

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF REFORMED THEOLOGY AND LIFE

# UNIO CUM CHRISTO<sup>®</sup>

UNION WITH CHRIST



## Pastoral Theology and Preaching



Westminster  
Theological  
Seminary  
Philadelphia

International  
Reformed  
Evangelical  
Seminary



[uniocc.com](http://uniocc.com)

Vol. 7, No. 2 / October 2021

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF REFORMED THEOLOGY AND LIFE

# UNIO CUM CHRISTO®

UNION WITH CHRIST

---

## **Editorial Committee and Staff**

Editor in Chief: Paul Wells

Senior Editors: Peter A. Lillback and Benjamin F. Intan

Managing Editor: Bernard Aubert

Book Review Editor: Brandon D. Crowe

Subscription Manager: Audy Santoso

Assistant: Emily Tielmann

Copy Editor: Henry Whitney

Typesetter: Janice Van Eck

## **Mission Statement**

*Unio cum Christo* celebrates and encourages the visible union believers possess in Christ when they confess the faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, the body of Christ. Thus, its mission is (1) to be an international scholarly and practical journal for the global Reformed community—churches, seminaries, theologians, and pastors; (2) to encourage deeper fellowship, understanding, and growth in faith, hope, and love in the Reformed community at large; and (3) to support small and isolated Reformed witnesses in minority missional situations. It will seek to do so by the publication and dissemination of scholarly contributions of a biblical, theological, and practical nature by Reformed leaders world-wide—including leading theologians, developing scholars, practicing missionaries, pastors, and evangelists.

Articles, interviews, and book reviews will consistently be in line with biblically based Reformed confessional orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Submitted or solicited contributions for its biannual issues will focus on specific themes of importance to the Reformed tradition and present debate.

---

*The opinions expressed in this journal represent the views only of the individual contributors; they do not reflect the views of the editors, of Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, or the International Reformed Evangelical Seminary, Jakarta.*

---

**This periodical is indexed in the ATLA Religion Database® (ATLA RDB®), a product of the American Theological Library Association. Email: [atla@atla.com](mailto:atla@atla.com), www: [www.atla.com](http://www.atla.com).**

The journal's "Ethics Statement" can be consulted on our website.

**ISSN 2380-5412 (print)**

**ISSN 2473-8476 (online)**

Copyright © 2021 International Reformed Evangelical Seminary and Westminster Theological Seminary. All rights reserved. *Unio cum Christo*® is a registered trademark of Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia.

Printed in the United States of America and Indonesia

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF REFORMED THEOLOGY AND LIFE

UNIO CUM  
**CHRISTO**<sup>®</sup>

UNION WITH CHRIST

---

Vol. 7, No. 2 / OCTOBER 2021

# Pastoral Theology and Preaching

*Published jointly by*

**Westminster  
Theological Seminary**

P.O. Box 27009  
Philadelphia, PA 19118  
United States of America

**International Reformed  
Evangelical Seminary**

Reformed Millennium  
Center Indonesia  
Jl. Industri Blok B14 Kav. 1  
Jakarta Pusat, 10720, Indonesia

---

**uniocc.com**  
**info@uniocc.com**

## Submissions

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

## Subscriptions

Annual subscription rates for 2021 are \$40.00 for institutions, \$30.00 for individuals, and \$20.00 for students. Single issues may be purchased at \$14.00 per copy. Inquiries concerning subscription and orders should be sent to [info@uniocc.com](mailto:info@uniocc.com).

---

**This periodical is indexed in the ATLA Religion Database® (ATLA RDB®), a product of the American Theological Library Association. Email: [atla@atla.com](mailto:atla@atla.com), www: [www.atla.com](http://www.atla.com).**

The journal's "Ethics Statement" can be consulted on our website.

**ISSN 2380-5412 (print)**

**ISSN 2473-8476 (online)**

Copyright © 2021 International Reformed Evangelical Seminary and Westminster Theological Seminary. All rights reserved. *Unio cum Christo*® is a registered trademark of Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia.

Printed in the United States of America and Indonesia

## CONTENTS

# Pastoral Theology and Preaching

### BAVINCK AND WARFIELD ANNIVERSARY

- 5 Guest Editorial: Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, 1851-1921  
/ **PAUL HELM**
- 11 Overcoming the World: Bavinck on Faith and Knowledge  
/ **HENK VAN DEN BELT**

### BIBLICAL, HISTORICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

- 33 *How Did God Hate Esau (Malachi 1:2-3)?* / **RON BERGEY**
- 51 Divine Righteousness and Forgiveness: The Old Testament  
Background of *Hilastērion* in Romans 3:25 / **MICHAEL C. MULDER**
- 65 New England Election Sermons: A Model for a Public Pulpit  
/ **TIMON CLINE**
- 85 Judgment and Mercy: Spurgeon's Preaching of Hell  
/ **JEREMY WALKER**
- 101 Böhl on Justification and Regeneration: Some Implications for  
Preaching and Pastoring / **MEINE VELDMAN**
- 119 Preaching and Definitive Sanctification / **MICHAEL CHRIST**

### PASTORAL THEOLOGY AND PREACHING IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

- 137 Spiritual Disciplines for Holiness in the Life of a Minister  
/ **JOEL R. BEEKE**
- 155 Preaching to *All* of the Heart / **A. CRAIG TROXEL**
- 171 The Priority of Preaching in the Church's Global Mission  
/ **JOHN CURRIE**

- 185 The Stigmatization of HIV/AIDS Victims in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Gospel / **PHILLIPUS J. (FLIP) BUYS**
- 203 The Challenge of Communicating Christ in Melanesian Culture / **RYAN DEJONGE**

## **INTERVIEW**

- 219 Interview with Timothy J. Keller / **PETER A. LILLBACK**

## **REVIEW ARTICLE**

- 231 Edmund P. Clowney's Triangle of Typology in *Preaching and Biblical Theology* / **VERN S. POYTHRESS**

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

- 239 John Calvin. *Crucified and Risen: Sermons on the Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ* / **PAUL WELLS**
- 241 David J. Hesselgrave and Leanna Davis. *We Evangelicals and Our Mission: How We Got to Where We Are and How to Get to Where We Should Be Going* / **ARJAN DE VISSER**
- 243 Matthew D. Kim and Daniel L. Wong. *Finding Our Voice: A Vision for Asian North American Preaching* / **STEVEN S. JO**
- 246 Robert Letham. *Systematic Theology* / **ARNOLD HUIJGEN**
- 249 Contributors

# Guest Editorial: Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, 1851–1921

**PAUL HELM**

**T**his year 2021 marks the centenary of the death of the theologian Benjamin B. Warfield.<sup>1</sup> He was a son of the Southern Presbyterian Church. John Meeter summarizes Warfield’s life as follows:

Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield was born into a godly Presbyterian home at “Grasmere,” near Lexington, Kentucky, November 5th, 1851. When only nineteen years of age he was graduated from what is now Princeton University, with the highest honor of his class. After two years of further study and travel abroad he entered Princeton Seminary, graduating in the class of 1876. In 1878 he was appointed instructor, and in 1879 installed as professor of New Testament Exegesis and Literature at Western Theological Seminary, Allegheny. In 1887 he received and accepted, the appointment to the Charles Hodge Chair of Didactic and Polemic Theology at Princeton Seminary; and for thirty-three years, from 1887 to the time of his death in 1921, he served Princeton Seminary and the Presbyterian Church U. S. A. in the Chair made famous by the Alexander-Hodge succession.<sup>2</sup>

Warfield’s middle name “Breckinridge” stood for his ancestor Robert Jefferson Breckinridge (1800–1871), who seemed rather unruly when young but was later the author of *The Knowledge of God, Objectively and Subjectively*

---

<sup>1</sup> For more of Paul Helm’s view on Warfield, see Paul Helm, “B. B. Warfield on Divine Passion,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 (2007): 95–104, and “B. B. Warfield’s Path to Inerrancy: An Attempt to Correct Some Serious Misunderstandings,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 72 (2010): 23–42.

<sup>2</sup> John E. Meeter, foreword to *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970, 1973), 2:viii.

*Considered*, 2 vols. (1857, 1859) and a Professor at Danville Seminary, Kentucky. So, Warfield was bred in the Southern Presbyterian Church, the church of James H. Thornwell and of Robert L. Dabney. While from the South, with a Southern drawl, Warfield went north for his further education, to Princeton, New Jersey, and stayed there. After a spell at Western Theological Seminary, the young Warfield visited Germany in 1872 as part of his theological education, and in their exactness and thoroughness his published articles were formed in the German manner. It seems that his entry into theology was prompted by a love for biblical exegesis.

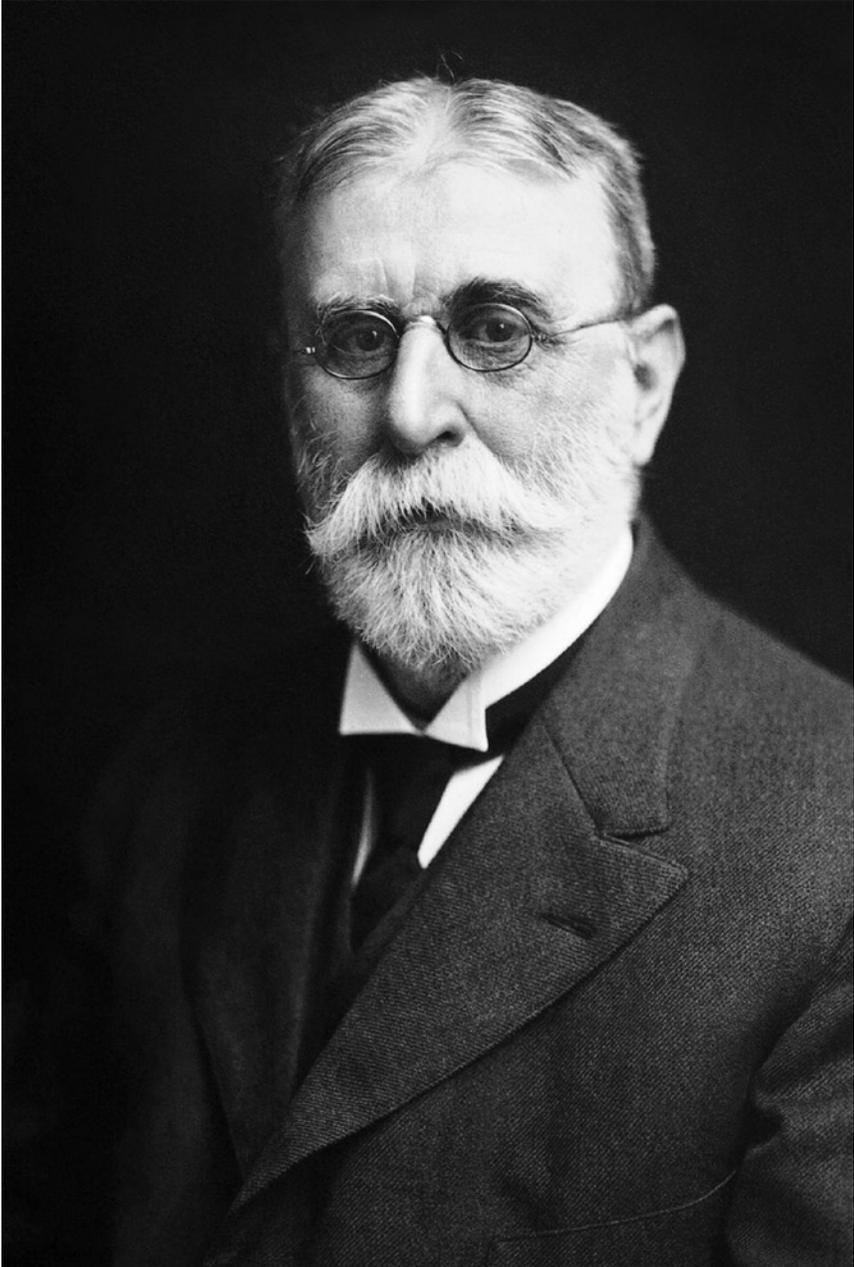
I first encountered his writings through the five volumes of his collected papers published in the 1950s. In the years after World War II, American theological books were hard to come by in the United Kingdom, but some could be obtained via the Evangelical Bookshop in Belfast. The five-book set was more or less a distillation of the ten volumes published by the American Oxford University Press with fresh introductory essays. In his selection of Warfield's papers entitled *Biblical Foundations* around the same time, David Martyn Lloyd-Jones recounted that on "discovery of them in a library in Toronto in 1932 [my] feelings were similar to those of 'stout Cortez' as described by Keats."<sup>3</sup> He was disappointed that what was for sale in Canada was not for sale in England. The ten volumes are available again.

The ten volumes were surely a splendid testament to Warfield's life's work.<sup>4</sup> They each consist of his writings with their dates of publication and works of reference in scholarly journals. The earliest paper that I could locate was 1880, and the two volumes on perfectionism were the latest, made public in the last decade of his life. The articles were organized by the editors, even though as far as Warfield himself was concerned, he usually put pen to paper because of some interest he had in Christian theology in America or abroad. The style of all of them is of painstaking, serious scholarship, occasionally leavened by a lighter glint of amusement. The breadth is noteworthy. In our contemporary world, academic theology has become one of specialism—everything seems to have its "theology"—but Warfield seems equally at home in Christology and in perfectionism, in Calvin and in contemporary German theologians, in Finney and in others, with developments in England and in Germany or the Midwestern states of the United States. They are

---

<sup>3</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, introduction to B. B. Warfield, *Biblical Foundations* (London: Tyndale Press, 1958), 7; cf. Iain H. Murray, *David Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years, 1899–1939* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 285–86. Lloyd-Jones is referring to Keats' sonnet "On first looking into Chapman's Homer."

<sup>4</sup> See B. B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 10 vols. (1932; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).



**BENJAMIN BRECKINRIDGE WARFIELD**

1851-1921

characterized by a certain anonymity, in that he does not let his reader know why he chose the material he deals with, but the readers should not be surprised at being filled with awe at his theological scope and exactness. The set of ten volumes is a fitting testament for a man whose adult years were lived exclusively in theological institutions, who traveled rarely, and whose wife was sickly for many years, the pair being childless; he devoted hours daily to reading to her, and as a person, he was industrious and private and modest in manner.

In the 1970s, Meeter, who had helped with the original set of Warfield's writings,<sup>5</sup> turned his hand to editing two volumes containing over a thousand pages of the *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* (1970, 1973) drawn chiefly from Warfield's accumulated papers. These give another side to Warfield, that of his journalism.

These writings were the source of his theological influence in his church, and they reveal a different side to Warfield, his way of dealing with doctrine for a popular, literate audience. He did not wrestle with any problems that were personal to himself. Many of the pieces were distilled from his front-line publications and communicated by his quiet, competent personality. This collection is of his more popular material and is more likely to have content for the student or the general reader. So, if you cannot afford the ten volumes, try the *Selected Shorter Writings*.

"Shorter," by the way, does not mean "elementary." Many of the shorter writings first appeared in journals or encyclopedias. They are divided into sections, "On Christ" (1:139–202), "Religion" (1:365–25), accounts of men whom he had met, such as Abraham Kuyper (1:447–54), and questions, such as "Why Four Gospels?" (2:639–42), and catechetical topics, such as "Doubt" (2:655–59), "Regeneration" (2:321–24), and "Sanctification" (2:325–28).

Warfield's inner self may likely come alive for readers of his shorter books of sermons, *Faith and Life* (1916), and his "Conferences" for his students in the Oratory of Princeton on Sunday afternoons, a Princeton tradition going back to Archibald Alexander and Charles Hodge, who also edited a collection of conference addresses.<sup>6</sup> There are other publications: a separate book of sermons, *The Plan of Salvation* (1915), a comparative study of different conceptions of salvation that is still in print, and *The Lord of Glory: A Study of the Designation of our Lord in the New Testament with Especial Reference to His Deity* (1907).

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Arthur W. Kuschke Jr., introduction to *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 1:xiv–xv.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Benjamin B. Warfield, *Faith and Life: "Conferences" in the Oratory of Princeton Seminary* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1916), ix.

Turning from his history and writings, I want to say a little about those views that have struck me over the years. The first is to say that as far as I can judge from what is available to me, Warfield had little or no interest in natural theology. If so, this is a little odd since the Westminster Confession upholds “proofs,” and Paul used them as part of his preaching to Gentiles, as in Lystra and Athens (Acts 14; 17). At most, Warfield seems to have committed himself to the view that God’s existence is an “intuition.” His “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Trinity” makes no effort to protect Christ’s deity by emphasizing his eternal generation as the Son, though he concurs with Calvin, as did John Murray.<sup>7</sup> In Warfield’s treatment of Jonathan Edwards in “Edwards and the New England Theology,” in his *Studies in Theology*, the ninth of the ten volumes, Edwards is free from any of the pantheistic tendencies that scholars of Edwards nowadays attribute to him.<sup>8</sup>

There is reason to think that Warfield did not venture to write a volume or volumes on systematic theology because he preferred instead to give prominence to Charles Hodge’s *Systematic Theology or the Outline of Theology* (1878) by the son of Charles, A. A. Hodge.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, some of his published papers are the size of a big book, especially the two volumes on *Studies in Perfectionism*, over 1200 pages in total. It is also reasonable to argue that his articles on Christology or on Scripture could be regarded as addenda to the Hodges’ books, but his output on perfectionism is greater in bulk than both of the Hodges’ publications on systematic theology put together.

There is nothing of Warfield’s writings that tell us what moved him to publish what he did, and his personal reserve is such that it is difficult to understand their context other than from what the articles themselves indicate. At whatever level he wrote, he was not inclined to express Christian truth by application of the first person singular; he stated not, “Eternal life is the prospect of my union with Christ,” but “He gives unending life to people.”

In general, his articles are not directly polemical, except for one or two instances. Two features, as compared to the twenty-first century, stand out. One is the sheer volume of printed commentaries and theological treatments today as compared to his day. Second, he does not always seek to engage with arguments in contemporary American literature, nor are there comments on the culture of secularism. His shorter writings give more away than do

---

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 5:189–284; John Murray, “Systematic Theology,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 4:7–8.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “Edwards and the New England Theology,” in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 9:515–38.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Lloyd-Jones, introduction, 7.

his pieces on religious and theological issues, and he is silent on what may have been fads of the day.

As liberalism grew among the members of the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary it would have been difficult for a senior member such as Warfield to give a strong reaction, let alone a published critique. When the break came, had he lived to suffer its occurrence, would he have remained in the Seminary as did his friend Geerhardus Vos? Some comments on Warfield must include more of his reactions to the onset of liberalism in the bulwark of conservatism at Princeton. Ned B. Stonehouse's biographical memoir of Machen contains references to Warfield through the eyes of Machen as the days darkened. Machen thought that Warfield did not favor a split in the church ("You can't split rotten wood"), and by temperament Warfield was not in favor of taking a leading role against liberalism. Some thought that the spirit of liberalism would soon scatter. According to Machen, Warfield thought that the wave of naturalism would soon be spent, as people concerned with their spiritual life would not be attracted by the naturalism of liberalism. Machen's view was that Warfield "was a man of the study rather than a man of the ecclesiastical arena": "With all his glaring faults he was the greatest man I have known," was Machen's verdict at the time of Warfield's death.<sup>10</sup>

We can bring this memory of Warfield to an end by a quotation from *Faith and Life*. Here, he is with students and less formal, less impersonal in the orientation of his words. Here in this "conference," if anywhere, he is rather informal. Recognizing that teacher and students have one common calling, he can be more personal. He closes the theme of help in our praying as follows:

Thus, then, the Spirit helps our weakness. By His hidden, inner influences He quickens us to the perception of our real need; He frames in us an infinite desire for this needed thing; He leads us to bring this desire in all its unutterable strength before God; who, seeing it within our hearts, cannot but grant it, as accordant with His will. Is this not a very present help in time of trouble? As prevalent a help as if we were miraculously rescued from any danger? And yet a help wrought through the means of God's appointment, that is, our attitude of constant dependence on Him and our prayer to His aid? And could Paul here have devised a better encouragement to the saints to go on in their holy course and fight the battle bravely to the end?<sup>11</sup>

May the Lord continue to use the example and output of B. B. Warfield for the glory of God.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 310–11.

<sup>11</sup> Warfield, *Faith and Life*, 200–201.

# Overcoming the World: Bavinck on Faith and Knowledge

HENK VAN DEN BELT

## Abstract

After a short biographical introduction, this article argues that Herman Bavinck's Reformed theology displays his appreciation for the catholicity of the church. This attitude appears most strongly in his interest in epistemology. For Bavinck, faith and knowledge form an essential unity. He intends to avoid subjectivity while incorporating the modern epistemological turn to the human subject. This is his most original and most important contribution to theology. According to Bavinck, faith overcomes the world by viewing it as God's fallen creation on its way to final restoration through Christ's redemption.

The appendix offers the first English translation of thus far unnoticed theses on faith and knowledge.

## Keywords

*Herman Bavinck, neo-Calvinism, theological catholicity, Christian epistemology, general revelation, subjectivity*

---

**T**he only printed sermon by Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), who died one hundred years ago, is on the “victory that overcomes the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4).<sup>1</sup> It is one of his favorite texts, often quoted by him to underline the calling of a Christian to serve God in this world. Bavinck’s theology helps us to reflect on and to shape a Christian worldview. The way in which faith gains the victory, however, is not by a pure antithesis. Bavinck acknowledged that this present world is occupied by the prince of darkness, but he maintained nevertheless that the world is God’s good creation that once again will be restored to its original destiny. Therefore, the way to overcome the world is by faith that acknowledges that the world belongs to God.

One of the most striking ways in which Bavinck developed this fundamental insight was by connecting human knowledge with divine revelation and by assessing epistemological issues from a theological viewpoint.

## I. *Biography*

Herman Bavinck was born on December 13, 1854. His father, Jan Bavinck (1826–1909), was a pastor in the Reformed church, which originated from the Dutch Secession. As a teenager he was sent to the Hasselman Institute, a school close to Almkerk, where his father pastored at the time and where the students and teachers conversed in French. The fact that Jan Bavinck—and other leading figures of the Secession—sent their children to this Reformed boarding school illustrates a positive attitude toward culture, as James Eglinton highlights in his critical biography.<sup>2</sup>

Bavinck decided to study theology at Leiden University, where the radical liberal theologian Jan Hendrik Scholten (1811–1885) was one of his teachers. Abraham Kuenen (1828–1891), one of the founders of the historical-critical method, made such an impression on Bavinck that the latter always had a portrait of him in his own study. Though Bavinck disagreed with the presuppositions and conclusions of higher criticism, he learned much from its methodology. The correspondence with his friend, the Arabist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936), provides a glimpse into Bavinck’s thoughts

---

<sup>1</sup> Herman Bavinck, *De wereldverwinnende kracht des geloofs: Leerrede over 1 Joh. 5:4b, uitgesproken in de Burgwalkerk te Kampen den 30sten Juni 1901* (Kampen: Kok, 1901). For an English translation see Herman Bavinck, “The World-Conquering Power of Faith,” trans. John Bolt, in John Bolt, *Bavinck and the Christian Life: Following Jesus in Faithful Service* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 237–54. A translation is also offered by James Eglinton in *Herman Bavinck on Preaching and Preachers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2017), 67–83.

<sup>2</sup> James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 47.



**HERMAN BAVINCK**

1854-1921

and feelings. Shortly after completing his studies, he wrote, “If everything were as calm and as peaceful internally, as it is externally around me—I would be truly happy.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1881, Bavinck became a pastor in Franeker in one of the congregations of the Secession and accepted an appointment by the synod of these churches as professor at the theological school in Kampen after only one year in the ministry. Next to dogmatics and ethics, he also taught philosophy, Greek, and theological encyclopedia. In Kampen he married Johanna Adriana Schippers (1868–1942); their marriage was blessed with the birth of a daughter, Johanna Geziena Bavinck (1894–1971).

Initially, Bavinck had to lecture so much that he was hardly able to publish, although he did organize his lessons such that he could use the material for publication. After the first ten busy years, he managed to write *Reformed Dogmatics* (1895–1901), his *Principles of Psychology* (1897), and a complete manuscript only recently rediscovered and published as *Reformed Ethics* (2019). He further published some of his lectures, such as *The Certainty of Faith* (1901) and *Creation or Development* (1901), and even a meditative booklet, *The Sacrifice of Praise* (1901). He ends this encouragement for young adults who have publicly professed their faith and been admitted to the Lord’s Supper with an eschatological vision:

From the throne in the midst of heaven, through all creation, into the depths of the abyss, only one voice will be heard: Christ the Lord! And all creatures together, shall bow the knee for Him, Who was deeply humiliated and died on a cross, but is also highly exalted and is set on the throne on the right-hand of the Father. What a future, what a spectacle! All creation on its knees before Jesus!<sup>4</sup>

In 1902, Bavinck moved to the Free University in Amsterdam, where he occupied the chair of dogmatics, which had become vacant after Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) became prime minister. In Amsterdam, Bavinck published in the field of psychology and pedagogy, including works titled *Pedagogical Principles* (1904), *The Education of the More Mature Youth* (1916), and *Biblical and Religious Psychology* (1920). He also dealt with a difficult issue in the Reformed churches regarding the relationship between baptism

<sup>3</sup> Jan de Bruijn and George Harinck, eds., *Een Leidse vriendschap: De briefwisseling tussen Herman Bavinck en Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, 1875–1921* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1999), 56. Eglinton is currently working on a translation of this correspondence.

<sup>4</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise*, 49, trans. Gilbert Zekveld, [www.SpindleWorks.com](http://www.SpindleWorks.com), November 2, 2008, [sources.neocalvinism.org/full\\_pdfs/bavinck\\_sacrifice\\_of\\_praise.pdf](http://sources.neocalvinism.org/full_pdfs/bavinck_sacrifice_of_praise.pdf) (English translations of Bavinck follow printed translations but are at times modified by the author); Herman Bavinck, *De offerande des lofs: Overdenkingen vóór en na de toelating tot het heilige avondmaal* (’s-Gravenhage: Verschoor, 1901), 120.

and regeneration in a booklet titled *Calling and Regeneration* (1903), adapted from a series of articles in the periodical *De Bazuin*. The tensions over the question of whether infant baptism is based on presumptive regeneration grew after 1892, when the churches originating in the Secession (1834) and those initiated by Kuyper's *Doleantie* (1886) merged. In Amsterdam, Bavinck also published a revised edition of *Reformed Dogmatics* (1906–1911) and wrote a summary titled *Magnalia Dei* (*The Wonderful Works of God*, 1909).<sup>5</sup> For some years Bavinck chaired the Anti-Revolutionary political party and was a member of the Senate. He died on July 29, 1921.

## II. *Catholicity*

Bavinck's magnum opus, *Reformed Dogmatics*, is relevant not only because of its content but also because of its method. He starts the discussion of every *locus* with the biblical data, immediately followed by a historical survey of the topic's treatment by church fathers, in medieval theology, during the Reformation, and in Reformed orthodoxy. Notwithstanding his high view of Scripture, he sees the Christian tradition as "the means by which all the treasures and possessions of our ancestors are transmitted to the present and the future."<sup>6</sup> In his surveys he also offers a fair presentation of the positions of those theologians—either Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or liberal—with which he disagrees. He always looks for a connection and discusses the position of his opponents with a certain mildness, representing the positions of others as well as possible and appreciating elements of truth in them. Sometimes this is confusing, because it is not always entirely clear how he relates to these alternative positions. In his description of the theology of others, he can be so congenial that it seems as if he himself agrees with them. Even during his lifetime this attitude sometimes led to criticism.<sup>7</sup> He commonly ends the discussion of a *locus* with a convincing argument for the Reformed position as the purest expression of the catholic faith, applying traditional Reformed theology to the questions of modernity. Therefore, in *Reformed Dogmatics*, even when his specific position on a *locus* is colored by his own context, Bavinck offers many relevant references to the sources, a clear summary of the theological development, and, especially, a great

<sup>5</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God: Instruction in the Christian Religion according to the Reformed Confession* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 1:492; Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 4th ed., 4 vols (Kampen: Kok, 1928–1930), 1:525.

<sup>7</sup> Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 189.

example of an irenic method. Bavinck can be polemical, but he is also always searching for possible connections with his opponents. This method and the underlying attitude are nurtured by the conviction that all truth is God's truth.

Bavinck always maintained a strong interest in biblical studies. Reflecting on the institution of the Pontifical Biblical Commission by Leo XIII in 1901, he expressed his concerns that so many questions raised by modern research into the Bible remained unanswered from the orthodox side. "If in any field we have neglected our vocation and lag behind our opponents, then it is in the field of biblical studies."<sup>8</sup>

Rejecting a mechanical view of inspiration that detaches the authors of Scripture from their personalities and their historical contexts, he advocates an "organic" view of inspiration. This means that the Holy Spirit leaves room for the human side, not only in the process of inspiration but also in the remaining character of the text of Scripture. The whole Bible is the word of God and God-breathed, but it is also vulnerable and given to us in the humble form of inscripturation. Just as the eternal Word of God took on the form of a servant, so also the written word of God has the form of a servant in the Bible.

Bavinck's theological method is intertwined with his appreciation for the catholicity of the church and of theology and his view of the relationship between the Reformed confession and Christian theology in general. After the publication of the final volume of the *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck writes that—despite the name *Reformed*—he is concerned not with exclusively Reformed views but with the catholic faith of Christianity. In his poetic prose:

The Reformed doctrine is nothing but the biblical, the Christian doctrine; the presentation of the treasure of truth, as it is laid down in Scripture. Drawn from Scripture and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in history, it must start to blossom and develop before our eyes in dogmatics, without artificiality or coercion. Then it is also the theology that our time needs.<sup>9</sup>

In an address as rector of the Kampen Theological School he develops his views in *The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church* (1888), interpreting this attribute of the church qualitatively. The church is not catholic because of her quantity—her presence in all times, in all places, and for all peoples—but because of her message of the restoration of creation through its redemption. Here Bavinck rejects all forms of dualism—Rome's disjunction of the

<sup>8</sup> Herman Bavinck, "Bijbelstudie," *De Bazuin* 50.5 (January 31, 1902).

<sup>9</sup> Herman Bavinck, "Dogmatiek," *De Bazuin* 49.17 (April 26, 1901).

natural and supernatural, Martin Luther's view of the two kingdoms, and the pietistic focus on individual salvation—and stresses the importance of the gospel's reforming and renewing power to deliver creation from the dominion of sin and Satan.

In the Reformed worldview “the Gospel comes fully into its own, comes to true catholicity. There is nothing that cannot or ought not to be evangelized.”<sup>10</sup> The world is God's world. Evil is an occupying enemy without any legal rights. God so loved this fallen world, the cosmos, that he sent his only Son, who was its co-creator, to redeem it and to start its glorious re-creation. Finally, God's grace will restore paradise lost to its original destiny and display the glory of God. That eschatological perspective encourages the Christian to live courageously, already participating in the new creation. Christians should not withdraw into solitude. Because of the general validity of truth, the Reformed church should never become sectarian.

The kingdom of heaven may not be of this world, but it does demand that everything in the world be subservient to it. ... Faith has the promise of overcoming the world. That faith is catholic, not restricted to any time, place, nation, or people. It can enter into all situations, can connect with all forms of natural life, is suitable to every time, and beneficial for all things, and is relevant in all circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

This qualitative view of catholicity, on the other hand, enables Bavinck to include all elements of truth into his theological system. All truth is God's truth, just as the one universal church comes to expression in several churches that are more or less pure, the one universal truth comes to expression in the various confessions. No confession “is identical with the whole of Christian truth. Each sect that considers its own circle as the only church of Christ and makes exclusive claims to truth withers and dies like a branch ripped from the tree.”<sup>12</sup> For Bavinck the Reformed confession, as it is derived from Scripture as its source and has developed historically under the guidance of the Spirit, represents divine truth in its purest form. Still, because of the universality of the truth—and the catholicity of Christianity and the church based on it—Bavinck freely makes use of the riches of other traditions and confessions as well. Bavinck's catholic attitude is the

---

<sup>10</sup> Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 238; Herman Bavinck, *De Katholiceit van Christendom en Kerk: Rede bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Theol. School te Kampen op 18 Dec. 1888* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1888), 32.

<sup>11</sup> Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 248–49; Bavinck, *Katholiceit*, 49.

<sup>12</sup> Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 250–51; Bavinck, *Katholiceit*, 49.

underlying motive of his interest in the questions and problems of philosophy and especially of epistemology. His most original contribution to theology—the connection of special and general revelation or of faith and knowledge—is rooted in his conviction regarding the catholicity of Christianity and the church. Therefore, we will now focus on Bavinck’s epistemology.

### III. Epistemology

Bavinck’s interest in epistemology already appears in his earliest writings. The very first article he wrote right after his dissertation is titled “The Knowledge of Faith,” in which he succinctly presents the thoughts that are only fully developed in his *Reformed Dogmatics* and his Stone Lectures on *The Philosophy of Revelation*.<sup>13</sup> Faith and knowledge form an essential unity. Believing does not exist without knowing and vice versa. Knowledge is gained not only from mere perception but also by the use of hypotheses that guide and direct research. The great scientists have always dared to draw far-reaching conclusions from the available data and formulated hypotheses that were later proven. In his enthusiasm, Bavinck even calls God “the Hypothesis of all hypotheses,”<sup>14</sup> an expression that does not occur in his later works.

What he elaborates on in his later works is the difference between faith and knowledge, explaining that it lies not in their degrees of certainty but in the different characters of their objects and in the different subjective faculties of the soul that are related to them. “The object of believing is invisible, moral, spiritual, and the object of knowing is visible, sensual, physical.”<sup>15</sup> Still, for both faith and knowledge the object and the subject must be related to each other; they necessarily correspond. In his later writings he will show how faith is related to special revelation and knowledge to general revelation and how the process of gaining certainty is similar in both spheres.<sup>16</sup>

In his article he offers a pointed analysis that knowledge also is based on faith, for instance, on the belief in the trustworthiness of our senses. “Knowing is the result of investigation. And to investigate, we need faith

---

<sup>13</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, Stone Lectures, 1908 (1909; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

<sup>14</sup> The article was republished posthumously in a volume edited by his brother Coenraad Bernardus Bavinck. Herman Bavinck, “Geloofswetenschap,” in Herman Bavinck, *Kennis en leven: Opstellen en artikelen uit vroegere jaren* (Kampen: Kok, 1922), 12; reprinted from *De Vrije Kerk* 6.11 (1880): 510–27.

<sup>15</sup> Bavinck, “Geloofswetenschap,” 7.

<sup>16</sup> See the references to the *Reformed Dogmatics* below. His later works, especially *Christian Worldview* (1904) and *The Philosophy of Revelation* (1909), elaborate on this parallel.

that the object of investigation exists, that our sense organs do not deceive us, that we will be able to gain knowledge by investigating. Without that faith there is no research and no science.”<sup>17</sup> The basic trust in our existence and the reality of the world around us remains axiomatic. Though such existence cannot be proven, rejecting this spontaneous realism would plunge us into the abyss of doubt and uncertainty. “As creatures we stand on the foundation of creation, we therefore can only know by experience; we can only *re-think*.”<sup>18</sup> (In Dutch “to think” is “nadenken,” literally “to rethink,” or rather, “to think after.” The Dutch original has “nadenken”; the italics emphasize that all our thoughts are *afterthoughts*, thoughts thought *after* God has thought them.) Later, Bavinck will develop this idea by defining all human knowledge as the re-thinking of God’s thoughts. Our mind does not invent the truth; it bears witness to the truth that comes to us from outside. It does not produce truth, but it reproduces, reconsiders, and reflects on it.<sup>19</sup>

### 1. Reformed Ethics

A similar connection between the certainty of faith and the certainty of knowledge appears in Bavinck’s recently published manuscript *Reformed Ethics*. In the context of a paragraph on “Assurance and Sealing,” probably originating from 1884 or 1885, he offers some thoughts on general epistemology. First, certainty concerning ourselves lies in our self-consciousness. “That I am I is a matter of faith. Likewise, that I exist. I can’t help it. Anyone who doubts that, who doubts whether his ego is and exists, cannot be logically refuted, but is ill, must be healed. Doubt is a soul sickness.”<sup>20</sup>

Next, certainty regarding the existence of things outside of us, that is, of God and the world, rests on testimony. The existence of God, the principles of science, for instance, in mathematics, are immediately evident, unprovable. “Certainty concerning the existence of all things is possible only through faith, the acceptance of the witness that my *I* itself, or God, or the sensual things, or the spiritual world, or others, give in my consciousness.”<sup>21</sup>

Finally, certainty in science is possible “objectively through evidence, through logical reasoning, but subjectively because knowing always includes

<sup>17</sup> Bavinck, “Geloofswetenschap,” 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:587; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* 1:556.

<sup>20</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 1:379; Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, ed. Dirk van Keulen (Utrecht: Kok Boeken-centrum, 2019), 255.

<sup>21</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:380; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, 255–56.

immediate awareness of that knowledge. When I know, I also at the same time, know that I know.”<sup>22</sup> These brief thoughts draw a parallel between knowledge and faith, between the witness of God’s general revelation in creation to our consciousness and the witness of special revelation in Scripture to the heart.

Taking his starting point in human self-consciousness brings Bavinck close to the position of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and the Dutch Ethical theology. On the one hand, Bavinck intentionally avoids the relativizing subjectivity of this Schleiermacherian position, but—and this is typical for his benevolent approach to modern theology—he also accepts the importance of the human subject when one’s deepest convictions are at stake. In his inaugural address in Kampen, “The Science of Holy Theology” (1883), he criticizes Schleiermacher for being too mystical but acknowledges an element of truth in his position by noting that Reformed orthodox theology has a *principium externum* (external principle) in Holy Scripture and a *principium internum* (internal principle), the Holy Spirit, who makes the things pertaining to God’s kingdom known to us.<sup>23</sup>

Bavinck’s development of his Christian epistemology is one huge attempt to avoid the subjectivity that somehow was part of the structure of his theology, a subjectivity that he expresses by saying that “at bottom, therefore, all certainty about myself and things outside of me is a belief in my own consciousness, in myself and the content of myself.”<sup>24</sup> His epistemological reflections reveal how, already this early in his career, he incorporates the modern epistemological turn to the human subject.

## 2. Reformed Dogmatics

In the first volume of *Reformed Dogmatics* (1895), in the prolegomena, Bavinck uses the Reformed orthodox terminology of the *principia*, the principles or—as the English translation has it—the foundations of theology as a structuring principle. Related to divine revelation in Scripture, the *principium externum*, is human faith, the *principium internum*. That he also equates this internal principle with the Holy Spirit or the witness of the Spirit is one of the unclaritys in his dogmatics. How Bavinck develops this theological concept is crucial for his Christian epistemology. Bavinck uses the Aristotelian notion of *principia*, Christianized in medieval scholastic theology and

<sup>22</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:381; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, 256.

<sup>23</sup> Herman Bavinck, “The Science of Holy Theology,” in *On Theology: Herman Bavinck’s Academic Orations*, ed. and trans. Bruce R. Pass (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 36; Herman Bavinck, *De wetenschap der Heilige Godgeleerdheid* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1883), 15.

<sup>24</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:381; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, 256.

reshaped in Reformed orthodox theology, to relate dogmatics to the other sciences by showing how faith and knowledge are intertwined.<sup>25</sup> Bavinck even uses the concept of the *principia* to connect epistemological and theological certainty. This quest for certainty is one of the driving forces behind his theological thought, and how he develops his Christian epistemology here is his most original and perhaps most important contribution to theology.

In his assessment of the *principia* in science Bavinck first argues that the starting point of all human knowledge is perception. With our senses we perceive certain characteristics of an object and that perception creates an image in our consciousness. This neurological process raises the question of the precise relation between the image in our brains or consciousness and reality. Post-Kantian philosophy poses a hardly bridgeable gap between the object itself and its subjective representation. Still, according to Bavinck, “there is no reason to doubt that in the representations we have a faithful, ideal reproduction of the objects outside ourselves.”<sup>26</sup> The human mind, however, is not content with these faithful reproductions because trustworthy sensory perception is not yet knowledge, which results from reflecting on the observations, forming concepts, and drawing conclusions. Although in these higher activities of the mind we may seem to run the risk of losing the connection with the solid ground of empirical reality, the opposite is true.

It seems strange, even amazing, that, converting mental representations into concepts and processing these again in accordance with the laws of thought, we should obtain results that correspond to reality. Still, one who abandons this conviction is lost. But that conviction can, therefore, rest only in the belief that it is the same *Logos* who created both the reality outside of us and the laws of thought within us and who produced an organic connection and correspondence between the two. Only on this basis is science possible.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, skepticism is untenable because it leads to the philosophical position of solipsism.<sup>28</sup> In a sense, Bavinck blames modern epistemology for this inherent tendency and claims that only faith in the creative activity of

---

<sup>25</sup> Compared to his Reformed orthodox sources, Bavinck is typically modern in this aspect of his theology; see Henk van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 229–300.

<sup>26</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:228; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:202.

<sup>27</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:231; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:205.

<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere he agrees with Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) that if there is no real existence behind the phenomena and all objects depend on the observing subject, then “all science would run aground on the reef of illusionism and solipsism.” Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:544; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:514.

the divine Word (*Logos*) can bridge the gap between objective reality and subjective knowledge and offer certainty that this knowledge is trustworthy. In creating the world and human beings in his likeness and image, God organically linked being and thought together in a mutual correspondence.

Next, Bavinck connects these epistemological observations to theology by claiming that in every science there are three *principia*. God as creator is the *principium essendi* (principle of being). All created things originate from his free knowledge of them that depend on his decree to create them. God reveals this knowledge in the works of creation: “The world is an embodiment of God’s thoughts.” With a reference to the Belgic Confession, Bavinck calls the world a beautiful book in which the creatures are like the letters.<sup>29</sup> The world is not a book with blank pages on which we write down our interpretation of reality; rather, it is God’s own handwriting that we can read. Thus, the created world is the *principium cognoscendi externum* (external principle of knowledge) of all human knowledge and science. Still, this is not enough: we also need a receptive organ to be able to read God’s book. Bavinck illustrates this with one of his favorite quotes from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832): “If the eye were not sun-like, how could we see the light?”<sup>30</sup> Knowledge would be impossible without correspondence between object and subject. This correspondence is guaranteed by creation. “The same Logos, who shines in the world, must also let his light shine in our consciousness.”<sup>31</sup> Reason, the intellect, originating from the Logos, recognizes the Logos in creation, and thus it is the *principium cognoscendi internum* (internal principle of knowledge) of general knowledge. Bavinck presents not only a Christian but even a Trinitarian epistemology: “So, in the final analysis, it is God alone who from his divine consciousness and by way of his creatures conveys the knowledge of truth to our mind—the Father who by the Son and in the Spirit reveals himself to us.”<sup>32</sup>

Bavinck connects these insights regarding the correspondence between the mind and reality on the level of knowledge with the correspondence

---

<sup>29</sup> Belgic Confession 2. The letters mentioned in this medieval metaphor were originally handwritten and sometimes beautifully illustrated.

<sup>30</sup> “Wär nicht das Auge sonnenhaft, wie könnten wir das Licht erblicken?” Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:233; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:205. The English translation has “filled with sunshine,” but that does not convey the correspondence expressed in the German word *sonnenhaft*. The poem has different versions in Goethe’s work; Bavinck quotes from “Zur Farbenlehre.” In his discussion of the innate knowledge of God (*cognitio Dei insita*), Bavinck makes a similar remark: “It cannot be denied, after all, that for us to see we need both the light of the sun (objectively) and our eyes (subjectively).” Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:70; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 2:41.

<sup>31</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:233; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:207.

<sup>32</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:233; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:207.

between object and subject on the levels of religious experience and of saving faith. Just as in science, also in religion, external and objective revelation corresponds to internal and subjective revelation. “Both *principia* are most intimately related, as light is to the eye and the design in the world to human reason.”<sup>33</sup> The *semen religionis* (seed of religion) corresponds to the revelation of God in nature and history.

On a third level, special revelation in Christ and Scripture also corresponds to a special internal revelation. This revelation may never be disconnected from the external and objective revelation in Christ and Scripture, but the *principium cognoscendi externum* in Scripture must also correspond to a *principium cognoscendi internum*, which is defined in various ways by Bavinck either as faith or as the illumination or the witness of the Spirit or even as the Spirit himself.<sup>34</sup>

God is always the *principium essendi*. The *principium cognoscendi externum* differs: in science it is the created world; in religion it is God’s self-revelation in the works of creation and history; and in Christianity it is God’s revelation in Scripture. The *principium cognoscendi internum* also differs: in science it is the human intellect; in religion it is the human receptiveness for the divine, what John Calvin calls the *semen religionis*; and in Christianity it is faith.

Similar thoughts are expressed by Bavinck in a lecture held at a pastors’ conference in Groningen in 1896. In the theses, which were published beforehand, Bavinck stresses not only that all knowledge and all human science rests on God’s revelation, as it is embodied in the whole cosmos as God’s creation, but also that theology is organically intertwined with the other sciences, maintaining an independent status due to special revelation.<sup>35</sup> According to Bavinck, all human knowledge starts with God’s archetypal knowledge. As the reporter summarizes one of Bavinck’s answers during the discussion:

Indeed, not only theology, but all science we have, is based on revelation. Why? Because all science in every field has to do with the revelation of God. God created everything through the Logos; that is, God created after having thought. ... All things are founded on the thoughts of God; in a flower, in an animal, the thought of God is inlaid.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:279; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:253.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:88, 213, 565, 609; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:64, 185, 533, 577.

<sup>35</sup> The appendix to this article offers the first English translation of these theses, which have remained largely unnoticed thus far because they were only published in the announcements and reports of the conference in *De Heraut* and *De Bazuin*.

<sup>36</sup> “Provinciale Groninger Gereformeerde Predikantenconferentie,” *De Heraut* 983 (October 25, 1896).

Bavinck argues that science is about penetrating what God has thought about the things that he created. He connects this with his fundamental conviction about the relationship between creation and redemption: Christ did not come in a new human nature but assumed human nature as it was originally created. Grace restores nature; Christ's incarnation does not introduce a new substance into creation. Bavinck even goes so far as to state that "spoken with respect: creation was God's first incarnation."<sup>37</sup> Though Bavinck does not use this bold expression elsewhere in his theological works, it does convey his deep desire to connect God's general revelation in the works of his hands with God's special revelation in Christ, of whom the Scriptures witness.

Bavinck's Christian epistemology connects the creative thought of God with the re-creative after-thoughts of human beings. In a sense, there might be an intellectualistic and even Platonist flavor to this emphasis on reality's display of eternal divine ideas. Yet, Bavinck's Platonism is congenial with the Augustinian and Thomistic traditions, and it takes a radically Christianized form, especially when he links the embodiment of God's archetypal knowledge in creation with his redemptive work in the incarnation of Christ. Although that does not always come to the fore in his epistemological considerations, we should not forget that Bavinck is deeply aware of the present fallen state of creation and the necessity of redemption: redemption is the liberation of fallen creation from the powers of evil and its restoration according to God's original intentions that will only be revealed eschatologically in the coming kingdom of God.

#### **IV. Spirituality**

To counterbalance an intellectualistic impression of Bavinck's epistemology, it is important to notice that he connects his epistemology with the certainty of believers regarding the Christian faith and with the assurance of salvation. As we have seen, in the *Reformed Ethics* he places the epistemological considerations in the paragraph on the assurance of salvation by the sealing of the Spirit. There he explains—referring to the practical syllogism—that the real problem of assurance in the later Reformed tradition lies in Christians' desire to conclude from the present marks in their lives of true faith that they have been eternally elected and will be eternally saved. "So, the

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. The Dutch disclaimer "met eerbied gesproken" might indicate that Bavinck acknowledges that this expression is improper. I have not found this expression in his published works and, of course, this is just an unauthorized newspaper report.

question became: Is the present fixed and firm enough to carry the edifice of assurance for the past and the future?”<sup>38</sup> If assurance depends on the present, on the experience of faith, regeneration, justification, sanctification, and the witness of the Holy Spirit, then the question shifts from knowing if we are elect to knowing if our faith is correct. To escape this difficulty Bavinck offers an extensive exegetical survey of the biblical meaning of the sealing with the Holy Spirit, which he saw as a special step or stage in the development of a Christian’s life. By the sealing of the Spirit, God gives us the pledge of our future glory so that we gain assurance of salvation. Every Christian immediately receives on believing the Spirit as a seal. However, “although he is thus assured and sealed in an objective sense, he only becomes actually assured and sealed when the Holy Spirit works so powerfully in the believer that he infallibly knows: I am a child of God.”<sup>39</sup> Again the relationship between objective truth and subjective knowledge of the truth is striking. In Bavinck’s later printed works, these reflections on the sealing by the Spirit disappear as he becomes more critical of pietistic tendencies in his own tradition.

In his booklet *The Certainty of Faith* (1901), Bavinck takes a different approach to the problem of assurance, connecting it more intimately with certainty regarding the Christian faith as such. Certainty in general differs from truth. Truth is the correspondence of thought and reality, a relationship between the content of our consciousness and the object of our knowledge. Certainty is not a relationship but a state of the knowing subject, a complete resting of the spirit in the object of its knowledge. The certainty of faith is different from all forms of scientific certainty because our deepest conviction is not the result of evidence. This certainty is weaker than scientific certainty in the objective sense. Scientific certainty rests on rational grounds; the certainty of faith on revelation and authority. The subjective power of the certainty of faith, however, is much stronger than that of scientific certainty. Religious convictions are the deepest and most intimate of all because they are rooted in the heart. “And with at least as much right as Descartes posited his *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) the believer can say: *credo ergo sum, ergo Deus est* (I believe, therefore I am, therefore God is).”<sup>40</sup> This bold statement is not intended to make the existence of God depend upon human faith; rather, it clearly conveys that faith and

<sup>38</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:375; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, 252.

<sup>39</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:395; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, 266.

<sup>40</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. Harry der Nederlanden (St. Catharines, ON: Paideia, 1980), 30; Herman Bavinck, *Geloofszeekerheid*, ed. Henk van den Belt (Soesterberg: Aspekt, 2016), 41.

knowledge are structurally resemblant, as are epistemology and theology, and that our certainty regarding the existence of ourselves and the world is rooted in faith in God our Creator.

In the chapter titled, “The Way That Leads to Certainty according to Holy Scripture,” Bavinck rejects the two alternatives of an objective demonstration and a subjective retreat. Although it is not wrong for Christians to argue rationally for their faith, all evidence is insufficient and of limited value. However, starting from experience cannot lead to certainty either because all experiences presuppose faith, and we cannot derive truth from religious feeling; we need an objective standard.

Therefore, according to Bavinck, the way that leads to certainty starts with the gospel and the appeal that it makes to the human conscience. The gospel does not demand anything or require anything of us; it is the opposite of law. It has no condition at all but is a matter of pure grace. It asks only for our trust, our faith, and nothing else. The gospel perfectly corresponds to the idea that our highest good lies in communion with God. In faith the sinner, aware of being lost, surrenders completely to God’s grace in Christ. The gospel’s moral influence is insufficient to produce faith. A new heart and a renewed will are gifts of God. “Just as knowledge can only occur when the known object and the knowing subject correspond to each other, so true knowledge of God is possible only through faith, which He Himself quickens in our hearts.”<sup>41</sup> From the center of trust in Christ, the believer is also bound to Scripture, because in one and the same act of faith the believer embraces Christ who is portrayed in the Scriptures and the Scriptures themselves.

In the second edition of *The Certainty of Faith* (1903), Bavinck adds that the bond of the soul with the Scriptures has a mystical character but is not irrational and ungrounded. Here he acknowledges an element of truth in the criticism of Benjamin Warfield on the lack of apologetics that he discerned in the first edition of the booklet and in the Amsterdam school in general.<sup>42</sup> In the addition Bavinck explains his disagreement with those who merely

---

<sup>41</sup> Bavinck, *Certainty*, 80; Bavinck, *Geloofszekeerheid*, 85.

<sup>42</sup> In the second edition Bavinck takes notice of Warfield’s “friendly and instructive review.” Herman Bavinck, *De zekeerheid des geloofs*, 2nd ed. (Kampen: Kok 1903), 5; cf. Bavinck, *Geloofszekeerheid*, 20. See Benjamin B. Warfield, “A Review of [Herman Bavinck,] *De Zekeerheid des Geloofs*,” (1903), in John E. Meeter, ed., *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970, 1973), 2:106–23. In his thorough assessment of the discussion between the two theologians, Gijsbert van den Brink concludes that Bavinck yielded to some secondary issues but did not accept the more prominent role for evidence advocated by Warfield. Gijsbert van den Brink, “On Certainty in Faith and Science: The Bavinck-Warfield Exchange,” *The Bavinck Review* 8 (2017): 81.

emphasize the subjective certainty of the Christian religion and in the meantime surrender its objective truth.

Returning to his main argument on the unity of faith in Christ and in Scripture, Bavinck writes that faith is not the source of knowledge but the soul's organ to recognize the truth. "It is the bucket, with which the believer draws the water of life from the well of God's Word."<sup>43</sup> Then he again relates these thoughts on the relationship between faith and Scripture to his epistemological insights.

In all perception and thought, agreement between subject and object is required. It is not enough that the sun shines in the sky; a human also needs an eye to behold that sun by its own light. It is not enough that the visible world is the embodiment of thought; man also needs a mind to search out these thoughts and absorb them into his consciousness. Similarly, the believer is nothing other than a normal human being whose eye has been opened again to eternal and heavenly things, whose heart has again learned to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.<sup>44</sup>

From the certainty of faith, Bavinck turns to the assurance of salvation, which he does not relate to the sealing of the Spirit as a particular step in the development of a Christian's life and experience; the certainty regarding the Christian faith is rather intertwined with the assurance of salvation. "It is characteristic of knowing that it is not only fully assured of its object, but at the same time also of itself. If we know something, know it well and for sure, we at the same time, spontaneously and immediately, know that we know it."<sup>45</sup> Just as knowledge excludes all doubt about itself and does not gain certainty by reasoning, reflection, or logical conclusions, so also faith brings along its own certainty. Assurance is essential for the Christian life; it cannot be obtained by self-reflection; the eye of the soul should not be turned inward. Those who cling to the promises of God trust in his grace, are his children, and receive the Spirit of adoption. The booklet ends with a description of the Christian's life that results from this happy assurance. The hidden life of prayer and fellowship with God is the center that determines all his thoughts and actions. This spiritual life does not exclude but includes the family, society, business, politics, art, and science. It is distinct from these and of much greater value, but does stand irreconcilably opposed to them. Rather, it is the power that enables a faithful fulfillment of the earthly vocation and stamps the whole as service to God. The kingdom of

---

<sup>43</sup> Bavinck, *Certainty*, 83; Bavinck, *Geloofszekeerheid*, 87.

<sup>44</sup> Bavinck, *Certainty*, 83–84; Bavinck, *Geloofszekeerheid*, 87–88.

<sup>45</sup> Bavinck, *Certainty*, 84; Bavinck, *Geloofszekeerheid*, 88.

God surely is like a pearl, more precious than the whole world, but it is also like a leaven that leavens the entire batch of dough. Faith is not only the route to salvation but also the victory that overcomes the world.<sup>46</sup>

There might be an intellectualistic stance in Bavinck's theological philosophy, but his deep spirituality helped him to avoid cold intellectualism. There might also be an optimistic flavor in his theology. The neo-Calvinist project was characterized by its broad vision of culture, where God's common grace was discerned and interpreted as a sanctifying power for the whole of life, including education, politics, art, science, and technology. This view made it possible for Reformed Christians to see their earthly life as a calling. Participation in culture is obedience to God. Bavinck's longing for the victory of the truth sparked an all-too-positive interpretation of renewed religious interest in European culture.

The neo-Calvinist flavor of his theology must be understood as a reaction to pietistic tendencies in the legacy of the eighteenth century. There is a certain tension in Bavinck's writings between this neo-Calvinist ideal and his pietistic sympathies. He was critical of the legacy of Puritanism and the writers of the Dutch "Further Reformation" (*Nadere Reformatie*) on assurance, but he still appreciated the core of this spirituality. Even in *The Certainty of Faith*, he acknowledges the value of the pietistic concentration on the inward relationship with God. "While Christians in earlier days forgot the world for the sake of themselves, we run the risk of losing ourselves in the world." Eagerness to conquer every sphere of life should not replace the awareness of the necessity of true conversion.<sup>47</sup>

Sometimes he distances himself from the neo-Calvinist ideal and warns against its dangers. In a preface to the Dutch translation of the sermons of Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine (1905), he writes, "It seems as if we no longer know what sin and grace, what guilt and forgiveness, what repentance and regeneration mean. We know them theoretically, but we no longer know them in the awesome reality of life."<sup>48</sup> One of his students, Gerrit Brillenburg Wurth (1898–1963), recalled him remarking at a conference in 1918:

How much progress have we made! How much more do we have scientifically and culturally than the older generation of the people of the Secession! But in one respect these people were ahead of us: they still knew what sin and grace meant, while we

<sup>46</sup> Bavinck, *Certainty*, 95–96; Bavinck, *Geloofszeekerheid*, 97.

<sup>47</sup> Bavinck, *Certainty*, 94; Bavinck, *Geloofszeekerheid*, 95.

<sup>48</sup> See the translation in Henk van den Belt, "Herman Bavinck on Scottish Covenant Theology and Reformed Piety," *The Bavinck Review* 3 (2012): 175.

seem to be in danger sometimes—with all our increased knowledge and cultural insight—of forgetting that one thing.<sup>49</sup>

A too-optimistic expectation that our faith will conquer the world may make Christianity vulnerable to being conquered by the world instead. Bavinck's eschatological perspective encourages the Christian to live courageously, already participating in God's new kingdom, while still living in this present evil world. Participation in God's new creation through union with the risen Savior, however, is not the same as unrestrained participation in present culture, although the Christian has a calling there as well.

## V. *Doxology*

Bavinck, brought up in the mildly pietistic, though culturally engaged, climate of the elite among the Dutch Seceders, and immersed in modernity in liberal Leiden, was driven by a longing to grasp the truth. Convinced that all truth comes from the Father of lights, he not only taught and studied dogmatics and ethics from a Reformed perspective but also assessed the unity of the truth by developing a Christian epistemology, connecting faith and knowledge, or special and general revelation. The main elements of this contribution to theology are his convictions 1) that Christianity is truly catholic, because its message is universal, 2) that believing does not exist without knowing and vice versa, 3) that for both faith and knowledge the object and the subject correspond, 4) that—even on the general level—ultimately the Father reveals himself to us by the Son and in the Spirit, and 5) that, therefore, our knowledge is a rethinking and reconsidering of God's thoughts displayed in creation to our mind.

In his later works, such as *Christian Worldview* (1904), *Christian Science* (1904), and *The Philosophy of Revelation* (1909), Bavinck develops these ideas more fully into a Christian perspective on the world and an apologetic analysis of general revelation.<sup>50</sup> In any case, Bavinck's epistemological contribution to theology is the result of a lifelong struggle to grasp the unity of the truth.

The connection between special and general revelation or faith and knowledge has been underestimated in the twentieth century. Understandably, the

---

<sup>49</sup> Gerrit Brillenburg Wurth, "Ter gedachtenis van Dr. Herman Bavinck," *Gereformeerd Weekblad* 10.24 (1954): 185.

<sup>50</sup> Space does not allow us to elaborate on these publications or to discuss the secondary literature. For further reflection, see Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, *God and Knowledge: Herman Bavinck's Theological Epistemology* (London: T&T Clark, 2020).

abuse of natural theology to defend Nazism and apartheid led to a strong critique of general revelation in creation and history. The concepts should therefore not be used in a naive or uncritical way. Nevertheless, in the context of the twenty-first century the importance of understanding faith as a perspective that allows the Christian to recognize God's hand and wisdom in creation and to discern the struggle against the powers of darkness that occupy the universe and corrode humanity in history can hardly be exaggerated.

Secularizing powers tend to wipe away everything that reminds us of him in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). Christians in the present cultural context are understandably glad if they can just survive. That, however, will turn out to be an illusion when anti-Christian powers fully burst forth. We need more than survival. The only way forward is to realize that faith is a "victory that *overcomes* the world."

Bavinck's theology is characterized by the desire to make everything subservient to the glory of God. It has a doxological character. For him, dogmatics was "a song of praise to all God's virtues and perfections, a song of worship and thanksgiving."<sup>51</sup> His desire to connect faith and knowledge, special and general revelation, stem from his passion for the unity of the truth. All truth is God's truth, and the whole world is a theater of his glory. The stage is occupied by the prince of this world, but the believer knows that this power is illegal, and that—notwithstanding the prince of darkness, the father of lies—the light of God will overcome all darkness and the truth will unmask lies and errors.

The Holy Spirit not only seals the salvation of the individual Christian but also bears witness to the truth. As Bavinck states in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, the doctrine of the *testimonium Spiritus sancti* (witness of the Holy Spirit) may seem to make the Christian, and especially the Protestant position, vulnerable, but in fact it is

the triumph of the foolishness of the cross over the wisdom of the world, the triumph of the thoughts of God over the deliberations of man. In this sense the testimony of the Holy Spirit has outstanding apologetic value. This is the victory that overcomes the world, namely our faith.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Rolf H. Bremmer, "Herman Bavinck," in *Biografisch lexicon voor de geschiedenis van het Nederlands Protestantisme* (Kampen: Kok, 1978), 1:43. Bremmer does not mention the source of this quote.

<sup>52</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:600; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:570.

Thus, the Christian can sing: “This is my Father’s world: O let me ne’er forget, that, though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet.”<sup>53</sup> According to Bavinck, faith overcomes the world by viewing it as God’s creation, though fallen, still on its way to final restoration because of Christ’s redemption.

## Appendix

Theses for the Provincial Groninger Reformed Preachers’ Conference:<sup>54</sup>

1. Since the Divine Being is infinitely superior to all creatures and therefore in himself unknowable to all creatures, all knowledge and all human science rests on God’s conscious and free revelation.
2. The content of this revelation, taken in the broadest sense, has its archetype in the *scientia libera* in the consciousness of God; rests on the basis of the *decreta* (decrees) in the will of God;<sup>55</sup> is embodied in all that exists as creation, outside of God’s Being through his will; that is in the cosmos; and for all these reasons forms one organic whole.
3. All human science has that cosmos, that is, that content of revelation, as its object and is therefore objectively connected in all its parts in an organic way; while subjectively, too, this organic connection of all science is demanded and confirmed by the unity of the human spirit.
4. Just as in all God’s works diversity goes hand in hand with unity, so too the organic unity of science does not exclude the diversity of its parts; and theology in particular occupies a separate and independent place in the organism of science, especially by virtue of the special revelation that became necessary because of sin.
5. As a science, theology is of course distinct from the knowledge of God, which is the share of all believers; its subject is not the church as an institution but as an organism;<sup>56</sup> and its practice requires the application of

<sup>53</sup> The hymn was written by Maltbie D. Babcock in 1901.

<sup>54</sup> “Provinciale Groninger Gereformeerde Predikantenconferentie” (1896).

<sup>55</sup> In Reformed orthodox theology the distinction between God’s archetypal knowledge as Creator and the ectypal knowledge that he shares with his creatures was quite common. For an introduction and discussion, see Willem J. van Asselt, “The Fundamental Meaning of Theology: Archetypal and Ectypal Theology in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Thought,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 64.2 (2002): 319–35. The Reformed orthodox also copied the medieval scholastic distinction between God’s necessary knowledge (*scientia necessaria*), by which he knows himself, and his free knowledge (*scientia libera*), which is based on his free decree to create and govern the creation.

<sup>56</sup> The distinction is derived from Kuyper. In the background stands the discussion about the right place for theological study and training, either the theological school of the churches

a scholarly method; the designation of which belongs to the task of Christian philosophy.

6. The characteristic of Reformed theology lies in its theological character, and therefore places a demand on its practitioner to maintain this character throughout its field, especially also in the various *loci* of dogmatics (e.g., election, justification, regeneration, baptism); the more so because the anthropological (Christological, soteriological) point of departure leads to all kinds of errors as history shows.

---

of the Secession in Kampen or the Free University in Amsterdam. Bavinck strongly advocated a merger of the school with the university in Amsterdam. He defends that by claiming that teaching theology is not the task of the church as an institution in an isolated theological seminary but of the church as an organism, and it therefore should take place in a broader university.

# ***How Did God Hate Esau (Malachi 1:2–3)?***

**RON BERGEY**

## **Abstract**

The antonyms “love” and “hate” in biblical covenant contexts and ancient Near East political texts refer respectively to keeping and not keeping covenant or treaty commitments. This same general sense is found in the marital covenant framework. One case involves Leah being described as “hated” and Rachel as “loved.” As Jacob’s first wife, Leah had covenantal matriarchal rights, which were disregarded in deference to her younger sister, Rachel, Jacob’s second wife. Against this background, the proposal made here is that the diametrically opposite divine disposition regarding Jacob and Esau in Malachi 1:2–3 has to do with covenant succession—God’s disregard for the right of primogeniture of Esau, said to be “hated,” in deference to his younger twin, Jacob, said to be “loved.”

## **Keywords**

*Malachi 1:2–3, Romans 9:13, Genesis 29:30–33, Deuteronomy 21:15–17, love, hate, Jacob, Esau, Rachel, Leah, covenant, marriage, primogeniture*

---

## I. Introductory Remarks

“**Y**et I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated” (Mal 1:2–3). Did God really hate Esau? The apostle Paul’s citation in Romans 9:13 of the Lord’s pronouncement made by the prophet Malachi casts no doubt.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, God did!

In current usage “hate” is synonym with extreme dislike, antipathy, enmity, and antagonism. Many biblical occurrences connote extreme dislike even, in some cases, violence done to the one hated (e.g., Gen 37:4; 2 Sam 13:15, 22; also see Gen 51:15; Deut 19:11; Judg 11:7; Prov 29:10). Most commentators, however, would concur with a view like that voiced by Ralph Smith: “The usual rendering of the word, *san’e* (= hate), is too strong here [Mal 1:3].”<sup>2</sup> But Carl Keil warns that it “must not be weakened down into ... loving less ... [Hate] is the opposite of love. And this meaning must be retained here.”<sup>3</sup> John Merlin Powis Smith affirms, “But it is a question, not of degrees of love, but of love or no love.”<sup>4</sup> Such comments illustrate that an answer to the question—What does “to hate” mean in the proclamation “Esau I have hated”?—is difficult to pinpoint.

So, the question raised here is, *how* did God hate Esau? A key to finding an answer lies in the antonymic relationship of “love” and “hate” in this and other contexts involving people in a covenant bond.<sup>5</sup> The working hypothesis is that the usage of these terms in such contexts should inform the response to this question.

## II. Antonymic Relationship of “Love” and “Hate” in Covenants and Political Treaties

“To love,” from *’ahav* (אָהַב), in a covenant relationship is especially expressed in action by adhering to the covenant stipulations by an inferior to a superior or vice-versa. “To hate,” from *sanē*’ (שָׂנֵא) expresses the opposite action, as

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Moo observes that the Romans 9:13 quote of this statement is the only time in the New Testament where it is said God hates someone. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 587, n. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, WBC 32 (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 305.

<sup>3</sup> Carl F. Keil, “Malachi,” *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, in Carl F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 10:40.

<sup>4</sup> John Merlin Powis Smith, “The Book of Malachi,” *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Hill concurs with those who find these words “best taken as ‘covenant language’ in Mal 1:2–3.” Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi*, AB 25D (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 152. Moo adds that statements in the Old Testament of God’s hatred of sinners “lack the covenantal flavor of Malachi and Paul.” Moo, *Romans*, 587. Cf., e.g., Ps 119:113.

illustrated by its juxtaposition with “love” in the Sinai covenant Decalogue (words italicized for emphasis):

For I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who *hate* me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who *love* me and keep my commandments. (Exod 20:5–6 *ESV*; cf. Deut 5:9–10)

These antonyms are also paired in ancient Near Eastern political language.<sup>6</sup> In the fourteenth century BCE El-Amarna correspondence, the Canaanite ruler of Jerusalem, Abdu-Heba, complains to Pharaoh about his lack of assistance: “Why do you love the ‘Apiru [Abdu-Heba’s adversaries] and hate the mayors [rulers of other Canaanite city-states needing help]?”<sup>7</sup> In another El-Amarna letter, the king of Byblos writes to Pharaoh about the rebellion in his city: “Behold the city! Half of it loves the sons of ‘Abd-Asir-ta [the rebellion leader], half of it loves my lord.”<sup>8</sup> The seventh century BCE Assyrian Esarhaddon treaty reads, “(You swear) that you will love Ashurbanipal, the crown prince, son of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, your lord, as you do yourselves.”<sup>9</sup> The same treaty warns against anyone who would incite the father and his heir designate “to hate each other.”<sup>10</sup> Saul Olyan succinctly states, “To ‘hate’ in a treaty context means to violate covenant; to ‘love’ means to conform to covenant stipulations.”<sup>11</sup>

This contrast is also seen in examples drawn from biblical texts involving political affairs. Jonathan loved David (1 Sam 18:1; 20:16–17). David expressed Jonathan’s love for him as “surpassing the love of women” (2 Sam 1:26). This language expresses their covenant bond (1 Sam 18:3; 20:16). Jonathan willingly relinquished his right to succeed to his father’s throne. He acknowledged David as God’s heir designate and did all he could during his lifetime toward that end. (1 Sam 23:17–18). To express his faithful covenant relationship, it is said that King Hiram “loved David” (1 Kgs 5:1). The “lovers” Ephraim hired were treaty-allies of Assyria (Hos 8:9).

<sup>6</sup> William L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25.1 (1963): 77–87.

<sup>7</sup> See William L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 326–27.

<sup>8</sup> Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” 79–80.

<sup>9</sup> Donald J. Wiseman, “The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon,” *Iraq* 20.1 (1958): 50.

<sup>10</sup> James B. Prichard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. with supplement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 537.

<sup>11</sup> Saul Olyan, “Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations in Ancient Israel and Its Environment,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115.2 (1996): 210.

To summarize, love and hate in biblical covenant contexts and ancient Near Eastern political language are not understood as states but as actions. To love is to act in accord with the covenant or treaty. Hate is not doing so.

### III. *Antonymic Relationship of “Love” and “Hate” in Marriage Covenants*

Terms used to describe covenant relationships are rooted in kinship. Political figures were spoken of and addressed each other anthropologically as kinsmen—fathers, sons, and brothers—as seen in many biblical texts (2 Sam 24:11, 16; 1 Kgs 9:13; cf. 5:26; 20:32; cf. v. 34; Ps 89:27–28; Isa 22:21; Amos 1:9) and other ancient Near Eastern documents,<sup>12</sup> even as son-in-law and father-in-law.<sup>13</sup> The latter case obviously expresses a covenant relationship formed by marriage. Kings allied by treaties are said to have married. “Jehoshaphat ... made a marriage alliance [reflexive form of קָח “to get married”] with Ahab” (2 Chr 18:1; 2 Kgs 8:27; see also 1 Sam 18:21; 1 Kgs 3:1).<sup>14</sup> Of course, these kings did not really marry each other. The treaties involved lesser kings marrying daughters of greater kings, thereby creating a covenant bond expressed in nuptial kinship terms. The former became the son-in-law and the latter the father-in-law.

According to Frank Moore Cross, kinship language was adopted into legal, political, and religious institutions.<sup>15</sup> This position inverts the popular idea “that the concept of ‘the love of God’ in the book of Deuteronomy is actually borrowed from the political life of the ancient Near East.”<sup>16</sup> On Cross’s foundation can be built a case that terms like covenant love and hate—and the correlation of these antonyms—worked their way into those other socio/religio-political spheres from the family unit.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> G. N. Knoppers, “Ancient Near Eastern Royal Grants and the Davidic Covenant: A Parallel?,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116.4 (1996): 681–84.

<sup>13</sup> For example, see Jacques Briand, *Traités et serments dans le Proche-Orient ancien*, Supplément – Cahiers évangile 81 (Paris: Cerf, 1992), 110.

<sup>14</sup> In such a context, קָח (*khtn*) could be rendered “become the son-in-law of.” See David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 137b; hereafter, *CDCH*.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Moore Cross, “Kinship and Covenant in Ancient Israel,” in *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 8, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Moshe Weinfeld approvingly refers to Moran’s notion (put forth in Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy”). Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 81.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Ron Bergey, “Dieu peut-il commander d’aimer? Le grand commandement dans le contexte de la parenté de l’alliance,” *La Revue réformée* 67.3 (2016): 19–28. For the Puritan Thomas Goodwin, the Incarnate Christ “is the pattern and exemplar of all these our relationships [husband, father, brother], and they all are but the copies of his.” Thomas Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 83.

The suggestion made here is that it was particularly the matrimonial bond that gave rise to the use of kinship terms in other covenant contexts. Admittedly, this is sociologically narrower than the kinship domain posited by Cross. But the marital relationship would better explain, it seems, why familial terms describe members in covenant relationship. Marriage gave birth to all that vocabulary.

An implication is that the covenant concept itself was adopted into other domains from marriage. Biblical texts show that marriage creates a bond-qualified “covenant.”<sup>18</sup> For example, “Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by *covenant* ...” (Mal 2:14; cf. Deut 7:2–3; Prov 2:17).<sup>19</sup> Moreover, marriage is a common metaphor portraying the covenant bond between the Lord and his people (e.g., Jer 31:32; Ezek 16:8; cf. Isa 54:5; Hos 2:16; Eph 5:31–32; Rev 21:9).

A further proposal can be made: the connotations of “love” and “hate” in covenant contexts are also derived from marriage. These antonyms are juxtaposed in conjugal contexts.

“If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved [lit., “hated”] ...” (Deut 21:15; cf. Judg 14:16). Comments on this text will follow.

In this regard—and in connection with Malachi 1:2–3—a key text is Genesis 29:30–33:

So Jacob ... *loved* Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. When the LORD saw that Leah was *hated*, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, “Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will *love* me.” She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Because the LORD has heard that I am *hated*, he has given me this son also.” And she called his name Simeon.

It is important to note that the text does not say Jacob did not love Leah. It says he loved Rachel “more than [he loved] Leah.” That comparison does not define hate, but it certainly delimits it and removes it from the realm of animosity. Some lexicons attenuate here the sense of “hate”: “be unable (unwilling) to bear one’s wife, disdain”; “be unloved, of wife.”<sup>20</sup> But the description of Jacob’s hating Leah is not one of repudiation, distaining or, in fact, not loving her. So, in what way or *how* was Leah hated?

<sup>18</sup> A well-recognized point emphasized by Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, 323.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Steven L. McKenzie and Howard N. Wallace, “Covenant Themes in Malachi,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45.4 (1983): 549.

<sup>20</sup> This is the order given in Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: Brill, 1958), 925b–926a; *CDCH*, 439a.

In this marriage covenant context, Leah was deprived of her rightful rank and privileges. As Jacob's first wife, Leah was the *de jure* matriarch. She was denied that status. Also, Leah gave birth to Reuben, Jacob's firstborn. A father's firstborn son was the legitimate heir. Instead, Jacob's second wife, Rachel, became the *de facto* matriarch. Her firstborn, Joseph, became heir and through his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, received the firstborn double portion. In short, in deference to Rachel, Leah was relegated to the second rank. She was deprived of her rightful privileges. The suggestion here is that Leah was "hated" by being deprived of her marriage covenant rights.

This understanding can be seen in two Deuteronomic laws. The first mirrors Leah's case:

If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved [lit., "hated," so elsewhere below], and both the loved and the unloved have borne him children, and if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, then on the day when he assigns his possessions as an inheritance to his sons, he may not treat the son of the loved as the firstborn in preference to the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn, but he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the firstfruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his. (Deut 21:15–17)

The second law also aims at stemming the deprivation of a wife's legitimate marital rights.

If any man takes a wife and goes in to her and then hates her and accuses her of misconduct [not being a virgin] . . . [By his false accusation] he has brought a bad name upon a virgin of Israel. And she shall be his wife. He may not divorce her all his days. (Deut 22:13–14, 19)

This latter law is behind Malachi's exhortation which also reflects the suggested understanding of "hate":

For the man who does not love [lit., "who hates"] his wife but divorces her [lit., "by divorcing," an infinitive in Hebrew with no complement], says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. (Mal 2:16)

The prophet calls out unjustified (arbitrary) divorce as violence done to the woman.<sup>21</sup> She is stripped of matrimonial rights ostensibly guaranteed by the marriage covenant.

---

<sup>21</sup> Despite the difficult syntax opening verse 16, this conclusion appears certain. On the interpretive issues, see Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: A Study of Biblical Law and Ethics Governing Marriage, Developed from the Perspective of Malachi*, VTSup 52 (New York: Brill, 1994), 48–73.

If it were argued that “hate” in these passages describes acrimony, thus the motive behind the action (disenfranchisement of a firstborn and groundless divorce) rather than a word-description of the deed itself, the question would still remain: *How* is hate manifested?<sup>22</sup> Hate here boils down to disregard of the marriage covenant in part or in whole. Deuteronomic law and Malachi’s remonstrance were intended to safeguard the covenant rights of a wife described as hated.<sup>23</sup>

#### **IV. Antonymic Relationship of “Love” and “Hate” Involving Jacob and Esau**

The point made up to this juncture is that “love” and “hate” in covenant contexts—be they in nature religious, political, or marital—correspondingly involve respecting (love) or disregard (hate) of covenantal responsibilities or privileges.

Viewed from this angle, Malachi 1:2b–3a is a theological crux: “Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated.” In context, the focus is on Israel (Mal 1:1, 5; 2:11) and Edom (Mal 1:4). Rather than employing those names of nations, Jacob and Esau appear since they, twins by birth, were the eponymous ancestors and representatives of the two nations in question. The past tense “loved” and “hated” underscores this.<sup>24</sup> These factors point back to what had occurred in the case of these twins born to Rebecca, wife of Isaac, even while the two were still in her womb. It is important not to lose sight of this antecedent as the setting of the statement in Malachi 1:2–3.

Behind the scenes and before their birth the Lord had stipulated, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger” (Gen 25:23). All this was part of God’s sovereign plan of covenant succession through Jacob, not Esau. Its outworking encompassed the deceitful schemes of Rebecca and Jacob’s collusion with his mother’s machinations to trick

<sup>22</sup> On the Romans 9:13 quote of Malachi 1:2–3, Moo says, “‘Love’ and ‘hate’ are not here, then, emotions that God feels but actions that he carries out.” Moo, *Romans*, 587.

<sup>23</sup> A case involving marital and political situations is that of the wife that Rehoboam loved more than his other wives, including his first wife. He made Abijah, the son of the wife he loved more, his successor (2 Chr 11:21–22). As a result, his firstborn son, born to his first wife, was deprived of his right of succession (cf. 2 Chr 21:3 on the succession to the kingship of the firstborn). In other words, the son of the “loved” wife was beneficiary of the right of legitimacy denied the firstborn.

<sup>24</sup> The context requires the past-tense translation, even though the same form of both Hebrew verbs, in some contexts, means “love” and “hate” continued from the past into the present (e.g., Gen 27:4; 1 Kgs 22:8).

the aged Isaac into bestowing the birthright and blessing upon Jacob, the son Rebecca loved (Gen 25:28). The net result was that Esau was not the designated successor—which was his natural right—in the covenant line established by God through no fault of his own. In that sense he was “hated”: deprived of that legitimate heirship privilege. By God’s choosing, covenant succession was granted to Jacob through no merit of his own. In that sense he was “loved.” These two opposite actions on God’s part are described by these antonymic terms in Malachi 1:2–3.

In context, God’s bestowal of covenant succession upon Jacob was an apt response to the people’s query, “How have you loved us?” “Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?” (Mal 1:2). Implicitly, God should have loved Esau as firstborn. But—here is the proof he loved “us” (Israel)—he loved Jacob (and his lineage) by bestowing on him the rights of primogeniture.

#### **V. Do Other Interpretations Better Respond to the Question, “How Was Esau Hated”?**

Some other interpretations of Malachi 1:2–3 have been noted in passing. These and others will be treated here.

The first maintains that the phrase “Esau I have hated” is explained in the contemporary post-exilic context of Malachi. Keil remarks, “Malachi does not expressly state in what the love of God to Jacob (i.e., Israel) showed itself; but this is indirectly indicated in what is stated concerning the hatred towards Edom. The complete desolation of the Edomitish territory is quoted as proof of his hatred.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, John Smith says, “The love for Jacob is demonstrated by the hatred toward Esau .... The prophet here in all probability refers to some calamity that has recently befallen Edom and cites it as indisputable evidence of Yahweh’s love for Judah.”<sup>26</sup> A description of Edom’s desolation for her aggression against her sister nation immediately follows the statement of Esau being hated: “I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert” (Mal 1:3b; cf. vv. 4–5). Pieter Verhoef states, “The effect of ‘love’ and ‘hate’ will be that Jacob’s descendants would be established in their country and those of Edom would be uprooted.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Keil, “Malachi,” 430.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, “The Book of Malachi,” 21–22.

<sup>27</sup> Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 202.

Coupled with this demise-of-contemporary-Edom interpretation, some see in God's "hate" of Esau "malevolent actions" and "hostility."<sup>28</sup> In view of their exile, God had said of Israel, "I began to hate them [Ephraim]" and "I will love them no more" (Hos 9:15). Andrew Hill approvingly quotes the comment of Francis Andersen and David Noel Freedman on "hate" in this verse from Hosea: it "describes hostility in a broken relationship," which Hill then applies to Esau and his descendants in Malachi 1:3, saying, "That same emotion and hostility color this text as well."<sup>29</sup> But "hate" in Hosea 9:15 (even if rendered "love no more") can be understood in context as God denying Israel what he had covenanted for obedience: life in the land. In that sense, God's "hate" would be expressed in his applying the covenant curse of exile (cf. also Jer 12:7–8, where God's "beloved" and his saying "I hate her" refer to his people [heritage] and his bringing the covenant curse upon them). In other words, Israel would be denied the expected covenantal privileges in the land of promise.

There can be little doubt that Malachi's statement did not have reference only to the past described in the Genesis 25 narrative. Just as Jacob was the head and representative of Israel, so too was Esau with reference to his people and nation. The Edomites and Israelites had a long history of conflict up until the then-present time (cf., e.g., Ps 137:7–9; Obad 1:10). The position presented here, however, is that the response to the question—*how* God hated Esau in Malachi 1:3—lies in an antecedent (Gen 25) rather than in contemporary or near-future Edomite circumstances. To reiterate, the reference to Israel and Edom was made by using the ancestors' names and that in the past tense: "Jacob I have loved but Esau I have hated." If the eponymic case were not intentionally foregrounded, would not God's disposition have been directly expressed instead to Israel and Edom, as is characteristically the case? In addition, as regards Esau, there was no divine malevolence or hostility involved before his birth, the time to which this statement refers. Although the contemporary or future vicissitudes of those two nations were not unrelated to those opposite divine dispositions, they were so only consequentially.

A second interpretation promotes a comparative idea. God's hating Esau means he was "loved less" than Jacob.<sup>30</sup> The comparative notion explains in

<sup>28</sup> Mignon R. Jacobs, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 165.

<sup>29</sup> Hill, *Malachi*, 152. Cf. Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea*, AB 24 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 545.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Ebenezer Henderson, *The Twelve Minor Prophets* (1858; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 448; Charles L. Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets* (Chicago: Moody, 1951), 251.

some cases the juxtaposition of antonyms, even love and hate, where the latter involves a lesser degree of the former (2 Sam 13:15; Prov 13:24; Matt 6:24; 10:37). In the key Genesis 29 passage, viewed as informative for understanding Malachi 1:2–3, it is said that Jacob “loved Rachel more than Leah” (Gen 29:30). If comparison were the point, why was it not said Leah was “loved less”? Likewise, in Malachi 1:3, would it not be said that Esau was “loved less”?

If automatically applied, the comparative notion would lead to a wrong understanding. Concerning the antonymic “good” and “evil” or “bad” (e.g., Rom 9:11; cf. Gen 2:17), would “less good” be an acceptable substitute for “bad”? Would “hate less” be an acceptable replacement for “love”? Substituting “loved less” for “hate” is tantamount to saying “cold” means “less hot”—which may define “warm” but certainly not “cold.” The comparative notion neither defines “hate” nor explains its antonymic use in a covenant context—which is the main point.

Related to the above comparative idea is the understanding that “hate” means, as briefly mentioned above, “unloved” or “not loved.” On Malachi 1:3, Herbert Wolf states,

The meaning of God’s hatred has perplexed and confused many, but a solution is readily available from Scripture [pointing to Gen. 29:30–33]. ... [Leah] was “hated” in the sense that she came out second best in her rivalry with Rachel. The New American Standard Bible is correct in translating the word “unloved” rather than “hated.”<sup>31</sup>

But how could Leah, loved less than Rachel, be unloved? How could Jacob not love someone he loved albeit less?

In the “two wives” Deuteronomy 21:15 passage cited earlier, it was seen that the quoted version refers to the “hated” wife as “unloved” (ESV; cf. “loves one but not the other” NIV; “loves more than the other” NET). “Unloved” or “not loved” expresses the opposite of “love.” But if that semantic opposition were intended, why did Genesis 29:31, Deuteronomy 21:15, and here, Malachi 1:3, rather than *sane* (סָנֵא, “hate”) not simply read *lo’ ’ahav* (לֹא אָהַב, “not love”)?

John Calvin rightly explains that for Malachi, “Jacob had obtained the right of primogeniture contrary to the order of nature.” In deference to his brother, Esau “was not loved by God.”<sup>32</sup> Apart from his rendering “not

<sup>31</sup> Herbert Wolf, *Haggai and Malachi*, Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1976), 64.

<sup>32</sup> John Calvin, “Zachariah and Malachi,” *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 5:465.

loved” rather than “hated,” Calvin draws the right conclusion: Esau was denied his firstborn rights.

A different interpretation equates “hate” with “reject.” This view is inextricably bound up in semantically equating “love” and “election.” The two are viewed as so indissociable that God’s love for Jacob is defined as “elective love.”<sup>33</sup> A. H. Konkel affirms that the prophet “is emphasizing the sovereign choice of God.”<sup>34</sup> Ralph Smith unequivocally states,

When Yahweh says, “I have loved Jacob,” he means, “I choose Jacob, and when he says, “I hated Esau,” he means, “I did not choose Esau.” ... This is certainly election language. “Loved” means chosen and “hated” means not chosen.<sup>35</sup>

In Deuteronomic terms, within the covenant framework, election proceeds from God’s love and election precedes the application of his redemptive work (Deut 7:7–8).<sup>36</sup> But love and election, while theologically systemically related, are not semantically one and the same any more than redemption and election are. It naturally follows that, if election is semantically assimilated to “love” for Jacob (see the following interpretation), the semantic counterpart to his “hating” Esau would indeed be “reject.”<sup>37</sup>

Commenting on the citation of Malachi 1:2–3 in Romans 9:13, C. E. B. Cranfield, after ruling out the comparative “love less” idea, states,

“Love” and “hate” are rather to be understood as denoting election and rejection respectively, God has chosen Jacob and his descendants to stand in a positive relation to the fulfilment of His gracious purpose: He has left Esau and Edom outside this relationship.<sup>38</sup>

If that were the intended meaning, it is strange that the common word pair—“choose” (*bakhar*, בָּחַר) and “reject” (*ma’as*, מָאַס)—was not used in

<sup>33</sup> Verhoef, *Haggai and Malachi*, 201.

<sup>34</sup> A. H. Konkel, “אָסַח,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1257.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, 305.

<sup>36</sup> Ron Bergey, “L’Élection dans le Deutéronome,” *La Revue réformée* 59.5 (2008): 49–64. In Hosea 11:1, love is the fountainhead of redemption.

<sup>37</sup> Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 223. Douglas Stuart says hate “could well be translated ‘reject’ or ‘oppose’...” Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC 31 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 153. Samuel Bénétreau views love and hate here in Paul’s thought as “practically synonymous of to choose or let aside.” Samuel Bénétreau, *L’Épître de Paul aux Romains* (Vaux-sur-Seine: Edifac, 1997), 2:43. On Romans 9:13, Moo says, “God’s hatred of Esau is best understood to refer to God’s decision not to bestow this privilege on Esau. Its might best be translated ‘reject.’” Moo, *Romans*, 587.

<sup>38</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 2:480.

Malachi 1:2–3 as elsewhere (2 Kgs 23:27; Job 34:33; Ps 78:67–68; Isa 7:15–16; 41:9; Jer 33:24).<sup>39</sup> Using those two words would have unequivocally answered the question raised in verse 2, “How have you loved us?” Moreover, judging from the covenantal contexts mentioned above, “hate” and “reject” are no more synonymic than “love” and “choose.” In short, translating “hate” with “reject” conflates two semantically distinct terms resulting in the loss of the specific sense of hate in covenantal contexts.

Finally, in tandem with the preceding interpretation is the view that “loved” and “hated” point to the eternal destinies of Jacob and Esau. Do these terms portend respectively the election of Jacob (unto salvation) and the rejection of Esau (leading to his eternal condemnation) in these passages?<sup>40</sup>

Well aware of this issue, Keil warned against watering down the sense of these terms in Malachi 1:2–3, especially “hate,” “to avoid the danger of falling into the doctrine of predestination.”<sup>41</sup> Robert Jewett made the following observation on Romans 9:13: “The extraordinary arbitrariness of double predestination in Malachi 1:2–3 combined with the use of the allegedly ‘un-Christian’ word ‘hate’ has led commentators to tone down as far as possible what Paul is saying here.”<sup>42</sup>

Concerning the quotation of Malachi’s affirmation “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” in Romans 9:13, John Murray finds “a distinction between salvation and the coming short of the same” and concludes, “We are compelled, therefore, to find in the word a declaration of the sovereign counsel of God as it is concerned with the ultimate destinies of men.”<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Concerning the latter, Eugene Merrill says, “Frequently it appears in contrast to vbs. meaning ‘choose,’ especially *bhr.*” Eugene H. Merrill, “חַמַּד,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:833.

<sup>40</sup> The question is then raised concerning their descendants and individuals in general, matters that are well beyond the scope here.

<sup>41</sup> Keil, “Malachi,” 430. According to H. L. Ellison, “The love and hate, as Paul quotes Mal. 1:2 [*sic*], are the election choice before they were born, a love and hate not necessarily expressed in final destiny but worked out in the history of their descendants.” H. L. Ellison, *The Mystery of Israel: An Exposition of Romans 9–11* (rev. and enlarged edition; Exeter: Paternoster, 1968), 46. John Piper states that Romans 9:6–8 provides an “ongoing principle” of unconditional election, not only of the nation of Israel but also within that nation, creating a sphere in which God’s word is effective resulting in a true Israel distinct from Israel at large, and deals with “election unto eternal salvation.” John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 48–49.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 580.

<sup>43</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 2:24. As concerns the quotation of Malachi 1:2–3 in Romans 9:13, Murray disagrees with Charles Hodge, for whom “hate” means “to love less, to regard and treat with less favour” (2:21). Murray adds, “The divine reaction stated [concerning Esau] could scarcely be reduced to that of not loving or loving less” (2:22).

Calvin juxtaposes Paul's quote of Malachi 1:2–3 in Romans 9:13 with the promise made to Rebecca, "the older shall serve the younger" (Rom 9:12; quoting Gen 25:23), and opines, "The spiritual condition of Jacob was witnessed to by his dominion, and that of Esau by his bondage."<sup>44</sup> On the transfer of the right of primogeniture from Esau to Jacob, Calvin fully acknowledges the physical dimension of inheritance. However, he also sees it as a type of a spiritual dimension; in his commentary on Romans 9:12, he says, "Although the promise had reference to the right of primogeniture, yet God declared His will in it as the type of something greater."<sup>45</sup> In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he states, "Here was a change like a portent, which, as Paul contends, testified to the election of Jacob and the reprobation of Esau" (3.22.4).<sup>46</sup> He adds, "God willed by an earthly symbol to declare Jacob's spiritual election" and Paul "did not hesitate to seek in the outward blessing evidence to prove the spiritual blessing." He concludes, "Jacob, therefore, is chosen and distinguished from the rejected Esau by God's predestination" (3.22.6).<sup>47</sup>

First and foremost—and germane to the present study—Calvin emphasizes God's overruling Esau's primogeniture both in Malachi 1:2–3 and in the quotation of those verses in Romans 9:13. As indicated earlier, apart from his rendering the Hebrew for "hate" as "not loved," Calvin holds the same position as posited here: the word refers to Esau as firstborn not being the covenant successor. Second, he understands Paul to say that Esau's being denied that right pointed to a spiritual dimension, namely, his not benefiting from the covenant promise of salvation typologically or symbolically portrayed in the firstborn right of inheritance. The matter underlined here is not the extent to which Calvin expounded this passage. It is rather that he kept the inversion of primogeniture and the typological import separate. The former is the focus here in response to the question: *How* did God hate Esau?

---

<sup>44</sup> John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians*, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 201–2. Cranfield also sees 9:13 as referring to "the older shall serve the younger" (v. 12), "but expressing it more clearly and pointedly." Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:480.

<sup>45</sup> Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians*, 201.

<sup>46</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles; LCC 21 (1960; repr., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 2:936. Verhoef says, "We disagree with Calvin, et al., that reference is made in our text to the predestination of Jacob to eternal life and the reprobation of Esau unto eternal damnation." Verhoef, *Haggai and Malachi*, 201.

<sup>47</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:938.

Does such an understanding of Paul's citation of Malachi 1:2–3 in Romans 9:13 militate against or mitigate the position posited here? Bearing in mind the answer sought to the question of *how* God hated Esau, the two interpretations—as framed by Calvin—are not mutually exclusive. The view espoused here is that Malachi appealed to God's overturning Esau's privilege as the firstborn to respond to the earlier question raised by his contemporaries, "How have you loved us?" (Mal 1:2), which inversely corresponds to "but Esau I have hated" (Mal 1:3). Paul appeals to God's overturning the privilege as the firstborn of Esau, in light of majority Israelite unbelief, to demonstrate that "it is not as though the word of God has failed" (Rom 9:6a), which leads to the clarification "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel" (Rom 9:6b) since, like Esau, the majority of Israelites stand outside the inner covenant circle of the word of promise through unbelief but nonetheless remain within the outer covenant circle as offspring of Abraham.<sup>48</sup> In the context of Romans 9–11, Paul will define the minority of Israelites in the inner circle as the remnant (9:27; 11:5).<sup>49</sup> Thanks to God's elective purposes, there always was, is, and will be a remnant (9:27–29; 11:2–5, 25–26).<sup>50</sup> It cannot be said that God's word, his covenant promise, failed because the majority of Israelites rejected Jesus as the Christ.<sup>51</sup>

## Summary and Conclusion

The working hypothesis here is that the marriage covenant bond is the fountainhead of the use of the antonyms "love" and "hate" in other covenant (and treaty) contexts, be they religious or political. Based on Genesis 29:30–33, it is suggested that "hate" juxtaposed with "love" refers to Jacob's disregard of Leah's privileges of matriarchy in deference to Rachel, who is described as "loved." As concerns Malachi 1:2–3, "But Esau I have hated," *how* God did so was by disregarding Esau's firstborn covenant right as

<sup>48</sup> On these issues, see Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:479–81; Murray, *Romans*, 2:xii–xv, 8–24; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, WBC 38B (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), 544–49; Moo, *Romans*, 587; Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 570–86; N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Book II, Parts III and IV (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013), 1156–58.

<sup>49</sup> The remaining part of chapter 11 is devoted mainly to Gentile ingrafting, a subject broached in chapter 9:14–26, 30.

<sup>50</sup> One can say that that is how "all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:26), that is, "all" who will be saved. The Hebrew expression behind "all Israel" does not mean every single Israelite (cf., e.g., Num 16:34; Josh 7:24–25; 8:24; 2 Chr 11:3).

<sup>51</sup> Paul uses "word" (Rom 9:6) in typical Hebrew fashion as referring to the "promise" (vv. 8–9; cf. 1 Kgs 8:20; 2 Kgs 15:12) or the "covenant" (e.g., 1 Chr 16:15; Ps 105:8).

covenant successor. It was bestowed on Jacob, who is described as “loved.” The Romans 9:13 citation of Malachi’s statement can be understood as consonant with this position even though its scope is enlarged.

On the lexical level, definitions of *sanē*’ (סנֵה) contrasted with “love” that require explanations like “hate may simply express the feelings of affection for one wife in contrast to the aversion for another (Deut 21:15, 17),” or “the attitude toward a preferred wife as opposed to the one who was tolerated or even rejected (Gen 29:31, 33)”<sup>52</sup> illustrate the difficulty in finding a concise and correct way to render “hate” in the matrimonial context. Replacing “hated” with “unloved” or “not loved” or “loved less” simply attenuates “hate” as normally understood and fails to do justice to the covenantal marriage context governing its employ and, by extension, to its usage in Malachi 1:3.

Clearly, there was no hatred of Esau on the part of God in the visceral or vindictive sense. He was not hated for any vice any more than Jacob was loved for any virtue. Malachi’s statement concerning them refers to a time before their birth. Moreover, Esau enjoyed God’s blessings. He was loved by his father (Gen 25:28). Hebrews says, “By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau” (Heb 11:20). In the final chapter of Genesis involving Jacob and Esau—where God renews his covenant promises to Jacob (Gen 35:11–12)—it is reiterated that Esau is Jacob’s “brother” (35:1, 7) and that Isaac was buried by “his sons Esau and Jacob” (35:29). Esau became the father of a great nation (Gen 36:1–43). He and his descendants inherited a land of their own (Deut 2:5; Josh 24:4). God protected Esau’s land and forbade the Israelites to dispossess the Edomites (Deut 2:5). The Israelites were not to abhor the Edomites given their kinship ties (Deut 23:7).<sup>53</sup> God promised to care for Edomite orphans and widows.

As indicated, the rendition “reject” pushes “hate” into another semantic domain in antonymic relationship to “choose” or “elect.” Doing so leaves “hate” undefined as an act in and of itself. Again, defining “hate” in antonymic relationship with “love” as respectively “reprobation” or “eternal condemnation” and “election unto salvation” uses language that differs from the divine edict in Genesis 25:23 and the reversal of primogeniture, God’s action understood as the basis of the declaration about the twins in Malachi 1:2–3.

<sup>52</sup> Konkel, “סנֵה,” 3:1257.

<sup>53</sup> Because Jacob ended up with his blessing (Gen 27:41), Esau did begrudge him—not *sanē*’ (סנֵה) but *satam* (סצמ), the latter rendered “hate” in the ESV (but cf. Ps 55:3 ESV “bear a grudge”). But Esau’s actions years later showed that he had forgiven Jacob. He showed Jacob affection and kindness when he could have easily avenged the wrong done to him by his vulnerable brother (Gen 33:4, 12, 15).

It is suggested that Romans 9:12–13, which quotes both Genesis 25:23 and Malachi 1:2–3, reads in the same way. Calvin astutely distinguished the physical act (reversal of primogeniture) from the spiritual domain with his type-antitype reading.

Admittedly, it is hard to find an alternate term or expression for “hate.” But in a covenant context a lexical functional equivalent for *sanē* (סָנַע) may be the locution “to disregard the covenant rights of.”

Finally, where did Esau, being “hated,” stand in relation to the promise as a descendant of Abraham? As concerns Ishmael and Esau, Calvin says,

First, the promise of salvation given to Abraham belongs to all who trace their natural descent to him, because it is offered to all without exception. Since it was the will of the Lord that his covenant be sealed [by circumcision], as much in Ishmael and Esau as in Isaac and Jacob, it appears that they were not altogether estranged from [God].<sup>54</sup>

As concerns God’s covenant promise, Esau was outside the pale of God’s grace no more than other descendants of Abraham and certainly no more than anyone from the nations with whom God made no covenant.<sup>55</sup> God’s sovereign bestowal of covenant succession on Jacob—his “love” for Jacob—was not a guarantee of his or any of his descendants’ salvation. Nor did God’s “hate” of Esau—his disregard of his Esau’s covenant rights of primogeniture—necessarily exclude him or any of his descendants from salvation. In Paul’s argument, Esau served to illustrate the descendants of Abraham who had not believed. Their unbelief did not make the covenant promise void. The gracious promise still stood and could be appropriated by any and all by faith. Paul himself was a prime example. His personal experience and testimony (e.g., Acts 26:4–23) is reflected in Romans 9–11.

Sadly, like many of Paul’s compatriots, there is no evidence that Esau ever did lay hold of that grace. The commentary on Esau from Scripture bears witness:

---

<sup>54</sup> Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians*, 197. Calvin assumed Esau, like Ishmael, was circumcised, the “seal” referred to. He distinguished two degrees of election: on the one hand, national or general election of a people, an intermediate between rejection of mankind and election of a meager number of the godly, and on the other hand, individual or effectual election to eternal life. Calvin, *Institutes* 3.21.6–7.

<sup>55</sup> Esau was not part of the nations with whom God had no covenant, a conclusion differing with Verhoef for whom, as distinguished from Jacob, Esau “merely became part of the nations on the fringe of the covenant people, and as such again entered into the scope of God’s redemptive purposes (Gen. 12:1–3).” Verhoef, *Haggai and Malachi*, 201–2.

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God ... that no one is ... unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. (Heb 12:15–17)

This commentary lends support to Calvin's view that God's disregard for Esau's right of primogeniture—with the full and willing cooperation of Esau himself!—was a type of his rejection of God's gracious promise of life, thus a warning to any who rejected God's grace appropriated by faith alone in Christ alone. To this can be added Paul's words which aptly apply: "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death" (2 Cor 7:10).



---

ADVANCING THEOLOGICAL  
UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE IN THE  
MODE OF CONFSSIONAL REFORMED  
CATHOLICITY

## THE GREYSTONE MEMBERSHIP

*The Greystone Membership is the innovative solution for your personal or group robust continuing education and rich theological edification.*

Hundreds of hours of lectures across the disciplines in the rapidly growing library of Greystone modules and events.

Resources for your listening or viewing edification in small segments that fit your daily commute or reading time.

Invest in your theological formation | \$18/mo. USD

[greystoneconnect.org](http://greystoneconnect.org) | [greystoneinstitute.org](http://greystoneinstitute.org)

---

# Divine Righteousness and Forgiveness: The Old Testament Background of *Hilastērion* in Romans 3:25

MICHAEL C. MULDER

## Abstract

We start with an analysis of the term *righteousness of God* in Romans 3:21–26. The righteousness as a gift to believers (genitive of source, verses 21–22) is founded on the righteousness that characterizes his being (subjective genitive, verses 24–25). However, God’s righteousness should not always be interpreted as God’s covenantal faithfulness. For the apostle, divine righteousness brings salvation and leads to judgment, as it does in the Old Testament. There the *hilastērion*, the ark cover, brings these attributes together. After investigating the background, we describe Paul’s use of the image (Rom 3:25) with the help of Jewish sources. In Christ, divine justice and mercy come together in this image. Finally, we ask to whom it applies.

## Keywords

*(Day of) Atonement, forgiveness, Jewish sources, mercy seat, propitiation, Romans 3, righteousness of God, hilastērion, reconciliation, sacrifice*

---

## Introduction

In preaching and in pastoral practice, a tension can be felt between forgiveness and the righteousness of God. How can I accept in faith that God has forgiven my iniquity while being aware that I cannot stand before a just and righteous God? This existential question can be dealt with in counseling and in the ministry of God’s Word. Therefore, it is good to note that in the Bible forgiveness is inseparably related to the righteousness of God. In fact, forgiveness, as we may receive it through Jesus Christ, is a revelation of God’s righteousness. In forgiving, God reveals himself as a truly just and righteous God.

The apostle Paul portrays this justice of God against a dark background. “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God” (Rom 3:10–11 ESV).<sup>1</sup> For Paul, this is true for both Gentiles, for whom it is self-evident, and Jews: “Both of them alike are under sin” (Rom 3:9).

God reveals his righteousness through the advent of Jesus Christ to people who brought themselves into this situation from which they cannot save themselves. Christ’s coming brings about something previously unthinkable and utterly impossible. This revelation of God’s righteousness is entirely new. Paul describes it as the dawn of a new, eschatological era: “But now, . . .” (Rom 3:21).

At the same time, the apostle connects this revelation of God’s righteousness in Jesus Christ to the way God acted before toward his people Israel. Apart from the Old Testament, this new revelation cannot be rightly understood. In revealing his righteousness in Jesus Christ, God upholds his faithfulness to Israel. At the heart of Paul’s argument to demonstrate this connection, he uses the word *hilastērion*. What exactly is he aiming at with the use of this word? A better understanding of it will elucidate the relation between God’s revelation in the Old Testament and that in the New and the connection between divine righteousness and forgiveness.

Recall that the apostle writes here to a specific community in Rome that finds itself in a difficult situation. Jewish and Gentile believers are searching for the right relation to each other within the congregation. As the final chapters of this letter indicate, that manifested itself in conflicts. Therefore, the whole letter displays a dual focus: God is faithful to Israel, and at the same time God is opening the way of salvation to the Gentiles. This explains why Paul underlines that at the very heart of the matter, the relationship with Christ through faith, there is no longer any distinction: Jews and

<sup>1</sup> Unless indicated, we use the ESV. Here, Paul gives a literal quotation of Psalm 14:3.

Gentiles find themselves in the same situation and thus need the same gospel Paul is proclaiming as “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom 1:16).

### I. Approach

In this article, we first direct our attention to the contents of Romans 3:21–26 as a whole, as the context of Paul’s use of the term *hilastērion*. A pivotal focus in this passage is on the “righteousness of God.” In this short passage, Paul refers no less than four times to this righteousness (in vv. 21, 22, 25, and 26). What exactly does this term mean? And does Paul refer to the same notion in each of these verses?

Next, we will zoom in on the specific word *hilastērion*, which Paul uses in verse 25, translated as “propitiation” (ESV) or “sacrifice of atonement” (NIV). What exactly is the signification of this term, which he uses only once in his letters?<sup>2</sup> We will briefly review some differing opinions about its meaning.

Finally, I will show that Paul fills the key words justice, propitiation, and redemption—terms that indicate the very heart of the forgiveness of sins—with meaning from the revelation of God in the Old Testament, while at the same time connecting them to the missionary purpose of his letter for the church he is writing to.

### II. Romans 3:21–26

Romans 3:21 begins with “But now.” With the coming of Jesus Christ, a new era has dawned. We live, Paul asserts here, as he does in so many other places, in the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God has come. In the Old Testament, this time was still in the future; now, through Jesus Christ, it has come. The passage ends noting the unique, eschatological moment with a similar expression: “at the present time” (v. 26).<sup>3</sup> This awareness of living in a new era, then, encompasses the whole passage.

However, this fulfillment cannot be considered apart from God’s earlier revelation; verse 21 emphasizes that this new era is marked by a revelation of the same righteousness of God to which the law and the prophets bore witness. Even if this revealed righteousness is new, it is not something different. Anyone who reads the Old Testament encounters in it the same God and the same righteousness of God.

<sup>2</sup> The word *hilastērion* (ἱλαστήριον) occurs only twice in the New Testament: here and in Hebrews 9:5. See section III below.

<sup>3</sup> *En tōi nun kairōi* (Ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ).

What is meant by this “righteousness of God”? Reading verses 21–22, one might think first of all of the righteousness that God grants. The genitive “of God” refers then to the One from whom this righteousness proceeds (genitive of source). It speaks of the righteousness that comes from God and before whom it can stand, in contrast to the righteousness that the law can never give. What the law cannot do, God grants in Christ. According to verse 23, all have sinned, and therefore all fall short of the glory of God. But now, “they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (v. 24).

The secret of this new reality, which happens to take place now, is described in verse 25: God has put forward Christ Jesus “as a *hilastērion* by his blood.” The precise meaning of this word *hilastērion*, which Paul uses only here, will be examined further in the next section; in any case, this *hilastērion* brings about reconciliation.<sup>4</sup> It is the ground on which redemption in Christ Jesus rests. With the term “redemption” (*apolutrōsis*), Paul links the work of Jesus Christ to the earlier history of Israel. In the Old Testament, similar words chiefly refer to the exodus from Egypt and later to the new redemption from Babylonian exile.<sup>5</sup> Nothing less than such a redemption is worked by God in this new era, Paul stresses by using this term.

It is clear from two other places in his letters that the apostle understands “redemption” to imply the forgiveness of sins. That is what this redemption consists of: “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Eph 1:7; cf. Col 1:14).<sup>6</sup> In Romans 3 also, the apostle emphasizes that this redemption is only possible through the blood of Christ, and further, that this redemption can only be received by faith (“by his blood, to be received by faith,” v. 25).<sup>7</sup>

And so, verses 25 and 26 continue, the righteousness of God has been manifested also when God, at this time, justifies the sinner by faith in Jesus

---

<sup>4</sup> Paul uses the term “reconciliation” (*katallagē, καταλλαγή*) in Romans 5:10–11 to indicate the result of “being justified.” I use this more personal and relational expression of the fact that man can have peace with God as an overarching term here because its reality is present in Romans 3 as well. Actually, this chapter shows how justification is related to God’s righteousness and thus demonstrates the firm ground of this reconciliation.

<sup>5</sup> Although the term *apolutrōsis* (*ἀπολύτρωσις*) is not used in the Septuagint, verbs and nouns containing the same root are used (*lutrōsis, lutron, and lutroum; λύτρωσις, λύτρον, and λυτροῦν*), rendering the Hebrew root *yatsa* which is often employed to describe the redemption of Israel from Egypt and Babylon; cf., e.g., Deut 7:8; 9:26; Isa 41:14; 43:1; Paul evokes this semantic field here.

<sup>6</sup> Paul can also use “redemption” (*apolutrōsis, ἀπολύτρωσις*) to refer to the future fulfillment of what can be experienced now in faith (Rom 8:23; Eph 1:14; 4:30; cf. Luke 21:28).

<sup>7</sup> *Dia [tēs] pisteōs* (Διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως) and *en tōi autou haimati* (ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι) form a dual qualifier of this *apolutrōsis* (*ἀπολύτρωσις*).

Christ. Exegetes have rightly pointed out that in these verses the expression “the righteousness of God”<sup>8</sup> takes on a slightly different meaning. The “righteousness” referred to here is not the righteousness that God grants, but the righteousness that marks who he is. In verses 21 and 22, we are to think of a gift that God gives to people, while in verses 24 and 25, it refers to God himself, to something that characterizes him. Herman Ridderbos, among others, interprets the passage like this: while in verses 21–22, “the righteousness of God” denotes the genitive of the source, in verses 25–26, Paul is using a subjective genitive, that is the righteousness that belongs to God’s being.<sup>9</sup>

Some scholars have objected that such a double meaning of the term righteousness (as an attribute of God and as a gift) would introduce too much tension into the interpretation of this passage. Rudolf Bultmann understands “the righteousness of God” in the whole passage as the righteousness that God gives and promises, whereas Ernst Käsemann prefers to approach the same term exclusively as an attribute of God himself, portraying it as the eschatological reign of God that reveals itself in Christ.<sup>10</sup> James Dunn consistently interprets “the righteousness of God” as “God’s saving action on behalf of his people.”<sup>11</sup> It speaks of the covenant righteousness of God, of his taking the side of his covenant people, fully in line with the use of the same expression in Isaiah 51, where “righteousness” and “salvation” stand in parallel: “my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed” (Isa 51:6).

Indeed, Dunn and others rightly state that in biblical usage God’s righteousness and mercy may never be set over against each other.<sup>12</sup> They argue that the righteousness of God would demand that he, through Christ’s sacrifice, needed to be brought to a change of mind, as if his wrath

<sup>8</sup> In verses 25–26: *dikaiosune autou* (δικαιοσύνη αὐτοῦ).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Herman Ridderbos, *Aan de Romeinen*, CNT (Kampen: Kok, 1959) 82–85; and Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 167–68.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the discussion in Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments, Band 1: Grundlegung; Von Jesus zu Paulus*, 3rd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 334. He concludes that the righteousness of God has a complex meaning in this passage, referring to God’s own being just, which becomes effective in the justification of those who believe in Christ (335).

<sup>11</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, WBC 38A (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 165.

<sup>12</sup> Not only the adherents of the so-called *New Perspective on Paul* highlight this aspect; Otfried Hofius also characterizes God’s righteousness (*dikaiosunē Theou*, δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) throughout this passage as “saving righteousness”: “so ist das Wort ‘Gerechtigkeit’—wie schon bei Deuteromesaja und in manchen Psalmen—ein Heilsbegriff”; “Sühne und Versöhnung: Zum paulinischen Verständnis des Kreuzestodes Jesu,” in Otfried Hofius, *Paulusstudien*, WUNT 51, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1994), 35.

had to be assuaged by a bloody sacrifice. God would then provide this sacrifice by his mercy to ultimately satisfy his justice. This line of thinking attempts to provide a logical explanation for God's justice, one that brings this "justice" into direct opposition with another of God's attributes, his mercy. In that case, we would need this mercy as an opposite attribute to God's justice so that we could understand why God, in his justice, rightly can forgive sins.<sup>13</sup>

Now the beauty in this passage in the context of Paul's letter is that there is no such human construct, but there is one great point of departure, which forms a common thread through the whole passage: God is active; God reconciles. In his reconciliation God is not subjected to a principle defined by our understanding, to which he would have to comply.

Thus, there is no tension between God's justice that needs to be satisfied and God's saving faithfulness. However, the Bible still speaks of different aspects of God's righteousness.

When we read and understand the Bible properly, the righteousness of God is not exclusively a righteousness that brings salvation to all people. The righteousness of God can also bring punishment. Just a little earlier in the letter, Paul has made the connection between the righteousness of God and his wrath (Rom 3:5). In the prophecies of Isaiah, just mentioned as examples, God's "righteousness" can simply refer to his covenant faithfulness, and the term can be used in a broader sense. Isaiah 10 announces the punishment of God upon the disobedience of his people: "Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness" (v. 22, see also Isa 5:6).

How can righteousness bring salvation on the one hand and punishment on the other? Does that mean that, dealing with God's righteousness, one would just have to wait and see which side one would face? It has been rightly pointed out that one overarching motif typifies the righteousness of God when it brings salvation to his people, that is, "his loyalty to his own name."<sup>14</sup> Time and again we read that God's righteousness takes a stand for his name and his glory.<sup>15</sup>

That is precisely why in the Old Testament the righteousness of God brought salvation to Israel in exile: at that moment God will stand up for his own honor. "For my name's sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my

<sup>13</sup> This line of thought can be traced back to Anselm of Canterbury's 1098 *Cur Deus homo*.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. John Piper, "The Demonstration of the Righteousness of God in Romans 3:25, 26," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 7 (1980): 21–22.

<sup>15</sup> When God upholds his righteousness, his purpose is that people are once again bound to his glory, his *doxa* (δόξα), so that God regains the honor that is due to him. A little earlier in this chapter, Paul indicates the consequence of sin as the exact opposite: it is this glory of God that people fall short of (Rom 3:23).

praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off” (Isa 48:9). The righteousness of God brings salvation for his covenant people since his name is bound up with them. For the same reason, God can also arise in punishment for his honor when his name is dishonored. In both cases, we are dealing with the same righteousness of God, which includes both his wrath and his salvation. Thus, these aspects are not to be contrasted as two different attributes of God. The same righteousness of God is concerned, which is particularly revealed in the atoning sacrifice that God has put forward.

### III. *Hilastērion* as “Means” or “Place” of Reconciliation

Paul points out that God “put forward” or “appointed” Christ as a *hilastērion* (Rom 3:25). Christ is the foundation on which our redemption rests. In Christ, something completely new in the revelation of God’s righteousness is portrayed, which at the same time is connected to the revelation of God in the Old Testament. In short, this *hilastērion* as God’s way of bringing about reconciliation is the heart of the whole passage.

What exactly does this word denote? As we have noted earlier, the apostle does not use it anywhere else in his letters, which makes it extra difficult to define its exact meaning. The only other place in the New Testament where *hilastērion* is used is in Hebrews 9:5. There, fully consistent with the usage of the term in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, it means “mercy seat” (ESV) or “atonement cover” (NIV). In the Septuagint, this word occurs twenty-eight times, almost exclusively as a translation of the Hebrew word for the golden cover that lay on the ark in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle.<sup>16</sup>

At first glance, it seems rather strange to translate Paul in line with this Old Testament usage: God has brought forward Christ as a “seat” or “cover.” In this context, one would rather expect an indication of the means of reconciliation, the blood of his atoning sacrifice, than an indication of the place where the sacrifice occurs. That is why many translations choose a more general rendering: the means of reconciliation, being more neutral than “mercy seat,” the place of reconciliation. Grammatically, the Greek *hilastērion* has adjectival form and may be translated as “reconciliatory.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, it is possible to insert a noun, in order to understand what is meant by this

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Exodus 25:17–22; 27:34, Leviticus 16:2, and elsewhere. There is just one exception: in Ezekiel 43:14–17, *hilastērion* (ἱλαστήριον) does not refer to the atonement cover but to the edge of the altar.

<sup>17</sup> This is a nominalized adjective: “that which belongs to reconciliation.”

“reconciliatory thing.” Practically, *hilastērion* could therefore mean the same as the “blood” that reconciles, which Paul mentions in immediate connection to it, or, more generally, Christ’s reconciliatory “sacrifice.”

However, if the term should be read in this way, why does Paul not simply use the word “blood,” or “sacrifice,” as he does more often? Why does he place precisely this particular word, *hilastērion*, which he uses nowhere else in the epistle, at the center of his train of thought? It is fruitful here to reflect on the background of this word. Which context is Paul drawing on here? Might this background help us to understand the unique character of the reconciliation accomplished by Christ, as well as its connection to the revelation of the righteousness of God, to which the law and the prophets bear witness, as he has just pointed out (v. 21)?

In broad outlines, exegetes identify three distinct meanings for *hilastērion*, meanings that arise from three distinct contexts in which the word occurs.

First, in Hellenistic Greek usage, the expression *hilastērion* denotes a concept that is connected to pagan cultic practice. It denotes a votive offering. That is how Josephus uses this word.<sup>18</sup> We find in an inscription a reference to a *hilastērion* as the “propitiation,” intended to evoke a favorable disposition of the gods toward the worshiper.<sup>19</sup> Behind it is the idea of *do ut des*: “I give so that you[, god,] give back to me.” Exegetes who translate *hilastērion* in accordance with this Greek usage suppose that this context of *do ut des* could still be present in Paul’s mind. One scholar who explicitly chooses the translation of “votive offering” in Romans 3:25 acknowledges, though, that in the situation of Romans 3 this votive offering is of a very unique kind because God provides this *hilastērion* himself.<sup>20</sup> This interpretation would imply that God has given Christ as a gift with the intention that he will change his disposition towards his people. This, then, should be understood within the context of Paul’s missionary approach: over against pagan idolatry, we have a votive offering that God himself has provided.

However, we could ask whether such a missionary approach would be helpful to persuade Gentiles to accept Christ as their *hilastērion*? Would they really be brought to other thoughts about God’s atonement? Does this not maintain that God must be brought to other thoughts through this sacrifice? How is that compatible with Paul’s insistence throughout the passage that God himself is the subject of this reconciliatory action?

<sup>18</sup> Josephus uses it as a pure adjective in the expression *hilastērion mnēma* (ἱλαστήριον μνημα; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 16.182).

<sup>19</sup> See Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer*, EKK 6.1 (Neukirchen: Patmos, 2014), 257.

<sup>20</sup> Stefan Schreiber, “Weitergedacht: Das versöhnende Weiheschenk Gottes in Röm 3, 25,” *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 106 (2015): 213.

Second, rather than a pagan cultic context, we might look for the background of the term *hilastērion* within a Jewish context. In one apocryphal text, the noun is used to denote “propitiation.” In 4 Maccabees 17:21–22, Eleazar the priest and a family of seven brothers, martyred at the hands of the tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes, give their lives as a “ransom for the sin of [their] nation.” In the next verse, this sacrifice is identified as an “atoning sacrifice” (*hilastērion*).<sup>21</sup> In this manner “divine Providence preserved Israel that had previously been mistreated.”<sup>22</sup> This is the only place known to us in intertestamental literature where the blood of human beings is described as an atoning sacrifice, and it is so described by precisely this word, *hilastērion*, drawn from the Day of Atonement. By this term their death is characterized as atoning.

That this usage occurs only once demonstrates that this expression is not the usual way to interpret the death of a martyr. Thus, Paul is not taking up a current usage of this term that would provide a conceptual context for understanding it. Moreover, Christ’s sacrifice, as Paul speaks of it, differs greatly from the martyrdom of Eleazar and his companions, who did not present themselves as a sacrifice but were executed. In 4 Maccabees, a text dating from the same period in which Paul was writing, the atoning significance of their death is only assigned as an afterthought, adding meaning to their death as martyrs. That is quite different from what we read in Romans 3:25, namely that God himself took the initiative, putting Christ forward as a propitiation by his blood.<sup>23</sup>

Third, the most obvious conclusion, then, is that Paul took over the word *hilastērion* from the Old Testament, where it was used in the context of the Day of Atonement. In almost every instance where the term occurs in the Greek Old Testament, it refers to the golden cover over the ark—traditionally translated as “mercy seat”—and so it was used on the Day of Atonement

<sup>21</sup> There is a text-critical issue here. Codex Alexandrinus reads, “διὰ ... τοῦ ἱλαστηρίου θανάτου αὐτῶν” (*dia ... tou hilastēriou thanatou autōn*; by their atoning death), whereas Sinaiticus repeats the particle τοῦ (*tou*), which supposes a more substantive reading of *hilastērion*: “διὰ ... τοῦ ἱλαστηρίου τοῦ θανάτου αὐτῶν” (*dia tou hilastēriou tou thanatou autōn*; by the atonement of their death).

<sup>22</sup> Fourth Maccabees 17:22 (NRSV).

<sup>23</sup> Because of the hymnic style of verses 24–26, scholars assume that Paul echoes a traditional early Jewish Christian formula here. Peter Stuhlmacher demonstrates that this formula is probably not shaped by the adjective use in 4 Maccabees 17:22, as Ernst Lohse suggests. He supposes that in the earlier “Paradosis” the connection between Christ’s sacrifice and the Old Testament usage of the term in the context of the Day of Atonement—as will be elaborated in the next paragraph—had already been established. See Peter Stuhlmacher, “Zur neueren Exegese von Röm 3, 24–26,” in *Versöhnung, Gesetz und Gerechtigkeit: Aufsätze zur biblischen Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 117–35.

(Lev 16). The *hilastērion* covers the ark, the place where the Lord says that he will appear: “For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat” (Lev 16:2). For this reason, even Aaron may not come into the Most Holy Place, “before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die” (Lev 16:2).

Only because Aaron makes atonement for himself, the sanctuary, and the people may this place continue as the place where God has communion with his people. Moreover, God has so ordered everything that such a meeting is possible. He has provided blood for that purpose, says Leviticus 17:11, “to make atonement for your souls.” That is the essence of the sacrificial ritual: God has provided this so that another life might be presented to him in place of the life of the people.

On the Day of Atonement, this sacrificial rite is brought back to its heart: First, Aaron must present a large incense offering so that when he lifts the corner of the veil, the cloud of incense hides the mercy seat from his view. Then, he is to sprinkle with his finger the blood of a bull as a sin offering for himself: one droplet on the mercy seat itself, and seven drops in front of it. Next, he is to do exactly the same with the blood of the goat as the atonement for the people. The Mishnah, a second-century Jewish collection of commentaries on the law, describes how the high priest was to perform that: he was forbidden to aim at a specific spot as he sprinkled; rather, he had to make a swinging, to-and-fro movement, “as though he were wielding a whip” (m. Yoma 5:4).<sup>24</sup> That was how it was done: even when the smoke of incense had dissipated somewhat, he was still not allowed to look at the spot where the blood actually landed. That is what the Most Holy Place demonstrated at the most holy instant: a priest, sprinkling a few droplets of blood, just as God had commanded. And that was sufficient.

What, then, was that sacrifice? Was it a gift to the deity? Does this practice of atonement resemble, in any way, the pagan *do ut des*? Do we give something to God to receive something from him in return? From this detailed description, we do not get the impression that the people of God can pride themselves on a great gift with which they can show off and present themselves before God. On the contrary, the emphasis is on the smallness of the offering. Just a few droplets of blood: that is all. Of course, these few droplets still point to a far greater mystery. They point to what ought to happen and to what does happen, symbolically: with these few blood droplets the entire life of the priest and that of the people who stand behind him are presented to God.

Placing the sins upon the sacrificial animal or presenting just a small part of yourself to God is not enough to be reconciled; rather, the essence of the

---

<sup>24</sup> Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 168.

sacrificial service is that the one who presents the offering offers himself. That is symbolically represented with the laying on of hands, not just the presentation of a small part of oneself but a complete identification.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in Numbers 8:10, the whole congregation of Israel placed their hands upon the Levites—representing them before God—and the Levites in turn placed their hands on the sacrificial animals to represent them before God. In the sacrifice, the life—or more accurately, the self, the whole person—of the one making the sacrifice dies. And this happens at the place God has appointed for this ritual: that is, the mercy seat. The priest stands there, with a few drops of blood, in which the whole people are present; at the same time, it is where the Lord himself appears in this ritual, precisely in this way.

Indeed, there are two movements here: one from the people to God, through the life that represents the self, and another from God toward his people. But this is not some kind of votive offering intended to gain something in return or somehow to secure the deity's favor. It is rather the reverse: he is the first to give, and what people offer him is a giving back to him, an acknowledgment of what he gave first. It is not *do ut des* ("I give so you may give in return"); rather, *do quia dedisti* ("I give because you gave first").<sup>26</sup>

These, indeed, are two movements: from us to God and from God to us, but these movements are framed by a much greater, all-encompassing movement that surrounds them: all this is given by God himself. That is foundational. He provides the mercy seat where the two movements become visible. That is the place where this happens, and it happens on the day that God has appointed.

Based on Leviticus 16:30, "for on this day shall atonement be made for you," Jewish tradition holds that the sins, for which sacrifices are made throughout the year, are only truly atoned for on the Day of Atonement. According to the Mishnah, sins committed in the course of the year are suspended for the whole year through the daily sacrifices; it is not until the Day of Atonement that they are actually done away with (m. Yoma 8:8).

#### IV. *Christ as "Mercy Seat"*

By using the word *hilastērion*, Paul makes an implicit reference to the heart of the Old Testament ministry of reconciliation. The allusion to what happens on the Day of Atonement helps explain what he writes about Christ's work

<sup>25</sup> Regarding this identification, see Wolfgang Kraus, "Der Jom Kippur, der Tod Jesu und die 'Biblische Theologie': Ein Versuch, die jüdische Tradition in die Auslegung von Röm 3,25f. einzubeziehen," *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 6 (1991): 163.

<sup>26</sup> See Hofius, "Sühne und Versöhnung," 40.

of redemption. Christ does not merely bring a piece of man to God, some sins; no, the life of the sacrificer is brought to God and dies there, as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:14: “One has died for all, therefore all have died.”<sup>27</sup> At the same time, this is how God himself comes to his own. The double movement of the presentation of the sacrifice and of the acceptance of this life instead of the people’s life is encompassed by the will of God: this is how he reveals his righteousness. This is more than a “display,” an illustration of what this reconciliation is about. It is the ultimate confirmation of this reconciliation itself, demonstrating God’s righteousness. That is how God is: he confirms “that he is just” also when he is “the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26).<sup>28</sup> Here he reveals who he is, righteous, in a way in which righteousness, faithfulness, and mercy will never contravene each other.

It is noteworthy that Paul says in this context that God, “in his forbearance, passed over former sins” until the present time.<sup>29</sup> In this word, too, we hear an echo of the Jewish ritual of the Day of Atonement. All sins are stored up until this particular day because this is the specific day God appointed to make atonement. Christ represents all those who have sinned. This representation takes place on a specific day, the day that God has appointed, and at a specific place, where God and man meet: the mercy seat. We could say that Christ himself is the mercy seat upon which everything is concentrated. Both movements, the movement from God to us and that from us to God, are encompassed by the great movement of God, who has given us this mercy seat. Christ is also the blood, the life that is sacrificed. He is also the one who sacrifices himself as a priest, but he is also the mercy seat, the place where everything comes together, which must be understood from this context.

Regarding the forgiveness of sins, this means not merely that the redemption in Christ removes a certain number of sins, or even all sins, but that the complete person dies there; as a result, a person receives a completely new life. Sin is not merely washed off the person; rather, the whole person is separated from the old life and transferred into a new life because God is there, where I am sacrificed: at the mercy seat. This forgiveness has now become a reality—through the coming of Christ, as Romans 3:21, 26 emphasizes. This wonderful reality can be applied in preaching and pastoral counseling, bringing divine justice and forgiveness together in the same movement of God’s mercy.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Stuhlmacher, “Zur neueren Exegese,” 134.

<sup>28</sup> *Endeixis* (ἐνδειξις, evidence) not only displays something, it also confirms it: *eis to einai auton dikaios* (εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον; “so that he is just”).

<sup>29</sup> *Paresis* (πάρεσις, passing by; Rom 3:25).

## V. Christ, the Ultimate Fulfillment

To whom does this reality apply? In conclusion, we note the following three aspects.

In the first place, this applies not only to people who had sinned until that moment but also to sinners living later. In Romans 6, Paul writes about Jesus's sacrifice having been completed "once and for all."<sup>30</sup> The sins stored up for the Day of Atonement were not only sins committed before that day but also those committed afterward.<sup>31</sup> In the words "once and for all," we hear the ultimate concentration of time and place: what happens here refers to what happened upon the mercy seat in the tabernacle, but now once and for all time.

In the second place, this does not apply only to Israel. Christ fulfilled the heart of Israel's service of worship in complete harmony with what God had revealed to Israel. He performed it not in seclusion, in the Holy of Holies, but in a public place, and he was "put forward"<sup>32</sup> by God himself. From that very moment, his atonement no longer counts for Jews only but for Greeks also; it counts for all without distinction (Rom 3:22). That is the newness of God's gospel in Christ. There is continuity with Israel's ministry and its openness toward all nations, as Paul continually emphasizes in Romans.

In the third place, this significant broadening also occurs alongside an exclusive narrowing as redemption applies only to those who believe. This narrowing, however, entails an open and missionary purpose. Paul, in this entire passage, guides us to the significance of faith. These verses serve as an appeal to see and acknowledge God's work at his mercy seat, where Christ is the mercy seat "by faith."<sup>33</sup> By this faith I bind myself to him who gave his blood, his life, to represent me before God. Thus, anyone "who is by faith in Jesus" is justified.<sup>34</sup> For them, faith is the source of forgiveness because Christ is the source, the mercy seat, the place where they may appear before God, and where God appears to them.

<sup>30</sup> *Epharax* (ἐφάπαξ; Rom 6:10).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. also Stuhlmacher, "Zur neueren Exegese," 135–36.

<sup>32</sup> *Pro-etheto* (προέθετο; Rom 3:25).

<sup>33</sup> *Dia [iēs] pisteōs* (διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως; Rom 3:25).

<sup>34</sup> *Dikaiounta ton ek pisteōs Iēsou* (δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ; "the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus"; Rom 3:26).



## MINISTRY ROOTED IN ANCIENT WISDOM

*Introducing the Lexham Ministry Guides.*

Edited by award-winning author Harold L. Senkbeil, this new series offers practical, proven wisdom for the church. These books invite you to enter into these conversations to better serve the Savior's sheep and lambs with confidence. You will find hands-on tools, lessons from years of ministry experience, and an array of resources to apply to your own ministry context.

Learn more at [lexhampress.com/LMG](http://lexhampress.com/LMG).



# New England Election Sermons: A Model for a Public Pulpit

TIMON CLINE

## Abstract

This article surveys the now largely foreign practice of election sermons delivered in colonial New England. The ultimate aim of the study is to provide a way forward for contemporary pastors: first, to challenge the modern bifurcation of the religious and the so-called secular in the public square; second, to chart a middle course between the extremes of blind partisanship and anemic passivity in commenting on public concerns. The content of election sermons also challenges prevailing evangelical notions of good government by presenting a more integrated sociopolitical life, emphasizing older priorities of the common good, justice, and prudence.

## Keywords

*Puritanism, New England, election sermons, preaching, public theology, church and state, politics, common good*

---

**I**n March of 1884, the Massachusetts legislature was occupied with rather ordinary business. Acts to regulate the sale of coal, the prohibitions of firearm sales to minors, new standards for the admittance to insane asylums, and an updated policy to prevent the spread of contagious diseases in public schools appear in the record, and all passed within

the span of a week. One would be excused for lacking interest in this relatively uneventful record of legislative affairs and for overlooking a noteworthy historical development hidden therein—indeed, an event unprecedented in Massachusetts since its founding, a repudiation of one of its most storied institutions.

On March 6, “An Act to Repeal the Public Statutes Relating to the Annual Election Sermon” was passed. Which is to say, as the bill summary shows, that the election sermon was “dispensed with.” For good measure, “the compensation of the preacher thereof” was also repealed.<sup>1</sup> There is no record of the vote, but the repeal act seems to have passed without incident. It was the following year, then, that for the first time in Massachusetts since 1634—excepting for the occasional cancelation due to extenuating circumstances—no election sermon was preached; a two-hundred-and-fifty-year tradition was abandoned overnight.

Almost since the very inception of the errand into the wilderness, election day in Massachusetts had been marked by the oration of an esteemed clergyman before the General Court and newly elected governor and assistants. This was a staple of colonial life, foremost in Massachusetts, and especially since other Christian holidays had by and large been jettisoned. Days of fast and thanksgiving were frequent but irregular. Election days lent some predictability to the Puritan calendar.

But as Lindsay Swift rightly noted in 1894, by the time of the General Court’s move to quash the election sermon, there were few tears shed over the removal of the “last slight interdependence in the Commonwealth between Church and State.”<sup>2</sup> In truth, for a long while prior, the annual sermon had been considered a matter of precedent rather than “sincere expression of the religious and political spirit of the age.” Perhaps it is a miracle that the election sermon endured for as long as it did, far exceeding other vestiges of the Puritan era.

The first election sermon was preached by John Cotton (1585–1652), the patriarch of Massachusetts and standard-bearer of Reformed orthodoxy and the New England Way, in 1634. The last was delivered in 1884 by the universalist minister and president of Tufts University Alonzo Ames Miner (1814–1895). That these two men serve as bookends to the story of the election sermon in Massachusetts, preaching the first and last sermon exactly two and a half centuries apart, is appropriately poetic.

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Amos Merrill, *Supplement to the Public Statutes of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1882–1888* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1890), 152.

<sup>2</sup> Lindsay Swift, *The Massachusetts Election Sermons: An Essay in Descriptive Biography*, Colonial Society of Massachusetts 1 (Cambridge: Wilson & Son, 1897).

Massachusetts was the last holdout, both in championing an established church—disestablished in 1833—and continuing the election sermon practice.<sup>3</sup> Connecticut had ceased in 1830. Only two such sermons were ever preached in Plymouth, one in 1669 and the other in 1674.<sup>4</sup> New Hampshire abandoned the practice twenty-three years before Massachusetts and had not begun it until 1784, with none being preached between 1832 and 1860.<sup>5</sup> Where the New England Way had been the strongest it lasted the longest, but even then, it did not last.

\*\*\*

The election sermon's eventual demise notwithstanding, there is much to be learned from what will doubtless be a foreign practice to contemporary ministers. More important than the form and occasion of election sermons is their content.

It is no secret that churches are increasingly politically polarized.<sup>6</sup> Pastors continue to struggle to discern a balance between bringing the full counsel of God to bear on the lives of congregants—the lives they inhabit the other six days of the week—and not turning their pulpit into a partisan “bully.” Some Christians expect pastors to address social issues; others assert a strong separation between church and world.<sup>7</sup> In either case, many pastors feel inadequate to mediate these seemingly contradictory demands and the in-house division, in part because they lack a sufficient, balanced model for public engagement from the pulpit. It is the contention of this article that colonial New England election sermons provide just such a model that, with minimal adjustments, can be readily adopted by contemporary pastors.

The supreme point of instruction to be gleaned from election sermons is the posture of faithful, decidedly nonreactionary plodding. The select few clergy who mounted the podium on colonial election days exhibited a vision

---

<sup>3</sup> John D. Cushing, “Notes on Disestablishment in Massachusetts, 1780–1833,” *William & Mary Quarterly* 26.2 (April 1969): 169–90.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Walley, *Balm in Gilead to Heal Sions wounds ...* (Cambridge, 1669); Samuel Arnold, *David Serving his generation ...* (Cambridge, 1674). Facsimiles of nearly all election sermons referenced can be accessed through the Evans Early American Imprint Collection or Early English Books Online.

<sup>5</sup> R. W. G. Vail, “A Check List of New England Election Sermons,” *American Antiquarian Society* (October 1935): 233–66.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Andres Henao and David Crary, “Christian Churches Mirror Country’s Political Division,” *U.S. News*, November 8, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2020-11-08/christian-churches-mirror-countrys-political-division>.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Graham, “Preaching or Avoiding Politics, Conservative Churches Walk a Delicate Line,” *New York Times* (November 1, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/01/us/church-sermons-election-politics.html>.

for society, informed by divine revelation, which they relentlessly—sometimes monotonously—preached. Their interest was to call ruler and citizen alike to faithfulness to their God-given duties, unto the common good of the whole, for the stability and tranquility of a covenant community, unto the glory of God.<sup>8</sup>

For two hundred years, New England preachers acted as the oracles of God to the entire community. For at least one day of the year, magistrates, clergy, and citizens gathered to be reminded of how they were to honor God and love their neighbors in their respective stations. And there is good evidence that all three estates endeavored to honor the vision for society proclaimed from the election day pulpits.<sup>9</sup> Such a strange, now-alien phenomenon—a society built upon and sustained by near-constant preaching—deserves to be studied for its own sake. The impetus of this article partially conforms to Swift’s own study, namely, to preserve the memory of “so venerable an observance.”<sup>10</sup> But our purpose is also to derive a strategy for the present. Controlling for contextual differences between seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England and the present, the election sermon can help pastors thread the needle between deafening silence and bombastic partisanship.

To orient the reader, part I will provide a limited but important background. Part II will then highlight and expound upon several common themes that run throughout election sermons of the period in focus (roughly 1660–1760). The themes selected are not exhaustive of election sermon content—only a fraction of the sermons preached are included below. Instead, the themes and doctrines in view are those that appear repeatedly in election sermons and are most easily applicable to any sociopolitical context.

## I. Background

The sermon was king in seventeenth-century New England. According to Harry Stout, it is unrivaled still, even by television, in terms of its reach and hold on the populace. Not so long ago, “the sermon stood alone in local New England contexts as the only regular (at least weekly) medium of public communication.” By this means, New Englanders received the lion’s share of their information, the “terms necessary to understand existence

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., William Stoughton, *New Englands True Interest ...* (Cambridge, 1670), 16–37.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy H. Breen and Stephen Foster, “The Puritans’ Greatest Achievement: A Study of Social Cohesion in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts,” *Journal of American History* 60.1 (June 1973): 5–22.

<sup>10</sup> Swift, *Election Sermons*, 9.

in this world and the next.” With both breadth and depth, heat and light, the sermon spoke to all of life, including the social and political. Underappreciated too is the extent to which the sermon supplied the basis for interpersonal relations by providing a shared knowledge base. Again, this is owed to its reach, frequency, and consistency of content. The sheer number of sermons preached, many of which were printed, is astounding. Stout estimates that five million were delivered in the colonial period and that the average New England churchgoer listened to seven thousand sermons in a lifetime.<sup>11</sup> By 1776, New England ministers were collectively delivering over two thousand discourses per week. The publications of these sermons alone far outnumbered secular pamphlets “by a ratio of more than four to one.”<sup>12</sup>

The whole scene is difficult to fathom today. Even after the Puritan era had come and gone, the sermon maintained its influence through the revolutionary period and early republic.<sup>13</sup> This was accomplished, in part, by establishing an array of occasions for sermons to be preached, of which election sermons were, perhaps, the most important. Of the “occasional sermons” (i.e., fast days, execution days, etc.) identified by Stout, election sermons have enjoyed comparatively limited treatment. In *The New England Soul*, Stout himself dedicates less than five pages to election sermons. Perry Miller’s emphasis was on fast day sermons and the jeremiad.<sup>14</sup> Alice Baldwin expertly wove election sermon data into her study but limited her sample to the mid-to-late eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

Sparse analysis of election sermons is also owed to the tendency in Puritan studies to handle them in conjunction with (irregular but frequent) *political* sermons, an eighteenth-century development.<sup>16</sup> The political sermons were, by and large, far removed from the first few generations of the colonies and gained steam in the aftermath of myriad doctrinal and political shifts. Accordingly, the themes and emphases of *political* sermons differ from those of *election* sermons; the latter alone will be in focus here.

---

<sup>11</sup> Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3–4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> See John C. Miller, *Origins of the American Revolution* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1959), 186–97; John Wingate Thornton, *The Pulpit of the American Revolution* (Boston: Rockwell & Churchill, 1876); Gary L. Steward, *Justifying Revolution: The American Clergy’s Argument for Political Resistance, 1750–1776* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 27–39.

<sup>15</sup> Alice M. Baldwin, *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1928), 22–46.

<sup>16</sup> See Mark Noll, “The Election Sermon: Situating Religion and the Constitutional in the Eighteenth Century,” *DePaul Law Review* 1223 (2010): 59.

Fast days, or days of humiliation, were truly *occasions*, usually called by civil magistrates when the colony faced great challenges or suffering. Election days, on the other hand, were annual (usually every May). As with nearly all events in colonial New England, preaching was the centerpiece. Stout paints a weighty picture of the setting of the election day discourse:

There, seated before the speaker in the principal building of the province, were the three orders of authority: the magistrates ... the deputies ... the ministers .... Each would be addressed in turn so that all aspects of government and authority would be illuminated by the Word of God.<sup>17</sup>

\*\*\*

The earliest printed election sermon is from Thomas Shephard (1605–1649), preached in 1638. But Shephard’s second address—he had also accepted the honor the previous year—was not printed until 1870, which is not to say that hand-copied notes and Shephard’s own manuscript did not circulate at the time. The inaugural sermon by Cotton was not printed either. No sermon was delivered in 1635, 1636, 1639, or 1642. Nathaniel Ward (1578–1652) preached in 1641, the same year his *Body of Liberties* was published, but only the latter effort was printed. The legislature ordered Richard Mather’s (1586–1669) 1644 sermon printed, but it never was. This is the case with several election sermons, even after 1660.<sup>18</sup> The same is true of Thomas Cobbet’s (1608–1686) 1649 sermon. Mather’s 1660 sermon is also lost to us. Prior to 1661, aside from Shepherd’s terse outline from 1638, no Massachusetts election sermon was printed except Cobbet’s and the eldest Mather’s. No copies remain.

Accordingly, the story of the election sermon in New England begins in 1661 with John Norton’s (1606–1663) *Three choice and profitable sermons*. But perhaps the circulation of Norton’s sermon was limited since Cotton Mather, in 1709, called John Higginson’s (1616–1708) 1662 sermon, *The Cause of God and his People in New-England*, the “first born, by way of the press, of all the Elections Sermons, that we have in our libraries.”<sup>19</sup> And yet, even those sermons that never made it to press did not lack influence. They were often quoted or referenced in subsequent works. In any case, regular printing stabilized by 1667; all delivered thereafter were printed. This sudden flurry of printing was likely a response to the Restoration of the Stuart

<sup>17</sup> Stout, *New England Soul*, 29.

<sup>18</sup> Swift, *Election Sermons*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 (quoting Mather).

monarchy in 1660 as well as an effort of filial piety; the first generation was dying off by the 1660s.<sup>20</sup>

The Connecticut legislature began hosting election sermons in 1674. The inaugural address, *A Holy Connexion*, delivered by James Fitch (1622–1702), is among the best delivered in that colony.<sup>21</sup> Plymouth's first election sermon by Thomas Walley (1616–1677/8) had little competition in Plymouth, being one of two preached there, but it nevertheless is among the most readable and learned of any of the sermons. In the end, what we find is that Massachusetts was the first, last, and most ardent practitioner of the election sermon. It is from Bay Colony orations that we will draw most of our insights.

\*\*\*

The last bit of groundwork needed before the election sermon is approached comes to us by way of qualification. The election sermons are pervaded by the assumptions of the day. For the sake of this study, it is sufficient to acknowledge such and then proceed to the themes in focus. Our subjects clung to the premodern vision of society.<sup>22</sup> The vision for the city on the hill was a fully integrated society, a *secular* regime was an oxymoron, and church and state were coordinate powers, offering mutual diaconal support within proper juridical bounds.<sup>23</sup>

## II. Themes

### 1. The Character of Good Government

Addressed at the outset of every election sermon was the nature, purpose, and character of government. The preachers of New England had a comparatively high view of government authority. It was a divine institution, not merely a permitted one. Some kind of civil order, Ebenezer Pemberton (1672–1717) suggested, would have been present even if man had remained

<sup>20</sup> See Stout, *New England Soul*, 69–70; see also Rollo G. Silber, “Financing the Publication of Early New England Sermons,” *Studies in Bibliography* 11 (1958): 163–78.

<sup>21</sup> New Hampshire, having no election sermon until 1784, sits outside of the scope of this study. The same goes for Vermont; its first election sermon was preached in 1777.

<sup>22</sup> See Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1956), 141–42.

<sup>23</sup> See John Cotton, *A discourse about civil government . . .* (Cambridge, 1663); Miller, *Errand*, 143; George L. Haskins, *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts* (New York: Macmillan, 1960); Stanley Gray, “The Political Thought of John Winthrop,” *New England Quarterly* 3.4 (October 1930): 681–705; David D. Hall, *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 121–55; Herbert L. Osgood, *The American Colonies in the Seventeenth Century* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1957), 1:200–223.

in innocence and paradise.<sup>24</sup> Lapsarian humanity required even stricter order. “Was it not a Terrible Day with Israel, when that Complaint was moaned out? *There was no King in Israel ...* God by appointing Government has consulted the good of the World. Levelism, is therefore an open Defiance of God, his Wisdom and Will, as well as the Reason of Mankind.”<sup>25</sup> To these preachers, government was never something to be detested or mocked, nor something to be transcended. It was a God-given good that received its power from the risen Christ himself.<sup>26</sup> “Even a tyrannous Government is better than none,” said Jonathan Todd (1713–1791). For without government, everyone would be his own tyrant.<sup>27</sup>

Though the forms of governmental polity were, within reason, subject to human determinations and varied in human history, the institution itself was divinely ordained unto certain ends and purposes. “It has not pleased God to interpose in this Case, by instituting one Form of Civil Government and obliging all Nations to submit to it,” said Noah Hobart (1706–1773).<sup>28</sup> This was clear from both Scripture and the light of nature.<sup>29</sup> The form of a just government, so long as it still accomplished the ends of government, was to be adapted to the context.

Albeit most of the preachers affirmed, along with Aristotle, that a mixed form—monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—was best. For Congregationists, the mediate means by which government polity was established mirrored that of church polity, namely, voluntary compact,<sup>30</sup> though it flowed naturally and inevitably from the sociable nature of man.<sup>31</sup> Hence, John Davenport (1597–1670) called it a “humane ordinance.”<sup>32</sup> Yet, government ultimately remained an ordinance of God; he was the first agent though an agent of means. Valid government had to be ordered to ends fitted to its God-given role and purpose, and certain duties, therefore, were incumbent upon it.

---

<sup>24</sup> Ebenezer Pemberton, *The divine original and dignity of government asserted ...* (Boston, 1710), 16.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 17. Judges 21:25 was repeated often as a sobering warning in election sermons throughout the period in focus. See, e.g., Jonathan Todd, *Civil rulers the ministers of God, for good to men ...* (New London, 1749), 1.

<sup>26</sup> James Allin, *Magistracy an institution of Christ upon the throne ...* (Boston, 1744).

<sup>27</sup> Todd, *Civil rulers*, 40–41.

<sup>28</sup> Noah Hobart, *Civil government the foundation of social happiness ...* (New London, 1751), 3

<sup>29</sup> John Davenport, *A Sermon Preach'd at the Election of the Governor* (Cambridge, 1669), 4.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Moss, *An election sermon ...* (New London, 1715), 6–7; see also John Cotton, *The Way of the Churches ...* (London, 1645), 2–4, 61–62.

<sup>31</sup> John Bulkley, *The necessity of religion in societies...* (Boston, 1713), 13–23; Solomon Williams, *A firm and immovable courage to obey God ...* (New London, 1741), 1; Hobart, *Civil government*, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Davenport, *Sermon Preach'd*, 4.

*Purpose and End of Government.* An evident blessing of government was that it restrained evil and chaos.<sup>33</sup> “If the Foundations be destroyed what can the Righteous do?” queried Hobart.<sup>34</sup> But this did not exhaust its true and positive purpose. The end of government regularly identified by election sermons is the public or common good. (Later, the “common good” was sometimes used interchangeably with “public happiness.”<sup>35</sup>) “The publick Good is the great End, and original Design of the Institution of civil Government. It was ordain’d as a Means to promote the Peace & Welfare of the World,” said Todd.<sup>36</sup> Those who animated government, the rulers or magistrates, as they were variously called, were to “seek the welfare, the good of the people,” following Romans 13:4.<sup>37</sup> This mandate was “engraven on the Forehead of the Law and Light of Nature,” and “owned and confirmed by the Scriptures ... Hence this Law being Supreme, it limits all other Laws and Considerations.”<sup>38</sup> Nothing could be right that was counter to it. This was the “Compass that Rulers are to steer by.”<sup>39</sup> “Think it not enough to do no hurt,” Jonathan Mitchel (1624–1668) told the Massachusetts magistrates in 1671. “Be willing to put forth thy self for the publick good according to thy Talent.”<sup>40</sup> Ruler and citizen both were to be “studious of the common good, the weal and welfare of the whole.”<sup>41</sup>

But what did the common good entail? For Mitchel and his compatriots, the common good necessarily included man’s highest good, right religion and God himself (i.e., the universal common good).<sup>42</sup> “Religion is the chief and principal thing, wherein the welfare of a people stands,” thundered Mitchel.

It is impossible they should be well and do well without this, whereby they may come to serve God and glorifie him, and attain Salvation for their own Souls. The

---

<sup>33</sup> Gurdon Saltonstall, *A Sermon Preached ...* (Boston, 1697), 4.

<sup>34</sup> Hobart, *Civil government*, 5.

<sup>35</sup> See *ibid.*, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Todd, *Civil rulers*, 9. See also Davenport, *Sermon Preach’d*, 5; Samuel Whitman, *Practical godliness the way to prosperity ...* (New London, 1714), 32; Azariah Mather, *Good rulers a choice blessing* (New London, 1725), 13–14; Jonathan Mitchel, *Nehemiah on the Wall ...* (Boston, 1671), 2.

<sup>37</sup> Mitchel, *Nehemiah on the Wall*, 2; (“... this is the way whereby the Ruler, as such, glorifies God ... To glorifie God, is the last end and great duty of every man” [*ibid.*, 6]).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 26–27.

<sup>42</sup> As Thomas Walley and Thomas Thatcher wrote in the introduction to Arnold’s *David Serving his Generation ...*, “Right Reason teacheth that the more common any good is, the better it is. Hence the first being is the chief good, because he is the most Common... universal good.”

weal, the excellency, end and happiness of Mankinde, lyes in true Religion: and therefore if Rulers seek the weal of a people they must needs seek the advancement and establishment of this. Hence ... Religion is the chief and last end of Civil Policy.<sup>43</sup>

This implied, among other things, that civil authorities would enforce both tables of the Ten Commandments.

The jurisdiction of the state did not permit direct ministry to this highest good but did necessitate diaconal care for it, namely, by supporting the church and recognizing the supremacy of Christ overall.<sup>44</sup> Hence, “To encourage and support Religion is one of the greatest & best Ends of Government.”<sup>45</sup> Rulers were to do this through the example of their own character as well as “taking Care for the Support of the Ministers of Religion, encouraging them to their Work; giving out Proclamations that the Ordinances of God be observed, and issuing out their Orders to pull down the Altars of strange Gods.”<sup>46</sup> If rulers were to be a terror to evil, this was implied in their God-given duty. After all, as an institution of God, like the church, the ultimate end of government was the glorification of God, according to its power and station.

The magistrate, therefore, was to terrorize, so to speak, heresy, idolatry, and licentiousness (e.g., laziness, profaning the Sabbath, public drunkenness, etc.) according to the doctrine, standards, and confession of the church. In this way, the magistrate backed up, so to speak, the ministry, reinforcing its discipline and proclamation.<sup>47</sup> But the clergy also justified the state’s role in religion on public grounds, namely, notorious heresy was disruptive, a threat to the social cohesion and peace of a Christian commonwealth.

Indeed, the belief that magistrates had no proper role in the care for religion was, for Puritan preachers, the root of the papist problem. The “Romish Clergy” had usurped civil authority making it impotent and thereby tearing asunder God’s design. In New England, the religious role of the civil jurisdiction was properly restored.<sup>48</sup> The clergy guarded this restoration zealously, even into the eighteenth century. Preaching in 1749, Todd declared the suggestion that magistrates “hath Nothing to do about religious Matters” an unwelcome innovation.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Mitchel, *Nehemiah on the Wall*, 2–3.

<sup>44</sup> Urian Oakes, *New-England Pleaded ...* (Cambridge, 1673), 18; Walley, *Balm in Gilead*, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Todd, *Civil rulers*, 15.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 16; see John Norton, *The Heart of New England Rent ...* (Cambridge, 1659), 50.

<sup>47</sup> To the clergy, this was no violation of conscience; see, e.g., Nicholas Noyes, *New Englands Duty and Interest ...* (Boston, 1698), 79; Stoughton, *True Interest*, 35–36; Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 18, 53–55.

<sup>48</sup> Todd, *Civil rulers*, 18–19.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

To be sure, the church had no need for state support. She was a perfect society in that she could independently accomplish her own proper ends. That being said, “It please God ordinarily to govern the World more mediately; and when he design Good to the Church, to raise up & spirit the higher Powers to protect & help it; the People of Christ justly have their Eyes to these Vice-gerents of God for Protection and Help.”<sup>50</sup> And this according to the promise to the church in Isaiah 60, enacted by Christ’s dominion (Matt 28:18; Eph 1:22).

Accordingly, in Protestant nations, the magistrate was to be a keeper of both tables of the law and submit his ministry to Christ, caring for the purity of doctrine and worship according to his role, chiefly through support of the ministry.<sup>51</sup> At bare minimum, magistrates were expected to honor the Sabbath, promote the preaching of the gospel, and punish blasphemy.<sup>52</sup> That kings should be nursing fathers and queens nursing mothers to the church, according to Isaiah 49:23, was repeatedly invoked by colonial pulpits throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>53</sup>

In the end, “the Interest of righteousness in the Common wealth, and Holiness in the Churches are inseparable. The prosperity of Church and Common wealth are twisted together.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, “If there be Sickness in the Church, there will be little health in the Common-wealth ... things amiss in the houses of God, are the chief cause that it goes ill with the Country.”<sup>55</sup> Clearly, if the preachers were to be believed, the temporal authority of the colonies had an interest in keeping the spiritual authority healthy. The early modern vision of society as an organic whole implied this interdependence, and the duty of rulers to God demanded it.<sup>56</sup>

This view did not mean that magistrates could proffer new articles of faith, encroach on the church’s discipline, or the like.<sup>57</sup> The church possessed her own liberty, and the temporal and spiritual powers could not be conjoined into a third kind, eroding key distinctions of nature and jurisdiction. They were to be complementary. This entailed the state’s support for the spiritual

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 14; see also, Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 56; Norton, *Heart of New England*, 56.

<sup>51</sup> Todd, *Civil rulers*, 19; see also, Davenport, *Sermon Preach’d*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Walley, *Balm in Gilead*, 13–15.

<sup>53</sup> See, e.g., Davenport, *Sermon Preach’d*, 10; Walley, *Balm in Gilead*, 19; James Fitch, *An Holy Connexion ...* (Cambridge, 1674), 7.

<sup>54</sup> Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 49.

<sup>55</sup> Walley, *Balm in Gilead*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> See generally Otto von Gierke, *Political Theories of the Middle Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900); Herbert L. Osgood, “The Political Ideas of the Puritans,” *Political Science Quarterly* 6.1 (March 1891): 1–28.

<sup>57</sup> Davenport, *Sermon Preach’d*, 13.

power via her laws and policy. Sermons often made it clear which power or jurisdiction was to be ultimately prioritized.<sup>58</sup> “The Church is more dear to [God] than the Common-wealth,” declared Walley in 1669. God was God to the state but Father to the church. The disparity in intimacy was clear, and this difference was directly connected to the eternal and higher nature of the church and her mission.<sup>59</sup> “There is a Civil Policy needful in Civil-Estate affairs,” said Fitch, “but the shine is in Divine Policy . . . Civil Policy is a good Servant, but Divine Policy must be the Master and Ruler.”<sup>60</sup>

Nor did this arrangement entail brutal persecution of dissenters, despite the popular narratives today. A “well-bounded Toleration,” as Walley put it, was “very desirable in all Christian Common-wealths, that there may be no just occasion for any to complain of Cruelty or Persecution.” But public blasphemy and idolatry were still to be punished, as well as any error that tended to “disturbing of Peace and Order in Church or State.”<sup>61</sup>

*Peace, Tranquility, and Quietness.* The emphasis on the maintenance of true religion vis-à-vis the common good notwithstanding, New England clergymen acknowledged more tangible elements of the common good though material conditions were considered in “subordination to Religion.”<sup>62</sup> Religion itself was a temporal good, though not merely so. Among “external” considerations under the magistrate’s purview were the safety of his people —“they cannot possibly have well-being, without the preservation of their Being, both Personal and Political”—as well as prosperity, “in matters of outward Estate and Livelyhood.”<sup>63</sup> Peace, tranquility, and quietness, as well as equity and order in the administration of justice, coincided with material prosperity. “Government,” declared Samuel Willard (1640–1704), “is to prevent and cure the disorders that are apt to break forth among the Societies of men; and to promote the civil peace and prosperity of such a people, as well as to suppress impiety, and nourish Religion.”<sup>64</sup>

Unity and prevention of disturbances, foreign and domestic, were the bare minimum conditions for the city on a hill to flourish.<sup>65</sup> In all things,

<sup>58</sup> See John Norton, *The Answer ...* (1648), trans. Douglas Horton (Cambridge: Belknap, 1958).

<sup>59</sup> Walley, *Balm in Gilead*, 19; see also, Fitch, *Connexion*, 8.

<sup>60</sup> Fitch, *Connexion*, 14.

<sup>61</sup> Walley, *Balm in Gilead*, 15; see also, J. M. Busted, “A Well-Bounded Toleration: Church and State in Plymouth Colony,” *Journal of Church and State* 10.2 (Spring 1968): 265–79.

<sup>62</sup> Mitchel, *Nehemiah on the Wall*, 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–4.

<sup>64</sup> Willard, *The Character of a Good Ruler* (Boston, 1694), 3.

<sup>65</sup> Mitchel, *Nehemiah on the Wall*, 4–5; see also, Stoughton, *New-Englands True Interest*, 17–18; Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 17, 21.

whether higher or lower, it was to be remembered that rulers were ministers of God and servants of their people. Indeed, “The people are not for the Rulers, but the Rulers for the people, to minister to their welfare.”<sup>66</sup> Government, the reader will recall, was a blessing, not a curse for the colonial clergy, and especially when governors acted as true public servants. Hence, Nicholas Noyes (1647–1717), in 1698, instructed his esteemed audience, “You are the Ministers of God for our Good, & you can do nothing more acceptable to God, honourable to your Selves; nor beneficial to us; than to do your utmost to make this Land an Habitation of Justice, and Mountain of Holiness.”<sup>67</sup> In some sense, just order was a precondition for a holy one.

## 2. *The Character of the Good Ruler*

Though discussion of the nature and ends of government was a foundational topic for all election sermons, no subject was more thoroughly treated than that of the character of the good ruler. It was believed that the destiny of a people was directly tied to the character of their leaders.

We shall always find among the Israelites that Religion flourished, or langush't according to the Disposition & Practice of their Kings. And it is not to be wondered, if Magistrates are Rulers of Sodom, that those under their Conduct be the People of Gomorrah.<sup>68</sup>

“You are betruſted with as precious an Interest as is this day upon the Earth,” preached Mitchel in 1671. That interest was “the Lives, Estates, Liberties, and Religious Enjoyments of ſome thouſands.” The eyes of the whole world and God himſelf were upon the magiſtrates, watching to ſee how ſuch a weighty reſponſibility was ſtewardſhiped.<sup>69</sup> For the fulfillment of this duty a ruler required a true “Compaſſion, ſo as to have a lively ſenſe of the Condition and Concernments of this people.” This, in turn, needed a “ſtudioſ and ſolicitous” approach to the “Publick Welfare,” as well as a meaſure of ſelf-denial and patience, courage and conſtancy, wiſdom and prudence, and above all, a healthy prayer life.<sup>70</sup>

Willard’s 1694 ſermon *The Character of a Good Ruler* ſet the tone for all ſubſequent diſcourſes on the topic. Willard’s progeny dutifully followed ſuit. Juſt as theſe preachers thought highly of government, they thought highly of thoſe who occupied it. “Good Magiſtrates, good Laws, and the

<sup>66</sup> Mitchel, *Nehemiah on the Wall*, 7.

<sup>67</sup> Noyes, *New-Englands Duty and Interest*, 81.

<sup>68</sup> Pemberton, *Divine original*, 58.

<sup>69</sup> Mitchel, *Nehemiah on the Wall*, 18–19.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–22; ſee alſo, Pemberton, *Divine original*, 25.

vigorous Execution of them hath been the priviledge and glory of New England,” asserted Urian Oakes (1631–1681).<sup>71</sup>

“Rulers are Gods,” thundered Pemberton in 1710, preaching on Psalm 82:6–7, “as they are God’s Vicegerents.” They were representatives of God’s authority and justice on earth—according not to their persons but to their office—and, therefore, worthy of the utmost reverence, rivaled only by the leaders of the coordinate state, the clergy.<sup>72</sup> All power was derived of God, even if mediately bestowed upon men by human, constitutional means (e.g., election). Already noted is the magistrate’s role in preserving religion. Good management of public religion, however, required good character in the manager. Rulers had a “double Office,” insofar as they were to “maintain Justice towards men, & Piety towards God.”<sup>73</sup>

If we could reduce the virtues of the ruler to three, per the sermons, they would be piety, justice, and prudence, all three of which were interdependent. The first criterion of electability for magistrates in colonial New England was not skill and experience but piety.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, if the magistrate’s chief duty was to promote *public* piety and defend *true* religion, then he must himself be a possessor of *personal* piety and devotee of *true* religion. Hence, Davenport stated,

Let Christ therefore have preheminance in all things, and in your choice of Rulers for the Commonwealth ... see that they whom you choose to be Rulers, be men interested personally in Christ: For when they that are called to Ruling Power, cease to exert it in subserviency to the Kingdom of Christ, there will be an end of New-England’s Glory, and Happiness, and Safety.<sup>75</sup>

Piety was variously referred to as “righteousness” and “fear of God.” Election preachers appealed to myriad Scriptural examples, primarily drawn from the Old Testament, to paint the picture of the pious ruler. “The Scripture plentifully shews,” said Davenport, “what strong and powerful influence and efficacy, the true fear of God exerteth in reference to all Moral duties among men.”<sup>76</sup> The end of rulers “should be to exalt Christ [not themselves] in dispensing his Government.”<sup>77</sup> Indeed, the ministers

---

<sup>71</sup> Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 19.

<sup>72</sup> Pemberton, *Divine original*, 19; Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 24; Samuel Philips, *Political rulers authoriz’d and influenc’d by God ...* (Boston, 1750).

<sup>73</sup> Willard, *Good Ruler*, 7.

<sup>74</sup> Whiting, *The Way of Israels Welfare*, 24.

<sup>75</sup> Davenport, *Sermon Preach’d*, 11.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

directly traced a disregard for the common good to demagoguery and “the want of humility.”<sup>78</sup>

Of course, the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. These two attributes were almost always discussed in tandem and heavily emphasized. The happiness of a people was wrapped up in the wisdom of their rulers, discerned William Hubbard (1621–1704) in a lengthy 1676 oration.<sup>79</sup> Justice flowed from, and was regulated by, the fear of God; it was conformity to the second table of the Decalogue, whereas holiness was obedience to the first, advised Nicholas Noyes (1647–1717), and the latter was the basis of the former.<sup>80</sup>

Prudence, the first classical virtue, entailed self-control and assumed piety. The ruler was not to “Exert his Power Illimitedly, and Arbitrarily, but in Conformity to the Law of God, and the Light of Nature, for Gods Honour, and the promoting of the common benefit.”<sup>81</sup> In other words, the ruler was to rule in accordance with general equity, reason, and the constitutional confines that preceded his own appointment. The good of the people required peace, order, and justice. Rulers were, therefore, to be circumspect in policy making and adjudication, making sure not needlessly to run roughshod over established customs and norms. In sum, the just ruler was one who feared God and obeyed his law, pursued the public benefit over his own, and honored the limits of his jurisdiction and rule.<sup>82</sup>

New England preachers were unapologetic in ascribing to rulers a paternalistic character.<sup>83</sup> They were to be fathers to their people. This entailed sacrificial love, but also knowledge and wisdom as to how to affect their good. Azariah Mather (1685–1737) preached in 1725 that “The great subordinate End is the Publick good; the Means and Laws of Government must be calculated to work and bring about that End & Effect.” The public good was the next, immediate, or subordinate end of government since the glory of God was its final end. Then again, service of the public good was the best way to glorify God. This balance required piety and wisdom, knowledge of the “maxims” or principles that, when applied rightly, yielded this result.<sup>84</sup> No maxim or rule of government could contradict the law of nature or societies or run afoul the end of government itself.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> William Adams, *God's Eye on the Contrite ...* (Boston, 1685), 22.

<sup>79</sup> Hubbard, *The Happiness of a People ...* (Boston, 1674).

<sup>80</sup> Noyes, *Duty and Interest*, 8–9.

<sup>81</sup> Willard, *Good Ruler*, 7.

<sup>82</sup> Moss, *Election sermon*, 18–28; Nathaniel Appleton, *The great blessing of good rulers ...* (Boston, 1742), 49.

<sup>83</sup> Walley, *Balm in Gilead*, 12.

<sup>84</sup> Mather, *Good rulers a choice blessing*, 13–14.

<sup>85</sup> Hobart, *Civil government*, 11.

The public good also demanded limits to magisterial power. Arbitrary power was not theirs to claim. God did not deal with his people in this way. “Absolute Dominion” that defied the “Principles of Reason” was ill-suited for “free and reasonable Beings, who need indeed to be Governed, but ought not to be Broken by the force, and weight of Power.” To do otherwise was to reduce them to beasts.<sup>86</sup>

Hence, the good ruler “governs not by unaccountable Will, or inconstant humour ... but by Stable Measures, as may best suit the Nature and Circumstances of his Subjects, and the Noble End of his Government.”<sup>87</sup> That is to say, the good ruler rules within preestablished constitutional limits by discernable prudence born out of genuine, fatherly love for his people and right knowledge of the purpose and end of government.<sup>88</sup> “Kings are properly the Fathers of their People, and not Masters placed in the Throne to be Served by Slaves.”<sup>89</sup>

More practically, beyond competence and piety, the good ruler required fortitude.

It oftentimes happens, that the Way to please the Multitude, is, to desert the Cause of God, and betray the Interest of their Country: And, if they have Resolution enough, to stem the Current of popular Humour, and to endeavour, to the last, to prevent the Ruin a People would bring upon themselves, they will doubtless, be often censured and reproach'd, and evil intreated ... [by] an unthankful People.<sup>90</sup>

The election day preachers advocated for the magistrates in this regard from a place of experience-wrought sympathy:

It is the hard condition of Magistrates and Ministers that they must bear all the murmurings of discontented people, and be loaded with all the obloquies and injurious reproaches that can be. They had need be men of great meekness and patience, able to bear much, that are Pillars in the Church and Common-wealth.<sup>91</sup>

Rulers were highly deserving of prayer and patience, and the people were regularly warned that “If men will be despising, and censuring, and reproaching, and abusing the Gods among them ... and the Angels of Churches ... God can send Devils ... to torment and terrifie them.”<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> Pemberton, *Divine original*, 26.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 46, 55.

<sup>90</sup> Todd, *Civil rulers*, 35–36.

<sup>91</sup> Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 39.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

The high bar for rulers notwithstanding, election sermons regularly reminded the audience that despite their laudable office, rulers were still fallen men prone to sin and vice. Hobart recognized the ever-present human element (of ruler and ruled) in government could destroy it, no matter how prudently it was constructed.

Civil Government may, and too often does fail of answering it's End ... This sometimes happens through the weakness or wickedness of Rulers, and sometimes through the Folly and madness of Subjects.<sup>93</sup>

Accordingly, people were to “make all favourable Allowances for the Infirmities, and Defects of their Rulers,” and cover them with a “veil of Charity.” Charitableness was derived in part from a duty to proper submissiveness to God’s authorities as well as a realist reminder “not to place undue Confidences in [even] the the best Rulers.”<sup>94</sup> All would eventually disappoint. The best rulers would realize this themselves, embrace it, and rule in all humility.<sup>95</sup> Only arrogant, mutinous men “can pick holes and find as many faults with our Rulers in the management of Civil and Ecclesiastical affairs.”<sup>96</sup>

The election preachers were generally intolerant of those who made a habit of criticizing authority and public office holders.<sup>97</sup> However, the preachers sometimes acknowledged that there was a limit to the failings of rulers that a people could countenance.<sup>98</sup> For example, Pemberton noted briskly,

Doubtless God has not left a State without a Regular Remedy to Save itself, when the Fundamental Constitution of a People is Overturned; their Laws and Liberties, Religion and Properties are openly Invaded, and ready to be made a Publick Sacrifice.<sup>99</sup>

The whole was greater than the sum of its parts. That being said, rebellion was generally ill-advised and rarely necessitated. Being tenacious of one’s liberties was *not* synonymous with harboring “carnal confidence” in the same.<sup>100</sup> “When you have pious Rulers, of whose Faithfulness you have had

---

<sup>93</sup> Hobart, *Civil government*, 5.

<sup>94</sup> Pemberton, *Divine original*, 70–72.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>96</sup> Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 35.

<sup>97</sup> Saltonstall, *Sermon Preached*, 5.

<sup>98</sup> Herbert Darling Foster, “The Political Theories of Calvinists before the Puritan Exodus to America,” *American Historical Review* 21.3 (April 1916): 481–503.

<sup>99</sup> Pemberton, *Divine original*, 87.

<sup>100</sup> Adams, *God's Eye*, 10.

experience, Do not easily suspect them.”<sup>101</sup> Citizens were never to complain “without cause.”<sup>102</sup> It was “men of like infirmity” that they were electing.<sup>103</sup>

In the end, charity and longsuffering were mutual duties of ruler and ruled. One thing was for sure, bad rulers were a sign of judgment. In that case, “there is no Reason to complain,” said James Allen (1632–1710).<sup>104</sup> Such a chastisement was a sign that citizens had first been derelict in their duties and was intended to humble them, returning them to the pursuit of piety and the common good.<sup>105</sup>

### 3. *The Character of the Good Citizen*

Elected officials were not the only ones addressed on election days. Hardly a sermon was given that did not forcefully remind the lay attendees of their corresponding duties to their betters. Election sermons were not a time to bash recently confirmed candidates for sport but rather a time to remind the whole commonwealth, ruler and subject, in church and state, of what God intended for, and demanded of, them. “You must submit to their Authority,” Davenport told the laymen in the audience, “and perform all duties to them, whom you have chosen to be your Rulers, whether they be good or bad, by virtue of the Relation between them and you.” Accordingly, electors were advised to be circumspect in their appointments. The time for scrutiny was properly prior to inauguration; thereafter, deference was owed.

The danger inherent in electing unfit and ungodly rulers pertained to the very survival of the commonwealth. The health of the commonwealth was directly tied to the conduct of the administration, just as the health of the churches was wrapped up in the zeal and faithfulness of the ministers. God could very well punish the whole for the malfesance of the part. “If men unjust, that fear not God, be chosen Rulers of the Common-wealth,” warned Davenport, “all the People are in danger of being punished by the wrath of God for the sins of their Rulers; Bad men being in publick place, will give bad counsel to corrupt Religion.” To prove the point, Davenport invoked the cautionary tales of Abimelech, Jeroboam, and Manasseh.<sup>106</sup>

In short, it was expected that the compassionate, prudent, just ruler would be complemented by dutiful, magnanimous subjects. Whereas today it is commonplace, indeed, often encouraged, to be cynical about (even to

---

<sup>101</sup> Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 52.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> James Allen, *New-Englands Choicest Blessing ...* (Boston, 1679), 8.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Adams, *God’s Eye*, 27.

<sup>106</sup> Davenport, *Sermon Preach’d*, 11.

detest) public servants, New Englanders were repeatedly told to “highly prize and honour” their rulers. In part, this was because rulers were God’s ordained means of maintaining “the people’s weal.” The style of governance and character of rulers was indicative of God’s favor, or disfavor, toward a people—the blame for the latter was always located within the people themselves—but the duty of the good citizen to honor authority was somewhat impervious to circumstances. Citizens were to pray for good rulers and that “God may dispose and assist them to seek and promote your welfare,” but this was not guaranteed, and true Christian citizen ethics could not depend on how favorable a regime was in a given moment. It is telling that this theme in election sermons did not waver under the tyranny of Andros,<sup>107</sup> nor throughout the mid-to-late eighteenth century when relations in the home government were souring.

Just as rulers are to seek the welfare of the people, so people are to be “Helpers to their own welfare.” “Love thy Neighbor, much more a whole community, a multitude of thy Neighbors, is the Lord’s charge to every one.” This entailed more than simply the willingness to “do no hurt,” but rather required that every citizen, regardless of station, spend themselves for “the public good.” A “publick Spirit,” perhaps above all other virtues in this context, was highly prized, and, therefore, frequently mentioned. A public spirit is sensitivity toward, and eagerness to serve, the common good. “Could [Aristotle] ... produce such Sayings as these; That man was not born for himself, but for his Country ... shall Christians be strangers to such a Publick Spirit, or be backward to act for the common welfare[?]” Part and parcel with serving the common good was the maintenance of order. “Keep in your places, acknowledging and attending the Order that God hath established in the place where you live.”<sup>108</sup> Egalitarianism was not in the cards for New Englanders of the period in focus. A well-ordered society required each citizen to faithfully fulfill their role to the glory of God.

## Conclusion

The optimal means for extracting insights from election sermons is reading them firsthand. Here we have sketched the skeleton upon which the flesh of every election sermon rested. Pastors desirous of bringing the pulpit to bear on politics and adjacent concerns need look no further than the

---

<sup>107</sup> See Guy Howard Miller, “Rebellion in Zion: The Overthrow of the Dominion of New England,” *The Historian* 30.3 (May 1968): 439–59.

<sup>108</sup> Mitchell, *Nehemiah on the Wall*, 23–26.

New England model. Infinitely more effective than reactionary comment on current events and partisan politics is annually reiterating the nature, purpose, and limits of government authority, as well as the corresponding duties of ruler and subject. Better than bemoaning the gridlock of Congress, the superfluosness of government agencies, or the blunder of electoral candidates is instilling respect and charitableness toward authority and appreciation for the institution of government and reminding all parties that law and policy are inherently moral, and that government is both accountable to God and responsible for the common good of the populace.

Simultaneously, the New England template informs voters and officeholders alike of a scriptural, if aspirational, vision for society, rather than being *tossed by the wind*. Faithfully preaching such themes in season and out of season, as Puritan clergy did, is more befitting of the preaching office than the hot take, pandering screeds that pass for some political sermons today. So too does it empower the preacher over silence.

At the risk of introducing a new theme, we would be remiss if the confidence in providence vis-à-vis government that runs throughout the election sermons was not mentioned, a mood applicable in all contexts. James Allin (1692–1747), preaching in 1744, reminded the people not to panic; Christ is on the throne, and providence governs all.

The great and sudden changes in publick affairs; the revolutions of states and kingdoms, which surprize and astonish us, are the effects of a designing mind, of an alwise cause. The various conditions and circumstances of men, that some are prosperous, others adverse; some rich, and others poor; some in dignity, while others are low and level with the earth; is not the result of meer chance, but design of Christ, and for wise ends. The beauty and glory of the whole consists very much in the variety of its parts: And the qualifications of men, for the different stations and parts they are to act, in the rank of rational beings, from Christ the fountain of wisdom.<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> Allin, *Magistracy*, 22.

# Judgment and Mercy: Spurgeon's Preaching of Hell

JEREMY WALKER

## Abstract

Charles Spurgeon contended and demonstrated that clear warnings concerning the coming wrath of God are an essential element of biblical preaching. A survey of published sermons provides a taste of such preaching, from his earliest days in Waterbeach to his later sermons in London. This lays the groundwork for assessing some of the particular features of Spurgeon's preaching of judgment and mercy, including its clarity, vividness, frequency, and consistency, arising out of a sense of duty, with real compassion and grace. While the examples themselves are illuminating, Spurgeon's instruction and exhortation also prompt today's preachers and hearers to consider whether we have achieved anything of a Christlike emphasis and tone on this too-often-overlooked element of faithful gospel ministry.

## Keywords

*Charles Spurgeon, hell, judgment, wrath, mercy, Christ, preaching, damnation, grace, ministry*

---

How few there are who will solemnly tell us of the judgment to come. They preach of God's love and mercy as they ought to do, and as God has commanded them; but of what avail is it to preach mercy unless they preach also the doom of the wicked? And how shall we hope to effect the purpose of preaching unless we warn men that if they "turn not, he will whet his sword?"<sup>1</sup>

If Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) offered such a lament in his day, what might he say in ours? Like him, we rejoice at the preaching of divine love and mercy, the sounding forth of God's sovereign grace toward the lost. With Spurgeon, we give thanks that God's free favor in Christ is readily declared in many pulpits.

But have we asked the corresponding question: "Of what avail is it to preach mercy unless they preach also the doom of the wicked?" With his customary lack of cladding, Spurgeon asserts that we cannot accomplish the true purpose of preaching unless we warn men of God's judgments against unrepentant sinners. In how many pulpits from which love and mercy are declared is there a corresponding setting forth of God's wrath against the ungodly? How many sermons sound the notes of warning concerning damnation that are typical of truly biblical preaching? To what extent is our testimony to the gospel comprehensively and proportionately scriptural? These are not insignificant questions as we contemplate the societies in which we live and the faithful pursuit of gospel ministry in that context.

## I. A Christlike Emphasis

Re-reading some of Spurgeon's sermons in *The New Park Street Pulpit* series, I happened also to be preaching through the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of Luke's Gospel. In his discourses there, our Lord—with his face set toward Jerusalem and all that must happen to him in that place—speaks with distinct urgency, fervency, and intensity. He presses home the realities of eternity and the threat of judgment against sin. After the weighty woes at the end of chapter eleven, our Lord speaks plainly to his followers:

My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten before God. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Luke 12:4–7 NKJV)

<sup>1</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Turn or Burn," in *The New Park Street Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1856), 2:417.

This emphasis continues insistently through the following record: the story of the rich fool, the priority of the kingdom of God, readiness for the return of the Master and serving in the light of his coming, division around the person of Christ, a right discerning of the times, the need to repent we perish, the unfruitful fig tree, the true dynamics of a heavenly kingdom revealed in mustard seeds and leavened loaves, the narrow gate and the open but soon-closing door, the true composition of God's kingdom, and mourning over Jerusalem. Even a brief perusal of such a passage underlines the weight of eternity that burdened our Lord and how that was communicated in his preaching and teaching. Christ constantly and clearly sets out the necessity of living a life of true faith in himself, and consequent holiness before God's eye, if we are to escape the coming wrath. He also assures his repenting and believing followers of a place in the kingdom of God, where they will be truly and lastingly happy.

I felt the force of that messianic emphasis. I was reminded afresh that truly Christlike preaching sounds such notes. There is a consciousness of the preciousness of time and the pressure of eternity, a gripping connection of the here and the hereafter, which is too often missing from much that passes for preaching today. I was, therefore, primed to be struck by the echoes of those themes I found in the ministry of Spurgeon, that gospel preacher whose robust and effective pulpit ministry exalted Christ Jesus in Victorian London and—from there, and since then, through the written word—around the globe. Here is a sample of Spurgeon's typically vigorous and straightforward language:

Sirs! Do ye believe there is a hell, and that you are going there? And yet do you still march needless on? Do you believe that beyond you, when the stream of life is ended, there is a black gulf of misery? and do you still sail downwards to it, quaffing still your glass of happiness, still merry as the live-long day? O stay, poor sinner, stay! Stay! It may be the last moment thou wilt ever have the opportunity to stay in. Therefore stay now I beseech thee. And if thou knowest thyself to be lost and ruined, if the Holy Spirit has humbled thee and made thee feel thy sin, let me tell thee how thou shalt be saved. "He that believeth on the Lord Jesus Christ and is baptized, shall be saved; he that believeth not," saith the Scripture "shall be damned." Do you not like that message? Ought I to have said another word instead of that? If you wish it, I shall not; what God says I will say; far be it from me to alter the messages from the Most High; I will, if he help me, declare his truth without altering. He saith, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be damned." What is it to believe? To tell you as simply as possible: to believe is to give up trusting in yourself and to trust in Jesus Christ as your Saviour.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Love's Commendation," in *New Park Street Pulpit Sermons*, 2:407.

Such examples could be multiplied a thousand times over, quite literally. There is no shortage of evidence that this was a prominent element of his preaching from its earliest days. After demonstrating that from the evidence available, we will consider in more detail the nature of Spurgeon’s preaching of judgment and mercy.

## II. *Ministry in Waterbeach*

Spurgeon cut his preaching teeth in the cottages and villages of Cambridge-shire. His first formal pastoral charge was in the village of Waterbeach, where he served from 1851 to 1854, prior to his call to London. Ebenezer Smith, close in age to the young Spurgeon when he arrived in Waterbeach, spoke of the preacher’s experience one night and the impact it had on his preaching from 2 Peter 3:10–11 the following day:

On another occasion he could not sleep on Saturday night, and early in the morning ere the light had dawned he awoke me. The perspiration was streaming from his forehead, he told me he had seen a vision of Hell. He described the last things, the Judgment, the wailing, the torments and the shriek of the lost, until I grew frightened.

The next morning he preached his marvellous sermon on the Final Conflagration, one of the most awful sermons that was ever heard from a Christian pulpit. Men and women swayed in agony. It was a mental torture unknown in our churches to-day. It seemed as though he shook his audience over the Pit, until the smoke of God’s wrath filled their eyes and made them weep, and entered their throats until they gasped for mercy. It was not done for effect. The power lay in the fact that it was real to the preacher. He had lived through a nightmare of a terrible experience and it was being used to a holy purpose. He was deeply in earnest and men knew it. He never preached a religion he had simply learned, but a truth that had been cut into his soul by a deep and rich experience.<sup>3</sup>

This echoes the response to Jonathan Edwards’s preaching on sinners in the hands of an angry God. Stephen Williams, present in 1794 on that occasion in Enfield, Connecticut, recorded in his diary the sense of immediacy that gripped the congregation:

Before the sermon was done there was a great moaning and crying out through the whole house, “What shall I do to be saved?! Oh, I am going to Hell! Oh, what shall I do for Christ?” etc. So that the minister was obliged to desist. Shrieks and cries were piercing and amazing. After some time of waiting, the congregation were still so that a prayer was made by Mr W[heelock]; and after that we descended from the pulpit and discoursed with the people, some in one place and some in another, and—amazing and astonishing!—the power of God was seen, and several souls were

---

<sup>3</sup> Ebenezer Smith, *Two Centuries of Grace: Being a Brief History of the Baptist Church, Waterbeach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 15–16.

hopefully wrought upon that night, and oh, the cheerfulness and pleasantness of their countenances that received comfort.<sup>4</sup>

The preaching notes for Spurgeon's sermon are available in a new and growing collection, *The Lost Sermons of C. H. Spurgeon*.<sup>5</sup> One of the most striking things about this sermon is how it is not, on the page, particularly striking! The preacher can read through the notes and identify those portions which, developed in a sermon, might have made the impact described, but the thunder and the lightning must have developed in the pulpit itself. Spurgeon himself asked of George Whitefield, "What was there in Whitfield to attract an audience, except the simple gospel preached with a vehement oratory that carried everything before it? Oh, it was not his oratory, but the gospel that drew the people. There is a something about the truth that always makes it popular." For Spurgeon, "it is not the style of preaching, it is the style of feeling" that makes the sermon what it is.<sup>6</sup> The need of the Spirit to bless the truth is powerfully communicated by the apparent gulf between the simply stated truths of the notes and the manifest potency of the sermon preached from them.

Also noteworthy is that this sermon, like others from his Waterbeach days, was recycled later in ministry. Spurgeon preached on the same text some twenty years later, in August 1873, at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, entitled "The World on Fire." The material is reorganized, and there is some development in the presentation, but the substance is essentially the same. Whether it had a similar effect on that occasion we do not know. While the emphasis is more on the flames that will purify the earth than the sufferings of the damned, Spurgeon's conclusion makes plain that the Waterbeach sermons cannot be dismissed as youthful zeal or puerile histrionics:

If all you love is here below, it will all go! Your gold and silver will all go! Will you not have Christ? Will you not have a Saviour? for if you will not, there remains for you only a fearful looking for of judgment and of fiery indignation. Tempt not the anger of God. Yield to his mercy now. Believe in his dear Son. I pray that you may this day be saved, and God be glorified in your salvation. Amen.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The Diary is printed in Oliver William Means, *A Sketch of the Strict Congregational Church of Enfield, Connecticut* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Seminary Press, 1899). Quoted by Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 169. The language and grammar have been updated.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Chang, ed., *The Lost Sermons of C. H. Spurgeon*, vol. 5 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2021), 5:46–57.

<sup>6</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Christ Lifted Up," in *The New Park Street Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1857), 3:262.

<sup>7</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "The World on Fire," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1873), 19:444.

### III. *London Ministry*

In the first sermon of the earliest collection of Spurgeon's regular sermons, *The New Park Street Pulpit*, the preacher addresses the immutability of God. God, says Spurgeon, is unchangeable in his essence, his attributes, his plans, and his promises. Before telling us that God is unchanging in the objects of his love, Spurgeon introduces "one jarring note to spoil the theme"—"To some of you God is unchanging in his threatenings":

If every promise stands fast, and every oath of the covenant is fulfilled, hark thee, sinner!—mark the word—hear the death-knell of thy carnal hopes; see the funeral of thy fleshly trustings. Every threatening of God, as well as every promise shall be fulfilled. Talk of decrees! I will tell you of a decree: "He that believeth not shall be damned." That is a decree, and a statute that can never change. Be as good as you please, be as moral as you can, be as honest as you will, walk as uprightly as you may,—there stands the unchangeable threatening: "He that believeth not shall be damned." What sayest thou to that, moralist? Oh, thou wishest thou couldst alter it, and say, "He that does not live a holy life shall be damned." That will be true; but it does not say so. It says, "He that believeth not." Here is the stone of stumbling, and the rock of offence; but you cannot alter it. You must believe or be damned, saith the Bible; and mark, that threat of God is as unchangeable as God himself. And when a thousand years of hell's torments shall have passed away, you shall look on high, and see written in burning letters of fire, "He that believeth not shall be damned." "But, Lord, I am damned." Nevertheless it says "shall be" still. And when a million ages have rolled away, and you are exhausted by your pains and agonies, you shall turn up your eye and still read "SHALL BE DAMNED," unchanged, unaltered. And when you shall have thought that eternity must have spun out its last thread—that every particle of that which we call eternity, must have run out, you shall still see it written up there, "SHALL BE DAMNED." O terrific thought! How dare I utter it? But I must. Ye must be warned, sirs, "lest ye also come into this place of torment." Ye must be told rough things; for if God's gospel is not a rough thing, the law is a rough thing; Mount Sinai is a rough thing. Woe unto the watchman that warns not the ungodly! God is unchanging in his threatenings. Beware, O sinner, for "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."<sup>8</sup>

While this is not a short excerpt, its very length demonstrates something of the development of such ideas in at least some of Spurgeon's sermons.<sup>9</sup> This is not a passing reference, no off-the-cuff comment. These are well-developed, central, and substantial elements of the sermons, with their own momentum, their rhetorical ebbs and flows.

<sup>8</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Immutability of God," in *The New Park Street Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1855), 1:4.

<sup>9</sup> While Spurgeon can be extremely pithy, there are also extended passages in which he builds a kind of sermonic rhythm. Only heard or read as a whole does the proper force of the passage begin to build.

Spurgeon's genuine "last sermon" on David's sharing of the spoil (from 1 Sam 30:21–25) is of a different order, though still redolent with a hopeful sense of eternity: "In life or death, where he is, there will we, his servants, be. We joyfully accept both the cross and the crown which go with our Lord Jesus Christ: we are eager to bear our full share of the blame, that we may partake in his joy."<sup>10</sup> In a sermon intended for reading on the same date, June 7, 1891, we find him speaking thus concerning the forgiveness of sins:

Too often, in popular talk, it is supposed that the chief and main thought of the forgiven sinner is that he has escaped from hell. Salvation means much more than this; and what it further means is too much kept in the background, but yet I will begin with rescue from punishment; for if sin be pardoned, *the penalty is extinguished*.

Salvation is not merely deliverance from hell, but it is certainly no less than that. With this reality in mind, he proceeds to a warning:

Can you go to bed to-night with your sins unforgiven? Some of you may have the foolhardiness to do that, but I would not dare to do it. See where you are. Within a moment you may be dead. Within that moment you will be in hell, past all hope.<sup>11</sup>

Focusing on publication date and turning to one of the last of the original sequence of sermons, the penultimate address of the final volume of the *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, published on Thursday, April 19, 1917,<sup>12</sup> we read the following, at least as notable as some of the former for its directness:

How we tremble at the thought of that outer darkness, where shall be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth! There are many enquiries nowadays about eternal punishment. Oh! men and brethren, do not rashly or carelessly challenge the bitter experience of such condemnation! Speculate as you will about the doctrine, but I pray you do not trifle with the reality. To be lost for ever, let that mean what it may, will be more than you can bear, though your ribs were iron, and your bones were brass. Tempt not the avenging angel. Beware that ye forget not God, lest he tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver. By the living God, I pray you fear and tremble, lest you be found out of Christ in the day of his appearing. Rest not, be not

---

<sup>10</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Statute of David for the Sharing of the Spoil," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1891), 37:313–314.

<sup>11</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Redemption through Blood, the Gracious Forgiveness of Sins," in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, 37:302, 309.

<sup>12</sup> The date of preaching is uncertain, though this is recorded as having been delivered at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Some very early sermons were used in the later volumes. My point is to show the consistent spread of such reference in the works, considered either chronologically or in publishing order.

patient, much less merry, till you are saved. To be in danger of hell-fire is a peril that no heart can adequately realise, no language fitly paint. Oh! I beseech you, halt not, give yourself no rest, till you have got beyond that danger! Flee for your lives, for the fiery shower will soon descend! Escape! God, in his mercy, quicken your pace that you may escape full soon, lest the hour of mercy cease and the Day of Judgment come! Surely these are reasons enough for wanting to pass in at the strait gate.<sup>13</sup>

Even the very last published sermon, on the sweet topic of “The Drawings of Love,” contains this reminder: “The genuine Christian serves God because he loves him; not that he fears hell, for he knows that he has been delivered from condemnation, being washed in Jesus’s blood; not that he expects to earn heaven; he scorns the idea. Heaven is not to be merited by our poor paltry works.”<sup>14</sup>

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that this note is fully dominant or even equally prominent in every available sermon. There are sermons where it does govern the whole, such as “Turn or Burn,”<sup>15</sup> “Heaven and Hell,”<sup>16</sup> or “The Saint’s Horror at the Sinner’s Hell.”<sup>17</sup> It is also present outside the sermons themselves. It crops up regularly in essays in Spurgeon’s magazine. Tracts published in *The Sword and the Trowel* regularly mention hell. One tract only a little over four hundred words long, concerning God’s slowness to judgment, declares that “Hell is not to be thought of without trembling, but it will soon be your eternal dwelling-place unless you repent. Can you endure its endless torments? Trembler, there is hope! Jesus died. Jesus lives.”<sup>18</sup> It would require an almost deliberate blindness to see it as anything other than a central concern and persistent emphasis of Spurgeon’s public ministry.

#### IV. Of Judgment and Mercy

Spurgeon’s preaching of judgment is *clear*. There is not a hint of uncertainty, even less of the possibility of doubt. Hell, equally with heaven, is a reality known and felt not by the preacher alone, but pressed upon the conscience

---

<sup>13</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Strait Gate,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1917), 63:184–85.

<sup>14</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Drawings of Love,” in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, 63:201.

<sup>15</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Turn or Burn,” in *New Park Street Pulpit Sermons*, 2:417–24.

<sup>16</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Heaven and Hell,” in *New Park Street Pulpit Sermons*, 1:301–10.

<sup>17</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Saint’s Horror at the Sinner’s Hell,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1863), 9:445–56.

<sup>18</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Sword and the Trowel, 1865* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1865), 84.

of every hearer. The language Spurgeon uses in speaking of both eternal bliss and woe is concrete, both set forth without the pulling of punches:

The school of modern thought laughs at the ridiculous positiveness of Reformers and Puritans; it is advancing in glorious liberality, and before long will publish a grand alliance between heaven and hell, or, rather, an amalgamation of the two establishments upon terms of mutual concession, allowing falsehood and truth to lie side by side, like the lion with the lamb. Still, for all that, my firm old-fashioned belief is that some doctrines are true, and that statements which are diametrically opposite to them are not true, that when "No" is the fact, "Yes" is out of court, and that when "Yes" can be justified, "No" must be abandoned.<sup>19</sup>

Such clarity is typical of Spurgeon and expected of those who would follow him. Hell and heaven must be set forth with absolute distinctness. The reality of the strait gate and the narrow way must never be diminished. Faith in Christ as the point of division between the sheep and the goats must be pressed home (cf. Matt 25:31–46). This reality is painful for preachers with regard to both our own souls and the souls of our hearers:

Will any of us be found wanting? Shall the pit of hell draw a portion of its wretched inhabitants from among our band of pastors? Terrible will be the doom of a fallen preacher: his condemnation will astonish common transgressors. "Hell from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming." All they shall speak and say unto thee, "Art thou also become weak as we? Art thou become like unto us?"

O for the Spirit of God to make and keep us alive unto God, faithful to our office, and useful to our generation, and clear of the blood of men's souls. Amen.<sup>20</sup>

If we are preachers, how distinct is our preaching of hell? If we are hearers, how carefully do God's servants expound and apply this aspect of truth? Spurgeon not only avoids but also condemns paraphrase, as we have already seen:

"He that believeth on the Lord Jesus Christ and is baptized, shall be saved; he that believeth not," saith the Scripture "shall be damned." Do you not like that message? Ought I to have said another word instead of that? If you wish it, I shall not; what God says I will say."<sup>21</sup>

Spurgeon has no time for preachers whose tongues are as velvet as the opulent cushions upon which they rest their Bibles. Do we use Spurgeon's plain Saxon (if that is our native tongue!) to make eternal reality plain?

<sup>19</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1889), 264.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 245–46.

<sup>21</sup> Spurgeon, "Love's Commendation," in *New Park Street Pulpit Sermons*, 2:407.

But this preaching is not simply clear in its content, it is also *vivid* in its delivery. In reading the sermons it is hard not to hear and almost see the preacher, to get something of the immediacy that shook the congregation in Waterbeach. Spurgeon is alleged to have said to his students, “When you preach on heaven, have a face that reflects the sweetness of God; when you preach on hell, your normal face will do quite well.” Leaving aside the wry counsel, there is a very real point about the preacher’s engagement with the substance of these warnings. Quite apart from the spirit of his language, there are direct references to his own agony of soul, his sweat and tears, in preaching these themes. For Spurgeon, there is little merely figurative in the language of Scripture. The fire, the darkness, the pit, the pain, are all decidedly real, including its eternal duration. Consider the careful point made by Edward Donnelly concerning the symbolic language of Scripture concerning hell:

By its very nature a symbol or sign is always less than the reality it represents. The reality behind the symbol is always more .... So there is no comfort to be found in saying that the language depicting hell is symbolic. That doesn’t make hell any less dreadful. It reminds us, rather, that the reality is worse than the most terrifying of the symbols.<sup>22</sup>

Spurgeon takes the symbols of damnation with the utmost seriousness and repeats them without any dilution. For a man so often accused of (over-)spiritualizing texts, here he rather emphasizes the very real horrors of the Pit, readily focusing attention on the physical aspects and drawing attention to the horrors of spiritual separation from God. In the notes to the aforementioned Waterbeach sermon, Spurgeon insists that the conflagration of 2 Peter 3:10–11 is “literal, not figurative—else it would be no answer to the scoffers ... besides the words are plainly literal.”<sup>23</sup> He adopts the same attitude with regard to descriptions of heaven and hell. He himself recognizes that there are dangers of excess here:

Perhaps some of the Puritanic fathers may have gone too far, and have given too great a prominence to the terrors of the Lord in their ministry: but the age in which we live has sought to forget those terrors altogether, and if we dare to tell men that God will punish them for their sins, it is charged upon us that we want to bully them into religion, and if we faithfully and honestly tell our hearers that sin must bring after it certain destruction, it is said that we are attempting to frighten them into goodness. Now we care not what men mockingly impute to us; we feel it our duty,

---

<sup>22</sup> Edward Donnelly, *(Biblical Teaching on the Doctrines of) Heaven and Hell* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), 34.

<sup>23</sup> Chang, ed., *Lost Sermons of C. H. Spurgeon*, 5:47.

when men sin, to tell them they shall be punished, and so long as the world will not give up its sin we feel we must not cease our warnings.<sup>24</sup>

There are points at which Spurgeon indulges in a little poetic license, when he perhaps is in danger of drawing color more from the realms of imagination than from the pages of Scripture. But he is always plain, often graphic, and that for sustained periods. These are not passing references but—as can be seen in the quotations above—long and sometimes lurid passages emphasizing the horrors and pains of eternal judgment. It does raise, for us, the question of the exercise of our imagination. For many modern hearers, the imagination has perhaps been overwhelmed by the intensity of modern multimedia experiences. We sit in front of screens on which the most outlandish scenes are vividly depicted. Mere words, we might feel, cannot compete. The preacher seeking to impress upon the lost soul the horrors of damnation and the wonders of redemption is trying to strike home into hearts dulled by exposure to a near-constant stream of striking images held before the very eye. Perhaps there is a temptation to try the same audio-visual route, or to aim at ever more strident and shocking flights of rhetoric. But, while insisting upon the painfully direct language and imagery of Scripture, we should again be willingly cast back—with Spurgeon—upon the Spirit's operations to make these truths known and felt.

In addition, Spurgeon's references to divine wrath are *frequent and consistent*. They are frequent both within and across the recorded output. You would be hard pressed to find more than a few sermons in which the judgment to come does not play a part, even if it is more of a mention than a focus. Certainly, the majority of the sermons have this in the background; many have it in the foreground. It is, for Spurgeon, part of the landscape of the Bible. That being so, one cannot paint a scriptural picture without choosing from this portion of the palette. And it is not just across the range, it is frequent within sermons. In one of the aforementioned sermons, "The Saint's Horror at the Sinner's Hell," it is so sustained as to almost dominate the whole, but that is natural given the text (Ps 26:9). Sermons with a less immediate emphasis are often still packed with the power of this reality, such as that on "Filling Up the Measure of Iniquity" from Genesis 15:16, on the iniquity of the Amorites.<sup>25</sup> Even sermons which might seem to demand little of this flavor often find space to embrace a heart-thrust or two in this

---

<sup>24</sup> Spurgeon, "Turn or Burn," 417.

<sup>25</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Filling Up the Measure of Iniquity," in *The New Park Street Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1907), 53:277–288.

direction. In a sermon on the woman who had the flow of blood, from Luke 8:43–44, he contrasts her concern with the indifference of others: “Many are sick with dire spiritual disease, but they make no resolve to have it cured; they trifle with sin, and death, and heaven, and hell.” He later warns those who imagine that they will find salvation without seeking it, “Alas! it may more likely happen to them, as to the rich man in the parable, ‘In hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments.’ God grant that none of you may trifle your souls into such misery!”<sup>26</sup> Those last two referenced sermons were preached in 1871 and 1888, demonstrating the consistency of this emphasis. The same notes are sounded time after time, over time. There is, in that respect, no softening.

It is worthwhile to recognize that, for Spurgeon, such an approach is simply *obedient*: it is part of his calling as a true minister of the gospel. To his students, he could say that “since, upon our ministry, under God, hang everlasting things,—life and death, Heaven and hell,—what manner of persons ought we to be? How careful we ought to be as to our inner health! How anxious to be always at our very best!”<sup>27</sup>

In an early sermon on Romans 13:12, preached at Wivenhoe near Colchester in 1855, published in 1889 in *The Sword and the Trowel* as “a curiosity of youthful preaching,” Spurgeon refers to a conversation between an unbeliever and a Christian minister who met often:

“Do you preach the gospel?” asked the infidel, one day, of the Christian. “I do,” replied the latter. “And do you believe there is a hell?” “Most certainly I do,” rejoined the Christian. “Then how is it,” said the infidel, “that you have been in the habit of seeing me every day for many years, and have never once warned me of it?” What a question to answer! Might it not be put to some of you?<sup>28</sup>

While the story is of a minister, the question is to every Christian. Spurgeon anticipates that every believer, gripped by the same realities, will feel something of the same pressure to warn of judgment and to hold out mercy.

That is why his preaching is *urgent*. He consistently labors under a sense of eternal reality. Like Edwards, he has eternity stamped on his eyeballs. Spurgeon’s warnings are earnest, direct, and personal:

---

<sup>26</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Cured at Last!,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1888), 34:206–8.

<sup>27</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “A New Departure,” in *An All-Round Ministry: Direction, Wisdom, and Encouragement for Preachers and Pastors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2018), 117. The address was first published in *The Sword and the Trowel*.

<sup>28</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Coming Day,” in *C. H. Spurgeon’s Forgotten Early Sermons: A Companion to the New Park Street Pulpit; Twenty-Eight Sermons Compiled from the Sword and the Trowel*, ed. Terence Peter Crosby (Leominster: Day One, 2010), 18.

If thou art lost, it is not for want of preaching; if thou art damned, it is not because I did not tell thee how thou mightest be saved; if thou art in hell, it is not because I did not weep over thee, and urge thee to flee from the wrath to come, for I did warn thee, and that will be the terror of thy doom—that thou hast despised warnings and invitations, and hast destroyed thyself.<sup>29</sup>

Doubtless here is another challenge for us. Do we actually believe what we claim to believe? Are we praying for such a sense of eternity? Preachers especially need to meditate on these things until they make a difference to their preaching.

Here also crops up the *compassionate* note. I hope that the longer quotations have already made this clear. There is never any sense of indulgence in Spurgeon's preaching of hell, never any gloating. He is never careless, never casual, never dismissive, in his warnings. In his sermon from Matthew 8:11–12 on "Heaven and Hell," he groans:

The second part of my text is heart-breaking. I could preach with great delight to myself from the first part; but here is a dreary task to my soul, because there are gloomy words here. But, as I have told you, what is written in the Bible must be preached whether it be gloomy or cheerful. There are some ministers who never mention anything about hell. I heard of a minister who once said to his congregation—"If you do not love the Lord Jesus Christ you will be sent to that place which it is not polite to mention." He ought not to have been allowed to preach again, I am sure, if he could not use plain words.<sup>30</sup>

Describing the agonies of the damned, there is a childlike integrity in his moan, "I want to get over this as quickly as I can, for who can bear to talk thus to his fellow creatures?"<sup>31</sup> Spurgeon takes no pleasure in so speaking. Like Christ considering judgment, he is weeping over his Jerusalem. You can hear the beat of his loving heart as he pleads with the lost.

And so, finally, such preaching is *gracious*: Spurgeon never fails to hold out Christ, in dependence on the Spirit. In a fascinating passage, he says,

I would prefer that the most prominent feature in my ministry should be the preaching of Christ Jesus. Christ should be most prominent, not hell and damnation. God's ministers must preach God's terrors as well as God's mercies; we are to preach the thunder of God's law. If men will sin, we are to tell them that they must be punished for it. If they will transgress, woe unto the watchman who is ashamed to say, "The Lord cometh that taketh vengeance." We should be unfaithful to the solemn charge which God has given us if we were wickedly to stifle all the threatenings of God's word. Does God say, "The wicked shall be cast into hell, with all the nations that

<sup>29</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Unimpeachable Justice," in *New Park Street Pulpit Sermons*, 2:263.

<sup>30</sup> Spurgeon, "Heaven and Hell," 306.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

forget God?" It is our business to say so. Did the loving Saviour talk of the pit that burneth, of the worm that never dieth, and of the fire that can never be extinguished? It is ours to speak as he spake, and not to mince the matter. It is no mercy to men to hide their doom. But, my brethren, terrors never ought to be the prominent feature of a minister's preaching. Many old divines thought they would do a great deal of good by preaching this. I do not believe it. Some souls are awakened and terrified by such preaching; they, however, are but few. Sometimes, right solemnly, the sacred mysteries of eternal wrath must be preached, but far oftener let us preach the wondrous love of God. There are more souls won by wooing than by threatening. It is not hell, but Christ, we desire to preach. O sinners, we are not afraid to tell you of your doom, but we do not choose to be for ever dwelling on that doleful theme. We rather love to tell you of Christ, and him crucified. We want to have our preaching rather full of the frankincense of the merits of Christ than of the smoke, and fire, and terrors of Mount Sinai, we are not come unto Mount Sinai, but unto Mount Zion—where milder words declare the will of God, and rivers of salvation are abundantly flowing.<sup>32</sup>

What is striking about this lengthy statement is that Spurgeon evidently saw no inconsistency between this and his declarations of divine wrath against sin. Whatever Spurgeon thought he was doing so vividly, regularly, consistently, and urgently speaking of damnation, he clearly believed that it was both proportionate and appropriate. This theme was never merely incidental, but neither was it overwhelmingly dominant, especially considered in its relation to the holding up of Christ. That something might strike us so forcefully by its presence in Spurgeon's sermons, and yet the preacher himself should consider it as something secondary, should give us significant pause for thought. Rather than risking making it "the prominent feature" of our ministry, have we so much relegated it that it is remarkable only when it is mentioned at all?

Spurgeon exalted Christ all the more because of his convictions about hell. Certainly, some of his most intense pleadings for sinners to come to the Savior are, as one might expect, in the very context of his warnings to flee from the wrath to come. In fact, there is one text that Spurgeon quotes with almost metronomic frequency, especially in the New Park Street years. It crops up again and again in sermon conclusions, becoming almost mantric in its insistent rhythm. It is there, repeatedly, emphatically, at the end of that sermon on "Love's Commendation" in which Spurgeon resisted any lesser language than damnation. Those words are from the end of Mark's Gospel: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be damned."<sup>33</sup> For Spurgeon, this is the simple hinge on

<sup>32</sup> Spurgeon, "Christ Lifted Up," 259–60.

<sup>33</sup> Spurgeon, "Love's Commendation," 407–8.

which the matter turns: on one side, faith and salvation; on the other, unbelief and damnation. With that in mind,

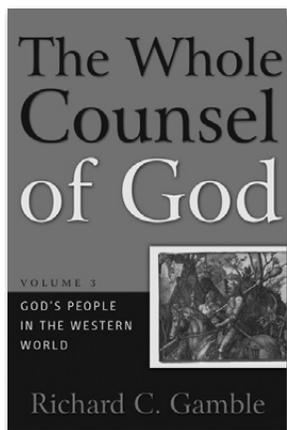
It is all very well to write essays, but what souls have you been the means of saving from going down to hell? Your excellent management of your school interests me, but how many children have been brought into the church by it? We are glad to hear of those special meetings, but how many have really been born to God in them? Are saints edified? Are sinners converted? To swing to and fro on a five-barred gate, is not progress; yet some seem to think that it is. I see them in a kind of perpetual Elysium, humming over to themselves and their friends, "We are very comfortable." God save us from living in comfort while sinners are sinking into hell! In travelling along the mountain roads in Switzerland, you will continually see marks of the boring-rod; and in every minister's life there should be traces of stern labour. Brethren, do something; *do something*; DO SOMETHING. While Committees waste their time over resolutions, do something. While Societies and Unions are making constitutions, let us win souls. Too often we discuss, and discuss, and discuss, while Satan only laughs in his sleeve. It is time we had done planning, and sought something to plan. I pray you, be men of action all of you. Get to work, and quit yourselves like men.<sup>34</sup>

It is all very well to write essays, and to read them. But, if we properly follow Spurgeon, imitating him as he imitated Christ, then the question remains concerning the ministry of judgment and mercy: "What souls have you been the means of saving from going down to hell?"

---

<sup>34</sup> Spurgeon, *An All-Round Ministry*, 42–43.

## NEW FALL TITLE



### **THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD: GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE WESTERN WORLD**

Richard Gamble's three-volume *Whole Counsel of God* explores the relationships between exegesis and hermeneutics and between biblical, systematic, and historical theology. In the final volume, Gamble examines how the church has handled God's holy Word throughout two thousand years of unfolding history. Readers will follow the development of theology in its context and, learning from the church's past mistakes, be better able to defend it to the world.

Vol. 1: God's Mighty Acts in the Old Testament | 978-0-87552-191-6 | \$49.99

Vol. 2: The Full Revelation of God | 978-1-59638-181-0 | \$59.99

Vol. 3: God's People in the Western World | 978-1-59638-182-7 | \$59.99

"This volume brings Richard C. Gamble's ambitious integrative theological project—biblical, systematic, and historical—to completion. The coverage is remarkably comprehensive, the judgments careful and well-informed. Seminary students in particular will be well served by a careful reading of this entire project."

—WILLIAM B. EVANS, *Younts Professor of Bible and Religion, Erskine College*

800-631-0094



WWW.PRPBOOKS.COM

# Böhl on Justification and Regeneration: Some Implications for Preaching and Pastoring

MEINE VELDMAN

## Abstract

By the preaching of God's law, the human being is confronted with his fallenness and existence in flesh, sin, and death. Eduard Böhl, with his emphasis on the synchronicity of God's act of justification and regeneration, seeks to maintain the boundary between Creator and creature in creation and history, *and* between sinner and Christ, flesh and the Spirit. From the viewpoint of the power of God's word in preaching, the possibility of a redeeming dialogue is reestablished, and the reality of participation by faith in God is restored. By the gospel as the power of God in which his righteousness is revealed, the believer in the word is powerfully brought to newness of life and sustained in sanctification.

## Keywords

*Justification, regeneration, preaching, law of God, Holy Spirit, Christ*

---

Louis Berkhof indicated the importance of Eduard Böhl's work on justification in his preface to its English translation:

A careful perusal of this work will bring its reward, for we can also learn from those who differ with us. The real value of the book lies in that which is the burden of the whole work: justification by faith, without the works of the law; salvation by grace only. It was necessary that this note should be sounded in the days of Boehl, and it is just as imperative in our time and in the environment in which we live, with all its Pelagian and Arminian tendencies, and its undue emphasis on the works of man and on humanistic ethics. We hope that by the grace of God this work may prove to be something of an antidote.<sup>1</sup>

In this article I propose to introduce Böhl, a relatively unknown theologian, then present his thoughts on the doctrine of justification and regeneration, and finally conclude with some practical implications of the principles of Böhl's thoughts on justification and regeneration for preaching and pastoring.

## I. Who Was Eduard Böhl?

Eduard Böhl was born in 1836. He passed away in 1903 in Vienna, Austria, where he was professor of Reformed dogmatics.<sup>2</sup> In his works, he strove for a Reformation-Renaissance in and for his own time.<sup>3</sup>

Important for the influence and development of Böhl's theology was that at the University of Halle, Germany, he became acquainted with Johannes

---

<sup>1</sup> Louis Berkhof, preface to *The Reformed Doctrine of Justification*, trans. C. H. Riedesel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 11. The rest of the preface contains some of Berkhof's severe critique of aspects of Böhl's theology. When he writes, "learning from those who differ from us," it is clear that he did not hold back his criticism, all the while supporting the translation of this seminal work of Böhl. Berkhof's critique specifically relates to Böhl's understanding of the image of God, the original state of man, the indwelling of God in the Old Testament, the imputation to Christ of Adam's sin, and the character of regeneration and sanctification and others. "Some of these aberrations also color his work on Justification by Faith" (9). Berkhof does not elaborate on these observations. Since then, two dissertations (see below) have set Berkhof's criticism of Böhl in a more positive light, if not refuting these negative opinions altogether.

<sup>2</sup> For more extensive details of Böhl's background, see Thomas R. V. Forster, *Eduard Böhl's (1836–1903) Concept for a Re-Emergence of Reformation Thought*, American University Studies, Series 7, Theology and Religion (New York: Lang, 2009), 1–10, 30–40. In the Dutch language, one can consult Willen Balke, *Eduard Böhl: Hoogleraar te Wenen Schoonzoon van H. F. Kohlbrugge* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> See Ho-Duck Kwon's dissertation, "E. Böhl's Aufnahme der Reformatorische Theologie, besonders der Calvins: Die Bedeutung dieser Reformatoren-Renaissance für die Lösung theologischer Probleme der Gegenwart [Eduard Böhl's Appraisal of Reformational Theology, in Particular of Calvin: The Significance of His 'Reformers Renaissance' for the Solution of Theological Problems of the Present Time]" (PhD diss.: Heidelberg Fakultät der Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, 1991).

Wichelhouse (1819–1858).<sup>4</sup> While studying Reformed biblical theology and dogmatics under the tutelage of Wichelhouse, Böhl was convinced he had found the heartbeat of the Reformation.

This acquaintance with Wichelhouse was to have a lasting impact on Böhl's theology, even more so because through Wichelhouse he entered the circle around Herman Kohlbrügge (1803–1901) who was also to have a great influence on his exegesis and dogmatics.<sup>5</sup> Wichelhouse and Kohlbrügge can be identified as the main influences on his biblical and dogmatic theology.<sup>6</sup>

Historically, Böhl's Reformed theology did not go entirely unnoticed. Many references can be found in the writings of Karl Barth.<sup>7</sup> In particular, Otto Weber, in his *Foundations of Dogmatics*, remarks with respect to the intention and purpose of Böhl's last major dogmatic work in relation to his liberal contemporary Albrecht Ritschl, "Böhl systematized Kohlbrügge's conception (of *Sola Gratia*) and relieved it of some of its tension, especially in his monograph against A. Ritschl, *Von der Rechtfertigung durch den Glauben*."<sup>8</sup>

Ho-Duck Kwon's recent work highlights Böhl's historical relevance as a Reformation-Renaissance figure, offering, in particular, a rich understanding of the human being for our contemporary often existential concentration on the human-being-in-relation. Focusing on the axioms of Böhl's theology, Kwon claims that his historical significance lies in his nonspeculative

---

<sup>4</sup> See in Dutch, Willen Balke, *Johannes Wichelhouse: Hoogleraar te Halle en vriend van Dr. H. F. Kohlbrugge* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> In his dissertation on Böhl, Forster researched and documented this influential connection in Böhl's life. He concludes, "Having then established the inseparable link between Kohlbrügge and Böhl, one can safely say that Böhl is correctly termed a Kohlbrüggian, a follower of Kohlbrügge's theology." Forster, *Eduard Böhl's Concept*, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Dissertations on Böhl have shown that he was shaped and formed, in terms of his understanding of the Old Testament in relation to the New, in his hermeneutic and his doctrines by Kohlbrügge (who became his father-in-law) and his professor in Halle, Wichelhouse. See Kwon, "Böhls Aufnahme der Reformatorische Theologie," 3. Forster traces this historical-theological link in detail. Under the heading "Böhl's Endorsement of Kohlbrügge's Theology," he specifically mentions the influence of Kohlbrügge on Böhl in the areas of hermeneutics (importance of the Old Testament and the unity of both testaments historically and typologically interpreted), anthropology (the exegesis that the human being was created *in* the image of God as life-*sphere*, i.e., in wisdom, righteousness and holiness), Christology, and soteriology. See Forster, *Eduard Böhl's Concept*, 29–49.

<sup>7</sup> See Karl Barth, *Die Protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert: Ihre Vorgeschichte und ihre Geschichte* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1947), 581; *Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes: Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1955), 234; *Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes: Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1948), 169, 210, 220; *Die Lehre von Gott: Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1958), 317, 383; and *Die Lehre von der Versöhnung: Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1960), 585.

<sup>8</sup> Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, trans. Darrel L. Gruder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 2:147 (emphasis added).

theology, which can be of real meaning for our contemporary context in terms of the question concerning the existence of the human being in the face of the question of God and nihilism.<sup>9</sup> Although Kwon focuses primarily on Böhl's positive and nuanced reception of John Calvin, his study is replete with fascinating comparative references to more contemporary theologians such as Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Wolfhart Pannenberg, with whom he carries on an interesting dialogue in light of Böhl's proposal for a reemergence of Reformation thought for his own time.

Thomas Forster also presents Böhl's theology as a reemergence of Reformation thought. Approaching the subject matter from a more historical-theological perspective, Forster places Böhl in the context of influences on his theology and the controversies that shaped his mature thought as a Reformation theologian. Forster thus sought to let this almost forgotten Reformed voice of the nineteenth century speak again from a historical-theological perspective.<sup>10</sup> The latter intention is also partly the reason for this article specifically focusing on Böhl's doctrines of justification and regeneration or sanctification. To those doctrines I will turn next.

## II. Böhl on Justification

Speaking of justification proper in his *Dogmatik*, Böhl refers to Romans 3:21–28 and specifically verse 28, “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law,” which he calls the *locus classicus* for the right understanding of the doctrine of justification.<sup>11</sup> So, how does one become righteous before God? The answer is, only by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ and the forgiveness of sins in the tribunal of God (*in foro Dei*).

Böhl emphasizes that justification is a legal and judicial matter. Denying the law (the Decalogue) before or after Christ would therefore undermine the doctrine of justification, both in terms of conviction of sins (repentance) and salvation by way of Christ's active and passive obedience to the law of God on behalf of his elect church. In fact, the righteousness of God, imputed to the one who believes, finds its reason and ground in the substitutionary

<sup>9</sup> See Kwon, “Böhls Aufnahme der Reformatorische Theologie,” 225–34.

<sup>10</sup> “Hopefully, with this historico-theological account on the life and the work of Böhl, we will be able to shed some rare shafts of light on a theologian who has wrongfully fallen into oblivion. Thus we hope to introduce a theologian whose life and theology still speak from the grave and of whom the present author believes has deserved a hearing that is long overdue!” Forster, *Eduard Böhl's Concept*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Eduard Böhl, *Dogmatik*, ed. Thomas Schirrmacher (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2004), 412.

work of Jesus Christ, that is, his active and passive obedience. From this perspective, Romans 3:28 is to be understood as the summary of what is written just before verse 28, that is, the law condemns both Gentiles and Jews, implying that justification (i.e., the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ), happens without any regard to works of the law. One is called and counted righteous by faith alone because of the work of Christ's passive and active obedience alone.<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, according to Böhl, God's one declaration of justification thus consists of two parts: the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, which are both rooted in the work of Jesus Christ for his church. First, Christ stands in for the sinner in the court of God, so that God will accept the sinner as covered, forgiven—that is, he will no longer count his sins against him. This negative side of justification is especially emphasized in Romans 4:6–8, in accordance with Psalm 32:1–2.

Second, Christ's positive merits also serve to secure a verdict. By virtue of Christ's active obedience, the sinner is counted righteous and conforms to God's law. So, a human being is not only absolved from guilt and the punishment for his sins for Christ's sake, but also, and at the same time, Christ's righteousness is positively imputed to the sinner and accredited to him as if it were his own.<sup>13</sup>

Paul conveys this in a sequence of principal thoughts in Romans 5:12–21. In this passage, he calls the obedience of Christ (*dikaiōma*, δικαίωμα) new life (*dikaiōsis zōēs*, δικαίωσις ζωῆς—justification that brings life [v. 18]), and from this comes the reign of the justified in this life. “For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous” (Rom 5:19). The Christian is pleasing to God and receives new life for the sake of Christ's obedience, just as he or she was not pleasing, but rather condemned to death, because of Adam's disobedience (Rom 5:16–18; cf. Num 23:21–23).

In short, the condemnation (*katakrima*, κατάκριμα), which entailed death, is here contrasted with the judgment of justification that leads to life (*dikaiōsis zōēs*, δικαίωσις ζωῆς, cf. Rom 5:15–19). Or, what is the same, the imputation of disobedience and its real effects, sin and death, is contrasted with the imputation of obedience with its real effects, righteousness and new life.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See *ibid.*, 414–16, cf. 268–70.

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, 414–16.

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid.*, 420–21.

From this point on, God looks at the sinner as conformed to the law in Christ or “in-lawed” to Christ (1 Cor 9:21) as he looked at them before in intimate connection with Adam (Rom 5:15–21). The one who is thus justified is now made conformable to the image of the Son of God as this was and is the intention of the foreknowledge and predestination of God, according to Romans 8:29, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined [*proōrisen, προώρισεν*] to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”<sup>15</sup>

When in justification God accepts the sinner for the sake of Christ’s merit as the sentence is passed—“You are righteous, your sins are forgiven you”—immediately faith arises in the heart, through the action of the Holy Spirit, and we, as we are, become children of God, joint heirs with Christ (Gal 4:5–7). This act of justification simultaneously takes place in heaven and on earth, as it has taken place in the raising of Christ from the dead (Rom 4:25).<sup>16</sup>

Böhl also emphasizes that justification is justification of *the ungodly* (Rom 4:5). What is important is that the subject of imputation, standing before the tribunal of God, is not to be considered as altered, either by infusion of grace or by a consideration of the new man born within.<sup>17</sup> Biblically speaking, justification happens to the entire person, that is, to the man in himself old, the sinner, who is nevertheless, by way of forgiveness and imputation, new.<sup>18</sup> In this way, no alteration of the subject of justification has taken place. Otherwise, justification would be a verdict without a true subject. “God would have to deal with an entirely different and transformed subject, consequently, the verdict would have no subject.”<sup>19</sup>

In theological terms, it is always a synthetic judgment (an effective judgment without any regard for anything that is in the subject) and never in any way an analytic judgment (a judgment that considers something present within the subject justified).<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> See *ibid.*, 419–20.

<sup>17</sup> See *ibid.*, 414.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 420. See also Eduard Böhl, *The Reformed Doctrine of Justification*, trans. C. H. Riedesel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 275.

<sup>19</sup> Böhl, *Reformed Doctrine*, 276.

<sup>20</sup> The language of synthetic and analytic judgments is Kantian. Albert Ritschl (1822–1889) used this language following Matthias Schneckenburger (1804–1848). Robert Mackintosh writes, “God ‘justifies the ungodly.’ As Ritschl expresses it in Kantian language, the decree of justification is ‘synthetic.’ He thinks Protestantism is deteriorating when the divine sentence comes to be viewed as ‘analytic’; the *believer* is justified!” Robert Mackintosh, *Albrecht Ritschl and His School* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1915), 88.

### III. *Justification and Regeneration*

For Böhl it is impossible to understand justification and regeneration (or rebirth) as separate from the one declaration of forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.<sup>21</sup> Rebirth or new life does not exist before justification. Therefore, the new birth also cannot be considered as an unconscious happening but must be considered as a conscious occurrence. The spoken word and declaration of justification is the seed or power unto new life and regeneration. This living word of God is received by faith, because of Christ the Savior, as worked by his Spirit.

Discussing justification in relation to regeneration, Böhl notes that a too-one-sided emphasis on justification as forensic does not do justice to the whole reality and concept of justification. According to the Hebrew idiom, *to justify* means *to pronounce righteous*.<sup>22</sup> However, according to Böhl, the Lutheran Formula of Concord (1577) was not right to assume that its forensic character was the definitive side of justification. Having assumed that the forensic character was the definitive side of justification, the writers of the Formula of Concord sought to supplement what was lacking in the almost exclusive forensic doctrine of justification by way of other doctrines of grace. However, they thereby weakened justification, perceiving it to be merely an entrance beyond which was to be found the real inner sanctuary and thus forced justification out of its central place. The word of justification was supplemented by the inner sphere and activity of the human subject.

First, what is at stake here is the right translation and interpretation of the Scriptures. Many read and interpreted the so-called golden chain of salvation as expressed in Romans 8:30 wrongly. “A preliminary *actus forensis* should not be placed in the second member of the golden chain of salvation (whom he called them he also justified), which should then be followed in the third

---

<sup>21</sup> Richard Muller comments on Böhl’s understanding of justification, “Böhl argues strictly for imputation, without impartation of righteousness or holiness, lamenting an *ordo salutis* that distinguishes but includes both,” Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 162, note 5. This is clearly too narrow. Böhl strongly defends the idea that the act of God justifying the sinner by forgiveness of sins and imputation of the righteousness of Christ includes regeneration. In fact, according to Böhl, theologians undermined the doctrine of justification when they started to distinguish overly, or even separate justification and regeneration. The result was that the imputative act of justification had somehow to be supplemented or complemented, with the further result that the supplementation, in whatever way, became more important than the act of justification.

<sup>22</sup> Böhl, *Reformed Doctrine*, 199.

member (he glorified) by the infusion of new qualities, or the *iustitia inhaerens* proceeding from justification.”<sup>23</sup>

Second, the remedy against this tendency is to conceive of justification and regeneration together in accordance with the word of God’s Spirit. This was clearly expressed in Melancthon’s *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*. Böhl comments,

There is, according to the Apology (as Loofs has nicely demonstrated) only one act, justification, in which all the other acts of God are included. ... Melancthon ... uses the expressions to justify, to render righteous, to regenerate, as equivalent and synonymous expressions and identifies regeneration with remission of sins. With him remission of sins is regeneration or renewal of life.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, precisely when we deal with justification and regeneration in this way the unity of the message, character, and function of the word of God becomes clear. Separating or chronologically and effectively distinguishing between the two can be considered the error that many have committed and the cause of the subsumption of the word of God under fleshly categories again. Third, the ultimate task, therefore, is not to corrupt the personal and living voice of God. The correct spiritual understanding of justification vindicates the word of God in accordance with its own sphere and power, that is, its regenerative power. Placing regeneration before or above justification, in fact, degenerates the simplicity of the word and corrupts the living voice of God. “Here not merely nature faces nature but person faces person—God facing the creature created in His image.”<sup>25</sup>

Finally, Böhl’s doctrine of the word of justification as related to regeneration also provides an insight into the doctrine of revelation as determining the limits of our existence as religious creatures under God. Separating or chronologically and effectively distinguishing the two will result in a soteriology that will tend to find its point of concentration in the human being and the horizon of his or her fleshly existence. Let me elaborate on these seminal thoughts relating justification to the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

#### **IV. Justification and the Holy Spirit**

Böhl emphasizes that faith in the word of imputation as the work of the Holy Spirit creates a wholly new situation. “This effects peace with God

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 211.

(Rom. V. 1), and whoever believeth in the Son hath eternal life. A mediating substance is not required.” He adds, referring to Melancthon, “And through the Holy Spirit there are kindled in us a love of God and a joy resting in God, and other such motives as the Holy Spirit Himself is.”<sup>26</sup>

With this act of God nothing of the human nature or flesh is renewed or restored, but the old, as a whole, is redirected by the Holy Spirit. At the same time, by faith, the believer is an entirely new person in Jesus Christ, and in that new situation the person of the Holy Spirit takes the Christian by the hand and guides him in the ways and works prepared in advance (Eph 2:10). What is most important in this regard is that the Holy Spirit “*is the abiding personal author of all those effects which are customarily comprehended under the term ‘sanctification.’*”<sup>27</sup>

Here too only faith and complete trust count, as “faith is a living thing, in so far as God’s Spirit makes it alive—it must come forth and manifest itself. It cannot content itself with an inner mystical enjoyment of God;—it must possess itself of the actual affairs of the world and reign in life through Jesus Christ.”<sup>28</sup>

### 1. *A Short Historical-Theological Excursus*

I now relate all this to the history of theology, with regard to justification, regeneration, and the Holy Spirit. According to Böhl, the seventeenth century had a habit of making a sharp distinction between God and the gifts of God, the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit. However, he adds, “This contrast between God and the gifts of God which dwell in believers is not admissible in the economy of grace.”<sup>29</sup>

When such a contrast is made, according to Böhl, the human being is tempted and in danger of falling back into the economy of the old creation and the law. In that scheme, the created human being is then someone

for [whom] God awakens the necessary disposition, (*habitus*), by offering a reward; but all that is thus accomplished in man is a natural strength, talent and excellence (*habitual state*) inculcated by numerous repetitions, and not an *opus Spiritus sancti*, the fruit of the Spirit. The same result is attained by training. Everything which in philosophy is praised as character and virtue belongs to the sphere of the *opera legis* [the works of the law].<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 236 (emphasis *his*).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

For these reasons Böhl opposes the introduction of terms like habit and the habitual into biblical exposition and theology. According to him they are, by definition, alien to the sphere of God's grace-revelation. Such terms and concepts belong to the economy of unjustified rational or ethical thinking and practice.

Consequently, (re)-introducing such Aristotelian methodological terms cannot be considered a neutral procedure.<sup>31</sup> They are not neutral but already conditioned by unjustified and unregenerated qualities and categories. From the perspective of the fundamental contrast between nature and grace, law and gospel, terms like habit and habitual belong to the realm of fallen nature, rationality, and law and therefore should not be used in the realm of faith, grace, and the gospel.

With these thoughts Böhl looks back in time, and his thoughts hark back to the early Lutheran categories and confessions as related to justification and regeneration. To demonstrate this, I will refer to and elaborate on Article 5 of the Schwabach Articles, which were written in 1529, and then come back to Böhl.

Therefore, because all people are sinners and are subject to sin, death, and the devil, it is impossible by one's own power or good works for a person to do enough to become once again righteous and upright. Certainly one cannot prepare oneself for, or bring about, righteousness. On the contrary, the more a person tries to work it out alone, the worse it becomes for that person. There is, however, only one path to righteousness and redemption from sin and death: that a person, apart from any merit or work, believes in the Son of God, who suffered for us, and so forth, as said above. This faith is our righteousness. God intends to impute righteousness to and regard this faith as our righteousness, uprightness, and holiness. All who have such faith in the Son of God are given the forgiveness of all sins and eternal life. For the sake of the Son of God, they shall be accepted into divine grace and are children in

---

<sup>31</sup> Muller and his methodology can best be understood as having come out of this turn to history and scholasticism. See Richard A. Muller, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 6 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991). John Frame quotes Muller: "The reason that Scripture is authoritative—apart from our traditional doctrinal statements concerning its divine inspiration and its authority as a doctrinal norm—is that its contents are mirrored in the life of the church and that, in this historical process of reflection, the believing community has gradually identified as canon the books that rightly guide and reflect its faith while setting aside those books that fail to reflect its faith adequately." John Frame, "Muller on Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 56 (1994): 146. Even the Scriptures are thus approached from a so-called objective historical point of view of seeing things together in their development, historically, experientially, and systematically, besides what we believe concerning them. Hereby, revelation and the history of its interpretation are placed in the domain of human experience, rationality, with an assumption of neutrality correspondent to an assumption of a would-be autonomous individual or process.

the kingdom of God, and so forth, as St. Paul and St. John in his Gospel teach so richly: Romans 10[:10], “For one believes with the heart and so is justified”; Romans 4[:22], “his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness.” John 3[:16b] says, “every-one who believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”<sup>32</sup>

It is clear from this article that, first, it is impossible for anyone to prepare themselves for justification in any way. In fact, such an endeavor will only make worse those who strive to do so. Second, Christ, the Son of God, is the primary object of faith. Third, justification by faith is described in terms of being reckoned righteous, that is, it is not a process, but it is punctiliar<sup>33</sup> and so at the same time includes forgiveness of sins, the gift of eternal life, and adoption into the spiritual kingdom of God. In other words, forgiveness of sins and being reckoned righteous are two elements of the same declaration and the gift of God given to the subject of justification. To this is simultaneously added adoption as children and the gift of eternal life. There is no temporal gap between any of these gracious acts and the gifts of God. They are all aspects of justification, according to this article.

Why is this important to maintain confessionally? It is vital because the presupposition of justification is that *God* speaks, acts, and gives gifts for the sake of Christ and his glory. To presuppose human acts, methods, or givens as part of the process of salvation itself, in part or in whole, is to subvert and undermine the doctrine of justification. Precisely the latter was later done with respect to regeneration and faith. Regeneration came to be regarded as a seed planted *in* man and faith as a disposition or habit *of* man, and so the old economy of law was reintroduced.

For Luther, therefore, any rational, physical, psychological, or moral correlation or cooperation with God, in or by man, falls under the condemnation of the law of God. To base justification upon any of it, in any way, is illusionary. To do so would be to return to medieval theology.

God’s acts of justification and regeneration cannot be fitted or suited into a rational, moral, or physical system. The human rational, moral, or physical spheres, unlike justification and regeneration, belong to the economy of the law and never to the economy of grace. The two should not be mixed. Only faith counts here. Only Christ and his righteousness count here. Only the Holy Spirit counts here. Only God’s justifying grace and love count here.

---

<sup>32</sup> Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, eds., *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 85.

<sup>33</sup> If this were not so, it would completely contradict the fact that Luther compared justification “to a mathematical point” (*ad punctum mathematicum*). See, Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 94.

Therefore, Luther and the early Lutheran confessions refined justification by faith in all its components “to a mathematical point” (*ad punctum mathematicum*).<sup>34</sup> Only in this way is the gospel of Christ and his righteousness a continuous power unto salvation while the subjects of God’s justifying grace go from faith to faith as sinful beggars, at the same time justified and sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*).

In his second lectures on Galatians (Gal 3:6), Luther states, “The Christian is righteous and a sinner at the same time (*simul iustus et peccator*), holy and profane, an enemy of God and a child of God. Only those who understand the true meaning of justification will understand this apparent paradox.”<sup>35</sup>

To say all this from another perspective, God’s justifying action involves two persons: God and the human being who trusts in him. Nothing in this relationship can be reduced to parts, because the word of God determines the whole of the believer, God speaking to the whole man who trusts in God’s *creative* word. The whole identity and life of the believer depend on this. Therefore, it would be unimaginable to temporally, or otherwise, conceive of a gap or lack of synchronicity between justification, new birth, regeneration, and existing as a new creature. In this context Robert Kolb states,

Luther explored both the noun “righteousness” and the verb “to make righteous” or “justify” in biblical contexts, concluding that God acts to restore the human righteousness he had created in the first place by speaking the “new creature” (Gal. 6:15) into existence through forgiveness of sins. Paul spoke of the conversion of the wicked, “which happens through the Word”, “a new work of creation”, in 2 Corinthians 4:6, Luther told his students in 1535. ... Justification is also an act of new creation. ... he wrote, “justification is in reality a kind of rebirth in newness” (John 1:12–13; 1 John 5:1), “a washing or regeneration and renewal” (Titus 3:5), new birth (John 3:3); the Holy Spirit calls God’s people “righteous, a new creature of God and the first fruits of God’s creatures, who, according to his will brought us forth by his Word” (2 Cor. 5:17; Jas. 1:18).<sup>36</sup>

Nature or law should, therefore, not be mixed or confused with grace or the gospel. The wisdom of man or philosophy should not be confused with the wisdom of God or revelation. It is not that such terms cannot be useful,

---

<sup>34</sup> See Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 94.

<sup>35</sup> As quoted in Gerald Bray, *God Has Spoken: A History of Christian Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 841.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 125, 127.

but they should remain and continue to be used in their proper spheres and domains. When this is not done, the word of God and the Holy Spirit are pulled into the sphere of the rational, the seeable, the graspable. In this process, the faithfulness of God is turned into *an aid*, and the law and the Holy Spirit of God into handmaids of the human being.

## 2. Back to Böhl

I now return to Böhl. Kolb writes that one must understand that

this law of works has once for all been abrogated and is an abomination to God—yea, the slightest cooperation on our part, (for this would pertain to the law) is an abomination to Him, since Christ bowed His head on Calvary and since the voice came from his lips: “It is finished.”<sup>37</sup>

Böhl singles out Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706), for whom faith is a disposition described in terms of an Aristotelian method. For him faith is the *habitus fidei*;<sup>38</sup> he does not understand faith as an empty hand. In turn, when the language of *habitus-actus* is used, the subject of investigation becomes what is received internally for the purpose of orderly arranging, methodizing, and living according to theoretical-practical skills accrued. In fact, Mastricht defines theology entirely in terms of habits. He writes, “According to its eminence, theology is all of the habits,<sup>39</sup> since it possesses the perfection of them all. For this reason we have most carefully defined it as ‘doctrine,’ which implies all those habits and does not restrict theology to any habit.”<sup>40</sup>

From this it follows—since *habitus* can be understood as acquired dispositions of thoughts and actions—that theology is preeminently practical. “Rather, we call it practical, even preeminently practical.”<sup>41</sup>

So, the grace of God becomes a theoretical-practical or “scientific” object as it is drawn into the physical, psychical, and active sphere of the human being. We can also say very simply, grace perfects nature, since grace possesses the perfection of all the natural habits as found, in this case, in Aristotle’s

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>38</sup> See Adriaan C. Neele, *Petrus van Mastricht, 1630–1706: Reformed Orthodoxy; Method and Piety*, BSCH 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 110–11.

<sup>39</sup> By “all of the habits,” he means all of “Aristotle’s intellectual habits, discussed in book 6 of his *Nicomachean Ethics* . . . theology is all of the habits, since it possesses the perfection of all of them.” Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, vol 1: *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 104–5.

<sup>40</sup> Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 1:105.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:107.

natural philosophy. This clearly is a return to medieval theology in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas and others.<sup>42</sup>

For this reason, Böhl writes, “With Peter von Mastricht, a genuine type of the Reformed Middle Ages, justification by faith grows very dim.” For Mastricht the mystical union stands central; it “is introduced by faith; this faith has been cast into the heart as a seed to sprout and grow.”<sup>43</sup> In Mastricht’s doctrine of salvation, regeneration *precedes* justification: “By regeneration the seed of faith is cast into the heart of the called; in conversion the seed comes forth from the soil, and now follows the mystical union with Christ. And among the attendant results justification comes first followed by sanctification.” In fact, with this, Mastricht was typical of much of the seventeenth century.

Concerning Mastricht and others, Böhl concludes,

It is impossible to extract one’s self from the physical processes but especially does the assumption of sanctifying powers in sanctification give rise to unevangelical fruits. The doctrine of the old and new man, of spirit and flesh, lies prostrate, and the Christian has relapsed to be entirely a creature of the law, a mixture of flesh and spirit, of heavenly and earthly, (everything by halves) and is not perfected by the testing furnace of life. ... In this process the true doctrine of justification is entirely forgotten—that such a representation should cause spiritual pride to reach an intolerable degree, yea, that sincere Christians should be horrified, is quite conceivable.<sup>44</sup>

Therefore, for Böhl, justification and the gift of the Holy Spirit must consequently be understood as *absolute* in relation to the human being. “The new man that is daily raised up needs no gifts; the one gift, the Holy

---

<sup>42</sup> In the work of W. J. van Asselt, P. L. Rouwendal, et al., *Inleiding in de Gereformeerde Scholastiek* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1998), a special chapter is dedicated to Aristotle. In it, T. T. J. Pleizier and P. M. Wisse discuss the philosophy and terminology of Aristotle as important for understanding the scholastic tradition. They note that Aristotle considered circular reasoning (*petitio principii*) as faulty reasoning (*drogredenatie*; see T. T. J. Pleizier and P. M. Wisse, “Aristoteles,” in *ibid.*, 33). However, I would stress that we should not hesitate to apply this mode of reasoning when speaking of God and his revelation. In fact, such presuppositional reasoning is precisely the way to prevent the biblical and dogmatic questions, as rooted in God’s revelation, from falling into the domain of human subjectivity and human rationality. Any other way presupposes a certain independence or neutrality of the human subject vis-à-vis God’s revelation and thereby introduces a determinative human subjectivity into the process of understanding its meaning, effect, and execution. Positively appropriating Aristotle, even if merely on the level of method, as many (Reformed) scholastics have done, assumes that one can separate method from content. However, such reasoning can perhaps better be termed faulty reasoning. The medium is never neutral, especially when one speaks of fallen human reason.

<sup>43</sup> Böhl, *Reformed Doctrine*, 65.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* See also Eduard Böhl, *Von der Rechtfertigung durch den Glauben: Ein Beitrag zur Rettung des protestantischen Cardinal Dogmas* (Amsterdam: Leipzig & Scheffer, 1890), 55–56.

Ghost in persona, is sufficient for him. This first and last guarantee of his (the new man's) existence (Ps. LI. 13) he never loses. Likewise, the life which has been obtained for the sinner by Christ, in place of the death environing man, cannot be lost."<sup>45</sup> This *is* assurance.

When the Holy Spirit bestows special gifts on us, it is so we can pursue a particular calling or office for the benefit of the church. Good works, or a special goal in terms of *fleshly* improvement or transformation, "are not the object of justification."<sup>46</sup> Being guided by the power of the third person of the Trinity is God's and Christ's gift to the believer.

To conclude, when one has understood the true nature of justification by faith, one also acknowledges the true design and purpose of divine revelation. Faith acknowledges God's word in its sovereignty and power. The result is that the human being can be the human being, sin can be sin, death can be death, and God's law can be God's law. Everything must be left in its own place, as the sinner by faith and justification is placed in a righteous new life. In this way, faith accepts and rejoices in things as they are judged, created, given, and directed by the living God for sanctification.

### **V. Preaching and Pastoral Ramifications**

In the last sections of his book on justification, which contain practical advice, Böhl remarks that the life of the justified is a life certainly filled with real temptations and trials. He asks, "Did not Luther have temptations and give offense in consequence of which he had to bear the cross? Oh, in abundance. ... The flesh, the world, and the devil did not cease to molest him; but he deemed such temptations highly necessary."<sup>47</sup>

Yes, the pangs of conscience, temptations, and struggles are real, and they must be, also for us. He writes, "As if any one could dispense therefrom, save God alone. We as teachers of the Church can at least not do otherwise than to permit the gate to be strait and the way narrow.—We must also insist on this conflict and be satisfied with the words of Jesus: 'and few there be that find it,' (the way)."<sup>48</sup>

Therefore, according to Böhl, one must always first reckon with God as judge and so also understand real temptation, sin, and the cross. "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, they will

---

<sup>45</sup> Böhl, *Reformed Doctrine*, 172–73.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

not behold the dawn' (Isa. VIII. 20)."<sup>49</sup> But at the same time, Böhl writes, "God no longer sees any evil or unrighteousness in his people. In place of judgment, which had death as its result, stands here the righteousness unto life, that is to say, the declaration of righteousness, which brings life (cf. Rom. 5:15ff.)."<sup>50</sup>

Thus, and in this way, is promoted faithful preaching of law and gospel, so needed in our days. This, in turn, will and can bring about a true understanding and real comfort of the doctrine of justification of the ungodly: ungodly, yet wholly delivered by Christ and so guided by the sovereign Spirit of God in word and deed.

To put it somewhat differently, the word of declaration of judgment upon sin, and its real effects, stands over against the word of declaration of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ and its real effects. To quote once more,

Paul states definitely (Rom. V. 21,) that just as sin hath reigned in death, that is, that it exercised its dominion through death as medium, so now grace reigns through righteousness, (righteousness characterizes the nature and manner of this reigning,) unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>51</sup>

This, in turn, can and perhaps must be translated into the practice of preaching and pastoral work, in which God is left God; his word, his word; and his Spirit, his Spirit. Only in this way will the honor be truly allocated to God, Christ, and the Spirit. His sovereignty in justice and righteousness—in the application of law and grace, repentance and faith—will once again become central in faith and practice, so justifying God in all his ways and works.

What this asks for is that in preaching, the old must be acknowledged as standing over against the new, death over against life, sin over against righteousness, and even the devil over against the Triune God. And so, in this way the preaching of faith in God's word of declaration and action, based on the merits of Christ (justification), and a personal *faith* in the gift that accompanies it, namely, the Holy Spirit, can no longer admit of any new law or marks in the human being, or of works done by the human being. At the same time, in this way the Spirit, as the other Comforter, glorifies Jesus and will bring sinners again and again back to the feet of the cross of Christ. "And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>50</sup> Böhl, *Dogmatik*, 420.

<sup>51</sup> Böhl, *Reformed Doctrine*, 234.

wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’” (1 Cor 1:30–31 ESV). This is in the end the song of Böhl’s *Dogmatik*, according to Dr. Willen Balke,<sup>52</sup> a song we can still sing today.

---

<sup>52</sup> See Balke, *Eduard Böhl*, 131.

## NEW FALL TITLE



978-1-62995-887-3 \$15.99

### **KATH BARTH BY SHAO KAI TSENG**

Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) has made a monumental impact all along the spectrum of theology and ethics. Among evangelicals, however, myths and caricatures have arisen that must be dismantled to achieve a critically and selectively fruitful engagement with his work.

A fresh look at Barth is necessary. Inviting readers to suspend their assumptions and calling evangelicals and Barthians to mutually edifying dialogue, Professor Shai Kai Tseng, a notable Barth scholar, seeks to establish a fair interpretation of Barth's writings that honors his texts and heeds his intellectual-biographical and intellectual-historical context. Professor Michael Horton writes, "I know of no other work that . . . explains Barth's theology with such skill."

### **MORE IN THE SERIES**

Thomas Aquinas • Francis Bacon • Richard Dawkins • Gilles Deleuze •  
Jacques Derrida • Michel Foucault • G.W. F. Hegel • David Hume •  
Immanuel Kant • Karl Marx • Karl Rahner

800-631-0094



WWW.PRPBOOKS.COM

# Preaching and Definitive Sanctification

MICHAEL CHRIST

## Abstract

This article proceeds from the assumption that the way a preacher conceptualizes a Christian's identity in Christ shapes how he brings moral exhortation to the congregation. The concept of definitive sanctification—first coined by John Murray and developed by Richard Gaffin and others—identifies the believer as, in some sense, holy in Christ. This is not the holiness of imputed righteousness but a renovative change. Moreover, having been made holy, believers must act according to the logic of their identity in Christ. Three implications for preaching emerge from definitive sanctification: (1) preaching Christ and moral commands must be kept together, (2) the biblical indicative and imperative must inform each other, and (3) preaching must be eschatologically oriented.

## Keywords

*Sanctification, John Murray, preaching, eschatology, definitive sanctification, union with Christ*

---

**J**ohn Murray coined the term “definitive sanctification” to refer to that aspect of our holiness that is settled the moment we believe. If believers are definitively sanctified (and I understand that this is a big *if*, for the topic is fraught with controversy), what relevance does this have for how we preach and for the kind of moral exhortation we give in sermons?

To put it another way, I am not so much talking about a specific kind of preaching or, still less, what a preacher should say. In the main, I think preaching should be expositional, that is, “preaching that takes for the point of a sermon the point of a particular passage of Scripture.”<sup>1</sup> And yet, we come to every text with certain assumptions about the nature of the congregation’s covenantal relationship with God and our role as preachers to establish and guard that relationship. How might definitive sanctification inform these assumptions? How might these assumptions inform how we preach?

First, I want to lay out a summary of the biblical support for definitive sanctification. Following this, I will draw out three principles for preaching that are either based upon or strengthened through this biblical truth.

### **I. What Is Definitive Sanctification?**

Definitive sanctification describes the real change that has taken place in the nature of every believer at the outset of his or her Christian life. As Murray explains, we recognize many aspects of our salvation as having a once-for-all quality about them, such as calling, regeneration, justification, and adoption. Definitive sanctification implies that a definitive aspect of sanctification also belongs to this category of once-for-all benefits.<sup>2</sup> Affirming this is not to deny that believers still sin, nor does it obviate the need to grow in holiness over time; indeed, our growth in Christ is another aspect of sanctification that we call “progressive.”<sup>3</sup> But to affirm definitive sanctification is to recognize that a decisive change forms part of the prerequisite for all historical growth. In other words, definitive sanctification answers to our depravity and inability so that we can respond positively to God’s commands. Without the definitive aspect of sanctification, there would be no progress in holiness.

The Scriptures bear witness to this definitive reality in at least three ways: (1) the words that Scripture uses to speak of sanctification, (2) the architectonic structure of our salvation in union with Christ, and (3) the organization of the biblical ethic such that a real change in the believer’s nature precedes all historical growth.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 44.

<sup>2</sup> John Murray, “Definitive Sanctification,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 2.1 (1967): 5.

<sup>3</sup> See John Murray, “Progressive Sanctification,” in *Select Lectures in Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 of *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 294–304.

## 1. *Words That Refer to Sanctification*

First, as Murray points out in his landmark article, many of the words that Scripture uses to speak of sanctification refer to a definitive reality.<sup>4</sup>

The verb *hagiazō* (ἁγιάζω, to sanctify) is used at least three times to refer to sanctification as a settled reality:

- “To those *sanctified* in Christ Jesus, called to be saints” (1 Cor 1:2).
- “But you were washed, you were *sanctified*, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11).
- “We have been *sanctified* through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10).

The noun *hagiasmos* (ἁγιασμός; sanctification, consecration, holiness) also refers to a once-for-all idea. “And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and *sanctification* and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30). Other uses of this word would seem to imply a once-for-all reality but are less decisive (1 Thess 4:7; 2 Thess 2:13; 1 Pet 1:2).

It is also significant that the word *hagios* (ἅγιος, holy one or saint) is used often to describe all believers without any reference to a special class or level of maturity:

- “All the *saints* greet you” (Phil 4:21).
- “To equip the *saints* for the work of ministry” (Eph 4:12).

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that every believer is a “saint”—a “holy one”—which points to some basic sense of sanctification in all believers.

Murray concludes, “It would be a deflection from biblical patterns of language and conception to think of sanctification exclusively in terms of a progressive work.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, Scripture compels us to recognize a definitive quality to our sanctification.

## 2. *The Structure of Our Salvation in Union with Christ*

We also see a definitive sense of sanctification emerge when we look at our salvation through the lens of our union with Christ and the resulting participation in his person. We will begin by considering how sanctification fits into the scope of Christ’s saving work.

<sup>4</sup> Murray, “Definitive Sanctification,” 5–6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

Christ accomplished our redemption for us by obediently taking the curse in our place so that we would not experience it. But God raised him from the dead, exalted him to his right hand, and gave him the promised Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33). This implies a change in the person of Christ—not, of course, in his divine nature but according to his human nature, as he transitioned from his state of humiliation to his state of exaltation.

Paul highlights this transition throughout his corpus: “For he was crucified in weakness but lives by the power of God” (2 Cor 13:4). “Lives” is best thought of as manifesting resurrection life, and “power” is the work of the Spirit to raise him from the dead. He “was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 1:3–4)—note the Spirit’s agency in Christ’s resurrection. Furthermore, “He *became* Life-Giving Spirit” (1 Cor 15:45).<sup>6</sup> These verses show a progression in Christ’s life: he becomes something new. “By that experience [Christ] was and remains a changed man in the truest and deepest—in fact, eschatological—sense.”<sup>7</sup>

In Christ’s eschatological glory he overturns what was broken and advances the world order to its God-appointed end. Christ delivers a decisive death blow to the old age—that realm in which Satan rules, sin dominates, and death reigns—and Christ constitutes the new age, the new creation reality, also known as “the kingdom of God.” In his resurrection, the new age has begun.

We who belong to Christ partake of his new age. In Christ we have been “transferred from the *domain* of darkness into the *kingdom* of his beloved son” (Col 1:14). Our relationship with the world has definitively changed: “I am crucified to the world and the world to me” (Gal 6:14). We are no longer of the flesh but of the Spirit (Rom 8:9). Through the law we die to the law so that we no longer serve according to the oldness of the written code but the newness of the Spirit (Rom 7:6). In sum: “If anyone is in Christ, it is a matter of new creation: behold the old has passed away, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17).<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> For this translation, see Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 44.

<sup>7</sup> Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “Life-Giving Spirit’: Probing the Center of Paul’s Pneumatology,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41.4 (December 1998): 581.

<sup>8</sup> Translation by Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “Romans” (lectures delivered at Westminster Theological Seminary, Glenside, PA, fall 2006). The translation “new creature” (NAS, KJV) surely misses the point. The second “he” in the ESV is not in the Greek text. Literally, Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, new creation.” Gaffin’s rendering, “It is a matter of new creation,” best captures Paul’s thought.

One of the benefits that we receive in our union with the resurrected Christ is sanctification. In Romans 6, Paul points to the newness of Christ in his death and resurrection in order to explain why believers have a new nature. Christ has “died to sin once and for all,” and he has been raised to live unto God (v. 10). “Death is no longer master over him” (v. 9). Christ’s death and resurrection constitute what we could call (with appropriate qualification) “Christ’s sanctification.”<sup>9</sup> We must be clear that Christ never actually committed sin, nor did he even assume a corrupt nature. But he did enter the evil age, and he did voluntarily submit himself under it so that he could break its power. Moreover, his resurrection constituted a new phase of the God-man’s relationship to his Father. In his resurrection life, he was, is, and always will be “alive to God.”

In becoming united to Christ, the believer enjoys a similar decisive change with reference to sin and death and a new orientation to God. Believers have died to sin (Rom 6:2–5) and are raised to walk in newness of life (v. 4), and the power of sin is decisively broken (v. 6). It is probably best to take *oitines* (οἴτινες) in v. 2 as qualitative and to understand the meaning as “we who are the *kind* of people who died to sin.”<sup>10</sup> We obtain this new nature because we are united to Christ who became new himself.

Bringing together what we have seen so far, definitive sanctification comes into view when we consider that what Christ has “become for us” (1 Cor 1:30) includes sanctification, and, therefore, sanctification is applied to us in our union with him. It also explains why our sanctification must include a definitive aspect. No one is partially united to Christ; therefore, in a very important sense, all believers are definitively sanctified—hence the many references to sanctification as a completed reality for all believers (see above).

To clarify definitive sanctification further, we should note that this decisive change is not just another way of describing justification. Justification is a forensic benefit: God declares us legally righteous, irrespective of our actual nature (Rom 4:5—“[God] justifies the *ungodly*”). In definitive sanctification, however, God changes our nature so that we are constituted as righteous (“how shall we who [are the kind of person who] died to sin still live in it?” [Rom 6:2]). In justification, righteousness is imputed. In sanctification, it is infused.

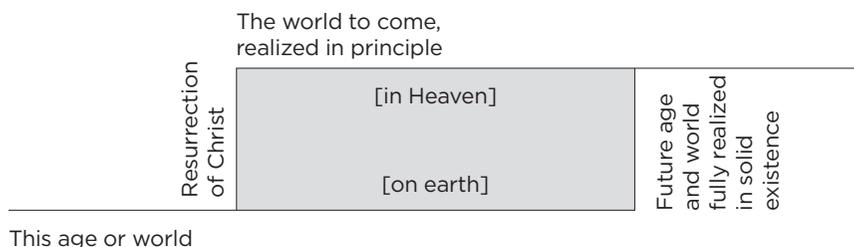
John Calvin’s commentary on Romans 6 helpfully explains why merely being justified is not enough. Justification alone will not curtail sin because

<sup>9</sup> Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 124.

<sup>10</sup> See John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:213.

“nothing is more natural than that the flesh should indulge itself under any excuse.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, if we only had justification, our fallen state would naturally use it as an excuse to remain in sin. (Hence, Paul’s question in Romans 6:1 arises organically out of his discussion on justification.) However, we do not only have justification; we also have sanctification, which is a change in our nature that prompts us to use justification as a warrant to move toward God in love and adoration. It is best to see definitive sanctification and justification as distinct and inseparable benefits simultaneously given in our union with Christ.<sup>12</sup> And it is best to see our progressive sanctification as a result of both justification and definitive sanctification working together.

But why does definitive sanctification not involve entire sanctification?<sup>13</sup> The answer lies in the relationship of the new age to the old age. The old and new ages do not sit side by side, the new beginning precisely where the old ends. Instead, the new age has only begun to be realized; it awaits full consummation at Christ’s return. Likewise, while the old age is passing away, it is not yet destroyed. We live within the overlap of the two ages, as Geerhardus Vos illustrated in this diagram:<sup>14</sup>



We live inside the box, between the first and second coming of Christ. This means that we live in a time when the “inner man”—that perspective on the total person that looks through the lens of union with Christ in his

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom38/calcom38.x.i.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> “Entire sanctification” is the idea that Christians are brought to a place of complete perfection in this life. From the Church of the Nazarene: “We believe that entire sanctification is that act of God, subsequent to regeneration, by which believers are made free from original sin, or depravity, and brought into a state of entire devotement to God, and the holy obedience of love made perfect” (“Christian Holiness and Entire Sanctification,” *Church Manual 2017–2021*, <https://2017.manual.nazarene.org/section/christian-holiness-and-entire-sanctification>).

<sup>14</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 38.

resurrection glory—is being renewed day by day, while the “outer man”—our life from the perspective of our physical existence headed to the grave—is wasting away.<sup>15</sup> Because of the two-age overlap, our life in Christ is real; we have been raised with him and seated with him (Eph 2:3–4), and even glorification can be considered part of our present reality in Christ (2 Cor 3:18 and possibly Rom 8:30). And yet, the fullness of this reality is not yet openly manifested. Thus, we are tempted, we suffer, we sin, we die. We walk by faith, not by sight, waiting for the appearance of Christ, when we will also be revealed in glory with him (Col 3:4). There is still a “not yet” to our holiness. “All does not yet gleam with glory, but all is being purified.”<sup>16</sup>

### 3. *The Structure of the New Testament Ethics*

Finally, we see definitive sanctification in the way that the New Testament ethics requires a change in nature prior to a change in behavior.

The sinful nature inherited from Adam creates a situation of radical depravity resulting in total inability to please God. Jesus affirms, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). “Nothing” should be understood in an ethical sense. Scripture stresses our inability so that we despair of ever producing holiness by ourselves, and instead we run to Christ, who instructs us, “Abide in me and you will bear much fruit” (John 15:4). Our union with Christ actualizes the possibility of real obedience because in union with Christ we become new people.<sup>17</sup> Murray explains: “If we accept the biblical witness to human depravity and iniquity, then there must be a radical breach with sin in its power and defilement if the demands of the biblical ethic are even to begin to be realized in us.”<sup>18</sup> This “radical breach” is another way of describing definitive sanctification.

One of the clearest examples of this ethical structure is Ephesians 2. God saves us by grace, not of ourselves (v. 8), and more specifically, “not of works” (v. 9). Thus, salvation comes solely from God. But immediately after this, Paul explains that we are created in Christ Jesus *for good works* (v. 10). Thus, our salvation is not *of* works, but it is *for* works. The *sine qua non* factor that moves us from a situation where works are impossible to us walking “in

<sup>15</sup> Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 61–65.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther, “An Argument in Defense of All the Articles of Dr. Martin Luther Wrongly Condemned in the Papal Bull,” trans. C. M. Jacobs, in *Works of Martin Luther: with Introductions and Notes*, vol. 3, ed. Henry Eyster Jacobs and Adolph Spaeth (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman & the Castle Press, 1930), 31.

<sup>17</sup> See J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 35–37.

<sup>18</sup> John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 203.

good works” (v. 10) is the re-creative work of God in the context of our union with Christ—that is, definitive sanctification. In fact, this section (vv. 8–10) explains Paul’s statements in the previous section (vv. 3–6), where he tells us that we were dead in sin “but God made us alive together with Christ ... and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places.” More riches of this passage could be mined,<sup>19</sup> but suffice it to say, a definitive change vis-à-vis our union with Christ creates the possibility of real obedience.

Romans 6 also makes this ethical structure explicit. The first half of the chapter could be summarized according to verses 2 and 4b, that we should not continue in sin because we are people “raised to walk in newness of life.” The walking in newness of life (which implies tangible acts of obedience) requires a prior resurrection. The resurrection actualizes real obedience. This resurrection is clearly that which we obtain in our union with Christ. Hence some definitive sense of resurrection—implying definitive sanctification—must undergird all historical obedience.

Further evidence of sanctification as a settled state prior to actual obedience is that we must consider ourselves to be in this state if we are to be holy. As Herman Ridderbos explains, a certain “self-judgment” is necessary if we are going to live within the logic of who we are in Christ.<sup>20</sup> Over and against the reality of sin, believers must look at themselves through what Christ has become for them and who they are in him so that they can live in a way that corresponds with who they are. John Webster explains this thought well: “The moral *movement* [that is, our acting morally] is imperfectly undertaken without apprehension of moral *nature*, without intelligence of who and where we are, and by whom we are met.”<sup>21</sup>

Further, Paul commands us to present ourselves to God “as those alive from the dead” (v. 13). We must not miss the fact that a certain mode of offering of ourselves is required. We must offer ourselves cognizant of the fact that we are people alive from the dead. If we were to offer ourselves in a different way—for example, with a goal of meriting life—we would not obey this command. The commands require we consciously act *from* life, not *for* life. The life from which we act is the new life we have in Christ, and we must act on it as a settled (definitive) reality.

---

<sup>19</sup> For instance, it is significant that this passage that speaks of the radical transition from death to life situates that transition in the two-age construct.

<sup>20</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 203.

<sup>21</sup> John Webster, “‘Where Christ Is’: Christology and Ethics,” in *Virtue and Intellect*, vol. 2 of *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2018), 14 (emphasis original).

We can summarize the relationship between definitive sanctification and ethics as “becoming who we already are in Christ.”<sup>22</sup> Obedience does not create a situation that was in no way true of us prior to obedience. Obedience manifests our sanctified nature in Christ. However, for this phrase to communicate Paul’s thought correctly, the words “in Christ” must carry immense weight. If we remove them, the sentence changes meaning;<sup>23</sup> it invites us to turn inward and try to become a better version of ourselves. However, “The farthest thing from the apostle’s mind is the notion that this new life is to be explained on the basis of man himself.”<sup>24</sup> We are truly (definitively) sanctified in the core of our identity, but only because the core of our identity is found in another, in Christ. Webster explains: “We really are, and we really are outside of ourselves.”<sup>25</sup> *Becoming* what we are in Christ is nothing more than manifesting Christ’s moral identity (an identity that we already inhabit) in our lives. The fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23) is the character of Christ, born in our lives through the Spirit of Christ by the gospel.

Definitive sanctification underscores the fact that our identity in Christ is a settled reality, which enables us to venture into the field of moral action with confidence.

What does all of this mean for preaching?

## II. *Implications for Preaching*

The implications I have in mind do not primarily concern the content of the pastor’s sermon, because that should be driven by the text. I care less about whether one sees definitive sanctification in any given text and more about the grid through which one understands the nature of the moral exhortation and the nature of the people he is called to exhort. I propose that definitive sanctification shapes or strengthens three overlapping principles for a theology of preaching.

### 1. *Preaching Christ Includes Preaching Moral Commands*

One legitimate concern with giving sustained attention to sanctification is that we become more interested in “How is your sanctification going

<sup>22</sup> Gaffin, “Romans” course lectures.

<sup>23</sup> See the fascinating interaction with this idea in Grant Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul’s Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 42. He cites a conversation with Julie Canlis, who commented that in many of the sentences that contain the phrase “in Christ,” one could remove the phrase and the sentence would retain the exact same meaning.

<sup>24</sup> Ridderbos, *Paul*, 253.

<sup>25</sup> Webster, “Where Christ Is,” 23.

today?” than “Are you knowing Christ, who is your life?”<sup>26</sup> But there is also a legitimate concern that the attitude expressed by “just preach Christ” can omit the moral instruction that makes up so much of the New Testament. The solution is not so much a middle ground but a way of preaching Christ that includes the moral commands and a way of approaching the moral commands that only makes sense in light of the believer’s definitive sanctification in Christ.

Paul makes this connection between Christ and moral exhortation explicit in Colossians 1:26–28:

... the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

The phrase “him we proclaim” is often taken as a mandate for preaching, and rightly so. It is consistent with how Paul often summarizes the center of his exhortation:<sup>27</sup> “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you, except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2; see also 1 Cor 15:3–4, Gal 6:14, and 2 Tim 2:8). Christ—in his death and resurrection—is the foremost concern for Paul as he considers his role in advancing the gospel and edifying the church.<sup>28</sup> If the center of Paul’s theology is Christ in his death and resurrection, our preaching should have that center as well.

But this center is not abstract and external; it is immensely personal, and this is where definitive sanctification comes into view. “Christ *in you*” is “the hope of glory” (Col 1:27). As we already noted, this implies that we share in Christ’s sanctified nature. Thus, our preaching is not more “Christ-centered” when we preach Christ without reference to the manifold ways in which we benefit from him. Rather, the glory that Christ received “was not,” as Calvin says, “for his own private use, but to enrich poor and needy men.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, to preach Christ is to help people understand their identity in him;

---

<sup>26</sup> See Gerhard O. Forde, “The Lutheran View,” in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1989), 14–32.

<sup>27</sup> I am making the significant assumption that Paul’s theology does have a center (see Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 23–49).

<sup>28</sup> Gaffin summarizes that “Christ, in His death and resurrection, is Paul’s ultimate epistemic commitment” (Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “Some Epistemological Reflections on 1 Cor 2:6–16,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57.1 [Spring 1995]: 108).

<sup>29</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:537 (3.1.1).

proclaiming Christ and teaching people the grounding reality of their sanctification are best done simultaneously.

Proclaiming Christ also includes specific moral instruction. Grammatically, “him we proclaim” is further explained by the activity of “warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col 1:28). Thus, “proclaiming Christ” includes—in Colossians at least—Paul’s prayer for wisdom to walk worthy of the Lord and for strength to endure (1:9–11); his warnings to continue in the faith (1:23); the commands to “walk in him” (2:6), shun worldly philosophy (2:8–10), seek Christ, who is above (3:2), put away sinful behavior (3:5–11), and put on love (3:14); and all the specific moral commands of the household codes (3:18–4:1). Proclaiming Christ is not averse to moral instruction but bound up with it. This does not run aground on moralism *if* it is also kept in mind that there would be no possibility for moral instruction if it were not for “Christ in you” and that “the hope of glory” is a hope that purifies us (1 John 3:2–3) as we long to experience in full what we now know only in part.

## ***2. Preach the Indicative and Imperative Together***

Another danger arising from attention to sanctification is that we can inadvertently accelerate the pendulum swing between antinomianism and legalism. A sermon intending to confront hypocrites could unintentionally rob the overly sensitive of assurance. A sermon designed to ground our assurance in the gospel could provide shelter for those persisting in unrepentant sin. A strong moral exhortation could leave some people feeling smug and others distraught.

The doctrine of definitive sanctification slows the pendulum swing by underscoring the theological connection between the indicative and the imperative, which brings into view a corresponding homiletical connection. When we command the congregation to be holy, we must do so in such a way that it reinforces their identity as part of the new creation in Christ. It becomes much harder to move the pendulum when we understand how the commands and promises imply one another.

First, it is helpful to realize that the connection between the indicative and the imperative in Christian sanctification is symbiotic and overlapping, which is different from their connection in any other realm. All but the most extreme philosophical constructivists<sup>30</sup> would say that there is some

---

<sup>30</sup> I am thinking, for instance, of Michel Foucault, who sees that our identity is constructed as we confess who we are. See Christopher Watkin, *Michel Foucault, Great Thinkers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018).

sense in which the imperative flows from the indicative because there is some sense in which given reality obligates my moral choices; for example, because I am a father (indicative), I should love and nurture my children (imperative). In fact, Scripture routinely assumes that creation and providence dictate and empower certain moral obligations (1 Cor 7). But, in the realm of Christian sanctification, the real change in the believer's nature in Christ—the indicative—reveals more than merely my moral context or even my potential and trajectory. It defines who I really am in my deepest moral identity because I have received the moral nature of Christ in my union with him.<sup>31</sup>

This creates an interesting situation—one that has been wrongly described as the *problem* of the indicative and imperative. Ridderbos explains: “The new life in its moral manifestation is at one time proclaimed and posited as the fruit of the redemptive work of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit—the indicative; elsewhere, however, it is put with no less force as a categorical demand—the imperative.”<sup>32</sup> That is to say, the indicative and imperative overlap. What is stated as true of us is also commanded to be true of us. This overlap is to be expected given the overlap of the two ages (see above).

We see this overlap in Scripture: the indicative includes the fact that I am already “dead to sin” and “alive to God” (Rom 6:11). I already am “unleavened” (1 Cor 5:7)—leaven here signifies moral corruption. I have already “put on Christ” (Gal 3:27); I have “put off the old man and put on the new” (Col 3:9–10).<sup>33</sup> And yet, I must “put sin to death” and “not let sin reign in my body” (Rom 6:12). Because I am unleavened, I must “get rid of the old leaven” to become “a new batch of dough” (1 Cor 5:7). I must put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the lust of the flesh (Rom 13:14). I must “put off the old and put on the new” (Eph 4:22–24).<sup>34</sup>

The gospel of grace hinges upon the correct relationship between the indicative and the imperative. Though overlapping, the indicative comes first logically and gives rise to the imperative. God constitutes us to have a certain identity in Christ, and then we—conscious of that identity—manifest in our behavior who we already are. And yet obedience is still required. The priority of the indicative in no way makes the imperative superfluous. Rather, the indicative establishes the need for the imperative. Given that the indicative describes my truest moral nature—a nature that really is unleavened, that truly is dead to sin and alive to God, that is free, no longer under

<sup>31</sup> See Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ*.

<sup>32</sup> Ridderbos, *Paul*, 253.

<sup>33</sup> Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 79–80.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

the rule of law and sin—I must manifest this reality in my life, however incomplete and unimpressive that manifestation might turn out to be. The indicative of definitive sanctification (that I *am* made new in Christ) must result in the imperative of progressive sanctification (I *must* live as a new person in Christ).

Thus, to separate the indicative from the imperative is to alter both. To present the indicative as a thing by itself is to present it as though it were not a real change in our nature that must manifest itself in a change of how we live. To present the imperative alone is to present it as though either it were simply a call to raw behavior change, a kind of “gutting it out in the flesh,” or that true heart change and genuine love spring from ourselves without a renovative act of God.

How does this relate to preaching? I contend that we must connect the indicative and the imperative in the way that we talk about Christian identity and moral exhortation.

This is not to say that we need to give a full theology of sanctification every time we repeat a biblical promise or command. (One sure way to kill the drama of Scripture in our preaching is to give a systematic overview of every doctrine that impinges on the passage we are preaching.) But the uniqueness of the relationship in Scripture should sensitize us to the fact that the congregation might not be automatically processing the indicative and the imperative in this same way. They may be understanding the indicative and the imperative as functioning separately, which, as we said, alters the meaning of both.

For instance, a member of a church I consulted with once told me that the problem with the pastor’s preaching was that he was not “legalistic enough,” as evidenced by the large number of people living immoral lives around him. If he had preached more rules, the congregation would be living in a more holy way. This betrays the misconception that the way to encourage holiness is to preach the commands while the way to encourage confidence and assurance in Christ is to preach the gospel. But this does not work. A kind of exclusive focus on the gospel apart from the need for holiness misunderstands what the gospel is all about. Likewise, emphasis on rules to promote holiness will not succeed because that is not the kind of holiness God wants and because the law only increases sin. Walter Marshall rightly pointed out that the most insidious antinomian error is neonomianism (read legalism) because while a legalistic impulse can masquerade as a deep concern for holiness, in

actual practice it will only produce sin.<sup>35</sup> Only the biblical indicative can lead us to obey the biblical imperative.

However, it is not enough simply to teach people that they are connected; we must teach them how that connection will affect their lives. It is frightfully easy to verbally affirm all the right things about sanctification but in a moment of moral dilemma to act as though we are obeying to merit life (and become legalists) or as though no obedience is required (and become antinomians). In other words, keeping the indicative and imperative together is not just a verbal affirmation; it is also a skill that needs to be learned and honed.

Ridderbos pushes us to consider the lived experience of the indicative and imperative when he says that both are a matter of faith, “on the one hand [faith’s] receptivity [that is, the indicative], on the other [faith’s] activity [imperative].”<sup>36</sup> Faith, in Scripture, signifies a mode of living. We live by faith, walk by faith, and overcome the world by faith, and faith works through love. This mode contrasts with “by sight.” Operating by faith means that we access the indicative not through our experience in the world but through Scripture’s proclamation. The creation displays the glory of God, but it does not tell us that we are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ. Our own history does not even tell us this. It is actually over and against evidence to the contrary that I trust what Scripture says about me. And yet, such a self-judgment is precisely what I need to make if I am going to fight against sin rightly. This, we saw, was Paul’s argument in Romans 6:1–14. I present myself to God as one who is alive from the dead, even if I do not feel that way. Thus, the indicative is a matter of faith, a matter of receiving the word of God as truth over and against my experience. The imperative is also a matter of faith, a matter of actively pursuing the kinds of actions that make sense given the reality that God says is true of us in Christ.

What is the process by which faith pivots from receptivity to activity? I contend that it involves skills that must be developed. The Reformed Orthodox were helpful when they said that theology is not simply a science—a kind of knowledge—but also an art. Marshall explains sanctification as “the rare and excellent *art* of godliness” at which he believes “every Christian should strive to be skillful and expert.”<sup>37</sup> Our theology of sanctification must not only explain the theoretical relationship between the indicative and the imperative, but it must also address such practical issues such as these:

---

<sup>35</sup> Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), 15, 219.

<sup>36</sup> Ridderbos, *Paul*, 256.

<sup>37</sup> Marshall, *Gospel Mystery*, 160.

- How do I stare into the blackness of my sin and yet still hold on to the reality that I am dead to sin and alive to God in Christ?
- How do I examine myself to see if I am in the faith without losing faith in what Scripture says of me?
- How do I know when I should doubt my salvation?
- What is the difference between serving in “the oldness of the letter” and “the newness of the Spirit”? What does that difference feel like? And how do I know when I am doing one and not the other?

These questions cannot be answered with recourse to propositional truth alone; they must also address lived experience and learned skills. Paul gets at something of this in 2 Corinthians 4. “We are struck down but not destroyed ... always carrying around the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus is manifested in us” (vv. 9–10). Paul is describing *how* he lives within the reality of the already and the not-yet, that is, “by faith and not (yet) by sight.”

Many of these skills for living refer people back to the means of grace, such as Bible reading, prayer, confession, and fellowship. Most congregations know that they need to be doing these things already. But there is a way to pray that builds from and reinforces our definitive identity in Christ, and there is a way to pray that acts as though we must build that on our own. There is a way to seek Christian fellowship as an overflow of who we are in Christ, and there is a way that wrongly grounds our identity in mere community. There is a way to confess and repent that flows from our life in Christ, and there is a way that reverts to salvation by law-keeping.

We must teach people how to live within the reality of both the indicative and the imperative and the already and the not-yet amid the warp and woof of life.

### ***3. Preach Holiness as Part of the Eschatological Renewal of All Things***

Some also fear that sustained attention to sanctification can orient us too much to this life and not enough to the life to come. If I spend too much effort trying to improve my life now, might I spend too little time longing for the life to come? Might sanctification become just a slightly baptized version of finding my “best life now”? The answer is no because sanctification is deeply eschatological.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> For more on the connection to eschatology, see Michael Allen, *Grounded in Heaven: Recentering Christian Hope and Life on God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), especially 10–12.

Recall the passage in Colossians we explored above (Col 1:27). Paul not only connects his proclamation of Christ to the church's present union with Christ ("Christ in you"), he also does so with a view to the consummation of their union ("hope of glory"). Thus, to preach Christ is to preach the hope of the beatific vision: "When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col 3:4). Moreover, sanctification and glorification are themselves connected, as Marshall captures so well: "Sanctification in Christ is glory begun as glorification is sanctification perfected."<sup>39</sup> Our present sanctification is nothing more than proleptically realized glorification. Living within "the Vosian box"—when the new age has dawned and the old has not yet passed away—is living in hope. "We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it."<sup>40</sup>

We could make an analogy. Just as we said that we really are sanctified because we really inhabit the identity of another, the resurrected Christ, so also, we are sanctified *now* because we are people who belong to the future. In other words, when we talk about our definitive sanctification in Christ, we are not really calling people to look back (back to the death of Christ and their conversion), but we are calling people to look to the future because our truest identity is who we are in Christ when he returns. When we say that our sanctification is, in part, a settled reality, we do not mean a de-eschatologized reality. We mean that it is settled because we are people "upon whom the end of the age has come" (1 Cor 10:11). Thus, the more clearly and concretely we understand that future reality, the more we will be able to act accordingly.

Here is one way this can manifest itself in preaching: Christians differ on this, but I see significant continuity between this world and the one to come. We will be raised in our physical bodies, speak to one another in human languages (I am intrigued by D. A. Carson's idea that we will come to learn these languages).<sup>41</sup> I believe that the "new creation" is not a wholly new creation, but this creation made new. In this new creation reality, I will worship God fully and purely. Our worship will not be ethereal, but we will have real physical bodies. I will interact with others without pretense or covertness. I will be among a people whom I enjoy for God's sake. We will enjoy creation for God's sake. We will do good works and serve one another. Our mode of living will be different: it will be by *sight*, no longer by faith. But the kinds of things that we are to aim toward will be the same.

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>40</sup> Luther, "Argument in Defense," 31.

<sup>41</sup> D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 74–75.

Preaching should seek to communicate a kind of sanctified imagination about this future glory. I do not mean any kind of “heaven tourism,” which simply takes the values of this present world and projects them into the world to come. I mean the opposite: the values of the world to come projected back into the present. We need to preach often about heaven and connect the holiness we will have in heaven to our pursuit of it on earth.

Here is another example: After a sermon I preached on sexual sin, one young person—obviously struggling—asked, “Is there a time in our Christian journey and experience when we can say that we are free from sexual sin and temptation? If not, what will keep us from giving up in our pursuit of holiness?” I responded:

Yes, absolutely ... there is a time. It is when Jesus returns, and we see him face to face. I know that is not quite what you are asking, but I want to implore you to see that future encounter with Christ as part of your Christian journey and experience. In fact, I want you to see that as the definitive Christian experience that our experience now needs to be lived in light of. Let us bring our present experience into that future glory.

## Conclusion

What we are talking about here is not a three-step approach for how to preach sanctifying sermons. Rather it is a call to be a student of the deep structure of the gospel and the classic works that explicate Scripture’s teaching about the Christian life. It means serious engagement with biblical concepts with a goal of mapping them on to real life. In my experience, congregants love passages about definitive sanctification but understand little about them. Galatians 2:20 warms their hearts, but they cannot tell you what it means to no longer live but have Christ live in them. They like the truth that they are a new creation in Christ, but little content fills this category. I can also say from personal experience that pastors usually fare no better. However, a commitment to study and preach with definitive sanctification in view can help integrate the church’s understanding of these passages into the broader tapestry of the gospel and implicate their experience in the reality of Christ and the glory to come.

If definitive sanctification is biblical, we must preach it because it is biblical, but we should not miss its cultural relevance. Definitive sanctification is another way of talking about human identity, which has been radically deconstructed by various postmodern ideologies in the West. Definitive sanctification grounds believers in a stable identity—because we really are united to Christ—while also recognizing that the fullness of that identity is

yet to be revealed. This allows us to see identity as both a solid platform from which we live and an ongoing project; such an identity is radically different from a modernist transparent identity or postmodern constructivist identity, both of which lead to contradiction and futility.<sup>42</sup> I wonder how the ongoing conversation about the legitimacy of a “gay Christian” could be different if we began the discussion with a robust understanding of definitive sanctification. I wonder how those who have suffered abuse could be helped by internalizing the reality that in Christ they are not only declared legally righteous, but their nature is also holy. I wonder how definitive sanctification could give more resources to those who are entrenched in a battle with sexual sin.

In essence, I am purposing that we use definitive sanctification as something of a grid for preaching, which means that we look not only at it but also through it. What emerges is a web of connections between the eschatological identity of people to whom we preach, the truth that they are called to believe, and the commands they must obey.

---

<sup>42</sup> I got this idea, in part, from a talk that Ted Turnau gave at the European Leadership Forum on postmodernism and identity.

# Spiritual Disciplines for Holiness in the Life of a Minister

JOEL R. BEEKE

## Abstract

Pastors need to use the spiritual disciplines daily and diligently to cultivate sanctification toward God to know him increasingly better. With the Spirit's blessing, such cultivation is essential for a truly God-owned ministry that results from the pastor's large, varied, and original life with God. Pastors must read Scripture diligently, systematically, prayerfully, and meditatively; pray unceasingly, read sound literature, listen to God-glorifying sermons, and profit from the sacraments, fellowship with believers, and sanctifying the Lord's Day. Even faithful stewardship of time and money, evangelizing and serving others, and the ministry of the Word through loving the Triune God and his people can be forms of a lifestyle of spiritual discipline that grows our relationship with God and promotes and sustains an effective ministry.

## Keywords

*Holiness, spiritual disciplines, prayer, fellowship, ministry, love*

---

**P**aul writes to Timothy, “Take heed unto thyself” (1 Tim 4:16).<sup>1</sup> Take heed, pay attention, be alert, the apostle says, for you are in danger, dear minister of Christ, and you must keep watch over your very self. For you must be “an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (v. 12).

One might think that the vocation of preaching, teaching, and leading in the church might fortify ministers against serious spiritual dangers, but in fact, the opposite is often true. Charles Spurgeon spoke of the “secret snares” of the ministry, “and of these the worst is the temptation to *ministerialism*—the tendency to read our Bibles as ministers, to pray as ministers, to get into doing the whole of our religion as not ourselves personally, but only relatively, concerned in it.”<sup>2</sup> As ministers, we can handle the word of God as if it were no more than the words of men. We can take that which is holy for granted even as we live unholy lives. We can exhort others to holiness, but, like the Pharisees, not move an inch in that direction ourselves.

Regarding such ministerialism, this article addresses questions we need to raise as pastors. Why is a godly life an utter necessity for us? What means or spiritual disciplines can we use to cultivate the sanctification of our own hearts toward God? How should we exercise those disciplines? What ought to motivate us, in dependence on the Spirit, to maintain holy living in the midst of busy and challenging pastorates?

## **I. Pursue Holiness**

Without holiness, no man—ministers included—shall see God (Heb 12:14). Perhaps no definition of sanctification, the process of becoming holy, matches that of the Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q. 35): “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”<sup>3</sup>

It is impossible to separate godly living from a vibrant spiritual life and a God-owned ministry. The sanctification of our own heart is not an ivory-tower topic or an isolated experience. It is a daily way of life, an absolute

---

<sup>1</sup> Portions of this article are adapted from Joel R. Beeke, “The Utter Necessity of a Godly Life,” in *Reforming Pastoral Ministry*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 59–82; and the chapter on the faithfulness of God’s ministers in Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 4 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, forthcoming). Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1875), 1:10–11 (emphasis added).

<sup>3</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994), 297.

necessity—both personally and in relation to our calling as ministers of the gospel—if we are to live to the glory of God.

Jesus condemns the Pharisees and scribes for not being and doing what they proclaimed. They were condemned for carrying on a professional ministry in which a great disparity existed between lip and life, between the doctrine professionally proclaimed and the doctrine assimilated and manifested in daily living. “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat,” Christ tells us. “All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not” (Matt 23:2–3). We as ministers are called to be as holy in our private relationship with God, in our role as husbands and fathers in our families and as shepherds among our people, as we appear to be on the pulpit. There must be no disjunction between our calling and living nor between our confession and practice.

The qualifications for elders remind us that spiritual leadership demands holistic moral excellence (1 Tim 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9), not just to enter ministry but to abide in it. If a man cannot present himself as an example of sincere godliness and repentance over sin, he should not continue in the ministry. Those who are teachers will receive a greater judgment (Jas 3:1).

The influence of a minister’s example amplifies the impact of his sins. William Perkins noted Isaiah’s grief even of his “unclean lips” (Isa 6:8), most likely small faults in his speech, and said, “We learn . . . what a tender conscience godly ministers must have above all men; namely, that they must make conscience, not only of the great and gross sins, but even of the lowest and least sins.”<sup>4</sup>

Pastoral oversight begins with one’s own soul. A minister must maintain a mindset of continual spiritual watchfulness (2 Tim 4:5).<sup>5</sup> One of the greatest dangers a minister faces is a failure to keep watch over his own spiritual condition. Henry Martyn wrote in his journal, “Apparently outwardly employed for God, my heart has been growing more hard and proud. Let me be taught that the first great business on earth is to obtain the sanctification of my own soul; so shall I be rendered more capable also of performing the duties of the ministry.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> William Perkins, *The Calling of the Ministry*, in *The Works of William Perkins*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Derek W. H. Thomas, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014–2020), 10:240–41.

<sup>5</sup> On spiritual sobriety and watchfulness, see Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 3:988–93.

<sup>6</sup> John Sargent, *The Life and Letters of the Rev. Henry Martyn*, new ed. (London: Seeley, Jackson, & Halliday, 1868), 214.

We as ministers must therefore seek grace to build the house of God with both the hand of sound preaching and doctrine and the hand of a sanctified life. Our doctrine must shape our life, and our life must adorn our doctrine. “He doth preach most who doth live best,” wrote John Boys.<sup>7</sup> We must be what we preach and teach, not only applying ourselves to our texts but applying our texts to ourselves. Our hearts must be transcripts of our sermons.<sup>8</sup> Otherwise, as John Owen warned, “If a man teach uprightly and walk crookedly, more will fall down in the night of his life than he built in the day of his doctrine.”<sup>9</sup>

## II. *Know the Lord Your God*

The heartbeat of a godly life is personal acquaintance with God. “Acquaint now thyself with him, and be at peace: thereby good shall come unto thee,” Eliphaz says (Job 22:21). Acquaintance with God will not only affect our entire ministry; it will also influence our redeemed humanity spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, and physically.

James Stalker said,

Power for work like ours is only to be acquired in secret; it is only the man who has a large, varied and original life with God who can go on speaking about the things of God with fresh interest; but a thousand things happen to interfere with such a prayerful and meditative life.<sup>10</sup>

Each aspect is essential to produce freshness, spiritual power, and unction in our preaching and pastoral work from week to week, year after year.

- *A large life with God.* Peter admonishes us to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3:18). Paul describes being changed by the Holy Spirit from one stage of glory to another (2 Cor 3:18).

Spiritual life begins in the heart and, as a dynamic reality, is fueled by grace and knowledge. When our hearts as preachers are increasingly sanctified toward God, new hues and subtle nuances will be added to our preaching that will reflect our inner growth. Though we speak of the same Father, the

---

<sup>7</sup> John Boys, *The Works of John Boys: An Exposition of the Several Offices* (repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 25.

<sup>8</sup> Gardiner Spring, *The Power of the Pulpit* (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 154.

<sup>9</sup> John Owen, *Eshcol: A Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 13:57.

<sup>10</sup> James Stalker, *The Preacher and His Models* (New York: Armstrong & Son, 1891), 55.

same Christ, the same Spirit, and the same covenant of grace, with all its attendant Trinitarian blessings, that we spoke of years ago when we were first ordained into the ministry, those great themes will become richer and deeper as they are punctuated with the freshness of a growing relationship with God.

Like a good marriage in which love is expansive, the partners remain the same, but the relationship is never static. The relationship remains alive and dynamic as husband and wife grow in knowing, loving, and serving each other. If this is true of the relationship between two finite personalities, how much more is it true of a pastor's relationship with God, in which he explores the depths of God's being and the glory of his salvation.

As ministers, we stand at the ocean's edge of God's vast being and inscripturated truth. There is so much more to explore and experience. Like Paul, we must press on: "This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:13–14).

• *A varied life with God.* The Psalms eloquently testify that knowing God and walking with him on earth is a varied experience. Some people view the Christian life as nothing but joy and victory. However, such a view would eliminate nearly half of the Psalms, which describe pain, sorrow, frustration, and loneliness as authentic parts of Christian experience. We ought, therefore, to look to the Psalms for a more complete understanding of what we will encounter in our walk with God.

Walking with God is a varied experience. A godly person may experience days of ecstatic joy and unspeakable peace followed by days of staggering struggle and groaning heaviness. There are times when pastors sing with David, praising God "with joyful lips" (Ps 63:5). But there are also times when we must cry out with Asaph, "Will the Lord cast off for ever? And will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever? Doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? Hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies?" (Ps 77:7–9).

If the soul of the preacher is estranged from this varied experience of walking with God, his preaching may become truncated and narrow, failing to incorporate large segments of God's word. Such preaching will not satisfy deeply exercised children of God as Paul's preaching did. Because Paul knew what anxiety was, he could teach believers how not to be anxious. Because he had personally battled fear and sin, he could preach to the fears and groanings of other believers (2 Cor 1:3–7).

Someone who spends a day working with lilies in a greenhouse will come out smelling like a lily. A man who has been alone with God will preach words that are permeated with that communion. Stalker says to preachers,

There are arts of study by which the contents of the Bible can be made available for the edification of others; but this is the best rule: Study God's Word diligently for your own edification; and then, when it has become more to you than your necessary food and sweeter than honey or the honey-comb, it will be impossible for you to speak of it to others without a glow passing into your words which will betray the delight with which it has inspired yourself.<sup>11</sup>

• *An original life with God.* God's word is filled with concepts of solidarity and community. Yet believers are also unique individuals. Jesus says that he knows all of his sheep by name, and they know him (John 10:3, 14). If our life with God is genuine, it will be original. We will not parrot the language or experience of another person. Christ's will for Peter was not the same as his will for John, and so Peter had to learn to stop wondering about what the Lord would do with John and simply heed the call, "Follow me" (John 21:20–22).

There is a sense in which every one of us must walk alone with God with a sense of pure, holy originality. We must trust God to sanctify us in every experience we are led through so that he can make us "able ministers of the new testament" (2 Cor 3:6). He leads us through these experiences to sanctify us in a way that perfectly fits us as individuals. He tailor-makes all our afflictions, joys, and experiences to perfectly fit his will for us.

If we are to be effective preachers and pastors, we must resolve, by God's grace, to be godly, or we must leave the ministry. We must have a growing, varied, and original life with God.

### III. Use Ordinary Spiritual Disciplines

How are we as pastors to cultivate holiness?

Discouragements and obstacles abound. Many of us confront much that is disheartening in our ministries and which rubs against our efforts to walk the King's highway of holiness. We often feel frustrated, disappointed, near despair, and quite unholy. So much of what we are makes us unprofitable, and so much of what we do appears to be fruitless. As John Stott said, "Discouragement is the chief occupational hazard of a leader."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Stalker, *The Preacher and His Models*, 53–54.

<sup>12</sup> John Stott, *Through the Bible, Through the Year: Daily Reflections from Genesis to Revelation* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2006), 131.

Still, the way to cultivate godly living is surprisingly simple: We are to walk with God in the way of his appointment, diligently using the means of grace and the spiritual disciplines, waiting upon the Holy Spirit for blessing. Godly living involves both discipline and the continued grace of the Holy Spirit. This dual emphasis upon duty and grace is fundamental to Puritan thinking on godly living.<sup>13</sup> As John Flavel wrote, “The duty is ours though the power be God’s. A natural man hath no power, a gracious man hath some, though not sufficient; and that power he hath, depends upon the exciting and assisting strength of Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

To this Owen adds, “It is the Holy Ghost who is the immediate peculiar sanctifier of all believers, and the author of all holiness in them.” The Spirit supplies what we lack so that we press toward the mark. The Spirit enables us as believers to “yield obedience to God ... by virtue of the life and death of Jesus Christ.”<sup>15</sup>

The believer is empowered with “the diligent and constant use and improvement of all holy means and duties, to preserve the soul from sin, and maintain its sweet and free communion with God,” Flavel said.<sup>16</sup> It has been well said, “If thou meanest to be devout, and to enlarge thy religion, do it rather by increasing thy ordinary devotions than thy extraordinary.”<sup>17</sup> Let us examine in more detail what spiritual disciplines or means of grace the preacher may use to enlarge his walk with God.

### 1. *Read Scripture*

Pastors will cultivate holiness through the discipline of diligent, systematic, prayerful, and meditative reading of the Holy Scriptures (Ps 1:2).

- *Be diligent.* Physical health is profoundly affected by one’s daily diet. In such a way our spiritual health is affected by our habitual spiritual intake. There are times of great crisis in ministry when we are driven to extraordinary times of prayer, and there are times when we are too hard-pressed to pray. But these are not the normal times. If we are to have an expanding, varied, and original life with God, we must cultivate the discipline of setting aside a regular time in which we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures. Seek God’s wisdom with greater diligence than men mine silver and gold (Prov 2:1–4).

---

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Webber, “Sanctifying the Inner Life,” in *Aspects of Sanctification: 1981 Westminster Conference Papers* (Hertfordshire: Evangelical Press, 1982), 44–45.

<sup>14</sup> John Flavel, *A Saint Indeed, or the Great Work of a Christian*, in *The Works of John Flavel*, 6 vols. (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 5:424.

<sup>15</sup> John Owen, *Pneumatologia, or, A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, 3:385–86.

<sup>16</sup> Flavel, *A Saint Indeed*, in *Works*, 5:423.

<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Taylor, *Via Pacis*, no. 50, in *Jeremy Taylor: Selected Works*, ed. Thomas K. Carroll (New York: Paulist, 1990), 414.

Richard Greenham said, “Diligence maketh a rough way plain and easy.”<sup>18</sup>

- *Be systematic.* We must study the whole range of God’s revealed mind from Genesis to Revelation, keeping in mind who God is, who we are, what his relationship is to us as our Creator and Redeemer, and what our relationship is to him and his world. We must immerse ourselves in the word of God, not the word of man. Too many ministers are more influenced by what others have told us about the Scriptures than by the Scriptures themselves.

Paul says, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim 3:16–17). In effect, he is saying, “Timothy, those Scriptures that were taught you by your God-fearing mother and grandmother are adequate to furnish you completely for a godly life and ministry.”

How often must Christ warn us as pastors, “Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures” (Matt 22:29)? The word of God is the lifeline of our souls, the very heartbeat of our sanctification. We must be able to say with Jeremiah, “Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart” (Jer 15:16).

Proper preparation for reading the Bible is critical, however. Without it, our reading will seldom be blessed. Such preparation, according to Greenham, means approaching Scripture with a reverential fear of God and his majesty, being “swift to hear, slow to speak” (Jas 1:19); with faith in Christ, looking to him to open the meaning of Scripture to us as he did on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:31); and with a sincere desire to learn, a heart that is good soil to receive the word fruitfully (Luke 8:15).<sup>19</sup>

- *Be prayerful and meditative.* Ask for the Spirit’s light. Stop presuming that knowing the original languages of Scripture and using exegetical tools are sufficient to unlock the mysteries of the Holy Scriptures. None of us knows Hebrew and Greek like the scribes and Pharisees, yet they searched the Scriptures daily and missed their true meaning (John 5:39–40). We must pray with David, “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law” (Ps 119:18). Set your heart to study and obey God’s word. Ezra 7:10 says, “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.”

---

<sup>18</sup> Richard Greenham, *A Profitable Treatise Containing a Direction for the Reading and Understanding of the Holy Scriptures*, in *The Works of the Reverend and Faithfull Servant of Jesus Christ, M. Richard Greenham*, ed. H[enry] H[olland] (London: Felix Kingston for Robert Dexter, 1599), 390.

<sup>19</sup> Greenham, *A Profitable Treatise*, 392–93.

After reading Scripture, meditating is critical. Reading may give knowledge, but meditation will add depth to that knowledge. Thomas Hooker defined the art of meditation as “a serious intention of the mind, whereby we come to search out the truth and settle it effectually upon the heart.”<sup>20</sup> Here are some suggestions for how to meditate:

1. Pray for the power to harness the mind and focus the eyes of faith on this task.
2. Read the Scriptures, then select a short passage on which to focus.
3. Memorize the selected passage.
4. Think carefully on the meaning and applications of the passage.
5. Preach the truth to yourself and stir up affections of love, fear, and so on.
6. Make a particular resolution of what action of obedience you will take.
7. Sing a Psalm related to the truth you have considered.
8. End with prayer for sanctifying grace and thanksgiving for God’s teaching.

We have lost the art of meditation. We have forgotten that disciplined meditation on the Scriptures helps us focus on God, for it involves our mind as well as our heart and affections. It transfuses Scripture through the texture of the soul. David says,

O how love I thy law! It is my meditation all the day. Thou through thy commandments hast made me wiser than mine enemies: for they are ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies are my meditation. (Ps 119:97–99)

Meditation on Scripture is absolutely crucial for a pastor (1 Tim 4:15). Meditation helps prevent vain and sinful thoughts (Matt 12:35) and provides inner resources on which to draw (Ps 77:10–12), including direction for daily life (Prov 6:21–22) and strength against temptation (Ps 119:11, 15).

Meditation also enriches public prayer. Christ says, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matt 12:34). The minister who interacts with God during the week through prayerful, meditative study of the Scriptures—who has tasted new dimensions of the grandeur and majesty of God that week, and new depths of his own indwelling sin and the riches

---

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Hooker, *The Application of Redemption by the Effectual Work of the Word and Spirit of Christ, for the Bringing Home of Lost Sinners to God, the Ninth and Tenth Books* (London: Peter Cole, 1657), 210.

of Christ to atone for him—will not have a cold, dry prayer on Sunday morning but will radiate the presence of the Almighty.

## 2. *Pray Unceasingly*

“Men ought always to pray, and not to faint” (Luke 18:1). “Ought” means that the obligation of prayer rests upon us at all times regardless of our present frame of mind. Giving up out of weariness (“faint”) is one of the greatest hindrances to prayer.

The apostles determined to give themselves “continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2, 4). Note the order here: first prayer, then ministry. As Charles Bridges once wrote, “Prayer ... is one half of our ministry; and it gives to the other half all its power and success.”<sup>21</sup>

Our consciences may condemn us here more than in any other part of our ministry. You may admit this, saying, “I have not been careless in the preparation of my sermons, neither in the hard work of exegesis nor in the sweating work of sermonic application, but I am plagued with guilt when I ask, ‘Have I given *myself*—not just time but myself—to prayer?’”

Part of our problem is that we view prayer as an appendix to our work rather than as our work. Notwithstanding all our failures, we must sustain the habit of secret prayer if we are to live godly lives. The only way to learn the art of sacred wrestling and the art of holy argument with God is to pray. Praying is the only way to turn the promises of God into the horns of his altar by which we lay hold of God himself. Our preaching about prayer and all the treatises we read on prayer will be of no help unless we pray with Jacob, “I will not let thee go, except thou bless me” (Gen 32:26).

If the giants of church history dwarf us today, it is likely because they were men of prayer, possessed with the Spirit of grace and supplication. Let us refuse to be content with the shell and husk of religion without the inner core of prayer. When we grow drowsy in prayer, let us pray aloud, or write down our prayers, or find a quiet place outside to walk and pray. Just do not stop praying.

Do not abandon stated times of prayer, but also pray in response to the least impulse to do so. Conversing with God through Christ is our most effective antidote to warding off spiritual backsliding and discouragement. A prayerless discouragement is like an infected sore, whereas prayerful discouragement is like a sore cleansed and soothed by the balm of Gilead.

Failure to pray unceasingly (1 Thess 5:17) is the primary reason why there is so little unction in most preaching today. This problem is two-sided to be

---

<sup>21</sup> Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 148.

sure. It is our fault as ministers because we relinquish prayer time too easily, and it is the fault of our people when they make too many demands of us. Too many churches indirectly pressure ministers to abandon prayer time by filling their days with administration duties, committee meetings, and counseling sessions. Today many pastors are busy studying the problems of the church and providing a smorgasbord of solutions, but where are the pastors who are giving themselves to prayer?

### **3. Read Books and Listen to Sermons**

Sound books that promote holiness are a powerful help to pastors. Read the spiritual classics, letting great writers be your spiritual mentors and friends.

The Puritans excel in this. “There must scarcely be a sermon, a treatise, a pamphlet, a diary, a history or a biography from a Puritan pen which was not in one way or another aimed at fostering the spiritual life,” said Maurice Roberts.<sup>22</sup>

Read on a diversity of subjects for a diversity of needs. If you would foster godly living by remaining sensitized to sin, read Ralph Venning’s *The Plague of Plagues*, Jeremiah Burroughs’s *The Evil of Evils*, Thomas Watson’s *The Mischief of Sin*, or Thomas Boston’s *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*.

If you long to be drawn closer to Christ, read Thomas Goodwin’s *Christ Our Mediator*, Alexander Gross’s *Happiness of Enjoying and Making a Speedy Use of Christ*, Isaac Ambrose’s *Looking Unto Jesus*, John Brown’s *Christ: The Way, the Truth, and the Life*, or Friedrich Krummacher’s *The Suffering Savior*.

If you are sorely afflicted, read Samuel Rutherford’s *Letters*, James Waddell Alexander’s *Consolation to the Suffering People of God*, James Buchanan’s *Comfort in Affliction*, or Murdoch Campbell’s *In All Their Affliction*. If you are buffeted with temptation, read Owen’s treatises *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers* and *Of Temptation*. If you want to grow in holiness, read Flavel’s *Keeping the Heart*, or Octavius Winslow’s *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul*. Or read J. C. Ryle and Jerry Bridges on holiness.

Since I was fourteen years old, such literature has enriched me. Good books have drawn me closer to God, enlightened me in his word, and prompted meditation, conviction, and allurements.

Organize your private time so you can read at least thirty minutes each day for your own godliness. When you read, do not be in a hurry. Look up cited texts. Be content to read some books more slowly than others. Some books may be tasted, while others should be chewed on before being digested.

---

<sup>22</sup> Maurice Roberts, “Visible Saints: The Puritans as a Godly People,” in *Aspects of Sanctification: 1981 Westminster Conference Papers* (Hertfordshire: Evangelical Press, 1982), 1–2.

Read as an act of worship. Read with the goal of being elevated into the great truths of God so that you may worship the Trinity in spirit and in truth. Read and meditate and apply. Pray before, during, and after you read, then put into practice what you have read, insofar as it is biblical.

Be selective about what you read. Subject all your reading to the touchstone of Scripture. So much of today's Christian literature is shallow froth, riddled with Arminian theology or secular thinking. Time is too precious to waste on unprofitable reading. Read more for eternity than time, more for spiritual growth than professional advancement. As John Trapp observed, as water tastes of the soil it runs through, so does the soul taste of the authors that a man reads.<sup>23</sup>

Ask of each book: Would Christ approve of this book? Does this book increase my love for the word of God, help me to kill sin, impart abiding wisdom, and prepare me for the life to come? Could I better spend my time by reading another book?

Speak to others about the best of what you read. Godly conversation upon godly reading promotes godly living. And in all your reading, aim for the psalmist's petition: "Teach me thy way, O LORD; I will walk in thy truth: unite my heart to fear thy name" (Ps 86:11).

Some people prefer listening to reading. Do both to live a godly life. Listen to great preachers, either in person or on recorded audio, who will enrich your spiritual welfare. Select those preachers who encourage your sanctification. Today there are a wealth of excellent sermon and conference tapes available.

Listen to sermons in the car, on your way to pastoral visits. What a boon such preaching can be for one's ministry! When you listen, prepare your soul with prayer. Listen with a holy appetite and a tender, teachable heart. Avoid a critical spirit. Be attentive to what is preached, receiving with meekness the engrafted word (Jas 1:21), mingling it with faith (Heb 4:2). Remember that your goal is not to compare preacher to preacher, but to know God and obey his will.

#### **4. Cultivate Other Disciplines**

Cultivate godly living through other disciplines, both the church's means of grace and other practices that you find profit you.

---

<sup>23</sup> "Take heed also what books ye read: for as water relisheth of the soil it runs through: so do the soule of the authors that a man readeth." John Trapp, *Solomonis Panaretos: Or, a Commentarie upon the Books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (London: By T. R. and E. M. for John Bellamie, 1650), 230 (on Prov 19:27).

- *The sacraments.* God's holy ordinances complement his word. They point us away from ourselves. Each sign—water, bread, and wine—directs us to believe in Christ and his sacrifice on the cross as the source for godly living. The sacraments are visible means through which Christ invisibly communes with us and we with him. They spur us to Christlikeness and therefore to holiness.

- *Fellowship with believers.* Pastors who would be godly should seek fellowship in the church and associate with mentors in godly living (Eph 4:12–13; 1 Cor 11:1), especially fellow pastors who will keep confidences. “He that walketh with wise man shall be wise” (Prov 13:20). The church ought to be a fellowship of caring and a community of prayer (1 Cor 12:7; Acts 2:42). A Christian who tries to live in isolation from other believers will be defective; likewise, a pastor who does not commune with others usually will remain spiritually immature.<sup>24</sup>

- *Journaling.* The ministry can be a lonely occupation. Ministers should take care not to divulge too many of their feelings publicly. We must use caution in whom we confide. Journaling or diary-keeping can help take the edge off loneliness by helping us to express thoughts to God and to ourselves that otherwise remain buried. Journaling can serve numerous benefits that promote godliness, including assisting us in meditating and praying, in remembering the Lord's works and faithfulness, in understanding and evaluating ourselves, in monitoring our goals and priorities, and in maintaining other spiritual disciplines.<sup>25</sup>

- *Sabbath-keeping, or sanctifying the Lord's Day.* This can greatly improve personal spirituality. Pastors need a weekly, extended private time with God, either on Sunday or another designated day. Though we must be careful not to bind ourselves with legalistic observances for our pastoral Sabbath, secular matters should not be allowed to infringe upon this time. We ought to view this time as a joyful privilege, not a tedious burden, in which our private worship of God and use of spiritual disciplines can be sustained without interruption. As J. I. Packer says, “We are to rest from the business of our earthly calling in order to prosecute the business of our heavenly calling.”<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Lang, 1991), 407–8.

<sup>25</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991), 196–210.

<sup>26</sup> J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 239.

- *Stewardship of time and money.* Time is short and must be used wisely, for the days are evil (Eph 5:15–16). The godly pastor uses time to prepare himself, his family, and his congregation for eternity (2 Cor 6:2). The disciplined use of money is rooted in the principle that God owns everything we have (1 Cor 10:26). Giving reflects faith in God’s provision (Mark 12:41–44) and is an act of worship (Phil 4:18). The godly man experiences that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

- *Evangelizing and serving others.* Christ expects us to evangelize and serve others (Matt 28:19–20; Heb 13:16). We are to be motivated in this discipline by obedience (Deut 13:4), gratitude (1 Sam 12:24), gladness (Ps 100:2), humility (John 13:15–16), and love (Gal 5:13). As pastors, one of our greatest rewards is serving people. To see people drawn closer to Christ through the Spirit’s blessing upon God’s word and the use of our gifts is a profoundly humbling experience. It also draws us closer to God.

- Finally, *the ministry of the word* is itself a spiritual discipline that promotes godliness. Often the best times of communion with God occur when one is studying, preaching, or writing on a spiritual subject. One of the ministry’s most profound joys is those rare occasions when we sense from the beginning to the end of our sermon that we are God’s mouthpiece. During such times, God rushes before us, and we have all we can do to keep up with him. Inevitably, we realize that we are preaching to ourselves and the people. Afterward, we yearn to be alone with God to savor the sacredness of renewed communion with him.

#### **IV. Practice Holistic Ministerial Faithfulness**

A minister’s holiness expresses itself in faithfulness to the Lord in all his ministerial duties. Paul says, “Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful” (1 Cor 4:1–2).

Pursue faithfulness in love for Christ and people. Christ said to Peter, “Lovest thou me? ... Feed my lambs” (John 21:15). Love for Christ is the great motivation for ministry. It is Christ who calls ministers, and they must perform their labors to please him (2 Cor 5:9; 2 Tim. 2:4).

Love for Christ overflows into a minister’s care for people. Martin Bucer said that this “care of souls” involves

providing that Christ’s lambs, who are still straying from his flock and sheep-pen, should be gathered in; seeing that those who have been brought in should remain with the flock and in the sheep-pen, and when they do go astray again, leading them

back again; and protecting those that stay with the flock against all temptations and afflictions, and helping them again if they fall prey to them.<sup>27</sup>

Pursue faithfulness in the ministry of prayer and the word. Every minister should devote large blocks of his time to prayerful intercession according to the word, prayerful study of the word, prayerful meditation on it, prayerful preparation of sermons, prayerful preaching of the word, and prayerful thanksgiving for its Spirit-worked effects.

Faithfulness in the ministry of the word demands the hard work of application. The Dutch Reformed churches charge ministers of the word to

faithfully explain to their flock the Word of the Lord, revealed by the writings of the prophets and apostles; and apply the same as well in general as in particular, to the edification of the hearers; instructing, admonishing, comforting and reproving, according to every one's need; preaching repentance towards God and reconciliation with Him through faith in Christ; and refuting with the Holy Scriptures all schisms and heresies which are repugnant to the pure doctrine.<sup>28</sup>

Lastly, pursue faithfulness in leadership. Spiritual leadership is the wise exercise of proper authority to influence people to take united action with biblical intention, motivation, instruction, and association. Intention answers the question, "What is our goal?"; motivation, "Why should we strive for it?"; instruction, "How can we attain it?"; and association, "Whom can I trust to be my companions and helpers to get there?" Faithfully labor to provide answers to these questions so you can lead and direct the church.

Ministers provide leadership by a combination of example, relationship, and communication. Paul says,

We preached unto you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. (1 Thess 2:9–12)

All Christian leadership must be soaked in thanksgiving and prayer to God (1 Thess 1:2–3; 2:13; 3:9–13; 5:23), for ministers can provide external motivations, but God alone places distinctively Christian inner motives in the heart.

---

<sup>27</sup> Martin Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, trans. Peter Beale (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 69.

<sup>28</sup> "Form of Ordination of the Ministers of God's Word," in *Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, and Church Order*, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999), 141.

## Conclusion

Ministers must live holy, disciplined lives. Reading, singing, memorizing, and meditating upon Scripture; engaging in secret prayer; reading sound biblical literature; listening to the preached word; using the sacraments; pursuing spiritual fellowship; journaling; sanctifying the Lord's Day; exercising stewardship; serving others for Christ's sake; preaching, teaching, and writing—these are the spiritual disciplines which, if diligently pursued in dependence upon God's gracious Spirit, will greatly sanctify our hearts toward God.

That in turn will work two great benefits:

### ***1. Disciplined living will promote godly living in every area of our life.***

The call to holiness is a comprehensive call. By cultivating the spiritual disciplines in private with God, we will cultivate godly living in our homes as fathers and family worship leaders; in our preaching and teaching as well as relating to ministerial peers, office-bearers, staff, and church members; in the pleasures of social friendship; and in relation with our unevangelized neighbors and the world's hungry and unemployed. As Horatius Bonar wrote:

Holiness ... extends to every part of our life, influences everything we are, or do, or think, or speak, or plan, small or great, outward or inward, negative or positive, our loving, our hating, our sorrowing, our rejoicing, our recreations, our business, our friendships, our relationships, our silence, our speech, our reading, our writing, our going out and our coming in—our whole man in every movement of spirit, soul, and body.<sup>29</sup>

### ***2. A life of godliness will promote and sustain an effective ministry.***

The people we serve will have a model to emulate and, by God's grace, will do so. The level of godliness in our personal lives does more to influence people than all of our busyness. Robert Murray M'Cheyne said, "It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God."<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Horatius Bonar, *God's Way of Holiness* (repr., Pensacola, FL: Mount Zion Publications, 1994), 16.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Murray M'Cheyne, Letter of October 2, 1840 to Daniel Edwards, in *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, ed. Andrew A. Bonar (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 282.

Finally, let us remember that, as we fight the good fight of faith and wrestle for greater sanctification of heart, we have Jesus Christ, the best of generals, to help us. We have the Holy Spirit, the best of advocates, to console us. We have the best of assurances to comfort us—the promises of the Father. And we have the best guarantee for eternal results: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).

However hard the task is to strive for godliness, let us not forget that godliness is ultimately God’s work of blessing the exercise of spiritual disciplines as he has promised to do. What a blessing that the outcome of the task of godliness does not depend on us! It rests with the King of kings, who sanctified himself that he might sanctify his people (Heb 2:9–11). And he who sanctifies and they who are sanctified are one. This provides unspeakable peace and freedom to fulfill in some measure the chief goal of our lives: “To glorify God and enjoy him forever.”



# IRES Jakarta, Indonesia

**International Reformed Evangelical Seminary**

*A Reformed Fortress with Evangelistic Zeal*



Westminster  
Theological  
Seminary  
Philadelphia



Theologische  
Universiteit  
Kampen  
Netherlands



Theologische  
Universiteit  
Apeldoorn  
Netherlands



Refo500

## Students Enrollment 2022

### Programme

Bachelor of Theology  
Master of Theology  
Doctor of Theology

### Documents Submission

*1st Period*

**November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

*2nd Period*

**April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

*3rd Period*

**June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

*4th Period*

**July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

*Successful applicant's entrance  
test and interview session will  
be informed by phone or email  
by the registrar.*

Phone: +6221-6586-7809

HP/WA: +62-89-7000-4000 (General), +62-811-9292-300 (Doctoral Program)

Email: [admissions@sttrii.ac.id](mailto:admissions@sttrii.ac.id) | Website: [sttrii.ac.id](http://sttrii.ac.id)

Reformed Millennium Center Indonesia

Gedung Kebudayaan Lt. 6

Jl. Industri Blok B 14 Kav. 1

Kemayoran, Jakarta Pusat, 10610, Indonesia.



# Preaching to *All* of the Heart

**A. CRAIG TROXEL**

## **Abstract**

There is little controversy over whether preaching should aim for the heart, but the question arises about how it should be done. This article provides an answer to this question by clarifying the biblical understanding of the heart in its fundamental unity and in its threefold complexity. Appreciating how the heart works in this way sheds light on preaching effectively to the heart.

## **Keywords**

*Preaching, heart, mind, desires, affections, will, word of God*

---

“Did not our hearts burn within us ... while he opened to us the Scriptures?”  
(Luke 24:32 ESV)

## **Introduction: Why Preach to the Heart?**

**W**hen asked why he spoke in parables, the Lord gave a twofold answer. First, he explained that many would not receive his word because their hearts had become dull. Their ears will not hear, their eyes will not see, and thus, their hearts will not understand (Matt 13:13–15). Second, he said that those who would receive his word are those whose hearts are like good soil that receives a seed and holds it fast. They hear the word, understand it, and bear fruit as a result (Matt 13:23).

There is an inseparable link between the sowing of the word of God and the human heart—whether for good or for ill. The heart is where that word is rejected (Matt 13:15; Luke 8:12), and the heart is where the imperishable seed of the word brings new life—and this word is the preaching of the good news (1 Pet 1:23–25). The coddling of new life and the nurturing of spiritual life take place in “an honest and good heart” (Luke 8:15). The word could not be more “near you” than by being “in your heart” (Rom 10.8).

We aim at the heart in preaching because the totality of our inner self is governed from this one point—everything we think, desire, choose, and do is generated in this one “controlling source.”<sup>1</sup> The heart comprehends the one source of all our spiritual faculties and moral operations.<sup>2</sup> It is the fountainhead of every motive, the seat of every passion, the center of every thought, and the spring of conscience.<sup>3</sup> It is the “hidden control center” in every person.<sup>4</sup> Abraham Kuyper said that the heart is “the common source from which the different streams of our human life spring.”<sup>5</sup> All of your inner life begins here. It originates from this one point of unity, from which “flow the springs of life” (Prov 4:23). It is the helm of the ship. The bearing it sets will be the course that your life will follow.<sup>6</sup> Why would a preacher aim at anything else?

## I. *What Is the Heart?*

### 1. *The Heart's Unity and Complexity*

“Heart” is the word used most often in the Bible to describe our inner person. It appears just under one thousand times.<sup>7</sup> Scripture presents it as

<sup>1</sup> John Flavel, *Keeping the Heart: How to Maintain Your Love for God* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2012), 8; cf. Murray Capill, *The Heart Is the Target: Preaching Practical Application from Every Text* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 97; Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 120.

<sup>2</sup> John Owen, *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Reminders of Indwelling Sin in Believers, in Temptation and Sin*, vol. 6 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 170.

<sup>3</sup> O. R. Brandon, “Heart,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter E. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 499.

<sup>4</sup> John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 42; cf. Peter Hubbard, *Love into Light: The Gospel, the Homosexual and the Church* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador International, 2013), 32; C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (1942; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 28.

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), 20.

<sup>6</sup> John Owen, *Spiritual-Mindedness* (1681; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 134.

<sup>7</sup> The Old Testament uses the Hebrew terms לֵב (*lev*) 598 times and לֵבָב (*levav*) 252 times, and the New Testament's Greek word καρδία (*kardia*) appears 156 times. Bruce Waltke with

the crucial ingredient in what you treasure or say (Matt. 6:21; Luke 6:45), in your inner beauty (1 Pet 3:4), your repentance (Deut 30:2, 10; 1 Sam 7:3; 1 Kgs 8:48; Jer 24:7), and your faith (Prov 3:5–6), service (Deut 10:12; 1 Chr 28:9), obedience (Ps 119:34), covenant faithfulness (1 Kgs 2:4), worship (Ps 86:12; Zeph 3:14), love (Deut 10:12; Matt 22:37), daily walk (Isa 38:3), and seeking of the Lord (Deut 4:29; 2 Chr 15:12; Jer 29:13)—which, in most cases are to be performed “with all your heart” (Deut 6:5; Matt 22:37). Like other biblical words that describe humankind’s inner life (like “soul,” “spirit,” “conscience,” and “inner man”), the word “heart” is a comprehensive term. It reflects our inward integrity and cohesion. As Kuyper stated, the heart is “that point in our consciousness in which our life is still undivided and lies comprehended in its unity.”<sup>8</sup>

Within this unity of the heart resides a triune complexity of functions: the mind, the desires, and the will.<sup>9</sup> That is to say, the heart includes what we *know* (our intellect, knowledge, thoughts, intentions, ideas, meditation, memory, imagination), what we *love* (what we desire, want, seek, crave, yearn for, feel), and what we *choose* (whether we will resist or submit, whether we will be weak or strong, whether we will say yes or no).<sup>10</sup> As opposed to other biblical words that describe our inner life (like “soul,” “spirit,” “conscience,” and “inner man”), the heart “combines the complex interplay of intellect, sensibility, and will.”<sup>11</sup> This threefold scheme of the heart (as mind, desires, and will) was foundational to Puritan theology and preaching. They understood the importance of aiming for the heart.<sup>12</sup> Their Reformed

---

Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 225; Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 40; Alex Luc, “לב,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 749; Theo Sorg, “Heart,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 2:182; Abraham Evan-Shoshan, ed., *A New Concordance of the Bible* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1989), 582–88.

<sup>8</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Sorg, “Heart,” 2:181; Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 225; Owen, *Indwelling Sin*, 169–76; Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, 25th anniversary ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2003). Plato and Sigmund Freud articulated a complex triune inner self but with models that are largely hierarchical trinities of tension and strife, devoid of a unifying center. Patrick Downey, *Desperately Wicked: Philosophy, Christianity and the Human Heart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Gen 6:5; Pss 19:14; 49:3; 77:6; 139:23; Prov 15:14, 28; Matt 5:19; Luke 2:19; 6:45; Rom 10:9; Eph 1:18; 4:18; Heb 4:12; 8:10.

<sup>11</sup> Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 225.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections* (1746; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 24–25; Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 134–36; Richard Sibbes, *Bruised Reed* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), 89; Westminster Larger Catechism 99; Stephen Charnock, “Sermon XIX,” in

descendants and popularizers have taken up the same scheme.<sup>13</sup> This triangular paradigm has weathered the test of time and is upheld by contemporary biblical scholars.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the word “heart” in Scripture is simple enough to reflect our inner unity and yet comprehensive enough to capture our inward threefold complexity. Just as the heart’s cohesive unity does not eclipse its compounded function, so also the heart’s complexity does not cloud its coherent integrity. This interplay between the heart’s unity and its complexity comes to the fore in Reformed theology, particularly when the issues of free will, the noetic effect of sin, and the “affections” are addressed in preaching. Before turning to that, we briefly explain each of the heart’s three functions.

## 2. *The Heart’s Mind*

The Bible attributes our intellectual abilities—our thinking, planning, ideas, meditation, imagination, convictions and confusion, knowledge and ignorance, and wisdom and folly—to the heart.<sup>15</sup> The heart is as much about reason as it is about emotion.<sup>16</sup> Many passages reflect this idea. Paul prays for the Ephesians, “May [God] give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened” (Eph 1:17–18). The heart receives the light of God’s truth, but it can also suffer “blindness and confusion of mind [lit., ‘heart’ in Hebrew]” (Deut 28:28), or doubt (Luke 24:38; Matt 13:15; Mark 2:6; Prov 15:14). It is from the heart that all thoughts spring, whether for good or for evil: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts” (Matt 15:19). The knowledge of God is in the

---

*Puritan Sermons, 1659–1689* (1674; repr., Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1981), 2:387–88.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., A. A. Hodge, *The Westminster Confession: A Commentary* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 174; Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.), 1:295; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 233; C. R. Vaughan, ed., *Discussions of Robert L. Dabney*, vol. 3, *Philosophical* (1892; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1996), 281; Bridges, *Pursuit of Holiness*; Elyse Fitzpatrick, *Idols of the Heart: Learning to Long for God Alone* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 93–98; Kris Lundgaard, *The Enemy Within: Straight Talk about the Power and Defeat of Sin* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998), 38.

<sup>14</sup> Brandon, “Heart,” 499; Sorg, “Heart,” 2:181; B. O. Banwell, “Heart,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1982), 465; Andrew Bowling, “Heart,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:466; Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 183. See the text note on Ecclesiastes 1:13 regarding “heart” in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Wolff observes about “heart” in the Old Testament that “in by far the greatest number of cases it is intellectual, rational functions that are ascribed to the heart.” Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 46–47.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. Interestingly, Wolff’s chapter on the heart is titled “Reasonable Man.”

heart: “I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD” (Jer 24:7). Simeon prophesied that through Jesus’s birth the “thoughts from many hearts” would be revealed (Luke 2:35). The religious leaders frustrated Jesus with their cynical reasoning: “But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts?’” (Matt 9:4; Mark 2:6). Note the parallel in Psalm 139:23: “Search me, O God, and know my *heart*! Try me and know my *thoughts*!” Or similarly in Proverbs 3:5: “Trust in the LORD with all your *heart*, and do not lean on your own *understanding*.” The heart’s thoughtful intentions are seen in Genesis 6:5: “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” So also, the word of God speaks to the heart’s mind: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). Our Lord assumes the essential role of thinking for the heart when he explains his use of parables: “For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them” (Matt 13:15; cf. Isa 6:9–10).

English translations render “heart” with words like “understanding,” “consider,” “sense,” or, most often, “mind” (Exod 14:5; 1 Kgs 3:9; Prov 19:21; Dan 2:30). When the words “heart” and “mind” appear together in Scripture—as they often do—they are not in contrast, but in coordination (e.g., Pss 26:2; 64:6; Jer 17:10; 20:12; cf. Matt 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). When the Bible says that a person lacks understanding, it is speaking of the person who “lacks heart” (Prov 7:7; 9:4, 16; 10:13; 11:12; 12:11; 15:21; 24:30). For example, in the book of Proverbs, translators have chosen phrases like “lacks sense” (ESV) to translate the literal phrase “lacks heart” (see Prov 6:32; 9:16; 11:12; 12:11; 15:21; 17:18; 24:30; cf. Eccl 10:3). These examples represent a small sample of the ways in which the Bible presents thinking as a vital function of the heart.

### **3. The Heart’s Desires (“Affections”)**

Longings and cravings flow from the heart in search of satisfaction (1 Sam 23:20; Pss 20:4; 21:2; 35:25; Rom 10:1). It is from our heart that evil desires like coveting, deceit, envy, and pride arise (Mark 7:21–23; Jas 1:14–15; 3:14), as do righteous desires like seeking God, his kingdom, and his righteousness and loving one another (Jer 29:13; Matt 6:33; 1 Tim. 1:5). Whether rightly or wrongly, the heart longs for companionship, security, encouragement, happiness, comfort, and satisfaction. Jonathan Edwards defined these

longings as “the more vigorous and sensible exercises” of our heart, which will not abide spiritual things dispassionately; they either like or dislike, approve or reject, love or hate.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps this is why the Puritans referred to these inclinations of the heart as the “affections.” Since desires are strong, the Bible employs words like “thirst” and “hunger” to speak graphically about spiritual appetites (Ps 63:1; Isa 55:2; Matt 5:6; John 4:10; 6:32, 48, 55; Heb 5:14; 1 Pet 2:2).

The biblical vocabulary for desire does double duty. It is used for both sinful desires and righteous desires, depending upon its object. The same word can be used for both a sinful craving (Num 11:4; 1 Sam. 2:16; 23:20; Ps 106:14) or righteous longing (Deut 12:15; Pss 45:11; 132:13; Isa 26:9). The word used for the condemned desires of lust (Matt 5:28), fleshly passions (Gal 5:24), and worldly desire (1 John 2:16–17) is the same word used for the commended longing to see the day of Christ (Matt 13:17) and the word Christ uses for his desire to eat the Passover with his disciples (Luke 22:15).<sup>18</sup> Desire can describe how Achan coveted the gold (Josh 7:1, 24) or our desiring God’s law more than fine gold (Ps 19:20). In Galatians 5:16–17, the same term is used for both the desires of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit. What we learn from these examples is that not all desires are necessarily wrong and not all desires are necessarily right. Desire is simply a part of what it means to be human. As George Herbert put it, “He begins to die, that quits his desires.”<sup>19</sup>

Desires become sinful when they are out of bounds or out of balance.<sup>20</sup> Excessive desire—even if the object of the desire is lawful—is what the Bible calls idolatry. This desire grows into self-indulgence. It is what the person truly loves. It receives their finest effort, their best care, and their greatest devotion. It is their treasure (Matt 6:21). We tend to be emotional about our treasure. Thus, Scripture associates the heart with feelings. The things that we love bring out what lies at our core. As we all well know, the heart feels anger, joy, envy, rage, anxious fear, longing, sorrow, lovesickness, anguish, despair, and many other emotions.

#### 4. *The Heart’s Will*

Often, when the word “heart” appears in Scripture, its volitional function is in view. The will determines if you will either resist or submit to what you

<sup>17</sup> Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> See also Acts 20:33; Rom 1:24; 6:12; 7:7; 13:9; Col 3:5; 1 Tim. 6:9; 1 John 2:16.

<sup>19</sup> George Herbert, “Outlandish Proverbs,” in *The Complete English Works*, ed. Ann Pasternak Slater (1908; repr., London: David Campbell, 1995), 257.

<sup>20</sup> John Freeman, *Hide or Seek: When Men Get Real with God about Sex* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2014), 16.

know and desire. Your heart has to make a choice. It will decide whether you will say yes or no. This is where the battle for the control of the heart is won or lost, depending on the will's strength or weakness, depending on the heart's callousness or brokenness, depending on whether the heart is still hardened by sin or made new by grace.

Whether fallen or redeemed, the will has two sides. On the one hand, the sinful will is a stubborn, rebellious, unyielding "heart of stone" (Ezek 36:26).<sup>21</sup> It is an impervious "hardened heart," which resists God in rebellious and impenitent unbelief (2 Chr 36:13; Ezek 3:7; Acts 19:9; Rom 2:5; cf. 11:7; 2 Cor 3:14).<sup>22</sup> Its patron saint is Pharaoh, who would not bend, despite all that he witnessed.<sup>23</sup> Christ cites Isaiah's call to explain why many will not truly see or hear his words due to their dull hearts, which are too thickly layered to feel spiritual sensitivities (Isa 6:9–10; cf. Matt 13:14–15; John 12:40). The same is true of the "uncircumcised" heart that stands in need of humble repentance (Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4; Rom 2:29). On the other hand, the sinful will's inability to resist temptation proves its weakness. It is sinfully enslaved, apathetic, unstable, uncommitted, and afraid. God rebuked Israel's weakness because they would not commit and "set their heart" on him but instead "set their heart" on gain (2 Chr 12:14; Ezek 33:31), ill-gained riches (Ps 62:10), or self-exaltation (Isa 14:13; Ezek 31:10). The weak-willed heart trembles or "melts" in fear (Gen 42:28; Deut 1:28; 20:8; Josh 2:11; 2 Sam 17:10).

Similarly, but conversely, the righteous will has two sides. It is both surrendered and strengthened. This is the fruit of the Spirit's regenerating work, which replaces what was impervious stone with what is now broken and contrite (Ps 51:17). On the one hand, this heart humbly bows before God and his word (Isa 66:2). It grieves over sin and is comforted by God's forgiving grace (2 Cor 7:10–12; Matt 5:4). This heart says yes to God's good pleasure and welcomes the joy of serving Christ. On the other hand, the righteous will is resolved to seek and obey the Lord (Judg 8:21; 1 Sam 2:1; 1 Chr 22:19; Ezek 40:4; Dan 1:8).<sup>24</sup> God's grace has infused it with a new and noble boldness that enables a Christian to say no to sin, defy the threats of the world, and resist the temptations of Satan (Acts 4:13; Jas 4:7; 1 Pet 5:9).

---

<sup>21</sup> J. C. Ryle, "The Heart," in *Old Paths* (1878; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 324.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Ezekiel 2:4, "The descendants also are impudent and stubborn [lit., 'hard and strong' in heart]."

<sup>23</sup> Exod 4:21; 7:3, 13–14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 34–35; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (1862; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 1:88.

## II. *Preaching to All of the Heart*

### 1. *Integrating the Mind, Desires, and Will*

If what has been stated thus far is true, then preaching to the heart means preaching to *all* of it—the heart’s mind, desires, and will. To do this properly one must bear in mind that the heart’s threefold complexity does not eclipse the heart’s unity. What the heart knows, desires, and chooses are in constant, mutual interaction. They must be held together, not pitted against one another. Each is distinct, yet not independent of the others.

For example, our desires are inseparably related to what we know and choose, because we are ultimately driven by singularity. We are not capable of dispassionate reasoning. The health of our mind is connected to the health of our desires.<sup>25</sup> A sick heart is a deceived heart (Jer 17:9). When our desires are impure, so are our reasons (Eph 4:18; Rom 1:21–22). But when our hearts and desires are renewed, then we see more clearly and discern with wisdom (Matt 13:16). God designed our affections and mind to be aligned. We study most diligently what we hold most dear.<sup>26</sup> We were not meant to think apart from our affections.<sup>27</sup> It is true that blind passion can confuse the mind (Prov 19:2), but it is also true that knowledge without passion rarely moves someone to act. Emotions do not always produce confusion; they can also bring clarity to the intellect.<sup>28</sup> We move with singular purpose and sharp thinking when we are energized by a “piping hot” righteous zeal. A stirred-up man of principle is not easily dissuaded. His emotion has given him lucidity and purpose.

So also, our sinful desires are hopelessly entangled with our thinking and choices. A heart given over to impurity and rebellion can no longer sustain sound judgment. Human reasoning is “radically embedded” in the character of the heart.<sup>29</sup> This is one lesson from Romans chapter one. Because the fallen heart has given itself to idolatrous and debased desires, it cannot help but suppress the truth with darkened, foolish, futile, and deceitful understanding. A deviant heart is a devious heart. When the heart is fixated on its chosen object, it does not have eyes for anything else, and it will not listen to common sense.

---

<sup>25</sup> James R. Peters, *The Logic of the Heart: Augustine, Pascal, and the Rationality of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 18.

<sup>26</sup> Sibbes, *Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Grosart, 1:89.

<sup>27</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 24.

<sup>28</sup> Vaughan, ed., *Discussions of Robert L. Dabney*, 3:277.

<sup>29</sup> Peters, *The Logic of the Heart*, 34–36.

Similarly, one cannot speak of the will in abstraction from the spiritual state of the heart, as the Reformers, the Puritans, and their theological descendants have understood so well. What is “free will” if the heart is enslaved to sin? Augustine understood this contrary to Pelagius. Martin Luther saw this in contrast to Erasmus.<sup>30</sup> John Calvin maintained this contrary to the Anabaptists: “Similarly the will, because it is inseparable from man’s nature, did not perish, but was so bound to wicked desires that it cannot strive after the right.”<sup>31</sup> Edwards explicated this same insight in *Freedom of the Will* (1754).<sup>32</sup> They wrote of the biblical teaching that an unbelieving heart suffers from being spiritually seared and calloused. Such a heart is not free: “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot” (Rom 8:7; cf. 2:5; 6:17; Eph 4:18; 6:6). The will takes up its alliance with the other chambers of the heart, particularly its bond with the affections.<sup>33</sup> The depraved heart is enslaved or in bondage (John 8:34; Rom 8:15). The hardened heart is an unfeeling heart, and a heart of stone is numb, insensitive, and unresponsive. Scripture aligns a hard heart with an unbelieving mind: “But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away” (2 Cor 3:14). Conversely, the heart that God has washed clean, made contrite, rendered righteous, and graciously filled with his Spirit and faith is free to serve God and man (John 8:32; Rom 8:2).

The relationship between the will and the mind is evident in the way that reasoning in Scripture is not restricted to the capacity to think or to the content of thought. Reasoning also involves the direction of one’s thinking. For example, Paul writes, “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit” (Rom 8:5). There is no neutral gear for the mind. The direction of a person’s thoughts cannot be separated from the direction of a person’s life. As Jürgen Goetzmann states, “Man is always aiming at something.”<sup>34</sup> The words that Paul chooses in

<sup>30</sup> These themes are visible in the Latin titles: Luther, *De servo arbitrio*, and Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio diatribe*.

<sup>31</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:271 (2.2.12).

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). The full, original title is *A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of That Freedom of Will Which Is Supposed to Be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame*.

<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.2.12; Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 25.

<sup>34</sup> Jürgen Goetzmann, “Mind,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Brown, 2:617.

Romans 8:5 “signify the direction of the will in human beings. The terms cannot be confined to the mind alone but refer to the whole existence of a person.”<sup>35</sup> What is in view is not simply the activity of one’s intellect but the movement of the will.<sup>36</sup> The same reality is seen in Paul’s exhortation to be “of the same mind” and to have the mind of Christ (Phil 2:2, 5). Paul refers to their mindset, the trajectory of their thinking or their “attitude.”<sup>37</sup> The same idea is found in the Lord’s rebuke of Peter: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Matt 16:23). The concern is not a random thought but rather the whole orientation of Peter’s thinking.

The indivisible relationship between the three “chambers” of the heart is underscored by the repetition of the phraseology “with all your heart” and “with your whole heart.” God commands us to serve him (Deut 10:12), obey him (Deut 30:2), repent (1 Sam 7:3), walk in faithfulness (1 Kgs 2:4), enter into covenant (2 Chr 15:12), give thanks (Ps 86:12), keep the law (Ps 119:34), trust in the Lord (Prov 3:5), seek the Lord (Jer 29:13), rejoice (Zeph 3:14), and love him (Matt 22:37)—and says to do these things “with all your heart.” We appreciate such commands only if we understand that they demand *all* that we know, desire, and choose. The heart’s will expresses itself deliberately in the thoughts we consciously entertain, in the desires we intentionally inflame, and in the direction we persistently follow.

That the heart is integrated in its threefold capacity would seem to counter the notion that people “are lovers before they are thinkers” or that the heart is accessed by noncognitive, intuitive, and subconscious ways more than intellectual ways.<sup>38</sup> Such a view falls outside the Scriptural map—although it may land you in ancient Athens (Plato) or late-nineteenth-century Basel (Friedrich Nietzsche).<sup>39</sup> As seen above, to put the heart and the intellect into a relationship of tension is a false dichotomy and creates the impression that the mind is somehow less spiritual or noble than the affective or volitional part of who we are.<sup>40</sup> Preachers do not have to choose between aiming for

<sup>35</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 411. The words in view are *φρονέω* (*phroneō*), *φρόνημα* (*phronēma*), etc.; see Rom 12:3, 16; 15:5; 1 Cor 13:11; 2 Cor 13:11; Gal 5:10; Phil 1:7; 3:15, 19; Col 3:2.

<sup>36</sup> Goetzmann, “Mind,” 617.

<sup>37</sup> As with the NASB and NLT.

<sup>38</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Culture Liturgies 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 47, 50, 60; James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 1–25.

<sup>39</sup> Ole M. Høystad, *A History of the Heart* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 151.

<sup>40</sup> For a helpful response to James Smith, see Matthew C. Bingham, “Brains, Bodies, and the Task of Discipleship: Re-Aligning Anthropology and Ministry,” *Themelios* 46.1 (April 2021): 37–54.

the “head” or the “heart.”<sup>41</sup> Is such a dichotomy really that different from the foibles of the Corinthian church, which denigrated the mind?<sup>42</sup>

## 2. *Priorities in Preaching to All the Heart*

Voices from the past and the present uphold both the integrated unity and the threefold complexity of the heart. Among them there is a shared assumption that the preacher should not appeal to only one aspect of the heart. Balance must be maintained in “ministering to the understanding, affections, and will.”<sup>43</sup> A few examples will suffice.

Augustine stated that “an eloquent man must speak so as to teach, to delight, and to persuade ... to teach is a necessity, to delight is a beauty, to persuade is a triumph.”<sup>44</sup> He is arguing that preaching is more than teaching; it is also “giving pleasure and moving.”<sup>45</sup> The preacher must appeal to the right-thinking mind and a “well-directed love” and a right will.<sup>46</sup> Edwards wrote that the “affections of the mind” are the “sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, the type of preaching that is most desired is that which affects the affections, which are inseparable from the mind and will.<sup>48</sup> Robert Dabney understood that one must preach to the mind and affections en route to reaching volition. The emotions move the will.<sup>49</sup> Charles Bridges believed that the “two main ends of the Christian Ministry” are “to enlighten the mind and affect the heart.”<sup>50</sup> John Piper has argued the same. Preaching must stir up “holy affections” but must also “enlighten the mind.”<sup>51</sup> In the words of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, preaching is light and heat. It is “logic on fire.”<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Capill, *The Heart Is the Target*, 97; Joel R. Beeke, *Reformed Preaching: Proclaiming God’s Word from the Heart of the Preacher to the Heart of His People* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 43–56.

<sup>42</sup> 1 Cor 14:12, 15, 19–20; cf. 12:7.

<sup>43</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, “Preaching to the Heart,” in *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching*, ed. Don Kistler (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2008), 107.

<sup>44</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 4.27, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1 (NPNF<sup>1</sup>) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 2:583.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:586.

<sup>46</sup> Augustine, *City of God* 14.7 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 2:267).

<sup>47</sup> Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 24. He did not see the will and the affections as essentially distinct.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 44–45.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Lewis Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric: Or, a Course of Lectures on Preaching* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 234.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (1830; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 318.

<sup>51</sup> John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 82–83.

<sup>52</sup> David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 97.

These comments show how a preacher can avoid the pitfalls of isolating the mind from the desires, or the desires from the will, or the will from the mind. It keeps him from appealing merely to emotion in the name of targeting the heart. The heart preacher recognizes that just as a person's understanding guides their desires, so also their desires move their will. "To produce volition it is not enough that the understanding be convinced; affection must also be aroused."<sup>53</sup> Those that aim for the heart in the proclamation of the Word do so comprehensively, sensitive to all of the heart's functions, and they do so thoroughly, in both sermon preparation and delivery. But does this entail a certain order or priority by which the preacher appeals to the different functions of the heart?

Some have spoken of giving preference to the mind when trying to reach the heart. Murray Capill, for example, believes that since the mind "is at the top" of the heart it comes first and operates as the "entrance point to the other faculties of the heart,"<sup>54</sup> whereas the passions reside at the bottom of the heart and perform the deepest and most powerful forces of the heart.<sup>55</sup> Thus, Capill argues that the preacher should appeal to the mind first, and then work his way "down" through the conscience and will, and then last of all, seek to impact the passions. Sinclair Ferguson states that preaching should be directed to the mind first and then it "touches the will."<sup>56</sup> "When we preach to the heart, the mind is not so much the terminus of our preaching, but the channel through which we appeal to the whole person, leading to the transformation of the whole life."<sup>57</sup> R. C. Sproul thought similarly: "We want to get to the heart, but we know that the way to the heart is through the mind."<sup>58</sup> Dabney put it this way. "Seeing is in order to feeling, and it only feels as it sees, no foundation can be validly laid for an appeal to the emotions without argument."<sup>59</sup>

It would be tempting to criticize such comments as overemphasizing knowledge or reflecting a form of rationalism. But none of the statements above speak of isolating the mind or envisioning it as the end goal. Rather, they see the mind as a port of call or as a means to the rest of the heart. One can appreciate the commitment to reach the heart without bypassing the mind. Theirs is surely a refreshing response to that form of preaching that

---

<sup>53</sup> Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 234, 237.

<sup>54</sup> Capill, *The Heart Is the Target*, 103, 105.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 103, 119.

<sup>56</sup> Ferguson, "Preaching to the Heart," 107.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> R. C. Sproul, "Preaching to the Mind," in *Feed My Sheep*, ed. Kistler, 87.

<sup>59</sup> Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 242–43.

apologizes for asking a congregation to think deeply. How does a preacher *not* immediately appeal to a congregation’s mind when explaining the context and meaning of an ancient text, before bringing out its significance?

The question of whether there should be a prioritized order in preaching to a particular function of the heart is answered by what has already been emphasized; namely, that preaching to the heart requires keeping *all* of the heart’s functions in view. Where one “begins” is not nearly as important as the preacher’s overall strategy, which must be to appeal to all of the heart. Would it not be perfectly natural to vary a sermon’s entry point, depending upon the genre, nature, and content of the biblical text? Some texts lend themselves to beginning with the mind, some may encourage us to appeal to desires, while other texts would have us challenge the will. Respecting the content and contour of the pericope is the way forward.

### ***3. Christ’s Preaching and Teaching***

The preaching and teaching of Christ illustrate this variation in targeting the heart’s mind, desires, and will—depending upon his subject and intention.

Firstly, Christ often engaged the minds of his audience as he tackled important points of doctrine. When the Sadducees tried to trick Jesus with a hypothetical situation concerning marriage and heaven, he responded by showing them their erroneous understanding.

But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching. (Matt 22:29–33)

He also corrected those who mislead others with the wrong interpretation of God’s commands.

Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 5:19)

He engaged the Pharisees on points of theology and biblical interpretation.

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” They said to him,

“The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying,

“The Lord said to my Lord,

“Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”?

If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?” (Matt 22:41–45)

Christ also exposed how sin begins with our secret thoughts of avarice and greed, worldliness and anxiety, self-righteousness and judgment of others—all of which pertain to the mind of the heart (Matt 6:1–33; 7:1–5).

Secondly, on other occasions Christ immediately takes aim at the desires of the heart and what it loves.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ... No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. (Matt 6:19–21, 24)

Christ frequently addressed the desires of the heart that have gone awry,

like anger,

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.” (Matt 5:21–22)

or lust,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matt 5:27–28)

or hatred,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matt 5:43–44)

or false motives,

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.” (Matt 6:1)

Speaking of false motives, one of Christ’s favorite targets was hypocrisy. He confronted the Pharisees about its presence and he warned his disciples about its danger. Like leaven, it easily permeates prayer, fasting, giving to the poor, and every practice of righteousness (Matt 23:1–36; 6:1–6, 16; Luke 12:1). It can spread so effectively that even experts in religion can become utterly blind to worldliness, injustice, lack of mercy, and their own sin, even as they become inflated with self-importance and self-righteousness.

Thirdly, Christ appealed directly to the will of the heart—calling for his disciples and potential disciples to decisions and to making righteous choices.

“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” (Matt 6:33)

Another of the disciples said to him, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” And Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.” (Matt 8:21–22)

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matt 16:24–25)

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:38–42)

“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” (Matt 7:13–14)

These examples illustrate that preaching to the heart is not so much about where one begins as about whether one finishes. Faithful preaching and teaching will reach into every corner of our hearts—testing our thoughts, confronting our desires, and challenging our wills. One who sits

under such expositions will feel the effect of the word of God as a hammer, sword, or fire and sense its comfort as a salve or taste its sweetness as honey. If preaching truly confronts all of the heart, then its hearers will sometimes feel assured, consoled, and at rest, while at other times they will feel exposed, disrupted, and uncomfortable. When the living and active Word is unleashed to do its bidding in the hearts of men and women, how should they feel? They should react as any other believer who heard or who reads the Sermon on the Mount (from which came several of the examples used above). C. S. Lewis once responded to a Dr. Pittenger, who did not “care much for” the Sermon on the Mount. Lewis wrote:

As to “caring for” the Sermon on the Mount, if “caring for” here means “liking” or enjoying, I suppose no one “cares for” it. Who can *like* being knocked flat on his face by a sledgehammer? I can hardly imagine a more deadly spiritual condition than that of a man who can read that passage with tranquil pleasure.<sup>60</sup>

Why should a faithful sermon accomplish anything less? Solid preaching of the Word brings Christ to bear upon all that you are and all that you have—both in what he requires and in what he gives. His greatest command is that you love him “with *all* your heart”—including with your secret thoughts, as your greatest treasure, and in your godly choices. And when he comes near to us, by his Word and Spirit, will we not also find ourselves saying, “Did not our hearts burn within us ... while he opened to us the Scriptures?”

---

<sup>60</sup> C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 182.

# The Priority of Preaching in the Church's Global Mission

JOHN CURRIE

## Abstract

This article seeks to reemphasize the priority of preaching in the church's global mission. Current crises and sophisticated cultural resistance to the proclamation of the gospel tempt pastors, missionaries, and church leaders to reevaluate the most effective methods for ministry. Key texts are examined and applied to support the position that the methodological priority of preaching transcends generational, cultural, and historical contexts and that the preaching of the word is missionally effective in our current globalized context.

## Keywords

*Preaching, eschatology, man of God, word of Christ, mission*

---

## Introduction

**T**his article has been written during the global COVID-19 pandemic. It is still not clear what the world will look like when the virus, which is ravishing not only bodies but entire societies, is brought under control. In my own country, the United States, as well as others around the globe, the science related to the pandemic has become weaponized politically, fueling social hostility among communities. Matters of ethnic discrimination and injustice have been

aligned with radical concepts of gender and sexuality to revolutionize the social fabric and social discourse of entire nations. No crisis has been wasted by media outlets, platforms, or politicians in advancing narratives that advantage their ideology, power, or wealth. The result is that pastors, missionaries, and church leaders must steward their ministries and the church's mission in a world entirely different from what it was just five years ago.

The question that presses on the heart of any pastor, missionary, or church leader who is earnestly engaged in their calling and authentically cares for the people God puts in front of them is *how*? How do we best fulfill our ministry and the church's mission in this radically revolutionized society? The answers I hear from many pastors are not encouraging. In a recent conversation, a pastor put forward the perspective that "perhaps preaching is not the best way to deal with these issues. We live in a gray world, and preaching is very black and white." Another pastor in the emerging generation recently stated how the word has lost its "functional authority" for his generation in his cultural context. Simply preaching it will not be sufficient for his audience.

Too many of the answers one hears from contemporary pastors sound similar to the convictions expressed during the modernist controversy in the early part of the twentieth century. For example, missionary Pearl Buck expressed this assessment of preaching as she advocated for the modernist mission methodology:

Let the sole question about that missionary be whether or not he is beloved in the community, whether the people see any use in his being among them, whether or not the way he has lived there has conveyed anything to the people about Christ—not mind you, whether he has preached, for that is of no value.<sup>1</sup>

Once again, pressing pastoral theological questions in these early stages of the twenty-first century seem to be, What value has preaching? Have our time and its troubles rendered preaching an outmoded means of ministry? Is preaching, as Christopher Ash interprets the contemporary perspective, merely "a heroic attempt by nostalgic Christians to sustain the methods of a bygone age"?<sup>2</sup> Or, as this article will seek to affirm, is preaching a *pancontextual* and *pangenerational* priority for pastors, missionaries, and leaders who seek to be faithful and fruitful in their ministry in the church? To address this issue, we will turn to the pastoral theology of the apostle Paul, the faithful, fruitful, pastor-missionary-leader.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pearl Buck, quoted in Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*, (Willow Grove, PA: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2004), 418.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Ash, *The Priority of Preaching* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2010), 18.

## I. *Second Timothy 4:1-5*

Second Timothy 4:1–5 must surely anchor the theology in practice of everyone whose calling is to steward the word.<sup>3</sup> These words are the urgent last words of an authorized spokesman of Christ, the apostle Paul, to Timothy, the apprentice to whom he has entrusted the leadership of the church in a strategic global city, Ephesus. In order to appreciate the relevance of this passage to pastoral theology in any time, we should reappraise ourselves of the context.

The apostle's first controlling category is the eschatological context in which Timothy and the church he leads find themselves. Paul would have Timothy understand that he exercises his stewardship in the context of the *last days* (2 Tim 3:1). That is, this age of God's redemptive plan in which the rule of God in Christ (through his death, resurrection, and exaltation) has now, by his Spirit, been inaugurated in heaven and in the hearts and lives of all those who are united to Christ by faith, but it yet awaits its consummation at the return of Christ Jesus (4:1). The context that Paul is most concerned that Timothy understand, and in light of which he must steward his work, is eschatological.<sup>4</sup> It is not, in the first place, philosophical and cultural. Timothy must "contextualize" his ministry in light of *where he is* and (as we will see below) *who he is* in terms of God's plan and purpose for history, not first in terms of how cultural authorities define their time in history.

It is also important to note that the divine spokesman (the apostle) interprets and anticipates this last-days context not as one that is sympathetic to the rule of God or divine revelation, but one that is in rebellion against it, with all of the consequent sociological and even ecclesiastical implications (2 Tim 3:2–9), and resistant to it (4:3–4). The context in which Paul issued his charge to Timothy was, by nature, one in which there was moral and intellectual (not to mention cosmic/spiritual) resistance to the message entrusted to Paul, to Timothy—and now to us (2:2)!<sup>5</sup> In other words, Paul's charge (4:1) is not plausible only in a "Christianized West." Rather, it is a charge for the entire time from the ascension of Christ until the return of Christ. This time will be characterized in every generation and in every

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. 2 Cor 4:1; 1 Tim 4:6; 2 Tim 2:2, 15.

<sup>4</sup> For an orientation to the structure of Paul's eschatological perspective, see Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 1–41.

<sup>5</sup> "As we preach the word of God we are not clothed in apostolic authority. We cannot bear their eyewitness to the risen Christ. But by God's grace we are numbered among those faithful men into whose hands the apostolic deposit has been placed." Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 61.

nation by an intolerance for (4:3) and rebellion against the revelation of God in Christ recorded in Scripture (3:16).

Appreciating this eschatological context means we must begin cultural analysis for pastoral practice (not least preaching) from the divinely authoritative interpretation of our contextual reality,<sup>6</sup> not from interpretations of reality and plausibility already conceded to cultured despisers of the divine revelation we are charged to proclaim.<sup>7</sup> Put plainly, we live and move and have our ministry where God says we do, and what fallen, finite cultural interpreters (no matter how sophisticated or powerful) say about what is plausible in our context should not have foundational or functional control over how we interpret or apply Scripture's prescribed precepts and patterns for pastoral methods! To put it positively, it is precisely because God's plan for the ages conditions Paul's charge that his urgency and priority about preaching the word is pangenerational and pancontextual.

However, the immediate global and social context in which Timothy received this charge is not without relevance and is, in fact, an encouragement to us to take up this charge in our generation. Timothy was exercising his ministry stewardship in Ephesus, a strategic, global city under the authoritarian structures of a globalized empire (however peaceable it might have been in a given time or location). That empire and its citizens and subjects knew seasons of famine, war and atrocity, and social oppression and injustice.<sup>8</sup> The empire was populated by philosophical schools and "marketers" of narratives in the context of an idolatrous pagan religious worldview.<sup>9</sup> All of this manifested the pronounced spiritual darkness in which this global city, the empire, and indeed the entirety of humanity had been "socialized."<sup>10</sup> In other words, while Paul and Timothy's immediate

<sup>6</sup> For a foundational resource on the priority of divine revelation and the epistemological implications for how one interprets one's ministry context over against the wisdom of the age, see Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Some Epistemological Reflections on 1 Cor. 2:6–16," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (1995): 103–24.

<sup>7</sup> See Ash, *The Priority of Preaching*, 17. On the issue of divine authority in contrast to how the "experts" of this age establish authority for their interpretations of reality, see Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 145–49.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Acts 11:27–28; Luke 13:1; Jas 5:1–4. See Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, in C. K. Barrett, ed., *New Testament Background: Writings from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire That Illuminate Christian Origins*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), 15. Kenneth S. Gapp, "The Universal Famine under Claudius," *Harvard Theological Review* 28.4 (October 1935): 258, n. 2.

<sup>9</sup> See F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 41–55. On the "marketing" of narratives by media, cf. Duane Litfin, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Duane Litfin demonstrates that precisely these kinds of rhetorical issues lay in back of the challenges to Paul's mode and method of ministry in Corinth.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Acts 19:13–19; Eph 2:1–3; 6:12.

context had not seen the technological advances of our present generation, their global, intellectual, social, and, most fundamentally, spiritual context was profoundly similar to the one in which we must steward ministry today.

With a renewed appreciation of this context for the apostolic charge to Timothy, we can now turn to the charge itself. The imperative that controls the passage is found in 2 Timothy 4:2: “*preach* ... the word.”<sup>11</sup> The verb translated as *preach* (*kērussō*, κηρύσσω) describes the activity of proclaiming a message authoritatively. The word would have conveyed to Timothy’s mind a herald commissioned and authorized by his master to speak on his behalf. To deliver the content entrusted to him was the only stewardship of a king’s envoy.<sup>12</sup> This is not unlike the familiar image of a modern-day ambassador representing a head of state.<sup>13</sup> The trustworthiness and effectiveness of an ambassador are built on his accurate delivery of the head of state’s message/communication and his ability to “negotiate” with the state’s friends and enemies within authorized parameters. The import of the apostolic imperative for the steward of the word is to proclaim authoritatively and accurately what your head has commissioned you to say on his behalf and in his name.

This charge would have been reinforced by the apostolic reminder of the pastoral identity already given to Timothy. Prior to this charge at the end of 1 Timothy, Paul reminds Timothy to see himself as the *man of God*.<sup>14</sup> To identify Timothy in this way is more than simply a call to be a godly man, though this call is entailed in the charge (1 Tim 6:11) and repeated in the Pastorals.<sup>15</sup> As Jonathan Griffiths points out, the phrase “man of God” evokes the Old Testament background of the prophet.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Timothy is called to see his office and stewardship in line with those of God’s servants such as Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah, and Elisha.<sup>17</sup> In other words, Timothy has already been positioned to take up this charge as God’s man entrusted with God’s word. Therefore, the apostolic charge is to authoritatively proclaim God’s word as God’s appointed spokesman and servant.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For an exegetical argument in support of this position, see George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 453–54.

<sup>12</sup> See Lothar Coenen, “κηρύσσω,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975–1978), 3:48–57.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. 2 Cor 5:20.

<sup>14</sup> See 1 Tim 6:11–16 (especially v. 13); 2 Tim 3:17.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. 1 Tim 1:5; 3:2–7; 4:7–8; 2 Tim 2:16–26; 3:10.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan I. Griffiths, *Preaching in the New Testament: An Exegetical and Biblical-Theological Study*, NSBT 42 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 58–60.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Deut 33:1; 2 Chr 8:14; 2 Sam 9:6; 1 Kgs 17:18; 2 Kgs 4:7.

<sup>18</sup> The New Testament pastor/preacher is not a prophet or holder of the prophetic office; rather, as a *man of God*, his official stewardship is to herald the (now inscripturated) word of God. We argue below that the risen Christ, as *the prophet* (Deut 18:18), speaks by his Spirit

Even this brief consideration must, surely, reorient the heart, mind, and practice of any pastor, missionary, or church leader who is sincerely asking the question about *how* to minister effectively to people in our globalized twenty-first-century context. Preaching (i.e., the authoritative proclamation of the Scriptures) is not a culturally bound, outmoded methodology. Rather, it is the earnest stewardship of those whom God, in Christ, has appointed as his servants! To be sure, there will be seasons (sadly, even in the life of the church and her leaders) when this divinely prescribed priority will not satisfy a culture's preconceived commitments or preferred narratives.<sup>19</sup> But the call upon the man of God in those seasons is to persevere in Spirit-given, hope-filled patience with both the message and the method entrusted to him.<sup>20</sup>

This is true not only for reasons already observed, but also because of what the man of God is charged to proclaim: *the word* (2 Tim 4:2)! There is a divinely prescribed content to preach: the Scriptures that have been *breathed out* by God (2 Tim 3:16).<sup>21</sup> Preaching is not simply a rhetorically functional form that the speaker must fill with content meaningful to his audience. It is the (primary) means by which the word that God has inscripturated is delivered to his people.<sup>22</sup> Because preaching is the God-ordained vehicle for the communication of God's own word, it is given priority in the Scriptures and must have priority in one's ministry. God, as he has revealed himself and his will to us, is of preeminent importance; the means of communicating the breathed-out revelation should be given priority in ministry in his name. But not only the God-breathed nature but also the God-given effect of the inspired Scripture should compel us to prioritize preaching. The apostle also tells Timothy that the word he is charged to herald is able to lead hearers to salvation in Christ (2 Tim 3:15), is profitable for every

---

when the word is faithfully preached. On the cessation of the revelatory gift and office of prophecy, see Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1979), 55–116, and Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 212–36.

<sup>19</sup> This would appear to be the essence of the intolerance of and resistance to the sound teaching of the gospel described in 2 Timothy 4:3–4.

<sup>20</sup> See 2 Tim 4:2; 2:24–26.

<sup>21</sup> For the meaning of *theopneustos* (θεόπνευστος) and its implications for the doctrine of Scripture, so foundational to a right view preaching, see B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 131–66; Sinclair B. Ferguson, “How Does the Bible Look at Itself?,” in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 54–66, and John Murray, “The Attestation of Scripture,” in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse and Paul Wooley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 29–35.

<sup>22</sup> See the Westminster Shorter Catechism 88–89.

aspect of making disciples of Christ (v. 16), and is sufficient for the work entrusted to the man of God (v. 17). In other words, the preaching envisioned in the apostolic charge is the God-ordained means to communicate God's own words to accomplish God's saving and sanctifying will with God-given effect! This points to the conclusion that the need of the moment, eschatologically defined and profoundly relevant to our global context, is the authoritative proclamation of the God-breathed Scriptures. With God's blessing, sinners are challenged and saints edified and equipped (Eph 4:12–16).

This is the conclusion to which we are drawn if our heart is for the mission of the church in the world since the heart of the apostle was expressed in his charge to Timothy. As Paul pens his final charge when finishing his own fight and completing the course of the mission entrusted to him (2 Tim 4:6–7; cf. Acts 20:24), his heart is fixed on his son in the faith carrying on the mission. We see the need of the nations animating this final charge to his pastoral successor in his tethering of the imperative to preach to the command to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim 4:5). In other words, the prioritization of preaching was missionally<sup>23</sup> driven. The prioritization of preaching was not, as it can be mischaracterized, the academic, mission-deadening practice of an increasingly institutionalized church. On the contrary, Paul saw preaching as the means to fulfill the glorious, global gospel mission to which Christ had commissioned his apostles and the church after them, to the end of the age (Matt 28:18–20).<sup>24</sup>

This connection between a heart for Christ's mission and the priority of preaching is evidenced even more poignantly in a second key text for Pauline pastoral theology, Romans 10:1–17.

## **II. *Romans 10:14–17***

In November 2018, I was flying high over mainland China on my way to speak at a conference in Hong Kong. It was the middle of the night, and as our flight tracker indicated, we were in the vicinity of Beijing. I pulled up the shade to get my first view of this densely populated nation. I could see lights immediately below and spotted off on the horizon. My heart was drawn to pray that God would raise an army of preachers to serve this great nation. We had no idea at that time of the authoritarian crackdown already

---

<sup>23</sup> While this term is often misused, it remains, in my view, a useful description of a ministry philosophy focused on the commission Christ gave to his church.

<sup>24</sup> See also Luke 24:44–49, where the priority of preaching is brought to the methodological forefront of the church's mission.

strategized by the officials governing the nation below. Was my prayer, in light of what has since transpired, a naïve, misguided prayer that failed to address the real needs of over one billion people?

Paul addressed his letter to the Romans to a church at the center of a global imperial régime. On his heart, under the inspiration of the Spirit, was the apostolic mission to the nations. Romans is bookended, so to speak, with missional concern (Rom 1:11–15; 15:8–21). That concern also encompasses Paul’s own nation, the people of Israel, and is given earnest, heartfelt expression in Romans 10:1: “My heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.” Paul opens his pastoral-missionary heart even further by positioning these words immediately after his exposition of the great doctrine of election (Rom 9:6–33).<sup>25</sup> Out of this heartfelt disclosure of missionary passion, Paul addresses the four pastoral theological questions in Romans 10:14–17. Following a razor-sharp argument (vv. 4–13) to prove that the gospel he has preached (i.e., Christ, revealed in the Scriptures, is God’s righteousness for everyone who believes in him) is the gospel promised in the Old Testament, the great missionary is compelled to ask the methodological question: *How?* Paul wants the church in the most strategic city in the empire left in no doubt as to the method by which the mission, to which his heart is so committed, will be effectively executed. So, in verses 14–17, this methodological question is asked four times in just three verses. And the answer to the repeated question is that the mission will be carried out through the preaching of those who, in fulfillment of the prophetic promise (Isa 52:7), are set apart and sent to preach the word (Rom 10:15)!

More astounding still is the declaration of the dynamic that makes the God-appointed method effective. It is in this preaching, by his own sent servants, that Christ himself actually preaches (Rom 10:17), and it is Christ whom they hear (v. 16b).<sup>26</sup> Paul expresses the same conviction and confidence

---

<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that even this revelation of the reality of God’s sovereignty in salvation is “bookended” by disclosure of the apostle’s evangelistic heart (9:2; 10:1). John Murray comments on 10:1, “Here we have a lesson of profound import ... our attitude to men is not to be governed by God’s secret counsel concerning them. It is this lesson and the distinction involved that are so eloquently inscribed on the apostle’s passion for the salvation of his kinsmen. We violate the order of human thought and trespass the boundary between God’s prerogative and man’s when the truth of God’s sovereign counsel constrains despair or abandonment of concern for the eternal interests of men.” John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965), 2:47.

<sup>26</sup> Here we follow Murray’s argument (Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, 2:58, esp. n. 16). Murray finds the argument for the priority of preaching so strong in the text that he is careful to note, “We are not to regard the apostle as excluding or disparaging other means of communication. But this is an index of the special place accorded to the preaching of the gospel”

about his own preaching as a sent (apostolic) servant in Acts 26:23; Ephesians 2:17; and 2 Corinthians 5:20. That is, it is through the faithful preaching of the servants whom he sends that Christ still preaches!

This apostolic conviction prompted Thomas Goodwin (reflecting on Heb 12:25) to write,

Because he is with us ministers in delivering of [the gospel] to the end of the world; yea, *Jesus Christ hath his pulpit in heaven to this day*; therefore, it is said, “Refuse not him that speaks from heaven.”<sup>27</sup>

And John Calvin chose to apply this reality most vividly to his hearers:

If our Lord gives us this blessing of his Gospel being preached to us, we have a sure and infallible marker that he is near us and procures our salvation, and that he calls us to him as if he had his mouth open and we saw him there in person.<sup>28</sup>

The heart-satisfying answer to the “how” question for the great missionary in his global context and eschatological moment was “preach”! Preach Christ from the Scriptures as the sent servant of Christ.

### **III. Practical Implications: Prioritizing Preaching in Pastoral Ministry and the Church's Mission**

If all that has been said here is true, what are the implications for pastoral theology and the church's mission? Without attempting in any way to be exhaustive, I suggest three practical implementations that arise from our conclusions from the two texts considered above.

#### **1. Renewed Thanksgiving**

God has spoken to us in the Scriptures and, by his Spirit working through these Scriptures, given us a living word for our moment in history. Surely this should lead us as pastors, missionaries, and church leaders to give thanks to God. Deuteronomy 4:32 (cf. 4:7) cues us to the wonder of God having spoken to his people. In the Spirit-inspired, infallibly recorded

---

(2:61, n. 20).

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1863) 5:538 (emphasis added).

<sup>28</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 25 (on Eph 4:11–12) in *Corpus Reformatorum* 51:559, quoted in T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 41–42.

Scriptures, we are the inheritors of the most glorious and undeserved gift, the word of God! Pastors, missionaries, and church leaders can begin to take that as commonplace and cease to stand in wonder (cf. Isa 66:2b) of not only having the word, but of being graced to be a steward of it (Eph 3:2). A good place to start in prioritizing preaching is recapturing the preacher's gratitude for the thing he is charged to preach. It is no common thing to have a copy of God's inscripturated word and the charge to speak it to others.

## **2. Renewed Trust in God-Appointed Means**

Historically, this was an issue at the heart of the Reformation. The Reformers' confidence in Scripture's God-ordained authority, power, and sufficiency caused them to do away with the extraneous and superstitious forms of Rome and centralize the preached word in their liturgy. This reform was symbolized by the moving of the pulpit to the center of the sanctuary. We must return to the conviction that God is wise enough and powerful enough to get his work done his way and trust his ordinary (and ordained) means rather than submitting the church's ministry to the authorities of human sophistication and speculation. This indicates an issue of faith for stewards of the church's mission and ministries. Do we believe what God has said about how he accomplishes his promises and purposes in the lives of his people both within and outside his fold? Do we still believe, as preachers, missionaries, and leaders of the church's mission, those texts that so compelled us to our calling (e.g., Isa 55:10–11; Heb 4:12–15; Acts 20:32)? Perhaps as importantly, do our practices in ministry align with what we say we believe? It has been said, "We seldom live what we profess; we always live what we believe."<sup>29</sup> Our ministry practices declare what we actually believe about the word of God and the priority of its preaching in the church's mission.

As he sought to explain the nature and mission of the church, R. B. Kuiper wrote, "The church's task is to teach and preach the word of God. Whatever else it may properly do is subordinate and subsidiary to that task." Kuiper goes on to demonstrate that on this understanding of the church's methodological priority, "the creeds of Protestantism are in complete agreement."<sup>30</sup> I take Kuiper's point to be that whatever legitimate and contextually wise ministries the church must deploy to engage people in different spheres of life and stages of discipleship, they are all "downstream" from the preaching of the word. This accords with what we have seen in Paul's pastoral-missiological methodology.

Is this, perhaps, an area in need of repentance for many of us? Is it possible

<sup>29</sup> Origin unknown.

<sup>30</sup> R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), 163.

that busyness, fatigue, fear, or the lure of earthly status and success have eroded our convictions about the functional priority (and power!) of God's word in our ministry? If this is the case, we ought to repent of our unbelief and practical disobedience. Drawing on God's grace in Christ we can turn from unfaithful stewardship back to God, "purposing and endeavoring to walk with him in all the way of new obedience."<sup>31</sup> Is it possible that, for many ministries around the globe, this revitalizing repentance should begin with the place we have given to the preaching of God's word?

### **3. Renewed Commitment of Time, Talent, and Treasure**

If, as we have sought to establish, this conviction is true to Scripture, it ought to have a prioritizing influence on the stewardship of the resources God has entrusted to us for deployment to the church's mission, namely, the pastor's time and talents (gifts) and the church's treasure.

The methodological priority of preaching should lead stewards of the word to give the best of their *time* (not necessarily *all* of their time) to its study and proclamation. Practically, this means identifying the hours in one's week that are most effective for study and writing and protecting these times as sacred, devoted to the productivity of sermon development. It also means managing one's time to maximize multiple opportunities to preach the word.<sup>32</sup> Keeping with Paul's ministry paradigm in the strategic Ephesian context, the amount that he preached was astounding! The narrative of the Ephesian mission records that he preached publicly daily for two years (Acts 19:9–10) as well as privately from house to house (Acts 20:20), night and day, for at least three years (20:31). Even assuming this tally accounts for reasonable seasons of rest, the apostle is presented as preaching thousands of times during the Ephesian mission. Surely this prolific proclamation contributed to the astounding effect of this mission where "all in Asia heard the word" (19:10).

Prolific proclamation of the word has been a driving force in the reformation and revival of the church throughout history. Calvin's prolific preaching helped fuel the Protestant Reformation. According to one modern biographer, Calvin was, at one point, preaching a "total of ten new sermons every fourteen days."<sup>33</sup> This was alongside the publishing of the word through commentaries and disputations "answering the enemies of religion."<sup>34</sup> During

<sup>31</sup> See the Westminster Confession of Faith 5:2.

<sup>32</sup> This can be one virtuous use of digital media platforms.

<sup>33</sup> Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 112.

<sup>34</sup> Theodore Beza, *The Life of John Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1909), 30.

the Great Awakening, George Whitefield preached prolifically, according to some estimates at least 18,000 times in 30 years.<sup>35</sup> Great movements in the mission of the church have been driven by prolific preaching. Pastors and missionaries, stewards of the word as preachers and evangelists, who desire to be faithful and, under God's blessing, fruitful in the mission of the church must dedicate their best time and the bulk of their time to the preaching of the word, and church leaders in congregations and mission agencies who desire to see reformation and revival in the fields they steward can and should encourage and protect this kind of time management by their pastors and missionaries.

This also relates to the stewardship of *talents* or *gifts*. The prioritization of preaching does not equal a commitment to the exclusivity of preaching in the mission of the church.<sup>36</sup> There are other vital ministries necessary for the church to accomplish its mission of discipling people.<sup>37</sup> In fact, faithful, prolific biblical preaching will produce other discipling ministries in a field. However, the preacher of the word does not possess every gift needed to steward every form of ministry. Stewarding talents means recognizing not only one's own limitations but the gifts God has given others. The priority of preaching is protected and proliferated when the entire church is equipped to steward the talents Christ has gifted to each one in the multi-ministerial execution of the body's common mission (Eph 4:7–16). In order for the servant of the word to work as a “workman who need not be ashamed” (2 Tim 2:15), he must steward his gifts in a discerning and disciplined way. This includes recognizing the way the head of the church has also resourced his mission through other members of his body and working together with them (Eph 4:16).

One final practical note: If we believe in the priority of preaching in the mission of the church, it will call for the investment of not only the time and talents God has entrusted to his church, but also its *treasures*. God has afforded to those whom he has given material wealth the unique opportunity to contribute to the church's mission by resourcing pastors, missionaries, and ministries that put priority on God's primary methodology.

---

<sup>35</sup> John Piper asserts, “Sober estimates are that he spoke about 1,000 times every year for 30 years. That included at least 18,000 sermons and 12,000 talks and exhortations.” John Piper, “I Will Not Be a Velvet Mouthed Preacher: Living and Preaching as Though God Were Real (Because He Is),” *Desiring God*, February 3, 2009, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/i-will-not-be-a-velvet-mouthed-preacher>.

<sup>36</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Harry L. Reeder III for this observation and distinction.

<sup>37</sup> See Archibald A. Alexander, “Suggestions in Vindication of Sunday Schools,” in *Princeton and the Christian Ministry*, vol. 1, ed. James Garretson (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 344–72.

This is the most prudent, long-term investment those who have been gifted with giving can make (1 Tim 6:17–19; Phil 4:14–20). If what we have said above is true, members of Christ's church should look for opportunities to discerningly deploy the material gifts God has given them toward the preaching ministry.

However, material resources are not the only treasures the church has to deploy for the proliferation of preaching. One of our key texts asked, "How are they to preach unless they are sent?" (Rom 10:15). In order for the preaching of the word to be panna-national and pangenerational, the church must send the next generation of preachers from among its most precious treasure, its children and grandchildren. This will also necessitate seminaries that are committed to training pastors, missionaries, and church leaders in preaching and, even more fundamentally, fidelity to the doctrine of Scripture that faithful preaching is to proclaim.

We might ask, following the Scripture's prompt, "How shall they preach unless they are taught?" Remaining steadfast in the "gray," "complex," global world with its proliferation of ideologies will require theological education for preachers that goes beyond short-term, quick-turnaround training programs. Confronting the world calls for deep development of doctrinal understanding in an environment of mentoring to put theological precept into practice. In other words, a commitment to the priority of preaching for the church's mission in our time calls for the church to send the treasures of the next generation to seminaries that can train them to preach the whole counsel of God from one generation to the next (2 Tim 2:2).

## Conclusion

In March 2021, the reputable pollster Gallup released a report that was sobering for church leaders. According to its study, there has been a dramatic decline in church membership in the United States.<sup>38</sup> The numbers reported might cause those who care about the mission of the church to lament the church's eroding influence on the nation and, as they have many times before, recalculate the most relevant means for reaching such an increasingly secularized mission field—unless, perhaps, they were also to consider a 2017 Gallup report that the primary reason people came to church and

---

<sup>38</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, *U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time*, Gallup, March 29, 2021, [https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=newsletter\\_axiosam&stream=top](https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiosam&stream=top).

stayed at church was the preaching that took place in the church.<sup>39</sup> This latter statistic should not surprise us, given the priority and place we have seen that God gives to preaching. But it should encourage us that God's means actually *work!* Contrary to the current cultural trends, present even within the church, God has purposed to use the preaching of the word of God by the man of God to lead the mission of God forward in the world. If we care about that mission, we must recommit ourselves to the priority of preaching to accomplish God's plan and purposes. May God raise up in this next generation an army of preachers who fit the description penned by Charles Spurgeon:

We want again Luthers, Calvins, Bunyans, Whitefields, men fit to mark eras, whose names breathe terror in our foemen's ears. We have dire needs of such. When will they come to us? They are the gifts of Jesus Christ to the Church, and will come in due time. He has power to give us back again a golden age of preachers, a time as fertile of great divines and mighty ministers as was the Puritan age, and when the good old truth is once more preached by men whose lips are touched as with a live coal from off the altar, this shall be the instrument in the hand of the Spirit for bringing about a great and thorough revival of religion in the land.

I do not look for any other means of converting men beyond the simple preaching of the gospel and the opening of men's ears to hear it. The moment the Church of God shall despise the pulpit, God will despise her. It has been through the ministry that the Lord has always been pleased to revive and bless His Churches.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Gallup, *Religion*, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>. The connection between these studies in relation to this topic was originally observed in the podcast by Harry Reeder, "Membership in Houses of Worship Drops to Lowest Level Since Survey Began," *Today In Perspective*, April 5, 2021, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/membership-in-houses-of-worship-drops-to-lowest/id595347900?i=1000515797712>.

<sup>40</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Early Years*, vol. 1 of *Autobiography* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1985). v.

# The Stigmatization of HIV/AIDS Victims in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Gospel

PHILLIPUS J. (FLIP) BUYS

## Abstract

One of the most challenging issues in dealing with HIV/AIDS in Africa is breaking through the stigmas surrounding the disease and building resilience in communities where large numbers of people are infected with HIV or otherwise affected by the pandemic. This article explores the relationship between shame, fear, guilt, witchcraft, and HIV/AIDS stigmatization by looking at key features of the African traditional worldview and culture. We point out predominant witchcraft beliefs and how they translate to community attitudes towards people living with HIV and AIDS. We highlight the influence of prevailing beliefs in witchcraft and how they aggravate the experience of fear, shame, and stigmatization by people infected with or otherwise affected by HIV. Relevant aspects of the gospel are brought to bear to answer these challenges.

## Keywords

*HIV/AIDS, stigmatization, shame culture, fear culture, witchcraft, ubuntu*

---

## I. Challenge

**H**IV and AIDS—especially in sub-Saharan Africa—still constitute one of the most horrific disasters that the human race has ever seen. A quick look at some of the frightening statistics establishes this fact. A 2013 World Bank report states that since AIDS first appeared in 1981, more than 65 million people have been infected, and more than 30 million people have died of AIDS-related causes.<sup>1</sup> Worldwide in 2011, 2.5 million people were infected with HIV, and 1.5 million died of HIV-related causes.<sup>2</sup> In 2018, about 74.9 million people had been infected with HIV, and 32 million people had died of AIDS-related illnesses. UNAIDS figures published in 2018 reveal that although there had been significant reductions in deaths from AIDS-related illness, the downward trend was not enough for the General Assembly’s 2020 goal to be reached. The annual number of global deaths from AIDS-related illness among people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA) has declined by 34%, but reaching the 2020 milestone would require a further reduction of nearly 150,000 deaths per year.<sup>3</sup> Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 68% of all new infections, and nearly half of all deaths globally in 2010 occurred in Southern Africa.<sup>4</sup>

It is shocking and painful to see, as several researchers point out, that with regard to the number of PLHA, South Africa had the largest number in 2016, with more than 6.3 million.<sup>5</sup> In 2011, South Africa already had 2.09 million children orphaned from AIDS deaths. A 2010 research report, funded by the German Development Bank in collaboration with the National Department of Social Development, identified in South Africa a growing phenomenon of child-headed households.<sup>6</sup> Unlike other disasters, AIDS is taking more lives, impacting the health of more people, and leaving more children and orphans homeless than any hurricane, earthquake, or tsunami.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> World Bank, “World Bank and HIV/AIDS: The Facts,” 2013, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/hivandaids/brief/world-bank-and-hivaids-the-facts>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See UNAIDS, “Miles to Go: Closing Gaps Breaking Barriers Righting Injustices,” 2018, [http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/miles-to-go\\_en.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/miles-to-go_en.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> See World Bank, “World Bank and HIV/AIDS: The Facts.”

<sup>5</sup> M. Roser and H. Ritchie, “HIV/AIDS,” 2018, OurWorldInData.org, <https://ourworldindata.org/hiv-aids>.

<sup>6</sup> S. M. Mogotlane et al., “A Situational Analysis of Child-Headed Households in South Africa,” 2010, <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/cura/v33n3/04.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> N. Keeba and S. Ray, *We Miss You All: Aids in the Family* (Harare: SAFAIDS, 2002).

## II. *Problem Statement*

The 2003 UNAIDS Fact Sheet on Stigma and Discrimination and a new 2018 report point out that all over the world, the AIDS epidemic is having a profound impact, having its worst effect when individuals are stigmatized and ostracized by their loved ones, their families, and their communities and discriminated against individually and institutionally.<sup>8</sup>

The problem of stigmatization and discrimination is so serious that it has even been described as a second epidemic next to HIV/AIDS.<sup>9</sup> The fear of stigmatization and discrimination leads to an endless circle of denial and silence. Fear of stigma makes people afraid to reveal their positive status by changing their behavior. Stigma and discrimination continue to play a huge role in the HIV response by hampering access to and uptake of critical HIV services. For instance, in Botswana, so as not to give away their HIV-positive status, 50% of new mothers continue to feed with infected breast milk instead of with uninfected formula, which would enable the babies to survive.<sup>10</sup>

Despite many efforts and programs to promote and facilitate disclosure, people with HIV often still conceal their status. Disclosure remains a contested practice among people with HIV and also brings anxiety to those to whom they do disclose. Research has revealed that most people on HIV treatment choose to manage stigma through nondisclosure.

How individuals discover and disclose their HIV status to others, as well as how they cope with their HIV status, is influenced by cultural and community beliefs and values regarding causes of illness, learned patterns of response to illness, social and economic contexts, and social norms.<sup>11</sup>

This article considers the relationship between stigmatization, resilience, and the predominant worldview of the people in the communities suffering from the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

---

<sup>8</sup> See UNAIDS, “Fact Sheet,” 2003, [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEA/PREGTOPHIVAIDS/Resources/fs\\_stigma\\_discrimination\\_en\\_pdf.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEA/PREGTOPHIVAIDS/Resources/fs_stigma_discrimination_en_pdf.pdf). Cf. also UNAIDS, “Miles to Go: Closing Gaps Breaking Barriers Righting Injustices,” 2018, [http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/miles-to-go\\_en.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/miles-to-go_en.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> M. W. Dube, “Towards Multi Sectoral Teaching in a Time of HIV/AIDS,” in *HIV/AIDS: The Curriculum; Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes*, ed. M. W. Dube (Geneva: WCC, 2003): vi–xii.

<sup>10</sup> L. Brown, L. Trujillo, and K. Macintyre, *Interventions to Reduce HIV/AIDS Stigma: What Have We Learned?* (New Orleans: Horizons Programme, Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Within the African context, life is perceived holistically. An individual is perceived to be in a continuous relationship with his community and the supernatural world, both of which have a distinct influence on the individual's life. The joys, struggles, and sufferings are interpreted within these relationship networks, and there ought to be an equilibrium between individuals and their environment. Sickness and suffering disturb this balance. Joseph Simbaya discovered that since HIV/AIDS became common in the late 1980s and 1990s, and as a result of stigmatization, secrecy, privacy, and individualism replaced the typical African culture of counseling in families in crisis times.<sup>12</sup>

The supernatural perception of sickness and suffering poses a pastoral care challenge in Africa, and the pastoral counselor may need to interpret God in terms of these supernatural perceptions and experiences.<sup>13</sup> Stigmatization and fear of disclosure pose huge challenges for pastoral care in Africa.

Some define resilience as a process of adapting successfully in the context of a threatening situation.<sup>14</sup> We understand resilience as a person's ability to bounce back and learn from adverse experiences to such an extent that they have gained the ability to reach out to others in adverse experiences, comfort them, and help them deal with their challenges. Second Corinthians 1:3–4 describes resilience from a Christian perspective: "Blessed be our God and Father, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

We hope to add to the present discussion on stigmatization by investigating the influence of shame, guilt, fear, and witchcraft beliefs on HIV/AIDS interventions and doing so by looking at features of the African worldview and culture and the relevance of the Christian gospel.

In the South African context, the following negative effects and observations could be added to the problems referred to above:

Fear of witchcraft still prevents open and honest discussion and much-needed counseling for patients and their relatives. Adam Ashforth convincingly argues—based on field and statistical research—that as the AIDS epidemic sweeps through this part of Africa, *isidliso* ("sickness"

---

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Simbaya, "An Ethnography of HIV/AIDS Care Transformation in Zambia" (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> V. Magezi, "Pastoral Counselling: Towards a Diagnostic and Interpretational Approach in Africa," *In die Skriflig* 41.4 (2007):655–72.

<sup>14</sup> S. E. Germann, "I Am a Hero—Orphans in Child-Headed Households and Resilience," *Commonwealth Youth and Development* 3.2 (2005): 39–53.

caused by witchcraft spells and ancestral spirits<sup>15</sup>) is the word that comes to mind among many in the epidemic's path.<sup>16</sup> Thus, in such cases, the HIV/AIDS epidemic becomes also an epidemic of witchcraft. When suspicions of witchcraft are in play in a community, problems of illness and death can transform matters of public health into questions of public power, questions relating to the identification and punishment of persons deemed responsible for bringing misfortune to the community—that is, witches. In addition is the following:

- Traditional healers sometimes exploit the fears of PLHA and impoverish them and their families and endanger their lives.
- PLHA are marginalized from communities and often suffer in loneliness without care.
- Vulnerable children and orphans cannot express their grief or receive proper Christian bereavement and resilience counseling because of the stigma surrounding the illness and death of their parents.
- Sex education and HIV/AIDS education is hampered because of the shame surrounding HIV/AIDS.
- Judgment and indifference, rather than compassion, continue to characterize the church's response to HIV/AIDS.

R. Parker and P. Aggleton have examined the influence of the broader cultural contexts in AIDS-related stigma and accompanying denial and concluded that stigma could not be fully examined outside the cultural contexts that give it meaning.<sup>17</sup> A three-year project funded by UNAIDS to develop a new direction for HIV/AIDS prevention in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean recommended culture as one of the five key

---

<sup>15</sup> Zacharias Kotzé writes, "As an illness thought to be caused by witchcraft, *isidliso* slowly consumes the victim while causing all manner of hardship and pain along the way, such as friendships fading, lovers leaving, and jobs disappearing. The term is used to refer to a variety of symptoms affecting the lungs, stomach, digestive tract, or that leads to a slow wasting illness. Although sometimes attributed to *muthi*, *isidliso* is directed against victims by means of intention rather than the chemistry associated with toxic substances. For example, it is believed that a witch can place *muthi* in food consumed in a dream. However, this is only one of the many techniques of the witch who can use incantations, words, rituals, and magic objects to inflict harm on a victim." Zacharias Kotzé, "A Comparison of the Witchcraft Is Poison Metaphor in Soweto and Selected Old Testament Passages," *Old Testament Essays* (New Series) 24.3 (2011): 612–27.

<sup>16</sup> Adam Ashforth, "AIDS, Witchcraft, and the Problem of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa," (Unpublished paper, 2001), <http://www.sss.ias.edu/publications/occasional.php>.

<sup>17</sup> R. Parker and P. Aggleton, "HIV/AIDS Related Stigma and Discrimination: A Conceptual Framework and Implications for Action," *Social Science and Medicine* 57 (2003): 13–24.

domains in HIV/AIDS prevention, care, and support, particularly in Africa.<sup>18</sup> V. Magezi rightfully states that a pastoral counselor in Africa, to make a meaningful diagnosis, should be aware of the crucial role that the African worldview plays.<sup>19</sup> The worldview provides the framework for probing and interpreting the conversation.

### III. *Central Theoretical Argument*

The hypothesis that forms our central theoretical argument is that one of the key aspects of the predominant African worldview in rural and semi-rural South African communities is the shame and fear culture and that Christian approaches to HIV/AIDS counseling and intervention have to be culturally sensitive and relevant to such contexts. We further hypothesize that the key message of the Christian gospel provides clear perspectives from which to deal with fear, shame, and stigmatization and thus may hugely contribute to the 2003 UNAIDS call with regards to stigma and HIV/AIDS: “Live and let live. Help us fight fear, shame, ignorance and injustice worldwide.”<sup>20</sup>

### IV. *Cultural Issues*

#### 1. *Unique Characteristics of the African Worldview and Culture*

Although it is an enormous generalization to speak of “African culture and worldview,” several researchers<sup>21</sup> have identified typical aspects of African culture commonly found on the African continent. Yusufu Turaki summarizes them as follows:

The details of African Traditional Religion vary from region to region, but all variants share five fundamental beliefs: belief in impersonal powers, belief in spirit beings, belief in divinities or gods, belief in a Supreme Being, and belief in a hierarchy of spiritual beings and powers.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> UNAIDS, “2008 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic,” <http://www.unaids.org/en/CountryResponses/Regions/SubSaharanAfrica.asp>.

<sup>19</sup> See Magezi, “Pastoral Counselling,” 655–72.

<sup>20</sup> UNAIDS, “Fact Sheet,” 2003.

<sup>21</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969); John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1970); Yusufu Turaki, *Tribal Gods of Africa* (Jos: Crossroads Media Services, 1997); B. J. Van der Walt, *When African and Western Cultures Meet* (Potchefstroom: Institute for Contemporary Christianity in Africa, 2006); G. Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991); W. O’ Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> Yusufu Turaki, *The Trinity of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 10. Cf. Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures* (Kindle Edition: Timē Press, 2017) indicates that groups of people use the moral emotions of guilt, shame, and fear in their

Following John Mbiti, Turaki, L. Nyirongo, and others, B. J. Van der Walt summarizes the uniqueness of African culture over against typical Western culture with the following characteristics:

1. Unique ideas about God: Africans believe that their creator god is far away and not interested in them.
2. Unique worldviews: for Africans, the spiritual world determines the physical world—every visible event has a spiritual cause.
3. Unique views of society: Africans have communalistic views of society as opposed to Western individualistic views.
4. Unique views of and ways of experiencing time: Africans have an event-oriented vision of time that contrasts with the chronological (clock) time of the West.
5. Unique ways of thinking: Africa thinks more holistically, synthetically, while Westerners are more analytically oriented.
6. Unique ways of communication: Africans prefer a more indirect way of communicating and experience the direct way of communication of the West as rude.

Another aspect of the traditional African worldview that has a bearing on the HIV/AIDS issue is the *idea of the limited good*. J. A. Van Rooy has pointed out that the presupposition of the idea of limited cosmic good explains many phenomena and aspects of African spirituality.<sup>23</sup> “Good” does not refer here primarily to goods in the sense of material possessions but rather of vital force, power, prestige, influence, health, and good luck.<sup>24</sup>

## 2. *Guilt, Shame, Fear, and Culture*

According to Van der Walt, the first researcher who used the model of guilt and shame to understand Western and non-Western cultures was Ruth Benedict (1946), who applied it to American and Japanese cultures.<sup>25</sup> Since then, many have used her model and worked it out in more detail. Van der Walt follows R. Lienard in stating that it is more accurate to speak about a contrast between an “honour orientation” and a “justice orientation.”<sup>26</sup> Andrew Mbuvi also argues that African theology should be developed from the perspective of honor and shame.<sup>27</sup> Only after an offense against the

---

worldview to distribute resources among themselves. Phillipus J. (Flip) Buys, “Corruption, Bribery, African Concepts of God, and the Gospel,” *Unio cum Christo* 5.2 (October 2019): 168.

<sup>23</sup> J. A. Van Rooy, “The Christian Gospel as a Basis for Escape from Poverty in Africa,” *In die Skriflig* 33.2 (1999): 235–53.

<sup>24</sup> Van der Walt, *When African and Western Cultures Meet*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> R. Lienard, “A ‘Good Conscience’: Differences between Honour and Justice Orientation,” *Missiology* 29.2 (April 2001): 131–41.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew M. Mbuvi, “African Theology from the Perspective of Honor and Shame,” in *The Urban Face of Mission; Ministering the Gospel in a Diverse and Changing World*, ed. Harvie M. Conn, Manuel Ortiz, and Susan S. Baker (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 310.

community is exposed does a person in an honor-oriented culture experience shame, whereas in a justice-oriented society, someone experiences guilt after transgressing the norms, even when it has not been exposed or is not known by the community. In the first instance, the honor must be restored by the community; in the other, care must be taken that justice be done.

Hannes Wiher's well-documented work provides a treasure of information. He documents in detail and analyzes the origin and development of this approach in a variety of disciplines (psychology, cultural anthropology, philosophy, theology, and missiology). Further, in a chapter on shame and guilt in the Bible, he deals with a wide variety of biblical examples, perspectives, and insights.<sup>28</sup> He uses biblical perspectives to analyze Western and African cultures critically, and his intimate knowledge of the African context enhances the book's value. (He has served as a medical doctor and lecturer in theology for more than twenty years in Conakry, Guinea.) He starts with the human conscience, which shapes and influences human existence and culture, though he does not deny that the surrounding culture forms a certain type of conscience in individuals. He does not, however, address the crucial role of fear and witchcraft in the traditional African worldview.

Similarly, Magezi also asserts that the challenge of pastoral diagnosis in Africa is to develop an interpretational frame in which the assessment focuses on interpreting the influence of the complex network of relationships. A "shame-oriented conscience" is linked to honor and status in the community. A "guilt-oriented conscience" is linked to a transgression of norms that a person has accepted as binding.<sup>29</sup>

Jayson Georges notes that guilt, shame, and fear, as well as being cultural criteria for the distribution of goods, are three different cultural responses to sin and so have become the foundation for three types of culture: (1) guilt-innocence cultures, individualistic societies (mostly Western), where people who break the laws are guilty and seek justice or forgiveness to rectify a wrong; (2) shame-honor cultures, collectivistic cultures (common in the East), where people shamed for not fulfilling group expectations seek to restore their honor before the community; and (3) fear-power cultures, animistic (typically tribal or African), where people afraid of evil and harm pursue power over the spirit world through magical rituals.

These three types of culture are like group personalities defining how people view the world. Just as individual people have a personality, cultural

---

<sup>28</sup> Hannes Wiher, *Shame and Guilt: A Key to Cross-Cultural Ministry*, Mission Academics 10 (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2003), 179–81.

<sup>29</sup> Magezi, "Pastoral Counselling," 661.

groups share a *groupality*, an “organized pattern of behavioral characteristics of a group.”<sup>30</sup> A person’s cultural orientation, or groupality, shapes their worldview, ethics, identity, and notion of salvation even more than their individual personality does. For this reason, awareness of culture types helps us anticipate cultural clashes and communicate the gospel three-dimensionally to the world.<sup>31</sup>

Likewise, Thias Kgatla concludes that

witchcraft discourse in South Africa has increasingly permeated all social structures, thereby becoming a real threat to the process of reconstruction and development. The neglect of witchcraft accusations and their resultant consequences can cause the country to lose all it gained as a result of the liberation struggle.<sup>32</sup>

These categories, as Wiher, Van der Walt, Magezi, and Georges repeatedly state, are not watertight. Measures of guilt, shame, and fear are present in every culture. In general, people have mixed conscience orientations with a tendency toward the dominance of either guilt, shame, or fear. In other words, people may have a strong guilt orientation combined with a weak shame and fear orientation or the other way around. Therefore, one cultural group cannot think that another (foreign) culture does not have a conscience—they merely have a different kind of conscience. In personal interaction with the people in the KwaNdebele region in South Africa and personal pastoral interaction with many people infected with and affected by HIV, I think that most people have a predominantly fear but also a shame cultural orientation.

### **3. African Communalism, Shame, and Fear Orientation**

Several African scholars have concluded that African culture and worldview are embedded in a communalistic understanding of society. L. Nyirongo, along with Mbiti, asserts that a person’s individuality is fulfilled through his or her participation in the tribe.<sup>33</sup> The individual is not a person until he or she has been accepted by the community. Africans believe that everything that exists is in an organic relation to everything else that exists, including

---

<sup>30</sup> Cf. “Understanding Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures,” *HonorShame Resources for Global Ministry*, 2021, <https://honorshame.com/understanding-guilt-shame-fear-cultures/>.

<sup>31</sup> Georges, *The 3D Gospel*, 129.

<sup>32</sup> S. Thias Kgatla, “Moloi Ga A Na Mmala (A Witch Has No Colour): A Socio-Religious Study of Witchcraft Accusations in the Northern Province of South Africa” (PhD diss., University of South Africa, 2000), iii.

<sup>33</sup> L. Nyirongo, *The Gods of Africa or the God of the Bible? African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* (Potchefstroom: Institute for Reformational Studies, 1997), 102; Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108.

how human beings interact. Turaki puts it this way: “People are not individuals, living in a state of independence, but are part of a community, living in relationships and interdependence.”<sup>34</sup> G. Setiloane adds,

In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of the past generations and his contemporaries .... The community must make, create or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group. Physical birth is not enough. ... I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.<sup>35</sup>

In Africa, the issue of *human relationships* is a matter of primary importance; relationships determine ethical norms, modes of conduct, and principles of education.

In communalistic societies, the community thus is of the utmost importance. Therefore, a very high premium is placed on interpersonal relationships and harmony among people. It is vital to emphasize that what the *community does to the individual* matters most, not the individual’s view of himself or herself. This identity is gained step by step, through various rites, but the initiation ceremony truly incorporates the individual into the social group. Without this transition, one remains a child, an outsider, a “half” person, or a nobody. Individuals will not fully enjoy the privileges of the community on their own. The community sets the norm and ideal for human existence. Consequently, it is all-important to be honored and accepted by one’s own people.

Turaki makes it clear that fear of spiritual powers and of the unpredictable contingencies of life before which humans are powerless is fundamental to the African psyche.

Traditional religious rites, rituals, ceremonies, sacrifices, and offerings provide only temporary comfort. Indeed, they often enhance fear, rather than reduce it, especially when they have to be repeated time after time.<sup>36</sup>

The ethical code and education of African people reflect the communal character of moral principles. Characteristics inculcated in children in traditional education are those that facilitate human relationships and prevent disunity in the community. These include respect for authority and seniority, humility, modesty, politeness, friendliness, willingness to compromise, sharing with others what one acquires, helping people in need, and hospitality. Harmony and acceptance mean honor and lead to a

<sup>34</sup> Turaki, *The Trinity of Sin*, 19.

<sup>35</sup> G. M. Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho Tswana* (Rotterdam: A. Balkema, 1976); G. M. Setiloane, *African Theology* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986), 55.

<sup>36</sup> Turaki, *The Trinity of Sin*, 14.

good conscience. Not meeting the ideals of one's group gives rise to a bad conscience; when such a shortcoming is discovered, a person subsequently loses status and honor. To be marginalized by one's group then leads to a personal identity crisis.

In an individualistic culture, living correctly (obedience to internalized norms) leads to a good conscience. Transgression of these norms gives rise to a painful feeling of guilt (even psychological depression) or a bad conscience. Someone who has committed an offense in a communalistic culture is never directly called to account for it in the presence of others—and definitely not someone with high status—since such an accusation tarnishes the offender's good reputation and as such is an insult even more serious than murder. Sanctions by the community thus take place more indirectly in such forms as gossip, stories, proverbs, parables, dramas, and other symbolic actions.

In summary, the difference between a shame-oriented conscience culture and a guilt-oriented conscience culture is as follows: In the case of an individualistic, guilt-oriented conscience culture, the transgression of norms leads to a feeling of guilt and fear of punishment. In more communalistic cultures, failure to meet the ideals of society leads to fear of rejection and, when it is discovered, to a feeling of disgrace or shame.<sup>37</sup>

In their holistic approach, traditional Africans believe that they can deal with the fear of being marginalized by accessing spirit power by consulting specialists who have access to these powers through rituals, divination, ceremonies, sacrifices, incantations, symbolism, witchcraft, sorcery, charms, fetishes, and white and black magic.<sup>38</sup>

#### ***4. Implications of the High Sensitivity for the Opinion of the Group***

The feeling of shame is a very serious matter with far-reaching consequences because it hits the individual hard and disturbs him or her deeply. It leads to a loss of status, low self-image, a feeling of inferiority, little or no confidence, uncertainty, and deep depression that may even lead to suicide. Some, instead of hiding or removing themselves from the community, may instead be stirred by great anger and led to strive to avenge themselves on those who publicized their offense and thus caused them to lose face and be disgraced in the community.

Stating it in the first person, the whole process can be summarized as follows: (1) I fear that my offense will be discovered; (2) my being discovered

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Wiher, *Shame and Guilt*, 60.

<sup>38</sup> Turaki, *The Trinity of Sin*, 23.

would change to (3) shame (4) because I have failed to meet (5) my duties according to the ideals of my community. (6) Consequently, I have lost esteem/honor and (7) am open to ridicule, contempt, and rejection by my own people. I thus need to either (8) withdraw or hide myself and (9) even clear away myself completely (suicide) or (10) avenge myself on those who brought shame on me. Consultation of specialists like witchdoctors or wizards with access to a wide range of spiritual powers is seen as a crucial means to solve life challenges.

Ashforth also explains how suspicion of witchcraft aggravates painful feelings of shame through marginalization from the communal and social group. He relates his finding in Soweto that no person who is afraid or suspects that they are ill because they have been cursed wants to publicize their fear or suspicion. Such publicity would not only be embarrassing but also dangerous because it would enable the witch who has caused the sickness to become aware of any efforts made to counteract his or her occult assault. Such knowledge allows the witch to redouble his or her efforts or seek out other avenues of attack; for this reason, traditional healers typically enjoin their clients to silence.<sup>39</sup> The experience of our home-based care workers in the squatter villages in KwaNdebele is that they are often called aside and whispered to that a relative or friend also has had “caffir poison” (referring to suspected witchcraft as the cause of someone being infected with HIV).

### **5. Difficulties in Giving and Receiving Forgiveness**

In shame cultures, replacing the pain of a guilty conscience with the restored joy of a good conscience is a complicated process. Both repentance and forgiveness are problematic.<sup>40</sup>

Firstly, acknowledging guilt and repentance (confession) is difficult since those guilty further disgrace themselves. Therefore, the offense, especially in the case of an important person, is preferably hidden as long as possible. If the offense can no longer be hidden (usually a result of gossip), the guilty person will not confess guilt but make use of a mediator (someone who does not share the shame) to acknowledge the offense publicly and negotiate reconciliation. Those thought to be wayward are asked to look within to find out where they have broken harmony or relationships and are then told to do restitution by offering gifts and sacrifices to restore peace and find

---

<sup>39</sup> Ashforth, “AIDS, Witchcraft, and the Problem of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” 13.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Wiher, *Shame and Guilt*, 151.

forgiveness. In the traditional worldview, sin is a lack of harmony or a broken relationship with the ancestors, the spirits, and the natural world. Atonement is the way to restore harmony and relationships.<sup>41</sup>

Secondly, it is difficult after guilt has been acknowledged not only to offer forgiveness but even to accept forgiveness. For if the offended person forgives the guilty one, they are implying that the guilty one is a bad person. And for the guilty, accepting forgiveness is tantamount to acknowledging the superiority of the other person!

Since the process of reconciliation can be so laborious in shame cultures, it is often easier to sweep an offense under the rug and keep silent about it in the hope of eventually forgetting it. The cultural trait of just keeping silent about sensitive issues aggravates stigmatization.

### **6. Fear, Shame, and HIV/AIDS Infected and Affected People**

Based on extensive research done in Soweto, Ashforth expresses the issue in strong terms:

To talk of a “stigma” attached to AIDS in contemporary South Africa without understanding the witchcraft dimensions is, in my view, to risk misunderstanding both the nature of community power relations and the impact of the epidemic.<sup>42</sup>

The idea of the limited good stimulates and confirms belief in witchcraft. As soon as a person prospers because they are somewhat more hardworking than their neighbors, that person is almost automatically suspected of drawing away the life force of another through witchcraft—that is what black magic amounts to. If one man’s children by different wives differ in health, prosperity, scholastic, and other achievements, the less fortunate ones will naturally suspect the others of witchcraft.<sup>43</sup>

In our daily encounters with HIV/AIDS patients in KwaNdebele, we often found patients marginalized from the community and left without any care because they were suspected of being bewitched. Being in touch with them is considered dangerous because the evil spirits of bad luck might affect the caregiver as well. That made it extremely difficult to break through the stigmas surrounding AIDS.

Because of the vital importance of group identity for the experience of personal identity, the fear of being marginalized and losing one’s place

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Turaki, *The Trinity of Sin*, 17.

<sup>42</sup> Ashforth, “AIDS, Witchcraft, and the Problem of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” 12.

<sup>43</sup> Van Rooy, “The Christian Gospel as a Basis for Escape from Poverty in Africa.”

within a group leads many PLHA rather to want to die than to speak openly about their status. When their condition cannot be hidden any longer, it is often too late for them to receive antiretroviral treatment.

The strong beliefs in the healing powers of wizards and witchdoctors also often prove detrimental to patients and their families. Families already impoverished because of a lack of income as a result of the disease may slaughter their last goat or cow or chicken to pay for the services of a *sangoma* to win the healing power of ancestral spirits in cleansing rituals. Ashforth has convincingly shown that “traditional healing” in South Africa is usually more expensive than Western medical treatment.<sup>44</sup> Some *sangomas* convey that they possess traditional healing medicines or potions that can heal AIDS or at least raise the CD4<sup>45</sup> count levels of terminally ill patients. Patients and their relatives may then sometimes get into deep debt buying witchcraft potions. We have seen traditional healers throwing sand or dirt on patients’ open bedsores or wounds or encouraging them to replace their use of anti-retroviral medicine with traditional laxatives that cause diarrhea and death.

The idea of the limited good also explains the strong feeling of obligation to reciprocity, repaying benefits with other benefits, as practiced in customs of bride price or loans and gifts. This practice is then also applied to ancestors. The widespread beliefs in the power of ancestral spirits to guarantee health, wealth, and happiness lead to very elaborate funeral rituals. Thus, many Africans in rural areas bury their economic future with these expensive funeral rites. In a rural area like KwaNdebele, funeral parlors are mushrooming, and such businesses are flourishing.

People seem to fear that the group would suspect them of witchcraft or marginalize or ridicule them if they do not organize a “proper” (large-scale) funeral.

Shame is the emotional pain that comes upon the discovery of a transgression of God’s laws or biblical or social norms for morality for which the perpetrator has previously felt no pangs of conscience. As long as a wrong is hidden and unspoken, nobody feels badly about it. This pattern sometimes leads to people fearing disapproval from their families or tribe more than they fear God’s wrath over sin. In such cultures, communities are extremely vulnerable to peer group pressure. In fact, one must even tell lies just to avoid offending one’s people. Someone’s consciousness of the shame and

---

<sup>44</sup> Ashforth, “AIDS, Witchcraft, and the Problem of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” 14.

<sup>45</sup> CD4 is a type of immune cell that stimulates killer T cells, macrophages, and B cells that make immune responses. A CD4-positive T lymphocyte is a type of white blood cell and a type of lymphocyte also called a “helper T cell.”

disappointment experienced by one's family—especially the elders and ancestral spirits—is more painful than the fear of God's wrath. These various aspects of the shame culture make it extremely hard to break through the stigmas around HIV/AIDS.

### **V. The Christian Gospel Removes Guilt, Shame, and Fear**

Wiher gives an elaborate discussion of guilt-oriented and shame-oriented consciences in light of the Bible.<sup>46</sup>

- After the fall, Adam and Eve were ashamed and tried to hide from God. God restores their personal relations with himself and covers their shame (Gen 3).
- God forgives the iniquity of his people and covers all their sins (Ps 85:2).
- “Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other” (Ps 85:11 NIV).

Most Christian theologians in the West interpret Christ's atoning death on the cross in the New Testament solely from the perspective of a guilt-oriented conscience. Christ paid for or made good in our place the guilt of our disobedience to God's commandments. Wiher, however, repeatedly shows that this is a one-sided understanding of the cross.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, Georges explains that the gospel is a multifaceted diamond and that God wants people in all cultures to experience his complete salvation;<sup>48</sup> Western Christianity, however, emphasizes only one of the gospel's facets. Georges explains that “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8) involve each of the three components of salvation. First, he takes away guilt: “in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins” (1:7a). Second, he takes away shame: “when we were dead in transgressions” (2:5), in love God predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ” (1:5) so that we are “no longer foreigners and aliens but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household” (2:19, cf. 2:12–13). Third, he takes away fear: the fear-power emotions are addressed in that God's “power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion” (1:19–21); therefore, Christians can be “strong in the Lord and in his mighty power and put on the full armor of God so that [they] can take [their] stand

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 179–281.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>48</sup> Georges, *The 3D Gospel*, 158–60.

against the devil's schemes" (6:10–11). The three aspects of salvation also emerge from Paul's central prayer: "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe" (1:18–19).

Finally, though the gospel always remains an indivisible whole, examining the facets individually provides a more complete understanding of salvation. Reading Ephesians three-dimensionally may help Christians to perceive fully "the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding" (1:7–8).

Wiher also shows through numerous examples how different Bible characters accommodate to the particular conscience orientations of their audiences. Christ himself approaches Nicodemus, a (guilt-oriented) man of the law, directly (cf. John 3:1–21). But in the following chapter (John 4:1–42), he approaches the Samaritan woman (a shame-oriented person, rejected by her own community) first in a subtle, indirect way before asking her an outright question about her husband. After careful analysis of a wealth of biblical material, Wiher convincingly concludes that the word of God does not choose between cultures but prefers an orientation that balances guilt and shame. In our relationship to God and our fellow men and women, and with other people, we have to live honorably (in love) so as not to act shamefully; and in our relationship to God's norms (which have greater authority than our social values), we have to live correctly (in obedience) not to be guilty.

This biblical balance, however, does not mean a mere compromise between various conscience orientations. Apart from finding points of contact, Christ also criticizes. He bluntly rejects the legalism of the guilt-ridden Pharisees because they have forgotten the most important thing—love. Likewise, he cannot accept the ordinary people's admiration for status, honor, and esteem (typical of a shame conscience) but calls them (including his own disciples) to humility and to regard others more highly than themselves (cf. Matt 23:12; Phil 2:3).

## **VI. *Evangelical Churches and the HIV/AIDS Crisis***

From an evangelical faith perspective, we offer the following solutions for consideration to living and preaching the gospel to those dealing with HIV/AIDS.

First, Evangelicals believe that the gospel is the power unto salvation (Rom 1:16). It is also the power for the transformation of lives and communities

(Rom 12:1–2). It has unmatched power to bring about the end of AIDS stigmatization.

Second, if the evangelical church cares for the sick and the dying, comforts the orphan and widow, shares its message of redemption, victory over all evil spirits, and transformation, disciples its members, and works for justice, then the worth and truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ will shine like a light on a hill, and the nations will stream toward it (cf. Isa 60:3; Rev 21:24).

Third, holistic mission and ministry can spring only from a church that is composed of reconciled believers living from grace, forgiveness, and assurance that shame is covered and taken away. Being assured of access to the power of the Holy Spirit, church members need to work toward creating an environment of hope and spiritual transformation in the midst of desperate suffering, poverty, fear, and despair.

Fourth, believers from the diverse classes and races of a local village or region must unite in sacrificial fellowship and service to ensure that the spiritual, physical, and emotional needs of the people in the community are met and to make God's tangible love for the poor and suffering a reality. The church ought to work hard to be a place where everyone, including the poor and PLHA and their affected relatives feel welcome and valued. Corporate worship, small group ministry, and culturally appropriate outreach are vital in a Christian response to AIDS.

Fifth, it is absolutely necessary to develop indigenous leadership. We must encourage and develop community people and leaders to bring spiritual, moral, and economic renewal to their communities. This task is the work of holistic disciple-making where holistic ministry implies that the church provides servant leadership in a community, and models healthy Christian lifestyles.

## **Conclusion**

Evangelical Christians ought to recognize and affirm that all people are made in the image of God and that all Christians are sinners saved by grace alone. All people are equal and have innate value, whether they are young, aged, disabled, or illiterate. Living by grace alone in the power of the Holy Spirit will provide not only the strength to forgive one another as God has forgiven us in Christ (Eph 4:32) but also the love that covers a multitude of sins (1 John 5:20). Also, it will help us realize that as children of God we have overcome evil spirits, "for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4–5).

We should also affirm that all people have a vocation. God has a calling for each person's life that requires them to be an agent—and not just a client or a lifelong beggar. Some of our best workers at Mukhanyo Community Development Centre were PLHA who had come to a saving knowledge of God's grace in Christ, including forgiveness of our sins, the covering of our shame, and the filling of the Holy Spirit with power for healthy lives (through, among other things, faithfully taking antiretroviral medication). PLHA may render the best service to other people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.

In a Christian response to AIDS, we ought to recognize that all people have gifts and talents that they can use to the glory of God both in the church and in the community.

A Christian response to AIDS should emphasize as well that labor and employment affirm dignity and contribute to our identity. Not only do we work to earn money, but work is also a fundamental way to participate in the activity of God in the world.

Evangelical Christians believe in a personal relationship with God as well as the communion of the saints, the fellowship of believers, and the common call to serve humanity around us with compassion. In this regard, the African concept of *ubuntu*<sup>49</sup> may be enriched with the biblical concept of *koinonia*. Within this paradigm, it is possible to accommodate those who have grown up in predominantly shame-oriented conscience cultures and to seek solutions for challenges through communal action.

The only way to overcome fears of witchcraft is a firm knowledge and an overwhelming conviction that Christ not only forgave our sins when he died on the cross but also disarmed all spiritual powers and authorities and triumphed over them (Col 3:15).<sup>50</sup> An experiential understanding that all power in heaven and on earth has been given to Christ (Matt 28:18) drives away fear and instills assurance that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:38–39).

---

<sup>49</sup> *Ubuntu* refers to behaving well towards others or acting in ways that benefit the community. Such acts could be as simple as helping a stranger in need or much more complex ways of relating to others. A person who behaves in these ways has *ubuntu*.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. M. S. Wolford, *Free Indeed from Sorcery Bondage: A Proven Scriptural Ministry* (Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 1999).

# The Challenge of Communicating Christ in Melanesian Culture

RYAN DEJONGE

## Abstract

This article deals with culture and cross-cultural communication. More specifically, the concept of *mana* in the Melanesian worldview plays a significant role in that culture. I will discuss various approaches to cross-cultural communication of the gospel that have been and continue to be used in Papua New Guinea and suggest some reasons why they have come up short. I suggest that the much-neglected field of *elenctics* must be utilized more and provide ways that this can be done in the context of *mana* and the Melanesian worldview.

## Keywords

*Worldview, elenctics, communication, animism, culture, gospel, syncretism, Melanesian Christianity, mission*

---

*“Tell me the secret of your power!”*

*Jim had been working with a certain people group in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea for some twenty years, translating Scripture and planting churches. During this time, he had built many deep relationships, but none deeper than his relationship with Upa, who was the first man to join his translation team, had spent countless days, weeks, and months working closely with Jim, had been disciplined by him and matured to the point of becoming a pastor and prominent*

*evangelist in the area. Now, it was time for Jim to leave and repatriate to his home country of Australia. After many tear-filled goodbyes and more “thank you” meals than he dared to count, Jim stood with Upa near the small single-prop plane that would take him away from the village and away from Upa for good. Having prayed, wept, and embraced, Jim was turning to the plane when Upa caught his arm and turned him back to face him.*

*“Brother Jim, please, I know that you are leaving now and I will never see you again. All these years I have worked with you and have never asked you for anything, but now I have one request for you. Please, can you tell me the secret to your power?”*

*“My power?” Jim asked, mystified.*

*“Yes, yes. Your power. Your success, your cargo, where does it come from? Where do you get it? How can I get it? You are like Elijah, and I am Elisha, and I want to know the secret to your power.”*

*“No, no, no. It doesn’t work like that. I have to go now. Um, ... just hold on to Christ, brother. Look to Christ, and he will give you all you need!” Even as Jim spoke these last words, the pilot was already herding him into the plane to prepare for takeoff.*

*As the plane flew Jim back to his mission’s headquarters, surrounded by a few boxes of goods that he was taking back, Jim was deeply troubled. He had worked with Upa for 20 years! They had suffered together. They had rejoiced together. They had studied Scripture together. And now he would ask for the “secret” to power, success, and cargo? How was this possible?*

## Introduction

**C**ommunicating Christ cross-culturally is a beautiful task, one commanded by Christ himself as he commanded his disciples and through them all the church to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19). At the same time, it is a task fraught with challenges, as the story above highlights. Sadly, it is not only possible but common to labor mightily for years with a person, a family, a village, or a church, only to realize that the message you thought you were communicating clearly has been understood in an altogether different way. The story of Jim and Upa was a story that I heard soon after arriving in Papua New Guinea, and it made a deep impression on me. It is a cautionary tale, but in the years since then, I have heard and experienced many variations on this same theme. In short, I want to answer the question: How can we ensure that there will be fewer stories like that of Jim and Upa?

## I. *Culture and Worldview*

The reason for the Jim and Upa story is culture. Understanding how culture works helps us to grasp how a message can be misunderstood and misapplied even when one has taken pains to communicate it clearly. Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, experts on the topic of cultural differences,<sup>1</sup> say that culture is like an onion, with various layers. The outer layer, the most visible, contains symbols, which are words, gestures, pictures, or objects that carry a particular meaning shared by those in a particular culture. Underneath are heroes, who can be alive or dead, real or imagined, and who embody the ideals of the culture and serve as models. Deeper yet are rituals, which are collective activities that are considered socially important, such as greetings, ceremonies, and meetings. Discourse, the type of language used in each context, is included here. At its deepest level, the core, a culture holds values, which are the broad ideals that reveal how a culture feels about what is evil versus what is good, dirty versus clean, dangerous versus safe.<sup>2</sup> Since each culture is a different onion, what is communicated in one culture will often have a different meaning or connotation in another. For example, if while my wife was cooking dinner for our guests, I were continually to give her instructions like turn on the oven, put the food in, fetch some water, and peel an extra potato, I would be seen as rude and domineering in the eyes of my Western culture. In a Melanesian context, however, I would be showing appropriate concern for my guests and devotedness to my wife. This difference exists because underneath all the words, gestures, and routines, there are a host of different beliefs, assumptions, categories, and values between Melanesian and Western culture.

Paul Hiebert provides helpful clarity in his conception of the cultural onion. In his model, cultural products, patterns of behavior, signs, and rituals all occupy the surface (sensory) level of culture. Beneath this layer is the belief structure of a culture. Underneath this level, Hiebert adds the worldview themes of a culture, such as categorization, logic, and epistemology. This model essentially divides Hofstede's values level into two. This helpfully allows us to ask why a culture holds the values that it does. Why does it label some things as good and others evil? What does it believe to be the reason why things are the way they are? At the deepest level, Hiebert contends,

---

<sup>1</sup> Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010), 30ff. Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov have used surveys given to IBM employees throughout the world to quantify and study differences in cultures, with fascinating results.

<sup>2</sup> Hofstede et al., *Cultures and Organizations*, 3–9.

worldview acts as a repository for the basic assumptions and presuppositions for a culture.<sup>3</sup>

## II. *Mana as Central to the Melanesian Worldview*

To communicate the gospel cross-culturally in Melanesia, it is necessary to understand the Melanesian worldview. Crucial to understanding the Melanesian worldview, especially about religion, one needs to understand the concept of *mana*.

The term *mana* was first described from a Western perspective by the missionary Robert Codrington in 1891.

[*Mana*] is a power or influence, not physical, and in a way supernatural; but it shews itself in physical force, or in any kind of power or excellence which a man possesses. This *Mana* is not fixed in anything, and can be conveyed in almost anything; but spirits, whether disembodied souls or supernatural beings, have it and can impart it; and it essentially belongs to personal beings to originate it, though it may act through the medium of water, or a stone, or a bone. All Melanesian religion consists, in fact, in getting the *Mana* for one's self, or getting it used for one's benefit—all religion, that is, as far as religious practices go, prayers and sacrifices.<sup>4</sup>

Darrell Whiteman describes this *mana* as “Life” and says, “The most fundamental value, central to Melanesian cultures and religions is the continuation, protection, maintenance and celebration of Life. Life with a capital ‘L.’”<sup>5</sup> In Papua New Guinea, this concept is present, but in Tok Pisin, the *lingua franca* of most of the country, there is not one word to describe it. It might be variously called *pawa* (power), *strong* (strength), or even *namba* (prestige).<sup>6</sup>

The concept of *mana* cannot be understood apart from the integrated Melanesian worldview. Western culture has a dichotomist view of the world. Westerners believe on a very deep level that the things of this world are broken into many different and unalterable categories and give value to

<sup>3</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 80–85.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Codrington as quoted in Darrell Whiteman, “Melanesian Religions: An Overview,” in *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions*, ed. Ennio Mantovani (Goroka: The Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service, 1984), 98.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>6</sup> It might be helpful to understand *mana* in comparison with The Force in Star Wars. Like *mana*, The Force is impersonal and amoral. Some people have greater stores of or access to it, and its use for good or bad depends on the practitioner. Unlike The Force, *mana* is often stored in objects, and it is manipulated through ritual and ceremony, not meditation and higher consciousness.

things based on these categories. The empirical and testable is more valuable, more real, to the Western mind than the nonempirical.<sup>7</sup> The Melanesian's integrated worldview does not see things this way. When Melanesians consider the world around them, they think not only of the rocks and trees, rivers and lakes, and friends and family, but also of the various types of spirits that inhabit these things: bush spirits, ancestor spirits, evil spirits, and more. *Mana* describes the impersonal force that ties all these things together and provides the explanation for why things are the way they are.<sup>8</sup>

*Mana* is believed to be infused into both natural objects and living beings. If something is large, irregular, or otherwise impressive, it may be understood to be a significant repository of *mana*.<sup>9</sup> As such, it is understood that humans can use these items to manipulate *mana* for their personal benefit. The area around a certain irregular rock might be a good place to plant a garden, while washing in a certain cold, fast-flowing mountain stream might more quickly cure your body of sickness. In my short time in Papua New Guinea, I have heard many, many accounts along these lines. Take, for example, the story of a Highlands man who discovered a large crystal on his land, and from this crystal's power became a wealthy pig farmer. As the story goes, he would rent out his crystal to others to plant in their field or store in their house so that they could benefit from the crystal's power, and his customers would pay him for the crystal with piglets. The conclusion of the story was that the crystal, not the man's business acumen, was the reason for his large herd of pigs.

In the integrated worldview of Melanesians, relationships of all kinds—with nature, with spirits, with ancestors, and with other people—are essential. While people seek to gain a *mana* advantage however they can, they still understand that all things are held in a balance and that *mana* is the currency of that balance. Usually, it is understood that if one man or family is benefiting from the presence of *mana*, someone else somewhere faces a setback. Also, mishandling of relationships is a sure way to lose the benefits of *mana*. In a certain area of the Markham River valley is a deposit of clay that is very good for making clay pots. The people of that area believe that they cannot sell the clay pots for money, however, or the clay deposit will go foul. To sell the pots would be greedy, would tip the delicate balance of relationships, and would forfeit the quality of this particular clay supply. The person telling

---

<sup>7</sup> Whiteman, "Melanesian Religions," 90.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>9</sup> Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1991), 101.

me this story did not use the term *mana*, but I believe that the concept explains their actions.

The goal of life for *mana* is to gain as much of it as you can for yourself, your family, or your tribe. The accumulation of *mana* can be measured in various ways, such as good health, long life, and the acquisition of leadership, but the accumulation of wealth in terms of money, material possessions, crops, pigs, children, and even wives is the most common.<sup>10</sup>

As discussed already, it is possible to manipulate physical things to gain a greater abundance of *mana*. This means that ritual becomes very important for Melanesians. Ritual is the link between the physical, visible world and the spiritual, invisible world. Ritual can be used positively, so that a unique stone, a bone of an ancestor, or the sprinkling of water from a certain source can bring about helpful results for the ritual performer. Ritual can also be used destructively. Melanesians have a strong belief that certain people can manipulate *mana* for harmful effects, so that sickness, drought, poor harvest, death, and even general poverty, while they may have come about by some misstep that upset the *mana* balance, are most often attributed to sorcery. In my experience, even in situations where it is medically demonstrable that a sickness or death had natural causes such as malaria or tuberculosis, many will still hold that some act of sorcery was the true cause of the ailment.

There are endless ways that these rituals are carried out because the important thing for the Melanesian is not the ritual itself but rather its effectiveness. If something works, do it. If it does not work, then find a new ritual that will harness the power of *mana*. Melanesians are very religiously innovative, willing to give anything a try. *Traim tasol*, “Just giving it a try,” is a favorite expression in Papua New Guinea. Some rituals, of course, are deeply embedded into local culture and not easily changed, perhaps because they are thought to be a part of the *mana* dynamic itself. But in many cases, individuals are willing to give something new a try.

### III. *Mana and Christianity in Melanesia*

*Mana* is an aspect of animistic religion. Animistic religions in other cultures have similar beliefs in impersonal spiritual forces.<sup>11</sup> At first, one might think that those who believe these things about *mana* are only those who hold to a primitive tribal worldview, rather than an “enlightened” Western one, or

<sup>10</sup> Van Rheezen, *Communicating Christ*, 210; Whiteman, “Melanesian Religions,” 101.

<sup>11</sup> Van Rheezen, *Communicating Christ*, 208.

that it is sought only by those who have not converted to Christianity. But this is not the case at all. The examples I have given are all in a context where Christianity, not animism, is confessed as the dominant faith. The story told at the beginning about Jim and Upa is based on a true story and highlights the tenacity of this animistic worldview.

Christianity has been present in Papua New Guinea for nearly 150 years, and according to the 2000 Census, a stunning 96% of the population professes Christianity.<sup>12</sup> This number would seem to indicate that Christian mission has already been massively successful there. When I was working as a pastor in the Greater Vancouver area in Canada, a country where 67% of the population identifies as Christian,<sup>13</sup> many asked me why I would go to a country that was *more* Christian to do *mission* work.

The reality, however, is that the Christianity of Melanesia in general and Papua New Guinea in particular is, as a former missionary shared with me before I came, a mile wide and an inch deep. Also, there is a great amount of syncretism happening between Christian and animistic beliefs. Further, even among church groups that seek to avoid syncretism in their missional approach and doctrine, that animistic worldview is still deeply engrained in many converts.

If we take Papua New Guinea as a test case, it seems that Christian mission has largely failed to significantly impact the worldview of its converts. Why is this? Why is the belief in the power of *mana* so stubbornly resistant to change? I believe it is because of the nature of *mana* itself, and how it interacts with the Christian gospel. In brief, the Melanesian belief in *mana* results in a quest for capital “L” Life, and Christianity promises that Jesus is key to capital “L” Life. The Christian gospel seems to answer the Melanesian quest for *mana*. The problem is, What is meant by “Life”? It is very easy to proclaim Christ in the Melanesian context, but the question is, is the full, cultural-arresting, worldview-changing message of the gospel being effectively proclaimed and received?<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> “Papua New Guinea,” U.S. Department of State Website, November 29, 2018, [te.gov/jdr/rls/irf/2007/90150.htm](https://te.gov/jdr/rls/irf/2007/90150.htm).

<sup>13</sup> “Canada: Religious Affiliation in 2011,” Statista, November 29, 2011, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/271212/religions-in-canada/>.

<sup>14</sup> The same question could be asked of Canada and its 67% of the population that professes Christianity yet appears in many respects to be an increasingly godless and unchristian country. But that is another topic altogether.

## IV. Models for Communicating the Gospel Cross-Culturally

### 1. Power Encounter

In a chapter entitled, “Communicating Christ into the Tribal Worldview,” David Hesselgrave passes along what he says is common missiological wisdom. “It has often been pointed out that in the context of a tribal worldview *power encounter* takes precedence over *truth encounter*. In other words, people want to know what the missionary—or better, what the missionary’s God—can do.”<sup>15</sup> This is precisely the question that Melanesians are asking. As Whiteman points out, in contrast to Europeans who are preoccupied with “complex doctrines to support their philosophical and theological frameworks of belief, Melanesians ask the more pragmatic, ‘Does it work? Is it effective? Will it bring abundant life?’”<sup>16</sup>

Alan Tippett coined the expression “power encounter,” and his reference point was the animistic religions of the South Pacific. In a power encounter, the power of ancestral gods was pitted against the power of the Christian God. Charles Kraft and other missiologists who followed Tippett have included signs and wonders as a part of this power encounter, and credit this approach with the success of Christian mission in the South Pacific, which includes Melanesia.<sup>17</sup> Undeniably, this approach has been very successful in gaining adherents to profess faith in Jesus Christ and who self-identify as Christians. Churches like Papua New Guinea’s Revival Centers, which focus on signs and wonders, have exploded in recent years, and many other churches there, even the mainline denominations such as the Roman Catholics and the Evangelical Lutherans, have been deeply influenced by the power encounter approach to evangelism and discipleship.

Despite its prominence, I believe that the power encounter approach has been largely unsuccessful in affecting the worldview of Melanesians, and it is not difficult to see why. We have already seen that Melanesian animism’s quest for *mana* is essentially a pursuit of the means of accessing and manipulating a power that will grant success in the form of abundant life. The Melanesian is very open to new, undiscovered ways of accessing this power, so when a revival crusade sweeps through town, many are very willing to be baptized, attempt some form of speaking in tongues, and seek physical healing to “try out” what they believe to be the Christian method of

<sup>15</sup> David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 231.

<sup>16</sup> Whiteman, “Melanesian Religions,” 97.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Kraft, *Power Encounters in Spiritual Warfare* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 1–2.

accessing *mana*. In terms of the cultural onion model, the superficial aspects of patterns of behavior, signs, and rituals have all been radically changed in a power encounter, but the deep structure, the worldview, is unaffected. It is no wonder that this kind of “conversion” is so common; it is hardly a conversion at all. It is merely a change of the surface structure of one’s life, while one’s fundamental beliefs, assumptions, and presuppositions remain unchanged and unchallenged.

## 2. *Truth Encounter*

The concept of truth encounter is often set in contrast or in addition to power encounter.<sup>18</sup> When Gailyn Van Rheenen discusses the challenge of preaching Christ in the context of the animistic belief in *mana*, he goes straight to the matter of worldview. While he does not use the phrase *per se*, what he advocates is a truth encounter in a three-step process. First, he says, we have to communicate clearly the basic tenets of the Christian gospel: who God is, human sinfulness, God’s salvation in Christ, and how one is to respond to the gospel in faith and obedience. Second, we must teach the biblical concept of power. While God is all-powerful, in Christ, God humbled himself and became a man and was crucified in weakness and shame to rescue his people. This provides a model for Christians who are to give up using power for selfish purposes and submitting their desire for power to the lordship of Christ. Third, we must make clear that there is blessing to be found in the Christian life, but it is a “strength in weakness” kind of power (2 Cor 12:9). Van Rheenen advocates highlighting the “radical discontinuity” between *mana* and the blessing of God.<sup>19</sup>

There is a lot to appreciate about Van Rheenen’s approach. His first step aims at the beliefs level of the cultural onion, and certainly, communicating the basic tenets of the Christian faith is necessary for true conversion. His second step sets up the third. The biblical truth corresponding to *mana* must be taught first, especially the selfless and loving use of power, and only then can one hope properly to gain a biblical and gospel-centered understanding of blessing, which itself is a major biblical theme, but one the cross-cultural missionary may neglect because he fears that it will be misunderstood.

However, there are two problems with Van Rheenen’s approach. First, it fails to account for the on-the-field reality that nearly every Western missionary faces when coming to a country like Papua New Guinea: he is

---

<sup>18</sup> David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 167–99. Hesselgrave includes elenctics within the category of truth encounter, while I believe it is more accurate to separate it into a third category.

<sup>19</sup> Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ*, 212.

in general much more materially well off and therefore likely to himself be seen as a source of the life force that the Melanesian is preoccupied with gaining.<sup>20</sup> Thus, while the missionary is preaching and teaching, regardless of what he is saying, many will easily follow him, learn what he is saying, and come under his discipleship. The initial reaction of many Western missionaries upon experiencing this type of reception is an inflated sense of their own selves or the naïve belief that the content of what they are saying is drawing adherents to them. As I have preached evangelistically, sometimes to over 500 people in busy markets or bus stops all around Papua New Guinea, I have certainly experienced both of these reactions. But the reaction that comes after many years, as highlighted in the story about Jim and Upa, is much more devastating. When it becomes clear that the disciple has been following all these years, showing such devotion and unity of purpose, but has all along been seeking some kind of secret knowledge or ritual that will unlock vast stores of success or cargo, then the Western missionary feels betrayed and believes that their protégé's behavior all this time has simply been a mask for greed. Yet while there is an element of greed involved, what he fails to realize is that his protégé is simply acting according to his worldview, which has remained unchallenged during all these years of mentoring and discipleship. Communicating cross-culturally means considering carefully how I, as the communicator, am viewed and understood according to the deep structure of my host culture's worldview.

Second, Van Rheenen's approach rightly understands that there is a clash between the animistic worldview and the biblical one concerning *mana*, but there is a lot more to be said in this regard. Similarly, Hiebert presents a method for transforming worldviews that goes no further than to assert that unbiblical worldviews must be exposed by bringing them to a level of consciousness so that those who hold them can reflect critically upon them.<sup>21</sup> According to Scripture, however, this approach comes up short.

### 3. *Elenctics*

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul tells Timothy that all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). What Van Rheenen and Hiebert miss is the element of rebuking. The word for rebuke here is the Greek word *elenchos* (ἐλεγχος). It can have the meaning of "expose" or "bring to light," but it also

---

<sup>20</sup> Van Rheenen does recognize this problem, but the approach he advocates fails to provide a solution (*ibid.*).

<sup>21</sup> Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 307, 319.

has the stronger sense of convict, reprove, or express strong disapproval.<sup>22</sup>

J. H. Bavinck keys in on this word in his approach to missional communication, even calling it *elenctics*, which he defines as “the science which is concerned with the conviction of sin.”<sup>23</sup> He says, “The Bible from the first page to the last is a tremendous plea against the heathenism, against the paganizing tendencies in Israel itself, in short, against the corruption of religion.”<sup>24</sup> This quote is extremely relevant to the state of Christianity in Papua New Guinea, where Christianity has largely remained entrenched in its animistic and antibiblical worldview.

If we consider the approach of the apostles in the book of Acts, we see that rebuking features prominently. When Peter is full of the Holy Spirit and preaches at Pentecost to a mixed crowd from the Jewish Diaspora—in other words, people of various cultural backgrounds—not only does he expose their actions and intentions for future consideration, he also rebukes them for being sinners and murderers who are responsible for the death of Jesus Christ. When Paul preaches his famous sermon in the Areopagus of Athens, he finds himself in a place and culture that loves to expose ideas and has a fascination with new teachings (Acts 17:26). But the heart of Paul’s message is a confrontation with the false worship of the Athenians and a clear call to repent of their idolatry.

The apostle Paul speaks of rebuking in Ephesians 5:11: “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.” The word translated expose here is *elenchete*. Christians are not only to reject sinful behaviors but must also expose their sinfulness. This exposing work is fundamental to who Christians are since they are children of light and it is the nature of light to expose and drive away darkness. If the light does not expose darkness, then the sinner will remain in the darkness of their thinking and acting. But this exposing is much more than the critical reflection Hiebert mentions. Clinton Arnold states,

The verb is probably best translated as “expose” here since this is the function of light when it penetrates darkness (see also John 3:19–20), but the term was also commonly used with the sense of “rebuke” and “convict.” In this context, the purpose of the exposure is to bring conviction and correction.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> “ἐλέγχω [*elenchō*],” Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 315.

<sup>23</sup> J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, trans. David H. Freeman (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), 222.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>25</sup> Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians*, ZECNT 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 331.

Paul understands as well as anyone that the sinful actions of the Greco-Roman world flowed from a belief system and worldview that was antithetical to God (cf. Rom 1:18–32). Therefore, Christians must be active in exposing and convicting sin as they shine the light of Christ in the particular culture they are in.

We can learn much from the cross-cultural literature, and I greatly appreciate what authors like Hesselgrave, Van Rheenen, and Hiebert say about it. However, an important but much-neglected topic in the discussion of cross-cultural gospel communication is the work of convicting the hearers of the sinful idolatry of their worldview. Of course, as Bavinck discusses, this is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>26</sup> But the Holy Spirit is pleased to use preachers of the gospel to carry out this work.

What does this mean for *mana*? It means that the cross-cultural communication of the gospel must aim to expose the idolatrous worldview of the culture. Melanesian Christians need to recognize that their quest for power, prestige, or wealth is sinful and is an expression of their depraved tendency to reject the true God and place themselves at the center of their universe. They must be taught what repenting of this sin looks like. Also, this approach helps to deal with the issue of the missionaries themselves being viewed as a source of *mana*. This issue often feels like a quagmire because, no matter what, I simply cannot make myself as poor and desperate as most Papua New Guineans. Even if I did cut my pay down to a bare minimum and lived in substandard housing, I simply cannot remove the *access* that I have, which guarantees me medical treatment and financial support if I so much as ask for it. But when the Melanesian Christians learn to understand their quest for *mana* as sin that needs repentance, then the presence of my access to financial and medical support becomes less of an issue between us.

#### 4. Applying Elenctics to Mana

So, what does it look like to rebuke *mana* and the deep assumptions and presuppositions that lie hidden in the animist's worldview? In other words, how does the gospel expose the unfruitful works of the darkness of *mana*?

In the first place, the preoccupation with *mana* reveals the human-centeredness of the Melanesian worldview. The goal of the quest for *mana* is ultimately human centered because, at its deepest level, it is ultimately focused on gaining an advantage for oneself or one's family or tribe. Scripture teaches that life is not to be human centered; it is to be God centered, as Paul writes to the Corinthians: "So whether you eat or drink, or whatever

<sup>26</sup> Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 229; as seen in John 16:8.

you do, do all for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). The context of this passage is that Paul is discussing the eating of food sacrificed to idols, where he is giving careful instruction about when it is okay and when it is not okay to eat such meat. In terms of the cultural onion, eating the meat is the superficial level, the level of behavior. Paul is in effect saying that whether the behavior is acceptable or not depends on the deeper levels of the cultural onion, both of the eater and his host. The question of eating cannot be separated from the deepest and most significant factor of them all: Is God glorified in this? Does God receive worship and adoration? Is his name exalted by my eating?

The Melanesians who are considering buying some “holy water” that is said to come from an auspicious source or place a certain rock or bone in their garden to increase its fruitfulness do well to ask these same questions. Does this action give glory to God? Is God being exalted in our hearts as we carry out this ritual?<sup>27</sup> Asking this question will cause them to consider the beliefs and motivations underlying their action. When they realize that in fact, their sole purpose was to increase their prosperity and that how they were seeking to do that denies God his rightful place as ruler and governor of all things and seeks to relate to God in a manner that one would relate to a lesser, fickle, and even impersonal god, then the proper response is to recognize the action and its attendant beliefs and motives as sin, experience sorrow for and hatred of that idolizing tendency, and earnestly seek forgiveness from God through Jesus Christ.

If this is the direction that sanctification will take in the life of a person, then this must be the direction that the communication of the gospel that person must take as well. The best homiletics teach that the goal of the sermon is the application since the goal of the gospel is a changed life. “[Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Pet 2:24). Effective cross-cultural preaching will not only show that an action is sinful but will also seek to reveal the sinfulness of that sin, call for repentance and faith, and disciple the sinner to be motivated for God’s glory.

Closely related to the self-centeredness of a preoccupation with *mana*, it also reveals a heart intent on greed. *The Oxford English Dictionary* definition of greed is “an intense and selfish desire for something, especially wealth, power, or food.” This definition describes precisely what is happening in the heart of the Melanesian seeking *mana* because, in their understanding of the

---

<sup>27</sup> As I discussed with a national pastor colleague how to overcome cultural differences and speak the truth into a culture, he suggested that this is the very question that must be asked.

world, *mana* is merely the channel through which wealth and power run.

In Acts 8:9–24, we read the account of Simon the Magician from Samaria. Simon was famous for his power in practicing magic. However, when Philip, and later Peter and John, come to Samaria and through their ministry the Holy Spirit makes himself known in signs and miracles, Simon offers Peter and John money for the power to control and dispense the power of the Holy Spirit. Simon is clearly motivated by greed, especially for power, but likely also for money and fame. As the pre-Christian Melanesian would seek *mana* as the channel through which power and wealth will come to them, similarly Simon seeks the Holy Spirit as the channel through which to receive power and wealth. Thus his “conversion” is no conversion at all. He is still seeking the same things, but this time through “Christian” means. This is precisely what is happening for so many Melanesians who, hearing the Christian gospel (or an aberration thereof), seek the Holy Spirit or the influence of Jesus as the channel through which power and wealth will come to them.

Peter’s strong and stinging response is a classic case of elenctics. He answers with a curse, an indictment, two commands, followed by an observation.

[Curse:] May your silver perish with you because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!

[Indictment:] You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.

[Command 1:] Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and

[Command 2:] pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.

[Observation:] For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity. (Acts 8:20–23)

In this cross-cultural exchange between a Jewish fisherman and a Samaritan magician, a preacher of the gospel of Christ and a high priest of paganism, Peter offers no quarter for Simon’s assumptions about power and how to relate with the true God. Simon is guilty of wickedness and in desperate need of forgiveness (“pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven”) and the conviction of the Holy Spirit (“for I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity”) that Jesus proclaimed in John 16:8–11.

Cross-cultural preachers do well to consider Peter’s example. What message must be given when would-be converts are motivated by greed? Rebuke in no uncertain terms, expose the darkness of the sin, and point to the only but sufficient hope that sinners have, which is true, motive-level repentance

and forgiveness. Sadly, there have been many Simons in Papua New Guinea, but instead of being rebuked, they have been accommodated.

In Ephesians 5:5, the Apostle Paul makes clear that greed is idolatry. This brings us to the third and final aspect of the quest for *mana* that needs rebuke: it is idolatry. For many Melanesians of the past, this was first-commandment idolatry; that is, idolatry that worshiped false gods. However, for many Melanesians who profess faith in Christ today, this is a second-commandment idolatry. The first commandment is about who is to be worshiped. The second commandment is about how God is to be worshiped.

The idolatry of the quest for *mana* is very similar to the idolatry of the Israelites in the Old Testament. In many cases, they still professed Yahweh as their God; however, as they approached him, they approached in the manner of the pagans of the surrounding nations (e.g., the golden calf, the high places, using the ark as a talisman). Often, this manner of worship was adopted because basic to the Canaanite idolatry and worldview was the belief that God (or the gods) could be manipulated and that making and caring for an idol was the channel through which this could be carried out. The prophet Isaiah humorously exposes this worldview with his story of the man who throws one half of a block of wood into the fire to warm himself and carves the other up into an idol. “He prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for you are my god’” (Isa 44:17b). Melanesians generally have not carved small figurines to channel God’s favor; their cultural tradition is to prefer crude rituals. But these are merely differences in behavior, differences on the surface level of culture. Underneath, in the deeper layers of the onion, there is the same assumption that God can be manipulated, that he himself is essentially human-centered, and that physical, this-worldly blessings are the climax of his gifts. All of these assumptions are unbiblical and false. The quest for *mana* is idolatry.

Such a base rejection of God simply cannot be accommodated, either by God or those who are called to proclaim the message of his self-revelation. This is why the field of elenctics is so important for cross-cultural communication—both the theory and the practice. If the gospel of Jesus Christ is going to be fully embraced, then the sinfulness of sin must be fully exposed, and the way of receiving Christ through repentance and faith must be fully preached, with full regard to how these truths are received by their hearers.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I indicated that we would consider how to ensure that the Jim and Upa scenario does not happen. I am hopeful that

we have helped to answer that question. We have considered what culture is, how it works, how it factors into mission communication. We have seen that elenctics, the science of rebuking sin, holds promise for helping to break through some of the barriers that cross-cultural communication presents. I have spoken strongly against idolatry in Melanesian culture, particularly as it relates to *mana*. I have spoken in this way because this idolatry is easier for me as someone coming from a different culture both to see and to address. However, as a minister of the gospel, I must remember that the treasure is always housed in a jar of clay (cf. 2 Cor 4:7). I myself am part of a culture with worldview assumptions and presuppositions that are also in need of loving rebuke. Unfortunately, elenctics has typically been understood as applying to foreign, pagan cultures, as though the Western worldview has no need for correction. This is simply not the case. As I have reflected on the story of Jim and Upa, I have wondered what a similar story, but of a Melanesian missionary leaving affluent Canada after toiling there for twenty years, might sound like. What Western assumptions of the gospel would be revealed? What hidden idolatries would need to be rebuked one last time as Upa said farewell?

## INTERVIEW

# Interview with Timothy J. Keller

**PETER A. LILLBACK**

(April 14, 2020)

**PETER A. LILLBACK:** *Tim great to see you today. Let us have a word of prayer, and we will get started.*

*Lord, thank you for the opportunity to interview Dr. Keller. Thank you for your call in his life and the ministry you have granted to him. We pray that this interview would be encouraging to the readers of Unio cum Christo, who are ministering around the globe. Thank you for the privilege of now giving this time to you; we pray for your presence and your glory, in Christ's name, Amen.*

*Tim, please share a little bit about your life and how you came to faith in Christ.*

**TIMOTHY J. KELLER:** I became a Christian through InterVarsity Fellowship at Bucknell University, where I was an undergraduate from 1968 to 1972, about halfway through. Even late in my freshman year, I started attending InterVarsity through friends. It is a little hard to say exactly when I crossed the line, looking back on it. I was raised in a Lutheran church; I was confirmed a Lutheran; I was a nominal Christian. Then I came to faith that way and almost immediately decided I wanted to go in the ministry and went to Gordon-Conwell for three years, from 1972 to 1975. I was ordained in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), which at the time was only about fourteen months old. Indeed, the first General Assembly was in December of 1973. I was ordained in the summer of 1975 and went to my first General

Assembly in the following September, which would have been the third. It was very new and the Book of Church Order was provisional; it could be altered at every General Assembly because it was not set in stone. So, by the time I was 24, I had a church, was preaching three times a week as a pastor in a brand-new denomination. That is the baby boomer experience.

**PAL:** *What experiences have especially shaped your life and ministry?*

**TJK:** My marriage without a doubt would be number one, but the trouble is your marriage is like most of your life. My relationship with my wife has been by far the most formative, though I was a Christian when I met her. Nevertheless, it would certainly have been the most important factor shaping my ministry and my Christian life.

**PAL:** *How did you develop an interest in culture, and how has this area of reflection shaped your apologetics and ministry?*

**TJK:** Being an older baby boomer, I remember pretty well when most American culture was closely aligned with the basic idea of Christianity, where virtually everybody believed in a heaven and hell, had respect for the Bible, had a belief in objective moral truth; where almost everybody had an understanding of sin and even of the idea that there was a God who was a personal God. Also, the general understanding of morality was largely a Christian one. However, there is no way that America ever was a real Christian culture. I know I am talking with Pete Lillback here, who knows a lot more about history than me, but there was certainly something called Christendom, where America was deeply influenced by Christianity. In my lifetime, I saw that go away. I do not know how you cannot be interested in culture if you find yourself talking to people who are different from you culturally. So in 1975, I could give a gospel presentation like this: “When you die you are going to want to make sure that you are going to heaven, not hell, right?” Everybody would say, “Yeah.” “And the only way you are going to go to heaven is if you live a good life, right?” Everybody agreed pretty much on what a good life was. However, you have not really lived a life as good as it should be, you know you have fallen down, you are really not sure you are going to heaven. Mostly people would say yes, and then you would roll out Jesus and say, “Now maybe you do not understand what Jesus Christ came to do.” Then, you talked about a substitutionary death, his atonement, justification by faith, and a percentage of people at that point would say, “Wow.” You could get there because they had all the basic furniture; you were connecting the religious dots: afterlife, God, sin. They



**TIMOTHY J. KELLER**

had the dots, so you could connect the dots, and a certain percentage of people were ready and open to the gospel. However, the problem is what happens when the dots are not there, when there is no sense of moral truth, no sense of afterlife, no sense of the existence of God, except as an amorphous spiritual thing. Suddenly, I cannot preach the gospel without understanding culture. So, if the question is “How did you get interested in culture?” the answer is, I wanted to evangelize, and, as the culture changed, without understanding culture, I could no longer evangelize.<sup>1</sup>

**PAL:** *How does the apologetic method in The Reason for God compare with classical apologetics and the apologetic methods of Francis Schaeffer and Cornelius Van Til? What is similar to each of them, and what differentiates your approach?*

**TJK:** That is a great question. I recently was reading Bill Edgar’s book on Schaeffer and was actually dialoguing with him about Schaeffer.<sup>2</sup> I do not know. I think that *The Reason for God* is a little bit more of a traditional apologetic in the sense of evidences and arguments for God, I am not trying to prove God, but I am looking at the classical arguments, at the evidence for the resurrection.<sup>3</sup> So I would say it was more of a traditional evidentialist approach. My book *Making Sense of God* is more presuppositional, more like what Van Til would do, which is to uncover the ground on which people are standing and to show some ways they are smuggling in all sorts of ideas that assume the existence of God, and they do not have a right to.<sup>4</sup> That is basically what I think Van Til’s approach to apologetics is. To me the difference between Van Til and Schaeffer is more theoretical than real. I hate to open up a big can of worms here, but Van Til did not believe that when you confronted people there was any common ground or point of contact. I think Schaeffer, in contrast, would say there is common ground. When you actually look at how they do their apologetics, by and large, what Van Til and Schaeffer did was very similar, and they would argue over whether what they were doing was assuming common ground or not. So theoretically they differ, and probably I would be a little more like Schaeffer than Van Til. Practically, or methodologically, I would do presuppositional apologetics

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on preaching and culture, see Timothy J. Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), and the review by Joel R. Beeke in *Unio cum Christo* 2.1 (April 2016): 235–37.

<sup>2</sup> William Edgar, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life: Countercultural Spirituality* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Timothy J. Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Timothy J. Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016).

pretty much the way Van Til or Schaeffer would. Put it this way, this is my idea of Van Til: you do not say to a non-Christian, “Oh, I see your standards of rationality; I can prove Christianity according to your standards; I can come up to your standards.” That would be ceding to them the high moral ground that they are rational, and you are going to try to meet their standards in order to convince them. Van Til says, “No, I am going to question your rational standards; I am going to question your very right to your rational standards on the basis of your own understanding of the universe; and I am going to question your objectivity; I am going to question all that.” I believe that is what we have to do now. So, I would sound Van Tillian, Schaefferian, but I know that there are theoretical differences between the two, and I am probably more like Schaeffer, but methodologically we are pretty much in the same party.

**PAL:** *What have been the guiding principles for your pastoral ministry at Redeemer Church?*

**TJK:** My guiding principles came from my training under Richard Lovelace, who taught us that revivals and renewals happen whenever the doctrine of justification, grace alone, salvation is recaptured; that whenever the *solas* are recaptured there is a renewal.<sup>5</sup> You might want to think of it like a mountain, that from the top of the mountain—on the top there is the clear gospel—either you can slip off into antinomianism or theological relativism and liberalism, or you can slip off into legalism; a legalistic church or a theologically liberal church is losing the power of the gospel to change lives. My preeminent principle was, we are trying to stay up here, that is, the preaching and teaching and ministry of the church cannot fall off into either legalism or liberalism. Insofar as that is so, we are going to have life-changing power; that was really the guiding principle behind communication and preaching, pastoral care, the way we did community and ministry in the world. This principle does to some degree break through the categories of conservative and liberal because conservatism does tend toward a kind of traditional legalism and obviously liberalism tends toward relativism. I could say this is not Bible Belt Christianity, but it is certainly not the mainline Christianity the rest of Manhattan has. So many of the churches in Manhattan were mainline liberal churches, and we were neither conservative or liberal, and so we had an ability to triangulate, split the difference between

---

<sup>5</sup> For more on Lovelace’s view of church renewal, see Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979). On the five Reformation *solas*, see Garry J. Williams, “The Five Solas of the Reformation: Then and Now,” *Unio cum Christo* 3.1 (April 2017): 13–33.

what most people thought were the only alternatives: a kind of legalism or a kind of mainline liberalism.

**PAL:** *Your engagement with the urban context of the church has led you to focus on world mission. How did this interest arise, and in what ways have you sought to fulfill the Great Commission?*

**TJK:** That is your first easy question, thank you very much! After about two or three years when Redeemer started to flourish, we saw many people become Christians, and it grew, and we started to get nibbles, first of all from the Netherlands. There were two or three conservative Reformed denominations that came to us and said, “Our churches in Amsterdam are dying or have died; we do not know how to get a Reformed ministry going in a big city.” And they said to us, around 1991—they were already starting to check us out—“We do not need money to plant churches—we have money, we have people, but every time we try to start a church, it dies because we know we are using a ministry model that works in our Bible Belt but not in the cities. So would you help us?” Because we have a lot of Asians in our church, the Chinese learned about it, and a lot of them had the same issues, and they said, “Our house churches are flourishing away from the cities but not in cities.” So, we said if we have the ability to do something that a lot of national church leaders do not, which is to get churches going in their biggest global cities, then that is what we can do for world mission. We can say to national leaders everywhere that we are not going to go sending Americans to start churches in big cities, but we are going to help national leaders in every country who have trouble reaching their cities; we are going to help you do it by simply giving you case studies elsewhere. What we would do would be very simple. Let us just say you are trying to reach São Paulo; so you say, “Here is a church in Berlin; here is a church in Nairobi; here is a church in Taipei; here is a church in New York; study them. In what ways are they different? In what ways are they the same? Whatever is the same is probably going to be something you need to do in Brazil too, but in the other ways you probably need to make it different, in that it is Brazilian, and Brazilian cities are not like New York City, although in other ways they are.” So we would expose them to models; we would try to train them and coach them without paternalistically telling what to do, and that was our way of doing it. It came to us. So we do not do any kind of mission; we just specialize and try to help people start churches in the biggest cities; we try to help national leaders do it, and that is our work.

**PAL:** *That is wonderful. How has your thinking and preaching developed in terms of Christian witness in the public and political arenas?*

**TJK:** It may be a little late to be saying this. I believe that when I came to New York City the pressure to address public issues or political issues was not there. I know that the mainline churches did it all the time. But I found that most people in New York were struggling with psychological questions. They were struggling with addiction, low self-esteem, and they had a kind of psychotherapeutic Freudian understanding of their problems. I was trying to connect with them and say, “This is Philip Rieff’s triumph of the therapeutic.<sup>6</sup> Your whole understanding of self-esteem and all that is wrong, but I am not just going to bring you a kind of rigid legalism; I am going to bring you the reordering of the loves of your heart; I am going to give you Augustinian theology that does not ignore your insights and feelings and, at the same time, does not worship your feelings and brings about a renewal of your heart with the gospel by reordering the loves of your heart.”<sup>7</sup> Most people were wrestling with the twelve steps movement and therapy when I got here. In the 50s and 60s almost every man at night went to a psychoanalyst four or five times a week, and that started to die off by the time I got here, but they were still so therapeutic. When I was to speak publicly to the things they were doing, it was not politics, it was more in the area of therapy, and I was trying to rethink that. By the way, what I learned from John Bettler, David Powlison, and Ed Welch down at Westminster and the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF) was really helpful to me.<sup>8</sup> The situation has changed now, and in the last five years, everybody became concerned about social justice. All the younger non-Christians are absorbed in identity politics. I do think that there has to be a way to speak to those issues without being captured by a political agenda, but it is really not going to be easy. So, if I were starting a church now, I would have to go back to the drawing board and ask how to speak the gospel connecting with the questions people are asking but at the same time subverting the common answers. I cannot ignore their questions. Weirdly enough, I was originally speaking to a psychological milieu, trying to bring the gospel to subvert and

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Augustine, *The City of God* 15.22; *Confessions* 4.10.15; 13.8.9; *Christian Instruction* 1.27–28; and James Montgomery Boice, *Two Cities, Two Loves: Christian Responsibility in a Crumbling Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), esp. 20–21.

<sup>8</sup> For a brief introduction to CCEF, see David Powlison, “Biblical Counseling in the Twentieth Century,” in *Introduction to Biblical Counseling: A Basic Guide to the Principles and Practice of Counseling*, ed. John F. MacArthur Jr. and Wayne A. Mack (Dallas: Word, 1994), 44–60, esp. 49–55.

fulfill, as it were; now, we are addressing a sociological milieu where they are much more concerned about justice and marginalization. There are ways to go, and I have actually been experimenting with them, but since I am not a week-in-week-out preacher now, I am doing it more theoretically. I am working with students up here in New York. I teach preaching. I teach a lot of stuff—not for credit, not part of a seminary program, but just New York leaders—and we are working right now on that very important frontier.

**PAL:** *What are the main diaconal responsibilities of the church, and how should these guide the church as believers engage the poor?*<sup>9</sup>

**TJK:** Are we going to acknowledge that we are having this interview in the middle of the virus crisis?

**PAL:** *Please do comment on it.*

**TJK:** In spite of reputation, I actually think that Christians ought to be very involved with diaconal needs. To a great degree, though, they should be doing it not officially through the local church but through voluntary associations that Christians form. I do not think the church ought to be doing drug rehab or social work, but Christians and Christian organizations should be. So I am definitely a Kuyperian in the sense that I believe you have the institutional church under its elders, and its job is to minister the word and sacraments and do diaconal work for its members. When it comes to reaching out into the city, I think that it should be done through various Christian 501(c)s.<sup>10</sup> When there is a massive crisis like we may be having right now—I do not know how Philadelphia is doing, but up here, lots of local churches are blue collar and poor. People in the poorer areas of the city are being decimated; in those churches 80 to 90 percent of the people are out of work, and they are having a lot of deaths and not just old people's deaths. If you are a middle-class church, you still have money after all this, a lot of your people are still employed, so I see connecting with some of those churches in poor neighborhoods and helping them not only minister to their own people but also to their neighborhood. I mean temporarily to reach out to the non-Christians in the neighborhood through some of those local churches. I think there are emergency room times. We may be in one. So I could imagine Redeemer Churches connecting to churches in Queens and channeling money to them not only to support their own unemployed but maybe even to help neighbors who are not Christians. That is not ordinarily the best

---

<sup>9</sup> Keller was Director of Mercy Ministries for the PCA and wrote on the topic; see, e.g., Timothy J. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> 501(c)s are non-profit organizations in the United States.

way for the church to be doing its ministry, but there are emergency times in which the world is watching, and Jesus would get a lot of glory if we do that wisely.

**PAL:** *What is the church broadly conceived doing today to advance the gospel effectively or, on the other hand, to diminish the clarity of the good news of Christ?*

**TJK:** I think that the church today faces three big challenges. They are not completely symmetrical. You will see what I mean. One, evangelizing very secular people who do not have those religious thoughts we were talking about before is a massive challenge. Even when I started in New York City thirty-two years ago, the average non-Christians could come hear me expound Scripture on Sunday morning and get what I was talking about. In other words, I always tried to include non-Christians as I was preaching. Today, the average non-Christian in New York City is further away both culturally, almost emotionally—they are more wary of the church—and intellectually. They do not have the furniture, as it were, and I feel like there are fewer non-Christians that can just come into a worship service, even one like ours, which was tailored for nonbelievers—it was a real worship service, not a Willow Creek seekers' service—but we were still very concerned to be speaking to non-Christians. Also, thirty years ago I could have a lot more of those folks in the church service than today. However, now, how do you actually find places to engage nonbelievers and talk about the gospel? The second problem is formation. Our younger people are much more influenced by social media and political outlets than they are by the word of God. And then lastly, there is political polarization. Younger evangelicals are skewing left so that they are kind of like what I would call blue evangelicals, and a lot of older evangelicals are to a great degree captured by more conservative political operations, and I call it red evangelicalism.<sup>11</sup> That is a bad witness, and it is also bad for the churches' working together. The average younger evangelical that talks much about the problems of racism is going to be called a cultural Marxist online, and the average conservative person online is going to be called a white supremacist. But this is happening inside the church. So overcoming the political polarization—which is really discrediting the church in the eyes of people because we do not have our act together—formation in the digital age, and evangelizing secular people not just in church but even outside, those are the three challenges. The identification of these three factors answers your question as to

---

<sup>11</sup> Contrary to traditional color conventions in politics, in the USA, blue is the Democrat party and red the Republican.

what we have to do and what we are doing that is making things harder.

**PAL:** *Let me end with two questions. First, what advice do you offer generally and as a friend to Westminster as your alma mater and also to a fledgling ministry trying to do some of the good things you are doing but not doing them as well as we should?*

**TJK:** Advice for the seminary. I wonder what the seminaries are going to do and how they are going to survive because the economic pressures are enormous. In the past, I felt that seminaries tended to go to the church and say, “We want to partner with the church,” but very often what they meant was, “We have certain products and are trying to get more customers for our products. So, we would be happy to partner with you if you basically buy whatever we have.” I think in the future, although I am really glad to see Westminster thriving in many ways, long term it probably needs to have more equal partnerships with clusters of churches in localities to provide theological education for people without making them get up and move. I really think that that is the way forward, and maybe you do not go far flung. Now maybe you go to Asia, because I know there has always been historically this Asia connection, but I am thinking closer to home as well; for instance, what about Pittsburgh? How do you get the churches in Pittsburgh together to say, “We really want you to help us provide great education for the people here and this is what we need from you, to listen to us, and not just give us your existing product?”

**PAL:** *The other question is broader in the scientific arena for evangelical Christian believers: what advice would you give to those who are struggling with faith and science issues? How can a Christian be simultaneously scientifically astute and maintain a historic Christian worldview inclusive of creation?*

**TJK:** About faith and science, I am old enough to remember that science does change. We have to make sure that we are interpreting the Bible properly, and I think we can change our minds on that too. But, by and large, with respect to our understanding of the Bible, which is based on sound exegesis and is also trying to stay in touch with the catholic tradition—I mean the historic tradition of how people in the past understood a text—once you get to a text that seems not to fit in with science, you have to be able to live with the possibility that science may change. I have a very good friendship with Francis Collins, who does not believe there was a real Adam and Eve, and he does not see it ever changing; for him, it is pretty much proven that we did not just have one genetic ancestral couple. I am saying to him, “Within

my lifetime you have changed before,” and I add, “I do not need to let my understanding of what Genesis is teaching be changed by what the science says. I have to let the word speak, and if that means I am in tension with some people, including friends, who are really great Christians and also scientists, I am not going to budge because you do not think the science fits.” Sometimes you have to be willing to live with tension in some places, but you have to let the word govern your understanding of the word and not let science govern it. By the way, I am not a young earth creationist either, and my background was from Meredith Kline and a whole lot of Westminster people who helped me see that we have to be careful regarding our fear of modern science and evolution. We cannot come to the Bible with our fears and try to find the exegesis that most seems to go against what science is saying. So I think that you can let science govern your understanding of Scripture from both a more liberal and a more conservative approach. We need to let Scripture speak and try to be as conversant with science as we can. At Westminster, you have Vern Poythress, and there is nobody better than Vern at listening to science.<sup>12</sup> In the end, though, there are two books of revelation, nature and Scripture: special revelation governs our understanding of general revelation. That is all I can say.

**PAL:** *What final thoughts do you have?*

**TJK:** All Christian institutions in the next four or five years are probably going to have a time of reckoning. Christian colleges, Christian seminaries certainly, and even Christian churches have had a bit of a respite from the cultural pressures put on us by the most recent political conflicts in which conservatives and liberals are toe to toe. I do not see that continuing. I think that the centers of culture—the Harvards, Yales, and Princetons, the *New York Timeses*, the Hollywoods, the Silicon Valleys—have been won by secularism. There is going to be a lot more pressure on all orthodox Christian churches and institutions in the future, and we have got not to be surprised by angry attitudes; we have to realize that other Christians have experienced a lot more marginalization in other parts of the world, and we have to be very careful not to panic. What I would say to Westminster Seminary: be part of the folks who say we are going to try to be very smart, but we expect these kinds of headwinds and want to be very wise about them. That is probably the last thing to say which is a bit of a down. On the other hand, we are in the middle of a virus pandemic, and nobody is feeling optimistic

---

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006).

right, now, including me.

**PAL:** *Well, Dr. Keller, brother in the Lord, Tim, thanks so much for your time. Would you please conclude in prayer for us?*

**TJK:**

Father, thank you for Westminster Seminary, for the amazing amount of good ministry that is done, the great number of ministers that have come out and have done wonderful gospel ministry over the years. I do pray for the seminary along with the other seminaries that hold up the inerrant word of God and train people to believe in it and to rightly divide it, and I pray that you would protect them all and help them flourish because you are making them wise, like the men of Issachar who understood the times and knew what Israel should do [1 Chr 12:32]. So I pray for that for them, and I pray that you will continue to help those whom they are training to flourish and grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

**PAL:** *Thanks so much for your precious time shared with us.*

# Edmund P. Clowney's Triangle of Typology in *Preaching and Biblical Theology*

VERN S. POYTHRESS

**E**dmund Clowney created a triangle diagram to explain the function of types in the Old Testament. The triangle has since become known as “Clowney’s triangle.” It has proved fruitful, and several people have incorporated it into their principles for interpretation and their interpretations of individual types.<sup>1</sup> Let us reflect on its significance.

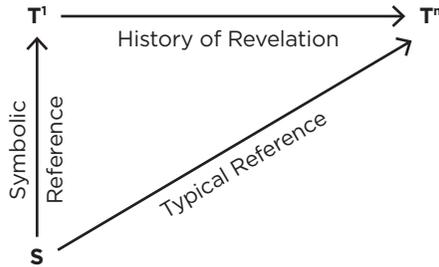
## I. *What Is Clowney’s Triangle?*

The triangle appears in print in Clowney’s book *Preaching and Biblical Theology*.<sup>2</sup> For purposes of reference, it is reproduced in Figure 1.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the course NT 123 at Westminster Theological Seminary, campus.wts.edu/~vpoythress/nt123/nt123.html, 1C6aModr.odp, slide 87; Vern S. Poythress, *Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God: A Handbook for Biblical Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 247–50; Vern S. Poythress, *The Miracles of Jesus: How the Savior’s Mighty Acts Serve as Signs of Redemption* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 65–67 and elsewhere; Vern S. Poythress, “Christocentric Preaching,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 22.3 (2018): 47–66, esp. 48, <https://frame-poythress.org/christocentric-preaching/>.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 110.

**Figure 1.** Clowney's Triangle of Typology

In the text that accompanies the diagram, Clowney explains what the diagram represents.<sup>3</sup> It summarizes the nature of sound reasoning about types. Since Clowney's own explanation is reasonably clear, we will move on to illustrate how it applies to a particular case, namely the tabernacle of Moses (Exod 25–27; 36–38).

## II. An Example: The Tabernacle

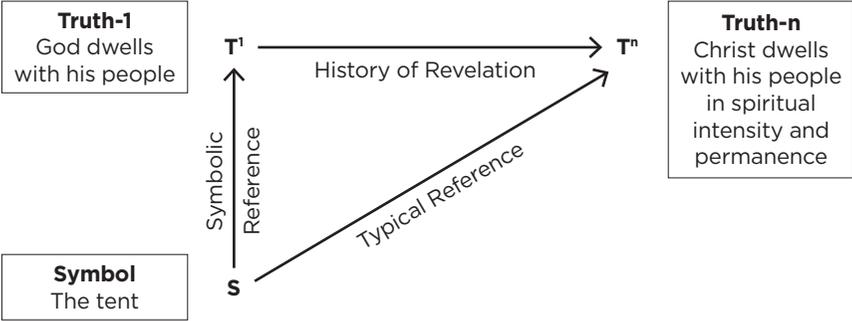
The tabernacle is a physical structure, a tent. In addition, it has symbolic meaning. So it is a symbol, which is designated *S* in Clowney's triangle (Fig. 1).

As a first step, Clowney advises us to consider what the meaning of the symbol is within its original historical context. For the tabernacle, we ask about its symbolic meaning at the time when God instructs Moses to set it up. It signifies that God has undertaken to dwell with his people: "And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (Exod 25:8). This meaning is designated "T<sup>1</sup>" in Figure 1. Step 1 is the movement from the symbol *S* to its meaning *T<sup>1</sup>*. It is represented in Figure 1 by the vertical arrow.

In step 2 we ask how this truth about God dwelling with his people comes to climactic manifestation (T<sup>n</sup>) as the history of revelation continues to unfold. It comes to a climax in Christ, "For in him the whole fullness of deity *dwells* bodily" (Col 2:8; see John 2:21; 1:14). Therefore, the tabernacle is a type of Christ. Christ is the "antitype" of this type. In general, *S* designates the type. T<sup>n</sup> designates the antitype, to which the type points. The relation between the two is "Typical Reference." The completed diagram appears in Figure 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 110–12.

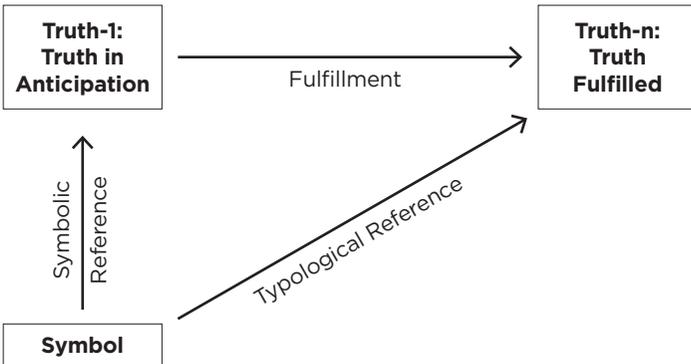
**Figure 2.** The Tabernacle as a Type of Christ



**III. Clarifying the Triangle**

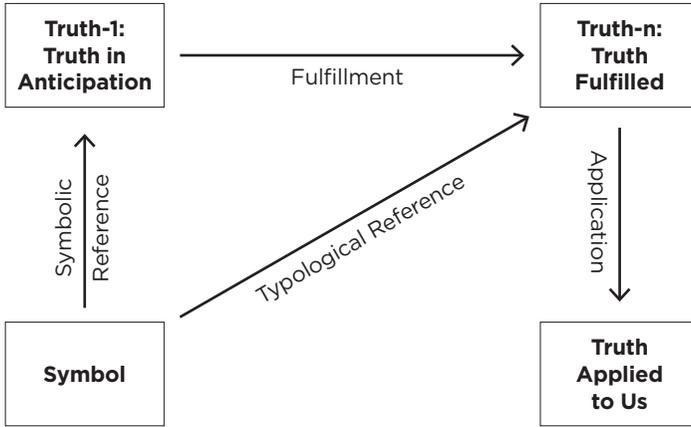
We may try to make a few clarifications in the triangle by relabeling. Instead of *S* we may write out “Symbol.” Instead of *T<sup>1</sup>* we may write out “Truth-1” or “Truth in Anticipation.” Instead of *T<sup>n</sup>* we may write out “Truth-n” or “Truth in Fulfillment.”<sup>4</sup> Instead of “History of Revelation” we may write “Fulfillment” to indicate more directly that the history is leading to a fulfillment. Instead of “Typical Reference” we may write “Typological Reference” because the word “Typical” can be misunderstood as having its more common meaning, “exhibiting the essential characteristics of a group,” rather than the more specialized meaning, “symbolic” (and forward pointing, see Fig. 3).<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 3.** Clowney’s Triangle with Relabeling for Clarification



<sup>4</sup> Clowney says, “The fullness of that truth revealed in Christ” (ibid., 110).

<sup>5</sup> Merriam-Webster online, merriam-webster.com/dictionary/typical/.

**Figure 4.** Clowney’s Triangle with Application

At some point, someone decided to add a fourth arrow to Clowney’s triangle to include application. So Clowney’s triangle became a rectangle (see Fig. 4).

The downward arrow moving from “Truth Fulfilled” to application to us is not actually the reverse of the upward-pointing arrow on the left side (“Symbolic Reference”). It would be more appropriate if the movement to application were represented by an arrow pointing out of the page toward the reader, to whom the truth is intended to apply. But we cannot represent this third dimension easily, so I think we should be content with the two-dimensional representation.

#### **IV. The Value of Clowney’s Triangle**

What is the value of Clowney’s triangle? It gives us guidance about how to do typological reasoning responsibly. We have to avoid inventing types arbitrarily. We also have to avoid overlooking genuine typological correspondences because we cannot conclusively “prove” them by some artificially high standard of proof.<sup>6</sup>

To show the challenge, we might consider two opposite extremes. On the one side is the stereotype of the untrained reader who invents types by following his fancy. On the other side is the stereotype of the doubting scholar who may find only a very few because he must have “proof.”

<sup>6</sup> Clowney, *Preaching*, 111–12.

Let us consider these two dangers and how Clowney's triangle addresses them.

### ***V. The Danger of Arbitrary Typology***

First, consider the danger of fanciful typology. An interpreter can find a type inappropriately if he introduces loose or fanciful connections and then claims that such-and-such a text gives us a type of Christ or the church or some spiritual truth.

I encountered one gentleman who told me that the three gifts of the wise men in Matthew 2:11 stood for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We can feel the arbitrariness of this claim. There are indeed three gifts. And there are three persons in the Trinity. But the connection is merely in the number three, not in the context of Matthew. Such an interpretation pays no attention to how the Gospel of Matthew is telling us about the wise men. Unfortunately, the interpreter who finds an artificial typology is apt to overlook genuine symbolic relations that the text presents. In Matthew we find repeated emphasis on fulfillment. The theme of "the king of the Jews" (Matt 2:2) builds on the Old Testament promise of the Messiah. The star of Bethlehem is connected to Numbers 24:17 and also more broadly to the promise of light that comes with the Messiah (Isa 9:2; 60:1). The gifts from the wise men correspond to the gifts of "gold and frankincense" that the nations will bring according to Isaiah 60:6.

Here is where Clowney's step 1 is important. His step 1 tells us to anchor our reasoning in what God revealed when he originally communicated a particular symbol. The tabernacle had a meaning for the Israelites. God explained it to them through Moses. We look back at this meaning from a later point in history. We can read in the New Testament about the coming of Christ. But the fulfillment in Christ is an enhancement of the meaning already given earlier. It does not cancel the earlier meaning or overlay it with something completely unrelated. Step 1 tells us to honor the truth that has been revealed at an earlier point. The climactic manifestation of truth in Christ will indeed be climactic. In certain aspects it will surpass what could have been seen earlier in history. However, it will surpass the earlier points by fulfilling them, not by negating them.

In sum, one temptation for the untrained but enthusiastic Bible reader is to generate arbitrary meanings and to claim that they are types. Whatever the text stimulates in his mind, however fanciful, becomes for him a

typological meaning. Step 1 serves to rein in his fancies. It disciplines his mind and heart by telling him to pay attention to what God says in the context of earlier texts and earlier history.

## **VI. *The Danger of Minimizing Typology***

Let us now consider the opposite danger, the danger of minimizing or neglecting typological meanings.

This minimization is a danger especially for scholars with a certain mindset. It can be tempting to overreact to fanciful readings by refusing to see any but the most obvious symbolic meanings. Some scholars tell us that we can find types in the Old Testament only when the New Testament *explicitly* tells us that there is a type. Or a scholar may claim that symbolic meanings are only relevant for the immediate historical circumstances. He treats each moment in history as if it were so distinct that the message of God is only for that moment, not for us (contrary to Rom 15:4 and 1 Cor 10:6, 11).<sup>7</sup> He breaks the unity of redemptive history and the unity of the plan of God into fragments, each fragment being its own distinct moment in time.

Clowney's step 2 is essential at this point. It tells us to travel forward in the history of revelation. We need to see that the truth that God reveals at one point in history is not isolated but belongs to his comprehensive plan.

All things in the Old Testament are moving to fulfillment. All the times of history are connected intrinsically, according to the comprehensive plan of God. The meanings are connected through the passage of time to later and fuller meanings. That is one of the reminders that we get from Clowney's step 2. No symbolic meaning we find in the Old Testament stands in isolation. No meaning is just abandoned and dropped along the way to be permanently forgotten. All is moving toward the climax in Christ, which comes with not only his first coming but his second coming (2 Cor 1:20). The interpreter who avoids this richness of meaning out of fear of making a mistake is not doing justice to the unity and profundity and beauty of the plan of God, summed up in Christ (Eph 1:10).<sup>8</sup>

It helps to observe that some connections of meaning are more obvious than others. Some connections are stronger and more salient than others.

---

<sup>7</sup> Clowney also notes the importance of divine authorship: "Such a method [of understanding 'organic connection'] does not commend itself to those who deny or de-emphasize the primary authorship of Scriptures" (*ibid.*, 111).

<sup>8</sup> "But a better grasp of biblical theology will open for us great riches of revelation" (*ibid.*, 112).

We do not need artificially to find a direct allusion from one passage to another, when in fact the texts provide only a broader thematic unity. But that having been said, Clowney's step 2 encourages us to practice a kind of humble boldness in looking for unity in meaning between earlier and later times, between Old Testament and New Testament.

Moreover, a sensitive examination of the Old Testament shows that symbolic meanings are everywhere. All things and all events are what they are according to the plan of God. And the plan of God is deep.

Some symbolic meanings are obvious. The meaning of the tabernacle of Moses, as a symbol of the presence of God and his dwelling with his people, is obvious because God tells Moses explicitly what the meaning is (Exod 25:8). However, meanings are not always that explicit. Consider something a little less explicit. The meaning of the sin offering includes substitutionary death. The death of the animal is symbolic of the need for substitutionary death to atone for sin. But the full implications are not completely spelled out in Leviticus 4.

We can see the symbolic dimension more clearly if we link Leviticus 4 to the reality of what the people were experiencing. Guilt is real. We have to understand that the people in those times, like us, experienced guilt. God teaches that he is holy. The people need forgiveness. And here, in the sin offering, God gives them a symbolic representation of how to get forgiveness. But people know, deep down, that an animal's death is not an adequate equivalent for the guilt of sin and the death it deserves. So they also may sense that the animal sacrifice points beyond itself to something definitive, something that would surpass an animal.

It would be superficial to pass by the account and dismiss it by saying that it is all merely outward ceremonies, or, as some interpreters claim, that it belongs to a "primitive mentality." Such interpreters show their ignorance of the human heart. They skate on the surface of the text. They do not realize that God, speaking in the text, can challenge the heart at a deep level.

And at that level, everything in the Old Testament concerns in one way or another the relation of God to man. We see guilt and pardon, death and life, alienation from God or fellowship with him, curse or blessing. The issues always have symbolic depth, concerning ultimate relationship with God and eternal destiny, ultimate curse or ultimate blessing.

The result is that typology is pervasive in the Old Testament.

## **VII. *The Larger Significance of Clowney's Triangle***

Clowney himself was deferential about the significance of his triangle.<sup>9</sup> The triangle is not a mechanism that automatically generates answers. It cannot substitute, by itself, for discernment and genuine understanding of the meaning of the word of God. Rather, it is a pointer and reminder about the structure of the history of redemption. When it is appreciated in this way and used as a clue to the broader issues of biblical interpretation, it is a most fruitful contribution to biblical understanding, and in particular the understanding of symbolic meanings.

---

<sup>9</sup> “This diagram is of only limited usefulness” (ibid., 110).

# Book Reviews

---

John Calvin. *Crucified and Risen: Sermons on the Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ*. Translated by Robert White. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2020.

This volume is a new translation of several of the Reformer's Eastertime sermons. The first two were Sunday sermons, and the sermon on the resurrection was preached on Easter Sunday prior to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The intervening ones were weekday sermons. These were published in Geneva by Conrad Badius in July 1558. It is not the first time they have been translated into English, that being in 1581 and then again much later in 1950.

However, this new translation is well worth it. Firstly, Calvin's sermons are models of biblical masterclass, perhaps only equaled by Klaas Schilder's twentieth-century trilogy on the sufferings of Christ. Calvin concentrates on Matthew 26–28 in nine sermons, and there is a bonus sermon on the ascension on Acts 1:9–11. Calvin's final prayers are restored at the end of each exposition. Rounding things off, a Scripture index and a general index have been added.

Calvin follows his habitual homiletic practice of expository preaching. He does not comment on every verse but allows the main Scriptural texts to mold his theological comments in an ongoing argument that once transcribed has become highly readable. It is as if we are privileged to be present, listening to Calvin himself from his pulpit at Saint Pierre in Geneva.

Secondly, as to the content itself, as expected, we find rehearsed the main themes of Calvin's cataphatic Christology drawn out of the text of Scripture. Everywhere he is attentive to showing how Christ as the perfect man was conscious of his mission, obeying the Father in all things, thus fulfilling the

prophecies of Scripture. Nothing either said or done by Christ or by others in the passion accounts happens by chance. God hates sin, and Christ took our judgment upon himself in a once-for-all offering as the one Mediator. By his sacrifice, forgiveness of sin was procured and full atonement achieved. That no merit can be added to the work of Christ is a recurrent theme.

As a student of humanism Calvin was a master of rhetorical method. He knew how to touch his hearers by his use of language, which can both touch the heights of praise and reach into the depths of pathos. This is particularly so in what is perhaps the linchpin of the whole, the sermon on “It is finished,” where Calvin deals with Christ’s abandonment and the famous words “My God, why have you forsaken me?” Christ suffered in both body and soul since it was necessary that he should know and feel condemnation for us. Calvin comments, “There is no doubt that, being himself God, he could not have felt that this (the forsakenness) was so. No, but when he suffered, his deity had to give way to the death and passion which he had to bear. Hence his power kept itself hidden for a time, until he had done all that was required for our redemption” (115). These challenging and mysterious words are left hanging. Calvin makes no attempt to explain the mystery. He rather holds back for us to contemplate the wonder of it all.

In many places, we find accents similar to those of Luther’s theology of the cross, describing how the glory of God’s salvation is present in contrary appearances. So Christ brings life out of death, justice out of injustice, salvation out of condemnation.

While concentrating on the drama of redemption and the Father-Son relationship, Calvin is not insensitive to the human dramas being played out on the sidelines. The hardness of heart of the Jewish leaders, the dilemma of Pilate, the wicked choice of Barabbas by the crowd, the injustice of it all to accomplish the justice of God, and much more. A moving exposition describes the fate of Peter contrasted to that of Judas, the betrayal in the garden, and the denial when the cock crows. These dramas are vividly described, together with pastoral applications.

In the chapter “Numbered with the Transgressors” on Matthew 27:27–44, Calvin presents the enigma of the just among the unjust. While we might find his interpretation of the “place of the skull” strange (93), when we come to the two thieves, Calvin does not let us off the hook: “We see in these two men mirrors of the human race. We see the wretchedness which wraps us around. This life is a pit of misery, the fruit of our sins, for Adam’s fall deprived us of God’s blessing. ... We must all return to dust and decay” (102). Throughout, Calvin speaks pastorally in this way, underlining sin and the glory of divine grace.

Thirdly, in a day of cheap paperbacks, it is a pleasure to hold a beautifully produced book such as this, since it does honor to the content, as does the translation. Robert White, who gave us Calvin's 1541 *Institutes* with the same publisher a few years ago, has once again done a fine job, including on his introduction to the volume, which is brief and to the point, as Calvin himself would have wished. White's translation does not fall foul to the snares of modern dynamic equivalence theory but sticks as closely as possible to the literal sense of the Reformer's original text. Only rarely, however, does one feel the French original underneath the English version, mostly in the translation of some of Calvin's reputed colloquial insults, which always present the challenge of knowing what to do with them.

**PAUL WELLS**

Professeur émérite  
Faculté Jean Calvin  
Aix-en-Provence, France

---

David J. Hesselgrave and Leanna Davis. *We Evangelicals and Our Mission: How We Got to Where We Are and How to Get to Where We Should Be Going*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020.

David J. Hesselgrave (1924–2018) was Professor of Mission at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois. Together with Donald A. McGavran, he was cofounder of the Evangelical Missiological Society. Through these positions, as well as his publications, Hesselgrave provided leadership to several generations of evangelical missiologists. He did not avoid tackling controversial topics. To mention an example: seeing that a holistic understanding of mission was gaining ground among evangelicals, he staunchly defended prioritism, the view that the primary goal of mission work is preaching the gospel, winning people to Christ, and growing responsible churches.

Blessed with longevity and a clear mind, Hesselgrave remained active in retirement. One of his last projects was writing the book *We Evangelicals and Our Mission* with the help of his granddaughter Leanna Davis. The book is a kind of final lecture series by the “dean of evangelical missiology,” as he is often affectionately called. Once again, Hesselgrave champions prioritism, but he does much more. The book offers a combination of theology and missiology. It describes the historical roots of classic evangelical missiology and identifies the pitfalls that evangelical missiology will need to avoid if it wants to remain relevant for the church-gathering work of the Lord.

The book has four parts. In part 1, Hesselgrave describes three historical roots of evangelical missiology: classical Christian orthodoxy as inherited from the early church, the understanding of the gospel inherited from the Reformers, and the missionary zeal and practices inherited from the revivals of the eighteenth century (George Whitefield and others). Hesselgrave's point is that evangelical missiology will need to hold on to this threefold heritage if it wants to remain relevant and fruitful in the coming years.

In part 2, Hesselgrave describes the main developments of the last two hundred years: the achievements of the great century of mission (the nineteenth century), the battle between ecumenical liberalism and fundamentalism, and the establishment of evangelical mission organizations. Those who are familiar with Hesselgrave's writings will not be surprised to find that he brings up "the Edinburgh Error" again (the failure of the famous Edinburgh 1910 conference to provide clarity with respect to the doctrinal underpinnings of mission work).

In part 3, several controversial issues in current evangelical missions and missiology are discussed. For many readers this will be the most interesting part of the book. Hesselgrave begins by identifying "three unavoidable issues." The first is the debate regarding the inspiration and authority of the Bible. The second is the debate between what Hesselgrave calls "traditionalism and meliorism," traditionalists being those who emphasize right doctrine and focus on the proclamation of the gospel, meliorists those who emphasize right practice and believe that the task of mission is to make the world a better place (melior = better). Hesselgrave suggests that the divide between these two approaches is so deep that it could lead to a final parting of ways.

The third "unavoidable" issue is very much related to the second and has to do with the meaning of mission as such: Is mission first and foremost proclamation of the gospel, with a view to the salvation of sinners and the planting of the church (prioritism)? Or should mission be understood to focus on social action, fighting for justice, and caring for the environment as well (holism)? Hesselgrave notes that in recent decades evangelical organizations have tended to become more holistic in their views. This trend clearly worries him, and he concludes his discussion by asking how long this process can continue if evangelical missions are to remain "evangelical" (94).

In the following chapter Hesselgrave discusses and critiques the viewpoints of three individual theologians: the eschatology of George Ladd, the theodramatic hermeneutic of Kevin Vanhoozer, and the kingdom mission view of Ralph Winter. Although an irenic man, Hesselgrave does not hesitate to qualify these three views as "divisive proposals."

Part 4 of the book looks to the future. Hesselgrave's main point is that evangelical mission will only have a future if it holds on to the faith that was inherited from the church fathers, the Reformers, and the great revivals. From this perspective, Hesselgrave identifies three current movements that are perhaps well meant but at the same time have the capacity to weaken the faith that was inherited from the past. These three movements are the praise and worship movement, the small group Bible study movement, and the short-term missions movement. Hesselgrave suggests that each one of these movements can potentially lead to a loss of biblical depth and content.

*We Evangelicals and Our Mission* is a fairly slim volume (less than 150 pages), but it covers a lot of ground. It is impressive to realize that even in his 90s Hesselgrave still felt a responsibility to speak up and call the church back to its core mandate. I warmly recommend it to readers in general. It can be used fruitfully as a course text for missiology students.

**ARJAN DE VISSER**

Professor of Ministry and Mission  
Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary  
Hamilton, Ontario

---

Matthew D. Kim and Daniel L. Wong. *Finding Our Voice: A Vision for Asian North American Preaching*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020.

In their work *Finding Our Voice*, Matthew Kim and Daniel Wong identify what they believe to be an apparent need among Asian North American (ANA) preachers: a unique homiletical voice that is hermeneutically sensitive to their context. Thus, the book aims to bring attention to this void and lay out a vision for ANA preaching.

Due to the novelty of the subject, Kim and Wong set helpful parameters for the book in the preface. The term "Asian North American" is used by the authors to refer to English-speaking Asian Americans born in the United States and Canada (either second- or multi-generational). They preface this further by stating the experience the book describes is predominately East Asian, that is, Korean and Chinese.

In chapter 1, Wong describes the experience as "marked by two competing narratives: that of the model minority and the perpetual foreigner" (22). This leads to ANAs wrestling with questions of identity and belonging in unique ways—they are often marginalized yet bear the weight of certain social expectations. Thus, to effectively reach their listeners, Wong contends that their preaching should address these issues.

In chapter 2, Kim tackles the subject of hermeneutics by first pointing out that plain “evangelical hermeneutics” unaffected by culture and context is a myth; interpretation does not take place in a vacuum. Pertaining to their contexts, the author advocates a “bicultural” or “hybrid” hermeneutic that takes into consideration both Western and Eastern cultures and philosophies (50–51). The chapter ends with Kim proposing a five-step hermeneutical approach: observation, experience, understanding, interpretation, and application. Faithful ANA interpretation gives thought to experience at every step.

Chapter 3 follows the same contours as the previous chapter as Kim surveys the field of ANA theology and proposes a new theological model that he calls *Incarnational Duality*. According to this model, Jesus’s dual nature serves as a helpful model for understanding ANAs as they also live with a “dual nature”—Asian and American/Canadian. This model ought to aid preaching.

The book transitions from hermeneutics to homiletics in chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 is descriptive, detailing preaching today. Wong notes seven current characteristics in preaching: contextual, intercultural, incarnational, Holy Spirit-led, transformational, narrational, and collaborative. Chapter 5 is prescriptive, as Kim and Wong conclude with recommendations for preaching. The authors remind their readers that their preaching should be distinct as it pertains to hermeneutics, illustrations, applications, delivery, and themes. Further, they urge preachers to preach with a prophetic voice, engaging the cultural issues of our time, namely, social justice and racial reconciliation. ANAs’ unique perspective (and often privileged position) can contribute towards gospel advancement and reconciliation in the world.

The book accomplishes its aim. It makes a compelling case for a distinct ANA preaching voice. As there are African American and Hispanic preaching traditions, the ANAs’ unique immigrant experience, in addition to existing tensions in identity formation and challenging worldviews (East versus West), ought to compel preachers and institutions to explore the new field of preaching. More importantly, the book encourages its target audience to embrace and celebrate their ANA-ness for the sake of greater kingdom contribution.

The authors’ ability to walk a fine line between contextualization and doctrinal orthodoxy is commendable. Kim and Wong avoid postmodern reading methods (unlike many other ethnic-specific theologies as noted in chapter 3) yet winsomely contextualize Scripture so that it speaks effectively to the hearts of ANAs.

However, some may find this to be a weakness in the book. The authors' ANA hermeneutics, their theology, and even the preaching model presented in the book may come off as generic or lacking "a distinctly Asian flavor" as a result of their theological commitment. For instance, one can argue that the listed examples of common themes found in ANA preaching today (law and grace, leadership, familial relationships, culture and identity, and social justice) can be found in any church context. The same can be said of their preaching's characteristics (see above).

In the authors' defense, the goal of this work is not to create a new reading of Scripture that is exclusionary (akin to feminist or postcolonial readings) but to contextualize in a fresh way the old truths of Scripture to a specific group of people. Therefore, the assessments of and proposals for preaching may be universally applicable. As Justo González has stated, "Theology must be ours without ceasing to be universal" (quoted on page 83).

Some anecdotal examples seem dated for a book recently published. For example, the noted stereotype of Asian men as feminine and sexually unattractive and the claim that Sunday school in Korean churches is usually in Korean may no longer be the case. On the other hand, the perpetual foreigner experience ANAs feel may have been exacerbated more recently with COVID-19 and the increase in hatred of Asians. This is no fault of the authors, but it indicates the rapidity with which the culture they are addressing is evolving.

This book is not exhaustive. Rather it is a starting point for a new and important field. As the authors note in their preface, the experience described in the book is mainly that of East Asians—Koreans and Chinese. I imagine the experience of Southeast Asians, South Asians, and Central Asians would be vastly different, and their voices would contribute to this dialogue in meaningful ways. I am grateful to Kim and Wong for starting this conversation.

For non-ANAs seeking to understand this experience, I strongly recommend chapter 1. I also recommend this book for both ANA workers in ministry and laypeople. For the former, this book will aid in the journey to self-discovery and, if needed, self-acceptance. For the latter, this book will explain why these congregations are necessary, and, if you are a part of one, why such churches feel so different even though "everyone speaks English."

**STEVEN S. JO**

Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

---

Robert Letham. *Systematic Theology*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019.

It is no slight task to write a comprehensive systematic theology in a single volume. Not only does the author need to be able to cover all the dogmatic *loci*, but he also needs to do so concisely. Robert Letham, a presbyterian minister and professor of systematic theology at Union School of Theology in the United Kingdom, manages to do both. His pastoral experience informs his theology. He is committed to the Reformed, confessional theology as expressed in the Westminster Confession but does not limit himself to discussions within that tradition. His scope includes Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann, as well as patristic, medieval, and Reformed theologians.

I will highlight three general characteristics of Letham's approach and then delve into some details.

First, Letham begins his theology with a discussion of the Triune God rather than with Scripture or with prolegomena. The reason is that God precedes his revelation. This fundamental choice affects all chapters because all parts of this theology are formulated from a theocentric perspective. Under the rubric "The Works of God," Letham discusses creation and providence. He treats eschatology under "The Ultimate Purposes of God." Within the doctrine of God, Letham places the Trinity before the discussion of God's attributes. These emphases remind us of Barth's theology, but Letham treats arguments for God's existence and general revelation before he enters into a discussion of the Trinity, which Barth would have never done.

Second, the main discussion partners reveal the nature of any systematic theology, and Letham's is no exception to that rule. He is clearly well versed in the theology of the early church and Eastern Orthodoxy. Besides Augustine's theology, which one expects in any Western systematic theology, Letham also engages Cyril and Origen, defending the latter against common misunderstandings. It pays off that he has studied Eastern Orthodox theology in earlier works. He often refers to John Meyendorff and offers an extensive, high-quality discussion of theosis (deification) in relation to union with Christ. Of course, Letham quotes John Calvin often but also reaches back to Thomas Aquinas. Remarkably, Karl Barth and T. F. Torrance are among Letham's favorite discussion partners, though he seldom agrees with Barth. In many cases, Letham takes the side of Oliver Crisp against Barth. For instance, he devotes ample attention to Bruce McCormack's claim that Barth argues that God elects to be Triune and to Barth's thesis that God the Son accepted the *fallen* human nature. Typically, he rejects the latter thesis by referring to Crisp's argument.

Thirdly, Letham's work shows a wide range of levels of detail and

contemporary emphases. Some chapters are based on earlier works. These chapters have many footnotes, and the discussion goes into great detail. Examples include the discussion of Scripture as the word of God in relation to the tradition of the church and the section on the necessity of preaching as part of soteriology. Meanwhile, other chapters on the order of salvation refer almost exclusively to biblical texts. Some chapters offer a more general overview than others. Still, the overarching theocentric structure keeps the work together.

As is to be expected in a systematic theology, Letham enters into contemporary debates, such as the status of evolution theory, the possibility of extraterrestrial life, feminism, women's ordination, the New Perspective on Paul, and the theory that the Mosaic covenant is a republication of the covenant of works. Letham is strongest in his discussions of the covenant, evolution, and the interpretation of Genesis, to which he devotes an extensive, nuanced appendix. He strongly opposes theistic evolution but denies that not maintaining the twenty-four-hour-day theory would result in doctrinal decline: Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield showed openness for aspects of evolution but opposed theological liberalism staunchly. On the other hand, his brief discussions of feminism and of the New Perspective on Paul lack nuance. The volume would have been stronger without these sections.

I consider Letham's three (!) chapters on the Trinity to be the strongest of this book. He devotes a chapter to the biblical basis of this doctrine, although he does not process the (admittedly) vast, complete body of secondary literature. In the chapter on the formulations the church adheres to, he shows his mastery of early church sources by rightly defending Origen's basic orthodoxy. He not only highlights perichoresis, which has been in vogue among social Trinitarians, but also the *taxis*, or order, of the Trinitarian persons. The third chapter on the Trinity discusses ongoing questions, such as the term *person* and the *filioque* clause (one of Letham's earlier studies that are inserted in this book). Still, his treatment of the recent debate whether or not the Son is eternally subordinated to the Father is strange: he inserts an e-mail he once wrote to someone who asked him questions arising from a book he had not read. Letham obviously regards the matter as less relevant but could at least have stated his position more clearly. More often, he leaves it to the reader to draw conclusions.

As always, the chapters on eschatology are among the most interesting. Letham rejects premillennialism but sees little distinction between post-millennialism and amillennialism, which he favors. He is very critical of dispensationalism. He has high expectations for Israel once Israel converts. However, the living voice of Israel in our time is absent from this book.

Letham rejects universalism and defends the reality of hell as a place of everlasting, conscious punishment. He even regards the preaching of the reality of hell as “a litmus test of the church’s faithfulness.” Letham does have some consideration for pastoral problems that can arise, and he discusses counterarguments, though not always convincingly.

The expectation that a systematic theology by a presbyterian like Letham would offer a large portion on the covenant is met. In these chapters, as in the chapter on sin and some others, the discussion is mainly historical and less theological. He does not take into account recent studies on the nature of (original) sin. All in all, the method is a hybrid. On the one hand, his systematic theology is theocentric, with the Trinity as the entry point and cornerstone. Given his many references to Barth and Torrance, this may well reflect their influence. Torrance’s work on the incarnation is among the most cited in the book. On the other hand, Letham includes proofs for the existence of God and general revelation and consistently takes the side of argumentations from analytical philosophy. Still, he does not offer much analytical theology himself but primarily engages in historical theology. Also, the dialogue with biblical scholars only surfaces when doctrinal issues such as the New Perspective on Paul or Meredith Kline’s republication theory are involved.

Every chapter of this book closes with study questions and suggestions for further reading. Sometimes, he mentions several substantive titles, but in other cases, he only references Calvin’s *Institutes* or the Westminster Standards. Whether Letham’s systematic theology is distinctive enough to serve as a textbook for students remains to be seen. His chapters on the Trinity surely deserve to.

**ARNOLD HUIJGEN**

Professor of Systematic Theology  
Theological University of Apeldoorn, The Netherlands

## **CONTRIBUTORS**

**JOEL R. BEEKE** is president and professor of systematic theology and homiletics at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, a pastor of the Heritage Reformed Congregation in Grand Rapids, the editor of *Puritan Reformed Journal* and *Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth*, and the editorial director of Reformation Heritage Books. He has written and co-authored and edited numerous books, most recently *Reformed Systematic Theology* (Crossway, 2019–), *Reformed Preaching: Preaching God’s Word from the Heart of the Preacher to the Heart of His People* (Crossway, 2018), and *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2012).

**RON BERGEY** has taught Hebrew and Old Testament in Israel, the United States, and France for forty years. He has spent his last two and a half decades as a professor at the Faculté Jean Calvin in Aix-en-Provence. He has authored many articles and some commentaries in French. His commentary on Numbers in the ESV Expository Commentary Series (Crossway) is forthcoming.

**PHILLIPUS J. (FLIP) BUYS** is Research Professor at North-West University in South Africa. He is an ordained minister in the Reformed Churches in South Africa and emeritus principal of Mukhanyo Theological College. He has had forty years of ministry experience in various places in Africa.

**MICHAEL CHRIST** (ThM Westminster Theological Seminary; PhD University of Chester) is an American living in Nairobi, Kenya. He works with Ekklesia Afrika to further theological education in Africa. He lectures for Central Africa Baptist University in Kitwe, Zambia, and African International University in Nairobi.

**TIMON CLINE** is a graduate of Rutgers Law School and Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. He is currently a law clerk at the Office of the New Jersey Attorney General and a 2021–2022 fellow at the

Craig Center at Westminster Theological Seminary. His popular writing has appeared in the *American Spectator*, *National Review*, and *Mere Orthodoxy*, among others, and he is a regular contributor to *Modern Reformation*. Recent scholarly works include “Common Good Constitutionalism and Vaccine Mandates: A Review of *Jacobson v. Massachusetts* in Light of COVID-19,” published in the *Appalachian Law Journal*, and “Jonathan Edwards on Natural Law and Conscience,” published in the second volume of the *Miscellanies Companion* series from the Jonathan Edwards Society.

**JOHN CURRIE** is dean and professor of pastoral theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, and a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He began his pastoral ministry in the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada and pastored churches in Canada and in the United States. He has written “Preaching by Faith, Not by Sight: A Sermon on 2 Corinthians 5:5,” in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in the Service of the Church*, ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington (P&R Publishing, 2008), 555–64; “Christianity and Liberalism in Preaching,” in *Christianity and Liberalism*, ed. David B. Garner (Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), 207–11; and “The Manner and the Message: 1 Corinthians 2:4,” *TableTalk* (August 2019): 14–15, <https://table-talkmagazine.com/article/2019/08/1-corinthians-24>.

**RYAN DEJONGE** has served as a missionary with Reformed Ministries in Papua New Guinea since 2016. He is the board chairman and visiting lecturer for the Reformed Churches Bible College in Port Moresby. He is currently completing a DMin at Knox Theological Seminary. Prior to going to Papua New Guinea, Ryan served as a pastor of the Langley Canadian Reformed Church in Langley, British Columbia, since 2009.

**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).

**TIMOTHY J. KELLER** is a pastor, theologian, and apologist. He is chairman and co-founder of Redeemer City to City (<https://redeemercitytocity.com>). He is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, of which he was senior pastor from 1989 until 2017. He also served as associate professor of practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. He is the author of numerous books, among others, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, 2nd ed. (P&R Publishing, 1997); *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (Dutton, 2008); *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (Dutton, 2008); and with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (Penguin Books, 2016).

**PETER A. LILLBACK** is president of and professor of historical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. He spent twenty-seven years as a 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).

**MICHAEL C. MULDER** teaches New Testament and Judaism at the Theological University of Apeldoorn, the Netherlands (TUA) and at Christian University Ede. He has published on New Testament exegesis and intertextuality, especially on Paul, and on Jewish tradition and Jewish-Christian dialogue. He has recently written "Covenant, Election and Israel's Responsibility: A Clarification through an Intertextual Analysis of Quotations from Scripture in Romans 10," in *Covenant: A Vital Element of Reformed Theology: Biblical, Historical and Systematical Perspectives*, Studies in Reformed Theology (Brill, 2021), a volume he co-edited.

**VERN S. POYTHRESS** is Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Biblical Interpretation, and Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, where he has taught for over forty years. He has earned doctoral degrees from Harvard University and the University of Stellenbosch. Among his many publications are *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (P&R Publishing, 1991), *God Centered Biblical Interpretation* (P&R Publishing, 1999), *Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God* (Crossway, 2016), and *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (P&R Publishing, 2020).

**A. CRAIG TROXEL** is professor of practical theology at Westminster Seminary California and a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He previously served pastorates for twenty-five years in Glenside, PA, and in Wheaton, IL. He is the author of *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires and Will Toward Christ* (Crossway, 2020).

**HENK VAN DEN BELT** is professor of systematic theology at Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, and the director of the Herman Bavinck Center for Reformed and Evangelical Theology. He has published on the authority of Scripture, the history of Reformed theology, neo-Calvinism, and pneumatology. His dissertation on the authority of Scripture (see *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* [Brill, 2008]) contains a chapter on Bavinck, and he has edited a critical edition of Bavinck's *Certainty of Faith: Herman Bavinck, Geloofszekerheid* (Aspekt, 2016).

**MEINE VELDMAN** is academic dean and professor of systematic theology at the Faculté de théologie évangélique, Montréal, Québec, and has been pastor of several churches in Canada. He is the author of *H. F. Kohlbrügge and Karl Barth on the Word of God and "Man"* (Lambert Academic Publishing, 2009); *God Speaks: Revelation, Justification, and Regeneration in the Theology of E. Böhl and His Critique of Albrecht Ritschl* (Faith Alone Publishing, 2009).

**JEREMY WALKER** serves as a pastor of Maidenbower Baptist Church, Crawley, UK. He has authored several books, and is grateful to preach, to teach, and to write as opportunity provides. Among recent works are *Our Chief of Days: The Principle, Purpose and Practice of the Lord's Day* (Evangelical Press, 2019), and *On the Side of God: The Life and Labors of Andrew Fuller* (Free Grace Press, 2020).

**Preach, teach, *and* lead**  
with *confidence* and *wisdom*.



EST. 1929

**MASTER OF DIVINITY**

---

**MASTER OF ARTS IN RELIGION**

---

**MASTER OF THEOLOGY**

*For nearly 90 years, Westminster Theological Seminary has been training pastors and ministry leaders to be specialists in the Bible to proclaim the whole counsel of God for Christ and his global church.*

*wts.edu*

---

## ABRAHAM KUYPER'S COLLECTED WORKS IN PUBLIC THEOLOGY — NOW COMPLETE

---

Never before available in English, the Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology has introduced a new audience to the thinking of one of Christianity's most thoughtful public theologians. Comprised of 8 key works spread over 12 volumes, this series has finally been fully published six years after its inaugural volume in 2015. The completion of the Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology marks a historic moment in Kuyper studies, and we hope it will deepen and enrich the church's interest and engagement in public theology.

*Learn more at*  
[AbrahamKuyper.com](http://AbrahamKuyper.com)



## **SELECTED CONTRIBUTIONS RELATED TO KUYPER, BAVINCK, AND WARFIELD FROM PREVIOUS ISSUES OF *UNIO CUM CHRISTO***

1.1-2 (2015)

Witness in the Public Square / **JAMES W. SKILLEN**

The Ministry of Religion and the Rights of the Minority: The Witness of  
Protestant Christianity in Indonesia / **BENYAMIN F. INTAN**

4.2 (October 2018)

Review of James P. Eglinton, ed. and trans. *Herman Bavinck on  
Preaching and Preachers* / **SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON**

5.2 (October 2019)

Review of Herman Bavinck. *Reformed Ethics: Created, Fallen, and  
Converted Humanity* / **CORY C. BROCK**

6.2 (October 2020)

Kuyper and Reformed Public Theology: Family, Freedom, and Fortune  
/ **JOHN WITTE JR. AND ERIC WANG**

Sphere Sovereignty according to Kuyper / **ANTONIUS STEVEN UN**

Bavinck as Public Theologian: Philosophy, Ethics, and Politics

/ **CORY C. BROCK**

Hope for Religious Freedom for All in China / **BOB FU**

7.1 (April 2021)

Warfield, Bavinck, and Kuyper: Interview with Cornelis P. Venema and  
David Garner / **PETER A. LILLBACK**

Review of Herman Bavinck. *Christian Worldview* / **DANIEL SCHROCK**

*These contributions and others from previous issues of the journal are  
available online.*

Consult at **uniocc.com**

## CALL FOR ARTICLES FOR *UNIO CUM CHRISTO*

The editorial committee invites the submission of articles (7,000 words maximum including footnotes) for future issues of the journal. Articles should be rooted in the Reformed faith and its confessional texts, and aim to be informative, edifying, missional in perspective, and relevant to current challenges facing the Christian faith worldwide.

We would like to encourage theologians (including research students) and pastor-theologians, particularly from countries in the developing world, to submit articles on issues relevant to the role of Reformed theology in their national and cultural contexts, and also book reviews.

We would also be pleased to consider texts translated into English that have already been published in journals in other languages.

Submissions will be peer reviewed before acceptance.

Upcoming numbers of the journal will present the following general themes:

- 2022/1 Economics and Business and Ethics
- 2022/2 J. I. Packer, John Stott, and Global Anglicanism
- 2023/1 Biblical Counseling
- 2023/2 The Doctrine of the Church and Its Mission

Dates of submission of completed articles are six months before the appearance of the journal in April and October.

Before submitting an article, contact Bernard Aubert ([baubert@wts.edu](mailto:baubert@wts.edu)) with a proposition of subject and an abstract (less than 200 words). Details concerning formal presentation will then be communicated to the author together with approval of the proposition (Guidelines of Style are available at [uniocc.com/journal/guidelines](http://uniocc.com/journal/guidelines)).

Paul Wells  
*Editor in Chief*

Subscription to *Unio cum Christo* can be done through the website **uniocc.com**. Older issues of the journal are archived and available on the site. Contributions are invited.

## **Editorial Board Members**

### **Africa**

Flip Buys, *North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa*  
Henk Stoker, *North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa*  
Philip Tachin, *National Open University of Nigeria, Lagos, Nigeria*  
Cephas Tushima, *ECWA Theological Seminary, Jos, Nigeria*

### **Asia**

In-Sub Ahn, *Chong Shin University and Seminary, Seoul, Korea*  
Wilson W. Chow, *China Graduate School of Theology, Hong Kong*  
Matthew Ebenezer, *Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Dehra Dun, India*  
Kevin Woongsan Kang, *Chongshin Theological Seminary, Seoul, Korea*  
In Whan Kim, formerly *Daeshin University, Gyeongsan, Gyeongbuk, Korea*  
Billy Kristanto, *International Reformed Evangelical Seminary, Jakarta, Indonesia*  
Jong Yun Lee, *Academia Christiana of Korea, Seoul, Korea*  
Sang Gyoo Lee, *Baekseok University, Seoul, Korea*  
Deok Kyo Oh, formerly *Hapdong Theological Seminary, Suwon, Korea*  
Moses Wong, *China Reformed Theological Seminary, Taipei, Taiwan*

### **Australia**

Allan M. Harman, *Presbyterian Theological College, Victoria, Australia*  
Peter Hastie, *Presbyterian Theological College, Victoria, Australia*  
Mark D. Thompson, *Moore Theological College, Newtown, Australia*

### **Europe**

Henri Blocher, *Faculté Libre de Théologie Évangélique, Vaux-sur-Seine, France*  
Leonardo De Chirico, *Istituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione, Padova, Italy*  
David Estrada, *University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain*  
Ian Hamilton, Inverness, formerly *Cambridge Presbyterian Church, Cambridge, UK*  
Roel Kuiper, *Kampen Theological University, Kampen, Netherlands*  
Robert Letham, *Union School of Theology, Bridgend, United Kingdom*  
José de Segovia, *Iglesia Reformada de Madrid, Madrid, Spain*  
Herman J. Selderhuis, *Theological University Apeldoorn, Apeldoorn, Netherlands*  
Henk van den Belt, *Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, Netherlands*

### **North America**

Greg Beale, *Reformed Theological Seminary, Dallas, USA*  
Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, USA*  
Gerald L. Bray, *Samford University, Birmingham, USA*  
Stephen Coleman, *Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, USA*  
William Edgar, *Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, USA*  
Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, USA*  
David (Eung-Yul) Ryoo, Centreville, USA, formerly *Chongshin Seminary, Seoul, Korea*  
Daniel Timmer, *Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, USA*  
Jason Van Vliet, *Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary, Hamilton, Canada*

### **South America**

Davi Gomes, *Mackenzie Presbyterian University, São Paulo, Brazil*  
Mauro Meister, *Andrew Jumper Graduate Center, São Paulo, Brazil*

