

from the text by “filleting the biblical materials into ever smaller and more disparate layers” (191). He also muses that it is a small miracle that so many people go to church given the smallness of the vision that they receive. Instead, they need to be exposed to something bigger and grander. He hints at the necessity for a robust worldview where ultimate commitments are more crucial than the choice of study method. Strawn touches on the problem but does not discuss the real issue: the character of Scripture. Many churches view Scripture as a purely human document, not the inspired, revealed word of God. If the Bible is only a human document, it loses its character as the living word of God through which God still speaks to his people. If Scripture is a limited human product that is historically conditioned, it is hard to see its relevance to God’s people today. If the Bible can be used along with other, more contemporary sources to instruct God’s people, it is no wonder that the Old Testament loses influence. The Bible itself is relegated to a subordinate position, or at least it is not given the priority it deserves, leaving little hope that people will take the Old Testament seriously.

The solution to the problem of the death of the Old Testament is to accept Scripture as the Word of God. When seminaries have a low view of the authority of Scripture, pastors are sent into churches without great confidence in the Word of God. This impacts all levels of a church’s life, from preaching to the choice of the Sunday School material to teach the next generation. In such an environment there is no great impetus to learn the language of the Old Testament. There is no great vision related to the supremacy of Christ and the glory of God. Seminaries and churches with a high view of the authority Scripture are in a better position to see the importance of the Old Testament as the living word of God that is written for God’s people today (1 Cor 10:6; Heb 4:12). A high view of the Old Testament does not solve every problem because people have to be taught how to understand it, but it gives pastors the boldness to preach and the people the impetus to understand and to pass it on to their children.

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Pierre Courthial. *A New Day of Small Beginnings*. Tallahassee, FL; Lausanne: Zurich Publishing, 2018).

It has been one of the privileges of my life, not only to know Pierre Courthial and to share his friendship, but also to participate actively in the

publication of his three major works.¹ For Courthial, God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is the first author of the whole Bible (*tota Scriptura*), the *ex nihilo* Creator of the universe who, as sovereign redeemer of his people, manifests his providence over every event in the history to all mankind. Spiritual intimacy with God gave Courthial the grace of generous and serviceable authority.

Courthial was born in August 1914 in Saint Cyr-au-Mont-d'Or, Lyon, of a Roman Catholic mother and a Protestant father.² He left us for his heavenly home in the evening of April 22, 2009. He was brought up with Reformed convictions. This dual family heritage may well have played a role in the development of his vocation; the strengthening of his confessional Reformed convictions, constantly called upon to do battle against the seductions of Rome; and the openness of his mind to horizons other than those of his own Protestant heritage. From this spiritual conjunction, under the normative authority of the Bible, at the age of thirteen, he began gleaning in the Scriptures and, somewhat later, in the vast heritage of Christian theology. This, no doubt, is the source of his Christian intelligence marked first by the confessional Reformed faith, then watered from various faithful Christian streams: the fathers, Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Evangelicalism. Also, from summer 1931 to autumn 1932 Courthial devoted himself to assiduously studying John Calvin's *Institutes* (1559) and Pierre Viret's *Christian Instruction* (1564), two works that had a lasting influence on his long ministry.

From November 1932 to June 1936 Courthial undertook theological training in the liberal Protestant Theological Faculty in Paris. There his convictions were greatly strengthened by the Reformed teaching of Auguste Lecerf (1872–1943), as well as by his lifelong friendship with his slightly older colleague and Calvinist theologian, Pierre-Charles Marcel (1910–1992). On April 20, 1939, Courthial and Hélène Jouve married, and they were blessed with five children. From 1937 on Courthial served as pastor in the French Reformed Church, a largely liberal and Barthian denomination. There he confessed the faith of the Reformation with theological acumen, courage, and force, sometimes like a latter-day Athanasius: “One against all”! The strength of Courthial's catholic orthodox Reformed faith, which marks

¹ Pierre Courthial, *Fondements pour l'avenir* (Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma, 1982); *Le jour des petits recommencements* (1996; revised edition, Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 2019); *De Bible en Bible* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme; Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma, 2003).

² Sources: “La vie et les temps de Pierre Courthial (1914–2009),” *La Revue réformée* 61.1–2 (Janvier 2010): 6–26; and Matthew Miller, “Pierre Courthial: A Brief Biography,” in Courthial, *A New Day of Small Beginnings*, xxvii–xxxiii.

his ministry and writings, arises, no doubt, from his persistently uncompromising ecclesiastical faithfulness against opposition to the teaching of the Bible. This led him, with Henri Blocher and Marie de Védrières, to found the monthly review *Ichthus*, which served to introduce the Reformed heritage to French evangelicals. In October of 1974, Courthial joined those who established the Free Reformed Theological Faculty of Aix-en-Provence (today Faculté Jean Calvin), from which he retired in 1984. His last years were spent, together with his wife, in the fifteenth arrondissement of Paris, not far from their children.

A New Day of Small Beginnings, the fruit of Courthial's Christian meditation, was written when he had passed his eightieth year as the *summa* of his lifelong reflection. The act of writing was always a source of suffering for Courthial, so great was his zeal to arrive at the synthetic precision of Scripture. His aim was to obtain a true *catholic* expression—complete “according to the whole of Scripture,” in keeping with the ancient creeds, confessions, and formulations of Christian liturgy. He sought to recover the precision, clarity, balance, and beauty of Reformed and orthodox catholicity, proper to the biblical thought of the church of Jesus Christ. For him the task was always to gather, in a harmonious whole, the fullness of the conceptual meaning the acts of God's annals. This task encompassed creation and God's relation to mankind from the beginning to the end in the fulfillment of the kingdom of God: the new Jerusalem. For Courthial this was the subject matter of the whole Bible and of all history.

To compose such a synthetic narrative is in itself difficult, but Courthial seeks to go further. Every aspect of the Christian faith coheres. In his worship of God and his meditation on Scripture, the theologian must show the divine acts in their mutual complementarity. This is the reality of the faith as depicted by the Bible, advancing through the phases of the history of the world's salvation towards summits progressively more exalted. These successive mountains of God (following the Syrian poet-theologian Ephraim), first culminate in the cross established on the mountain of Zion, that earthly Jerusalem, where the prophets of old were killed and where the victory of Jesus Christ over evil and death and their first author, the devil, was accomplished.

This victory leads to the manifestation of the ultimate consequences of Christ's triumph on the cross, through the prophetic work of Jesus Christ—that of the law and the gospel—by the militant and triumphant witness of his faithful church to all peoples and nations of the earth. This is the church's manifestation of the victory of her Lord: her obedience of faith to all the law-word of God. Thus, the disciples of Jesus Christ were sent out by

the Holy Spirit in the world's providential history to gather in Christ's people. The Law-Gospel's prophetic witness of the church will put under the feet of our Lord—that is under the feet of the church, his body—all his enemies, this until the consummation of the age, the glorious manifestation of Jesus Christ accompanied by his saints. It is then, in a renewed heaven and earth where justice dwells, that his victorious people will dwell eternally in the very presence of God.

Courthial's purpose in *A New Day of Small Beginnings* is to gather together, as in a short theological and doctrinal *Summa*, written with the *symbolic* precision of the language of liturgy, the lines of the Bible's history of the world. We thus find ourselves in the presence of a truly *catholic* vision, that of the whole of Scripture, *tota Scriptura*, which includes in its vision the whole creation of the world and every aspect of the history of the church—both painful and victorious—in its pilgrimage. Thus, the divine purpose of God for his church culminates in the glorious transfiguration of all things in the heavenly Jerusalem that comes down from above. It is thus from the *catholicity*³ of such a vision of God's work and his people's response that Courthial, faithful to the meaningful content of Scripture, seeks to gather it into the language of men; from the temporal and eternal majesty of God's victory over all the forces of evil stems the immense hope that animates Courthial's labors and thinking and life itself. God, in his immense grace and faithfulness, has given a doctor of the faith to his church to encourage his people to persevere in faith, hope, and love! What a wonderful gift this is in these times of generalized despair. For men, by their revolt against both gospel and law—and now also against the very order of God's creation

³ Richard Paquier (1905–1985) here comes close to Courthial's vision of *catholicity*. "To have the spirit of *catholicity* is to desire to be complete and not unilateral, to live an integral and not truncated Christianity, universal and not sectarian. To be *catholic* is to affirm the fullness of God, the entirety of Scripture, the whole church and every aspect of the 'cosmos.' It is to believe in a transcendent *and* immanent God, Principle *and* Energy, in a God Three *and* One, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is to confess Christ as both God *and* Man and not merely the prophet, or the priest, the man or the God, the moral Model or the mystical Host of the soul, the Savior or the Judge. It is to acknowledge the Old Testament *and* the New Testament, the latter in its entirety: the Synoptics and John, Paul, and James. It is to be in communion with the church of every century, and not to make the history of the church begin with the Reformation, nor, on the contrary, causes the life of the church to cease at its medieval stage. It is to be in communion with the church on earth *and* with the church in heaven, with the church triumphant just as with the church militant. It is to realize in the sacraments and in the worship of the church the harmonious union of spirituality *and* corporeity, of the order of nature *and* that of the spirit, of this world here *and* of the next. *Catholicity is the attribute of a complete, total, integral Christianity.*" Richard Paquier, *Vers la catholicité évangélique*, Cahier 6 (Lausanne: Église et liturgie, 1935): 8. Pierre Courthial was a frequent speaker at the meetings of *Église et liturgie* in the canton of Vaud.

—persist by the hardening of both heart and mind in a relentless obstinacy to do evil and turn, in the wicked progress of their folly, against the merciful gospel of our Creator and Savior, Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

According to Courthial, the biblical theologian must gather together God's design, both multiple and one, into a single dogmatic sheaf. This explains the vital importance he assigns to the central dogma of *catholicity* that affirms that all things hold together in Jesus Christ in his Word alone. The attentive reader will discover how Courthial holds together the creeds of the ancient church, the confessions of the faith of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformation, the heritage of the church throughout history, and the prophetic perception of the present condition of the people of God under the overarching vault of the *catholicity* of holy Scripture. For Courthial, *catholicity* and *tota Scriptura* are joined in the doctrine of God's sovereign covenant of grace, by which heaven is joined to earth, and biblical revelation to the natural revelation of the created order to the providential history of mankind, a revelation at whose heart is found the redemption of the elect.

The compact and complex nature of *A New Day of Small Beginnings* makes the reading of this book, as Courthial well recognizes, a challenge. The writing seeks—and often achieves—the aim of standing so close to the content of the Bible's meaning that when one pulls a thread the others follow. One is constantly before truly *magisterial* exegesis of the biblical texts examined. It is Courthial's ardent and constant aim thus to obtain a complete and exact reading of Scripture that imposes on his writing a rigor at times both unbearable and exhilarating in its truth.

The first and second parts of *A New Day of Small Beginnings*, “The Ancient Order of the World” (the old covenant) and “The Turning of the Ages” (the first seventy years of our era), consist in what we call a biblical theology of an astonishing exegetical sureness. The third part, “The New Order of the World” (from the end of the apostolic period to the return of Christ in glory), presents us with an extraordinary summary of the covenantal history⁴ of the church in the world. This is accompanied by a thorough presentation of what should be a contemporary defense of the faith, containing both the law and the gospel. Courthial here manifests clarity of perception and forceful expression. The titles of these three sections are in themselves very eloquent:

⁴ On the universally valid principles of the biblical covenant.

1. The Genuinely Catholic Ecclesial Tradition (151)⁵
2. The Church Sick with Humanism (216)⁶
3. Humanism Defeated by the Law of God (251)⁷

This last section consists in a robust defense of the faith, whereby the Law-Word of Christ—“the testimony of Jesus [which] is the Spirit of Prophecy” (Rev 19:10)—confounds the errors of a world that calls itself “modern” while being the mere resurgence, on a worldwide scale, of those ancient heresies a thousand times refuted and that now are summed up by a new slogan: the cult of man by man.

This book, in a very dense and concentrated way, consists in three *Summae*: theological, historical, and apologetic: first a *Summa* of biblical theology according to the covenant of grace; next a *Summa* of the history of the church in light of this divine covenant; finally, a *Summa* of apologetics showing us how to apply the law-gospel of God both to the evils and to the challenges of our time.

We have an extraordinary expression of the classical Christian faith, orthodox, catholic: balanced, biblical, and complete.

This structure implies the careful scrutiny of the whole of Scripture read in the context both of the fullness of the created order and in that of all the providential history of mankind up to and including the present. Each of these aspects is held in a careful balance with the others, this always under the sovereign ordering authority of all Scripture. Thus,

- its symbolism balances the Bible’s intrinsically doctrinal character;
- the fully historical character of the Bible cannot be separated from its intrinsically doctrinal aspect;
- the prior literal nature of the divine revelation cannot be opposed to its necessarily symbolic, typological, and prophetic character;
- the fully legal aspect of all Scripture is associated with the fullness of that grace of God that fills its every page.

For Courthial a proper catholic (that is complete) reading of Scripture holds these aspects to be fully complementary. This approach implies the application to the reading of the Bible and to the theology that issues from it, the conjugal principle: “What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder” (Mark 10:9). Each of the aspects of biblical reality we have just mentioned are presented in the framework of their universal

⁵ From the fathers of the church to the fathers of the Reformation.

⁶ From the end of the age of faith to the tyranny of the Enlightenment.

⁷ The law-word of God, that is to say the covenant: the gospel and law, instruments of God for the victory of the church over all her enemies.

application, that of the covenant of both God's grace and his just judgments, the covenant that runs from the creation to the final advent when, on that last day, the old creation will be fully renewed. Such a vision enlightens for Courthial the entirely providential character of the biblical history of the world, a divine history that encompasses all the aspects of man's existence up to our present time and to what is still to come.

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