of education is mentioned in North America and beyond.

Machen advocated a Confessional seminary. The Westminster name is meant to remind us of an older heritage as well. It recalls some of the richest of Protestant confessional documents and the last milestone of the long Reformation. Its motto emphasizing “The Whole Counsel of God” (cf. Acts 20:27, *pasan tēn boulēn tou Theou*) reminds us that theological flourishing requires a confession longer than ten points on a website.

Westminster was intended to be what would later be termed an evangelical seminary. In addition to believing in a Reformed doctrine of the church, we believe in a Reformed doctrine of the communion of the saints. From the beginning Westminster welcomed to its student body those who wished to be part of the recovery and proclamation of Christ’s gospel in every age. This too is part of our Westminster tradition: knowing where the boundary

³⁰ Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 508.

lines lie between confessionally and experientially defined communions, but choosing to talk at the curb instead of lobbing verbal grenades over fences.

Westminster was of course intended to be a practical seminary. To state the obvious, Machen and his colleagues wanted to build a place where consistories and sessions send their prospective pastors, a place where all qualified people could grow in their gifts and graces. It was started for the sake of the church; he intended a seminary and not just another graduate school. This continues to be a useful vision. The church desperately needs improvement in the quality of its preachers and preaching. Surely the heart of Westminster's continuing purpose must lie with mentoring men to be the kind of pastors and churchmen that congregations covet and presbyteries prize. Our desire is to be a constructive and useful seminary. For obvious reasons, Westminster has tended to pursue these goals by teaching; I am sure it is already obvious to everyone that the seminary must also do a lot of listening: What are we doing well? Where are we falling short? What can we improve?

Finally, Westminster was founded as an embodied seminary with a physical presence. Of course, in the 1920s, the only other option was study by correspondence. But the physical presence of the seminary has proved to be important. By providing men and women a richly resourced residential sanctuary for two to four years of study, Westminster has been able to serve a constituency well beyond cities on the East Coast. Admittedly, the seminary curriculum has always had a Western slant, but it has nonetheless drawn many of its students from non-Western cultures. And just as Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*, written for one particular audience, has proved useful in a wide variety of ecclesial ecosystems, so too, I pray, this seminary in a Philadelphia suburb will prove to be a powerful witness—and sometimes a protest—against false progress in the church and in the world.

Young Age Faith in Light of Developmental Psychology

G. JONKER VENTER AND H. G. (HENK) STOKER

Abstract

This article focusses on the faith formation and ability of preschool children to defend their faith from as early as the early childhood phase (two to six years). The research investigates prominent psychological theories that cover preschool children's cognitive development to determine if children within this age group can constructively partake in faith formation, as well as the role that parents have in encouraging and shaping this faith formation and apologetic ability. The article provides apologetic guidelines from the Reformed tradition to parents to assist them in this task.

Keywords

Christian education, faith formation, apologetics in preschool children, spirituality, developmental psychology, early childhood, Jean Piaget, James Fowler, Lev Vygotsky, Erik Erikson

Small children think about deep theological questions. This statement may sound strange to some, but parents will agree about the surprisingly tricky type of questions even toddlers can ask. Together with ordinary questions about the course of life, they also ask existential questions.

When my (Jonker Venter) son was three years old, while we were on our way to vacation, he asked us, “If God is in our heart, and there is only one God, how can he simultaneously be in the heart of every child of God?” This is a highly intelligent question coming from a three-year-old! We were stunned that a child as young as this uses such sound logic¹ to make sense of the faith that we had taught him (thus far). The realization that we will have to provide him with a proper answer (among other things) gave rise to this article. If we had not answered his question correctly, our child would probably have wrestled with this question until eventually he was provided with a wrong answer from someone else, or perhaps he might have concluded that there is no answer. If this were to happen, not only might our child doubt us as his parents, but also, more importantly, he might start doubting the majesty and power of God himself, which in turn would bring about questioning and uncertainty in matters of faith. He might perhaps even come to a conclusion with a wrong worldview, such as a deistic worldview, believing that God is far away and beyond reach, either unable or not wanting to be personally involved in his life. We realized that we could not give him an answer such as, “Once you grow up, you will understand,” or “Do not ask questions to which the Bible does not give answers!” To his satisfaction, I responded as follows: “That is a very good question! God is so magnificently great that he can be in all his children’s hearts at the same time! This, my son, is exactly the reason why we can worship God with confidence: because he is everywhere and always with us.”

This answer made enough sense for this three-year-old boy’s logic that it answered his question at that moment. It helped him find peace on this matter but also contributed to the development of a deeper awareness of God’s greatness and omnipresence. This event also contributed to the formation of his faith as the Holy Spirit worked in his heart and mind. This

¹ Concerning the human capability to reason solely on the grounds of logic, see Sarel van der Walt and Nico Vorster, eds., *Reformed Theology Today: Practical-Theological, Missiological and Ethical Perspectives* (Durbanville: AOSIS, 2017), 41–60. Human logic is so darkened by sin that human reason alone cannot lead to knowledge of God. Only when the Holy Spirit works faith into the human heart through the means of scriptural revelation is it possible for human reason to accept submissive servanthood to the Scriptures. This relationship between Scripture and human reason has been maintained throughout the centuries by the Reformers and other Christians. God remains the standard norm of all logic. However, he also created human beings with logical minds so that they can rightfully know him through faith and can know his will as he has revealed himself in Scripture. See also Norman Geisler and Ronald Brooks, *Come, Let Us Reason: An Introduction to Logical Thinking* (Grand Rapids: Baker House, 1990), 17; John Frame, *Perspectives on the Word of God: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 6–7, 51–52; John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 181.

event enabled him to grow in his relationship with God; he was already aware that God is always with him and all his other children, and he trusted God while confidently continuing to live according to his faith. The answer he received made it possible for him to convincingly give an answer about his faith in God to anyone, young or old, who might have similar questions.

From a young age, children learn what it means to trust because all people enter the world as helpless and vulnerable infants. This confidence can provide certainty and insight into the trustworthiness of God and his assured love. God's attribute of truth and truthfulness is a vital part of the faith guidance of Christian children. Is faith not defined in the Heidelberg Catechism with the verbs "know" and "trust"?

1. Faith Formation and Apologetics in Preschool Children

In order to determine young children's cognitive abilities to comprehend God and their relationship with other people on a more abstract level, the findings of developmental psychologists and other authoritative research specialists about this early age will be taken into account. The focus will first be on the cognitive-developmental phases that children undergo, according to psychological research. After that, the article will shift towards the relationship between religion and spirituality in these young children.

1. Cognitive Development in Children under Seven Years

Although humans are complex beings that develop through various factors at various paces at different stages in life, it remains useful to divide children according to the appropriate developmental stages. Psychologists generally classify children between the age of two and six years in a cognitive-developmental phase called *early childhood*.² Since cognitive development has important points of contact concerning one's faith formation and apologetic ability, we need to focus on cognitive development during the early childhood phase.

Cognitive development theories concentrate on how children think and how their thinking develops and changes over time.³ Well-known theories concerning cognitive development during the early childhood phase are those of psychologists such as Jean Piaget and his contemporary Lev Vygotsky.⁴ Other theories follow, such as Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of

² Dap A. Louw and Anet E. Louw, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 2nd ed. (Bloemfontein: Psychology, 2014), 8.

³ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴ David R. Shaffer and Katherine Kipp, *Developmental Psychology: Childhood and Adolescence*, 8th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2008), 281.

moral development,⁵ thought process theory, and modern techniques of information processing.⁶ While all standard theories have their unique strengths, none of them provide an all-inclusive and comprehensive view of a child's total cognitive development.⁷ Therefore, an investigation into some of the prominent psychological theories will enable a more holistic view of children's cognitive and moral development as well as identify the factors that influence this development.⁸

Jean Piaget's Four Stages

According to Piaget, children go through four stages of cognitive development, each containing a more complex reasoning ability in their understanding of reality. The first stage is the *sensorimotor* stage, during which children from birth through the first two years develop their cognition through their senses and motor skills.

The second stage, called the *preoperational* phase, includes children between ages two and six years. At this stage, children use language and symbols to refer to and represent ideas and objects. The next phase, between ages seven and eleven years, he calls the *concrete operational* phase, which is the phase in which children develop logical thinking, with little to no abstract ability. The last stage is the *formal operational* stage, where twelve-year-old children develop the ability to think in terms of abstract concepts.⁹

The faith formation of children under the age of seven falls into Piaget's preoperational phase, where children are not yet able to think abstractly and are therefore not yet ready to think logically. However, this theory is

⁵ Wayne Weiten, *Psychology: Themes and Variations* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning), 443–46.

⁶ See Louw and Louw, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 157–73.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10–15. The debate still exists among psychologists about the relationship between nature and nurture; in other words, whether children's inherited characteristics are responsible for their development or whether the influence of parents and environment plays the decisive role in children's development. Further uncertainty in this regard is about whether children play an active or passive role in their development and what contribution the cultural context makes in children's development. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that religion and spirituality can play a big role in this regard.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 25–26. These phases of the child's cognitive thinking are mainly based on the following interdependent principles of processes. *Organization* occurs when the child makes sense of reality so that everything can be systematized in categories (which Piaget called *schemes*). *Adaptation* occurs when the child must amend his or her theory in order to adapt to new information concerning reality. The latter takes place in one of two ways: either by way of *assimilation* or by way of *accommodation*. Piaget believes that *assimilation* and *accommodation* are used to bring the child's theory into harmony with reality, which Piaget called *equilibrium*. See also Shaffer and Kipp, *Developmental Psychology*, 250–52; Louw and Louw, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 27.

self-destructive because it simultaneously claims that these children already use language on a cognitive level to refer to objects; this therefore proves that they do have the ability to argue conceptually and disproves that they are incapable of abstract thinking. Even by Piaget's own theory about the animistic worldview that children in this phase have, whereby they associate emotions to nonliving objects such as their dolls or animal toys, it is evident that children can think abstractly. However, Piaget based his conclusion that children are unable to comprehend abstract thoughts on certain obstacles which he observed during the fluid comparison experiments he conducted with children.¹⁰

Although Piaget's theory is to some extent one-sided, he has contributed significantly to the understanding of children's cognitive development. Particularly relevant is the fact that children play an active role in understanding their world,¹¹ which should be taken into account, especially concerning the understanding of children's faith formation and their ability to defend their faith.

However, contemporary research differs, in many respects, from Piaget's. One difference, for example, is with his view that children's contexts do not play any role in their cognitive formation.¹² Another claims that children are not wholly animistic and do not truly believe objects to be alive. Further studies of children's emotional development have also indicated that children are not as egocentric as Piaget's experiment suggests and that they are even able to show empathy. Other tests point out that some children in this phase also have an understanding of numerical orientation, something that Piaget sharply questioned.¹³

James Fowler and Children's Faith Formation

James Fowler's theory is still authoritative when it comes to children's faith formation, even though it has received extensive critique in the past.¹⁴

¹⁰ Louw and Louw, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 158–61. See also Shaffer and Kipp, *Developmental Psychology*, 265. These experiments are known as Piaget's conservation studies. He filled, for example, two identical glasses with the same amount of liquid. After the child agrees that both glasses contain the same amount of liquid, one of the glasses' fluid is poured into a third glass that is both taller and thinner. The general observation is that children in the preoperational phase usually say that the third glass now contains more liquid than the first glass. As a result, Piaget concluded that these children's thoughts centered on the object that attracts most, and therefore children in this phase are to be classified as intuitive thinkers.

¹¹ Shaffer and Kipp, *Developmental Psychology*, 278.

¹² Weiten, *Psychology*, 441.

¹³ See especially Shaffer and Kipp, *Developmental Psychology*, 266–69; Louw and Louw, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 161–62.

¹⁴ Joyce Eady Myers, "Children's Spiritual Development: Analysis of Program Practices

Fowler bases his theory on Piaget's developmental stages and applies it to children's faith formation.¹⁵ Although Fowler views faith formation within the framework of developmental stages, he still believes that children's faith does not unfold by itself, claiming rather that children are born with some readiness for faith, which develops mainly through the parents' interaction and nurturing.¹⁶

Fowler's theory regards the first two years of a child's life as the *prestige* of faith, where they develop feelings of confidence and support based on parental interaction.¹⁷ This period creates the foundation for healthy faith development. During the next phase, known as the *early phase* or *Intuitive-Projective phase* (two to six years of age), children begin to have a basic moral judgment of right and wrong.¹⁸ Although children in this phase are very imaginative and still have a very concrete representation of God and the devil, they have already begun to form their concepts about who God is and who the devil is (e.g., that God is love and loves his children, whereas the devil is a liar who wants to hurt God's people). According to Fowler, it is only once children reach the next phase that they can differentiate between fantasy and fact, differentiating between a human's perspective and God's perspective. It is interesting, however, that preschool children describe God in terms of his being, whereas children in the next phase use more concrete anthropomorphic terms to describe God.¹⁹

By the time children enter the middle childhood phase, they are already influenced by several adults. Although children at this stage start to think more logically, according to Fowler, they still interpret religious stories in a very literal way. The last religious stage is reached when children enter adulthood. A personal search for love and acceptance, as well as a personal relationship with God, characterize this phase.²⁰

Criticisms of Fowler's theory include, among other things, that he underestimates modern children, as they can reflect on established standards and even rebel against them. Further criticism includes claims that Fowler's definition of faith is so broad that it exceeds religious faith.²¹ For this reason,

and Recommendations for Early Childhood Professionals" (D.Ed. diss., University of North Texas, 2009), 39. See also Louw and Louw, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 297.

¹⁵ Myers, *Children's Spiritual Development*, 11, 13, 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12, 29, 56.

¹⁷ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981), 53–55, also 119–21.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 130, 133.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 135–50.

²⁰ Louw and Louw, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 296–97.

²¹ Cf. Myers, *Children's Spiritual Development*, 40.

various interpretations exist based on the conclusions of his research.²² Fowler's theory does, however, emphasize the vital role that family and society play in children's faith formation.

Lev Vygotsky and Environmental Factors

Piaget's contemporary Vygotsky agreed with Fowler by recognizing the critically important role that environmental factors, such as the influence of the home environment and kindergarten, play in children's cognitive development.

Piaget places the focus on children's current intellectual abilities, while Vygotsky is more interested in children's intellectual potential.²³ He agrees with Piaget's argument that children undergo intrinsic development. However, unlike Piaget, Vygotsky believes that without the assistance of society, these inner forces cannot cause children to fully develop on their own.²⁴ Only through the direct participation of the surrounding society and culture, by way of role modeling, will the child's cognitive ability fully develop. These influences include skills such as language acquisition, memorization, and mastery of numbering systems and scientific concepts.²⁵ In this endeavor, every society aims to enable children to learn the skills and culture of their particular social group. For this reason, Vygotsky instead focuses on ways in which adults can cooperate in children's development.²⁶

Vygotsky's emphasis that children's cognition primarily develops through interactions with parents, teachers, and the rest of society²⁷ offers sufficient grounds for parents to encourage and guide their children in their process of faith formation and spiritual growth toward spiritual maturity (cf. 1 Cor 3:2; Heb 5:12–13; 1 Pet 2:2). Children's play and scaffolding are especially relevant here. When it comes to guidance and participation during the act

²² Louw and Louw, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 297.

²³ Ibid., 168.

²⁴ Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, and Ellen Souberman, eds., *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 30.

²⁵ Shaffer and Kipp, *Developmental Psychology*, 282–83; Louw and Louw, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 167.

²⁶ Louw and Louw, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 28–29, see also 168–69. Vygotsky calls this influence of adults in children's lives the area of close development, or the zone of proximal development. This refers to the difference in development between a child without guidance and one with guidance, the latter displaying higher performance and competence. His theory is based on, among other things, his view that cognitive development follows a dialectical process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. In this process, the thesis represents the child's initial idea, which is challenged by an older person's antithesis, so that the child can eventually come to a synthesis that stimulates the child to higher cognitive levels.

²⁷ Shaffer and Kipp, *Developmental Psychology*, 281.

of play, parents have the most influence on their children. Indeed, parents usually know their children better and will, therefore, know what type of exposure will challenge each child to a new level for further growth and development.²⁸

Vygotsky also differs from Piaget in terms of children's development of language and thought. Piaget believes that cognitive development precedes language, whereas Vygotsky believes that language regulates every aspect of children's minds, keeping in mind that language should not be confused with speech (spoken language). That is why Piaget characterizes children as egocentric when engaged in self-talk while playing. In contrast, Vygotsky identifies this phenomenon instead as *private speech*, which children use while developing their cognition.²⁹

This private speech serves as an imitation of previous assignments given by adults. As an imitation of what children have learned from adults, they speak out loud in an attempt to exhort themselves to correct behavior. As soon as these children become competent enough in their development to control their behavior and thoughts without parental supervision (which happens typically at the age of six or seven), this private speech changes to *inner speech*. This is the age when children develop the ability to internalize and integrate the conversations that they have with adults guiding them.³⁰ By participating in their children's cognitive development, parents assist their children in developing their logical thinking.

Erik Erikson and Adaptation

Erik Erikson, one of Freud's students, places the emphasis on the active role that children themselves play in an attempt to adapt to their environment. Therefore, Erikson developed the psychosocial theory that divides the development process of human beings into eight stages. Within this theory, Erikson identified certain milestones that humans need to pass before they can enter the next stage (see Table 1).³¹ If an individual moves to the next stage without mastering the previous challenge, this person will not be competent in meeting the subsequent challenges, as this jump brings potential negative effects on that person.³²

²⁸ Ibid., 287–88.

²⁹ See, e.g., Michael Cole et al., *Mind in Society*, 27.

³⁰ Shaffer and Kipp, *Developmental Psychology*, 289–90; see also Louw and Louw, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 168–69; Weiten, *Psychology*, 442.

³¹ The table is taken from Shaffer and Kipp, *Developmental Psychology*, 44–46.

³² Ibid., 44–46; see also Louw and Louw, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 22–23.

Table 1. Erik Erikson's stages by age.

Psychosocial Stage	Age	Basic Challenge to be met
Trust vs. distrust	0-1 years	Realize the world around is safe and good
Autonomy vs. mistrust	1-3 years	Recognize independence and the ability to make decisions
Initiative vs. shame	3-6 years	Try new things and deal with failure
Industry vs. inferiority	6 years-adolescent	Learn basic skills and cooperation with others
Identity vs. confusion	Adolescent	Develop a preserving integrated sense of self
Intimacy vs. isolation	Young adult	Commit oneself to a love relationship
Generation vs. stagnation	Middle-aged adult	Contribute to younger people's lives and other community work
Integrity vs. despair	Late adult	Look with satisfaction back on one's own life

The most serious criticisms of Erikson's theory are that it is only descriptive, that it is vague, and that it lacks a fundamental empirical research and so is subjective and inaccurate. His theory does, however, provide an overview of a human's personality development, of which parents can use the core elements in their contribution toward their children's development.

Furthermore, Erikson's theory also addresses children's faith development in the sense that a healthy psychosocial development will prepare the way for a healthy relationship with God. It is much easier for children to develop a healthy concept of God when they have already developed trust, autonomy, initiative, and a sense of self-worth. In such a way, Erikson's psychosocial stages support the Christian concepts of hope, human will, and purpose in children under the age of seven, as shown in the table.

Newborn child (up to one year old) who have not yet learned to *trust* cannot place their *hope* in God, and later in life, they cannot place their hope on salvation in Jesus. Consequently, children between one and three years who have not yet *discovered their own will* cannot place their *will* under God's will. Following the same pattern, if children between three and six years have not experienced some sort of *purpose* through their own initiative, they will not be able to realize that God has a *purpose* for their life.³³

³³ Myers, *Children's Spiritual Development*, 40-41.

The Early Childhood Phase and Abstract Thinking

Of all the psychologists discussed, only Piaget states that children in their early childhood phase cannot think abstractly. The other three (Fowler, Vygotsky, and Erikson) disagree with Piaget's theory on this matter: Fowler claims that children are born with a readiness for faith, Vygotsky believes that the abstractness of language is present in children from birth, and Erikson states that children from birth already strive towards autonomy while wrestling with complex challenges and decisions. It is even evident from Piaget's theory that children have a certain sense of abstract thoughts since children in the preoperational phase can use words to refer to objects, as well as assigning imaginary emotions to objects such as dolls or toys. Therefore, if Piaget's theory is considered apart from the totality of child development theory, it is easy to wrongly conclude that preschool children are unable to think abstractly and are therefore not yet ready for concepts of faith and faith formation.³⁴

2. The Relationship between Religion and Spirituality

Although the majority of psychological textbooks fail to discuss the influence of religion and spirituality,³⁵ some psychologists believe that religion and spirituality can have a considerable impact on a child's development. However, within psychology, there is no uniform answer as to what the relationship between religion and spirituality should be.³⁶ The only certainty is that spirituality and religion are somehow interconnected to each other, although spirituality in a man does not necessarily imply that he is religious.³⁷ For this reason, Anna Giesenberg suggests that these theories should be combined to acquire a holistic view of man, where the spiritual represents the core of human existence. As things stand, faith or religion are taken to represent only a segment of human existence.³⁸ This spirituality is synonymous with one's worldview and is expressed by small children in everything they do

³⁴ Louw and Louw, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 16. Theories of child development are useful and helpful as they point out various aspects of development (see also p. 7). They serve as indicators whether the child is developing according to the general norms and determines whether the child is ready for new phases, for example, to go to school. The advantage of psychological theories is that they can describe the child's development. However, as far as faith formation is concerned, psychology cannot take the Bible's place and prescribe how the child's faith formation and spiritual growth should proceed. On this matter, see Myers, *Children's Spiritual Development*, 13.

³⁵ Louw and Louw, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 10.

³⁶ Anna Giesenberg, "The Phenomenon of Preschool Children's Spirituality" (PhD diss., Queensland University of Technology, 2007), 10–25.

³⁷ Ibid., 10–11.

³⁸ Ibid., 25–28; see also Myers, *Children's Spiritual Development*, 130.

and say, whether it be play or a work of art.³⁹ In essence, children live according to their spirituality as if their whole being is their spirituality. Thus, Giesenberg defines spirituality in children as follows: “Spirituality is an innate part of a person. It is an awareness or consciousness of the surrounding world, a sense of compassion and love towards this world and anything in it shown through wonder and through activities and relationship with peers and significant adults in the child’s life.”⁴⁰

3. The Necessity of Faith Formation and Apologetics for Children under Seven

In Christianity, spiritual development overlaps with faith formation because, for Christians, spirituality includes and should include all aspects of their lives, even to such a degree that spirituality be considered as a religious character trait.⁴¹

Giesenberg notes that preschool children have a strong concept of God, but that children naturally have an interest about God while not necessarily having a living relationship with him.⁴² Thus, Christian children’s spiritual development should include a conscious relationship with God in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, within the community of believers who cherish this relationship, as well as an understanding and response towards this relationship. Of all age groups, children in the age group of three to five years ask the most questions about God. It seems that children even have an innate sense of God’s existence but do not quite know how to express themselves during prime childhood.

II. Apologetic Guidelines to Promote Faith in Preschool Children

With children under the age of seven showing the most spontaneous interest in existential questions and matters concerning God, it seems only logical to provide some apologetic guidelines for Christian parents. This is especially crucial since these children are proven to have the ability to actively partake in their understanding of God and their relationship with God. Therefore, these guidelines should therefore be from an apologetic angle,⁴³ within a

³⁹ Giesenberg, “Preschool Children’s Spirituality,” 32.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 256.

⁴¹ Ibid., 29, 32, 133–34; see also Myers, *Children’s Spiritual Development*, 44.

⁴² Giesenberg, “Preschool Children’s Spirituality,” 134, 259.

⁴³ Our conviction is that Reformed apologetics should follow the presuppositional apologetics viewpoint as developed by Cornelius Van Til and others. The basic point of presuppositional apologetics is that Scripture alone can convince someone of the Christian faith through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is the only way anyone can become a believer. There is,

biblical and Christian worldview, as it will specifically focus on promoting faith formation and apologetic ability in preschool children. Even though there might be many guidelines, we will only discuss two.

1. Teach the Christian Worldview and Preach the Gospel to Children

In the Great Commission in Matthew 28, Jesus commanded believers to make disciples of all people, which includes the idea that the follower's entire outlook and lifestyle should change accordingly. The process of disciple-making includes⁴⁴ new believers continually being taught about everything that Christ commanded and taught his followers. Parents should consider their children as “new believers” and also continually teach them to be disciples of the Lord and to have insight in the Christian doctrine⁴⁵ with the worldview that flows from it. Even though children below the age of seven cannot understand all the doctrines of the Christian faith in all its details, parents should still lay the foundation for the principles of the Christian doctrine. Indeed, it is precisely at this age range that the core aspects of the development of a Christian worldview take place.⁴⁶ All worldviews, and therefore also Christianity, reflect and provide answers to the most fundamental questions about God, humanity, and the world. These essential questions can be laid out in the following statements:

- 1) Who God is and what he does (including questions about the Trinity)
- 2) Who man is and what he does (including questions about the fall)
- 3) What nature is and what it entails (including questions about science)
- 4) Questions about life in the future, after death (eschatology)

however, within this viewpoint still place to make use of various methods from other apologetic convictions. Methods from evidential apologetics, for instance, can be used without neglecting the viewpoint of presuppositional apologetics. Henk Stoker calls this approach *reasonable reformational apologetics*. For more information on this, see H. G. Stoker, “Convinced by Scripture and Plain Reason: Reasonable Reformational Apologetics,” in *Reformed Theology Today: Practical-Theological Missiological and Ethical Perspectives*, ed. Sarel P. van der Walt and Nico Forster (Durbanville: AOSIS, 2017), 58.

⁴⁴ Note that the only main verb in the Great Commission in the Greek original is *matheusate* (you should make disciples). The other two verbs (baptizing them and teaching them) are participles that function as adverbs as an extension to the main verb. Therefore, these two adverbial words function rather as a further description of the process of disciple-making.

⁴⁵ The ecumenical confessions (the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Creed of Athanasius) and the three forms of unity (the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort) provide good summaries of the Reformed Christian doctrine.

⁴⁶ In chapter 5, paragraph 14, the Canons of the Synod of Dort teach that God preserves his grace in humans, continues with it, and perfects it when the gospel is heard, read, and meditated upon, as well as through the use of the sacraments. See Philip Schaff, ed. *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 3, *The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches*, 6th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 550–97.

- 5) Questions about living in the present (including ethics and Bible knowledge)
- 6) Questions about life in the past (including history and covenant history)
- 7) Religions (including other worldviews)⁴⁷

Almost all apologetics books deal with questions about life that can be categorized under these seven.⁴⁸ Everyone who is involved in the nurturing of small children should consciously give attention to all these matters when having conversations while continually striving to live according to the faith so that the teaching of the gospel does not create any unnecessary conflict within children. If they do so, the children under their care can experience both the teaching and the living examples and see how the biblical doctrine and Christian worldview provide satisfactory answers to these essential life questions.

2. Teach and Guide Children to Defend the Faith

First Peter 3:15 clearly expects all believers to be prepared and thus ready to give answers and witness to the hope that is in them. Also, the Canons of Dort confess this in chapter 5, paragraph 15, where unbelievers are contrasted with believers: “This teaching about the perseverance of true believers and saints ... is something which the flesh does not understand, Satan hates, the world ridicules, the ignorant and the hypocrites abuse, and the spirits of error attack. The bride of Christ, on the other hand, has always loved this teaching very tenderly *and defended it steadfastly as a priceless treasure.*”⁴⁹

When the Bible encourages believers in 1 Timothy 6:12 to always be prepared to defend the faith and to fight the good fight it includes children. Second Corinthians 10:3–4 states that this fight is a spiritual battle (see also Eph 6:12) against Satan and the unbelievers. It is obvious that Christian children should be able to handle claims of other worldviews from a very young age. It is essential for children from a very young age to be guided in order to be equipped to explain and defend their faith against other views and religions. When children are confronted with questions and claims from other worldviews, parents need to be equipped to provide satisfying answers from the Christian worldview for their children at their level.

⁴⁷ James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 23.

⁴⁸ Natasha Crain, *Keeping Your Kids on God's Side* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2016) is a comprehensive book that offers excellent ways to explain life's questions within these categories to children in a simple manner and how to start these conversations with children.

⁴⁹ This version of the confession can be found on the website of the Reformed Churches in South Africa, <http://www.cjbf.co.za/belydenisse/english/cod.html>. Italics added for emphasis. For more on the Canons of Dort, see Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3:595.

Conclusion

Children in the preschool phase are not only susceptible to faith formation, but they have a real interest in making sense of their world, which notably includes questions regarding matters of faith. Of all the theories investigated, only Piaget claims that children under the age of seven cannot think abstractly, though he contradicts himself when he admits that small children do have the ability to use (abstract) words to refer to objects, as well as their imagination to assign emotions to objects such as their toys. Other development psychologists also agree that the abstractness of language, for instance, is present from birth and that these children are even born with a readiness for faith.

Therefore, everyone who is involved in nurturing and educating these young children should be equipped to assist parents in their task of guiding their children in spiritual formation, as parents have the most impact upon children's faith formation and their ability to defend their faith. Developmental psychology theories are only descriptive, so the Bible should be used as the only source that gives prescriptive guidelines for faith formation because the Bible is the only revelation from God that Christians have received for the shaping of their faith.

Everyone involved in nurturing preschool children should, therefore, not only teach these children about the Christian worldview but also actively guide them to defend their faith against other worldviews. It is vital to develop curricula on faith formation and related course material that include worldview aspects that will guide children in the shaping of a Christian worldview. More attention should thus be given to the development of apologetic course material within the various contexts in which preschool children grow up.

To illustrate this point, I (Jonker Venter) will use another example that involves my son. It is common for young children in kindergarten to become sick every now and then. Sinus congestion made my son sick so often that it started frustrating him, even to the point where he started questioning why God made bacteria in the first place. Through prayer and the teaching of creation and sin entering into the world, he concluded that even bacteria were meant to have a good purpose. By viewing bacteria and sickness as a result of the fall, he made peace with the fact that God is still good, and therefore we can and should still worship him.

INTERVIEW

Interview with Os Guinness

PETER A. LILLBACK

(February 19, 2020)

PETER LILLBACK: *Let me offer a prayer and then we will begin.*

Father, thank you for the joy of pausing for a moment and lifting our hearts to you and your glory and your goodness. Please hear our request for your guidance in this interview. We thank you for the fruitful labors and ministry of Os Guinness through the years; for the impact you have allowed his work to have. And we pray it might be abiding for generations to come. Bless this conversation now for the good of your people, and we are truly grateful that it is by your grace that we come together. We ask this all in Jesus's name. Amen.

OS GUINNESS: Amen.

PL: *For this issue of Unio cum Christo we have the joy of interviewing Dr. Os Guinness. He is extraordinarily well known around the world in the areas of apologetics and Christian leadership, with a particular concern for religious liberty. It is my joy to interview him, and I am grateful for his emphasis on public theology, the witness of the church in the public square, and the importance of defending the faith. Thank you, Dr. Guinness, for being with us. I would like to ask you to begin by sharing a bit about your life, including how you came to faith in Christ.*

OG: Well, I am a descendent of a well-known Irish family that produces beer but also many missionaries. My grandparents and parents were missionaries in China, and I was born in China. But I spent most of my teenage years back in England, with my parents in China under house arrest. So my journey to faith was at school, through a close friend, and through reading

C. S. Lewis, particularly *Mere Christianity*. There was a kind of a debate in my mind over two years between atheists like Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre, and my own hero on that side, Albert Camus, and on the other side, people like Blaise Pascal, G. K. Chesterton, and C. S. Lewis above all. And it was through reading *Mere Christianity* that I actually came to faith.

PL: *Well that is marvelous. So C. S. Lewis enjoys in heaven knowing that his labors impacted you! Let me ask you this question: L'Abri is part of your story, and you got to know Dr. Francis Schaeffer along the way. How did these experiences shape your life, ministry, and approach to apologetics?*

OG: I was at London University in the early 1960s, and we had wonderful teachers at the University, people like John Stott, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and Michael Green, but while it is fair to say that they gave us rich, deep, blocks of theology, it had absolutely no relation to culture, which was typical of Evangelicalism at that time. And there we were in what was called Swinging London, the counter-culture—the films of Ingmar Bergman, student radicalism, drugs, sex, and rock and roll—and there was no understanding of any of that. So it was really intriguing to me when a friend, Ranald Macaulay, Schaeffer's son-in-law, introduced me to his father-in-law. My first three weeks when I went out to L'Abri after I graduated were incredibly revolutionary in my thinking. For the first time, I knew we were free to think about anything and everything under the lordship of Christ. While that was obviously less important than my conversion, it was practically more important because it launched me on an understanding of how we engage the modern world. So I owe a huge debt to Schaeffer, above all for his passion for the Lord, for people, and for truth. Though he was not a scholar, those three things outweighed any flaws he may have had. And I owe the world to him.

PL: *How would you describe his apologetic if you were to distill it?*

OG: Well, his apologetic was very personal and practical. People have often contrasted it with that of someone like Cornelius Van Til, which was much more philosophical and theoretical. In contrast, Schaeffer had an incredible way of talking to people. He would ask questions to get into their lives and then really explore what was the treasure of their heart. And if you watched him you could see that after a minute or two—he was not aware of it—his eyes would fill with tears because he was so empathetic with the story and the things people had gone through. He was remarkable. I have never seen anyone who was a better apologist one-to-one.



OS GUINNESS

PL: *You mentioned the distinctive approaches of Schaeffer and Van Til. They both appeal to a system that has sometimes been called presuppositional. How much of Schaeffer is Van Tilian presuppositionalism, and maybe where would be ways that would differentiate their approaches?*

OG: Well, my good friend and your friend, Dr. Bill Edgar, has explored the differences between them in much more fruitful ways.¹ But, for me, Schaeffer was so much more personal and practical. There was a great deal of evidential emphasis in his apologetics, and while he is known for presuppositionalism, my own apologetics—which grows out of his—combines both, and I do not think there is any ultimate contradiction there.

PL: *Through the years you have become known as someone who is focused on what might be called the sociology of religion. How did your interest in this area arise, and how has that impacted the way you have sought to defend the Christian faith?*

OG: Both Van Til and Schaeffer majored in the history of ideas—how ideas washed down in the rain, as Schaeffer used to say. But being a child of the 1960s, I saw that much of the impact on the church did not come from just ideas but the whole notion of modernity and its structures. When I read Peter Berger—I read *Facing up to Modernity* first—it just turned on all the lights for my understanding, not as an alternative to Schaeffer, but as a complement.² Now Schaeffer was brilliant on the history of ideas, and Peter Berger gave me an understanding of the sociology of knowledge or what you might call more simply, cultural analysis. There are so many things shaping us that do not come from thinkers at all. You could take the notion of “fast life,” 24-7-365 pressure, which we all know we live under. Where does it come from? It is not from a philosopher or sociologist or psychologist. It actually comes from clocks. You know the African saying, “All Westerners have watches. Africans have time,” and you can see that the clock has put a stamp on modern life. It is said to be the most powerful Western-invented machine. But you need sociology of knowledge or cultural analysis to understand that. That is true of a lot of things; this is why I try to balance the history of ideas with cultural analysis. But again, it is both/and and not either/or.

PL: *What do you believe to be the abiding impact of Schaeffer and L’Abri on the global stage of Christian thought today?*

¹ Cf. William Edgar, “Two Christian Warriors: Cornelius Van Til and Francis A. Schaeffer Compared,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57.1 (Spring 1995): 57–80.

² Peter Berger, *Facing up to Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics, and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

OG: Well, sadly, things move so fast now that people are even saying, “Who was Francis Schaeffer?” and “Who was Billy Graham? Who was Carl Henry?” which is really quite appalling. However, as I look back over my life, and at 60 years since I came to faith in Jesus, Schaeffer’s great contribution was as a “door opener.” Evangelicalisms, certainly in Britain and much of the America, were pietistic in a good way: warm hearts, but not much of a sharp mind. So for many people, Schaeffer, for better or worse, gave them the freedom to move through the door, to think about anything—philosophy, art, culture, politics, you name it—within the framework of a Christian understanding. So even people who have been critics of his in various colleges would admit that he was the one who opened the door. They went through in different directions, but they owe that door opening to Schaeffer. Now for many of us who knew him, it has had a much deeper implication than all that we learned from him, the things I mentioned like his passion for God. For example, though he was not the greatest preacher I have heard, in almost every sermon at some point his voice would break. He was overcome by the immensity of the wonder of the truth he was proclaiming, and that sort of passion for the Lord was wonderful and inspiring.

PL: *Another area of your research and leadership has impacted the American story, including the Williamsburg Charter and your recent book, The Last Call for Liberty.³ As we look at those two works, first of all, how did your interest in this area arise, and what has happened between that first work on the Williamsburg Charter and your most recent book in the public political arena and issues of culture?*

OG: I have always been taken up with Augustine’s idea that if you want to understand a nation, you do not look at the size of its GDP, not that he talked that way, or the strength of its military or the size of its population. You look at what it loves supremely. There is no question that what America loves supremely is freedom. So I think the deepest way to analyze America is through the lens of understanding how it became a free country and where that freedom is today. That of course includes religious freedom. My work with the Williamsburg Charter (June 22, 1988) was almost providentially accidental.⁴ I wrote a single page on the genius of religious freedom and the First Amendment when I was at the Brookings Institution, and it fell into the hands of a senator’s wife who gave it to her husband. He called me and said, “I have just been appointed to the commission celebrating the

³ Os Guinness, *The Last Call for Liberty* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2018).

⁴ “The Williamsburg Charter,” *Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum Institute*, <https://www.religiousfreedomcenter.org/about/charter/>.

bicentennial of the Constitution,” and added, “Would you like to meet the Chief Justice who is the head of the commission?” I had only been months in the country and I had lunch with Chief Justice Warren Burger. And he said to me, “I am embarrassed. We have millions to celebrate free speech, but almost nothing on behalf of religious freedom. What would you suggest?” Almost like Nehemiah as the cupbearer before the king, I prayed and suggested what became the Williamsburg Charter in June 1988. It was followed by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in 1993. Looking back, we can see that those two events were the high water mark of 300 years of the American celebration and protection of religious freedom.

Since then, there has been a sea change that has cast a shadow over religious freedom. I call the villains the three dark Rs. One, the *reducers* who have reduced religious freedom to freedom of worship rather than the comprehensive right that it is. Second are the *removers*, particularly those after 9/11 who were horrified by the face of religion in public life and now see religious freedom as freedom *from* religion and not *for* religion. And third and most fatefully are the *rebranders*. Religious freedom used to be the first liberty, and it has now been rebranded as a code word for bigotry and discrimination. Today, you can see that religious freedom is under threat from the left as it has never been in the whole of American history.

PL: *That is a very powerful expression of our current milieu. Which raises the question, what do you believe are the biggest risks to religious liberty today? And should Christians really be concerned, given the divine promise of the survivability of the church and the all-encompassing character of divine purpose and providence?*

OG: Religious freedom is in essence the “freedom to be faithful.” That is why it is so important for us. It is obviously less important than faith in Jesus itself, but it is very important. If we look back over history, Christians were the pioneers: for instance, Tertullian in the second century and Lactantius, who was the tutor to Constantine’s son. But then sadly we were the perpetrators of some of the worst violations of religious freedom through the medieval times: “Error has no rights,” the Inquisition, and so on. Then with the Reformation, in Thomas Hywels and Roger Williams, we have the rediscovery of religious freedom. So, we Christians have a mixed record. We were the pioneers, we were the perpetrators of some of the worst deeds in history, and today, wherever people are persecuted, we too are persecuted.

I think there are many reasons why it is absolutely essential for the human future. It is the key to a civil society. It is the key to social harmony in a highly diverse world. And above all, it is the first liberty. When freedom of conscience and the civil public square—one is the inner forum and the

other is the outer forum—are guaranteed, you have the chance of a society that upholds freedom with justice. So it is incredibly important.

PL: *To those that would appeal to providence taking care of the matter and argue that it is not our concern, would you say that it is a misuse of the biblical doctrine? Or what would you counsel someone that says the church should just leave it alone and God will take care of our freedom?*

OG: I think that seems irresponsible. You know at the heart of faith and freedom is the notion of initiative and responsibility. Obviously, our brothers and sisters in the early church had very little room to move under the power of the Caesars, but we in the Western world, Europe and America, and many other parts of the world too, still have open societies. We are responsible as citizens to stand for these things, not just for our sake but for the human future; the passivity of saying we will just leave it all to God is terrible. The Lord is sovereign, but we are significant and responsible, so we are junior partners under him on behalf of freedom and justice.

There has been a sea change over religious freedom. Looking at the huge polarization in the United States at the moment, the deepest division I see is between those who understand America and freedom from the perspective of 1776 and the American Revolution, which was largely but not completely biblical from the influence of the Reformation, and those who understand America and freedom from the perspective of 1789 and the French Revolution and its heirs. Now the French Revolution only lasted ten years in France before Napoleon squelched it, but its ideas remain in some parts of the world through communism and the cultural Marxism of the progressive left. You see a fundamental threat to America that is deeper than anything America has faced. This threat is not external like communism during the Cold War or Hitler in World War II. Rather, it is internal. That is the greatest threat to freedom, and many are asleep at the wheel.

PL: *What is the church, broadly conceived, doing today to advance the gospel effectively or to blunt or diminish the clarity of the good news of Christ?*

OG: As you know well, the church is exploding in the global south. Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, where I happened to be born in north central China, are the epicenter of the fastest growth of the church in 2000 years. You see much of the fullness of the gospel, not only preaching but healing and deliverance and community, all sorts of dimensions that we have sadly long lost in parts of the West. And I would argue—and have done in a good many books, including *Impossible People*—that we are not only the victim of ideas that are against us—secularism, relativism, and various obvious ideas

—but we have fallen captive to some of the shaping powers of modernity in ways that are unfortunate.⁵ We therefore need a revival and a reformation and an awakening in the Western world.

PL: *Can authentic Christian intellectuals be simultaneously scientifically astute and maintain an historic Christian worldview as they engage debated issues such as creation and evolution, gender, and sexual identity?*

OG: I would answer with a grand “Yes, of course!” The West is a cut-flower civilization, looking nice but uprooted from its roots. We owe a lot to the Greeks and the Romans, but the main roots of our Western world come from the gospel and the Jews. Notions such as human dignity and freedom and truth and words, including the rise of modern science, arise from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Now what we are implacably opposed to, and they are opposed to us, is scientism or naturalistic science that views the scientific method as the sole way of understanding life, and that is simply inadequate. For example, the naturalistic scientists and the atheists—like Sam Harris or B. F. Skinner or John B. Watson—have a no better view of freedom than the ancient Babylonians, who believed in the stars, or the Greeks, who believed in fate, because they believe only in determinism. Naturalistic science is so reductionistic that it is a positive danger today, as it gives neither the values nor the foundations we need. I am from Oxford and am incredibly grateful to the Lord for people like Andrew Briggs, Lionel Tarassenko, and Ard Loouis, who are eminent scientists and professors in their fields, Francis Collins at the head of the National Institutes of Health, and all those who understand that a strong view of faith and a strong view of science go hand in hand.

PL: *What are the greatest opportunities for Christian influence and thought today as well as perhaps some of the greatest risks facing Christians?*

OG: I think it is time for Christians in the West to get off the back foot. We are on the defensive, which is a scandal. If you think of it, there are groups compared with us who are tiny. Take our friends the Jews. They are less than two percent of America, but they punch well above their weight intellectually, financially, and in the world of entertainment in Hollywood. We who are followers of Jesus are huge in numbers, and we are called to be salt and light, but our influence is puny. So it is time for us to re-explore the great

⁵ Os Guinness, *Impossible People: Christian Courage and the Struggle for the Soul of Civilization* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

foundational issues and move out into public life. Above all, not just to speak them out, but to live them out.

I mentioned, for instance, human dignity. We are moving from a post-truth world to a post-rights world. Not long ago, people were saying the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) was the “Bible of humanity” and would sweep the world. Not today. It is now described as Eurocentric or unfounded. But where did human worth come from? It came from Genesis 1:26 and 27. You can see that the Genesis declaration is quite literally the Magna Carta of humanity. So we need to explore all these things, as we have been forced to be defensive: words, civilities in crisis, truth, covenant, freedom, justice, and peace. We are the champions and the guardians of the greatest truths that made our Western civilization. It is becoming “a cut-flower civilization,” so it is up to us to stand for them for the Lord’s sake, not for the West’s sake.

PL: *As you look at your extensive writings, which works that you have authored should be the first for someone to read to understand your perspective and concerns, and which do you think is your most enduring in impact?*

OG: You could tell me better than I could! My bestselling book by a long way is *The Call*.⁶ It goes to the heart of our discipleship, an individual’s longing for purpose and fulfillment, and the breaking of a narrow pietism and engaging with life through our callings. So I am not surprised that that is by far my best selling, and maybe my most important book. But there are many that I love. I love my little book *Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Hard the Times*.⁷ It has not sold all that many but has the heart of things I think we need today. I have recently published two books on freedom. I have just finished a first draft of a third one, which is a more constructive view of Exodus and freedom. As I said earlier, I think freedom is the issue of the hour: certainly in America but also for the human future. I have no idea which ones will survive and which ones will not, but *The Call* is certainly my most important.

PL: *The first time I saw the name of Os Guinness on a book it was one called The Dust of Death. What caused you to write that book?*

OG: I never thought of being a writer, but I came to the United States in 1968: six weeks from the east to the west coast, and Berkeley and Harvard. I

⁶ Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling God’s Purpose for Your Life*, revised and expanded 20th anniversary edition (Nashville: Nelson, 2018).

⁷ Os Guinness, *Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Hard the Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

met Mario Savio, who led the Free Speech Movement in 1964, went to the Fillmore West and listened to Grace Slick and Jefferson Airplane. A hundred cities were ablaze, and that was the year that Martin Luther King was assassinated, and then Bobby Kennedy. Then you had the so-called police riots at the Chicago Convention. When I came back, I realized that what was happening in the US was of incredible importance, certainly for the West, but even wider. Then at L'Abri, I gave a series of ten lectures on the 1960s, and people came up and said, "You should write this." At first, I just shrugged it off. Then my old English teacher from my school in England came by, and he encouraged me too. So I thought, well, I will give it a try. L'Abri gave me six weeks off to write *The Dust of Death*, which I did.⁸ It did so well that it launched my writing, and I have enjoyed trying to do more since then.

PL: *So how many books in print total approximately are now bearing the name of Os Guinness?*

OG: I have absolutely no idea, and I do not particularly bother about the numbers. But it must be somewhere around 200 to 250 thousand. My books have sold far more in Korea than in my own home country, England.

PL: *Interesting. Well, what opportunities do you think Westminster Theological Seminary might have for the advance of the kingdom of Christ in the coming decades as you look at this school, which has enjoyed a long friendship with you?*

OG: I love Westminster Seminary, above all for its great faithfulness. That is the central issue of our time over against Protestant revisionism, the sexual revolution, and the progressive left. The central issue is Christian integrity and faithfulness. Beyond that, Westminster has a wonderful Reformed framework for thinking, so your graduates should be in the lead in terms of intellectual engagement with our modern world. Those are the two things that stand out for me. But if I could say so gently, Westminster is too often known for its little internal squabbles, which sadly blunt the incredible impact that it should be having.

PL: *Thank you for taking this time to interview with us. I want to conclude with an open-ended question. Are there any other issues that you might wish to clarify or comment on for our readers as we conclude our discussion?*

OG: Let me just comment on the challenge that Evangelicals are responsible for Donald Trump, they will pay for it, and so on. As I said, the polarization

⁸ Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death: A Critique of the Establishment and the Counter Culture, and the Proposal for a Third Way* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973).

we are facing revolves around the central issue that I identify in my book as being between Sinai and Paris.⁹ It has come down to us in terms of 1776 against 1789. However, I think we need to define the central crisis of our time more clearly, and then align ourselves more carefully in terms of that. I personally thank God for the wise things Trump has done, although he has a character that leaves a lot to be desired. Indeed, he has done an extraordinary number of good things for the country, but we have to show where we agree and where we disagree. Evangelicalism has now become conflated with him. When the coming reaction takes place, which is bound to happen, whenever he leaves office, after one or two terms, there is going to be a huge backlash, and society will probably lean more towards the progressive left. Unless we clarify where we are, we are going to be in trouble and just swept away as if we were merely conservative or merely political. Thus, we have to have a much better understanding of the reality we face, and a much clearer articulation of who we are and what we stand for. Along with others, I tried to state that in “The Evangelical Manifesto” in 2008, which in many ways prefigures the problems we face today as Evangelicals and points the way forward.¹⁰

PL: *Well we want to thank you so very much for your thoughts. You have given us a great deal to think about, and our prayer is that God would continue your fruitful labors for many years to come. Would you please conclude with a prayer that we can share with our readers?*

OG: OK, thanks, Pete.

Lord, thank you that you are sovereign over this fascinating, crazy, challenging world. You are Lord. And so we ask that you will give us wisdom and trust, obedience, and courage, that each of us in our callings and in our churches and communities may so be faithful to you that we may serve your purposes in our generation. We pray in Jesus’s name. Amen.

⁹ Guinness, *The Last Call for Liberty*.

¹⁰ Cf. Os Guinness, “The Evangelical Manifesto,” *Os Guinness*, 2020, <http://osguinness.com/publicstatement/the-evangelical-manifesto/>.

SHORT NOTICES

Schaeffer's Apologetics¹

JERRAM BARRS

Abstract

This article presents Francis Schaeffer's apologetics through a consideration of his work and writings. It starts with an overview of his books and lectures, which reveal a passion to present biblical truth in a way relevant to the questions of his interlocutors. Compassion and encouragement, motivated by his view of the dignity of all, characterized his approach. The article then answers some common criticisms of his method. Persuasion, life, and prayer were key, as illustrated by the work of L'Abri. Schaeffer's apologetic methodology was presuppositionalist, yet he was more an evangelist than an academic apologist.

Keywords

Francis Schaeffer, apologetic methodology, truth, evangelism, prayer, encouragement, compassion, dialogue, L'Abri

I. Books, Lectures, and Evangelism

Francis Schaeffer said that the heart of his apologetics could be found in these three books: *The God Who Is There*, *Escape from Reason*, and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. These three books together set out an outline of Schaeffer's apologetic approach, the way he defended and commended the truth of Christianity.

¹ This article was originally published as Jerram Barrs, "Francis Schaeffer: His Apologetics," in *Francis Schaeffer: A Mind and Heart for God*, ed. Bruce A. Little (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 27–49. It is republished with slight revisions with the publisher's permission.

Escape from Reason and *The God Who Is There* are primarily an analysis and response to the dominant ideas in Western thought and culture. *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* also deals with many of the ideas set forward today as alternatives to historic biblical Christianity; in addition, it presents a basic Christian worldview in a more systematic way than do the other two books. Other summaries of his apologetic approach can be found in *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, *How Should We Then Live?*, *Death in the City*, *Genesis in Space and Time*, and by audio in many of the lectures that are still available on tape through L'Abri and from the tape ministry Sound Word. See, for example, a basic lecture entitled "Apologetics."²

A lecture series that stands behind *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* is entitled *Possible Answers to the Basic Philosophical Questions*,³ which is an example of Schaeffer's apologetic method put into practice. These lectures were given several times at L'Abri in Switzerland during the decade of the 1960s, and that is where I first heard them. He also gave them as special lectures at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, when he came as a visiting lecturer while I was a student there between the years of 1968 and 1971. I remember the lectures very well as I took them for one hour of seminary credit and consequently took thorough notes (notes I still possess). I have them before me as I write this.

The primary reason I remember the lectures so well is that the lectures were open to the public (though they were not widely advertised), and all through the week, a handful of visitors would join us in the tiny seminary chapel. I remember that one man, an unbeliever, came faithfully to the whole week of lectures. Schaeffer covered the three areas of existence, morals, and knowledge and showed how in each of these areas "modern man"—he used the term "modern-modern man" (today he would say "postmodern man")—is left only with the hell of alienation. Christianity, on the other hand, gives answers in each of these areas, answers that are satisfying both intellectually and personally. At the end of the week, he finished by saying that with the Christian answer, there can be true beauty in each of these three areas. The young man who had attended so faithfully became a Christian as the last lecture finished.

I mention this story here both because it is a precious memory and because it reveals something about the way Schaeffer approached his lecturing and

² Francis Schaeffer, "Apologetics," L'Abri England, <https://www.soundword.com/l-abri-schaeffer--francis-apologetics.html>.

³ Francis Schaeffer, "Possible Answers to the Basic Philosophical Questions," L'Abri Suisse, <https://www.soundword.com/l-abri-schaeffer--francis-possible-answers-to-basic-philosophical-questions---part-1.html>.

his writing. The title of the lectures, *Possible Answers to the Basic Philosophic Questions*, probably sounds abstract to many when they first come across it. However, Schaeffer was not interested in either abstract or purely academic apologetics. He was an evangelist—that is how he thought of himself and how he spoke of his ministry.

Those particular lectures—and indeed all his lectures and apologetic books—were developed to answer the questions of both Christians and non-Christians who came and sat at his table in Huemoz-sur-Ollon in Switzerland, the village where he and Edith had founded the work of L'Abri. I personally know many people who became Christians listening to his lectures, either when originally given or by listening to them on tape as they studied at L'Abri or in other settings all over the world. He would use the same approach found in his lectures and books when he discussed the truth of Christianity with unbelievers or doubting Christians at mealtimes (as Edith served delicious food to meet their other needs). Or, if the weather was good, as he sat on the bench outside their chalet and talked with visitors to L'Abri, he would urge them to consider the truth claims of the gospel using the same approach. Or, as he walked through the forests, fields, and mountains of that lovely part of Switzerland, he would encourage his companions to raise their questions and doubts about the Christian faith and would seek to give them answers to their questions.

II. God's Truth

Schaeffer passionately believed that Christianity is the truth about the universe in which we live. God is indeed there, and he is not silent. God, he would say, is not an idea projected from our minds, or our longings, onto the giant screen of the heavens, a kind of superhuman created to meet our needs. God is not a thought in the system of a philosopher who cannot cope with having no answers to the dilemmas of our human existence. No, God truly exists, and he has spoken to us in the Bible to tell us about himself, ourselves, and our world. He has made known to us what we could never discover by ourselves in our questioning and searching.

God has revealed to us the truth about the world in which we live, our human existence, and himself. He has spoken this truth to us in his Word, and therefore the message of the Bible fits with the nature of reality as we experience it: it fits like a glove on the hand of reality. Christianity is true to the way things are. Schaeffer was deeply convinced of this, and indeed every believer should be convinced of this. When we stand up in a worship service and declare the affirmations of the Creed, we are saying what we believe to be true:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, Our Lord
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
Born of the Virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate;
Was crucified, dead and buried;
On the third day he rose again from the dead,
And ascended into heaven.

These affirmations are not like cartoon balloons floating loose in the air. No, they are statements about the way things truly are. The Christian is saying, “This is the truth about the world, about God, about history.”

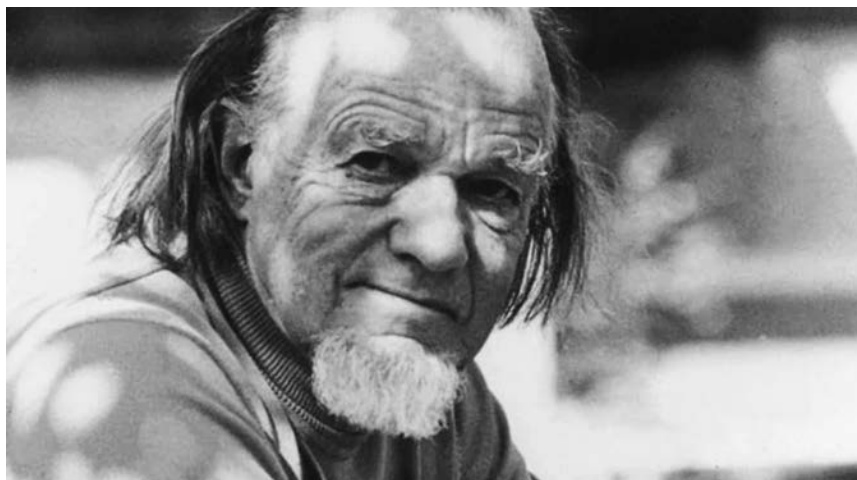
Schaeffer often used to say, “I am more sure of God’s existence than I am of my own!” That may sound a little strange or extreme, but he was simply acknowledging that if God did not exist, then we would not exist. His existence is prior to ours—in time, of course, but also because he is our Creator. Human life is possible only because the Christian Triune God lives.

In the same way, God’s moral perfection is prior to our understanding of morality. God’s character has always been one of holiness, goodness, and justice. It is because God is good that we can affirm that there is a difference between good and evil. It is because God is good that we can commit ourselves to the pursuit of moral beauty. Morals are possible for us because God is moral.

In the same way, God’s love is prior to our love. The members of the Trinity have loved each other for all eternity, from “before the beginning,” as Schaeffer used to say. Because we are made in the image of our Creator, we are designed to love, and we are designed for relationships: a relationship of love with our creator and relationships of love with one another. Love is possible for us because God is love. I remember a wonderful wedding sermon Schaeffer preached from John 17 entitled *Before the Beginning*. In this sermon he spoke of the eternal reality of love and communication between the members of the Trinity as the sure foundation for all human relationships.⁴

In the same way, God’s knowledge is prior to our knowledge. God knows all things truly—indeed he knows all things “exhaustively,” as Schaeffer would say. We humans are created by God to have knowledge: knowledge about the Lord, knowledge about ourselves, and knowledge about our world. We will never know exhaustively, for we are finite, but we can know truly, otherwise we would not be able to function at all in this world. Even

⁴ See his sermon “Before the Beginning” available from Soundword.com: <http://www.soundword.com/l-abri-schaeffer--francis-before-the-beginning.html>.



FRANCIS SCHAEFFER

1912–1984

despite our fallenness, we can still have true knowledge because of God's commitment to care for us and for all creation and because of his kindness in granting his wisdom to the whole human race. Knowledge is possible for us because God knows all things and because he upholds all things and has designed us so that there is coherence between us and everything around us. Because we know God—or rather, because God has made himself known to us—it is possible for us to know ourselves. Schaeffer's statement that he is more sure of God's existence than of his own is very similar to the words of Calvin: "It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face."⁵ We can only know ourselves truly when we come to know God.

III. *Compassion and Encouragement*

Because Christianity is the truth about the world in which we live and about our lives, it is proper for us as Christian believers to encourage one another, to encourage our children, and to encourage unbelievers to ask

⁵ "Accordingly, the knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him. Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 37 (1.1.1–2).

their questions, express their doubts, and raise their objections against Christianity. We do not need to say to the doubting Christian or to the unbeliever, “Don’t ask questions—just believe!” We do not need to say to a Christian who has struggles and uncertainties about their faith, “Just pray harder!” Schaeffer would say, “If you try to load every doubt, objection, and question on the donkey of devotion—eventually the donkey will lie down and die, for it is being asked to bear a load God never intended it to bear.”

God has made himself known in his Word in such a way that we can think carefully about what he tells us—that is why, said Schaeffer, the Reformers were so eager to get the Bible translated and into the hands of all the people—so that they could read God’s Word for themselves. In addition, God has made himself known in the created order and in human nature in such a way that we can think carefully about what he has revealed. What God says, to quote the apostle Paul when he is defending the message of the gospel, is “true and reasonable,” and it is not “hidden in a corner” (see Acts 26:24–29).

In the same way, the apostle Peter encourages Christians to always be prepared to give a reasoned defense of their hope in Christ (1 Pet 3:15–16). Schaeffer saw this calling to be able to give a reasoned defense as part of the birthright of every believer—not just of pastors or some specially trained apologists. Schaeffer was terribly distressed when people would come to his home at the point of giving up their faith because no one in their church would take their questions seriously or because they would be rebuked for asking questions or expressing doubt.

I remember one young woman who came to L’Abri filled with pain because of the response of her parents when she raised questions about the Christian message. Her father was a pastor, but as a young teenager she began to have doubts and wrote down some of her doubts and questions in her personal journal. One day her mother started reading through this journal (though it was private) and was horrified to read there the struggles her daughter was having. She shared the journal with her husband, and they threw her out of her home, declaring that she must be “reprobate” because of the doubts she had expressed. She was then just sixteen years old!

This is an extreme example, but all of us who worked at L’Abri with Schaeffer could share many horror stories like this. This kind of situation broke his heart, and he would devote himself to listening for hours to the struggles and questions of those who came to his home. He would say, “If I have only an hour with someone, I will spend the first fifty-five minutes asking questions and finding out what is troubling their heart and mind, and then in the last five minutes I will share something of the truth.”

I am often asked, "What about Schaeffer made the greatest impression on you?" I think all of us who had the privilege of working with him would respond to such a question, "His compassion for people."

Some who came to the Schaeffers' home were believers struggling with doubts and deep hurts like the girl above. Some were people lost and wandering in the wasteland of twentieth-century Western intellectual thought. Some had experimented with psychedelic drugs or with religious ideas and practices that were damaging their lives. Some were so wounded and bitter because of their treatment by churches, or because of the sorrows of their lives, that their questions were hostile, and they would come seeking to attack and to discredit Christianity.

But no matter who they were or how they spoke, Schaeffer would be filled with compassion for them. He would treat them with respect, he would take their questions seriously (even if he had heard the same question a thousand times before), and he would answer them gently. Always he would pray for them and seek to challenge them with the truth. But this challenge was never given aggressively. He would say to us—and model for us—"Always leave someone with a corner to retire gracefully into. You are not trying to win an argument, or to knock someone down. You are seeking to win a person, a person made in the image of God. This is not about your winning; it is not about your ego. If that is your approach, all you will do is arouse their pride and make it more difficult for them to hear what you have to say."

Schaeffer believed and practiced the conviction that it is God who saves people. Indeed, he would frequently encourage people to leave L'Abri for a time and go off by themselves to think through what they were hearing. He would say that we do not have to try to push and to pressure people into the kingdom. He loved the words of the apostle Paul: "We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor 4:2). Because Christianity is true, and because God is the one who delights to draw people to faith in Christ, we do not need to put emotional pressure on unbelievers, nor do we need to try to manipulate them into responding to our message. Rather we commend the truth to them by seeking to show them that it is indeed the truth, and we pray for the Spirit to open their hearts to that truth.

In addition to his deep compassion for people in their struggles and in their lost state, Schaeffer also had a strong sense of the dignity of all people. The conviction that all human persons are the image of God was not simply a theoretical theological affirmation for him; nor was it just a wonderful truth

to be used in apologetic discussion. It was a passionate shout of his heart, a song of delighted praise on his lips, just as for David in Psalm 8:4–5:

What is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?
You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.

The truth that we are the image of God, a truth that is at the heart of all Schaeffer's apologetic work, is for him a reason to worship God. This conviction of the innate dignity of all human persons had many consequences for him. He believed, and he practiced the belief, that there are no little people. He invited people into his home who were damaged in body and mind and treated them with the same dignity and compassion as the most brilliant or accomplished visitors. He was just as willing to spend time with the maid or the janitor in a hotel as he was to go and talk to someone considered important in the eyes of the world or of the church. He took a conversation with one damaged and needy young person as seriously as when he was talking with the president or lecturing before an audience of thousands.⁶

This same conviction of the dignity of people and his compassion for them led him to desire to avoid aggressive confrontation with unbelievers. His refusal to "debate" with anyone, including a radical liberal like Bishop Pike, was an example of this. He insisted that their meeting should be called a dialog. Those who attended that dialog said the most impressive part of it was that it was evident that Schaeffer could have demolished Pike's positions and his arguments and made him look foolish and extreme—but he did not. What was evident was his compassion for this man and his commitment to treat him with dignity. One friend shared with me how he went up to talk to Schaeffer after the public meeting was over. When he arrived behind the stage, Schaeffer was surrounded by people eager to congratulate him and to ask him questions, but Bishop Pike was standing by himself on the other side. When Schaeffer realized this, he politely excused himself from his questioners and went over to talk to Pike. As a consequence of this occasion they became friends and corresponded with each other until Pike's death while he was searching for manuscripts in the desert.

This conviction of the dignity of all people also led Francis and Edith into their work of child evangelism, for to the Schaeffers, children were just as

⁶ See his sermon, Francis A. Schaeffer, "No Little People, No Little Places," in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, vol. 3, *A Christian View of Spirituality* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982), 1–191.

significant as adults, just as precious, just as worthy of receiving our time and effort. In “The Secret of Power and the Enjoyment of the Lord,” he wrote, “There is a certain gentleness about really great Christians. There are many ways to observe this, but perhaps one of the best is to notice the tenderness for children in some of the great warriors of the past.”⁷

While he was in St. Louis as a pastor in the mid-1940s he and Edith started a ministry to children, Children for Christ. This work eventually became international and was greatly used by God to reach many children with the gospel. He and Edith wrote the materials for the meetings, and Edith designed flannelgraphs to be used with them. These materials were translated into many languages, and he and Edith traveled extensively teaching others how to lead children’s meetings. They would model this by leading a study with the adults as if they were a group of children. If one is able to find a copy of these materials (there were, for example, studies on Genesis and on the Gospel of Luke, the latter published in a different format under the title *Everybody Can Know*), it quickly becomes clear that Schaeffer takes the same basic approach to communicating biblical truth to children as he does with adults. I had the privilege of leading an evangelistic study for inner-city children while I was a seminary student in St. Louis, and I managed to find a copy of the studies on Genesis to use in my teaching. The study was, in essence, a beginner’s version of *Possible Answers to the Basic Philosophical Questions* and *Genesis in Space and Time*, and I found it very helpful in communicating God’s truth to those young African-American city-dwellers.

IV. Responses to Criticisms

Obviously in this context the communication of truth to children is taking place with the use of different language and with other appropriate adjustments—but children need precisely the same truth and ask just the same questions: indeed, some of the most difficult questions I have ever been asked were asked by little children. In these Bible studies for children, the Schaeffers were dealing with the same fundamental questions about the nature of human existence and with the same wonderful answers that the Bible gives to these questions—the very same questions and answers that he presents in *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. This is an important point to notice for several reasons.

⁷ See Francis A. Schaeffer, “The Secret of Power and the Enjoyment of the Lord,” *The Sunday School Times* (July 1 and 8, 1951): 539–40, 555–56.

First, Schaeffer was sometimes criticized for being too intellectual. Some have said that he was dealing with issues that “ordinary people” do not wrestle with in the course of regular life. That the same questions and truths could be used (and used very powerfully, and in a way that was greatly blessed by the Lord) to communicate the good news to little children shows the inappropriateness of such a criticism of his apologetic work.

Second and in similar fashion, Schaeffer was accused of making the gospel too complicated. Why did he not simply tell people the ABCs of the gospel? You are a sinner; Christ died for you; repent and believe in him.

His response was that all people (including little children) have to understand and respond to the truths of the biblical worldview and to turn from their idols and from whatever false ideas they have put in place of God’s truth. They have to believe “that God exists” (Heb 11:6), to accept the truth of who God is and who they are as human persons before they can understand that they are sinners and that Christ died for them.

If people already share a Christian worldview because of growing up with a church background and with knowledge of the Bible, then, of course, we may begin with the ABCs, for the ABCs will make sense to them. But, if they are like the people of Athens whom Paul addresses (Acts 17:16–34), then we will have to start with the true nature of God, and with the false ideas and idolatry of the pagan thinkers if we desire to make Christ known to them.

Schaeffer recognized that there are fewer and fewer people in the Western world who truly hold to a biblical worldview. Consequently, he saw that it is absolutely essential with the majority of people we meet to begin at the beginning. The beginning for modern and even more for postmodern people is denial or doubt about the existence of God and denial or doubt about the existence of truth. While these might seem like abstract issues, they are not in fact abstract. Rather, they are very practical. Nothing is more practical, nothing is more basic, than the conviction that there is truth that can be known. Without this conviction life becomes more and more intolerable and more and more filled with alienation. The more consistently people live with the loss of truth, the more their lives will fall apart, for the center does not hold.

Another response that should be made to this criticism—that he was making the simple gospel too complicated—is that he did not develop his apologetic approach in a study far removed from the lives of real people. He developed the answers he gives in all his apologetic writings and lectures in the heat of battle, so to speak. His home was filled with people seeking answers to the questions of existence, morals, and knowledge.

I worked for almost twenty years at L'Abri, many of those while Schaeffer was still alive. Our pattern was to tell those who came to our homes that "no questions are off limits." For if we believe that Christianity is indeed the truth, we do not need to be afraid of any questions or objections. Consequently, almost all the lectures that were given (and that still are given at the various branches of L'Abri) were given in response to the questions, doubts, and struggles of those staying with us. The issues addressed in Schaeffer's apologetic works are the questions of real people.

My own conversion bears on this issue. As a non-Christian, I wrestled with several of the problems that are addressed repeatedly by Schaeffer. I wondered how any meaning and value can be given to human life. "Who am I, and is there any ultimate meaning to my life?" were questions that plagued my soul. I did not see any basis for being able to make a distinction between good and evil. I felt there was a difference, and I longed for there to be a difference, but I could find no reason for such a difference. Does not the same end come to those who seem morally upright and those who devote themselves to wickedness? Does it ultimately matter, or is it just an illusion to think that moral integrity is important? I was haunted by the reality of suffering. Is there any reason for suffering, any ultimate explanation for it, or is it meaningless in the end? Is it just that we live and die, we win some and lose some, we have fleeting moments of joy and longer periods of sorrow, but none of it makes any sense? And is there any resolution to suffering? Or do we simply have to endure it, either with passive resignation or with bitter rage, following Dylan Thomas's urging to "rage against the dying of the light"?⁸

When I was a teenager growing up in England in the sixties, many of my friends struggled with such questions, but most of them attempted either to drown their anxious thoughts with alcohol, drugs, or promiscuous sexual encounters or to bury themselves in pursuit of a life that would give them "personal peace and affluence" (to use Schaeffer's expression). I found myself unwilling to take either of these routes, for both seemed a betrayal of everything I treasured (largely thanks to my parents, who were truly good people and who were excellent parents with a genuinely happy marriage).

⁸ See the poem of Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night":

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

See Dylan Thomas, *The Poems of Dylan Thomas* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2003), 239.

For me, the lack of answers drove me to the very edge of suicide. I was prevented (Thank God!) from throwing myself over a cliff one January day by the glory of creation even in the middle of winter. I felt constrained to keep searching just a little longer before taking such a final step.

About two weeks after this, I met a Canadian, Mike Tymchak, a doctoral student at Manchester University where I was an undergraduate. He had studied under Schaeffer at the Swiss L'Abri and had discussions, Bible studies, and sessions listening to Schaeffer's tapes in his apartment each week. The first of these evening meetings that I attended after I met Mike, he led a reading and reflection on the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes. It pierced me to the heart, for here was a man, Mike, and here was a book, the Bible, that took my questions seriously and began to give me answers. Over the next months, Mike played tapes by Schaeffer that covered some of the ground covered in the book *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* and in other of his basic apologetic books and lectures on tape. Mike's own approach to my questions was the approach that Schaeffer takes. Within a little over a year and a half Mike led me in a prayer of commitment one Tuesday evening in November 1966 as we knelt side by side on his kitchen floor. God had brought another reluctant sinner to himself!

A third criticism that is sometimes made of Schaeffer's apologetic approach is that he believed that he could argue people into the kingdom of God. Nothing could be further from the truth. He stated categorically many times that argument alone will not save people.

He did not acknowledge this because the reasons that demonstrate the truth of Christianity are inadequate. They are not inadequate; rather, they are fully sufficient to persuade an open-minded person. People, however, are not open minded. We are all rebels against God, with wills resistant to his truth. Schaeffer would say, as he says in several of his lectures, that to come to the truth men and women have to bow before God three times.

First, we have to bow as creatures, acknowledging that God is God, and that we are not the source and origin of our own life. Rather, we are dependent. Our hearts resist this.

Second, we have to bow morally, acknowledging that we are to see God as the lawgiver, that we are people who consistently have disobeyed his commandments, and that we deserve his judgment. We are dependent utterly on his mercy in Jesus Christ.

Third, we have to bow in the area of knowledge. God is the source of truth and we are not. We are dependent on him for understanding of the world and even of our own existence.

V. Persuasion, Life, and Prayer

In addition to this recognition of the problem of the hard heart, Schaeffer understood that there are three elements, all equally important, to the demonstration of the truth of Christianity: persuasion, life, and prayer. This understanding was not merely theoretical. His life's work was built around the practice of these three elements.

We are called by God to make his truth known and to demonstrate that truth to unbelievers by giving them compelling reasons for faith. These reasons are found in God's own revelation in Scripture and in creation. They are not the clever inventions of our minds. Schaeffer believed his apologetic method was faithful to Scripture and that he was using the approach of Scripture.

We are called by God to live the truth, to demonstrate the truth of the gospel by our lives. Schaeffer called the life of the Christian "our final apologetic"—and he sought to show in his own life, "in some poor way," as he put it—the reality of "supernaturally restored relationships." He believed that the New Testament teaches us that the non-Christian ought to be able to see a difference in our lives and thereby draw conclusions about the truth of the message of Christ that we proclaim.

We are called by God to pray that he would demonstrate his existence in the reality of his answers to our prayers. Francis and Edith Schaeffer prayed that God would bring the people in whose hearts he was at work to L'Abri. Schaeffer knew, and constantly repeated to those who worked with him, that the work of saving people is impossible for us, but it is indeed possible for God. He was a man of prayer who humbly believed that without the work of God in the hearts and minds of people all our labors are in vain.

Actually, of course, I ought to have set these three points in the reverse order, for Schaeffer believed, and spent his life practicing the belief, that prayer is the most important work that we do whether in the task of apologetics or in any other area of our Christian obedience. In one sense he would say, "Prayer is an activity that must be central to our lives," but then he would quickly add, "In prayer we are holding out the empty hands of faith to the God who is there and who can do far more abundantly than all that we ask or imagine!"

VI. Appendix—Schaeffer's Apologetic Methodology

Where did Schaeffer fit in the classification of different apologetic methodologies? Robert Reymond declared that Schaeffer was a classical or "empirical"

apologist.⁹ Classical apologetics seeks to demonstrate God's existence and theism as the only correct worldview to believe. This demonstration is given through the use of the "theistic arguments" (made famous by Thomas Aquinas) and is then followed by appeal to historical evidence to establish other important matters, such as the deity of Christ, his historical resurrection, and the reliability of Scripture. Proponents of this view are usually said to include Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, William Paley, B. B. Warfield, R. C. Sproul, Norman Geisler, John Gerstner, and J. P. Moreland.

Gordon Lewis thought Schaeffer was a verificationist, or someone who holds to what is called cumulative case apologetics.¹⁰ This approach suggests that the truth of the Christian message is not strictly a formal argument to "prove" Christianity, or an argument from probability. According to Steven Cowan,

it is more like the brief that a lawyer makes in a court of law or that a literary critic makes for a particular interpretation of a book. It is an informal argument that pieces together several lines of data into a sort of hypothesis or theory that comprehensively explains that data and does so better than any alternative hypothesis.¹¹

Those who use this approach are usually said to include Basil Mitchell, C. S. Lewis, C. Stephen Evans, and Paul Feinberg. Feinberg puts it this way:

Christian theorists are arguing that [Christianity] makes better sense of all the evidence available than does any other alternative worldview on offer, whether that alternative is some other theistic view or atheism.¹²

On this approach, the Christian account of reality given to us in Scripture explains such foundational matters as the existence and form of the cosmos, the nature of morality, religious experience, historical facts such as the virgin birth and resurrection of Jesus, and the hope of ultimate redemption.

I think Schaeffer would have been fascinated to have seen these attempts to pigeonhole him into a particular approach. But where did *he* think he fit into the usual classification of classical apologetics, evidential apologetics,

⁹ Robert L. Reymond, *The Justification of Knowledge* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1984), see his section on Schaeffer, pages 145–46.

¹⁰ Gordon R. Lewis, "Schaeffer's Apologetic Method," in *Reflections on Francis Schaeffer*, ed. Ronald W. Ruesegger (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 71.

¹¹ Steven B. Cowan, introduction to *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 18.

¹² Paul D. Feinberg, "Cumulative Case Apologetics," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Cowan, 152.

verificationalism, presuppositionalism, Reformed epistemology apologetics, and fideism?

Schaeffer regarded himself as a presuppositionalist, though he sometimes resisted the attempts of others to put him into any particular category. Presuppositionalists stress the deep impact of sin on every aspect of our humanity, including our ability to know. Because of this, they argue that the unbeliever has to be challenged at a more foundational level than a presentation of powerful evidence for the truth of the Christian message. This position recognizes that every human person has assumptions, or presuppositions, that shape everything they believe and the way they live. Because we have fallen away from our original state of innocence and live in rebellion against our Creator, not one of us starts our investigation of the world, of human life, and most especially of God, from a place of neutrality. The unbeliever has a heart turned away from God toward idols, especially the idol of the self, and this pre-commitment of the heart stands in the way of hearing and receiving the truth. The Christian apologist should gladly acknowledge their presupposition of the truth of Christianity. God exists and he has spoken—this is the starting point of apologetics. Evidences and arguments may be marshaled to support the truth claims of Christianity, but at base the apologist argues that all morality, all meaning, all rationality presupposes the existence of the God who has made himself known in Scripture. John Frame argues, “We should present the Biblical God, not merely as the conclusion to an argument, but as the one who makes argument possible.”¹³ Schaeffer would have been in thorough agreement with Frame’s statement.

While Schaeffer saw himself as a presuppositionalist, and he would have affirmed the outline of this approach to apologetics that I have set out above, he is not easy to fit into a box, and this is why he has been classified in other ways by Reymond and Lewis. This is also the reason why he was criticized repeatedly by Cornelius Van Til as being inconsistent to a properly presuppositional approach to apologetics. Part of the challenge here is that rather than developing a particular methodological approach, Schaeffer had a passion for the communication of Christian truth both to believers and unbelievers, and he was very gifted at this task, whether he was speaking to people who considered themselves intellectuals, to ordinary working people without much book learning, or to little children.

¹³ John M. Frame, “Presuppositional Apologetics,” *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Cowan, 220.

He very carefully said that he was not an academic apologist, but rather an evangelist. He would always add that he was not implying that academic apologetics was an inappropriate calling, but it was not his calling.

He also was, from his earliest years, passionately committed to seeing the “common ground” between different perspectives among believers, including the common ground between differing apologetic approaches.¹⁴ One of the earliest articles Schaeffer wrote was an attempt to get J. Oliver Buswell, a leading classical apologist, and Van Til, a presuppositionalist, to see that they had much in common. Schaeffer’s article was written in response to a series of exchanges between Buswell and Van Til, exchanges that had become fairly heated and had troubled some of the readers of the magazine in which they had been printed because of the lack of charity that seemed to be creeping into this to-and-fro. Schaeffer, then a young man of 36, urged the two to recognize that they both believed that reasoning alone could not save anyone, that both insisted that people are rebels trapped in sin, and that both admitted gladly that without the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart and mind no one would come to faith; and he urged them to acknowledge that they both agreed that only God’s Word makes sense of human life. In this article Schaeffer set out an outline of his approach to apologetics that helps us understand his life’s work. I will summarize in my own words as a series of brief points what he wrote.¹⁵

1. All people, no matter what their beliefs or way of life, live in God’s universe, for it is the only one there is.
2. The unbeliever may indeed invent another world to inhabit, a world of false gods, idols, a world where there is an obstinate refusal to worship and serve the true God and maker of all things. Such an invention is what all religions and alternative worldviews and ways of living are in fact—not truth but a kind of make-believe.
3. This invention does not fit what is truly “there,” so the unbeliever lives between two worlds, worshipping and serving the gods he or she has chosen; but living in actuality in the world that God has made.

¹⁴ For an excellent article on Schaeffer as an apologist “who favors integration” between different apologetic methods, see Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr., “Apologists Who Favor Integration,” in *Faith Has Its Reasons: An Integrative Approach to Defending Christianity* (Devon: Paternoster, 2006), 425–82; available online as “Faith Has Its Reasons” at www.Bible.org.

¹⁵ See Francis A. Schaeffer, “A Review of a Review,” *The Bible Today* 42.1 (October 1948): 7–9.

4. If the unbeliever were consistent to their make-believe world, they would be driven to meaninglessness, amorality, and irrationality. But, thankfully, no one is fully consistent.
5. The unbeliever has to live in deceit, benefiting from God's world and the beneficence of his general grace but suppressing the truth in unrighteousness.
6. God constantly confronts the unbeliever with the truth, for the Spirit is the world's prosecutor. He gives people up to the consequences of the false ways of seeing the world that they have chosen to serve, and he also continues to pour out his good gifts on the unbeliever. These gifts are a testimony challenging the unbeliever to repentance and to seeking the one true God, and they render the unbeliever inexcusable.
7. We are to focus on the tension, helping unbelievers to see that all that is good and true and beautiful comes from God, that God's world and gifts are their true home, and that the worldview or idol to which the unbeliever has given mind and heart is a totally inadequate means of dealing with the world that truly exists.
8. We are to remember that in our thinking and our lives we believers are never consistent either. We are all still living in two worlds, and therefore, understanding our own fallibility and inconsistencies, we are to communicate the truth with humility, understanding, grace, and respect.

Another way to summarize how Schaeffer approached the task of making truth known to people would be to say that he used presuppositions as a kind of evidence. We may imagine him praying for the Holy Spirit to open a person's heart and mind all the time he is speaking like this: "If you turn away from God and make a world of your own imagining, there will be terrible consequences, both for the way you think and for the way you live. Yet at the same time, because you live in God's world and you are made in his image, you will be restrained from being consistent to your way of seeing the world." Schaeffer would speak very often of two realities, "the universe and its form" and "the mannishness of man," both of which act as a constraint on people's thinking and their lives. "If, on the other hand," he would continue, "you would turn to the Lord, you will find the world 'falling into place' in your thinking, and your life will be set free by the truth."

Schaeffer saw his work as simply applying Paul's words in Romans 1:18–32, where Paul sets out the consequences of suppressing the knowledge of God and of worshiping and serving part of the creation in God's place. Another way to put this would be to say that Schaeffer's approach was similar to Isaiah's in Isaiah 40–48, where the prophet contrasts the folly of the worship

of idols with the wonder of the worship of God and sets out the consequences of these two ways of thinking and living. In Psalm 115, we see the psalmist doing precisely the same thing when he sings of the glory of the Lord and contrasts that with the emptiness of idols and the way they make those who worship them become like them. False belief systems, just like practical idolatries, destroy our humanity. Only the truth made known by the Triune God can make sense of our lives and set us free to be truly human. This was Schaeffer's passionate conviction. He spent his life defending this conviction and seeking to bring others to acknowledge the Lord who graciously gave us the truth and who sets us free as we bow to him.

Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology

ARJAN DE VISSER

Abstract

Lesslie Newbigin is an inspirational figure whose theological legacy should be considered carefully. Using a new book by Michael Goheen as guideline (*The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*), this article focuses on Newbigin's views regarding the identity and mandate of the church. Two aspects are noted with appreciation: Newbigin's defense of the uniqueness of Christ and his critique of Western culture. There are concerns, however, with respect to three aspects of Newbigin's ecclesiology: his views of salvation, election, and the mandate of the church. The common thread in Newbigin's approach appears to be his aversion and over-reaction against what he deemed to be an individualistic view of salvation.

Keywords

Lesslie Newbigin, Michael Goheen, missional church, ecclesiology, election, salvation

Lesslie Newbigin (1909–1998) is well known to a broad spectrum of Christians as an ecumenical churchman who was the inspiration behind the contemporary missional movement. He worked as a missionary and bishop in India for almost forty years. During that time, he played a role in the unification of various denominations that resulted in the formation of the Church of South India in 1947.

At the international level, he was active in the World Council of Churches. After retiring and returning to the United Kingdom in the 1970s, Newbigin started a second career as a lecturer and writer. He became known as a critic of modern Western culture and a prophetic voice that encouraged the church to stand firm and live up to its missionary calling.

Even before Newbigin's death in 1998, people were writing books and dissertations about him, and during the last few decades, many more have been published. Michael Goheen published his doctoral dissertation on Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology in 2000. Goheen has since written and spoken on Newbigin on many occasions. Recently he returned to his subject again with his new book, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

For this article, I am using Goheen's book as a window into the theological views of Newbigin, especially his missionary ecclesiology. Apart from Goheen's book, I have also used two books by Newbigin himself *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

I. Uniqueness of Christ

An aspect of Newbigin's writing that we can appreciate is his defense of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the Savior of humankind as, for example, in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, where he describes his position as "exclusivist in the sense that it affirms the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ" (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 182). He rejected the kind of inclusivism that regards non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation, a position that required courage on Newbigin's part. It must not have been easy to defend the uniqueness of Jesus Christ within World Council of Churches circles at a time when pluralism was gaining the upper hand. Although Newbigin's struggle in the World Council of Churches did not have the desired effect, we appreciate that he spoke up against the views of pluralists like John Hick and Paul Knitter.

II. Western Culture

Another aspect of Newbigin's writing that we can appreciate is his ability to analyze modern Western culture as he did, for example, in *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986). Goheen summarizes this in chapter 6, "A Missionary Encounter with Western Culture." Having lived and worked in India for close to forty years, Newbigin was able to see Western culture with the eyes



LESLIE NEWBIGIN

1909–1998

of a foreign missionary. He considered Western culture to be the most dangerous foe the church has ever faced (*Church and Vocation*, 164). He also judged Western culture to be more resistant to the gospel than any other culture in the world (165). In his judgment, the church in the West had become syncretistic: “Instead of confronting our culture with the gospel, we are perpetually trying to fit the gospel into our culture” (167). Newbigin offered a penetrating analysis of modern Western culture: how it has been influenced by the Enlightenment, how it has relegated religion to the category of values (not facts), and how Western culture is based on hidden faith assumptions even though it claims to be neutral and objective. In sum, Newbigin did a good job of unmasking Western culture as idolatry.

III. *Salvation*

This brings us to a key aspect of Newbigin’s theology: his view of the identity and mandate of the church (ecclesiology). To get a handle on this, a good place to start is where Goheen starts as well: Newbigin’s view of salvation. Goheen observes that Newbigin wanted to stay away from an individualistic understanding of salvation that views salvation as limited to the personal salvation of individual people. Newbigin would not deny that there is “some truth in this” (according to Goheen), but he would insist that “this is an entirely too reductionistic view of the gospel” (41).

Newbigin describes the gospel message in much broader terms. In his view, it is a message “about the fullest revelation and the final accomplishment of the end of universal history—the comprehensive restoration of all creation and the whole of human life in the kingdom of God—present and coming in history in Jesus Christ and by the Spirit’s power” (quoted in *Church and Vocation*, 42). The biblical support for this view is taken from Jesus’s announcement at the outset of his public ministry: “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:14–15). But what is the kingdom of God? In Newbigin’s view, the kingdom of God consists of *corporate and cosmic renewal*. In Newbigin’s own words, the very essence of salvation is “that it is corporate and cosmic, the restoration of the broken harmony between all men and between man and God and man and nature” (59).

Newbigin’s view of salvation contains important biblical aspects, but in my estimation the emphasis is problematic. It appears that Newbigin’s aversion to an individualistic understanding of salvation has caused him to be one-sided. He focuses on Christ’s announcement of the kingdom but says little about the atonement, the need for personal faith in Christ, the

promise of forgiveness of sin and guilt, the promise of indwelling by the Spirit, and the coming wrath of God on those individuals who do not repent. I am aware that one should be careful with criticizing a theologian for what he is *not* saying. At the same time, however, when certain aspects are always highlighted and other aspects largely ignored, things get out of sync. In this regard, I find Goheen's observation to be revealing: "Newbigin does *not* move from Christ to the application of Christ's work and the distribution of various salvific benefits to individuals" (54, emphasis added).

Newbigin's discussion of the work of the Spirit illustrates this principle. Goheen observes that Newbigin describes the work of the Spirit in eschatological, missional, and communal terms. While Newbigin acknowledges that Christ's work brings benefits to individual people, Goheen nevertheless feels that Newbigin's references to the Spirit's work in individuals are "infrequent" at best (54).

IV. Election

Another important aspect of Newbigin's theology is his understanding of election. In *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, he entitles the chapter on this theme "The Logic of Election," and he is at pains to point out that the doctrine of election should not be understood as some people having a privileged status before God while others do not have that status: "To be chosen, to be elect, does not mean that the elect are the saved and the rest are the lost" (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 86). One wonders how Newbigin felt about the confessional statements in the Westminster Confession of Faith (ch. 3) and the Canons of Dort (ch. 1) that God has predestinated and foreordained to everlasting life a definite number of specific persons. Once again, Newbigin seems to be fighting against what he considers to be an individualistic view of salvation.

What, then, is Newbigin's understanding of election? In his view, "to be elect in Christ Jesus means to be incorporated into his mission to the world" (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 86–87). It seems that this is a reductionist view of election. To be God's elect means more than being sent on a mission. It means to be adopted as sons of God through Jesus Christ (Eph 1:5), and this sets the elect apart from the lost. Our Lord himself, in the prayer that is recorded by the apostle John, said that the Father had given him authority "to give eternal life to all whom you have given him" (John 17:2).

V. Church

Newbigin's views of salvation and election influence his understanding of the nature of the church and its calling in the world. Goheen quotes Newbigin to the effect that the church "does not exist for itself or for what it can offer its members" (*Church and Vocation*, 122); rather, the church exists to carry out God's mission in the particular place in which it is set (123). When the apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth or Ephesus, Newbigin takes this to imply that the church exists *for* Corinth, *for* Ephesus. The church must be the church "for its particular place" (123). This does not mean that the church simply goes along with the world. Rather, the church will live in a painful tension (145): the church is *for* the world and identifies with the world; at the same time, the church is *against* the world and confronts its idolatry. Newbigin has a high view of the calling of the church: The church has to claim the high ground of public truth. It is called to represent the kingdom of God in the life of society (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 222, 226). To do this, the church will be "a community that does not live for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of its neighborhood" (229).

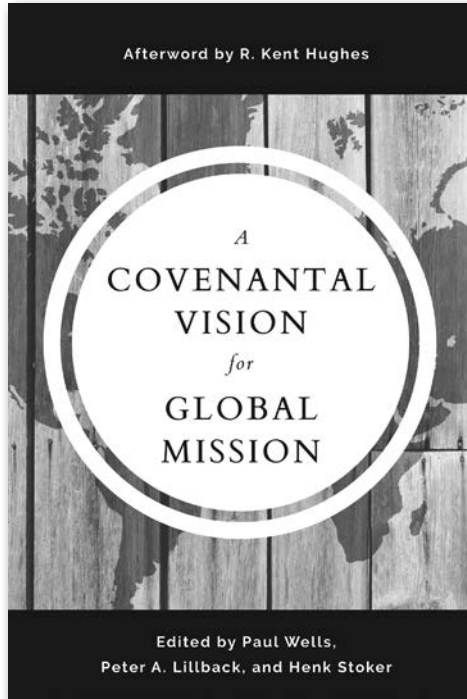
We can appreciate Newbigin's call to the church to be relevant and active and to confront the world. At the same time, he is overstating the case when he says that the church exists "for" the place where it is planted. The church exists for God and her Savior, and therefore it is called to build herself up to the measure of the fullness of the stature of Christ (Eph 4:13). The church should not feel guilty when lots of time and energy are invested in the edification of her members, worship, pastoral work, and diaconal work. After all, the church is the bride of Christ. He gave himself up for her so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph 5:27). In other words, the church is not merely an instrument in the hands of the Lord to reach the world! God gave Christ as head over all things to the church, which is "his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:22–23).

Conclusion

In sum, I appreciate the fact that Newbigin defended the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Savior of humankind. I also appreciate his efforts to unmask the idolatrous nature of Western culture and the task of the church to take a firm stand on this. There is a lot that is good about his call to the church to reclaim its missionary calling. At the same time, his views of salvation and election are lacking in biblical balance. His aversion to a so-called

“individualistic” view of salvation goes hand in hand with a view of the church that sees its *raison d’être* mainly in what it does for the world. The church fathers and the Reformers were more balanced and emphasized that the church is called to be the “mother of believers” (see John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.4). She is called to nurture her children! As a result, we cannot but conclude that there are significant weaknesses in Newbigin’s ecclesiology.

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— ROB EDWARDS, *Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology,
Westminster Theological Seminary*

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— HANNES WIHER, *Associate Professor of Missiology, Faculté libre de théologie évangélique, Vaux-sur-Seine, Faculté Jean Calvin, Aix-en-Provence, France*

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Book Reviews

Flavien Pardigon. *Paul Against the Idols: A Contextual Reading of the Areopagus Speech*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019.

Flavien Pardigon is a guest lecturer at Reformed Theological Seminary in Washington, DC. This book is “a substantial revision of a PhD dissertation submitted at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) in December 2007.” It shows a broad scope of knowledge and understanding, engaging in scholarly discussion while demonstrating the redemptive-historical interpretation and practical implications of Paul’s Areopagus Speech (Acts 17:16–34) in light of the historical and literary context of Luke-Acts. The book, which has two parts, has a brief and commendable foreword by dissertation advisor William Edgar (xiii–xvi), an author’s preface (xvii–xix), and a list of abbreviations (xx–xxiii). Part 1 (“Contextualizing and Orienting Our Reading of the Areopagus Speech”) includes an introduction and three chapters. Part 2 (“A Contextual Reading of the Areopagus Speech”) has six chapters, followed by an “exegetical epilogue” and conclusion. The author finishes the book with a bibliography, a valuable resource for further research into Luke-Acts, and indexes of modern authors, Scripture citations, and ancient sources (227–80).

The author explores Luke’s theology, his use of the Old Testament, and the narrative setting for the story of Paul in Athens in light of the “macro-narrative framework” in chapters 1 to 3 (pages 1–97). He evaluates divergent interpretations and understandings of Luke’s theology, primarily represented by historical-critical methods. He also identifies Luke as a redemptive-historical theologian, stating that “Luke’s thought demonstrates a clear redemptive-historical structure and sensitivity” (10–11). He presupposes Luke to be a Trinitarian theologian, noting that “Luke-Acts is wholly

consecrated to the depiction of the triune God's activity in human history" (6–12). He also highlights the importance of Luke's biblical eschatology to the understanding of his interpretation of history in light of God's redemptive history in and through Israel (20). Exploring the use of the Old Testament, he argues that Luke uses "the Isaianic New Exodus program as the canvas for his own New Exodus program" in Luke-Acts. Therefore, the eschatological new exodus motif should be applied as "a primary interpretive lens in our study of Acts 17:16–34" (80). Evaluating the Athens episode along with the diverse speeches in Acts, the author emphasizes that "Acts 17 is the last so-called 'missionary speech' recorded in the book of Acts" (86).

Subsequently, the author extensively discusses "the micro-narrative" of the Athens episode itself in chapters 4 to 9 (101–216), dealing with the narrative frame of the speech (Acts 17:16–22a, 33–34), its beginning (Acts 17:22–23), God as Lord (Acts 17:24–25), the divine design for mankind (Acts 17:26–27), man's treason (Acts 17:28–29), and the eschatological proclamation of judgment (Acts 17:30–31).

Pardigon demonstrates keen insight and observation in his exegesis of verses 30 and 31 in light of the eschatological judgment, rightly seeing these verses as the conclusive thrust of the Areopagus speech (211–16). Thus, he argues that it is "God's universal lawsuit" against idol worshipers because they are covenant breakers, "The mention of the preparatory proceedings for God's universal lawsuit is syntactically and causally related to God's *commanding* to men to repent. ... This double turn of events (imminent lawsuit and divine injunction), however, is a rhetorically effective and pressing inducement to repent." Indeed, it is a brilliant observation to see "God's universal lawsuit" in the historical context of Paul's Areopagus speech against the idol worshipers in Athens. Moreover, the author identifies idolatry as "seditious covenant-breaking" (212). Closely examining verse 31, the author correctly indicates that "a day" has been set for the final verdict and the "second Adam" as the judge has been appointed as well:

Verse 31 now tells us that everything for the trial is in place and ready: the date has been set, the evidence and witness are gathered, and a competent and legitimate judge has been appointed to render the verdict. The date of the court session is set to "a day," but no specific data is offered in line with Jesus' words to his disciples in 1:7. This suggests both the eschatological nature of the "day" and its redemptive-historical imminence. In the ancient world, the setting of a date and appointment of a judge indicated that the trial was ready to start. ... The characterization of the instrument appointed for this worldwide lawsuit is intriguing, to say the least: God will judge the inhabited world *ἐν ἡμέρῃ*. ... Jesus is the Isaianic Servant who serves in Yahweh's lawsuit. ... It has therefore unmistakable messianic and eschatological overtones, especially as it suggests that the judge is a "second Adam" who defines

or establishes the final redemptive-historical age. ... The one event that brought redemptive history to its telos and birthed the eschaton is, in Lukan short-hand, the resurrection of Jesus. Since Jesus' death "inaugurates" the eschatological lawsuit (proleptically, it represents the judgment of all of humanity), mankind is now arraigned before God's eschatological tribunal to answer for its idolatry. (213–16)

Introducing the good news of the gospel to idol worshipers in all nations is a worldwide lawsuit, as the author insightfully indicates. Furthermore, Jesus serves as the final judge in Yahweh's lawsuit on the appointed day of the Lord.

In the appendix, the author provides succinct insights into the "Areopagita" as "a powerful scriptural evidence *against* the theories of inclusivism," suggesting the proper approach to "a biblical theology of religion" (223–26). He convincingly notes that in light of the antithesis between unbelievers in Adam and believers in Christ, "The Areopagita is a powerful anti-idol polemic which demonstrates the foolish and culpable nature of man's religiosity outside of God's covenant statutes. It proclaims a final and eschatological judgment on all men who are in Adam but not in Christ, i.e., who belong to 'this age' which is set for destruction rather than to the 'age to come' that broke through in the person and work of Jesus" (224).

As an apologist and theologian Pardigon displays creative and sound scholarship. He engages with divergent scholarly opinions in the theology of Luke-Acts, Paul's apologetical method, and its apologetical and missiological implications in the global missional age. Moreover, he contributes valuable insights with in-depth analysis for missionaries, pastors, and believers, providing apologetical, hermeneutical, missiological, and theological insights and implications. He shows redemptive-historical consciousness in his analysis and interpretation of Luke-Acts and Paul's Areopagus speech.

Nevertheless, I would like to add a constructive suggestion to strengthen a comprehensive understanding of the implications of the text. Paul presupposed *the antithesis* between unbelievers in the first Adam and believers in the last Adam when he delivered his Areopagus speech. In that sense, Paul's audience, including the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, were idol worshipers in the first Adam who broke the covenant of works. So, Paul's speech was an invitation to believe in Jesus Christ. This was an invitation not only to receive the good news of the gospel with repentance but also to receive the last Adam, who is the mediator of the covenant of grace. In other words, if we look at the text in light of the bipolar distinction between the covenant of works in the first Adam and the covenant of grace in the last Adam, we will have more profound insights and better perceive the implications of the *epistemological antithesis* between believers in Christ and unbelievers in idol worship.

In this perspective, the concepts of “God’s universal lawsuit” and the “seditious covenant-breaking” of idolatry need clarification against the background of mission to the Gentiles. This could be achieved by identifying them as expressing *God’s universal covenant lawsuit in the New Covenant Age against idol worshipers who broke the covenant of works in the first Adam*. This said, I highly recommend Pardigon’s well-researched and well-written book to students of the Bible for a deeper understanding of God’s redemptive history and the method of evangelism and apologetics in the age of global mission.

JEONG KOO JEON

Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology
Bethel College and Seminary
Ellicott City, MD

Elijah Hixson and Peter J. Gurry, eds. *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019.

Elijah Hixson, junior research associate in New Testament Text and Language at Tyndale House, Cambridge, and Peter J. Gurry, assistant professor of New Testament and codirector of the Text and Canon Institute at Phoenix Seminary, have enlisted the aid of several young scholars in New Testament textual criticism (or related disciplines) to offer a helpful book that seeks to address the myths and mistakes that attend New Testament textual criticism.

In the introduction, the editors set forth the purpose of this book, namely, to correct wrong approaches that have been taken by apologists who have set out to defend “the Bible and ... its credibility” (1). The editors’ desire to dispel such approaches is motivated by their conviction that Scripture is truly “God’s special revelation” and thus ought to be defended—but, they argue, such defense must be accurate to avoid creating further doubt about the reliability of the Bible. Some examples they mention include “outdated information,” “abused statistics,” and “selected use of evidence” (5–12). The editors are then careful to state that this book is primarily concerned with matters of New Testament textual criticism; it is not meant to replace a general introduction to the subject.

In chapter 2, Timothy N. Mitchell addresses what autographs are and how long they survived. He engages the opposing views of Matthew Larsen and Craig Evans. Larsen completely rejects the idea of a finished autograph, whereas Evans argues against the existence of major changes between the autographs and the first copies. In light of Greco-Roman publication habits

and the ability of audiences to distinguish between different versions of a text, as well as the survival (or destruction) of ancient manuscripts, Mitchell takes a mediating stance that contrasts with those of both Larsen and Evans, arguing that the former overplays the “alterations made by readers and scribes” (46) and the latter fails to consider evidence contrary to his position.

Jacob W. Peterson discusses the number of manuscripts and whether more manuscripts amount to better evidence. He covers the difficulties of counting manuscripts, evaluating their value, and the continuing discovery of manuscripts, all of which point to his overall conclusion that the use of the number of manuscripts for apologetic purposes needs to proceed with modesty. James B. Prothro urges for the need for more accuracy when comparing the New Testament with ancient works.

Hixson addresses the dating of manuscripts, with specific attention given to the earliest manuscripts. After noting the difficulties of assigning a date to a manuscript, he provides helpful suggestions to the aspiring apologist. Greg Lanier, along similar lines, argues that assigning a later date to a manuscript does not necessarily mean it is a worse manuscript; he eschews inaccurate presentations of the Byzantine tradition(s) and discussing some of the habits of later scribes to substantiate his argument.

Zachary J. Cole offers a complex picture of the work of copyists of the New Testament manuscripts, arguing against both those who state that they were untrained and hence grossly imprecise in their work and those who suggest that they were on par with the Jewish copyists of the Old Testament. Peter Malik discusses the actual practice of copying, with specific attention to what corrections made to the exemplar teach us. One major takeaway is that the corrections a scribe made to his copy can demonstrate a concern to present a carefully copied text.

Building on his PhD dissertation, in which he collates the entire Greek manuscript tradition of Philemon, S. Matthew Solomon presents some of the findings that emerge from this work and urges for the need to fully collate other texts of the New Testament (Jude and John 18 are the only other fully collated texts besides Philemon) given the benefits obtained.

Concerning the issue of textual variants—an issue often met with much consternation—Gurry concludes, “In the final analysis, it is best to admit that, in relatively rare cases, variants *do* have some bearing on some doctrines or ethical practices of the Christian faith, but none of these ... practices is *established* from these disputed texts. Nor are any of them in jeopardy because of these disputed texts” (209).

Robert D. Marcello explores the possibility of corruptions due to theological motivations and argues that we must be tentative when identifying

corruptions of this nature. Indeed, it is much more challenging to determine the motivations lying behind textual corruptions than is often suggested. Andrew Blaski argues against the myth that virtually the entire New Testament could be reproduced from the writings of the church fathers. He presents evidence for more complex citation practices among the fathers, such as a citation of two different variants when deemed appropriate.

John D. Meade seeks to dispel the weight accorded to the codex in the early church's recognition of the canon, arguing instead that early canonical lists are the best way forward in tackling this question. Jeremiah Coogan explores early translations of the New Testament and argues that, while they are less useful for textual criticism, they have much value for understanding early Christian practice. Edgar Battad Ebojo, in the final chapter, explores the relationship of modern translations to textual criticism, noting that the concerns of translators are not always consistent with text-critical concerns and, as such, modern translations are not the primary place for understanding the issues surrounding textual criticism.

By way of evaluation, this volume is clearly written and beneficial. First, it provides a nuanced and complex picture of New Testament textual criticism. Second, it engages with the most recent findings in the discipline. Third, it provides accurate information for the apologist; indeed, some chapters have an apologetic thrust (especially chapters 8, 11, and 12). Fourth, it persuasively argues for continued work in New Testament textual criticism and notes areas that need more attention. Fifth, the contributors are not afraid to question recognized scholars (e.g., Daniel Wallace and Michael Kruger) when necessary.

One negative aspect is that the reader will have to have a general familiarity with the issues to follow the arguments. However, the editors rightly note that this book does not replace an introduction on the topic, but it constitutes a supplement to such an introduction.

In sum, this book meets its objective, especially since it offers helpful contributions to the discipline of textual criticism. It ought to be read by anyone interested in textual criticism in particular or in evidence-based apologetics in general.

THOMAS HAVILAND-PABST

Asheville, NC

John V. Fesko. *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019.

Reforming Apologetics is a challenging book for any who follow Cornelius Van Til in apologetics. John Fesko aims to retrieve a classic Reformed approach and, with it, the need to recover the value of the “book of nature.” This goal involves not simply arguing in a transcendental way, as Van Til and his disciples propose, but also returning to the classical arguments from the facts of nature and common notions embedded in man from the time of his creation. Fesko presents an overview of the classical method of apologetics, showing firstly how Reformed theology has never abandoned the light of nature. For this task, chapter 1 deals with the idea of the “light of nature” in the Westminster Confession of Faith. In chapter 2, Fesko goes deep to define and defend the common notions that all human beings share. However, Fesko identifies the need not to argue merely from the tradition of Reformed thought in the seventeenth century, so in chapter 4, he presents John Calvin’s theology about the common notions and how he never departed from scholasticism. At this point, Fesko demonstrates the importance of Thomas Aquinas, which leads to a critical discussion in chapter 5 of the concept of worldview used by contemporary Reformed thinkers. Chapters 6 and 7 criticize Van Til’s and Herman Dooyeweerd’s thoughts, respectively, and show how they based their thoughts on modern autonomous thinking. Finally, in chapter 8, he returns to the central theme of reforming apologetics, that of retrieving the role of the “book of nature” and common notions in defending biblical faith.

After teaching at Westminster Seminary California, Dr. Fesko is now a professor of systematic and historical theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi. His ability in academic research is evident throughout his book. He proposes to write his book from a systematic and historical perspective, given his training in these areas, although he has training in philosophy as well. Undoubtedly, Fesko is erudite with a comprehensive experience and knowledge in the theme of the book. The bibliography is copious, covering a wide range of apologetic subjects. Thus, Fesko is aware of the main discussions surrounding this topic and displays a pastoral concern to furnish a coherent Reformed method of apologetics to aid Christians in defense of their faith.

We now turn to Fesko’s manner of arguing and highlight certain points worthy of further comment. His criticism of the apologetical method of Van Til, which permeates the whole book, is not the focus of this review;

suffice it to note that Fesko displays some misunderstandings about Vantilian apologetics and recommend James Anderson's website, which provides a detailed commentary on each chapter of Fesko's book.¹ I have more familiarity with Dooyeweerd's thought, which also receives a vigorous refutation. However, I will also not dwell on that one side because Rudi Hayward supplies a critical view of the chapter dedicated to Dooyeweerd in an article on his website, which demonstrates the imprecisions of Fesko's book as well.² My point is not to defend Van Til or Dooyeweerd but to note that Fesko does not accurately describe their positions. Fesko's criticisms of both in his claim that they depended on modern philosophy makes it worthwhile to consider the chapters dealing with Aquinas's philosophical theology and Calvin's appropriation of scholasticism. Here Fesko's appreciation of Aquinas's philosophical theology comes strongly to the fore.

Unfortunately, Fesko's critical position misses the brilliant analyses of Van Til and Dooyeweerd in their identification of the major problem with Aquinas's natural theology, that is, its dependence on the Pseudo-Dionysian triple way, *causalitatis-excellentiae-remotionis* (causality-excellence-removal). For Aquinas, the knowledge of God can be acquired three ways: by causality, that is, the perfections found in creatures have their causes in God; by excellence, that is, the perfections found in creatures are found in God in their highest degree; and by removal, that is creaturely limitations. For Aquinas, there is an ontological difference only in degree between God and creation; otherwise, the knowledge of God would be impossible. God can be known by this triple way since the process of knowing is not only intellectual but also sensorial. Theoretical thought must retrieve images from the senses (*specie intelligibilis*, intelligible species). This is why Aquinas can be considered not a rationalist, but a mystic: knowing God requires no sensorial data, and Aquinas adopts a mystical approach that draws on Pseudo-Dionysius's mystical theology. Theoretical thought (*intellectus agens*) is capable of knowing God from reality because, according to Aquinas, there is an analogy of being. The conclusion, then, is obvious, as Van Til has seen: to support this method of knowing God, Aquinas has to deny or at least seriously compromise the difference between Creator and creature. Thus, Fesko has assumed nonscriptural content when accepting Aquinas's

¹ James N. Anderson, "Reforming Apologetics (Transcendental Arguments)," *Analogical Thoughts*, January 10, 2020, <https://www.proginosko.com/2020/01/reforming-apologetics-transcendental-arguments/>.

² Rudi Hayward, "Dooyeweerd among the Reformed Thomists," *Intermezzo*, November 22, 2019, <https://reformationalintermezzo.blogspot.com/2019/11/dooyeweerd-among-reformed-thomists.html>.

method and his five ways to prove God's existence. It seems that these trends of Aquinas's epistemology have influenced Fesko's argumentation about common notions and the book of nature. He tries to advocate an analogical way of thinking from nature to arrive at God; however, the link between them is filled by metaphysics.

Van Til saw that the way of removal is entirely metaphysical and without any support from Holy Scripture. If it is accepted in theological reasoning, as in Aquinas's system of thought, a mystical presupposition becomes the foundation that sustains the whole theological elaboration of the knowledge of God. Indeed, it is an uncritical and unproven assumption that the God of the Scriptures can be known from reality by a deductive process. In this way, Aquinas must presuppose an autonomous reason capable of knowing God by itself since he accepts the concept of rational soul (*anima rationalis*) from Aristotle. Classical metaphysics becomes the structure of thought that achieves God. Thus, Aquinas's epistemology is not a simple relation of cause-to-effect reasoning but a metaphysical dependence on a mystical way of thinking completely foreign to Scripture. Calvin, Van Til, and Dooyeweerd, in their own ways, have all been aware of this, which is why they could not follow Aquinas's propositions. In Calvin's thought, there is a rupture with the scholastic way of thinking due to this strong dependence on metaphysics. Fesko has unfortunately miscomprehended this rupture by arguing that scholasticism is simply a method. To sustain his appreciation of scholasticism, Fesko creates a Thomist Calvin, forgetting a significant difference between the two theologians: Calvin maintains the *sola Scriptura* principle while Aquinas does not.

In conclusion, probably an audience inclined to Reformed scholasticism or a classical method of apologetics will appreciate Fesko's book. Although Fesko has raised some critical issues concerning Van Til's apologetics and Dooyeweerdian thought, he misses his target in many aspects. At the end of the book, we cannot find a more developed approach to apologetics that overcomes the limits of the classical method. What Fesko is proposing here as a toolkit for doing apologetics is more a return to classical apologetics based on Aquinas's thought. However, to present a more accurate picture of the book, it is worth highlighting again the pastoral concern and the high level of academic references in Fesko's book, even if the quality of engagement with these sources varies according to his appreciation of them.

ANDRÉ GESKE

Faculté Jean Calvin, Aix-en-Provence
Pastor at the Eglise Réformée Evangélique de Marseille, France

Paul Helm. *Human Nature from Calvin to Edwards*. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018.

This book is a leisurely jaunt through theological anthropology. Paul Helm, beginning briefly with patristic and medieval sources, takes us through the Reformation thinkers up to Jonathan Edwards, outlining as he goes what he takes to be the distinctive features of these various authors' conceptualization of human nature. What is meant by "human nature"? Helm says, "We shall be interested in human nature as equivalent to the 'soul' in its metaphysics and its powers and capacities, including its relation to the body" (xii). Differences of opinion on how to understand the soul's properties and nature typically arose in light of theological discussions. What aspects of one's nature change in regeneration, exactly? What faculties of the mind are involved in saving faith? How does human freedom post-fall differ from human freedom pre-fall? And so on.

Being a gentleman of the Reformed persuasion, Helm's focus is on the Reformed tradition and the often-subtle debates that preoccupied that tradition's thinkers. Someone reading the volume to find out what Robert Bellarmine's take on this topic is will be disappointed.

Helm begins by pointing out that the thinkers in question all assume what is called "faculty psychology." He helpfully defines this concept as the view that the human self is composed of "different sets of powers, of faculties: the intellect, the emotions, and so on. ... Each set of powers is in relative independence of the others" (xvii). Thus, I might, in principle, lose my decision-making faculty, say, and be unable to intend anything, while retaining my faculty of emotion, and therefore remaining capable of feeling. The guiding thought behind faculty psychology is that each type of mental state or event is assigned its own distinct faculty in the soul.

So, what are the major positions taken on this topic? Helm begins by noting Aquinas's strong influence on the Reformed tradition (19). This influence is manifest in the dominance of intellectualism over voluntarism in Reformed thought. Like Aquinas, all Reformed thinkers took the understanding, the intellect, to be the faculty ultimately responsible for human action, not the will. Aquinas's Aristotelianism had far less influence on Reformed thought; however, although there were Aristotelians such as Vermigli about (ch. 2), it was the Platonism of Calvin that ended up the dominant influence.

Free will is a recurring theme throughout the book. The essential distinction between the Jesuit or Arminian freedom of indifference and the

Reformed preference for freedom of rational spontaneity is laid out with commentary from different theologians. Likewise, the introduction—which owes largely to Joseph Truman, it appears—of the celebrated distinction between natural and moral inability into Reformed thought is here discussed. Toward the end of the book, Helm picks up, to an extent, his debate with Richard Muller over whether Edwards’s theory of the will signaled a departure from the Reformed position.

One interesting perspective that Helm discusses is that of the “New Methodists.” They were a cluster of Reformed thinkers taking inspiration from John Cameron, who held to the curious view that freedom of indifference is a freedom fallen man has—a fitting consequence of the fall—while freedom of spontaneity—true freedom, they aver—is the freedom man returns to in his glorified state. I found encountering unusual and forgotten positions such as this to be the chief draw of the book.

Two things bothered me about the volume. The first was that I felt that Helm gave too little time to analysis and assessment of the various positions canvassed. In fairness, Helm makes it clear that, as far as he is concerned, “the emphasis is on straightforward didacticism, noting different emphases in different writers” (56). The second issue I had was the table of contents. It does not list sub-chapters. This makes it far harder than it should be to get a grasp of the particular debates and theologians treated in the various chapters of the book.

So egregious is this lack that I have appended to this review a more complete table of contents. This table should prove valuable to readers of the book.

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MATTHEW J. HART

Liverpool, England

Jordan Peterson. *Twelve Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. London: Allen Lane, 2018.

Jordan Peterson, a practicing clinical psychologist and a professor at the University of Toronto, has attained notoriety by speaking out against the social agendas promoted by minority identity groups. He considers them to be detrimental to the mental health of individuals and society, particularly when they pass into law. Drawing on his study of authoritarianism and thirty years’ experience in professional practice, he seeks to define the causes of the “chaos” or “poison” in present society.

Peterson sees human activity in terms of an antithesis between chaos and order, two fundamental aspects of lived experience. He analyzes the reasons for the present chaos then suggests ways they can be countered. He posits that ordering principles, standards, and values are needed from childhood to provide a framework for human flourishing. He explores the trends of postmodernism from the loss of belief systems to present group-centered dysphoria. The tyranny of ideas promoted by militant minorities herds

people into “tribes” of conflicting ideological belief systems, with the result that different groups become unintelligible to each other.

Order is a known territory within which things happen according to expectations; the ancient hierarchy of place, position, and authority is a shared code that allows for cooperation in society. The longer an order has lasted, the more it is “natural” (14). According to Peterson’s evolutionist ideas, the hierarchical configuration of male and female has been in existence for a billion years, parent and child for 200 million years: these are “the vital and fundamental parts of the environment to which we have adapted” (39). They are not arbitrary sociocultural constructions of capitalism or patriarchy. The past is a gift from our ancestors: it is reasonable to do what people have always done. Life is too short to work everything out for ourselves.

It is dangerous to overthrow time-tested values when there is no consensus on the criteria for a new order. Today, traditions are being deconstructed to accommodate vigorous, vocal minorities, even if there is no evidence that this will bring about improvement. He denounces the “insane incomprehensible postmodern insistence that all gender differences are socially constructed” (314) and highlights the “crisis of masculinity” (Rule 11) in the new social disorder, which considers male oppression as being guilty of having unearned privileges. Robbing men of their “manishness” can have only negative results.

Chaos is “unexplored territory” entering a predictable world, bringing instability in its wake. It is the “dreadful freedom” of the unfamiliar (35). Even where there is order, “chaos lurks beneath the surface” (268). Traditional values are overthrown by blind conformity to new “dictates,” leaving in their wake a disordered universe with no evident objective rules. However, if order is important for achieving security, it is dangerous when it goes to excesses. There must be a balance between order and chaos: man needs to step outside the known to explore the unknown and discover.

This book is neither an autobiography nor a testimony, but Peterson’s personal beliefs show through. He speaks of his disillusionment with both the “shallow Christianity” he grew up with and the left-wing politics he later embraced. He uses historical evidence to expose the shortcomings of the Marxist mindset of Jacques Derrida and Jean-Paul Sartre and the totalitarianism of “single-cause interpretations and those that purvey them” (311). He also respects Taoism’s balance in the struggle between order and chaos and sees the value of religion for ethics. As an agnostic, Peterson has a disjointed view of the God of the Bible, cobbled together from various sources: Charles Darwin, Carl Jung, Friedrich Nietzsche, René Descartes, and Christian existentialism. It is absurd, he says, to posit that the judgmental deity of the Old Testament and the loving God of the New Testament

are the same (107), and he explores the question as to how we can believe in an all-good God after the horrors of twentieth-century totalitarianism (105, 346).

Peterson speaks out against academia, a world he knows well, for promoting political action of a particular kind driven by a destructive, nihilistic philosophy whose agenda undermines the very culture that finances it. Young people are taught “unsupported ideologically-predicated theories about the nature of men and women—or the nature of hierarchy” (314). This amounts to indoctrination in leftist radicalism unwittingly propped up by the state. There is no reason, he says, that people teaching these ideas should have any claim to public funding (313). If radical conservative ideas were to be so blatantly peddled, masquerading as university courses and financed by the state, it would cause outrage.

Christianity gets a fair hearing and a mostly positive evaluation, even if it is a “single-cause interpretation.” Christian doctrine “elevates the individual soul” (186); men and women are metaphysically of equal importance before God. Many of the positive changes in our society over the last two millennia, such as the abolition of slavery and the raising of women’s status, both unthinkable in the ancient world, were driven by Christianity, although this is forgotten. The Bible is, “for better or worse, the foundational document of Western Civilisation (of Western values, Western morality, and Western conceptions of good and evil)” (104, 53). The whole Bible, after the fall, is a “remedy for that Fall, a way out of evil,” pointing the way to the Messiah (57). Although Peterson does not view it as a revelation given by a coherent God sovereign over the creation, he grants psychological credence to the Bible’s archetypal “stories” as age-old wisdom (53) thrown up out of the collective imagination (10), and he repeatedly refers to them. He presents the Genesis narrative as a credible psychological explanation for man’s condition, order and life, chaos and death, sin, work, suffering, shame and guilt, self-consciousness, neurosis, and fear of the truth. The analysis of faith and religion points out that these sum up man’s dilemma in a world full of tragedy.

Peterson is lucid as to the condition of the human heart. He speaks in strong terms of “cowardice, malevolence, resentment and hatred,” and the “evil triad” of arrogance, deceit, and resentment. He describes human beings as “naked, ugly, ashamed, frightened, worthless, cowardly, resentful, defensive, accusatory” with a capacity for wrongdoing. The propensity for evil is in the soul of every human being. Man is unique in the animal kingdom because we can not only be hurt and feel terror, horror, and disgust, but also willfully inflict pain, and we alone are fully aware that one day we

will die. This sounds almost like “original sin.” Peterson seems to grasp the notion that man is “fallen,” but it is not clear what from. Our awareness of our true nature has a sting in its tail, however, in that it makes us doubt our self-worth (53); this has to be countered by limiting the chaos in our lives, setting ourselves on the right track.

Despite his lucidity, Peterson has an optimistic view of human nature. He believes we can consciously work to make things better. To progress, our negative attitudes and behavior must be dealt with, and making the world a better place starts with oneself. Man and woman have the capacity to bring order out of chaos, according to the Genesis account (56). We can even look to Christ as a prototype, a model to follow (180). Christ’s sacrifice is exemplary, not redemptive and cosmic. There is no metaphysical freedom from sin, no new birth, or new life. Rather, we are called on to do as Christ did, sacrifice what we love best to ensure future prosperity. However, as merely a “model for honorable man,” not divine revelation, the Bible is emptied of its real meaning.

There is some value in religion as a basis for ethics. “Religion is about proper behavior” (102). No one can act as if there were no God, as if they were free to do whatever they liked. An innate sense of guilt is useful in restraining the worst excesses of psychopathy (55). Religion is the highest in a hierarchy of values, it would seem, a source of justice, guilt, and mercy, and therefore useful for preserving social values. Faith is “the realisation that the tragic irrationalities of life must be counterbalanced by an equally irrational commitment to the essential goodness of being” (107). All this is a pretty warmed up mess of liberal theological pottage.

Although “antidote” suggests a remedy, Peterson does not claim his rules will “cure” anyone. What exactly does Peterson propose in his commonsensical “rules”? Setting goals, pursuing what is meaningful, trying to set things right, adopting and following structures: all these make people and society better. People come to their senses when they realize that far from being victims, they are in part responsible for the mess their lives are in because of their choices. Individual responsibility has been eliminated from post-modern social agendas, and values need reinstating.

This is challenging, but does it ring true? It is hard to see how people floundering in disordered lives could leap from the depths of chaos to the heights of a better, ordered world: what could motivate them, or enable them? This optimism fits into an evolutionary worldview (52) and the will of the organism to mutate. It verges on irrationality and blind optimism in our ability to better ourselves. But man is alone in an unforgiving universe, there is no God to whom we are accountable, no basis for what is good

and what is evil, and any values we invent are necessarily arbitrary and subjective. There is very little light at the end of the tunnel of chaos.

Peterson writes in a mixture of styles: technical, conversational, and humorous, writing more for his media following than for fellow psychologists. The argument is dense at times, backed by scholarly references and interdisciplinary analyses; the book is also peppered with a string of anecdotes and illustrations drawn from case studies and family experiences. Peterson comes over as a person of integrity, a man with the courage of his convictions and unpopular views on the dangers of postmodern social conformity.

Why would a Christian read this book? A self-confessed “classic British liberal,” Peterson gives an in-depth analysis of society that is useful, even though—and maybe for this very reason—his ideas are based on pre-suppositions antithetic to Christian ones. You could say he has been touched by the common grace afforded to unregenerate persons to see problems and gain understanding. Peterson can help hone critical Christian understanding of the ravages of postmodern radicalism. It would be good to hear him out, to thank him, and also to pray for him particularly in light of the attacks he has suffered from the woke.

ALISON WELLS

Liverpool, England

EPILOGUE

Pastoral Principles Pertaining to Pestilence and Providence

PETER A. LILLBACK

(Easter Monday, April 13, 2020)

Resurrection Sunday worship in 2020 was greatly impacted by the global pandemic—stay at home orders, empty churches, online worship, and a renewed realization of human mortality. These realities have highlighted the precious and pertinent words of Jesus. In the Upper Room he promised, “Because I live, you also will live” (John 14:19 esv). Facing the cross, our Lord comforted his own: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27). The risen Lord declared, “And behold I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). These biblical truths harmonize with the great opening question of the Heidelberg Catechism:

Question 1. *What is thy only comfort in life and in death?*

That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me, that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth to live unto him.¹

¹ “The Heidelberg Catechism. A.D. 1563,” in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, rev. David S. Schaff (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983): 3:307–8.

Moreover, the Heidelberg Catechism teaches that God's providence encompasses both "health and sickness."² This confidence in the Lord's sovereign use of human suffering is sustained by Jesus's statement in John 9:3 concerning the man who was born blind: "Jesus answered, 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.'" Indeed, according to the apostle Paul, God's sovereignty governs all things, for God "works all things according to the counsel of his own will" (Eph 1:11).

Yet when it comes to the Lord's purposes in times of pestilence and plague, we might wonder if the Lord is truly at work. But the Scriptures do not step back from asserting that *wounding and healing are prerogatives of God*. Deuteronomy 32:39 states, "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand." Job 5:18 declares, "For he wounds, but he binds up; he shatters, but his hands heal" (Job 5:18). Indeed, the Lord has *four judgments* that produce dread among humankind: war, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence:

"Son of man, when a land sins against me by acting faithlessly, and I stretch out my hand against it and break its supply of bread and send famine upon it, and cut off from it man and beast

"For thus says the Lord God: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem *my four disastrous acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence*, to cut off from it man and beast!" (Ezek 14:13, 21; cf. Deut 32:15–44; Rev. 6:7–11)

I. Wisdom from the Past in the Face of Plague and Pestilence

How then should believers in a sovereign Lord act in such a time of apparent divine judgment upon humankind? A salient historical example is Martin Luther's response to the plague. His advice to Christian leaders in the pandemic of the black plague of his day is instructive for our experience with COVID-19. Here is Luther's counsel in "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague":

Others sin on the right hand. They are much too rash and reckless, tempting God and disregarding everything which might counteract death and the plague. They

² "Question 27. *What dost thou understand by the Providence of God?* Answer. The almighty and every where present power of God, whereby, as it were by his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth, with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand" (Ibid., 3:316).

disdain the use of medicines; they do not avoid places and persons infected by the plague, but lightheartedly make sport of it and wish to prove how independent they are.

They say that it is God's punishment; if He wants to protect them He can do so without medicines or our carefulness. This is not trusting God but tempting Him. God has created medicines and provided us with intelligence to guard and take good care of the body so that we can live in good health.

If one makes no use of intelligence or medicine when he could do so without detriment to his neighbor, such a person injures his body and must beware lest he become a suicide in God's eyes. By the same reasoning a person might forego eating and drinking, clothing and shelter, and boldly proclaim his faith that if God wanted to preserve him from starvation and cold, he could do so without food and clothing.

Actually that would be suicide. It is even more shameful for a person to pay no heed to his own body and to fail to protect it against the plague the best he is able, and then to infect and poison others who might have remained alive if he had taken care of his body as he should have.

He is thus responsible before God for his neighbor's death and is a murderer many times over. Indeed, such people behave as though a house were burning in the city and nobody were trying to put the fire out. Instead they give leeway to the flames so that the whole city is consumed, saying that if God so willed, he could save the city without water to quench the fire.

No, my dear friends, that is no good. Use medicine; take potions which can help you; fumigate the house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence or has recovered, and act like a man who wants to help put out the burning city.

What else is the epidemic but a fire which instead of consuming wood and straw devours life and body? You ought to think this way:

Very well, by God's decree the enemy has sent us poison and deadly offal. Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it.

I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence.

If God should wish to take me, He will surely find me and I have done what He has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others.

If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely, as stated above. See, this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God.

Moreover, he who has contracted the disease and recovered should keep away from others and not admit them into his presence unless it be necessary.

Though one should aid him in his time of need, as previously pointed out, he in turn should, after his recovery, so act toward others that no one becomes unnecessarily endangered on his account and so cause another's death. "Whoever loves danger," says the wise man, "will perish by it."³

³ Martin Luther, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague," *Luther's Works*, vol. 43, *Devotional Writings II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 131–32.

The biblical and medical wisdom displayed by the Reformer a half-millennium ago is recognized by contemporary physicians who are on the cutting edge of fighting the corona virus.⁴ Such practical insights remind us that God's wisdom has been imparted throughout the centuries, encouraging believers to be students of church history in the spirit of Hebrews 13:7–8, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

II. *Pestilence Is Due to the Fall*

As we consider the Scriptures amidst this moment of global suffering, several truths emerge that should shape our thinking and ministry. Proverbs 18:14 says, "A man's spirit will endure sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?" Accordingly, we need to get our theology right, as theology impacts our minds and our spirits as we face physical infirmities. So, let us review some basic principles of biblical theology.

First, we must remember that the Creator gave his creatures a perfect creation. He declared it to be very good: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day" (Gen 1:31). But paradise was not permanent and was lost by Adam's disobedience.

Thus, second, we are in a fallen world that is under God's curse (Gen 3). Suffering, pain, and death are the lot of all the children of Adam. Accordingly, disease, pestilence, and plague are described in the Old Testament, revealing that they afflict the covenant people of God (e.g., Lev 13; Num 25:1–9; 1 Sam 5–6; 2 Sam 24:10–17; 1 Cor 10:6–13). Yet God's people are instructed to handle them with faith and wisdom. Leviticus, for example, is a medically astute book emphasizing principles of both physical and ceremonial hygiene long before microbiology was even a consideration. A clever post by Paul Sloan on March 23, 2020, quips: "You, six weeks ago: those Levitical laws on impurity and contagions are so barbaric! Have a heart! You today: now if a person tests positive for Corona, he shall remain unclean all the days of his infection. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling is outside the camp."⁵

⁴ See Westminster Seminary's *Crisis, Christ and Confidence*, episode 1, where vaccinologist Dr. Greg Poland of the Mayo Clinic is interviewed. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utFtyw3yx4>.

⁵ <https://ifunny.co/picture/i-paul-sloan-e-paulthomasloan-you-six-weeks-ago-those-rTUlwuoX7>.

Third, biblically, we are instructed to see our sin against the Lord as the real disease of mankind (Rom 3; 6:23). A classic Puritan expression of this is Ralph Venning's *The Sinfulness of Sin* written after London's Black Plague, in which he declared,

In short, sin is the dare of God's justice, the rape of his mercy, the jeer of his patience, the slight of his power, the contempt of his love, as one writer prettily expresses this ugly thing. We may go on and say, it is the upbraiding of his providence (Psalm 50), the scoff of his promise (2 Peter 3.3–4), the reproach of his wisdom (Isaiah 29.16). ...

Now since sin is a separation between God and man, an interruption of this communion and conformity, it must needs be prejudicial and hurtful to him. ... Man's suffering follows at the heel of sin, indeed, as he suffers by sinning, so in sinning; suffering and sinning involve each other. No sooner did sin enter into the world, but death, which is a privation of good, entered by it, with it, and in it, for sin is the sting of death. ...

Man no sooner begins to live, but he begins to die; and after a few days, which are but as a span, and pass away more swiftly than a weaver's shuttle, sin lays all in the dust, princes as well as beggars. Sin has reduced man's age to a very little pittance, from almost a thousand to a very uncertainty, not only to seventy, but to seven, for among men no man's life is valued at more. Man's time is short and uncertain: he that is born today is not sure to live a day. ...

Think of it, poor sinner, think of it in time before it is too late; for if you die in your sins, though you should weep out your eyes in Hell it will do you no good.⁶

Fourth, pestilence, plague, and all human suffering are temporary for God's people. There is the sure ultimate hope for the ending of human suffering in the eschaton. The climactic healing of the fallen and cursed universe is guaranteed by the redeeming work of Christ. According to Paul,

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. (Rom 8:20–22)

The climax of God's inaugurated healing of the brokenness of human life by Christ's redeeming work is revealed in Revelation 20–22. The Lord has promised that there will be a new heaven and the new earth without tears, pain or death. Christians therefore live in hope (Rom 5:1–11; 8:13–39).

⁶ Ralph Venning, "Sin, the Plague or Plagues, or The Just Vindication of the Law of God, and No Less Just Accusation and Condemnation of the Sin of Man (1669)," *The Gospel Truth* (2002), https://www.gospeltruth.net/sos/sos_sinfulnessofsin.htm.

III. *Disease and Judgment?*

All suffering and disease flow from the fall. But is all suffering judgment? The story of Job shows that this is not the case, as does the blind man healed by Jesus in John 9. Yet suffering and covenant-breaking and sin are linked in Scripture. Thus, faithful Israel's *blessings included protection from illness*. Exodus 23:25 says, "You shall serve the LORD your God, and he will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you." Deuteronomy 7:15 promises, "And the LORD will take away from you all sickness, and none of the evil diseases of Egypt, which you knew, will he inflict on you, but he will lay them on all who hate you."

But *divine judgment on rebellious Israel included sufferings by sicknesses*. Deuteronomy 28:58–61 declares,

If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God, *then the LORD will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting*. And he will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were afraid, and they shall cling to you. Every sickness also and every affliction that is not recorded in the book of this law, the LORD will bring upon you, until you are destroyed. (Cf. Deut 29:22–29)

Consistent with this, the *prayer for the blessings of forgiveness* by Solomon in 1 Kings 8:30, 37–39 *included healing from diseases*:

And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, *forgive*. ...

If there is famine in the land, if there is *pestilence* or blight or mildew or locust or caterpillar, if their enemy besieges them in the land at their gates, whatever *plague*, whatever *sickness* there is, whatever prayer, whatever plea is made by any man or by all your people Israel, each knowing the affliction of his own heart and stretching out his hands toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart you know, according to all his ways (for you, you only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind).

All suffering flows from the fall and so in this sense is an expression of God's holy judgment. Yet, God is not necessarily judging a person who suffers. His purposes may be to show forth his glory and to advance the spiritual life of his child by what some have termed his "severe mercy."⁷

⁷ Cf. *A Severe Mercy* (1977), written by Sheldon Vanauken concerning his wife, their friendship with C. S. Lewis, their conversion to Christianity, and subsequent tragedy.

IV. God's Mercy amid Suffering

Preeminently, *Jesus affirmed by his restorative miracles the blessing and importance of seeking physical healing.* According to Matthew 4:23 and 9:35, Jesus healed all their diseases. In Matthew 10:1, Jesus gave the ability to heal all diseases to his disciples. The redeeming work of Christ for both body and soul reveals that caring for the sick and seeking their healing reflects God's love for fallen sinners.

Here we may consider God's nature during human suffering. Orthodox Christianity affirms, as taught in Westminster Shorter Catechism Question 4, that God is "infinite, eternal and unchangeable." This means that there is no limit to God's presence. Wherever there are those resisting, treating, or suffering with the coronavirus, God is there. Psalm 139:7 puts it this way: "Where shall I go from your Spirit?" Moreover, there is no limit to God in time, for time exists within God's eternal nature. So, while we dread to see a new day's statistics for those who have contracted the disease, those hospitalized, or those who have died, our omniscient and eternal God knows what the final statistics will be. He alone can declare the end from the beginning (Isa 46:10). There is no place in the Scriptures where it says, "When God saw what had happened, he panicked." Because he is unchangeable, we can be sure that his holiness against sin, his love for his people through Christ, and the life-sustaining and comforting promises of his Word are ever sure. Indeed, as observed above, how good it is to know that because he lives we will live as well! We can rest in that he is with us to the end of the age. In his peace, our hearts can rest untroubled and unafraid. He promises forgiveness for repenting and believing sinners (1 John 1:9) and assures judgment for the arrogant who resist him and his Word (John 3:36).

V. Pandemics and Divine Iconoclasm

While God's goodness is seen in his mercy, his holy judgment is seen in the humbling of the false deities of human worldviews that stand against the God who is there. Exodus 12:12 says, "For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and *on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments*: I am the LORD." Similarly, in pandemics, he is not silent but is declaring that he alone is the Lord and that there is none other. Thus, pandemics are *iconoclastic* by nature and call us through *revival and repentance to be the righteous remnant saved by the Lord's grace.* God's purpose in times of suffering humbles

humanity's false gods whether they be pride, boasting, power, treasure, health, success, and self-sufficiency. Isaiah 10:10–22 states,

“As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of *the idols*, whose carved images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria, shall I not do to Jerusalem and her *idols* as I have done to Samaria and her images?”

... He will punish the speech of *the arrogant heart* of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes. For he says:

“... I remove the boundaries of peoples, and plunder their treasures; like a bull I bring down those who sit on thrones. My hand has found like a nest the wealth of the peoples”

Therefore the Lord GOD of hosts will send *wasting sickness* among his stout warriors, and under his glory a burning will be kindled, like the burning of fire. The light of Israel will become a fire, and his Holy One a flame, and it will burn and devour

In that day *the remnant of Israel* and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on him who struck them, but will lean on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. A *remnant* will return, the *remnant* of Jacob, to the mighty God. ... Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness.

Indeed, human suffering underscores the *danger of forgetting God* by taking his many blessings for granted. Deuteronomy 8:11–20 affirms,

Take care lest you *forget the LORD your God* by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. *Beware lest you say in your heart, “My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.”* You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day. And if you forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the LORD makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God.

Compare this with President Abraham Lincoln's call for a Day of Prayer, Fasting, and Humiliation during the Civil War, March 30, 1863:

It is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet

with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.

And, insomuch as we know that, by His divine law, nations like individuals are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole People? We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!

It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

Now, therefore, in compliance with the request, and fully concurring in the views of the Senate, I do, by this my proclamation, designate and set apart Thursday, the 30th. day of April, 1863, as a day of national humiliation, fasting and prayer. And I do hereby request all the People to abstain, on that day, from their ordinary secular pursuits, and to unite, at their several places of public worship and their respective homes, in keeping the day holy to the Lord, and devoted to the humble discharge of the religious duties proper to that solemn occasion.

All this being done, in sincerity and truth, let us then rest humbly in the hope authorized by the Divine teachings, that the united cry of the Nation will be heard on high, and answered with blessings, no less than the pardon of our national sins, and the restoration of our now divided and suffering Country, to its former happy condition of unity and peace.

... By the President: Abraham Lincoln.⁸

If it was true a century and a half ago during the American Civil War that America had grown in prosperity like no other nation but had forgotten God, how much truer it is today as America and the world face COVID-19!

VI. *The Christian's Personal Witness during Suffering*

Margaret Clarkson, a woman who lived with daily suffering, gleaned valuable insights for the believer facing suffering. She explains,

Suffering may well be a part of God's will for our lives. Peter wrote of this in his letters to the young churches in Asia. He warned them of the suffering that was to be theirs and urged them not to be bewildered by it as if some strange thing had

⁸ Abraham Lincoln, "Proclamation Appointing a National Fast Day (March 30, 1863)," *Abraham Lincoln Online*, 2020, <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/fast.htm>.

happened to them; rather, he urged them to rejoice because they were sharing Christ's sufferings and would also share His glory (1 Pet. 4:12–13), and he went on to add words that have blessed countless sufferers ever since: "Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator" (1 Pet. 4:19 KJV).

Our part in suffering in the will of God is twofold: first, we are to commit the keeping of our souls to God, believing that he is in control of our lives and trusting Him to do for us all that He has promised. We must resist Satan's lies. We must not be deceived into thinking that God "gave" us this suffering as a sadistic "gift" because He wants us to suffer, that He is no longer in control in our affairs, or that we have lost our way and strayed outside His will. We must accept the fact that he has permitted this evil to come to us, and we must commit its outcome, along with our souls, into His keeping.

Second, we are to do this "in well doing": we are to concentrate on continuing to do the things that are well pleasing to God. This means that we will witness a good confession in our suffering. We will not fall apart when calamity strikes. It is not easy to maintain a good witness in the face of sudden upset and pain, but it is a part of our Christian responsibility. The spiritual confusion and devastation we so often experience when suffering invades our lives not only causes us needless pain but is a poor testimony to others. It betrays a lack of spiritual maturity and shows that we do not in fact possess the faith we profess.

Suffering borne with courage and confidence in God is a powerful witness to His grace. Fear, anxiety, self-pity, and inner havoc suggest to others that God is not all He claims to be, that He is not sufficient for our needs. Many an observer has been turned either towards God or away from Him by watching a Christian's response to suffering.⁹

The examples of past saints challenge us to show forth the glory of our God when we suffer. The Puritans learned much about suffering from illness as well as persecution for the sake of conscience. A classic example is Thomas Case, who writes,

We are great strangers to the cross, and when we suffer, we either despise the chastisement of the Lord or we faint when we are rebuked by him. If the affliction is in measure, we are apt to despise it and considerate it not worth taking notice of. But if the rod fetches blood, presently it is intolerable, and we begin to faint, crying out in our passion: "Was ever sorrow like my sorrow?" But God's rod and God's love may stand together! Providence has so ordered that whosoever will follow the Lord fully like Caleb (Num. 14:24) will be exposed to the world's hatred, but the glorious spirit will rest upon them (1 Pet. 4:14).¹⁰

⁹ Margaret Clarkson, *Destined for Glory: The Meaning of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 91–93.

¹⁰ Thomas Case, *On Affliction* (1652), republished by as Thomas Case, *When Christians Suffer* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009).

Among the lessons that bearing the cross of suffering brings, Case offers the following:

1. God teaches us by affliction to have compassion for those who suffer.
2. Through sufferings God teaches us to value our outward mercies and comforts more, and yet to dote upon them less.

Other salient lessons he offers include these:

5. God also uses affliction to reveal unknown corruptions in the hearts of his people.
13. God teaches us in a suffering condition to attend to our duty more than our deliverance.
17. Another lesson to be learned is to rightly estimate the sufferings of Jesus Christ.
18. The next lesson that God teaches by affliction is to prize and long for heaven.

May our Lord help us to reflect such faithful responses to suffering if that is his purpose for us.

VII. An Opportunity and Time for Awakening?

Could it be that God will use this situation for a gospel awakening, for which so many have prayed? This season of suffering may be a severe mercy of the Lord to restore his church and grant revival. Let us pray to that end. To help us consider how pestilence has been used by God in the past, here are comments that Charles Haddon Spurgeon made during the cholera epidemic in London. Notice that Spurgeon observes that while pestilence is powerful it can soon be forgotten after it passes.

“Who is the man that does not fear to die? I will tell you. The man that is a believer. Fear to die! Thank God, I do not. The cholera may come again next summer—I pray God it may not; but if it does, it matters not to me: I will toil and visit the sick by night and by day, until I drop; and if it takes me, sudden death is sudden glory” (18th Feb 1855).

“In times of pestilence it is possible to walk in the midst of cholera and death, singing—‘Plagues and deaths around me fly, Till he please, I cannot die.’ It is possible to stand exposed to the utmost degree of danger, and yet to feel such a holy serenity that we can laugh at fear; too great, too mighty, too powerful through God to stoop for one moment to the cowardice of trembling” (14th Oct 1855).

“You cannot say, can you, that you have all your salvation? But a Christian can. He can walk through the cholera and the pestilence, and feel that should the arrow smite him, death would be to him the entrance of life; he can lie down and grieve but little at the approach of dissolution, for he has all his salvation; his jewels are in his breast, gems which shall shine in heaven” (15th Apr 1855).

“How many of the same sort of confessions, too, have we seen in times of cholera, and fever, and pestilence! Then our churches have been crammed with hearers, who, because so many funerals have passed their doors, or so many have died in the street, could not refrain from going up to God’s house to confess their sins. And under that visitation, when one, two, and three have been lying dead in the house, or next door, how many have thought they would really turn to God! But, alas! when the pestilence had done its work, conviction ceased; and when the bell had tolled the last time for a death caused by cholera, then their hearts ceased to beat with penitence, and their tears did flow no more” (18th Jan 1857).

“If you ask me what I think to be the design, I believe it to be this—to waken up our indifferent population, to make them remember that there is a God, to render them susceptible of the influences of the gospel, to drive them to the house of prayer, to influence their minds to receive the Word, and moreover to startle Christians into energy and earnestness, that they may work while it is called to-day. Already I have been told by Christian brethren labouring in the east of London, that there is a greater willingness to listen to gospel truth, and that if there be a religious service it is more acceptable to the people now than it was; for which I thank God as an indication that affliction is answering its purpose” (Aug 12th 1866).¹¹

Will the coronavirus, like the cholera epidemic of Spurgeon’s days, bring a revival today? This is being discussed and some believe it is possible.¹²

VIII. *Claiming God’s Promises in the Pandemic*

The Scriptures declare, “as [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Prov 23:7 kjv). So, it is essential that believers today meditate on God’s great promises in the inevitable periods when anxiety and fear arise. Here are examples of some of the wonderful truths of God’s Word available for us to focus upon as believers:

Moses declared to Israel, “Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you” (Deut 31:6 esv).

The Lord commanded Joshua as he assumed Moses’s leadership mantle,

Be strong and courageous Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. ... This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you might be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For

¹¹ “Lessons from Spurgeon on Coronavirus,” *Christian Concern*, March 17, 2020, <https://christianconcern.com/comment/lessons-from-spurgeon-on-coronavirus/>.

¹² <https://www.reviveourhearts.com/true-woman/blog/could-coronavirus-lead-revival/>; <https://thefederalist.com/2020/03/27/amid-coronavirus-lockdowns-neighborhoods-are-coming-to-life-again/>; <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2020/march/praying-for-revival-during-coronavirus-crisis.html>; <https://www.christianpost.com/voices/coronavirus-could-ignite-revival-like-a-diesel-engine.html>.

then you will make your way prosperous and then you will have good success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go. (Josh 1:6–9)

When David was taken captive in Gath by the Philistines, he declared, “In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?” (Ps 56:4). This is the closest biblical source for the United States national motto adopted by Congress on July 30, 1956, “In God We Trust.”

And as our Lord faced the cross in the Upper Room, he assured his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27).

We are to take God’s promises to heart lifting them up in our prayers. We must remember that suffering calls on us to be strong today and to prepare for eternity tomorrow. Accordingly, let us meditate on biblical texts on the following themes and principles:

1. Divine omnipotence: Our Lord is always in control. Nothing escapes his plan.

Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. (1 Chr 29:11–12)

2. Humbly but confidently let us approach our Heavenly Father through our High Priest and Savior, Jesus Christ.

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. (John 15:16)

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Phil 4:6)

3. Remember as we pray that our God is able to do more than we can think or ask.

Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you. (Jer 32:17)

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think ...

to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph 3:20–21)

4. Let us seek to deepen our trust in God because he uses suffering and trials for his purpose and our good.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (Jas 1:2–4)

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Rom 8:28)

5. Should we face death, let us rest in the wonderful truth that God is with us and we look forward to an eternity with our Savior.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. ...

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (Ps 23:4, 6)

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Rom 8:18)

6. Let us be authentic and thankful upon recovery. Consider the example of King Hezekiah's grateful prayer after his recovery as he reflected on what he thought was his imminent death:

A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, after he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness: I said, In the middle of my days I must depart; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years. I said, I shall not see the LORD, the LORD in the land of the living; I shall look on man no more among the inhabitants of the world. My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent; like a weaver I have rolled up my life; he cuts me off from the loom; from day to night you bring me to an end; I calmed myself until morning; like a lion he breaks all my bones; from day to night you bring me to an end. Like a swallow or a crane I chirp; I moan like a dove. My eyes are weary with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed; be my pledge of safety! What shall I say? For he has spoken to me, and he himself has done it. I walk slowly all my years because of the bitterness of my soul. O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these is the life of my spirit. Oh restore me to health and make me live! Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness; but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back. For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day; the father makes known to the children

your faithfulness. The LORD will save me, and we will play my music on stringed instruments all the days of our lives, at the house of the LORD. Now Isaiah had said, “Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover.” Hezekiah also had said, “What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the LORD?” (Isa 38:9–22)

Conclusion

Clarkson, quoted above, summarized the biblical doctrine of suffering under the sovereign purposes of God in the final stanzas from her hymn, “O Father, You Are Sovereign”:

O Father, you are sovereign, the Lord of human pain,
Transmuting earthly sorrows to gold of heav’nly gain,
All evil overruling, as none but Conqu’ror could,
Your love pursues its purpose—our souls’ eternal good.

O Father, you are sovereign! We see you dimly now,
But soon before your triumph earth’s every knee shall bow.
With this glad hope before us our faith springs forth anew:
Our sovereign Lord and Savior, We trust and worship you!¹³

In these uncertain days of suffering, may our Lord grant us all the humble trust of Job, who declared, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21).

¹³ “75. O Father, You Are Sovereign,” in *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: Great Commission Publications, 1990). Copyright *Christianity Today* (1982); assigned to Margaret Clarkson.

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CONTRIBUTORS

JERRAM BARRS holds the Francis Schaeffer Chair of Apologetics at Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, and is the Senior Scholar at the Francis Schaeffer Institute. He teaches apologetics, theology of ministry, and classes on literature and Christian responsibility in society. His first book, *Being Human: The Nature of Spiritual Experience* (InterVarsity Press, 1978), was co-authored with Ranald Macaulay. His publications include *Delighting in the Law of the Lord: God's Alternative to Legalism and Moralism* (Crossway, 2013), and *Echoes of Eden: Reflections on Christianity, Literature, and the Arts* (Crossway, 2013).

ARJAN DE VISSER is professor of ministry and mission at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary in Hamilton, Ontario. He worked as a missionary among Sotho-speaking people in South Africa from 1989 to 2004. His doctoral dissertation, "Kyrios and Morena: The Lordship of Christ and African Township Christianity" (Potchefstroom, 2001), focused on beliefs regarding Christ in indigenous churches in South Africa.

WILLIAM EDGAR is professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, and is a *professeur associé* at the Faculté Jean Calvin, Aix-en-Provence. He directs the jazz band Renewal and belongs to the American Musicological Society and the Society for Ethnomusicology. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society, a senior adviser at the Trinity Fellows Academy, and a board member of the Huguenot Fellowship, which supports French speaking evangelical works. He has published several books and numerous articles, most recently *Does Christianity Really Work?* (Christian Focus, 2016) and *Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture* (IVP Academic, 2017).

ANDRÉ GESKE is an ordained pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Brazil serving at the Eglise Réformée Evangélique de Marseille in France. He has a bachelor's degree from Rev. José Manoel da Conceição theological

seminary in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and an MTh from the Faculté Jean Calvin in Aix-en-Provence, France.

OS GUINNESS is an author and social critic. He completed his undergraduate degree at the University of London and his DPhil in the social sciences at Oriel College, Oxford. He has written or edited more than thirty books, including *The Call* (Nelson, 2018) and *Time for Truth* (Baker Books, 2000). His latest book, *Carpe Diem Redeemed* (InterVarsity Press, 2019), has just been published. Since moving to the United States in 1984, he has been a guest scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Studies, a guest scholar and visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, and senior fellow at the Trinity Forum and the EastWest Institute in New York. He was the lead drafter of the Williamsburg Charter in 1988, a celebration of the bicentennial of the United States Constitution, and later of “The Global Charter of Conscience,” which was published at the European Union Parliament in 2012. He has spoken at many of the world’s major universities and to political and business conferences.

PAUL HELM is a British philosopher and Reformed theologian. He is a teaching fellow at Regent College, after having served as the first incumbent of the J. I. Packer Chair from 2001 to 2005. His writings range over philosophy of religion, philosophical theology, historical theology, and apologetics, and they include major works on Calvinism: *Faith and Understanding* (Eerdmans, 1997), *Calvin at the Centre* (Oxford University Press, 2010), *Faith, Form, and Fashion: Classical Reformed Theology and Its Postmodern Critics* (Cascade Books, 2014), and *Human Nature from Calvin to Edwards* (Reformed Heritage Books, 2018).

YANNICK IMBERT is professor of apologetics and church history at the Faculté Jean Calvin, Aix-en-Provence, France. He is a member of the theological commission of the Conseil national des évangéliques de France and of the editorial committee of the *Journal of Urban Mission*. He has written several studies on J. R. R Tolkien and is the author of an introduction to apologetics, *Croire, expliquer, vivre: Introduction à l’apologétique* (Excelsis and Kerygma, 2014).

REID KARR lives in Rome, Italy, where he has worked as a church planter since 2009. He is the pastor of the evangelical church Breccia di Roma S. Paolo. He serves as the Associate Director of the Reformanda Initiative

and is co-host of the Reformanda Initiative podcast that discusses and analyzes Roman Catholic theology and practice from an Evangelical perspective. He is a PhD candidate with the Union School of Theology, United Kingdom.

PETER A. LILLBACK is president of and professor of historical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. He spent twenty-seven years as pastor in Pennsylvania and Delaware. In 2000 he founded the Providence Forum. His most recent work is *Saint Peter's Principles: Leadership for Those Who Already Know Their Incompetence* (P&R Publishing, 2019).

FLAVIEN PARDIGON received his MTh from the Faculté Libre de Théologie Réformée in Aix-en-Provence (France) and his PhD from Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. A pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America, he ministers in the Majority World, where he supports indigenous churches and trains local church leaders. He is the author of *Paul Against the Idols: A Contextual Reading of the Areopagus Speech* (Pickwick, 2019).

JOHN SPAN has over fifteen years of missionary experience in Muslim-majority countries. He has posted articles, as well as his ThM and ThD theses, on academia.edu. He is a member of Biblical Missiology and the Southgate Fellowship of Reformed missiologists (<https://thesouthgatefellowship.org/>). A pastor in the Christian Reformed Church, he and his wife were recently asked to join the faculty of Mukhanyo Theological College in South Africa.

H. G. (HENK) STOKER is a board member of the World Reformed Fellowship. He earned a doctorate in apologetics in 1993 and also has completed postgraduate degrees in philosophy and psychology. He pastored several congregations of the Reformed Churches in South Africa for twenty-five years. In January 2012, he was appointed professor in Apologetics and Ethics at the Faculty of Theology of the North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa.

CHAD VAN DIXHOORN is professor of church history and director of the Craig Center for the Study of the Westminster Standards at Westminster Theological Seminary and serves as an honorary research fellow at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. He has published and edited

multiple books, including *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643-1652* (Oxford University Press, 2012). He is currently working on a major monograph on the Westminster Assembly as well as a complete edition of John Lightfoot's journals. Both volumes are to be published by Oxford University Press.

THEODORE G. (TED) VAN RAALTE is professor of Ecclesiology at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary in Hamilton, Ontario, where he teaches church history, apologetics, and other subjects. He obtained his PhD in 2013 at Calvin Theological Seminary under Richard Muller. He published *Antoine de Chandieu: The Silver Horn of Geneva's Reformed Triumvirate* (Oxford University Press, 2018) and co-authored *Early French Reform: The Theology and Spirituality of Guillaume Farel* (Ashgate, 2011).

G. JONKER VENTER is a PhD student at the Unit for Reformational Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa. As a theological student of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA), he completed a BTh Honors degree in biblical languages and earned the MDiv degree *cum laude* in 2018. After that, he completed his MTh degree in apologetics at the Faculty of Theology at the North-West University, with his topic focusing on faith formation and apologetic ability in pre-school children.

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